

Socio – Cultural Determinants of Honor Killings: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Honour killings described as an act of violence that include the killing of people, especially females and couples, whom members of their families feel have dishonored their clan or community. The concept of honour has found deep roots within the traditional culture and society. Violence committed in the name of honour demonstrates how traditional patriarchal values, caste ideologies, and entrenched social hierarchies continue to shape social relations in contemporary society. Therefore, honour killing cannot be viewed simply as individual aggression, rather it is indicative of the social structure operating within the culture.

Honor killers justify themselves as people attempting to restore the honor of the family lost on account of the activities engaged in by the victims, including choosing partners of their choice, marrying outside the religious and caste groups, getting divorced from one's spouse, among others (D'Lima, Solotaroff , & Pande, 2020; Iyengar & Varghese, 2024).

In India, honor killings occur in situations where people violate the boundaries set forth by the society concerning religion, caste, community, family prestige and marriage. Honor killings arise out of patriarchal social institutions whereby the family and community's honor are given more preference compared to the honor of the individual and the individual's rights (Punia & Malik, 2020) Honor killings and associated violence are the outcome of the failures of a number of support mechanisms, including the individual's family, community, and other social support organizations. Most times, the perpetrator

happens to be none other than the victim's family that exerts collective force in the context of honor killings through the victim's isolation, coercion, violence, and even murder.

Review Of Literature

1. Global Perspectives

Vered Ne'eman - Haviv (2021) critically examined honour killings across Muslim and Western societies and argued that honour crimes are deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies, mechanisms of social control, and rigid gender expectations. Moreover its deep rooted by factors like caste , ethnic, religious misinterpretations, migration weak legal enforcement etc. The study emphasized that women's autonomy in matters of sexuality, control over marriage and relationships, patriarchal social structures and personal choice often become the central trigger for such violence. According to the author, honour killings are not confined to a single religion, culture, or geographical region; rather, they are a global manifestation of gender-based violence shaped by family honour and community surveillance.

The research further pointed out that in many societies, the concept of "honour" is closely tied to women's behavior, where any perceived deviation from social norms—such as choosing one's partner, seeking divorce, or asserting independence—can result in severe punishment, including murder. The study also highlighted how migration and globalization have complicated the issue, as honour-based violence has increasingly been reported among diaspora communities in Western countries.

2. Indian Perspective

(a) Caste and Honor-Based Violence

Louis Dumont (1980), through his theory of purity and pollution, explained caste as a system of hierarchy maintained through endogamy. This framework remains central in understanding honor killings in India, particularly in inter-caste marriages. Building on this, Gurram Ashok and Ramdas Rupavath (2022) argued that caste operates as a biopolitical mechanism controlling marriage choices and preserving caste purity. Their study in South India showed that honor killings are deeply tied to caste endogamy and upper-caste anxieties over social mobility.

(b) Patriarchy and Gender Control

Sylvia Walby (1990) conceptualized patriarchy as a system of social structures that controls women's labor, sexuality, and mobility. This perspective

is relevant to honor killings, where women's identity symbolizes family honor. Kaushambi Kaushal (2020) also emphasized that honor killings are gendered forms of violence where male relatives enforce patriarchal authority by punishing women who exercise autonomy in choosing their partners.

Statement Of the Problem

Honour killing remains one of the most severe forms of violence rooted in socio-cultural norms, where individuals, particularly women, become victims for exercising their personal choices in matters such as marriage, relationships, and lifestyle. Despite social progress and legal protections, honour killings continue to persist in many parts of the world, including India, reflecting the deep influence of caste hierarchy, patriarchal values, family control, and rigid cultural traditions. These acts are often justified as a means of preserving family honour, social status, and community reputation.

The problem is not merely an individual act of violence but a collective outcome of socio-cultural determinants such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, community pressure, and social stigma. Families and communities often perceive inter-caste, inter-faith, or self-choice marriages as threats to established norms, leading to extreme forms of punishment. The persistence of these practices highlights the conflict between traditional values and individual rights, particularly the right to life, autonomy, and freedom of choice.

