

**WHIG ARTICLE****Alia Hogben****August 8/09**

On June 30 a car, containing the bodies of three young girls aged 13 to 19 and a woman aged 52, was found submerged in the Kingston Mills Locks.

This terrible tragedy has raised questions regarding violence against women and girls and also suggestions of possible "honour killing."

Some speculation ended when the Kingston Police held a press conference on July 23 to announce that three members of the same family have been charged with four counts of First Degree Murder and with four counts of Conspiracy to Commit Murder. A lot of unanswered questions remain, as the police said providing more details would jeopardize the court case.

We need to be careful not to assume guilt, as many facts of the case are not known, the family have said nothing and the charges have yet to go to court.

The accused are the father, mother and older brother of the girls. There are three other younger siblings now in the custody of the Quebec's child protection services. The drowned woman is allegedly the first wife of the man and has been living with the family as a "cousin/aunt."

As the family is originally from Afghanistan, some individuals are labeling the murders as "honour killings" and insisting that this is part of the Afghan culture

The argument taking place in Canada, not in another part of the world, is whether these deaths are violence against women [family violence] or something very different. Some are insisting that these murders are distinct and unlike other domestic violence; while others, including me, are unwilling to label these as anything but violence against women.

Why should we, as Canadians, not name these murders as "honour killing?"

What is the definition of violence against women?

The 1993 U.N. Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women definition includes any intentional use of physical force with potential for causing death, injury or harm. This includes all forms of violence including spousal violence and violence against children.

The Declaration states, "recognizing that VAW is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men...VAW is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men."

The Declaration recommends that a state not allow any justification of VAW by anyone invoking “custom, tradition or religious considerations.”

Let’s try to understand this situation and why people are discussing “honour killing.” However, I want to emphatically state that my assumptions of what is the likely thinking of such a family should not in anyway rationalize or justify the murder of four women.

In such families, men see themselves as the patriarchs of the family, responsible for the care and maintenance of their womenfolk. This may include affection, but it also includes control and power over the women. Added to this, the males and females acknowledge that the family and its place in their community are more important than individual members.

It is likely that the honour and shame of the family would also be raised. This concept of family honour is present but not as significant in most Western cultures, while it is important in the Eastern cultures, regardless of religions.

Because of the acceptance of control, power and honour, the family may believe that any perceived “rebelliousness” of a female can be controlled with violence.

I don’t think one can blame the teachings of any religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism or Christianity for VAW, even though each has elements of patriarchy. It is more that some cultures continue to value patriarchy, the assigned roles of men and women and the inequality of the sexes.

We are very fortunate that in Canada there has been a concerted effort to improve the situation for women with laws and services. However, before we become too complaisant, please remember that in 2007, there were 74 spousal homicides reported to police across Canada, and in Ontario alone there have been 25 female victims each year from 1975-2004, totaling 725 in 30 years. Women under the age of 25 are at greater risk of homicide by men they know and the murder of children by either parent is also part of VAW.

Because we are discussing VAW does not mean that we are ignoring violence against boys and men, but sadly most perpetrators happen to be men.

What is my reluctance to use the label of honour killing in Canada?

By our refusal in Canada to label any murder as “honour killing” we are stating unequivocally that we reject the whole context and rationale for any murder of women. We do not want to be part of any “world movement” to acquiesce to such violence.. For us to label these murders as “honour killings” is both divisive and dangerous. It makes these murders “exotic and foreign” alien to “our Canadian culture.” It encourages blatant racism for some as it gives them permission to blame “those

people” and demand their ousting from Canada. It makes others defensive or apologetic about their culture or religion, and blocks any acknowledgement that these murders do irreparable harm to religion or culture.

For others who differentiate these women’s killings as part of their culture, it gives them reasons for using cultural relativism as the argument to lessen the horror of the crimes, and to make these women’s lives less valued.

To those who insist that this type of violence is not family violence, would they want considerations such as culture or religion to mitigate the punishment for these murders? We know this has happened in the past and happens in some other countries.

For some of us naming this kind of murder of women and girls “honour killing” and laying the blame on specific cultures, ignores the fundamental issues of patriarchy, control and power over women.

There are many reasons given by perpetrators for their violence against women, but should these be accepted - whether as cultural, or for the honour of the family or due to jealousy or whatever?

Why should we, as sane compassionate persons, accept their rationales and call it “honour killing” as if that somehow is less heinous?

Should we care that these men are Afghans or Europeans or Africans? Why would we give credence to their rationale about safeguarding of a woman’s virginity, or the family’s honour, or the rebelliousness of wives/girl friends who want out of relationships?

Bluntly, my answer is that it is some males’ domination over women’s minds and bodies. How dare they think they have the God given right to kill women and children?

As Canadians we must uphold the U.N’s recommendation that there be no invocation of custom, tradition or religion to justify violence against women and girls.

There is no honour in killing!