

What is honour?

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A quick Google search defines honour as “an abstract concept entailing a perceived quality of worthiness and respectability that affects both the social standing and the self-evaluation of an individual...” This is an apt concept in our social context. Individual worthiness and respectability affects our social standing within our family and wider community. Doing the honourable thing, being the honourable, magnanimous person, carrying our honour with shoulders back and head high are traits that are strongly associated with South Asian culture. The actions of one person determine the honour of the whole family and community. It may be an abstract concept, yet it carries with it a lot of responsibility in South Asian cultures.

The problem in South Asia is that such an important, powerful tool of family standing and worthiness has been placed on the shoulders of the female members of the family regardless of age. Women carry the honour of the family name, uphold the family worth and their actions determine how high a father or brother can hold his head up among his peers and community. Unpacking this socially complex term reveals that such an important responsibility is placed on the same woman, who during her lifecycle from childhood to adolescent to adulthood, has no real say in the household. The same girl, who is often denied the right to receive an education, is obliged to carry out household chores instead. In Pakistan, in 2015 approximately 13.7 million girls were out of school. We are talking of the same girl who is married off (without her consent, which as a child she is incapable of giving) while still a child often to a man twice her age. India has the highest number of child marriages in the world, with around 47 per cent of girls married

off before they are 18-years-old. In Pakistan, we are not far behind, despite prohibitory laws in some provinces. It is the same girl who is offered as compensation to settle family disputes or to keep property within the family. The same woman who is not consulted before taking any major household decisions. The same woman who is not in control of her reproductive health, nor a decision-maker in her children's future. The same woman who dare not speak in front of a male elder and often unable to even challenge her own sons. The same woman who is unable to inherit property rightly belonging to her. A woman is given half of any inherited property and has half the word in evidence but carries on her shoulders the ever so important respect and credibility of the entire family.

And if this abstract concept of family pride is violated, it is the men that are affected. She violates the honour, he is the one that is wounded by the violation. And then society says to men, you now have carte blanche to do what is needed to bring this so-called honour back that was so disdainfully stained by the one person in the house that has no say or power. Men set the standards of when honour has been violated and set the parameters of how far they may go to retrieve it.

This patriarchal concept is not just taught to us by the men of the family, it is ingrained in the women of the family as well. So a mother will be told to do what is needed to ensure that the daughter is doing everything to maintain the family name. As South Asian women, we are keepers of morality, at all ages and stages of our lives. In 2007, we saw a 70-year-old British Sikh woman convicted for the murder of her daughter-in-law who sought a divorce and was suspected of having an affair. In 1999, Saima Sarwar was shot dead by an assassin, in her lawyer's office in Lahore. Saima's mother arranged the killing because allegedly Saima brought shame to the family name for eloping with the man of her choice.

Surely, the logical thing would be to have the male of the house be the keeper of family honour and pride, and maintain its upkeep and ensure its compliance? Why is there such high expectation from the underprivileged, disadvantaged, unequal member of the household?

What conclusion can we draw from all of this? Women carry this abstract, tainted and arbitrary idea of honour so that men can wear it on their high shoulders and pronounce it proudly to the world. The same men can then declare revenge, arbitrarily, if they feel it's been violated. And the unsaid rule is that no community, no religion and no law will stand in the way of the person reclaiming this so-called honour they believe they have been deprived of. I say give the honour back to its rightful owner. Men should keep it, carry it and be responsible for it. We, women, find the load too heavy and the price too steep to be responsible for such a powerful abstraction of a man's ego.

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