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Exploring Gender Role in the Perpetuation of Honour Killing: A Case Study of District Kohat-Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT

Honour killing remain a significant issue within the Pakhtun community, deeply rooted in socio-cultural constructs and traditional notions such as “namus” (honour) and “ghairat” (Chivalry). This study investigated the socio-cultural dimension of honour killings in District Kohat, focusing on the perspectives of key community stakeholders, including Jirga members, offender families, social activists, researcher and Non-governmental organization (INGOs). A qualitative research methodology was employed, collecting primary data through in-depth interviews by selecting 25 participants through a purposive sampling technique. The thematic analysis technique was applied for data analysis. The study identifies key factors contributing to honour killings, including rigid gender roles, societal pressure, deep-seated patriarchal norms, and a lack of effective legal enforcement. Findings reveal that concepts such as “paighor” (taunt) and public shame act as catalysts for honour-related violence, compelling individuals and families to resort to extreme measures. Honour killings are not merely personal acts but are reinforced by broader systemic issues, such as weak governance, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, and the collective pressure to conform to cultural expectations. The study recommends that addressing these structural and cultural factors, society can move towards the gradual eradication of honour killings and the protection of fundamental human rights within the Pakhtun community.

Keywords: Honour killings, Pakhtun Perspective, Socio-cultural constructs, Gender roles.

Introduction

Honour killings have long been practiced in patriarchal societies where family reputation is linked to female chastity and obedience (Iqbal et al., 2012). According to Wikan (2008), honour killings occur predominantly in communities with rigid gender norms, where a woman's perceived transgression is considered an attack on the family's social standing. This practice is particularly prevalent in South Asia, the Middle East, and some parts of North Africa, where deep-rooted

traditional beliefs dictate family and community responses to perceived dishonour (Itzin et al., 2010).

Pakhtunwali,¹ the traditional code of conduct followed by the Pakhtun people, reinforces strict gender roles and the concept of “*ghairat*”² (Chivalry) (Gill et al., 2014). Chesler (2010) highlights that under *Pakhtunwali*, (the Pakhtun code of conduct) men are responsible for safeguarding family honour, and any perceived breach of moral or cultural expectations by women results in severe consequences. This cultural framework legitimizes the use of violence as a corrective measure to restore honour, thereby perpetuating honour killings across generations (Oldenburg, 2002).

Historically, honour killings have been linked to feudal and tribal structures where women’s roles are strictly defined, and any deviation is met with social condemnation and punishment (Chesler, 2010). In many cases, such acts of violence are not merely personal decisions but are reinforced by collective community pressures. The notion of honour is often manipulated to maintain traditional power hierarchies, ensuring that social norms are upheld even at the cost of human life (Sanauddin et al., 2015).

Despite efforts to address honour killings through legal means, enforcement remains weak (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013). Welchman and Hossain (2005) argue that many honour-related crimes go unreported due to social stigma and the involvement of informal justice systems such as *Jirga*’s³. *Jirga*’s (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) often rule in favor of the perpetrators, viewing honour killings as justified acts rather than criminal offences. This legal leniency contributes to the continued prevalence of honour-based violence (Ratner, 2000). The socio-cultural context of honour killings in the Pakhtun community is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and practices (Helba et al., 2014). Nazirullah and Ahmed (2022) explain that families often face external coercion from extended relatives and village elders, urging them to take action against women who are perceived to have dishonoured the family. The fear of “*paighor*”⁴ (taunt) leads families to choose violence over reconciliation, reinforcing the cycle of honour-based crimes (Dogan, 2011).

Gender roles play a crucial role in perpetuating honour killings. Women are expected to adhere to strict moral codes, with their actions reflecting upon the family’s reputation (Smartt, 2006). Any deviation, such as choosing a marriage partner against the family’s wishes or engaging in premarital relationships, is seen as a direct attack on family honour, often resulting in lethal consequences (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007).

