

Human Rights Watch

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The Jordanian government imprisons women threatened with "honor" crimes rather than the male relatives who threaten them. In cases where women are killed, the perpetrators receive minimal punishment.

The 37-page report, "Honoring the Killers: Justice Denied for 'Honor' Crimes in Jordan," documents the killings and attempted murders of women by male family members who claim they are defending family "honor." The report also details the cases of women, threatened with "honor" crimes, who languish in prison for years while held in protective custody.

Women in Jordan run the risk of violence if they talk to an unrelated man, marry someone without family approval, have pre-marital sex, or become pregnant outside of marriage. According to press reports, four women already have been killed for reasons of family "honor" in 2004, as were 17 women in 2003, and 22 in 2002. Many more cases go unreported.

Government officials frequently send women threatened with "honor" crimes to prison "for their own safety." Once a woman is incarcerated, government officials will not permit her to leave prison until a male family member claims that he will guarantee her safety. According to Jordanian press reports, as many as 40 victims of "honor" crimes and women threatened with such crimes are being held in protective custody.

"The Jordanian government responds to threats of 'honor' crimes by incarcerating the would-be victim instead of taking action against the male relatives who threaten her," said LaShawn R. Jefferson, executive director of the Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. "After a woman has been killed, the courts typically hand down little more than a slap on the wrist."

The Jordanian penal code permits reduced penalties for crimes committed in a "fit of fury" resulting from an "unlawful and dangerous act" on the part of the victim. In practice, the courts apply these provisions to benefit men who claim that their honor has been impugned. Judges typically accept the argument that the victim has besmirched family honor in her actions, and apply the "fit of fury" defense by reducing sentences—even for the many premeditated "honor" crimes that occur weeks or months after the victim's "dishonorable" behavior.

"The police and the courts sympathize with 'honor' killers and routinely accept a killer's excuse that he acted out of 'fury,'" said Jefferson. "The Jordanian government's message here is unmistakable: men are justified in killing female relatives."

Human Rights Watch interviewed women incarcerated in the Jweideh Women's Correctional and Rehabilitation Centre in Amman, the nation's sole penitentiary for women. As in the case detailed below, some women spend as many as 10 years in prison. Many women said they were planning to remain in prison until the family members who threatened them either died or left the country.

Although some officials in Jordan, as well as members of the royal family, have raised concerns about "honor" killings, the government has taken little action to address the problem. There is a proposal to open a shelter for victims of domestic violence, but it remains unclear whether women threatened with "honor" crimes would be allowed to seek safety in this facility.

Human Rights Watch called on the Jordanian government to prevent, investigate and fully prosecute "honor" crimes and attacks. The government should also take immediate measures to ensure that women who are detained or in prison "for their own protection" can be released on their own recognizance and that their security is fully protected after their release.

The Ministry of Justice should monitor the application of the penal code in order to end the misapplication of the "fit of fury" defense in "honor" crime cases, Human Rights Watch said. The government should appropriately investigate and punish all individuals in positions of de facto authority who endorse or tolerate "honor" crimes and other violence against women, including tribal or local leaders.

R. Ahmed (pseudonym)

R. Ahmed was 28-years old at the time of her interview and has been in prison since 1994. When she was 18, her family forced her to marry a cousin against her will. She then fell in love with a Lebanese neighbor, and they made plans to flee to Syria. Suspicious uncles followed them to a house and, when she refused to go home with them, they shot her multiple times and left her for dead. When she was interviewed, the scars of the bullet wounds were still visible on her shoulders and chest. She had required five months in a hospital to recover.

In the hospital, guards protected R. Ahmed, and her uncles were not permitted to see her. Nevertheless, through an aunt, they convinced her not to press charges against them. R. Ahmed believed that, if she decided not to press charges, they would relent. But when she recovered and was sent to meet the administrative governor of al-Salt, her home province, her uncles were present, still vowing to kill her. The governor deemed that her only choice was to go to prison. Her lover was later deported to Lebanon.

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