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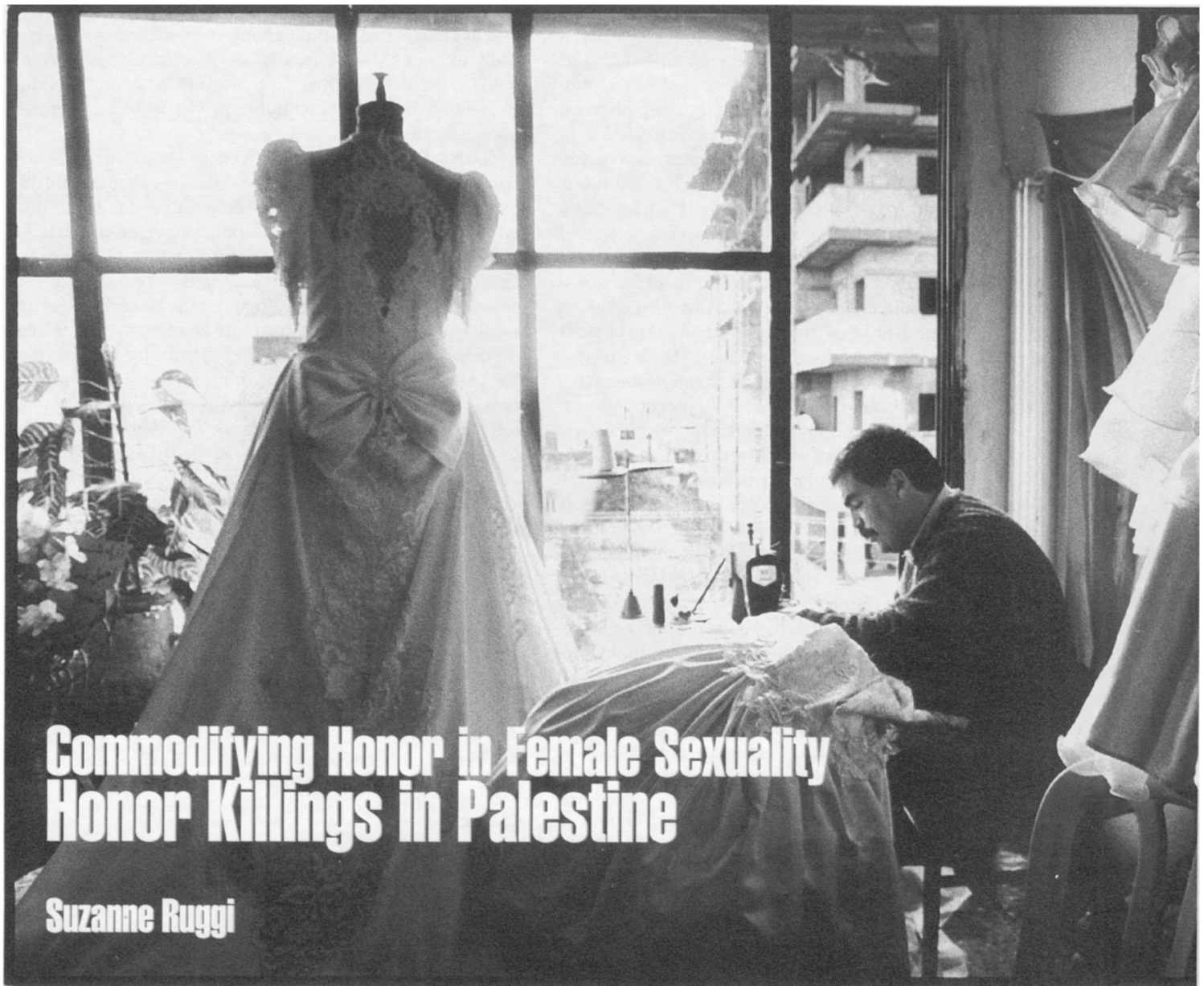
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Commodifying Honor in Female Sexuality Honor Killings in Palestine

Suzanne Ruggi

A wedding dress maker in Gaza City, the Gaza Strip.

The family constitutes the fundamental building-block of Palestinian society. Family status is largely dependent upon its honor, much of which is determined by the respectability of its daughters, who can damage it irreparably by the perceived misuse of their sexuality.

