

Proposed reforms to UK policy on honour based violence: the big societal divide?

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Abstract

Background: Honour Based Violence results in several deaths each year in the UK and has many health and social implications. In recent years, practitioners have stated that the scale is increasing and that government policies are not making adequate provision to address it as a major problem. Method: The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee report remains the most comprehensive government document on the issue of honour based violence in England and Wales to date. We used the Rist policy cycle framework to critically analyse the Report, dismantling the policy process into three key stages for subsequent independent assessment. Results: Current policy defines and categorises honour based violence differently from domestic violence yet has chosen to tackle it under the rubric of domestic violence. Responses have been constrained by limited capital to adequately finance specialist interventions, lack of expertise, inability to reach individuals who are most susceptible therefore highly vulnerable, and contraction of specialist non-governmental organisations who have always been at the fore in tackling issues on honour based violence. Consequently, the government's response has been unconvincing

and improperly conceptualised by accepting it into the broader context of violence against women and hence domestic violence. Conclusion: Stronger coordinated response at local level is needed but this is where issues of community, integration, tolerance, and the Big Society agenda are made complex and serve to confound new legislation and policy. Overcoming highly sensitive cultural barriers is a key challenge to all. Consequently, we recommend that for honour based violence to be tackled effectively, the government needs to re-access and take a broader view on the issue by constructing honour based violence within the discourse of human rights in order to declare a position that sits easily in the context of cultural differences and the Big Society.

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Key words: Honour based violence, UK government, Policy analysis, Multiculturalism, Big society, Human rights

Submitted for Publication – October 2014

Accepted for publication – January 2015

Introduction

One foremost development in recent political discourse has been an increasing concern for community life, social relationships, and organisations within public life, considered by many to be in need of revitalisation. The

current discourse of Britain's Big Society asserts that social problems can be tackled through more effective community action (Sage, 2012). For some communities, oppressive (and arguably patriarchal dominance within) attitudes and behaviours that result in interpersonal violence justified as

honour restoration can be considered one point of focus for critical analysis (Hague, Gill and Begikhani, 2013). Accordingly, this article critically explores political responses to the issue of honour based violence as experienced in the UK, and questions the extent to which the concept of the Big Society which asserts that social problems can be engaged through effective community action is relevant to tackling it.

Although we acknowledge that boys and men are often victims of honour based violence, we maintain as corroborated by available evidence that it is a patriarchal ideology of oppression (Robinson, 2010; Honour Based Violence Awareness Network, 2013; Elakkary *et al.* 2014). Honour based violence is perceived to have occurred when a person is being punished by their family and/or wider community for actually or allegedly challenging what the family and/or community understands as the correct code of conduct (ACPO, 2008; Brandon and Hafez, 2008; Feldman, 2010; Gill, Begikhani and Gill, 2012). Community and family approval and collusion are what make honour based violence different from domestic violence (Dickson, 2014); hence, we maintain that current definitions require a change of both description and meaning.

Method

July 2007 witnessed the House of Commons announce its intention to conduct a broad-ranging inquiry into domestic violence, honour based violence and forced marriages to focus particularly on the implementation of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act of 2004 and other related legislation such as the Forced Marriage Civil Protection Act of 2007. One year later, the House of Commons published the report of this inquiry which concluded that although the government had made progress in improving its response to domestic violence, forced marriage and honour based violence, significant failings remained in a number of key areas. The report of this inquiry was entitled: House of Commons Home Affairs Committee report on Forced Marriage, Domestic Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Honour Based

Violence and remains the most comprehensive government document on the issue of honour based violence in England and Wales to date.

The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee report (HACR, 2008) (hereafter referred to as The Report) was therefore considered the document most in need of analysis, towards uncovering whether the sovereign power of government when compared to the disciplinary power of the people is at odds with regards to the multifaceted nature of honour based violence in the UK, and considering the recent political rhetoric of the Big Society. We used the Rist policy cycle framework (Rist, 1994) to critically analyse the Report, reducing the density and complexity of the report by dismantling the policy process into several stages for subsequent independent assessment. This framework situates policy-making as a multi-faceted process which cannot be attributed to any one group of decision makers, but a process which evolves through cycles which are interrelated by time, funds and political support (Rist, 1994).