Honour killings are also fueled by patriarchal ideologies that position men as the ultimate authority figures in the household (Casimir & Jung, 2009). Studies indicate that in communities where women’s rights are suppressed, honour-based violence is more prevalent (Korteweg, 2014). These acts are not just personal but institutionalized within the larger socio-cultural framework, making it difficult for women to seek justice or protection.

Psychologically, honour killings are rooted in the social conditioning of individuals within patriarchal societies (Nawaz & Robina, 2020). Korteweg (2014) discusses how honour-related

¹ *Pakhtunwali*: The traditional code of conduct followed by the Pashtuns, emphasizing values like honour, hospitality, and bravery. It serves as a guiding principle for social behaviour and decision-making within the Pakhtun community.

² *Ghairat*: A term signifying personal and family honour in Pakistani and Pashtun culture, often linked to pride and the defense of one's dignity.

³ *Jirga*: A traditional assembly of leaders in Pakhtun society, used to resolve disputes and make decisions on various community matters, often functioning as an informal court.

⁴ *Paighor*: A Pashto term meaning "taunt" or "insult," often associated with challenges to one's honour or dignity, which can provoke strong social and emotional reactions within Pakhtun culture.

violence is instilled in young men as a duty, teaching them that preserving family honour is their primary responsibility. This generational transmission of honour norms makes it difficult to break free from the cycle of violence (Kakakhel, 2005).

Economically, honour killings are more frequent in lower-income communities where women have limited access to education and financial independence (Almosaed, 2004). Studies by Lewis (2002) suggest that women's economic dependency on male family members increases their vulnerability to honour-based violence, as they have few means to escape oppressive environments.

Pakhtunwali (the Pakhtun code of conduct), the traditional code of conduct followed by the Pakhtun people, reinforces strict gender roles and the concept of "*ghairat*" (chivalry) (Malik et al., 2019). Ahmed (2013) highlights that under *Pakhtunwali* (the Pakhtun code of conduct), men are responsible for safeguarding family honour, and any perceived breach of moral or cultural expectations by women results in severe consequences. This cultural framework legitimizes the use of violence as a corrective measure to restore honour, thereby perpetuating honour killings across generations.

Despite efforts to address honour killings through legal means, enforcement remains weak (Chesler, 2010). Welchman and Hossain (2005) argue that many honour-related crimes go unreported due to social stigma and the involvement of informal justice systems such as *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions). *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) often rule in favor of the perpetrators, viewing honour killings as justified acts rather than criminal offences. This legal leniency contributes to the continued prevalence of honour-based violence (Ishaq & Bashir, 2023).

The socio-economic dynamics of honour killings also play a crucial role in their persistence (Gul & Fayaz, 2022). Studies by Chesler (2010) indicate that honour killings are more frequent in communities where women have limited access to education and economic independence. In such societies, women's autonomy is restricted to maintain traditional power structures, further reinforcing the belief that their behaviour must be controlled to protect family reputation (Bhanbhro et al., 2013).

Honour killings are also fueled by collective community pressure (Tarar et al., 2017). Nazirullah and Ahmed (2022) explain that families often face external coercion from extended relatives and village elders, urging them to take action against women who are perceived to have dishonoured the family. The fear of "*paighor*" (taunt) leads families to choose violence over reconciliation, reinforcing the cycle of honour-based crimes (Stanely & Kumari, 2010).

Psychologically, honour killings are rooted in the social conditioning of individuals within patriarchal societies (Sloan, 2007). Korteweg (2014) discusses how honour-related violence is instilled in young men as a duty, teaching them that preserving family honour is their primary responsibility. This generational transmission of honour norms makes it difficult to break free from the cycle of violence (Janina & Jakab, 2020).

The role of media and globalization in exposing honour killings has brought increased international scrutiny (Kulczycki & Windle, 2011). However, as Lewis (2002) notes, despite greater awareness, deep-seated cultural traditions continue to resist change. Efforts to implement reforms often face backlash, as communities perceive them as external interventions against their cultural autonomy.

