

**“There is nothing ‘honourable’ about honour killings”: gender,  
violence and the limits of multiculturalism**

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## **“There is nothing ‘honourable’ about honour killings”: gender, violence and the limits of multiculturalism**

### **Abstract**

‘Honour killings’ are extreme acts of domestic violence culminating in the murder of a woman by her family or community. However only in relation to religious and ethnic communities is the concept of ‘honour’ invoked as motivation for domestic violence. In this paper we argue that ethnicised women<sup>1</sup> are caught up in a collision of discourses. Women who are victims of honour killings are invisible within the cultural relativism of the British multicultural discourse and the private/public divide which characterises the domestic violence discourse. But since September 11, while ethnicised women have become highly visible, they are now contained and constructed in the public consciousness within a discourse of fear and risk posed by the presence of the Muslim alien ‘other’. By developing an effective human rights approach to honour killings it could be possible to move away from the ‘gender trap’ of cultural relativism within the liberal democratic discourse on multiculturalism.

**Key Words** domestic violence, ethnicised women, honour killings, human rights, Islamophobia multiculturalism.

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## Introduction

Honour killings have been defined as “...*the killing of women for suspected deviation from sexual norms imposed by society*” (Faqir 2001: 66). Honour killings are extreme acts of violence perpetrated upon a woman when an honour code is believed to have been broken and perceived shame is brought upon the family. Women can also carry the burden for the shame of male violations of their sexual ‘honour’ and have been killed because they have fallen pregnant as victims of incest and rape. Being suspected of sexual deviancy such as pregnancy outside marriage or adulterous behaviour is also seen as enough to justify punishing a woman. What marks so called ‘honour killings is that it is not just the husband or partner that may carry out the act, but also the community and other family members such as mothers, brothers, uncles and cousins.

The UN estimates 5000 women are being killed each year in the name of ‘honour’ (UNFPA 2000). Honour killings have been documented in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda and the UK (Sajid 2003). While more than 100 women are killed by their partners in England and Wales every year, the Metropolitan Police estimates that in 2003 there were approximately 12 honour killings across Sikh, Muslim and Christian communities (The Guardian Oct 3 2003). Southall Black Sisters (SBS), a campaigning group for the rights of minority ethnic women deal with over 2500 cases of domestic violence a year and report over 20 honour killings in the UK between 2001-2003 (RWA 2003). While many of these reported cases come from the Pakistani, South Asian and Kurdish community, African and Caribbean women<sup>2</sup> are also affected by crimes of ‘honour’ (RWA 2003). In

this sense the experience of violence or that of honour is not confined to women in Asian communities, or the preserve of Muslim communities.

However in the UK honour killings as a specific phenomena is perceived by the media and government agencies as a crime that is practiced only among certain minority ethnic groups. Thus honour killings as domestic violence has become 'ethnicised' within the British multicultural context. While we recognise that ethnic groups and communities do have specific religious and cultural traditions which they may themselves label as honour based, why, in the context of ethnicity, is domestic violence treated as a culturally specific honour crime by our wider organisations and institutions? In this paper we argue that ethnicised women are caught up in a collision of discourses. They are caught between the contradictions inherent within the cultural relativism of the British multicultural discourse and the private/public divide which characterises the domestic violence discourse. On one hand these women are at personal risk from patriarchal, cultural and religious belief systems of 'honour and shame' that can lead to what has been popularly termed as 'honour killings'. On the other hand their personal risk is amplified as they are invisible from protective agencies and social services. Multiculturalism which is underpinned by notions of 'respecting diversity and valuing cultural difference' unwittingly engenders non-intervention when dealing with domestic violence rooted in cultural and religious practices in the private sphere of the home. In this paper we explore these contradictions and suggest that these women 'slip through the cracks' of both the domestic violence and the multicultural discourses. As Beckett and Macey (2001) argue:

*"Multiculturalism does not cause domestic violence, but it does facilitate its continuation through its creed of respect for cultural*

*differences, its emphasis on non-interference in minority lifestyles and its insistence on community consultation (with male self defined community leaders). This has resulted in women being invisibilised, their needs ignored and their voices silenced” (Beckett and Macey 2001: 311).*

While Beckett and Macey highlight the contradictions of gendered multiculturalism which invisibilises women, particularly in terms of service provision, we also question the concurrent growing concern for the hitherto marginalised ethnicised woman. Why has the issue of violence to young ethnicised women been selected for attention now, at this time? In this paper we suggest that not only do young women ‘slip through the cracks’ of the shifting liberal democratic discourse on multiculturalism, but since September 11 young ethnicised women have become highly visible. However they are now problematically contained and constructed in the public consciousness within a discourse of fear and risk posed by the presence of the Muslim alien ‘other’. Thus ethnicised women are visible and yet pathologised as victims in relation to the negative media attention in the current discourse of Islamophobia. Ultimately, the need for a human rights approach to domestic violence which transcends the cultural context may provide a way forward, as it highlights patterns of domestic violence across all cultures<sup>3</sup> and gives gendered violence the status of a global risk through creating a collective awareness of the issues.

