

**“HONOR KILLINGS” AND THE MUSLIM BAN:
HOW PRESIDENT TRUMP’S EXECUTIVE ORDERS ARE PREMISED ON ANIMUS
AND NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES AGAINST MUSLIMS**

In January 2017, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13679, “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States” (First Executive Order).¹ After a number of federal courts blocked that order from going into effect, President Trump, in March 2017, signed Executive Order 13780 (Second Executive Order).² These orders—known as President Trump’s Muslim Ban—have garnered much attention because of their provisions that would temporarily ban the entry of travelers from several overwhelmingly Muslim countries³ and suspend all refugee admissions into the country.

Less well-known but equally damaging, however, are provisions in both Executive Orders that require the regular collection and publication of information about “honor killings,” a phenomenon that has no connection to international terrorism and reference to which is used almost exclusively to stigmatize Muslims by portraying them as regressive, uncivilized, and inherently prone to violence.⁴ While President Trump and his administration have asserted that the Executive Orders are not designed to discriminate against Muslims, the inclusion of the term and directive regarding “honor killings” make clear that animus against Muslims is in fact that overriding purpose.

Background

The term “honor killing” refers to the killing of a woman who is perceived to have brought shame upon her family by her relatives in the name of restoring family honor.⁵ Even though this form of gender-based violence occurs across a variety of demographic backgrounds, the term is almost exclusively employed as a means of referring to such acts within Muslim families or families perceived to be Muslim.⁶ As the research of scholars like Columbia University anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has shown,⁷ the term’s appearance in public discourse is almost always linked specifically to Islam, and its invocation has become a powerful rhetorical tool through which to implicitly attack the religion and its followers.⁸

The First Executive Order uses the term in precisely this manner, wasting little time before invoking “honor killings” as a partial justification for the Muslim Ban’s very existence. In Section 1 of that Order, which clarifies its purpose, President Trump asserts that the United States “should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including ‘honor’ killings [and] other forms of violence against women).”⁹ The Second Executive Order, while nixing this barefaced attempt to link the problem of violence against women to the populations of predominantly Muslim countries, nevertheless retained its predecessor’s instructions for the

creation of a report that would serve the same purpose, directing the Secretary of Homeland Security to gather and make public “information regarding the number and types of acts of gender-based violence against women, including so-called ‘honor killings,’ in the United States by foreign nationals.”¹⁰ The Second Executive Order mandates that the inaugural report be released six months after the Order’s effective date, with subsequent reports released every six months thereafter with no specified end date.¹¹

The only purpose of this reporting mechanism is to stigmatize Muslims by reinforcing the false and harmful stereotype that “honor killings”—and violence against women more broadly—are “culturally specific form[s] of violence” that are connected to Islam and to Muslim men in particular.¹² This is utterly and demonstrably false. Neither Islamic law nor the faith’s major religious leaders condone “honor crimes,” and there have been numerous and repeated statements from Muslim religious leaders explicitly condemning these acts of violence against women.¹³ Nevertheless, the “honor crimes” label has consistently been selectively applied to those violent crimes against women whose perpetrators are perceived to be Muslim, regardless of whether or not religion plays any role in the acts.¹⁴ In explaining how the term’s usage reflects observer bias rather than objective fact, Professor Abu-Lughod has written:

The population concern with the honor crime solidifies certain violences as timeless cultural practices associated with particular kinds of communities defined by their alien difference from us, rather than treating them as the perverse and diverse acts of individuals in different circumstances.¹⁵

Regrettably, violence against women is a global phenomenon that knows no national or religious boundaries.¹⁶ Rather than acknowledging this, President Trump’s Muslim Ban seeks to associate the global scourge of violence against women with the populations of several overwhelmingly Muslim countries, and in so doing serves only to reinforce a xenophobic and prejudicial stereotype of the Muslim community.

