

HONOR KILLINGS IN EUROPE: AN INTERVIEW WITH SCHOLAR AND ACTIVIST DR. SYLVIA MAIER

Jennifer Dunham

In the spring 2008 edition, *Perspectives on Global Issues* published an interview by Lorna Tychostup with Jordanian journalist and activist Rana Hussein on the phenomenon of honor killings in her home country. Recently, PGI editor in chief Jennifer Dunham sat down with Dr. Sylvia Maier, a professor at NYU's Center for European and Mediterranean Studies and the Center for Global Affairs, to discuss a related issue: honor killings among immigrant communities in Europe. Sylvia has devoted her considerable energy and passion toward exposing the flaws in the use of the "cultural defense" in European courts by those who commit honor killings, as well as advocating for the prevention of these crimes among the diaspora communities.

JD: Welcome Sylvia. I'd like to start by asking you about your background. Specifically, what led you to focus your work on honor killings in Europe?

SM: I am Austrian by birth, I'm a political scientist by training, and I also consider myself a feminist. I've always been interested, coming from a very conservative family, in the role of religion in public life and the extent to which religion impacts women's rights. My interest in Islam developed organically—there was no linear development. I was born Catholic, I've been interested in Judaism—part of my family is Jewish—and I started to become more interested in specifically Islam and women's rights, being from Europe and with Islam having a larger public profile in Europe.

I have strong interest in Central Europe—Germany, France, my home country Austria—but also the United Kingdom, which is where my passion really lies. In all of these countries, Islam has a very high public profile. We have a very large minority of Muslims; Muslim immigrants as well as first, second and third generation Muslims. In all four countries, the Muslim communities are very heterogeneous, hailing from Turkey predominately in the cases of Germany and Austria; Pakistan, Bangladesh and India in the case of the United Kingdom; and North and sub-Saharan Africa in the case of France. These communities have very strong public faces in the sense that they have very strong institutions that negotiate with the various governments on the national, regional and even local levels in that they seek accommodation of certain rights. And I'm not just talking about religious exemptions, for instance for what I consider very obvious and simple cases (which is sometimes very controversial) such as the headscarf or ritual slaughter or ritually appropriate food in schools or the right to have imams in the military. They also to seek the accommodation of *sharia* law in the secular domestic legal systems.

How would you define honor killings?

Honor killing is the physical extermination of predominantly Muslim young girls or women for allegedly transgressing gender roles and norms in a particular community. This transgression of religious norms, of gender norms, can be anything from having premarital or extramarital sex, seeking a divorce, getting out of an abusive relationship, refusing an arranged marriage, seeking an education, cooking poorly, [or] dressing in a Western way. The argument is that this gender non-conforming behavior violates or sullies the honor of a particular family. So we are seeing honor killings in very patriarchal societies, predominantly in Pakistan, in Jordan, in Lebanon, in Palestine. (Although, we do have honor killing in other religious communities as well, where they are called more euphemistically “family tragedies”—which implies a bias against Muslim communities because only there is it called honor killings.) It also occurs in the diaspora of these communities; communities that have a lower socioeconomic status where the honor of the family is the only tradable and marketable (so to speak) commodity.

I have become interested in honor killings largely because of an interest in women’s rights and my interest in the public accommodation of Muslim minority rights claims. There are about 10 every year in the United Kingdom and about 5,000 to 10,000 every year globally.

Is that just the honor killings that are reported?

5,000 reported and 10,000 actually going on, so we double roughly the reported number. This is based on U.N. reports—by UNIFEM specifically. The honor murderers have offered a cultural defense, saying that they should receive less punishment or should be acquitted because it is a cultural requirement to exterminate young women for that gender non-conforming behavior.

I have been appalled to see that in some countries, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, the legal authorities, law enforcement, prosecution and judges, have actually accepted the cultural defense and have prioritized the cultural needs in what I see as some misguided difference to cultural diversity and cultural traditions over women’s rights. I think that’s completely unacceptable and hence my research on the accommodation of the cultural defense and my interest in the advocacy, design and implementation of programs that combat honor-based violence. More broadly defined, honor killings are just one aspect of honor-based violence; it also includes, for instance, forced marriages (as opposed to arrange marriages, which I think can be perfectly fine) or female genital mutilation. As a feminist, I’m appalled that anybody would consider honor killings of any type, shape, or form excusable, and allow religious or cultural rights to trump women’s rights, which I consider to be universal.

You’ve done work in Germany, the United Kingdom and France. How does the situation vary among these countries and why?

The main difference is the number of honor killings that occur. The number in the United Kingdom is very, very high. Much higher, for instance, than in France, where hardly any cases are reported. A few more in Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, but the numbers are in the single digits. And there are hardly any reported in the Muslim communities in the Mediterranean countries. But please don't get me wrong. Any single honor killing is one too many.