Although legal mechanisms exist to address such violence, the recurrence of honour killings indicates that structural and cultural factors continue to sustain the practice. There remains a need to critically examine the socio-cultural determinants that influence honour killings to understand the underlying causes and patterns. Such an understanding is essential for developing effective interventions, strengthening support systems, and promoting social change to prevent honour-based violence.

Significance Of the Study

This study is significant because it shifts the focus of academic inquiry from the act of honour killing itself to the experiences of those who survive or are directly affected by such violence. Their voices, experiences, and struggles are frequently overlooked in academic research, policy discussions, and support interventions. It brings attention to the lived experiences of victims, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter in the aftermath of honour-based violence. The study highlights how resilience is not merely an individual trait, but a dynamic process shaped by the availability of social, institutional support.

The findings of this research may contribute to several fields, including social work, psychology, sociology, gender studies, and human rights research.

In addition, the study may provide valuable insights for policymakers, legal professionals, and social service organizations working toward the prevention of honour-based violence and the rehabilitation of survivors.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To determine the Socio – cultural factors of Honour Killing.
2. To Analyse the Voice of the Victim and Individual Experiences Related to Honour-Based Violence
3. To assess respondents, support systems in promoting resilience.

Theoretical Framework

The present research is built on three principal theories: (a) Purity and Pollution Theory, (b) Patriarchy Theory, (c) Social Control Theory. According to Louis Dumont (1980) in his book *Homo Hierarchicus*, the Indian caste system can be understood using purity and pollution ideas; the caste hierarchy is maintained through controlling social contacts including marriage when endogamy is used for maintaining caste purity while inter-caste marriages are considered pollution. Hence, this theory helps to understand honour killings from the perspective of trying to restore purity and preserve caste hierarchy in case of any boundary violations. The concept of patriarchy is described in the work of Sylvia Walby (1990) in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*; patriarchy represents a system of social arrangements and practices in which men control women, especially when it comes to the sphere of sexuality and reproduction of women. From the perspective of honour killings, this approach explains why the autonomy of women to choose a partner is regarded as a threat to patriarchal power and family honour. In the context of honour killings, Travis Hirschi in *Causes of Delinquency* (1969) Social Control Theory helps explain how families and communities enforce social norms related to caste, gender, and marriage. When individuals, particularly women, challenge these norms by choosing their own partners or engaging in inter-caste or inter-faith relationships, families may perceive this as deviance. Community surveillance, fear of social exclusion, and pressure from kinship networks act as strong mechanisms of social control, often resulting in violence to restore family honour and maintain social order.

Methodology Research Design

The current study employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze and understand the factors that influence the victims of honor killings. The research takes the phenomenological approach, where the aim of research

is to capture the experience, emotion and meaning attached to honor-related crimes by the participants. Such type of approach is appropriate for this kind of research as it gives an opportunity to gain deep insight into socio cultural factors, victims voice and support systems of the participants.

Tools of Data Collection

Data are collected through an Interview Guide and in depth interviews for conducting interviews that act as the main qualitative instrument in order to explore the social and cultural context of the incidents, problems and voices of victims, characteristics of their support systems and their resilience. The interview guide entailed a series of open-ended questions that enabled the participants to provide an elaborate account of their experience. Such questions included issues like personal background, response from family members and society, coping mechanism, and availability of support system.

Sampling Technique

Non-probability sampling techniques such as purposive sampling were used in this study to pick participants who had been victimized by the act of honour killings. This method was suitable since the research needed relevant cases for honour killing. The participants were picked with the help of Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front, NGO cum Social Movement, which was formed at the end of 2000, through the initiative of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). With that NGO's assistance, the researcher could identify the participants (Victims) of Honour Killing in an ethical way.

This study selected 20 respondents randomly from districts in Tamil Nadu that have had high prevalence of honour killings. These were Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Dindigul, Madurai, Theni, Tirunelveli, and Ranipet. The final number of participants was selected according to data saturation principle, where no more new information was received from further interviews. The process of identifying participants came with various hurdles.