Every year, hundreds of women and girls are murdered in the Middle East by male family members. The honor killing—the execution of a female family member for perceived misuse of her sexuality—is a thorny social and political issue. Palestinian activists campaigning for equality find it difficult to stop the killings altogether. Legitimacy for such murders stems from a complex code of honor ingrained in the consciousness of some sectors of Palestinian society.

Suzanne Ruggi is a staff reporter for The Jerusalem Times.

Given that honor killings often remain a private family affair, no official statistics are available on the practice or its frequency. According to a November 1997 report of the Woman's Empowerment Project published in *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, there were 20 honor killings in Gaza and the West Bank in 1996. One representative of the group added, "We know there are more but no one publicizes it." Similarly, an unofficial report given to the Palestinian Women's Working Society stated that "recently" 40 women have been killed for honor in Gaza. The report defined neither the



John Tordai

period in which these murders took place nor the exact circumstances. During the summer of 1997, Khaled Al-Qudra, then Attorney General in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), told *Sout Al-Nissa'* (Women's Voices), a supplement published by the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), that he suspects that 70 percent of all murders in Gaza and the West Bank are honor killings.

Though a growing number of Palestinians find honor killings unacceptable, the practice continues. "No one knows the magnitude, because no one has conducted a study," said Lisa Taraki, associate professor of sociology at Birzeit University. Women's organizations have mobilized against the killings, but are furious that the practice continues in spite of the legal prohibitions. The killings violate the right to life upheld in versions of the draft Basic Law and openly discriminate against women. The woman alone is punished for the "crime," whereas the man, who may have raped his victim, is considered an innocent party and often walks free.

The honor killing emerged in the pre-Islamic era, according to Sharif Kanaana, professor of anthropology at Birzeit University. It is, he believes, "a complicated issue that cuts deep into the history of Arab society." He argues that the honor killing stemmed from the patriarchal and patrilineal society's interest in maintaining strict control over des-

ignated familial power structures. "What the men of the family, clan, or tribe seek control of in a patrilineal society is reproductive power. Women for the tribe were considered a factory for making men. The honor killing is not a means to control sexual power or behavior. What's behind it is the issue of fertility, or reproductive power."

In an Islamic context, punishment for relationships out of wedlock is stipulated as 100 lashes if the woman is single, or if married, death by stoning. In both cases, however, there must be four witnesses willing to testify that the sexual act took place; conditions which make punishment difficult.

Examples cited by women's organizations show that women are also punished, even murdered, on the suspicion of having been involved in a sexual relationship. Victims of rape have met the same fate. Maintaining honor is deemed a

woman's responsibility, whether or not she has been educated about sex or consented to the act. This illustrates that the ideological web of honor sanctions the honor killing for more than reproductive or religious reasons. Ultimately, says Kanaana, this code "prevents women from having sexual freedom or the right to use their sexual powers the way they want."

Murder for Family Honor

The family constitutes the fundamental building-block of Palestinian society. Family status is largely dependent upon its honor, much of which is determined by the respectability of its daughters, who can damage it irreparably by the perceived misuse of their sexuality. "The honor of a family is very dependent on a woman's virginity," said Shadia Sarraj of the Women's Empowerment Project at the Gaza Community Mental Health Project. A woman's virginity is the property of the men around her, first her father, later a gift for her husband; a virtual dowry as she graduates to marriage. In this context, a woman's 'ard (honor) is a commodity which must be guarded by a network of family and community members. The woman is guarded externally by her behavior and dress code and internally by keeping her hymen intact. Sexual relations out of wedlock do exist among young Palestinians, especially in student communities where women are living away from the watchful eye of their families. However, for most women, it is considered 'eib (shameful) to be seen alone with a male non-family member.

Centuries of rule by various foreign authorities have reinforced the family as a location of power in Palestinian society. Even today, the family is directly responsible for defending its honor. In many communities, this means that murder in the name of honor is family business, not frowned upon by the local community. As a result, the murderer is unlikely to be reprimanded in court.

Though she knows of many cases, Manal Kleibo Zarf, a female attorney at the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC), has never been asked to prosecute an honor killing. She believes this is because Jordanian Law still applies to the West Bank. Article 341 considers murder a legitimate act of defense when "The act of killing another or harming another was committed as an act in defense of his life, or his honor, or somebody else's life or honor."

