***The phenomenon of Honor violence what is it and how does it look like***

By Halima Salat

Thank you for the invitation – I am very humbled to be invited to speak on this topic.

I would like to start with reference to the most public case of “honor” violence in the UK and one that had tremendous impact on me personally.

Banaz Mahmod was murdered, stuffed in a small suitcase and buried in a backyard in in Birmingham, UK. Banaz’s crime was that she dishonored the male members of her family. So her father and uncle put it upon themselves to premeditate that she had to die in order to ‘restore’ the family’s ‘honor’. In fact from media reports I read that word on the street was that they succeeded to ‘restore’ this honor. The more media coverage Banaz’s story got, the higher the ranks of her family members rose among the community. Yes they were finally brought to justice, but Banaz was still dead.

Benaz’s story had a tremendous impact on me because I could not cross over the fact that

a) she was living in London,

b) she was known to the police as a victim of domestic violence in previous incidents and;

c) she had gone to the police 5 times.

If Victims of honor violence are not taken seriously because honor threat is not something the family shares with the victim in detail like ‘oh hey by the way, we plan to kill you, so could you not go anywhere on Tuesday?’ When the victim comes to the police with a claim like ‘I think my family is planning to kill me, or kidnap me, or harm me in some way, if the police look at this like it is something that needs to be noted in the system and not much steps is taken, and the victim goes back to the environment I bet you, 8 out of 10 times, she has just been sent back to her death. Reporting to authorities is also a ‘dishonorable’ act which can have grave consequences.

To understand the origin of the word “honor” to describe “honor violence” - the bottom line is – it’s a phenomenon that places the burden of safeguarding the ‘honor’ of the family or community, solely on the shoulders of female members of the family/community.

Transgression against such ‘honor’ is considered to bring ‘shame’ – mostly on the male members of the family and hence the consequences result in violence, forced marriage, kidnapping and in extreme cases murder. Transgression can be anything from dressing, dating, having friends, falling in love with someone the family hasn’t approved, leaving religion, turning down an arranged marriage, and many otherwise normal acts of freedoms.

Now we know those basic facts. But do we know the multifaceted way in which honor violence presents itself here and abroad? While common in communities who come from Asia, middle east, and Africa – the degree of emphasis placed on maintaining honor among families living in Europe including the Netherlands can present itself in a sort of adaptive ways.

Of course it is illegal to subject any person to violence for individual choices of how they choose to live their own lives. But when your life is not yours and belongs to an extension of those in your family, relatives, and community, then the dictates of maintaining an ‘honorable life’ is left to be policed by the ‘moral police’ of your community. What do I mean by ‘moral police’? It is other members of the community who put it upon themselves to watch, correct, direct, and punish how a woman should live her life.

Violence against women that is orchestrated for the sole purpose of keeping in check the honor of the one’s family and community, can be present itself in many forms.

For example practices like virginity test, hymen reconstruction, FGM, early marriage, rape victims being coarsed to marry their rapist to name a few: some of these practices are very common among certain communities but almost non existent is other communities.

Cultural/religious norms in varying degrees of seriousness can be have high prevalence in some communities and low prevalence in other communities; and those with low prevalence of one form of honor-related violence can then have spiking prevalence of another form of honor-related violence.

I personally consider FGM a form of honor violence because it very common in my ethnic background. Despite the assumption that it is just some ritualistic and cultural cutting that has existed for years, the point we keep missing is that it all boils down to this one point: ensuring that the female member of the family, does not later (in life) bring ‘shame’ in the form of pre-marital sex. Sex outside marriage is an act of dishonor for the family.

Now I was invited to give some definitions of what it is like to live with the burden of being expected to preserve honor. My personal story will not fit in 2 minutes so….

Instead I would like to know from the committee and the Member of Parliament who brought on the topic:

1. When you say, ‘in the Netherlands you can decide your own life’ – how is that implemented in help available to women who become victims of honor-related violence? Because from what I know, when running away from family honor, that young woman is banking on some serious help to be waiting on the other side. And if that help is *wishy-wishy* at best, and misunderstands the victim at worst, then the perpetrators end up accomplishing their goals.

2. The elephant in the room today, is that women of migrant background do not necessarily receive as much support as every one else, I would like to conclude with a request to the committee to leave this meeting with the focus on how to help victims of honor-related violence. And not wait until someone has either been shipped off to the country of origin of their parents/family or worse…. found stuffed in a suitcase.

Thank you very much.