Considering the sensitive nature of honour killing, most of the people who could potentially contribute to the study were afraid to give details of their experiences due to fear, trauma, physical & psychological torture, stigmatization and worries about their safety. It took much time and travel and the involvement of some well-wishers & intermediaries to gain access to such persons. Nevertheless, the researcher managed to identify participants whose experiences contributed to the richness of the data. Therefore, purposive sampling facilitated by institutional arrangement made sure that cases worthy of consideration were included in the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected through interview guides and in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, followed by cluster analysis, which facilitated the grouping of related themes into broader four categories such as (a) Rigid Cultural norms, (b) Gender Inequality, (c) Voice of the victim (d) Support system as resilience.

(a) Rigid Cultural Norms

Rigid cultural norms refer to social values, customs, beliefs, and expectations which dictate an acceptable mode of behavior for individuals within a society. These rigid cultural norms act as mechanisms of social control whereby people must conform to specific behavioral patterns dictated by societal standards. With regards to honor killings, rigid cultural norms often dictate how individuals should marry, interact and behave. Those who do not conform to these norms especially through decisions like inter-caste relationships, inter-religious marriage and even marriage without family consent bring dishonor to the family and community. Such behavior acts as a challenge to the traditional way of life and patriarchal dominance. In such cases, there is usually pressure on families from members of the community and relatives to regain their social standing. In serious situations, it might lead to violence including honor killings due to the power of rigid cultural norms on individuals.

Participant

It was important for me to uphold the family honor as far as culture was concerned. All the decisions I made were weighed in terms of what my family and the community expected of me. Even when I want to make choice for my life, the fear of disappointing my family and bringing shame to them stopped me. My family opinions mattered more than my happiness, and I was constantly reminded that my actions reflected on the honour of the entire family.”

(b) Gender inequality

Gender inequality is another important dimension of honour killing. Women, in most societies, face restrictions on issues like education, work, movement, sex, and marriage. Male-dominated social structures contribute to gender inequality and control women’s behavior and decisions.

Participant

In my family, being a girl meant I had less freedom than my brothers. They could make their own choices, but I was always expected to follow the rules set

by my family. When I chose my partner, it was seen as bringing shame to the family. My feelings were never given importance, and I was made to feel that my choices had no value.

Such social structure might generate situations in which acts performed in the name of saving family honor become socially acceptable and legitimate. Therefore, gender identity acts as the underlying element that facilitates the perpetuation and reproduction of practices and violence associated with honor killings.

(c) Voice of the Victim

Voice of the Victim reflects the participants' experiences of being denied their fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to choose their partner and live with dignity. The narratives reveal how personal autonomy is often suppressed by family and societal expectations in the name of honour. Individual rights are the basic freedoms and rights that allow individuals to be able to make choices for themselves about their life and relationships without force and discrimination. Such rights include freedom to choose whom one wants to marry, autonomy, equality, and safety from violence. With regards to honor killings, the victims find it difficult to exercise these rights because of the pressures of family and society.

Participant

I have seen how offenders find ways to escape through the system, and that makes me question the value of individual rights. When a person's right to choose, live, and love is taken away, no amount of punishment or compensation can heal that loss. Every individual has the right to live with dignity, but in reality, these rights are often denied in the name of honour."

There may be many individuals who get into relationships or marriage that go against the expectations of the family and society, and therefore the choice they make is perceived as something that is opposed to the family and society's honor and traditions. This will lead to violation of the individual rights.

(d) Support System

Claiming legal rights refers to the process through which individuals recognize, assert, and seek protection of their legal entitlements through available legal mechanisms. In the context of honor killings, awareness and exercise of legal rights may empower victims to seek protection, report violence, and access justice. Legal rights related to personal freedom, equality, protection from violence, and choice in marriage can serve as important resources for

individuals facing threats and discrimination. Accessing legal support and utilizing legal mechanisms may strengthen victims' ability to resist oppressive situations and create pathways toward safety and justice.

Participant

I strongly believe that there should be a separate law against honor killings. I do not want this to happen to any other woman. Many murders have taken place, but no woman should have to experience such suffering. Those responsible should be punished. Whenever lawyers speak, they often claim that our testimonies are false. They do not listen to us. We explain what happened, but they accuse us of lying. We do not need to lie; we speak from our lived experience. Yet our voices are ignored, and they prefer to rely on other versions of the story rather than listening to us.

