Women's Reputation and Harassment in Jordan

Droeber, J.

Middle East

JULIA DROEBER

Women's Reputation and Harassment in Jordan

Much has been written recently about the so-called 'crimes of honour' in Jordan.[1] By now, the facts and fiction about those heinous crimes have become widely known. According to official statistics, about 25 women on average are killed every year for the sake of their families' 'honour'. The number of deaths that could also be categorized as such crimes but are recorded as suicides or accidents is much higher.

The victims of honour crimes usually do not share a common class background, yet they are mainly unmarried women between fifteen and thirty years of age. The perpetrators are generally male family members, most notably brothers, fathers, and husbands. Owing to Paragraph 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code[2], which continues to be in force despite various proposals of amendment, these perpetrators usually are given very lenient sentences of only a few months, or are completely exempted because they are minors, as is the case when younger brothers kill the victims.

These killings can be considered within various wider frameworks: firstly is that of violence against women in general; secondly, they can be viewed against the backdrop of the notions of 'honour' and 'shame' that are prevalent in Jordanian society. Crimes of honour can also be analysed as a manifestation of power relationships in a patriarchal social system, or can be placed within a religious context. During research conducted among young, highly educated, mainly middle-class women in Jordan between 1997 and 1999, honour crimes were encountered under different circumstances. Furthermore, at the time, they were the subject of heated debates not only in the media, but also among the population. Instead of reiterating facts about those atrocious crimes, the following offers a closer look at how the crimes and the debate about them affected the young women (and men) that were met during the research period.

Reputation and rumours

A very crucial issue became evident during the research period: individual as well as family reputation and rumours play an essential role in the everyday lives of young women. The honour crimes can be related to this. Women, especially during the phase of unmarried adulthood and late adolescence, are thought to carry a great deal of responsibility for the reputation of their kin group within society. While still unmarried, this means they are to safeguard their virginity and behave 'modestly', and once they are married they are expected to remain chaste and modest.

It is important here to show how the so-called 'crimes of honour' are not only a way of actually punishing women for their alleged sexual misconduct, but also a means of social control in their role within the system of rumours and gossip.

Women in Jordan have become increasingly 'visible' outside their homes in recent decades and this increased appearance in 'public' seems to have created a greater need for supervision, control, and restrictions. How have young, unmarried, highly educated, and often working women coped with the tensions inherent in this situation?

Stories about 'crimes of honour' such as that of a young woman who was strangled by her younger brother with a telephone cord because she was talking to a man on the phone, became public knowledge and entered public discourse. Especially after the instigation of the campaign to abolish Paragraph 340 and the ensuing debate about it, stories like these are often used as a threat to enforce 'modest' and 'chaste' behaviour among young women. On a less tragic level, this body of narratives includes stories about assaults and harassment, which have considerable impact on young women, and which make them think carefully about their behaviour in public. By reminding each other about what had happened to other young women, who had transgressed existing societal norms of behaviour, they are reinforcing existing control mechanisms and creating fear of the consequences of misconduct. The creation and repeated evocation of this body of narratives by men and women alike helps to bolster patriarchal hierarchies in society.

Most of the young people met during field research, however, were appalled by these crimes. They generally thought that they were not personally threatened by those killings, since they were, according to one young man, 'only found in rural areas where tribal and social values are highly respected'. One young woman, however, explained that the topic 'has become a cliché, but it is an issue that touches each one of us.' Regarded as just another, albeit atrocious form of violence, she asked whether this 'killing and fighting helps to solve any problem', and whether 'these acts are honourable'. One young man, like many others, could not relate to the notion of 'honour' that supposedly was behind these crimes: 'I would be ashamed of myself, if I even think of killing someone regardless if he or she is guilty. How can an honourable family tolerate the idea of one of its male members killing his sister or wife out of suspicion? Killing is a sin condemned by all religions. And it has never been an honourable thing to kill one's sister out of mere suspicion.' A female university student expressed criticism: 'What's even worse than the "honour crimes" themselves is the Parliament's refusal to throw out the article that allows for lighter sentences for people having committed honour crimes.'