### **Is killing ever ‘honourable’? Cultural context of domestic violence**

Hannana Siddiqui of Southall Black Sisters argues using the term ‘honour’ is a misnomer. *“The crimes themselves are dishonourable: they are merely justified by the perpetrator, and wider community, in the name of honour”* (RWA 2003: 6). In this sense honour crimes are essentially a justification for male violence and essentially about domestic violence. However only in relation to religious and ethnic communities is the concept of honour invoked as motivation for domestic violence, or a reason why women are unable to escape domestic violence<sup>4</sup>. What is important to note is that the concept of honour plays a part in perpetuating violence against women in two ways. On one hand it is used by the perpetrator as an excuse or a mitigating factor when they commit acts of violence against women. As Siddiqui argues *“The state thinks that honour crimes are about cultural beliefs that they should not criticise. Implicitly this means the state accepts honour as a mitigating factor and condones crimes perpetuated in the name of it”* (RWA 2003: 6). From the perspective of the women themselves the concept works differently. What is particular about the concept of ‘honour’ and the fear of ‘shame’ is that it isolates women further and this results in preventing them seeking outside help when affected by domestic violence. Women fear punishment for having brought shame on the family or community honour, and they can suffer anything from social ostracism, to acts of violence, or as in the cases here, murder itself.

Media reports frame the popular discourse on honour killings in Britain. These reports are often sensationalised with a negative spin, and they can engage in a ‘pornography of violence’ focusing on the individual family and their barbarity and senselessness (CIMEL/Interights 2001). They also suggest it is often younger women in their late teens and early twenties who are victims of this crime. At this age young women’s emerging sexuality comes under increasing regulation and control by the family and wider

community. It is the young woman's sexual purity and 'honour' that is seen to define the status and regard with which the family is held in the community. One such case in the press is that of Heshu Yones who at aged 16 was murdered in 2002 by her Kurdish father in West London as he feared she was becoming too westernised. Rukhsana Naz, 19, was murdered by her brother and mother in 1998 because she was expecting an illegitimate child. To the mother Rukhsana was guilty of insult to the honour or 'izzat' of her family. She was held down by her mother and strangled by her brother. There is the well known case of Zena Briggs. Zena declined to marry a cousin in Pakistan and ran away with her English boyfriend. Her family hired professional 'bounty hunters' and hit men from within their community to track down both her and her boyfriend. A TV documentary was made and the couple are still in hiding after several years. In an interview Sawsan Salim (2003) of the Kurdistan Refugee Women's Organisation in London (KRWO) suggests though there are widely reported cases such as the murder of Sobhiea Abdullah Nadar and Heshow Abdullah, there are also many cases which are not reported, as well as situations of women being driven to suicide because they are afraid of familial and community retribution.

Focusing on culturally specific forms of domestic violence is often seen as very controversial ground. However culture has been used in some UK cases of honour killings where the defendant has tried to push for a more lenient sentence by pleading a cultural defence<sup>5</sup>. It is generally disputed that culture can explain how and why particular practices happen (Dobash and Dobash 1998). However, as African-American writer Toni Morrison asserts, we must raise difficult issues of sexism and domestic violence within our own (black) communities (Morrison 1993). In vulnerable and racialised communities there are tensions between protecting men from the racism of state agencies and negative



media representation on the one hand, and the need to raise the issue of gendered violence and protect women's rights in these communities on the other (Williams Crenshaw 1994)<sup>6</sup>. As Salim explains in the Kurdish community there is a fear amongst some that putting honour crimes on the public agenda might cause a dangerous backlash in the immigration debate and heighten xenophobic sentiments against asylum seekers (Salim 2003).

As a counter to the racist assertion that black and Asian men are more barbaric, Gupta (2003a) argues we must take a global perspective on domestic violence and see honour killing as part of a wider global patriarchal phenomenon of violence. The problem of femicide is not particular to one culture or religious group or community. Women are beaten and murdered across the globe for similar reasons. She argues domestic violence cuts across race, class, religion and age. Patriarchy uses violence extensively to subjugate women – it is not an issue of racial or ethnic differences. It is a question of the economic, political and social development of a society and the levels of democracy and devolution of power within communities. She suggests research shows that low-violence cultures have female power and autonomy outside the home, strong sanctions against interpersonal violence, a definition of masculinity that is not linked to male dominance or honour, and equality in decision making and resources within the family. These progressive qualities are absent from societies in which female sexual purity is still linked to familial and community dignity and social status, where the male is the custodian of that honour (Gill 2003).

As there is often community and wider familial involvement in honour killings, this demonstrates that violence against women is not only about the relationship between male

and female, but is also about systems of power (Walby 1990). In what Rubin (1975) has called Sex/gender systems oppression is not always inevitable, but rather the product of the specific social relations which organise it. Black feminists argue however that gender oppression is not just about a natural division of the sexes, but about understanding the social organisation of differences and in particular the race and class dimensions that structure these economic and political systems of power (Williams Crenshaw 1994; Mohanty 2003). These raced and classed patriarchal systems are embedded in our social, political and economic systems, and are especially manifest in our legal frameworks and judicial systems. Women's agency within these systems requires further exploration for a more complex understanding of female participation in systems of patriarchal violence (Carby 1982). Such an exploration would include women who are implicated as perpetrators and abusers, as well as the young women themselves who are bound into the values of the system itself. Women's involvement in honour crimes is not just a phenomena in relation to so called 'ethnic' communities. As Stanko (1985:53) shows many survivors of domestic violence in a western context who have attempted to seek help from their own mothers do not always receive support, being told to put up with it because 'he's your husband'.