Discussion

The results obtained from this study indicate that honour killings are influenced by various connected determinants found in social, cultural and structural contexts. Among such determinants, the most prominent was the caste system. Participants frequently pointed out the fact that relationships between people belonging to different castes were seen as a direct threat to the identity and status of the family.

Another important determinant found by the research is 'Patriarchy', and according to the stories of the participants, women had little autonomy in matters of marriage and other relations, and the fact that women are the keepers of family honour becomes quite evident. This result is consistent with the theory of patriarchy because it illustrates the way the domination of males is preserved through control of females.

In 'family pressure and collective actions' are concerned, the study illustrate the fact that honour-based violence is not an action of an individual, but rather a collective effort of the family members and sometimes their relatives... This serves to underscore the strong connection between the family, being a social institution, and its contribution to conformity and deviance control.

'Community pressure and the threat of social stigma' increased the chances of honour killing incidents. It is apparent from the responses of the participants who felt that social stigma and community pressure often determined their actions as well as their families'. This supports the social control theory that indicates how communities use informal measures for regulating behavior.

'Rigid cultural customs and traditions' prevailed among the participants. The need to protect family honor, obey the elder members of the family and follow the

traditional way of marriage meant that freedom of personal choice did not exist. This result correlates with the idea of purity and pollution theory, wherein violation of caste and culture is a form of polluting the family honor. Lack of awareness about the law and the lack of institutional back-up was another reason for the perpetuation of honor violence as many respondents were ignorant of the laws.

Overall, the discussion highlights that honour killing is not the result of a single determinant but a combination of caste ideology, patriarchal power, family control, community surveillance, and cultural rigidity. These determinants collectively sustain the practice and normalize violence as a means of restoring honour. The findings emphasize the urgent need for stronger legal mechanisms, awareness programmes, advocacy, comprehensive policy and programmes and community-level interventions to challenge these deep-rooted structures.

Recommendations

➤ **Addressing Caste-Based Discrimination**

Since caste emerged as a major determinant, awareness programmes and social campaigns should be conducted to challenge caste hierarchy and promote the acceptance of inter-caste and inter-faith marriages.

➤ **Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Autonomy**

Efforts must be taken to reduce patriarchal attitudes by encouraging gender equality, empowering women, and promoting their right to choose their life partners without fear of violence.

➤ **Strengthening Family-Based Interventions**

Family counselling and mediation services should be introduced to address conflicts arising from marriage choices and reduce collective family pressure that often leads to honour-based violence.

➤ **Reducing Community Stigma and Social Pressure**

Community-level interventions should focus on changing rigid social norms and reducing stigma associated with personal choice in relationships and marriage.

➤ **Creating Awareness on Legal Consequences**

Awareness should be created regarding the legal consequences of honour killings so that families and communities understand the seriousness of such crimes.

Enhancing Institutional Support Systems

Victims and individuals at risk should have access to support systems such as counselling centres, shelters, legal aid, and helplines for protection and guidance.

➤ **Training for Law Enforcement Agencies**

Police and legal authorities should be sensitized and trained to identify and respond effectively to honour-related threats and violence.

➤ **Educational Interventions on Social Equality**

Schools and colleges should integrate discussions on equality, human rights, and freedom of choice to challenge casteism, patriarchy, and rigid cultural practices from an early stage.

➤ **Community Engagement through Social Work Practice**

Social workers should actively engage with families and communities to address harmful traditions, mediate conflicts, and advocate for the rights of individuals.

II.CONCLUSION

Honour killings represent a serious violation of human rights and continue to persist due to deeply rooted socio-cultural factors such as caste endogamy, patriarchy, rigid cultural norms, and concerns regarding family honour. While existing studies have largely focused on the causes and prevalence of honour-based violence, limited attention has been given to understanding the lived experiences, support systems, and resilience processes of victims and survivors. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how victims navigate adversity, access resources and rebuild their lives following experiences of honour-based violence.

III.REFERENCES

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