In a forthcoming publication on law and the status of women by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University, Penny Johnson writes that, regarding personal status, the Egyptian and Jordanian legal systems of the West Bank and Gaza are "based on a well-developed legal theory with a clearly defined model of family and gender relations that is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal." This legal framework matches the prevailing ideology, and social and economic circumstances in the West Bank and Gaza. The single mother is not only an outcast of her community, she also has no role in the patriarchal legal system. Ostracized and without a husband or access to a social welfare

system, an unmarried mother has no economic support. The honor killing, as an inherited mechanism, deters and eliminates deviation from the honor code, in order to perpetuate the traditional clusters of patriarchal familial power.

The “Battle”

Although honor killings constitute a violation of human rights, their precedent in tradition makes the issue complex for the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), and the emerging Palestinian legal system. Women’s organizations have sought to strike efficiently and immediately at the new crystallizing power structures.

The lack of reliable statistics makes it difficult for activists to campaign against honor killings. Hanan ‘Abdullah, from the Palestinian Women’s Working Society, explains, “We do not have statistics, there is nothing official. It is very hard to handle lobbying activities without accurate information. The only people who know the actual number is the police. What we are trying to do, is to lobby the police and officials to publish statistics. Then we can move to highlight the issue.”

The WCLAC is preparing a study entitled “Legal Victimization of Woman in the Arab World—a Palestinian Case Study.” The Center is hoping to catalogue cases of honor killings in order to establish reliable statistics. Information will be drawn from cases brought to the Center’s attention as well as follow-up on “suspicious” newspaper reports. The WCLAC hopes that this will provide documentation for future campaigns.

Employees at the Women’s Empowerment Project regularly receive telephone threats as a result of their efforts to help victimized women. They are accused of rebelling against tradition and corrupting society. Nadira Shalhoub-Kervorkian, founder of the Palestinian women’s hot line, Al-Amam, is adamant that the NGO under which the four-year-old service operates remain confidential. “When we started out, there were problems with individuals who opposed the idea. I was beaten twice,” she said.

As a result of the sensitivity of the issue and the difficulties posed by the lack of complete data, efforts to combat honor killings have taken two general forms. First, women’s organizations strive to provide practical services to protect and assist women in need. At the same time, a number of groups have launched a broader campaign directed at the development of a more gender-sensitive society and PNA.

Emergency Assistance

Women’s NGOs provide emergency assistance for women in danger for having violated “honor codes.” Services offered by the Al-Amam hotline and other organizations include counseling and referrals for hymen-repair operations. Samia, who learned of the hotline from a press advertise-

ment, says the hotline “is always ready to help girls.” When a fellow student became pregnant, Samia and her friends referred her to Al-Amam for advice.

Women’s organizations have also established a good relationship with the Palestinian police force. For Su’ad Abu Dayyeh, recognition of the WCLAC and other centers by the police and governors is the most positive recent step in combating the victimization of women. She said that the police have “heard about the services our Center gives. They feel that we are committed and that they are ignorant. When they feel they cannot help, they contact us.”

After Hania, a 30-year-old Gazan, became pregnant in 1996, she received a death threat. She turned to the police, who provided shelter and invited the Women’s Empowerment Project to offer counseling services throughout the pregnancy, which was spent in a prison cell. The Project later referred the woman to another women’s NGO, which sought a home for Hania and her baby boy. Both the Women’s Empowerment Project in Gaza and WCLAC in the West Bank currently coordinate with the police force, providing workshops to train officers to deal with victimized woman.

According to Intisar Al-Wazir, Minister of Social Affairs and also a member of the PLC, the ministry is preparing to establish a shelter for women. The NGOs have also called for the availability of abortion as an option for women who become pregnant as a result of rape. Several women’s organizations drafted a letter to the Palestinian Ministries of Health, Justice, and Social Affairs, demanding that the state meet with them to discuss state-sponsored abortions in such circumstances. Although the letter was sent in January 1997, no reply has been received.

Equal Rights

The achievements of NGOs in providing practical and emergency assistance women in danger are part of the larger struggle to ensure women’s equal rights, to secure nondiscriminatory legislation and to increase public awareness of women’s issues.