Addressing honour killings requires a multi-dimensional approach. Legal reforms alone are insufficient unless coupled with social transformation. Baird (2018) suggests that community-based interventions, educational programs, and involvement of religious scholars can play a pivotal role in reshaping attitudes toward honour and gender roles. Additionally, providing safe

spaces and support systems for potential victims is crucial in preventing honour-related violence (Nussbaum, 2005).

Research Questions

1. What is the contribution and expectations from male member of the family in the perpetuation of honour killing in Kohat?
2. What are the factors that compel a male member of the victim family to perpetuate honour killing?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the contribution and expectations from male member of the family in the perpetuation of honour killing in Kohat.
2. To investigate the factors that compel a male member of the victim family to perpetuate honour killing.

Literature Review

Honour killings are often justified within societies that uphold rigid gender roles and collective family honour (Cooney, 2014). Wikan (2008) argues that in many traditional communities, honour is not just an individual trait but a shared family asset, where women's actions are seen as reflective of their family's reputation. In the Pakhtun community, the concept of *Pakhtunwali* (the Pakhtun code of conduct) reinforces this belief, assigning men the role of protectors of family honour and obligating them to take extreme measures if honour is perceived to be at risk (Ahmed, 2013).

The concept of *paighor* (taunt) plays a crucial role in pressuring families into committing honour killings. Nazirullah and Ahmed (2022) state that families act not just out of personal conviction but due to external pressure from extended family and community members. The societal expectation that men must uphold honour through punitive actions creates a collective reinforcement mechanism, making honour killings appear as necessary rather than criminal acts (Welchman & Hossain, 2005).

Research consistently links honour killings to rigid patriarchal structures that enforce control over women's autonomy. Chesler (2010) highlights that societies with high rates of honour killings often restrict women's rights to education, employment, and independent decision-making. In these settings, a woman's perceived disobedience, such as choosing her spouse or engaging in premarital relationships, is seen as a direct challenge to male authority, warranting violent retribution (Merry, 2011).

Wardak (2004) further emphasizes that the normalization of male control over female bodies in such societies perpetuates gender-based violence. Honour killings are not just personal or spontaneous acts of rage but are often premeditated, involving the consent or coercion of multiple family members who see the act as a duty rather than a crime (Kabeer, 2001).

Despite international human rights advocacy, legal frameworks in many regions remain weak in addressing honour killings (Jackman, 2002). Welchman and Hossain (2005) argue that in countries where honour killings are prevalent, legal loopholes, societal leniency, and informal justice systems such as *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) allow perpetrators to evade punishment. In Pakistan, for instance, the practice of Qisas and Diyat, which permits families to forgive the offender, often results in honour killers being acquitted or given minimal sentences (Hussain et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the reliance on informal justice mechanisms such as *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) often reinforces honour-based violence rather than preventing it. According to Ibrahim (2005), these traditional dispute resolution forums often

prioritize communal harmony over individual justice, leading to decisions that justify or even encourage honour killings. The lack of institutional accountability further weakens efforts to combat these crimes (Jackman, 2002).

From a psychological perspective, Korteweg (2014) discusses how honour-related violence is deeply ingrained in the upbringing of young men in patriarchal societies. Many men are socialized to believe that their identity and family status depend on their ability to control female relatives, leading to internalized beliefs that honour killings are justified (Merry, 2011).

Economic factors also play a role in perpetuating honour killings. Studies by Irfan (2009) show that honour killings are more common in communities where women lack financial independence. In lower-income settings, controlling women's behaviour is often linked to maintaining economic security, as marriage alliances and dowry systems rely on a woman's perceived virtue and obedience. When women assert their independence, it threatens established economic structures, further escalating honour-related violence (Malik, 2012).

The increasing role of media in highlighting honour killings has led to both progress and resistance (Kabeer, 2001). Ledbetter (2016) notes that while media exposure has drawn international condemnation of honour killings, it has also resulted in backlash from conservative groups who see external scrutiny as an attack on cultural traditions. Media portrayals of honour killings can sometimes sensationalize cases without addressing the structural factors that sustain them, creating a superficial understanding of the issue (Malik, 2012).

