



IN SOME ARAB
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WHO STRAY MAY
BE KILLED FOR
THE SAKE OF
THEIR FAMILIES'
REPUTATION
BY DOUGLAS JEHL

INTERNATIONAL

MURDER FOR HONOR

It took six years for the al-Goul family to hunt down their daughter Basma. She had fled after her husband accused her of infidelity, and in the crowded Jordanian village of Resaifah, where a woman's chastity is everyone's business, contempt for her family kept spreading. Because of her alleged infidelity, villagers ostracized her parents, deemed her eight sisters unmarriageable, and taunted her five brothers on the street.

"We were the most prominent family, with the best reputation," says Um Tayseer, her mother. "Then we were disgraced. Even my brother and his family stopped talking to us. They would say only, 'You have to kill.'"

Um Tayseer went looking for Basma, carrying a gun. In

the end, it was Basma's 16-year-old brother who pulled the trigger, killing her.

In many parts of the Arab world, female chastity is seen as the boundary between respect and shame for a family. An unchaste woman, some people say, is even worse than a murderer. For centuries, the result of that harsh, unforgiving code has been death—the killings of girls and women by relatives in order to cleanse honor that has been soiled. Sometimes, the misconduct is only rumor.

Lately, however, a number of Arab activists and leaders—

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For some Arabs, a woman's sexual misconduct—even a rumor of it—brings dishonor on the entire family.

tencing, and many tend to regard the killings as just.

"Nobody can really want to kill his wife or daughter or sister," shrugs Mohammed Ajarmeh, chief judge of the High Criminal Court in Jordan.

Last June, Wafik Abu Abseh, a 22-year-old Jordanian woodcutter, killed his unmarried sister, bashing in her head with a paving stone when he found her in the company of a man. Abseh, who said he was simply administering God's law, spent four months in prison. "We are Muslims," his older brother has said, "and in our religion, she had to be executed."

Many of those who engage in these honor killings cite the law of Islam, the predominant religion in the Arab world, as their justification. That belief, however, is a misunderstanding of religious teaching, say Islamic scholars. For women and for men, Islam does indeed put a premium on chastity and prescribes harsh punishments for sexual misconduct—death for adultery, flogging for sex between unmarried individuals. But Islam teaches that religious leaders, not family members, should be the judges.

DOUBLE STANDARD?

Still, many Arabs dismiss international criticism as simply a form of Western bias. "When a Western man kills his lover or wife, it is called a crime of passion," says Mohammed Haj Yahya, an Arab sociologist at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "But when it happens in Arab societies, it is called a family honor killing, and we are viewed as barbarous."

Attempts to improve the treatment of women have been denounced as a betrayal of Arab ways. But change is coming, even if slowly. Jordan has announced plans to open a shelter for endangered women, the first in the Arab world. And in April, Mubarak repealed a law that allowed rapists to go free if they married their victims. The law had been used by the parents of rape victims to regain their family honor by marrying their daughters off to their attackers. (However, without that law, some say, rape victims may never be able to marry, or may even be killed.)

Meanwhile, there are signs that public opinion, too, may be changing. In Resaifah, the village from which Basma Tayseer ran for her life, some people now openly condemn her murder.

"A guy who kills might think that dishonor goes away," says Yousra al-Auteh, 17. "But when he walks past, people will say, 'There goes the guy who killed his daughter.'" ■

including Jordan's King Abdullah and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak—have begun to attack the practice of so-called honor killing. At a conference in Jordan in June, delegates from the region discussed the problem openly—a rarity in itself—and began to consider action.

HUNDREDS OF WOMEN KILLED

The extent of honor killing in the Arab world is difficult to measure. Although such murders are tacitly condoned at many levels of society, most occur among the poorer and less educated, outside the big cities, and far from government scrutiny. In Jordan, statistics suggest that honor killings account for one of every four homicides. Throughout the Arab world, experts say, the number of women killed for reasons of honor may total hundreds each year.

In many Arab countries, killers often receive light punishment, if any. According to human rights groups, judges are given great latitude in sen-



In traditional Arab societies, women cover themselves with long veils, part of a behavioral code for women that values chastity.

For more information on honor killings and Islam, visit our website at www.nytimes.com/upfront.