### **The 'Gender Trap': Multiculturalism and the marginalisation of women**

Multiculturalism in the UK is a contested term meaning different things to different people (Hall 2000). It is often used loosely in political discourse to affirm the distinctness, uniqueness and individual validity of different cultures, groups or communities, and also recognises the importance of acknowledging and accommodating these differences and distinctness (Fisher 2004). The Commission on the Future of Multi Ethnic Britain (Runnymede Trust 2000 MEB) highlighted a need to move towards a

multicultural post-nation in which Britain would be a ‘community of communities’, in which we have shared values, but also the autonomy of cultural expression to wear the Muslim Hijab headscarf or eat Halal meat. State intervention, policy and professional discourse in the UK are predicated upon a loose and historically haphazard notion of what Hall (2000) has called ‘multicultural drift’. Here multicultural policies have been piecemeal and based on concessions, extensions and exemptions such as scheduling exams to avoid key festivals for various religious groups, Sikhs being exempt from wearing helmets, and slaughterhouses for Jewish and Muslims (Harris 2001). These concessions have been won or lost through the struggles post-war migrant communities living in Britain.

However multiculturalism as it has evolved in the British context is also deeply racialised (Hesse 2000). While liberal multiculturalism is popularly and politically conceived as celebrating diversity and ‘tolerating’ different cultural and religious values between groups, the notion of mutual tolerance is fragile. Multiculturalism in this sense is ‘skin deep’, and it works only if the demands of visible and distinct ethnic groups are not too ‘different’ and not too rejecting of the welcoming embrace of the ‘host’ society (Ahmed 2004). This fragility was tested when the MEB report suggested Britishness had unspoken racial connotations linked to Empire. This was met with a hostile media backlash against multiculturalism as it was seen to challenge the homogeneity of an exclusive imaginary ‘white’ Britishness (McLaughlin and Neal 2003).

In the face of growing racist political rhetoric and anti-asylum and immigration policies in the UK, we are witnessing a retreat from multiculturalism and a move towards ‘civic integration’. As part of the civic integration agenda newcomers have to swear an oath at

ceremonies, the toughening of the English language requirement when acquiring British citizenship, and mandatory citizenship and democracy education at English schools (Joppke 2004). In the context of racial unrest and ethnic segregation in the Northern Towns in Britain in 2001, 'social cohesion' and 'civic integration' has become the new discourse on multiculturalism (Bhavnani et al 2005). Social cohesion emphasises 'building bridges' between segregated communities through interfaith and cultural understanding, legitimating the link between citizenship and nationhood as essential for multicultural coexistence. Integration and active citizenship are now seen as the solution to economic inequality, political representation and structural segregation in housing and education which are the core issues of racial unrest.

However, liberal multiculturalism in its many and shifting manifestations has consistently functioned to privilege 'race' and ethnicity over gender (Samantrai 2002; Mirza 2003). Multiculturalism deals with problems *between* communities, but not problems *within* communities as it fails to recognise the gendered power divisions within ethnic groups. Gender differences within the multicultural discourse now and in the past have yet to be recognised (Okin 1999). In the Commission on the Future of Multi Ethnic Britain women get a three page mention in the 314 page report (Mirza 2003). The Government's Community Cohesion reports fail to look at the specificity of gendered social action (Bhavnani et al 2005). A gender-blind multicultural discourse means women remain invisible, locked into the private sphere where gender oppressive cultural and religious practices are still played out. As Beckett and Macey (2001) argue "*The 'honour killing' of women who are viewed as having disgraced their community highlights the problems inherent in both multiculturalism and the public: private*" (pg 313).

To understand the invisibility of gender and violence in multicultural discourse we need to look at the way in which ethnicity has become reified and essentialised in the western construction of difference (Fisher 2004). Yuval Davis (1997) calls this process of reification ‘ethnic fundamentalism’. Here ethnic group identity is defensive, constructed in fixed ‘immutable collectivity boundaries’. The inherent cultural reductionism in the multiculturalist discourse not only assumes cultural homogeneity among local communities, with each one spatially segregated, but it also means we cannot talk about racial difference and hierarchies of cultures as it is politically incorrect (Stolcke 1995). As a consequence of this culturalist tendency in political discourse, the exclusion of ethnic minorities, and especially the women, is legitimated through insensitive multicultural policies that locate them in marginal spaces, on the periphery of decision making both politically and in terms of policy (Bhavnani et al 2005).

Such reductionism fails to see the intersectionality of structural inequalities that affect all women, including an understanding of the interrelationship between global patriarchy, racism and domestic violence (Crenshaw Williams 1994). Domestic violence cuts across class, race and different societies where violence is used as a way of maintaining control over female behaviour. There is thus a need to do something about the patterned use of violence, both physical and mental coercion to control and dominate women across cultures (Merchant 2000). Women who stray from their ‘owners’, whether being their husband, partner, wider family or in-laws often suffer the consequences through experiencing regulation through violence:

*“To understand the experience of gender based violence, we need to ask questions about the ownership of different kinds, including with*

*regard to ownership and access to women's bodies within and outside marriage, to public and private space" (Astbury 2003: 163).*

Such bodily regulation can be explained, in part, by looking beyond individual 'ownership' to the wider discourses that frame such regulation. For example, multicultural discourse, it has been argued contains connotations of nationalism which has negative consequences for women (Abbas 2004). Some parallels with nationalism are the belief in the necessity of each culture, the loyalty demanded to it, and the duty to transfer it to the next generation. Anthias and Yuval Davis (1992) argue for the need to understand the symbolic role attributed to women as carriers and bearers of ethnic group identity. In the experience of migration, identity of new arrivals and indeed established communities may be contested, often leading to communities feeling the need to uphold their identity from their homeland. While identity and culture are not static, the woman's body is the site over which identity is asserted and culture is maintained. She, as the carrier and bearer of her ethnic group has the obligation not to stray and disrupt the group's identity by mixing with 'others'.

