



OCTEVAW - COCVFF  
Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women    Coalition d'Ottawa contre la violence faite aux femmes

## OCTEVAW Position Paper

### *Connecting Violence Against Women and “honour killing”*

The Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW) is a coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to ending violence against women and, through leadership, education, advocacy and political action, to promoting a coordinated response to women and their children who have experienced abuse. Our members include women’s centres and shelters, counselling agencies, community resource and health centres, victim services, child protection services, hospital and justice members including police representatives, the crown’s office, academic researchers and other concerned community members. We have collaborated for more than 20 years to ensure that our broad network of services work together for the best interests of women and children.

OCTEVAW recognizes that violence against women is not limited to any geographical area or nation and that violence spans culture, religion, class, ability, age, and sexuality. As such, OCTEVAW questions how the media has presented “*honour killings*” to Canadian society. In the media, the use of the term “honour killing” has functioned to separate what is widely, but incorrectly, perceived as “ordinary” or “non-cultural” interpersonal violence from that which is perceived to be “extraordinary” or “cultural” violence. Representing “honour killings” as distinct and more extreme than what is understood to be “Canadian” domestic violence effectively downplays the seriousness of *all* forms of violence against women while also fostering sensationalized and racist portrayals of ‘barbaric’, ‘backwards’, and ‘uncivilized’ groups.

When the media emphasizes a distorted understanding of “honour” and “shame”, attention is deflected from the larger issue of violence against women. Consequently, this helps to fuel the misconception that this heinous act can only be committed by an ‘uncivilized foreigner/Other’. Claiming that ‘Other’ people bring their ‘traditional’ and ‘backwards’ customs with them to Canada allows the government and its citizens to avoid accountability for the widespread prevalence of violence against women. Violence against women is an important issue within migrant as well as non-migrant communities, and it is important for media outlets to understand the multiple factors that contribute and sustain violence against women, including a culture of patriarchy in Canada. Limiting focus to the perpetrator’s justifications and presenting the control and violation of women as “honour” killing culturalizes violence. That is, women’s experiences of violence are

understood as solely connected to their culture and ignoring the multiple levels and intersections of women's oppression. Moreover, the emphasis of a violent act as an "honour crime" homogenizes cultural, religious and nationalistic identities of the assumed perpetrators and victims, and disconnects the crime from the larger issue of *Violence Against Women in Canada*. **OCTEVAW encourages all media outlets, as responsible news sources, to consider the impacts of disconnecting the term 'honour killings' from the larger issue of Violence Against Women.**

According to Statistics Canada, 146 women were killed in 2008, and 45 were murdered by a spouse or domestic partner. Between 2007 and 2008, 61,690 women sought help from abuse shelters in Canada. According to the OCTEVAW *Hidden From Sight* report, an average of eight women in Ottawa are sexually assaulted *every day*. Moreover, over 600 Aboriginal women are currently missing and/or murdered in Canada. Indeed, it cannot be denied that violence against women in Canadian society is a systemic concern.

OCTEVAW acknowledges that many who are struggling to address violent practices use the term "honour killing". However, true understanding of this crime cannot be achieved without it being placed in the paradigm of Violence Against Women. All violent practices perpetrated against women are centered on power and control. Accordingly, "*honour killings*," like other forms of violence against women, do not happen in isolation or randomly. The concept of honour is intimately linked with entitlement and control, and this form of violence against women is often the end result of a pattern of coercive behaviour perpetrated most frequently by men against women.

According to the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, the use of the term "*honour killing*" to explain acts of violence toward women has further deepened the already widespread Islamophobia in Canada. It is our position that a nuanced lens is required, one which balances the reporting of the details of the individual crime with the understanding that it is part of a wider context. Our concern is that without this balance, large segments of society will be silenced due to fear of reinforcing racist stereotypes that could be unjustly used against them. Moreover, readers and audiences own assumptions of cultural 'Others' will remain challenged.

Ultimately, OCTEVAW highly recommends that to effectively address "honour" crimes and other forms of Violence Against Women in the media, a collaborative process is needed which involves a diverse cross-section of society. It is only by grounding the term "*honour killing*" in this understanding of Violence Against Women, that we as a society start to see some of the patterns and red flags that may help us truly address this crime before another woman or girl becomes a victim.

## Recommendations

### *Recommendation 1*

**Articulate Violence Against Women as a systemic issue that does not happen in isolation.**

Background: Multiple factors contribute to and sustain Violence Against Women. While this violence occurs in both migrant and non-migrant communities, experiences of alienation, racialization, discrimination, and dispossession mean that violence within a migrant context can be unique. For example, Jiwani (2006) found that the feelings of exclusion and marginalization from the dominant society push South Asian women and men to remain within their own community circles. Women experiencing violence in this context experience both patriarchal forces within the home and a combination of racism and sexism in the larger dominant society.

### *Recommendation 2*

**If using the frame of ‘honour killings’, connect this to the larger issue of Violence Against Women in Canada. Avoid stereotyping and/or characterizing minority communities as made up solely of perpetrators and/or victims.**

Background: The culturalization paradigm uses the notion of honour to separate “their” honour killing from “our” domestic murder. This paradigm fails to investigate the concept of male honour and its intimate relation with male entitlement and patriarchal control in both ‘East’ and ‘West’. For example, the notion of female violation of honour is often portrayed in relation to female sexuality and mobility and seen as unique to a particular cultural (“foreign”) context. However, a number of researchers have explored the notion of shame in relation to domestic violence perpetrated by men against women (Dutton, 1995; Lansky, 1992). Dutton (1995) reports that batterers tend to express anger in response to negative emotions such as humiliation, guilt, shame, or depression. This nuance is often hidden in Western understandings of domestic homicide, although moral emphasis on normative female gender roles is not unique to any one society or cultural group.

### *Recommendation 3*

**Use a variety of news sources to represent a diverse cross-section of society and present a nuanced picture.**

Background: Violence against women is a difficult topic to report on and a complex issue to cover. Media coverage of these crimes is important because the news both conveys information and facilitates societal discussions and actions with social and political consequences. If we fail to understand the killing of women by men, we are unable to prevent it.

‘Honour killings’ are part of the very real problem of violence against women that happens in Canada as well as across the globe, and OCTEVAW would like to ensure that a violence against women perspective is included as part of news coverage of crimes such as ‘honour killings’. We recognize that journalists face many pressures, including time restrictions, in reporting on a variety of issues as accurately and deeply as possible, and therefore hope to tailor our media engagement strategies in a way that is efficient and effective for news production. As such, we would like to have a conversation that we hope is helpful for both journalists covering violence against women and advocates from the VAW community working to engage the media.