However, digital activism and human rights campaigns have played a crucial role in shifting societal attitudes. Mares (2010) discusses how the rise of women-led advocacy groups and legal reform movements has started to challenge the cultural acceptance of honour killings. Public discourse and awareness campaigns are slowly eroding the impunity traditionally associated with these crimes.

This study builds upon these insights by specifically focusing on the Pakhtun community in District Kohat, examining the lived experiences of individuals affected by honour killings (Stanely & Kumari, 2010). By engaging with local perspectives, this research aims to provide deeper cultural and policy-oriented solutions to address honour-based violence effectively. Existing literature suggests that honour killings stem from a combination of patriarchal control, societal expectations, and legal leniency. Scholars such as Wikan (2008) argue that the fear of losing caste status and social standing compels families to commit honour crimes. Furthermore, Welchman and Hossain (2005) highlight governance failures as a contributing factor, where weak law enforcement allows these acts to continue unpunished. Honour killings have also been linked to traditional justice systems, such as *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions), which often justify these acts in the name of maintaining social order. This study builds upon these perspectives by examining the issue within the specific socio-cultural framework of the Pakhtun community.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives of the Pakhtun community regarding honour killings. Qualitative research is most appropriate for investigating complex socio-cultural phenomena as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, and motivations (Creswell, 2019). The study employs an exploratory case study approach, focusing on District Kohat as a representative area within the Pakhtun region. This approach provides rich, contextualized insights into how cultural traditions, legal frameworks, and social pressures contribute to honour-based violence.

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who have direct knowledge of honour killings. This non-probability sampling method ensures that the most relevant and information-rich cases are included in the study (Cresswell, 2019). Additionally, snowball sampling was used to identify further participants through referrals from initial interviewees, particularly in sensitive cases where survivors' families were hesitant to participate. This study employed primary data collection methods, with a particular emphasis on in-depth interviews conducted with 25 participants who were selected based on their knowledge, lived experiences, or expertise in honour-related issues (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). The participants included, 5 *Jirga* members, 5 offender families, 5 researchers, 5 International Non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and 5 social activists.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative research method that facilitates the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process began with familiarization of data, where transcriptions were read multiple times to develop a deep understanding of participants' responses. This was followed by initial coding, where key themes were identified, and codes were assigned to categorize different aspects of honour killings. In the next step, theme identification, the generated codes were grouped into broader themes such as gender roles, legal failures, social pressures, and psychological justifications. Finally, in the data interpretation phase, the findings were examined in the context of *Pakhtunwali* (the Pakhtun code of conduct), patriarchal norms, and customary laws, establishing connections with existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Discussion

Patriarchal Role

The study findings reveal that men bear the primary responsibility for honour killing because of the power dynamics in a patriarchal society/male-dominated system. Power dynamics refers to the unequal distribution of authority and decision making power between genders, where men hold control over family and societal matters, while women are marginalized and have limited autonomy. This imbalance, perpetuates rigid gender roles and expectations, contributing to the persistence of honour killings.

A participant Ahmad expressed that.

"I have seen in our society, men are considered the protectors of family honour, and this burden often leads them to take extreme actions when they feel that any form of honour is threatened. They believe that it is their duty to uphold the family's respect at all costs."

A participant Ahmad opined that. . .

"I believe that mostly men are responsible because, in a patriarchal system, they hold power and authority. Women are victims of this system and have limited resources for their protection or justice."

In many cases, women become victims of decisions made within this patriarchal structure, as they are expected to uphold the family's reputation, yet are left vulnerable without protection or a voice in such matters the findings are similar to the finding of Onal (2012). Onal (2012) also found that traditions place the burden of honour on women, yet it is men who decide how that honour should be defended or restored. This unequal power makes women targets in honour-related conflicts.