Furthermore there is a link between migration experience and violence (Akpinar 2003). If communities feel discriminated against in host societies, there is the risk that those who hold conservative and patriarchal values will turn inwards and will "*continue exerting pressure on females by holding on to patriarchal values which are remnants of a rural/feudal culture*" (p428). For migrant women patriarchal practices can be amplified in western countries. Fadime Sahindal, a 22 year old Kurdish-Swedish woman and her Swedish boyfriend were killed by her father in 2002. Before her death, Fadime was a celebrity. She went public and spoke about problems of immigrant women and

maintaining family honour. This arose out of the problems she faced from her own family, where she had been threatened with her life if she were to continue her relationship with her Swedish boyfriend (Kurkiala 2003). What this case demonstrates is Fadime's family's honour was disrupted by her having a relationship with Swedish man. It is within a migratory context that these problems are more likely to arise. Families fear loss of identity and feel the need to continue culture and practices from their homeland. The need to uphold values and identity from the homeland have to be maintained through regulating female behaviour, by ensuring that she maintains the group's ethnic identity through mixing with her 'own'. If she somehow strays from this code of behaviour, she may no longer be desirable and risks ostracising herself and her family from further networks being built within the community.

### **Dealing with difference: domestic violence and multicultural services**

The focus on racialised position rather than gender has paradoxically given rise to some acute cases of women's exclusion from services (Burman and Chantler 2004). Women from ethnic minority communities can lack protection because organisations are fearful of being seen as racist when taking a positive stance in relation to culturally specific problems such as honour crimes. Elders and patriarchal leaders of many ethnic communities have used the liberal discourse of multiculturalism as a means of localised empowerment though claiming to be the vanguards of women's traditional 'honour' codes. They often act as gatekeepers between minority and majority communities. As Johal argues, if the State colludes with community leaders, what kind of protection can we expect from the State? She points out gendered violence is seen as a community issue:

*“The issue of preserving family honour remains central to the community attitude to domestic violence. If a woman brings dishonour to her family, then any violence committed against her can be justified on this basis” (Johal 2003: 37).*

But despite the struggles of black and Asian women’s groups to empower women, male community leaders are still influential within the communities. Ali Jan Haider, a Muslim social worker, explains the complex inter-relationship and confusion between Islam and Pakistani culture on one hand and the practice of the social services and his white and non-Muslim colleagues on the other. The latter often see such practices as ‘part of the culture’. This confusion often leads to inaction and resistance preventing Muslim women from seeking out help when they most need it. He relates how male family and community elders personally threatened him and his family when he helped a young 21 year old woman and her 5 children escape domestic violence and placed her in a refuge. The young woman had come to the UK aged 16 from the rural Mirpur district of Pakistan and had been subjected to persistent physical and mental abuse at the hands of her husband and her in-laws for several years. He explains the consequences of his actions,

*“...the community interference began in earnest. I had a phone call from a local Asian Councillor asking me if I could explain why I had taken mum and children away and broken up this respectable family. I then had phone calls and visits from countless community elders including a local religious leader. He did not waste any time castigating my actions and telling me what I had done was sinful.*



*He told me how I should be personally held responsible for the family's loss of face, and the distress I had caused them'* (Haider 2003:4)

An overly sensitive multicultural approach which Haider suggests is engendered by uninformed assumptions can often lead to negative action or inaction and can replicate structures of oppression within communities. Based on primary research with health care physicians, Puri (2005) cites cases where GPs breached confidentiality telling the family of the woman of her injuries, claiming that they did not know how to handle the patient's 'cultural baggage', or even allowing the patient's husband to stay for his wife's physical examination. As Burman et al argue community networks are usually seen as a support mechanism in minority ethnic communities but for some women in violent and life threatening situations, they can be followed and caught through their community networks, which may make them reluctant to approach community organisations (Burman et al 2004).

A multicultural approach to service provision has meant more involvement of different communities, and this has taken the form of multi-agency work (Gill and Rehman 2004). In a climate of increasing personal responsibility for professionals, services have had to relate to young women at risk of violence, abuse and death in the context of the discourse of multiculturalism in Britain. This emphasis on risk has consequences for how sensitive social problems such as domestic violence are dealt with. Radford and Tsutsumi (2004) argue that feminist activism against violence has taken place within a policy context of crime control, where risk assessment and risk management have become an increasingly important part of how agencies such as the police and probation handle their workloads, meet their targets, and manage resources. They argue that while feminists have seen the

risk discourse as an opportunity for opening up a dialogue with key agencies, uncovering violence, and getting it taken seriously by the police and courts, it has also meant rationing strategies limited to women who are deemed 'most at risk', thus denying protection to the majority and subsuming the broader issue of gendered violence and human rights.

In the case of domestic violence, honour killings and the risk faced by young ethnicised women, the tendency to individualisation and accountability in the discourse on risk, along with a laissez faire multicultural approach to dealing with violent gendered cultural practices within the private domestic sphere of the ethnicised family can exacerbate a state of reluctant interventionism. The State's response to domestic violence in ethnic communities has been slow. The police until recently have lacked interest or even been hostile to cases of honour killings. Women's organisations such as the Southall Black Sisters have successfully campaigned to highlight the specific ways in which immigration law, welfare policy and protective practice impinge on the rights of Black and Asian women. When there is a case of forced marriage which is on the continuum of domestic violence abuses, social services in the past have first tried to mediate, with safety and protection for these young women coming second. Mediation is not endorsed for women in the wider community. Siddiqui (2003) called for an end to mediation policies as women often lack power in mediation and after the honeymoon period, families often resort back to abuse and forced marriage. Mediation is a less threatening option than girls leaving their families and taking out injunctions against them. She goes on to argue that the solution lies in giving women alternatives from agencies where agencies can support and advise them in breaking away from abusive relationships. The input from women's groups such as the Southall Black Sisters has to some extent been successful in

informing the revised Forced Marriage Unit's approach to dealing with these situations. In their recent guidelines to police, social workers and education professionals they recommend that community representatives and family members should not be approached as a means of reconciling differences and state that this method could be potentially dangerous (FCO 2004; FCO 2005)