Closer to their own experience, however, were incidents of assaults and harassment. Most of the young women interviewed had personally experienced harassment in public, but were so intimidated by the admonitions concerning their reputation that they often did not dare to bring these incidents into the open, let alone confront the perpetrators. This caution with regard to voicing protest might be due to the widespread notion that the women are generally to blame for such incidents as they are said to provoke men in one way or another, which, again, triggers an assault.

One young woman used to be harassed by a man every time she walked through a certain street on her way home. She told her father about it and, instead of comforting and supporting her, the father started shouting at her, basically telling her that it was her fault: 'It's probably the way you dress that instigates such behaviour!' But she holds that 'it doesn't matter what you wear, or if you're walking alone or with a group of friends. Nothing will stop them!' She observed that Amman's streets have become a 'hazardous territory for females in this country', and that 'harassment of women in public places is becoming a usual thing that is not condemned by society at large.'

Similar to the lenient punishment of the perpetrators of crimes of honour, which is apparently supported by many Jordanians, the – what I would regard as misbehaviour of men – assaults and harassment of women in public is tolerated by many. In both cases, 'aggressors are usually proud of what they do, bragging about it to every soul they happen to know. And the poor victims usually feel guilty thinking they are the ones that instigate such harassment.'

Examples abound. One young woman was sitting next to her brother in a bus. Suddenly she started feeling someone pinching her from behind. The young woman was puzzled, not knowing what to do. She could not just confront the man because her brother was sitting next to her (and would have had the responsibility of confronting the man), and was afraid to tell him what was happening for fear that he might kill the man. She did not say anything for a while but kept moving closer to her brother hoping that the man behind would stop. He did not, and her brother started suspecting that something was going on. He asked her if anything was wrong, but she kept saying no. She thought the situation was fairly obvious. Eventually, the young woman's brother looked behind him and gave the rude man a threatening stare. The rest of the journey home went peacefully.

Change of attitude

Stories of silently bearing harassment is nonetheless not totally indicative of how women are dealing with this issue. In fact, many young women seem to be becoming more self-confident and aware that what happens to them does not have to be endured in silence. They are often advised to confront the harassers audibly, and generally the people around them come to their defence. A young woman told me how she was walking through downtown Amman with her ten-year-old cousin. Suddenly, a young man approached them and pronounced some 'dirty words' directed at the young woman. She was furious and embarrassed, but at the same time thought that she ought to do something about such rude behaviour. She stopped the man and confronted him with what he had just said. People who started crowding up to see what was happening began shouting at the young man asking him if he would like it if someone said the same thing to one of his sisters or mother. The aggressor was speechless.

Another young woman was riding on a minibus, which was half-empty. She sat alone on a double seat with a man sitting behind her. Suddenly she turned around shouting at the top of her voice that he should never do that again, that he should never ever dare to touch her, followed by a tirade of curses and a final: 'Get me?!' Intimidated, he tried to make excuses, explaining that he only wanted to push the curtain aside, but by then the other passengers had turned around with looks of dismay. The young woman turned back again and could terminate her journey in peace. The perpetrator, however, had clearly lost face in this situation.

In these cases, young women discarded the feeling of guilt that they were often made to take on (for their role in provoking men), and by doing so, were also able to protect their reputation. Had anybody witnessed the women being touched and not reacting – and therefore their silence potentially being interpreted as consent – they would have run the risk of being accused of 'immoral behaviour'. The consequences of this need no further explanation.

Notes

1. See, for example, Lama Abu-Odeh, 'Crimes of honour and the construction of gender in Arab societies', in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996). See also: *www.amanjordan.org* – the website of the Arab Centre for Resources and Information on Violence against Women *(al-markaz al-ᶜarabiylil-masadir wal-ma'lumat hawla al-ᶜunf didd al-mar'a)*.
2. 'He who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery with another, and he kills, wounds or injures one or both of them is exempt from any penalty.'

Julia Droeber is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Exeter, UK.
E-mail: juladr@yahoo.com