The three phases of the Rist framework required multiple questions to be resolved by disentangling key issues within the policy. First, policy formulation, concerned with issues which necessitated the need for the policy and how the policy was crafted, by whom and with what relevant information was explored. The policy implementation phase is the second stage of the policy cycle and is concerned with the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something and the ultimate impact in the world of action. This phase discusses the manner and way, government policies have been transformed into action and the response to these initiatives. The decision on a specific course of action and the adoption of a programme does not guarantee that the action on the ground will strictly follow policy-makers aim and objectives (Brady and Collier, 2004). To this end, the final stage of this cycle is the policy accountability stage which addresses questions of impacts and outcomes.

Result/Discussion

Policy Formulation

The Report maintains that honour based violence is a “patriarchal ideology of oppression in which women who make autonomous decisions, particularly in relation to their private lives, are believed to have brought shame to their family” (HACR, 2008, p.12). The philosophy of multiculturalism has also led to a tolerance towards perpetrators of honour based violence which is reflected in the relatively light sentencing of perpetrators (Women Against Fundamentalism and Southall Black Sisters, 2007). The mechanism through which multiculturalism fuels honour based violence lies in the subtle ways in which multicultural policy facilitates communities in maintaining that the problem is less serious than claimed (Deveaux, 2006). Indeed, it has recently been argued that although policy responses to complex social problems such as honour based violence should reflect multicultural sensitivity, this should not become an excuse for nonintervention (Eshareturi, Lyle and Morgan, 2014).

As the concept of the Big Society advocates that community action could concurrently solve community problems (Cabinet Office, 2010), the question herein is: what happens when a problem is not acknowledged by the community? Notably, action taken by government and its agencies such as the police may hesitate to intervene for fear of accusations of racism (Deveaux, 2006; Yurdakul and Korteweg, 2013). The result is that responsibility for tackling infringements of individual freedom such as those associated with honour based violence is evaded and the protection of women is, although more subtly, displaced by multicultural concerns. The government supports this position by asserting that the perception of honour crimes as a cultural phenomenon has in the past granted immunity to perpetrators of these crimes (HACR, 2008).

Commenting on the scale of honour based violence, the government acknowledges that epidemiological data for the UK is almost non-existent (HACR, 2008) as a consequence of

non-reporting, misunderstandings by criminal justice officers, differential categorisation, and the politics of maintaining a peaceful multicultural society (Brandon and Hafez, 2008). Although the government cedes that “about 12 honour killings occur each year in the UK” (HACR, 2008, p.17), this figure underestimates the magnitude of the problem. Dustin and Phillips (2008) argue that the scale of honour based violence in the UK is increasing with the growing number of women seeking help from honour crimes indicative of a rapid significant upsurge since 1997. Indeed, The Report indicates that as of 2007 “community-based organisation Karma Nivana saw around 15 cases a week of honour related violence, including forced marriage” (HACR, 2008, p.17). But what exactly is this telling us and how does this relate to government understanding?

There is no reason to suggest that the government does not clearly understand the issue and dynamics of honour based violence. On the contrary, the bone of contention appears to be the government’s attitude towards tackling it. On the one hand, the politics of balancing the needs of a big multicultural society with fear of not wanting to appear racist directly contradicts the establishment’s purported claim of zero tolerance towards honour crimes (CPS, 2008). Yet, on the other hand, the evidence to date such as the support for anti-domestic violence services under the banner of supporting localism against centralist over-control (Beresford, 2011) suggests that the Big Society is unlikely to offer the policy in which the change in direction necessary to tackle honour based violence will take place, particularly because this form of violence is usually condoned by the community in which it is perpetrated.

The Report states that the government does not clearly identify one single factor as the cause of honour based violence but proposes a number of reasons, chief of which is lack of integration by ethnic minority groups. Yet, contradictorily, “the government has situated the issue of honour based violence within the context of its domestic violence framework” (HACR, 2008, p.15), thus indicating a gender

sensitive approach to these crimes whilst surreptitiously circumnavigating the issues of culture and legacy. In rationalising this approach, it is important to note that although the government's inability to adequately address cultural integration and acceptance (or otherwise) is not exactly reassuring, doing so may encourage a false contradiction between minority and majority communities, with crimes in the former explained by reference to 'culture', and those in the latter understood as individual deviation (Sundari, 2008; Gill and Brah, 2014).

This said, it is perpetrators as much as victims who are perceived as being without agency, portrayed and sometimes depicting themselves as acting according to the understood laws of their culture (Gill, 2006; Gill, 2013). Within such discourses culture is credited with a compelling power to position and drive behaviour, as if it is culture rather than people which commits these crimes. Faced with this abuse to and of culture, it is understandable that the government has chosen to acknowledge the issue of honour based violence within the rubrics of domestic violence and violence against women. However, even the government has acknowledged that where honour based violence can be differentiated from the wider category of violence against women, recognising its specificity may save lives (HACR, 2008).