The numbers are higher in the United Kingdom, and this is a big conundrum that scholars are still trying to answer. Britain uses multiculturalism as its philosophy for integration. In other words, there are policies and laws in place that allow for each religious or ethnic community to organize themselves and to practice their cultural traditions without government interference to the largest degree possible. Which, of course, differs from France, where there is assimilationism; or Germany, where there is differentialism, which is a little bit less accommodating of the multiculturalism.

In Britain, the Muslim communities, especially hailing from Pakistan and Bangladesh, are economically much more successful than in other countries. Yet, according to surveys, they show the highest degree of dissatisfaction with their lives. When you press the interviewees a bit, they say they feel disrespected and that they do not feel that they advance economically, even though they have the highest level of income.

In terms of enforcement, up until September 11, at the time when people became more aware of Islamic radicalism in their communities, there was a fairly laissez-faire approach to honor killings. In other words, you had a greater acceptance of the cultural defense. Charges were not brought or people were just charged with manslaughter, for instance. Which, of course, is an example of the patriarchal nature of many of the [European] legal systems, and the idea that a husband or a father has the right to discipline their female relatives and monitor their sexual capabilities and sexual lives, even if it means murder.

Since [September 11], you see across the board that they are cracking down on honor killings. You see hardly any variation at all now over the last five or six years in terms of how the honor killings are being punished. Almost all of them are prosecuted as murder, and in almost all cases, the offender is serving a life sentence.

Is this just in Britain or in all the countries?

In all the countries. There is some minor variation, but in almost all cases now the people are prosecuted for murder and not for manslaughter and they are serving life sentences. Keep in mind that none of these countries has the death penalty, so the death penalty is never an option. A life sentence in Germany does, for historical reasons, mean 25 years. In England, it means life as it does in France, but in Germany and in Austria, it means 25 years.

You mentioned a change after September 11. Do you think that was the main cause of these honor killings being prosecuted more, and prosecuted as murder?

Yes, I think that's part of it. There has been a much greater awareness of Islamic radicalism and Islamic fundamentalism in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. It doesn't mean that September 11 brought about greater radicalization or greater traditionalism, but there has been a greater awareness of the situation of women in many of these communities.

This is not to portray these women as perennial victims. Muslim women—and I have had the great pleasure and honor to work with many of them and know many of them—are incredibly strong, articulate and well-educated women, and also very pious. The point is that there has been a focus on the existing traditionalism and, in many cases, the oppression of women, especially those who do not feel they can articulate themselves or assert their rights as well as other women can. And hence there has been a greater awareness.

This is also thanks to the incredible work that many of the Muslim women's rights groups have done, sometimes alone, sometimes in cooperation with non-Muslim women's rights groups. Women's activists and advocacy groups such as Terre des Femmes [in Germany] or the Southall Black Sisters in the United Kingdom, or here the Feminist Majority or NOW that are raising awareness about domestic violence and honor killings.

It also came about in the United Kingdom, and to a degree in Germany, with new governments that were more to the left, like Tony Blair's and Gerhard Schroder's. They became very aware of the limits of multiculturalism, the clear limits to tolerance that one has to set and a greater support of women's rights.

So the discourse about women's rights, women's needs, and the unacceptability of domestic violence in all communities for all women has had a much greater focus, a much greater legitimization, awareness and organizational capabilities—largely through the Internet—between and among women's rights groups. There has been greater coordination among social movements, as defined by integrated awareness and radicalization, increasing traditionalism, and in many Muslim communities a greater awareness of the occurrence of honor killings.

Are you talking about a shift in attitudes just within the general population in these European countries, or do you think there has been a shift in attitudes in the diaspora population as well?

I wish I could give you a whole hearted yes. I'm afraid there isn't. Especially in the United Kingdom, there is a great struggle going on between the more traditional groups that purport to represent the various communities, such as the Muslim Council of Britain or the Muslim Parliament. In public they pay lip service to the anti-honor-based violence programs. But they do not endorse them

as whole heartedly in their community relations, where the public eye is averted—in sermons or in funding domestic violence crisis centers and domestic violence help lines. There is no moral support or very little moral support, some exceptions notwithstanding, for women who are trying to escape abusive relationships.

Evidence shows that honor killings and domestic violence programs only work if you make the men who commit these acts unwelcome in the community and you have community condemnation of these acts. So you don't really see that in kind of the representative bodies yet. You see a change in attitudes within communities, in the younger and more progressive parts.