In their evidence to the Working Party on Forced Marriage, Southall Black Sisters were concerned about the failure of service providers to address the needs of women and girls at risk of forced marriages, which in some cases have led to honour killings (CIMEL/Interights 2001). Such service providers may cite cultural grounds for this failure, on the assumption that minority communities are self policing, and they therefore do not have to intervene on behalf of these women. According to Siddiqui (2003) many community leaders who were consulted on the Working Group on Forced Marriages denied that there is a problem with forced marriage, and are hostile to women who refuse these marriages and women's organisations that work with them. Some have argued that issues raised around forced marriage are a form of racism and attack on the community, and on their cultural and religious heritage. In many cases of abduction and forced marriage of dual nationals, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have refused to intervene formally as the young women are overseas and it is argued it is not within their jurisdiction (CIMEL/Interights 2001).

Women's campaigning organisations have highlighted how immigration law continues to sideline women who may be fleeing a violent domestic situation, as gendered risk is not recognised as grounds for asylum (RWA 2003; Crawley 2001). Asylum is granted on the basis of proven political affiliation. This criteria is inherently male biased as women are

less likely to be officially involved as dissidents (Kofman 2004). The burden of proof is so onerous on women who have been raped, sexually threatened or forced to marry that they often face death or incarceration rather than be publicly shamed (FCO 2000).

Eligibility for service support is denied to many women by virtue of their immigration status and can be excluded from service and welfare support (Burman et al 2004).

Women have been turned away from refuges because they did not have proper immigration status (Burman and Chantler 2004). In response to black and Asian women's activism, in 1999 the government introduced a concession to the One Year Rule (which stated that women would have to stay with their husbands for one year, or otherwise would face deportation) for women experiencing domestic violence (Back et al 2002). The women have to prove that they have been victims of domestic violence if they are within the first year of marriage. But proof levels consist of legal evidence: a court injunction, a police caution against the perpetrator, and medical evidence alone will not be accepted. Many young women, regardless of ethnic background, would find it difficult to report a domestic violent situation to the police in fear of further violent action from their partner.

### **The 'new risk': Islamophobia and the ethnicised woman**

Post 9/ 11 risks associated with gender related violence are on the public and political agenda. For example increased media attention has been accompanied by steps taken by the Metropolitan Police Diversity Directorate looking into honour crimes. UNIFEM has given money to NGOs to work on honour killings. In January 2005 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office jointly launched the Forced Marriage Unit which works to prevent forced marriages taking place providing assistance to potential

victims, develop policy and undertakes project work. It views forced marriage as an abuse of human rights (FCO 2005). A recent project funded by the European Union's DAPHNE programme, 'Shehrazad' aims to create a European knowledge base about honour-related violence, and facilitate an exchange of experiences and good practice between partner countries. Recently the Crown Prosecution Service held a one day conference in London on specifically addressing honour crimes and to raise awareness of such crimes in Europe (CPS 2004). We have also witnessed pronouncements by David Blunkett as Home Secretary on criminal measures to deal with the issue of forced marriage as it affects young Asian women living in Britain<sup>7</sup>. Similarly when war was declared on Afghanistan in response to September 11, Cherie Blair and Laura Bush the wives of the UK Prime Minister and USA President took up the issue of 'Taliban oppression of women and children in Afghanistan' (The Telegraph 17 Nov 2001). Holding special meetings in 10 Downing Street to 'give back a voice' to Afghani women, Cherie Blair chose to spotlight the 'shocking and inspiring stories' of the women and raise charitable funds for the cause (The Guardian 20 Nov 2001).

However this raises the question, 'what is behind this growing concern for the hitherto invisible and marginalised 'ethnic woman'? It is argued we are living in a 'risk society'. Mary Douglas (1992) suggests some risks are selected for concern at particular times, and constructed and legitimated for public attention. She argues that risks are chosen for their usefulness to the social system. Beck (1992) also argues that risk is malleable and open to social definition and construction. He was aware that the elite, such as the media, scientists, politicians and legal profession, can define and legitimate risk. The mass media have a big part to play in public perception of risk. It is a filter in the way lay people and experts receive news and interpret events (Gabe 1995). Questions should

repeatedly be asked such as whose definition of risk, and how has the perception of risk been constructed? How are some risks selected for concern and how are they legitimated for public attention? In the case of violence to young ethnicised, and in particular Muslim women, the question arises as to why their risks are selected for attention over others right now?