Policy Implementation

Responses to honour based violence in the UK have been specifically related to tackling its specific manifestations rather than the cultural belief systems which underpin it (Brandon and Hafez, 2008). Notwithstanding, government initiatives to address forced marriages which arguably leads to honour based violence (Yurdakul and Korteweg, 2013) date from as recent as 1999 when the Home Office established a working group in response to media coverage of cases of forced marriage and prior activism of minority women's groups (Khanum, 2008; Sundari and Gill, 2009). Moreover, at that time there were no specific criminal offences of forced marriage or honour crime within England and Wales

(ACPO, 2008). What followed was an attempt to reframe honour based violence as honour based domestic violence. This allowed for the prosecution of offenders from within a range of offences under the body of law, yet none tailored to address the specifics of violence resulting from principles and moralities of non-Western cultures (CPS, 2008). However, this approach is hotly debated by many women's organisations that see domestic violence as being diluted by the inclusion of other forms of violence against women into present domestic violence policy framework and practice (Payton, 2014). The argument here is that this approach adversely impacts on services available to support victims of both domestic violence and honour based violence whose needs are 'similar yet dissimilar'.

We can clearly see this reframing of honour based violence preserved in The Report in that "the response of the UK government to honour based domestic violence is to tackle it in the context of its wider domestic violence framework" (HACR, 2008, p.15). Proponents of this approach posit that this approach favours criminalisation thereby benefiting victims as they gain from the resources and best practices present under the domestic violence framework (Siddiqui, 2007). Similarly, the domestic violence model of policy intervention widens service provision for honour based domestic violence within the government's strategies and policies (Sundari, 2008). Nonetheless, the government acknowledges that honour based domestic violence differs significantly from more common forms of domestic violence since it could be carried out by a person's children, siblings, in-laws and extended family (HACR, 2008). We argue that this differential underlies the need to separate and redefine honour based violence from domestic violence (Payton, 2014). Following this further, we maintain that this differential must be recognised by practice in determining what is needed to support potential victims, victims and survivors of violence in the name of honour.

The government's response to honour based violence has also been conceptualised along the lines of Western Christian belief which disagrees with the use of violence as a means

of maintaining honour (Burman, Smailes and Chantler, 2004), although we argue it is not as simple as this. Nonetheless, this has inevitably led to honour based violence becoming increasingly conceptualised as a problem associated with minority communities wherein honour is an aspect of their culture (Gupta, 2003). This accepted, the government maintains that so-called “honour based violence occurs in ‘communities’ where the concepts of honour and shame are fundamentally bound up with the expected behaviour of families or individuals, especially women” (HACR, 2008, p.5). Furthermore, the media has increasingly encouraged the stereotyping of honour based violence as being associated with ethnic minority groups, which has arguably, misrepresented ethnic minorities and engendered a sense of mainstream moral superiority (Gill, 2006). As the government is a political entity, its construction of honour based violence is bound (indeed expected) to reflect the view of the majority of its people and the construction of honour based violence by the media merely illustrates the government’s thinking on the issue.

Policy Accountability

The Report maintains that initiatives on honour based violence are focused on criminalisation as opposed to prevention and rehabilitation (HACR, 2008). Yet, laws have not been passed to criminalise specific acts of honour based violence and, whilst the police and other statutory sector bodies have aimed to protect women in acute crisis and at risk of immediate violence, this is to the detriment of those whose risk is deemed to be low (Southall Black Sisters, 2008; Eshareturi, Lyle and Morgan, 2014). The determination of risk level is contentious, possibly flawed, and counter-productive for many simply due to the volatile and unpredictable nature of interpersonal violence.

Moreover, a notable constraint associated with implementing initiatives to tackle honour based violence is one of capital. The costs to implement targeted initiatives on honour based violence are enormous and as funds available to government are limited not all enterprises are implemented to the capacity to which they

had been originally designed (Radford and Harne, 2008). Similarly, the mainstreaming of honour based violence into domestic violence in terms of service provision has been a key constraint to initiatives targeting honour based violence (HACR, 2008; Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2012). Honour based violence has unique characteristics which clearly set it apart from domestic violence and, as a consequence, initiatives concerned with domestic violence which are used in tackling honour based violence are merely adequate to the degree that they tackle the ‘domestic’ component of honour based violence (Fowles and Wilson, 2008). Consequently, these initiatives fail to address the root of the problem, which is the misguided belief in the preservation of honour at all (or any) cost which, in particular, runs counter to the concept of the Big Society.

