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## Honour killings and violence against women in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic

The incidence of violence against women has increased worldwide since lockdowns to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 were implemented.<sup>1</sup> Iran already had high levels of violence against women, with a reported 8000 so-called honour killings between 2010 and 2014.<sup>2</sup> Honour killings are common in some cities in Iran. About 20 percent of all murders and 50 percent of family murders in East Azerbaijan province are related to sexual and honour issues.<sup>3</sup>

Honour killings are defined as the perpetration of violence against women by male relatives with the intent to murder.<sup>4</sup> Honour killings punish women for bringing so-called disgrace upon their families, for example by refraining from forced marriage, being the victim of rape, getting divorced, having sexual relationships, or adultery. The social construction of honour as a value system, norm, or tradition is the main justification for the perpetration of violence against women.

The Middle East and North Africa are commonly identified as the geographical and cultural epicentre of honour killing.<sup>5</sup> Honour killing is more common in countries with very high levels of political Islam; however, religious leaders deny that such violence against women has roots in Islam.<sup>5</sup>

According to some women's rights activists, honour killing is rooted in patriarchal law.<sup>4</sup> For example, Article 630 of the Iranian Penal Code allows a man who witnesses his wife in the act of having sexual intercourse with another man to kill both of them if he is certain that his wife is a willing participant. Article 301 of the Code stipulates that the father and paternal grandfather are not to be retaliated against for killing the child.

A possible link between honour killings and various demographic factors, such as poverty, low social status, and rapid modernisation, has recently been suggested.<sup>4</sup> Within Iran, provinces with the highest rates of honour killings also have the highest rates of unemployment and poverty. Unemployment, desperation, and anger might predispose a man to violence. Ignoring socioeconomic factors in macroeconomic policy responses to COVID-19 (including lockdown) could lead to greater vulnerability of poor and disadvantaged people, which might have more dangerous consequences than COVID-19. Financial insecurity, increased stress, restricted access to personal space in the home, isolation, and poor economic conditions lead to damage to mental health and poor socioeconomic status.

Victims of honour killings are also victims of the weakness of civil society and advocacy institutions. How can one hope for the obsolescence of long-standing traditions when there is no room for civic activism and independent associations, and advocacy organisations have little opportunity to raise awareness among the public? The speed of modernisation in Iran and the intellectual divide between patriarchal thinking and the progressive outlook of Iranian women is a new challenge. Rules should be enforced, women's rights should be legally protected, and the ethos of society needs to change to prevent honour killings, both now during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the future.

We declare no competing interests.

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