“Honor killings” in public discourse

In the United States, media coverage and political commentary that invoke the term “honor killing” almost always do so in a way that links such crimes to Islam.¹⁷ In 2009, for example, the *New York Daily News* reported on a murder that took place near Buffalo, NY; the headline read: “Muslim TV mogul Muzzammil Hassan’s alleged beheading of wife... may be ‘honor killing,’” despite the absence of evidence that religion played any role in the crime.¹⁸ Similarly, *Fox News* reported on the murder by citing “experts” who determined that the murder’s “fierce and gruesome nature... signal[ed] it’s an honor killing.”¹⁹ Less than one month prior, both media outlets reported on a Chinese student at Virginia Tech who beheaded a female friend; no mention was made of the man’s religion, and no speculation as to his “honor-related” motivations was made.²⁰

This pattern of associating Islam and “honor killings” is also visible in statement that reduce all perpetrators and victims of “honor killing” to Muslims: a July 2016 *New York Post* article about “honor killing” in the United States, for example, described such violence as “Muslim-on-Muslim” crime.²¹ Such comments lay blame for this violence squarely and exclusively at the feet

of the Muslim community. This kind of coverage both informs and is reinforced by the perceived linkage between “honor killing” and the adherents of Islam. As a result, this has bolstered the term’s power as a rhetorical device in the hands of anti-Muslim activists, who often invoke it as a means of implicitly attacking and demeaning Muslims and their faith.

The term “honor killing” makes frequent appearances in the speeches and writings of prominent anti-Muslim voices and the organizations with which they are affiliated. Its use in attacking Islam and its adherents as retrograde and violent is consistent and can easily be observed over a number of years. For example:

- In 2008, Robert Spencer, the director of the anti-Muslim blog *Jihad Watch* stated after an alleged “honor killing” took place in the United States that the crime was “the direct result of...a failure to confront the ugly realities of Islam.”²²
- In 2009, the Center for Security Policy—an organization that has been deemed an anti-Muslim hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)²³—published an article by Nonie Darwish in which she wrote that “Muslim individuals were told they must be Allah’s enforcers of Sharia on earth if the government fails to do so. That is the reason honor killing...happen [sic] in the West.”²⁴
- In 2014, Pamela Geller, a political commentator who has been designated an anti-Muslim extremist by the SPLC,²⁵ spearheaded a campaign in Edmonton, Canada to place ads on the back of public busses that read, “Muslim Girls Honor Killed By Their Families” under a photo of several women and girls and declared that “[h]onor violence, honor murder, is not just a tribal custom; it’s Islamic law.”²⁶
- In January 2017, Phyllis Chesler, a psychotherapist and *Fox News* “expert”²⁷ who has published articles on “honor killings” in which she connects such crimes with the Islamic faith,²⁸ defended Trump’s First Executive Order while explicitly citing the Order’s mention of “honor killings.” On her website, Chesler acknowledged that “[n]ot all honor killers are Muslim,” but placed all such potential killers outside the Western world and declared that “[t]hose who emigrate to the West do not bring this custom with them. Only Muslims do.”²⁹
- ACT for America, an organization that has also been designated an anti-Muslim hate group by the SPLC,³⁰ focuses its programming around “honor violence” in the United States;³¹ in June 2017, ACT’s founder and chairman Brigitte Gabriel posted an article about “honor killing” in which she stated that, “[i]n the West, we call this murder. In the Islamic world, they call it ‘honor killing.’”³²

A host of additional examples are available, but the point is clear: anti-Muslim activists regularly use the term “honor killings” in order to demonize Muslims and Islam. The invocation of the term in President Trump’s Executive Orders is not coincidental, but is instead a pointed “dog whistle”—coded language used for the sole purpose of tarring an entire group with a negative stereotype.

“Honor killings” in the United States

Despite the consistency with which a purported connection between Islam and “honor killing” is drawn in the public sphere, no such uniformity can be found within Islamic law or among Islamic religious authorities to support it. In fact, many Muslim religious leaders have repeatedly and forcefully condemned acts of violence against women, declaring that Islam does not in any way permit such crimes.³³ Researchers and scholars have also found that acceptance of violence against women may be reinforced in any cultural context in which honor occupies a central role in social life and is connected in part to the perceived fidelity of women—examples of such cultures are in no way limited to the “Muslim world” and instead range from the Middle East to the Mediterranean to the American South.³⁴

Furthermore, with regard to actual observed instances of “honor killings” in the United States, existing research fails to establish such crimes as a category requiring emergency intervention. Indeed, according to a 2014 study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice, “cases of any type of honor violence [in the United States] appear to be rare in comparison to other types of crime.”³⁵ Furthermore, the lead author of one of the only studies to actually estimate the number of “honor killings” that occur in the U.S. each year—the results of which have been cited by organizations like ACT for America as necessitating the organization’s attention to the issue³⁶--has himself stated that the study was “not terribly scientific,” and that there simply is no reason to make “honor crimes” a focal point of American crime policy.³⁷ Clearly, then, even a cursory review of relevant research points to the absurdity of citing the practice as a justification for excluding an entire class of immigrants from the country.