Even more worrying is that recent social policy towards minority communities has shifted from multiculturalism to ‘multi-faithism’ (Patel, 2012) via social cohesion (Yurdaku and Korteweg, 2013) and in addition to this sobering mix, we are experiencing cutbacks on public spending and the dismantling of the welfare state which impact disproportionately on refuges and Black and minority ethnic women’s projects (Ishkanian, 2014). Indeed, it is without question that the rhetoric around the Big Society idea has provided a vehicle, and indeed a gloss, for the introduction of policies based upon the notion that they will cost less to deliver (Walklate, 2012). However, the government maintains that its achievements on the issue of honour based violence are numerous and include “the provision of support services for victims” (HACR, 2008, p.63), “legislation for prosecuting perpetrators” (HACR, 2008, p.127), “and immigration measures to prevent honour crimes which arise as a consequence of forced marriages” (HACR, 2008, p.38). On the contrary, our analysis of the report suggests that the major achievement of the government on the issue of honour based violence is its acceptance of the phenomenon as an issue requiring policy intervention.

Conclusion

This article of a current and contentious issue has shown that the most important question for the government in tackling honour based violence is whether its policies have been successful in reducing the incidence of honour based violence. We argue that, from the available evidence, it has not and the government's attempts have been unconvincing and unsound. Worryingly, securing women's rights and safety has been severely compromised by accusations that the underlying motive is to reduce immigration (Dustin and Phillips, 2008; Sundari, 2008). However, it is not possible to map the success of various initiatives because a common problem is the dearth of research and data on the extent of honour based violence in the UK. This lack of accurate information is extremely worrying because it informs regressive policy approaches to migrant communities as a whole (Patel, 2012).

Whilst the government expects the incidence of honour based violence to decline as immigrants integrate successfully into mainstream society, opposing evidence is available to suggest that with the increase in immigration, separatism is a more likely outcome and cultural practices such as honour based violence will increase (Brighton, 2007). We argue therefore, that the government's initiatives have failed to protect women who are most vulnerable to violence in the name of honour and its approach to tackling the issue would never have worked. Punitive initiatives tend to hold government focus and over time have received more attention than other interventions. However, we contend that there is clearly useful work being done to raise awareness within communities concerned but this is ill-defined, under-resourced, and unmeasured.

This analysis reveals no evidence to suggest that the British government does not clearly understand the issue of honour based violence. However, it has underscored the point that current policy defines and categorises honour based violence differently from domestic violence yet has chosen to tackle the phenomenon under the rubric of domestic

violence. Furthermore, the government does not attribute a specific cause to honour based violence. In this context, the government has responded to this issue by tackling crimes like forced marriages and domestic violence which they posit lead to the perpetration of honour based violence. However, responses have been constrained by limited capital to adequately finance specialist interventions, lack of expertise, inability to reach individuals who are most susceptible therefore highly vulnerable, and contraction of specialist non-governmental organisations who have always been at the fore in tackling issues on honour based violence. Consequently, we maintain that the government's response to the issue of honour based violence has been improperly conceptualised by accepting it into the broader context of violence against women and hence domestic violence.

Importantly, there is no law in the UK dedicated to prosecuting honour based violence, but crimes of honour could be prosecuted under several other legislative edicts. However, a major limitation to prosecution arises from the difficulty inherent in evidencing honour related violence from within a community that condones it (CPS, 2008). We assert that preventative work will be best approached in schools wherein specialist and dedicated support can be targeted; the role of education in changing hearts and minds cannot and should not be under-exaggerated. A stronger coordinated response at local level is needed but we argue that this is where issues of community, integration, tolerance, and the Big Society agenda are made complex and serve to confound new legislation and policy. Overcoming highly sensitive cultural barriers is a key challenge to all.

Finally, we argue that the major achievement of the British government on the issue of honour based violence has been the acceptance of the phenomenon as an issue requiring policy intervention, yet the major obstacles to progress on managing honour based violence are ill-conceived shifts in driving policy forward and a concomitant lack of political will. Consequently, we recommend that for honour based violence to be tackled

effectively, the government needs to re-access and take a broader view on the issue by constructing honour based violence within the discourse of human rights. In particular, policy makers should understand clearly the relationship between culture and morality and use this understanding to influence policy in order to declare a position that may sit more easily in the context of cultural differences and the Big Society.

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