While the increased attention given to honour killings in the media has opened up the issue of individual human rights for these women, it has also had the effect of exacerbating Islamophobia and ‘fear of the ‘other’. Honour killings have become associated with Islam and the risk of terrorism in our midsts (Majid and Hanif 2003). Sara Ahmed (2003) argues that discourses of fear and anxiety which have circulated since September 11 work by securing what is the “truth” about ‘the other’. She states,

*” fear operates as an effective economy of truth: fear slides between signs and sticks to some bodies and not others. For example the judgment that someone “could be” a terrorist draws on past and affective associations that stick various signs (such as Muslim, fundamentalist, terrorist) together. At the same time, fear is reproduced precisely by the threat that such bodies “ may pass (us) by.” Such bodies become constructed as fearsome and as a threat to the very truths that are reified as “ life itself” ( pg 377) .*

Thus the increased focus on ‘honour’ based crimes need to be seen within the current climate of Islamophobia. Fekete (2004) has written of the climate of claimed global threat to security from Islamic extremism. We are living in a time when it is not just a case of fear from ‘outsiders’ but also those within. Resident Muslim and Asian citizens within western countries are now under the spotlight. The current discourse on ‘others’ is

about the threat that multicultural policies pose to core values, cultural homogeneity and social cohesion. To minimise the risk of threat we now have increased citizenship laws and security legislation, the introduction of compulsory language and civic tests for citizenship applicants, and codes of conduct for trustees of mosques. As Fekete explains,

*“The stereotyping of all aspects of Muslim culture as backward creates a climate in which politicians and the media can attack multiculturalism as the cover behind which reactionary cultural practices can flourish”* (Fekete 2004: 19).

Honour killings when reported in the British press are often sensationalist, and engage in cultural stereotyping which puts the gaze on the ‘other’ (Majid and Hanif 2003; CIMEL/Interights 2001). The young women are constructed as either romantic heroine, struggling for the benefits of the ‘west’ against her cruel and inhuman father and family, or victim, succumbing to her backward and traditional ‘eastern’ culture (Puwar 2003; Ahmad 2003). Parallels can be drawn to colonial times where women’s bodies were part of the debate over the civilising mission. The British abolition of sati, the practice of widow burning in India, was a case of the heroic white male colonists “saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988). In the current discourse, the gaze as ever, is on the woman. Her over-determined body (Dwyer 1999) has become symbolic in the battle against Islam and the barbaric ‘other’. But unlike in colonial times the woman is not ‘saved’ within the current climate of Islamophobia and multiculturalism. The laissez faire discourse of liberal multiculturalism ensures community and group cultural practices are not to be interfered with. It contributes to further construction of the ‘other’s’ barbaric customs and cultures (Said 1985), which are left alone but condemned.

While honour killings are real in *effect*, in that women are brutally murdered, they are also constructed as an ethnicised phenomena within the racialised multicultural discourse, and are as such also an *affect* of this discourse. In this regard the media reports have a real consequence. They contribute to putting women at risk through sensationalising these crimes through their style and content of reporting which results in voyeuristic spectacle (cries of ‘how dreadful’!) followed by multicultural paralysis and inaction (‘nothing to do with us! It is part of their culture’).

*“The combination of sex and violence involved in honour crimes lends itself readily to lurid images and, in the case of the western media, cultural stereotyping, which can result in a backlash on the issue at a national level”* (CIMEL Interights 2001: 31).

Sensationalist images and analysis are in frequent use in the media, as are generalised and simplified explanations of honour crimes (CIMEL Interights 2001). By not acting in conjunction with human rights activists, women’s groups, and academics, the mainstream media collude to undermine the subjectivity and agency of the marginal ethnicised woman. In what Mohanty has called the ‘latent ethnocentrism’ of the west (Mohanty 1988) the women are presented as voiceless, stereotyped, racialised victims rather than active agents working to determine and engage their rights as individuals. Such sexualised objectification of ethnicised women disavows the relationship of gender, power and patriarchy within the negative social construction of Islamophobia.



## **Feminism, diversity and human rights: Challenging the multicultural State**

Black and minority ethnic women's groups have been central in raising awareness and tackling problems related to domestic violence, sexuality and cultural and religious conservatism within specific communities and groups<sup>8</sup>. Since the 1980s, the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), SBS, Newham Asian Women's Project (NAWP), RWO (Refugee Women's Organisation), WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws) and WAF (Women Against Fundamentalism), to name a few have contributed to placing minority ethnic women's issues on the agenda. Black feminists have long argued that race and gender matters in its differential effects (Williams Crenshaw 2000; Mirza 1997; Brah 1996; Collins 1998; Mama 1989).

However Samantrai (2002) argues that black British feminist activism has been more than just about accessing rights and services. Black women activist groups such as SBS are a contingent and politically destabilizing force, in constant state of flux, where neither allies nor enemies are readily identifiable and where even its own subjects may become obsolete. She argues black British feminists are, '*a privileged interlocutor of the similitudes and differences that constitute postimperial Englishness*' (Samantrai 2002: 2). In their interrogation of the racial subtext of English majority and minority identities, she argues they are engaged in refining the 'we' of the nation. Samantrai explains, '*As the experiences of women move from the margin to the centre in a community's self definition, women no longer have to choose between belonging or exile in a collective that itself remains fixed. They become central actors in the regeneration, through translation of their communities and histories of belonging*' (p164)

SBS has effectively mobilised around the insistence that domestic violence does not signify cultural difference but also demonstrate a refusal to abandon their claims on their community of difference. However the strategic actions, values, and beliefs of feminists in achieving their goal are determined in part by both domestic socio-cultural and international conditions (Savery 2005). Walby (2002) notes a re-framing of feminism in terms of globalisation and the human rights discourse constitutes a major challenge to feminist treatments of difference and diversity, especially in terms of ethnic, national, religious and racialised divisions between women. She suggests that in the UK, rather than relying on women's own resources in civil society feminists have tended to draw on the wider political resources of the transnational movement against male violence in their engagement with the British State. At a roundtable held to address the issue of honour crimes held by CIMEL and Interights (2001), a discussion of human rights as protection for women came under the spotlight. It was recommended that it is important to raise honour crimes as a human rights violation before as many UN human rights bodies as possible. It is also important to work with community leaders and submit shadow reports to UN treaty bodies such as the Human Rights Committee, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Committee Against Torture, and Committee on the Rights of the Child. The conference concluded that a human rights approach would need to take into account a country's civil societal role in addressing honour crimes and include their own national concerns about sexuality, patriarchy and sexual autonomy. Such an approach calls for a redefinition of community, citizenship and the individual and challenges the false dichotomy between community and women, where women are placed outside of the community.