In such a structure man, whether they are fathers, brothers, or husbands, often act as the enforcers of family honour. It is further explored that, in *riwaj*⁵ (customs), the responsibility of preserving *kor izzat* (family respect) falls heavily on men, pushing them toward harsh measures, such as honour killings, when they feel it is under threat. This traditional system often leaves little room for dialogue or alternative resolutions, leading to tragic outcomes.

Gender Norms

It is found that a man is seen as the *wali* (guardian) of the family, bearing the main responsibility for preserving and protecting the family's honour. He is the one who is expected to control and guide the household to prevent any actions that could harm the family's standing. A woman, however, is expected to uphold *sharam* (modesty) in all aspects of her life. She must avoid anything that could be considered *beytura*⁶ (dishonourable) or lead to *badnami* (social disgrace), especially in her behaviour, appearance, and interactions with others. The study uncovers that if a woman steps outside these defined roles, whether by engaging in what the community deems inappropriate behaviour or by rejecting an arranged marriage, it is viewed as a direct attack on the man's *ghairat* (chivalry). Such actions bring *paighor* (taunts), where the community might criticize the man for failing to control his household. In extreme cases, this perceived violation of honour can result in honour killings, as men believe this is the only way to restore their family's reputation and erase the shame brought upon them (Caffaro et al., 2014).

A participant Hadi shared that: -

"In our society, a man is traditionally regarded as the wali (guardian) of the family, holding the primary responsibility for upholding and safeguarding the family's nang (honour). A woman, on the other hand, is expected to adhere strictly to societal norms and values, particularly concerning her behaviour and interactions with others. These expectations include maintaining sharam (modesty), avoiding any actions that could be perceived as beytura (dishonourable), and refraining from interactions that could lead to suspicion or social badnami (stigmatization)."

Another Participant named Ali also opined that.

If a woman fails to meet these societal expectations, such as by engaging in behaviours considered inappropriate or by refusing an arranged marriage, it is seen as a direct threat to the man's ghairat (chivalry). This can result in social paighor (taunts), where the man is taunted or insulted by the community for not controlling his family. In extreme cases, this perceived attack on honour may lead to an honour killing as a means to restore the family's reputation and cleanse the dishonour."

A participant Abdul Hadi further added that,

I believe that it is the foremost duty of male to protect his family honor. Both male and female are bound to protect and preserve their family's honor because it defame the whole family or even the tribe. Someone has well said that "Ka pa nar ke ghairat wi, no pa khaza ke sharam pkaar de" (If a man has honour, then a woman must have modesty).

Patriarchal Authority

It is explored in this study that, in a Pakhtun community, *ghairat* (chivalry) are central to family reputation, and this focus on honour is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system and traditions. When a woman's actions are seen as stepping beyond the boundaries of honour, it is perceived

⁵ **Riwaj:** A local or traditional custom or practice followed by a specific community, often passed down through generations.

⁶ **Beytura:** A Pashto term referring to an act that brings dishonor or disgrace to the family or community, often by violating cultural or moral norms.

as a direct threat to the family's honour, and the responsibility falls on the men to address this. In such cases, men often feel compelled to take drastic measures, as society expects them to defend their family's honour. This can lead to honour killings, which are viewed by some as a necessary step to remove any shame brought upon the family and restore their standing in the community. It is a harsh reality driven by deep-rooted cultural values and the belief that a family's reputation must be protected at any cost.

Another participant Syed Abbas expressed that: -

"In Pakhtun community, the primary reasons for honour killings are the patriarchal system and traditions. It is very important to maintain the honour of their family, and if a woman violates, men consider it their responsibility to take severe action against her."

The main reason behind honour killings is rooted in a desire for controlling and maintaining *ghairat* (chivalry). Men hold authority over family members, especially women, and see it as their duty to protect the family's honour and dignity. When a woman does something that is viewed as going against the family's expectations or commands, it is often seen as an act of defiance. At that point, men feel compelled to reassert their control to restore family honour. This response is not just a personal choice; it is also fueled by intense social and family pressures and long-standing traditions that demand men to take action if their family's respectability is at risk. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to honour killings, as men feel it is the only way to cleanse the perceived dishonour and reaffirm their authority within the family.

