

# In the Name of Honor?

## Evaluating the Impact of Weather Variability on “Honor” Killings in Pakistan

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Every year, approximately 5,000 women are murdered globally in the name of honor. These crimes, labeled as “honor” killings, are meant to punish transgressing individuals who are believed to have brought shame to their families by overstepping social boundaries regarding acceptable sexual freedoms. In Pakistan’s context, where the “purity” of a woman is crucial to ensuring a successful arranged marriage, dishonor might result from, among other reasons, coming home late, having an alleged affair, or eloping.

The biggest hurdle for any informed discourse on the subject is the lack of reliable and systematic data collection on honor killings. Often, crimes are not reported to law enforcement or are miscategorized in police reports. Very few victims survive to tell their story, and families are reluctant to pursue cases against perpetrators who are close relatives. My first research task then has been to construct a database of honor killings. I have browsed 11 online and print newspapers to compile a detailed data set of honor killings in Pakistan. So far, the data include information on 1084 unique incidents, spanning 41 months. Interestingly, 70 percent of victims are young women, while nearly half the perpetrators are male members of her natal family, such as a father, brother, or son. The relationship of the perpetrator contrasts with other forms of domestic violence in which perpetrators tend to be husbands or intimate partners.

The mainstream public discourse on the subject regards violence in the name of honor as primarily culturally or religiously motivated. Even the labeling of these crimes as honor-based underlines the driving cultural factors but leaves little room for alternate explanations and causes. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests there may be economic motivations behind honor kill-

ings. For example, women who participate in pre-marital relationships are no longer marriageable, implying that the woman would need to be financially supported by her natal family for her remaining years. During periods of economic distress, families may be more sensitive to accepting this responsibility.

In this research, my goal is to assess the role of economic factors in explaining honor killings in Pakistan. I focus on a specific economic factor—agriculture income. The agriculture sector contributes a quarter of Pakistan’s GDP and employs half of its labor force. Of the major crops sown, cotton is by far the most lucrative; the country is the fourth largest global producer of raw cotton, which contributes to approximately half of the *yearly* income for cotton farmers. However, cotton quality and yields are very sensitive to rainfall, especially during the harvesting period. Cotton that is exposed to too much moisture can become moldy, attract disease, and will otherwise not be purchased by ginning companies.

I exploit this fact and show that rainfall above what is “normal” in any month leads to a 7.3 percent increase in honor-killing incidents, but specifically within regions that produce cotton. What is most interesting is that the above-normal rainfall increases incidents during the cotton harvesting months, from September to December. The results suggest that greater than average amounts of rain, by negatively affecting crop yields, are closely tied to decreases in agriculture income and subsequent increases in honor killing incidents. Approximately 70 percent of the reported incidents in my data occur in rural areas, so it is not implausible that violence against women would increase during periods of poverty or economic distress.

What remains to be determined is *why*



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periods of economic distress would lead to increased victimization of women for honor? One possible explanation is that periods of economic distress lead to increases in crimes of monetary exploitation, which are then falsely labeled as honor-based. Indeed, it is also possible that periods of poverty make families gravitate closer to their culture or traditions, and therefore become more likely to punish anyone who digresses from their socially allocated roles. Finally, it is likely that unmarried women who do not contribute to the household income are just too costly, especially for poorer families. When marriage is not an option, violence might be the second-best choice. Crimes against women and girls, in the shape of infanticides, early marriage, or witch killings, often occur through the latter income mechanism. My future research will focus on unpacking the potential various explanations.

Leaning on the results of my work, I suggest some policy implications. Data collection on honor-based crimes must be improved. This would entail training local law enforcement and authorities to improve investigation and reporting of honor-based crimes. The potential impact of any positive steps taken by the government will be muted if local authorities miscategorize the crimes. Second, increased access to improved weather insurance may reduce the economic distress faced by households from damaged cotton crops, thereby reducing the indirect risk to women of household income volatility. ■

—Amna Javed is a doctoral candidate in economics. She received a 2019 Graduate Student Grant for her dissertation project.