Diana Nammi, for instance. She's the president and founder of the International Coalition Against Honour Killings, based in London. She's of Kurdish Iranian background and says that she sees in the community an awareness that attitudes need to change, and that it's the young and more educated people who are trying to provide leadership. But they're running head-first into resistance among the older community leaders. The problem is that in the United Kingdom, and to a degree in Germany and lesser degree in the Netherlands, the government is speaking to these main representative bodies [largely led by older men] and believes them when they say that they are doing something about it.

The [the younger and more progressive] women's advocacy groups' voices aren't heard as much yet. They'll say, look – [the older community leaders] are only paying lip service to the programs that [government officials] endorse and create, but there is no enforcement, no implementation thereof. There is a bit of a change in the mindset in the communities in terms of greater awareness, but there is a split with the older conservative leadership. And, it's only the men in the communities who can elect the leadership, and not the women.

And in these communities, do they have separate schools and social networks? Are they segregated, or self-segregated – especially in British society?

Sometimes they are. You see segregated schools and gender segregated social clubs and organizations all across Europe are in the most typical communities. Very much in the Orthodox Jewish community as well, but more so in the Muslim communities. So you do have kind of parallel societies within this parallel society, so to speak. In the case of Germany, for instance, there are rape and crisis hotlines run by Turkish women for Turkish women, for instance. So you do have these emerging organizations, but they're very much in their infancy.

What you see, however, in terms of help lines and crisis lines, is that mostly women all across Europe who come from traditional backgrounds prefer to deal with Muslim women, because they feel they're more respectful and understanding of the cultural and religious background when it comes to

domestic violence and the threat of forced marriages or arranged marriages, and honor killings.

There's research coming out of Germany and the United Kingdom that those groups that are staffed in terms of the crisis hotlines phone lines support groups by Muslims don't have to be terribly traditional. But at least Muslims are more successful than those who are secular or staffed by Western or completely secular staffers who may mean well, but who just don't have the legitimacy and feel that the women are not just comfortable talking with them.

If, generally, the European courts are not accepting the cultural defense anymore in honor killings, what is the main challenge now? It seems as if there's still a lot of work to be done, but at least the courts have made the shift. What are you focusing on now in terms of preventing honor killings?

You're putting a finger right on the spot. Now, the emphasis is on prevention. Prevention is really achieved through a change in the mindset in the communities, especially among the men. A young man may be tempted or compelled [to commit an honor killing], sometimes by family members—especially if they're very young. Which is child abuse in its own right: if you ask a 13-year-old kid to murder his sister, because you know very well that the kid can be brainwashed easily and/or will get off with a juvenile sentence.

There needs to be a change in the mindset within the community that it is completely unacceptable to kill somebody because they allegedly transgressed some sort of amorphous gender norm or sullied the family's honor, whatever that may be. So the prevention programs are what I'm working on in my research now—what is more effective or what are the best practices in these prevention programs. That means working together with religious authority figures and getting those individuals to speak up. And not just speak up in public—where they're interviewed by the *Times* of London or *Le Figaro* in Paris, for instance—but also speaking out against domestic violence and against honor-based violence in Friday sermons or in the communities.

Our next challenge is to devise programs that prevent. Not just in terms of prevention programs within the community, but also prevention programs that dovetail that in the schools, for instance, putting up flyers in schools saying honor killings or forced marriages are unacceptable. That you have a right to choose your own spouse.

The French government recently launched a campaign in which sent leaflets to schools and health clinics talking about forced marriage and genital mutilation and how both are against French law. Because this initiative is coming from the government, would the people in the community listen? Or is it just discarded?

Some of them will discard it, but it is part of a general strategy of awareness-raising. In and of itself, it may not be the single most effective way, but especially in schools, it's important to instill, especially in young boys from a very early age, the idea that it's not sanctioned by the state. It is completely unacceptable. The teacher as an authority figure makes it very clear, especially if they come from the communities themselves, that certain actions, certain gender discriminatory behavior is completely unacceptable. It is also violation of the boy's rights to choose his spouse or to force him into marriage.

And, that if the parents do so, then they can be punished. In the case of England, it's a civil punishment; the parents won't be sent to jail, which was one of the things that mostly women pushed for. They argued that girls would not report their parents to the police if there is a chance that the parents might go to jail, so there only has to be a civil penalty, meaning monetary fines. But what you outlined is being done in England already, including putting up fliers and leaflets in schools.

Some schools, especially in the area of Leeds and Bradford, however, have taken down these flyers because of community pressure. The Muslim communities said, look, this is completely unacceptable. This is against our values. We do believe in arranged marriages, which is sometimes confused with forced marriages, so that was that.

But I think it can be very effective. It has to be kind of a multi-level, multi-agency approach to combating honor-based violence. The government has to do awareness-raising and punishment. The community has to speak out and shun those, like in the Amish community, who transgress single certain values. Women who are frightened by any of these honor-based violent crimes have to know that the government is not supporting these actions, that it is not shielding or protecting in any type, shape or form the transgressors and the perpetrators, and that there is a support structure out there.