Like another participant Muhammad Haider also added that: -

"In Pakhtun community, the fundamental reason behind honour killings in the name of honour is the desire for power and control. Men exert control over women to protect their honour and dignity, and if women deviate from their commands, men demonstrate their power. These actions are driven by social and familial pressure and traditions."

The interview with Muhammad Haider highlights that honour killings in the Pakhtun community are rooted in the desire for power and control within a patriarchal framework. Men, as guardians of honour, exert authority over women, and any deviation from their commands is met with extreme actions to preserve family dignity. These acts are reinforced by social and familial pressures and entrenched cultural traditions.

Responses to Honour Violations

The above theme explored the cases where individuals resisted the societal expectations linked with honour, particularly the tradition of honour killings. In some honour cases where the matter is brought to the *Jirga* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions), when *Jirga* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) reach at a decision and pronounce death penalty for a female, then in some cases the fathers or young brothers stand firmly with their daughters/sisters when they are accused of immorality. The community and even the family want to follow the *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) decision, which likely would have resulted in an accused female's death to restore the family's *ghairat* (chivalry). But they refuse to bow to this pressure. Instead of accepting the *Jirga's* (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) ruling, in some cases they take the matter to courts, seeking justice through legal means. It is not easy for them, they face immense backlash from their relatives; they are accused of being dishonourable, and they face significant social isolation. Despite this, they remain committed to protecting their daughters/sisters. Eventually, these efforts pay off, and their daughters/sisters are cleared of such accusations. However, such resistance is made at a high personal cost, as such actions are seen as defiance against *riwaj* (customs) and the family's reputation. Such bravery highlights that challenging customs is

possible, however it requires great courage and the ability to withstand social and familial pressures.

The real words of a Shahzad Gul are quoted below: -

“Yes, I have seen some instances where individuals challenged the tradition of honour killings. In one case, a young man supported his sister when she was accused of immorality. He refused to accept the decision of the Jirga (a council of elders resolving disputes per Pakhtun traditions) and took the case to court. Eventually, he succeeded in his stance and his sister received justice, but he faced pressure from his family and community throughout the process.”

Codes	Categories	Thematic Code
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male responsibility • Male Authority in Honour Matters • Male superiority 	Patriarchal Role	Gender Stereotypes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female modesty • Women’s honour • Gender expectations 	Gender norms	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patriarchal authority • Patriarchal justice • Guardianship of honour 	Patriarchal authority	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent response to honour violation • Challenge to <i>Jirga</i> decision • Compulsion to support honour killings 	Responses to honour violations	

Conclusion

This research explored the deeply entrenched and culturally sensitive issue of honour killings within the Pakhtun community of District Kohat, focusing on the indigenous perceptions, gender roles, and socio-cultural pressures that sustain such practices. Through qualitative inquiry and participant narratives, the study uncovered that honour killings are primarily rooted in the concepts of *ghairat* (chivalry), *izzat* (honour), and *paighor* (taunt), which shape and dictate family and individual behaviour. These terms, deeply embedded in *Pakhtunwali* (the Pakhtun code of conduct) the traditional code of conduct construct a rigid moral framework where men are seen as custodians of family honour, and women as its bearers.

The findings revealed that deviations from traditional gender expectations are often perceived as direct assaults on family honour, leading to extreme measures under social pressure. The societal emphasis on preserving honour at any cost, combined with a fear of *paighor* (taunt), results in families justifying honour killings as a means of restoring their *izzat* (honour). Furthermore, the research highlights the role of community, customs, and a lack of legal enforcement in perpetuating these acts.

This study emphasizes the need for culturally-informed interventions, community engagement, and awareness programs that challenge harmful traditional beliefs while respecting local values. Legal reforms, combined with education, psychological support, and the inclusion of religious and tribal leaders in advocacy, are essential to reduce and ultimately eliminate honour-based violence. The research calls for a balanced approach that addresses both the cultural roots and human rights dimensions of this complex issue in the Pakhtun context.

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