Given the absence of any information suggesting that “honor killings” are a distinctive problem in the U.S.—or one that is in any way related to national security or to the populations of the countries identified in the Orders³⁸--President Trump’s decision to track and publish figures of these crimes in the U.S. reveals an interest in stigmatizing Muslims and the nationals of the Muslim Ban’s targeted countries, rather than in actually combating violence against women. Indeed, this latter point is underscored by the fact that his Executive Orders only charge the Secretary of Homeland Security with collecting and disseminating information about “honor killings” and other acts of violence against women that are committed by foreign nationals, despite the absence of any evidence that those crimes are more pronounced among immigrants.

The Trump administration and violence against women in the United States

To challenge aspects of the Muslim Ban’s brief mention of violence against women is not to argue that such violence never occurs among Muslim communities, but rather that there is nothing characteristically “Muslim” or “Islamic” about such violence.³⁹ Regrettably, violence against women occurs in all national and cultural contexts with disturbing frequency—and the United States is no exception. But the narrow focus of the Muslim Ban’s reference to gender-based violence wrongly suggests that violence against women is a problem that can be addressed simply by closing our borders and collecting information about those crime that are committed by the Muslim immigrants and other foreign nationals who remain. Beyond being simple-minded and ineffective, this approach is an affront to the reality of violence against women in the United States and around the world.

In fact, rates of violence against women in the United States are alarmingly high.⁴⁰ According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, approximately one quarter of all women in the U.S. have been victims of severe physical violence at the hands of an intimate partners in their lifetimes.⁴¹ Similarly, annual Violence Policy Center studies since the early 2000s have consistently found that significant percentages of female homicide victims in the U.S. are killed by their male intimate partners.⁴² Just this year, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention released a report⁴³ that again displayed this trend,⁴⁴ finding that nearly half of the 10,000 female homicide victims it analyzed were murdered by their male intimate partners.⁴⁵

If the Trump administration were truly focused on combating violence against women in the United States rather than simply compiling stories for use in promoting its anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant policies, its efforts would look very different. The lack of a systemic, single-source method of tracking violence against women in the United States, for example, is a deficiency that the federal government has a legitimate interest in addressing. However, the creation of a public list that documents only those acts of violence against women that are committed by foreigners is preposterous as a proposed remedy; it is a transparent attempt to place the blame for these crimes on non-citizens, and its explicit mention of “honor killings” points towards its attempt to stigmatize Muslim in particular.

President Trump’s efforts to implement massive federal budget cuts in relevant areas have further underscored his administration’s lack of motivation to genuinely address violence against women in the United States. In April 2017, the President put forward a budget “blueprint” that would take an axe to federal funding for grants authorized by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), potentially cutting such funding by 93% over the next ten years.⁴⁶ These grants currently provide victim support services, trainings, and other measures that are vitally important in the fight to reduce gender-based violence in the United States.⁴⁷

Conclusion

By invoking the term “honor killings” in both Muslim Ban Executive Orders, President Trump is seeking to appear as if he is taking a strong stance in opposition to violence against women. In reality, however, he is simply peddling anti-Muslim animus and promoting inaccurate and inflammatory stereotypes about Muslims. The President’s actions represent the latest example in a long and ugly history of “dog-whistle” politics.

In singling out “honor killings” and connecting violence against women with Muslims and Islam, the Trump administration is turning a blind eye towards the larger problem of domestic violence. President Trump should instead be addressing the overall rates of violence against women in the United States, and creating policies that effectively and meaningfully respond to the true breadth of the issue. His focus on “honor killings” will simply add further hardship to the everyday lives of Muslim and immigrants in the United States while doing nothing to combat the most ubiquitous forms of violence against women around the country.

President Trump's Muslim Ban and "honor killings" database will neither make women safe nor America great. It should be rejected and replaced with a policy that seeks to address violence against women in the United States in all its forms.

Endnotes

¹ Executive Order No. 13769, 82 C.F.R. 8977 (2017), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/>.

² Executive Order No. 13780, 82 C.F.R. 13209 (2017), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states-2/>.

