

Honor Killing: A Form of Femicide

by Phyllis Chesler



THE WORD FEMICIDE IS NOT YET RECOGNIZED by spellcheck. Every time I use it, I am met with an angry red underline. This presents something of a disincentive for its use. We might say that the resistance to this concept begins in Silicon Valley. However, the word does appear in the dictionary.

I am not certain why I began to study honor killings. They are quintessential femicides, except among Hindus (but only in India) where men are often also killed for having violated caste rules.

Perhaps my inquiry had something to do with my own long-ago captivity in Kabul about which I've written in *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013). I had witnessed woman-hating at ground zero and one can never forget it (Chesler, 2006).

Like many other American feminists, I was also active in the civil rights and antiwar movements—but unlike most feminists, I had “once lived in a harem in Afghanistan.” This is the opening sentence of my book *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013). I lived with my mother-in-law in a polygamous household in rather posh purdah; this meant I was not allowed out without a male escort. My father-in-law had three wives and twenty-one children—facts my Westernized husband failed to mention during our long American college courtship. I saw women in burqas stumbling around on the streets of Kabul, and pre-Rosa Parks, forced quite literally to sit at the back of the bus.

Therefore, I was aware early on that worldwide, most women were illiterate, impoverished, and forced to marry men not of

their choosing when they themselves were still children. As girls, they were expected to meet impossibly high standards of subordinate behavior—and, if they failed to do so, they risked severe punishment. Their lives were far more difficult and endangered than American women's lives.

I began using the word patriarchy in 1961-1962.

I co-pioneered the study of violence against women in the late 1960s. I focused on women living in North America and Europe who had been psychiatrically diagnosed and hospitalized; were the victims of rape, sexual harassment, incest, intimate partner battering, pornography, and prostitution.

I also documented the profound double standards and anti-woman biases which led to good mothers losing custody of children to abusive fathers and husbands; women sentenced to long or life prison terms when they killed batterers in self-defense; and the violence women faced as they fought for their reproductive, educational, economic, political, and religious rights around the world.

My generation of feminists believed in universal human rights. We were not multicultural relativists. We called out misogyny when we saw it and did not exempt a rapist, a wife-beater, or a pedophile because he was poor (his victims were also poor); or a man of color (his victims were also people of color); or because he had an abused childhood (so did his victims).

In the early 1970s, I was alarmed by the mass Muslim-on-Muslim, male-on-female gang-rapes in the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh. I knew that the victims' families would reject or kill them for having been raped. I wanted American feminists to understand the specific danger these rape victims were in but I had no single word to describe the use of rape as a weapon of war (as opposed to a spoil of war). I might have said this was a barbaric form of misogyny. I did not use the word femicide to describe these rapes.

Dr. Diana E. H. Russell's and Nicole Van de Ven's 1975-1976 International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women (1976) drew 2000 women from 40 countries. In dramatic first-testimonies, they documented and condemned crimes such as female genital mutilation (FGM), beating, forced prostitution, forced motherhood, forced sterilization, etc. Russell did use the word femicide to describe the assaults against women because they were women. Femicide appears on the cover of this important collection but not within its pages.

In 1979 Fran Hosken, in The Hosken Report, documented FGM globally. I do not believe that she used the word femicide", but her book is now packed away and I cannot check it.

By the 1990s and early 21st century, I was also concerned with the fate of kidnapped and sexually enslaved women in North Africa at the hands of Islamist paramilitary units; and in the increasing use of gang-rape as a weapon of war, in Bosnia, Congo, Guatemala, El Salvador, Rwanda, and Sudan.

It was not until repeated public gang-rapes took place in the Sudan in the 21st century that I described them as gender cleansing. But not necessarily as an example of femicide.

In the early 1990s, because I became involved in the Wuornos trial I read a great deal about the lives of prostituted girls and women and about serial killers (Chesler 1993). Then, in about 2004-2005, I recognized an equally or possibly more pandemic domestic example of just such femicides—sadistic “overkills” in terms of honor killing among Muslims globally, Hindus (only in India) and, Sikhs, to a lesser extent. Serial killers that targeted only close female relatives lurked in every family that upheld strict honor codes.

I had been reading the Memoirs of tribal women (primarily Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs), and their searing testimonies, coupled with my long background of feminist research led me to study a phenomenon that few Western feminists had explored.

In 2009, I published the first of four studies about honor killing. Titled Are Honor Killings Simply Domestic Violence? (2009); I did not use the word femicide.

In 2010, I published a second and far more major study titled Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings (2010). I used the word femicide twelve times.

I did not use it even once in my third study (2012) titled Hindu vs. Muslim Honor Killings—but I did use it three times in my fourth study (2015) titled When Women Commit Honor Killings.

Many Western feminists have never read these studies. They were published in an academic venue and by intellectuals who were viewed negatively as “conservatives.” I am referring to the distinguished Middle East Forum under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Pipes.

Those feminists who did read some of this work were a bit hostile and viewed them as “racist” or “Islamophobic.” Some felt that men broke women’s bones and shed their blood everywhere, including in non-honor-based societies—why single out men of color?

In my view, there was another reason not to look more closely at honor-based violence, including honor killing. Although the victims were mainly girls and women, and usually women of color, their killers were also men and women of color. Thus, Western Caucasian feminists (and academics of color in the West) dared not blame formerly colonized men of color for the crimes they commit against “their” women. They viewed themselves as personally guilty for the historical crimes of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. Or, rather, they wished to virtue-signal their atonement for such historical atrocities.

I went on to collect my writings in this area and I published two volumes: One, in 2017 was titled “Islamic Gender

Apartheid: Exposing a Veiled War Against Women” in which I continually used the word “femicide.” I published the second volume in 2018. It is titled “A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killing.” I also used the word femicide many times in this volume.

An honor killing is the cold-blooded murder of girls and women simply because they are female. (This is the definition of femicide.) Being born female in a shame-and-honor culture is, potentially, a capital crime; every girl has to keep proving that she is not dishonoring her family; even so, an innocent girl can be falsely accused and killed on the spot.

A girl’s fertility and reproductive capacity are “owned” by her family, not by the girl herself. If a girl is ever seen as “damaged goods,” her family-of-origin will be responsible for her care for the rest of her life. This is a killing offense. Her virginity belongs to her family and is a token of their honor. If she is not a virgin, (or it is merely suspected that she may not be a virgin), the shame belongs to her family and they must cleanse themselves of it with blood; her blood.

Imagine growing up in a family where you are closely monitored, harassed, perhaps even beaten daily; threatened with death if you are seen talking to a boy or if your veil has slipped. Imagine knowing that members of your own family-of-origin might one day kill you for the slightest offense or for no offense at all—and coolly get away with it; imagine knowing that you cannot escape, that no relative, and no legal forum will protect your right to live and to live free from normalized violence.

Becoming too “Westernized,” wanting to choose one’s own spouse, refusing to marry a first cousin, daring to have infidel friends or allegedly engaging in sex outside of marriage—are all killing offenses.

From a tribal point of view, this shame-and-honor code does

enforce social stability but at the price of individual rights and personal freedom.

Continue reading in