While the human rights approach offers the way forward to protecting women from violence and abuse, mainstreaming women's concerns and experiences into the human rights framework does raise many issues. Kelly poses several questions in this regard: Does the mainstreaming of rights based claims by 'insider' transnational feminist coalitions into UN and international law undermine the foundations and transformative effects of 'outsider' grassroots feminist activism? Has the vocabulary and machinery of human rights the ability to transcend differences and create a common language and agreed goals that can really tackle deeper causes of oppression and domination which is at the root of violence in gender relations (Kelly 2005)? Clearly a human rights approach is not without its problems when considering intersectional engagement with rights issues and for creating a positive legal and political culture for equality seeking initiatives. As Conaghan and Millns explain the Human Rights Act 2000 in the UK should be approached with caution as regards its capacity to improve women's lives and contribute more generally to a just and equal society. However they argue while it is imbued with the deficiencies inherent within national and human rights instruments it also provides the opportunity to open up a 'new constitutional space' not only in terms of new litigation strategies but it can also provide, "*the potential audibility of previously unheard dialogue about the rights of women and others whose concerns have been traditionally eclipsed by the legal perpetuation of dominant (hetero)sexist norms and practises*" (Conaghan and Millns 2005:12).

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action resulted in the declaration that culture, tradition and religion could not be used by the State to avoid their obligation to protect women (Kelly 2005). Radhika Coomaraswamy, the special Rapporteur to the UN Commission on Human Rights on Violence against Women highlights the importance of the State's

willingness to be active and interventionist in promoting these new norms of international law if they are to permeate down to the realm of the everyday. She suggests the creativity and innovation of Asian women's activist groups in India demonstrates how a bridge can be made between the discourse of international human rights and the private sphere of personal lives. Indian women have adapted tradition to support women's rights within the family by arguing for their individual right to choose between the competing human rights law at the national level or personal law as it affects their daily lives (Coomaraswamy 1997 in Kelly 488-9).

Ultimately, as Savery (2005) argues we need to explain why some international norms of sexual non-discrimination have been incorporated into domestic State practices and others not. In developing a critical realist approach she suggests we need to understand the dynamic interplay of international and domestic structures, various agents, discourse and power. In particular she points to tension between the gender-biased corporate identity of many States, which resist diffusion of gender-based human rights norms, with the articulation of international and domestic pressure from a variety of actors. For many women's groups such as SBS , KWRO (Kurdish Women's Refugee Organisation) and WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws) that are campaigning against honour killings in the British multicultural context, Savery has a strategic message,

*“...advocates struggling for change at the domestic level need to be aware that discursively challenging political elites' ideas of **proper** and **appropriate** gender roles and relations in society contributes to generating State behavioural change”*  
(Savery 2005:111 sic).



## **Conclusion: From multiculturalism to Islamophobia: Contextualising the collision of discourses**

By highlighting domestic violence issues in specific cultural and religious ethnic communities in the UK are we at risk of stereotyping these communities as backward and barbaric? Does this place a disproportionate 'gaze on the 'other' woman- racialise her, separating out this form of domestic violence as a special cultural phenomena needing special cultural sensitivity? These questions lie at the heart of understanding the tensions between recognising gender oppression in the cultural context and preserving multicultural difference. This debate has been raised in relationship to other practices such as female genital mutilation and forced marriages, where the sanctity of (male) community rights are privileged over the bodily rights of individual (female) victims when the cultural context is brought to bear (Beckett and Macey 2001).

Phoenix (1996) suggests there is a normative absence/pathological presence response with regard to women from black and minority ethnic communities. Indeed ethnicised women are caught up in a collision of discourses. They are visible and yet pathologised as victims in relation to the negative media attention in the current discourse of Islamophobia. However these women at the same time are largely absent in the normative discourse on domestic violence in the west (Mama 1989; Carby 1982). Many young women from ethnic minority communities are at risk of not being fully protected by the State as equal citizens as they are invisible. Within the discourse of multiculturalism, women 'fall between the cracks'. In this discourse 'race' and ethnicity is prioritised and gender differences and inequalities are rendered invisible.

However the killing of women must never be seen as cultural matter, but always as a human rights issue (Salim 2003). The power struggle between community leaders and women's groups within a multicultural policy framework needs to be reassessed in terms of who should agencies be working and consulting with. Questions should be repeatedly asked such as who is getting marginalized and why, and who is speaking on whose behalf and why? For example while issues of 'intimate femicide' have been raised and highlighted by radical feminist scholarship over the last 30 years the particular situation of the ethnicised woman has been marginalised within the domestic violence discourse. The cultural specificity of honour and shame, and community and familial violence as opposed to intimate male violence means that often the ethnocentricity of gendered violence is not addressed (Carby 1982). However if honour killings and forced marriage as forms of domestic abuse and violence are constructed as ethnicised problems by politicians and the media, as witnessed in the current preoccupation with 'the Muslim woman', it can create not only more multicultural marginalisation but also a racist backlash at a local and national level.