³ The First Executive Order banned travelers from the following seven countries, all of which have populations that are more than 90% Muslim: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The Second Executive Order banned travelers from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

⁴ See, e.g.: Phyllis Chesler, “Are Honor Killings Simply Domestic Violence?” *Middle East Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 61-69, available at: <http://www.meforum.org/2067/are-honor-killings-simply-domestic-violence>;

Chad Groening, “Ignoring root of ‘honor killings’ dangerous,” *One News Now*, November 4, 2009, <https://www.onenewsnow.com/culture/2009/11/04/ignoring-root-of-honor-killings-dangerous>; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 112; Benjamin Weinthal, “Suspected ‘honor killing’ stokes German fears about customs, crimes of Middle Eastern refugees,” *Fox News*, October 9, 2015, www.foxnews.com/world/2015/10/09/suspected-honor-killing-stokes-german-fears-about-customs-crimes-middle-eastern.html.

⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod, Decl. to United States District Court for the District of Columbia in *Universal Muslim Association of America, Inc. et al. v. Donald Trump et al.*, Case No. 1:17-cv-00537-TSC, 3.

⁶ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 114.

⁷ See, e.g., Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

⁸ Abu-Lughod, Decl., 3.

⁹ Exec. Order No. 13769, Sec. 1.

¹⁰ Exec. Order No. 13780, Sec. 11(a)(iii).

¹¹ Exec. Order No. 13780, Sec. 11(b)(a).

¹² Abu-Lughod, Decl., 3.

¹³ Paola Loriggio, “Shafia Murders: Imams Issue Fatwa Against Honour Killings, Domestic Violence,” *Huffington Post*, April 5, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/02/04/honour-killing-imams-fatwa-against_n_1254697.html.

¹⁴ In 2008, for example, an Egyptian-born man murdered his two daughters in Dallas, TX. Despite the father’s long history of sexually abusing his daughters, and even though there was no evidence suggesting the man was motivated by religion, commentators were quick to describe the murders as “honor killings,” and blamed them in “Islam.” (Leti Volpp, “Framing Cultural Difference: Immigrant Women and Discourses of Tradition,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 90-91.

¹⁵ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 128.

¹⁶ K.M. Devries et al., “The Global Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women,” *Science* 340, no. 6140 (2013): 1527-1528.

¹⁷ Abu-Lughod, Decl., 4.

¹⁸ Fred O. Williams, “Muslim TV mogul Muzammil Hassan’s alleged beheading of wife, Aasiya Hassan, may be ‘honor killing,’” *New York Daily News*, February 17, 2009, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/muslim-tv-mogul-muzammil-hassan-alleged-beheading-wife-aasiya-hassan-honor-killing-article-1.393494>.

¹⁹ Joshua Rhet Miller, “Beheading in New York Appears to Be Honor Killing, Experts Say,” *Fox News*, February 17, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2009/02/17/beheading-in-new-york-appears-to-be-honor-killing-experts-say.html>.

²⁰ See, e.g.: “Virginia tech graduate student attacked, decapitated by fellow student,” *New York Daily News*, January 22, 2009, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/virginia-tech-graduate-student-attacked-decapitated-fellow-student-article-1.422670>; “Virginia Tech Student Decapitated with Kitchen Knife by Attacker She Knew,” *Fox News*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2009/01/23/virginia-tech-student-decapitated-with-kitchen-knife-by-attacker-knew.html>.

²¹ Andrea Peyser, “We’re so afraid of Muslims we’re ignoring domestic ‘honor killings,’” *New York Post*, July 21, 2016, <https://nypost.com/2016/07/21/were-so-afraid-of-muslims-were-ignoring-domestic-honor-killings/>.

²² Chad Groening, “Silence over ‘honor killing’ stuns Islam critic,” *One News Now*, July 14, 2008, <https://www.onenewsnow.com/politics-govt/2008/07/14/silence-over-honor-killing-stuns-islam-critic>.

²³ “Center for Security Policy,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/center-security-policy>.