In 1995, a project entitled, “The Palestinian Model Parliament—Women and Legislation” was launched as part of the comprehensive effort. Al-Wazir commends this effort, noting that previous efforts were “very weak due to lack of unity.” The project, initiated by WCLAC, involves 15 women’s organizations training men and women throughout the West Bank and Gaza in legal literacy and advocacy. “Palestinians only have two years of experience of the Legislative Council,” said Hanan Abdel-Rahman Rabbani, Project Manager. “It’s still not clear to them what the role of their PLC member is, or what his or her relationship is with his or her constituency.”

The project has focused on highlighting discriminatory legislation in laws, such as the personal status law. As Attorney Manal Kleibo Zarf has noted, “If a woman is raped, she cannot go to court on her own. Her case is only

valid if she is accompanied by her father or her brother." The project is drafting amendments to redress such instances of gender discrimination. These amendments constitute the core of their lobbying activities, and are to be presented at a Central Model Parliament scheduled for March, 1998.

As Suheir Azzouny of WATC said with regard to ending the practice of honor killings, "Nothing can be done by legislation; there has to be awareness in the community." The sense of the honor code in general and what is considered to violate it has evolved in recent years, according to Lisa Taraki. "Many infringements of the honor code are solved in other ways, such as through elopement or marriage."

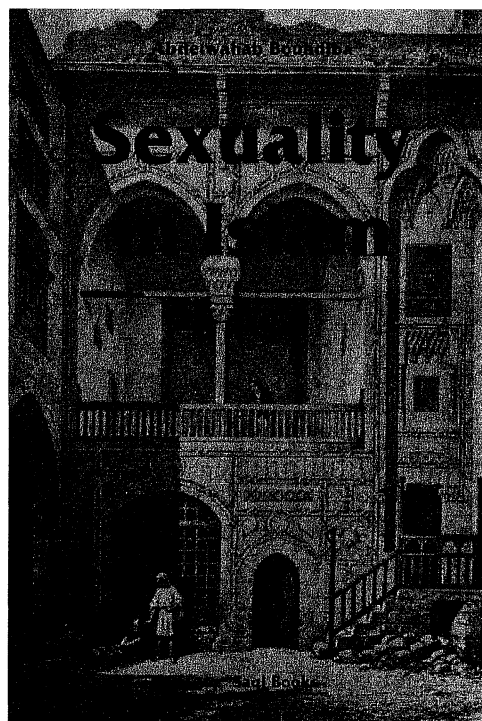
As a result of NGO efforts, the media's publicizing of honor killings has begun to raise the issue in public forums and make it a matter of public debate. Last spring, the Palestinian press reported on a four-year-old girl who was raped by a 25-year-old man and left to bleed to death by her family because she had "dishonored" her family. The child survived, but her "honor" is marred for life.

The WATC has also brought discussion of honor crimes to newspapers, its radio show and its newsletter. The group publicized the recent honor killing of a woman from the Ramallah area, referring to her as a "martyr" of her society, thereby seeking to promote a redefinition of the "dishonorable" woman's status. The women's movement has incorporated the issue of honor killings into its wider and less sensitive campaign to reduce violence against women. Last December, a coalition of WATC-led organizations secured an official PLC condemnation of domestic violence.

Palestinians increasingly acknowledge that sexual abuse, including incest and rape, occurs in Palestinian society. Safa Tamish, who is affiliated with the Tamer Institute for Community Education, has been pioneering research on Palestinian sexuality for several years. Acknowledging her work, the Ministry of Education recently agreed to train its 270 counselors in sex education. In time, Tamish's work may serve as a foundation upon which sex education may be introduced into the Palestinian curriculum.

Within a broader sociological context, a number of trends have been redefining the honor code, independent of efforts exerted by individuals, the women's movement or officials within the PNA. In *Palestinian Society*, published by Birzeit University's Women's Studies Program, Lisa Taraki tentatively suggests that the patriarchal nature of Palestinian society could be undergoing a redefinition due to socioeconomic changes, such as the growth of employment prospects for women, the rising age of marriage, rising educational levels for women and the break up of the extended family. The latter change, Sharif Kanaana believes, is the means most likely to decrease the rate of honor killings. "What needs to come first is a system that changes relations between people, especially within families." ■

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