

Revenge Rape in the Middle East

Victims of rape would never wish the horrors of sexual violence on another person. But how is it that rape, in terms of revenge and honor, is not only allowed but encouraged in certain communities?

In all of the testimonies I have read, no victim of rape has mentioned that they wish their rapist to suffer the same sexual violence that they did. In fact, I have noticed that many victims clarify that the abuse they experienced should not be inflicted on anyone—ever. And although there have been cases of victims who have sought revenge on their rapists, I have yet to come across a case in which a rape victim seeks revenge by sexually abusing their own sexual abuser back. Considering this, never did I imagine that the concept of revenge rape could even exist. But unfortunately, revenge rape is a reality.

In many Middle Eastern communities, revenge rape is seen as a valid law. One case report from the National Library of Medicine explains, “Physicians in Islamic countries might be requested to participate in the Islamic legal code of *qiṣās*, in which the victim or family has the right to an eye-for-an-eye retaliation. *Qiṣās* is only used as a punishment in the case of murder or intentional physical injury.” What shocked me is just how literally this ancient eye-for-an-eye mindset is taken.

In Muzaffarabad, a suburb outside of Multan, Pakistan, a twelve-year-old girl was raped by a seventeen-year-old boy. Instead of taking the issue to court, her family went to the local *panchayat* for justice. A *panchayat* is a tribal council of (male)

elders who are, as explained in one NPR article, “influential landlords who settle disputes according to tribal customs that predate Islam.” The panchayat is resorted to by many who do not trust their country’s justice system, can not afford to go to court, or simply see tribal law as the law to follow. One Centre for International Governance Innovation examines the issue of honor rape in Afghanistan, stating, “The Afghan government has not been able to adequately protect the rights of women despite constitutional guarantees and the support and presence of foreign human rights organizations. The incidence of rape has grown significantly in recent years, particularly involving children under the age of ten.” In this case, the panchayat ruled that to get even, the twelve-year-old rape victim’s brother should rape the rapist’s sixteen-year-old sister. The revenge rape took place two days later.

In the Middle East, sexual violence against women is not a crime because it is nonconsensual or brutal. Still, rather, it is a crime because it disgraces families—not the family of the rapist, but the family of the victim. Given the strict beliefs about purity, many families will try to remedy the shame brought upon their name by marrying their daughters off to their rapists. However, in this case, the rapist’s family refused the marriage, which led her family to seek justice from the panchayat instead. What this tells us is that in rape cases in the Middle East, the victim is not the person who was raped; the victim is the family of the person who was raped. And, that the forceful stealing of a daughter’s virginity is still, after all, the loss of her virginity before marriage, which dishonors and humiliates a family. Dr. Nazir Mahmood explains, “It is both tradition and a lack of legal implementation. It has

been a tradition to mete out this treatment to women for centuries, and local elders deem it befitting to victimize women rather than punish the rapist." Mukhatar Mai, a victim of gang rape herself, says, "What a pity, first the life of one girl was ruined, and then to avenge the disgrace, the life of another girl is ruined."

Victims of rape are the ones who deserve justice, yet have no part in the decision making that leads to the so-called "justice" being served. The United Kingdom Metropolitan Police point out that, "People who carry out honor-based abuse are often close family members, but also extended family or community members." The Ayaan Hirsi Ali Foundation elaborates, saying, "Honor violence is typically seen in the form of physical or emotional abuse, sexual assault, rape or kidnapping—but it also includes female genital mutilation and forced marriage. In its most extreme cases, honor violence can lead to murder. In sharp contrast to other forms of domestic violence, honor violence is often condoned by families and communities, making it particularly difficult to identify and stop. Sadly, it often involves several perpetrators within the family or community." It is because the family feels that they have been more victimized than the person who was actually raped that it is seen fit that the family seeks revenge for its name, not for the member who was physically affected. And oftentimes, a family will feel so victimized that they resort to blaming the true victim of the rape. It is this victim-blaming that keeps women out of public spaces and allows men to continue to mistreat their female counterparts.

The normalization of rape as a punishment does not solely affect women (although it is women who suffer from sexual abuse most often). In one article from German broadcaster Deutsche Welle News, activist Marvi Sirmed states, "...I would also like to invite attention to the male rape victims. If it is difficult for women to register rape cases, a male victim can't do so. In this case, patriarchy and masculinity work against men. Boys do not report rape because that would end all kinds of self-esteem and respect in society for them." It is no surprise that cultures in which patriarchal and toxic masculine attitudes are extremely prevalent see such a high number of these extreme rape cases. Sure, culture is not something that is easily changed, but I ask, what can relieve such prevalent sexual abuse?

There are a plethora of foreign organizations and local activists in the Middle East, working to aid those who have been subject to sexual abuse and fight the cultural norms that allow it to persist. Unfortunately, shame around the issue runs so deep that victims are in danger of further violence and abuse—often inflicted by their own families or communities.

Even here in the United States, we see so many victims remain silent to avoid criticism, even if it means never getting any justice. However, in the Middle East, justice is not true justice, as honor rape only hurts more people. This vicious, never-ending cycle can not change until attitudes change. Unfortunately, attitudes are not superficial; they are deeply rooted in religious and ancient tribal beliefs.