While the intersectionality of race, class and gender power dynamics produce culturally specific manifestations of domestic violence which are important to acknowledge and address in local service delivery, the responses and funding should be mainstreamed into informing domestic violence interventions more generally. Policies such as not putting non-English speaking women into white run refuges because of a perceived lack of 'cultural fit' can leave desperate women without care or shelter (Williams Crenshaw 1994). At the same time it is important for Asian women's sense of empowerment to be in a domestic violence project that enables their equal participation and values their decision making (Gill and Rehman 2004). The climate that multiculturalism has produced

in relation to racism is one of 'walking on eggshells' where cultural differences are respected, often without question, for fear of not offending communities and ethnic groups. In these situations young ethnic minority women can suffer from a lack of protection because they 'slip through the cracks' of not only conflicting discourses but also services. Organisations that deal with their protection are fearful of being seen as racist, or feel they lack the cultural expertise, or cannot access ring-fenced specialist funding.

With the appropriate enforcement of the Human Rights Act (2000) in the UK, it is possible to move away from the 'gender trap' of cultural relativism inherent within liberal democratic discourse on multiculturalism, where gender is rendered at best marginal, or at worst invisible. In the absence of global social and political reform of violent patriarchal cultures where masculinity and honour is linked to female control, we can use human rights law-based challenges to develop a more equitable and culturally neutral perspective where women's rights are ensured and privileged over patriarchal cultural practices. By adopting a realist human rights approach (Savery 2002) which is predicated upon challenging the gender-biased corporate identity of the British multicultural State, black and Asian feminist activists who are in the process of redefining the 'we', not only in their own communities but in the multicultural nation (Samantrai 2002), have already begun to challenge the injustice of culturally endorsed domestic violence at its heart.

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1 We use the term 'ethnicised women' in preference to the official and much contested collective term 'Black and minority ethnic women' (Bhavnani, Mirza and Meeto 2005). While the latter term denotes the social construction of difference through visible racial (black) and cultural (ethnic) markers, it does not emphasise the *process* of racial objectification implied by the former term. Thus *being or becoming* 'ethnicised' brings into play the power relations that inform and structure the gaze of the 'other' which, we suggest, frames the women's experience. Despite women's agency and activism, women deemed as 'the other' are often 'ethnicised' or typified by the media and state agencies in terms of their perceived (backward) cultural and religious practices.

2 There are the well known cases of the two Nigerian women, Safiya Hussaini and Amina Lawal, who both faced being stoned to death but were then spared following an international campaign (The Guardian Sept 10 2002; The Guardian Sept 26 2003). There are many cases in the Caribbean for example see Coomaraswamy (1999).

3 For a discussion on the globalization of domestic violence issues in different cultural contexts see Nair 2001; Walby 2002; Radford and Tsutsumi 2004; Kelly 2005

4 It is most often in relation to religious and black and minority ethnic communities that the concept of honour is invoked. Various forms of political and religious violence against women are culturally specific practices but are more likely to be seen as the consequence of systems of patriarchy (Araji 2000) and less likely to be perceived as an honour crime. For example in 1970s women in Northern Ireland were tarred and feathered for dating British soldiers (The HistoryNet.com accessed 14/06/05). Similarly in 1900s unmarried mothers in Ireland were cruelly incarcerated, often for life, in state-funded homes with their babies (Smith 2004).

5 The Southall Black Sisters suggest that 25% of all domestic homicides concern the killing of women, and in many of these cases men invoke a cultural defence (CIMEL/Interights 2001). Some

UK cases of honour killings have shown that the defendant has tried to push for a more lenient sentence by pleading a cultural defence (see cases of Rukhsana Naz and Shaida Mohammed for example). These cases have been unsuccessful. But cultural pleas have been made with the aim to reduce the sentence to manslaughter. Shabir Hussain who argued on appeal for manslaughter on the grounds of provocation is evidence of this is a case in point. He argued for loss of self control and which led to him running over his sister in law Tasleem Begum numerous times. When he was retried his original life sentence was cut to 6 ½ years.(Phillips 2003). The case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia who was tried for the murder of her physically abusive husband, suggests that culture can become available to female defendants only when they conform to the subservient non-western wife (Phillips 2003). The judge asked the jury to consider that she was an Asian woman, married to an Asian man, but also an educated woman., suggesting that because she was an Asian woman she was more likely to be trapped in her marriage, but the fact that she had a university degree might cancel this out. She eventually had her conviction overturned through medical evidence that she was suffering from a major depressive disorder

6 There are also further issues of conflicting interest between white and black women evident in feminist movements. The Reclaim the Night marches in the 1970s attempted to make the streets safer for women. These marches are still in operation today. The areas that were under the spotlight were often black areas and demands were made for better policing. However it was argued that police protection is not the same for black women, highlighting the different relations women have to power structures (see Bhavnani and Coulson 2005)

7 Clearly government intervention is a controversial matter that raises the issue of community rights and women's rights. Blunkett in calling for an end to arranged marriages outside the UK was criticized by Mr. Siddiqui Head of the Muslim Parliament as 'using racist language' and Labour Peer Baroness Uddin as being 'deeply offensive'. A Muslim woman Human Rights lawyer, Sood

stated Blunkett was contravening human rights by imposing his views on the Asian community and failed to see the difference between forced and arranged marriage. Sikh Community Action Network spokesperson said it is a serious issue hidden behind a barrier of cultural diversity and Ann Cryer, MP for Keighley, West Yorkshire welcomed the debate and the extra protection for young women. (8 Feb 2002 ) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/1807885.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1807885.stm)

8 See Gill and Rehman 2004; Thiara 2003; Gupta 2003b Takhar 2003; Samantrai 2002; Sudbury 2001

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