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Experts: Men Distort Religion to Justify 'Honour' Killings

By Jan Strupczewski

STOCKHOLM (Reuters) – Men all over the world distort the teachings of Islam and Christianity to justify abusing their wives and daughters, leading to thousands of “honor” killings a year for which courts provide virtual impunity, experts say.

U.N. estimates show that more than 5,000 women are murdered every year in “honor”-related violence, but the real number could be much higher, said experts at an international conference near Stockholm, which ended Wednesday.

Horror stories of women and even girls as young as seven being beheaded, burned to death, maimed, beaten, raped, forced into suicide or mentally abused underscored that patriarchal violence against women pays no heed to religion.

In many cases it is rooted in cultural and tribal beliefs.

“Islam as a reason for the honor killings is rubbish,” Nilofar Bakhtiar, adviser to Pakistan’s prime minister on Women’s Development, told Reuters.

She blamed such violence in Pakistan on “the feudal tradition, the culture and the tribal system.” She said that men found it “very convenient to say that what they don’t want to do is against Islam and what they want to do is in the name of Islam.”

While most cases are reported in Muslim countries, “honor” violence also occurs among Christian families, delegates said.

“After we got married, Hell started,” a Christian woman from the Middle East, identified only as Maria, said in a video tape.

Beaten and raped for questioning her husband’s business practices, she fled to Sweden when he threatened to sell her into prostitution.

While traditional Islamic Sharia law does impose stricter dress codes on women and stresses their household duties, one Muslim cleric at the conference said the Koran condemned abuse of the weak but its teachings had been distorted over time.

“We must educate imams and young people,” said Imam Abdal Haqq of the Swedish Islamic Society. “We must free ourselves from these honor killings and the ‘Islamophobia’ they create.”

GOD THE FATHER...

But some experts believe any male-dominated religion, in which God and his prophets or apostles are male figures, creates conditions for the subordination and abuse of women.

Predominantly Catholic Poland, although free from “honor killings,” has a problem with violence against women, rooted in the strong influence of the Catholic church on public life, Polish minister for gender equality Magdalena Sroda said.

“Catholicism does not directly support or oppose violence against women. But there are indirect links through culture which is strongly based on religion,” Sroda told Reuters.

“It is a structure based on patriarchal domination of God the Father and the less important role of women can be seen for example in the letters of Saint Paul,” she said.

Asma Jahangir, U.N. Special Rapporteur on religious freedom, said many courts condoned patriarchal violence by letting the perpetrators get away with “a slap on the wrist.”

“In 405 documented cases of honor killings in Afghanistan so far this year only 20 arrests were made,” she said.

Zorayha Rahim Sobrany, deputy minister for Women’s Affairs in Afghanistan, said the concept of women’s equality to men was slow to take root, but that progress was being made.

“We need time. We must move step by step. If you go too fast, the reaction is that people close themselves,” she said.

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