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- ²⁴ Nonie Darwish, “The scandal of apostate killing,” *Center for Security Policy*, August 3, 2009, <https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2009/08/03/the-scandal-of-apostate-killing-2/>.
- ²⁵ “Pamela Geller,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/pamela-geller>.
- ²⁶ Pamela Geller, “Pamela Geller, Breitbart: ‘In Canada, Defending Girls from Islamic Honor Killing is ‘Racist,’” *American Freedom Defense Initiative*, July 7, 2014, <http://afdi.us/pamela-geller-breitbart-in-canada-defending-girls-from-islamic-honor-killings-is-racist/>.
- ²⁷ See Miller, “Beheading in New York.” This article’s headline cites “experts” in suggesting that the murder being discussed was an “honor killing.” Later in the article, Chesler is quoted as one such authority on the matter when she said that “[t]he fierce and gruesome nature of this murder signals it’s an honor killing.”
- ²⁸ See Chesler, “Are Honor Killings Simply Domestic Violence?”; Phyllis Chesler, “Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings,” *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2010), available at: <http://www.meforum.org/2646/worldwide-trends-in-honor-killings>; Phyllis Chesler & Nathan Bloom, “Hindu vs. Muslim Honor Killings,” *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (2012), available at: <http://www.meforum.org/3287/hindu-muslim-honor-killings>.
- ²⁹ Phyllis Chesler, “Trump’s Executive Order is Quite in Order,” *Phyllis-Chesler.com*, January 30, 2017, <https://phyllis-chesler.com/articles/trumps-executive-order-is-quite-in-order>.
- ³⁰ “Act for America,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/act-america>.
- ³¹ “Honor Violence,” *ACT for America*, http://www.actforamerica.org/honor_violence.
- ³² Brigitte Gabriel, “The War on Girls,” *ACT for America*, June 6, 2017, http://www.actforamerica.org/the_war_on_girls.
- ³³ See, e.g., Loriggio, “Shafia Murders: Imams Issue Fatwa.”
- ³⁴ Joseph A. Vandello and Dov Cohen, “Male Honor and Female Fidelity: Implicit Cultural Scripts that Perpetuate Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 5 (2003): 997-1010.
- ³⁵ Cynthia Helba et al., *Report on Exploratory Study into Honor Violence Measurement Methods* (2014), 1-1, available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/grants/248879.pdf>.
- ³⁶ ACT for America, “Honor Violence.”
- ³⁷ Jesse Singal, “Here’s What the Research Says About Honor Killings in the U.S.,” *New York Magazine*, March 6, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/03/heres-what-the-research-says-about-american-honor-killings.html>. In conducting his study, Professor Ric Curtis of John Jay College of Criminal Justice used data about “honor crimes” from European countries and applied them to U.S. crime rates and demographic statistics. Using this method, his study estimated that between 23 and 27 “honor killings” occur in the United States per year.
- ³⁸ The Second Executive Order quotes at length the State Department’s 2015 Country Reports on Terrorism in order to justify its attention to the six countries its provisions apply to. Notably, not a single such report for any of the six countries targeted by the Order makes any mention of “honor killings” (Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2015,” 2016, available at: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf>).
- ³⁹ Abu-Lughod, Decl., 4.
- ⁴⁰ “Statistics,” *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*, <https://ncadv.org/learn-more/statistics>.
- ⁴¹ M.C. Black et al., “National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report,” *National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2011, 2, available at: https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.
- ⁴² Violence Policy Center, “Female Homicide Victimization by Males,” <http://www.vpc.org/revealing-the-impacts-of-gun-violence/female-homicide-victimization-by-males/>.
- ⁴³ Emiko Petrosky et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Homicides of Adult Women and the Role of Intimate Partner Violence – United States, 2003-2014,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 66, no. 28 (2017), available at: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6628a1.htm?s_cid=mm6628a1_w.
- ⁴⁴ It is worth noting here that some of these murders almost invariably involve “honor”-related characteristics—men killing their intimate partners after discovering what they believe to be evidence of adultery, for example. When the perpetrator is non-Muslim, however, such acts are sometimes regarded euphemistically as “crimes of passion” rather than “honor crimes,” and entering such a plea in some states can result in a more lenient punishment than might otherwise be handed down. In 1994, for instance, a man named Kenneth Peacock used this defense in a Maryland court after he shot his wife in the head with a rifle upon finding her in bed with another man. Peacock was ultimately sentenced to just 18 months in prison. When the judge handed down the sentence, he indicated his desire to let Peacock simply walk free, stating that he “wonder[ed] how many men married five, four years would have had the strength to walk away without inflicting some corporal punishment.” (“Punishment Is 18 Months For Killing

Cheating Wife,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/19/us/punishment-is-18-months-for-killing-cheating-wife.html>.)

⁴⁵ Camila Domonoske, “CDC: Half Of All Female Homicide Victims Are Killed By Intimate Partners,” *NPR*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/21/538518569/cdc-half-of-all-female-murder-victims-are-killed-by-intimate-partners>.

⁴⁶ Lindsay Wise, “Massive cuts to Violence Against Women programs just ‘technical,’ White House says,” *McClatchy DC*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/white-house/article152705234.html>.

⁴⁷ “Grant Programs,” *U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women*, <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/grant-programs>.