Changing the mindset is very important—empowering young girls, making sure that girls are going to school, [and that] they're staying in school until they're 18—which means in France, for instance, that they have to be allowed to wear the headscarf because otherwise parents may take them out.

I'm very heartened by the British approach, which is integrated, interdisciplinary and multi-level. It's not terribly successful yet, but it has just been started in 2005, 2006, so we need to give it some time. There is also a greater awareness really across the European continent that it is a problem. The Council of Europe has passed resolutions, has issued reports. The European Union has condemned honor killings on the European Union level. United Nations has condemned honor killings and violence against women on the international level. There is multi-level approach awareness-raising about the issue. Organizations are now working together. The Internet has facilitated that very, very much and we are moving in the right direction. We just need to give it some time to work.

I think one needs to take into account as well that one cannot just condemn these communities for being “barbaric” or “uncivilized.” I think that’s wrong. There’s a very real sense of alienation, discrimination, and reassertion of a religious identity because that is the only thing that many communities have left. We have managed to take away their dignity in many ways because there is still institutionalized racism and Islamophobia, in this country as in many European countries.

If this Islamophobia exists, why do you think that cultural defense worked in the past in courts in Europe?

I’ve struggled with that question intellectually, and as I was lucky enough to be able to interview some of the judges who saw over these honor killings. They all said that in honor killings cases, they did not accept the cultural defense. But they gave two explanations, and I agree with both. One is that it was a misguided sense of multiculturalism, the idea that you have to accommodate diversity and this is just one aspect of cultural or religious difference.

So it was almost necessary to show respect to the community by not imposing one’s values of what constitutes proper sexual behavior. In Western society, the idea is that women should be able to control their own sexuality and their own behavior. They were trying to show that we do not seek to impose that on other communities and conversely punish somebody—a father, a husband, or a brother—using Western standards of what constitutes gender-conforming behavior.

I think it was a false sense of deference to culture difference. It was an endorsement of cultural difference that went way too far. It was a feeling that you had to be deferential to the family structure and understandings of family honor in these communities, so it is a cultural relativistic argument. And also strategically, they didn’t want to stir the pot too much.

And when you look at some of the decisions that were coming out of German courts, you see judges say: we may not agree with it, but in “their culture,” this is what’s being tolerated. And we consider ourselves open minded and tolerant, so we have to accept that they’re just “uncivilized” and this is the way it is.

Then the second argument—and I as a feminist completely agree with it, but I’m glad that an older male judge said it—[is that] many of the judges are very traditional and very conservative. They will not go as far as to say that killing a wife who strayed, or killing a daughter who had premarital sex or was rebelling against the father, is acceptable. But, they had very traditional notions of what constitutes a gender conforming-behavior and there was a sense of—I can see why the husband killed his wife because she was cheating on him, so he had to defend his honor.

Please don't forget that we still have the crime of passion defense on our books, so a husband or a wife—although it's mostly the men who get off and the women who get punished—use the defense that they just lost it when they saw their wife in bed with somebody else. So my point is that the law is still very patriarchal and there is still an understanding that a man has the right to police, or to sit in judgment—sometimes leading to death—of a woman's sexual behavior.

One final question. Do you see yourself primarily as a scholar, or an activist, or a combination of both?

A combination of both really. I would be very uncomfortable, and I think I would be remising my duties to the society, to the community, and to my sisters, so to speak—sisterhood is global in my view—if I just locked myself up in the ivory tower and contented myself with writing articles and books, and sat in judgment in terms of analyzing the activities of others from a scholarly perspective—what programs work, what projects works—without actually being brave enough to go out there and speak out against what I consider an injustice.

Secondly, I feel extremely passionate about women's rights and I don't think that just sitting in the ivory tower pontificating about certain things is enough for me. I want to speak out against injustice. I want to poke men in the eye and raise awareness, and I want to export and encourage other people to do the same. I want to join other people in combating what I consider crimes and in advancing women's rights and women's equality, which is what I stand for and what I'm passionate about. So eventually, I will transition out of academia purely into women's rights advocacy, because that's what I'm really passionate about.

I'm considering getting a J.D. and I've thought about going to law school, so I can assist in any way I can the women who are working on advancing women's rights, and advance them myself. So I'm a scholar/activist. I don't see the two as mutually exclusive. I don't think one should be both. Eventually I will transition into advocacy. I have too much energy and I get too passionate about women's rights to just lock myself up in the ivory tower, so I'll be more in the streets soon.

- * Dr. Sylvia Maier received her B.A. in Political Science at the University of Vienna, Austria, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. She has focused her research and teaching on the topics of Islam-state relations in Western Europe, international law and gender studies.