



Comparative Human Rights Framework: Reconceptualising Honour Killings as Multiple Violations of Men's and Women's Rights under International Law and Its Impact on Indian Jurisprudence.

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How to Cite this Article:

NIZRA, A. F. (2026). Comparative Human Rights Framework: Reconceptualising Honour Killings as Multiple Violations of Men's and Women's Rights under International Law and Its Impact on Indian Jurisprudence.. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, <i>02</i>(6).
<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i6.275>

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<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i6.275>

Abstract

Honor killings are, however, a combination of various human rights violations and the most serious, complicated caste and gender based violent practices recognised under international law. This research posits honour killings as transgressions of the basic rights of men and women alike, preserved in place due to patriarchal social structures, community watching and the complicity of institutions. The fact that it has mostly been conceived of as crime against women alone needs to be addressed, and the idea reconceptualised. The paper comprehensively traces the scope of violations against all range of rights under study and systematically addresses right to life and dignity and right to equality as well as right to personal liberty and liberty to marry freely and demonstrates rights being undermined by referencing a wide array of human rights instrument: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW). It further analyses the jurisprudence of Indian courts on the issue and examine some prominent judgements of the Supreme Court of India where the courts slowly declared honour killings unconstitutional and asked the

governments to take punitive and preventive steps. It analyses the adequacy of present penal provisions available under the Indian Penal Code and proposed Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and other legislative developments like the Prevention of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition Bill. Finally, the paper comes to conclusion that although the present laws are directionally appropriate, without a strong implementing framework and targeted legislations, in the context of the gender-sensitive interpretation by the judiciary conforming with human rights standards they are unable to address the issue properly.

Keywords

Honour killings; international human rights law; CEDAW; Indian jurisprudence; gender-based violence; constitutional rights



I. INTRODUCTION

“One of the most abhorrent violations of human rights that we witness today, is the incidence of honour killings which are normally explained as the murder of a person—mostly by family members – for allegedly bringing dishonour to the family or community¹. This practice, reported in the Indian subcontinent, in countries of the Middle East and North Africa and, of course, in their expatriate communities in Europe and North America, may defy simple categorization either as solely cultural and/or private; on the other hand, in practice it underlines the complex links between caste oppression, community hegemony, patriarchy and the complicity of the state ²”.

The predominant emphasis on female victims present in discussions is a significant missing component, due to overwhelming evidence and documented case law illustrating that men also become targets for honour killing/violence, primarily if they decide to pursue their chosen mates from outside the realm of their chosen caste, creed or community³. Due to this simplification in the perception of such crimes, a proper legal framework is often impeded and this often-concealed extent to the trauma suffered. Law might seem to lack specific mention, but despite the 2018 Supreme Court’s judgement of India in the case of *Shakti Vahini v. Union of India* laying down a watershed in jurisprudential thoughts with respect to honour killings constituting a violation of fundamental rights⁴, even so, the attainment of justice suffers.

To construct a model of honour killings as multiple, overlapping abuses of both men and women's rights under the rubric of international law, this paper uses a comparative human rights methodology, critically assesses the Indian constitutional jurisprudence, legal gaps, law reform needs and maps violations under the various relevant international conventions. Research question: What are the ways and means by which the Indian approach to honour killings could be reformed or modified in light of a comparative international human rights lens?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Various academic disciplines have studied the topic of honour killings including law, feminist gender and development, sociology and criminology. The ‘honour’ concept has come under intense criticism by Lila Abu-Lughod and others⁵,⁶ who argue that ‘the use of ‘honour’ as a discourse serves to entrench the power of patriarchy and, as such, does not necessarily reflect real social values or practices’ and see the concept of honour killings as situated within a wider history of women's and human rights and challenge a cultural relativist defence of it.

Prem Chowdhry⁷ and Veena Das⁸ have written about how caste endogamy, kinship structures, and deadly violence against couples who cross social limits are intertwined in Indian academics. According to their sociological analyses, honour killings in India are frequently planned by larger kinship networks and quasi-judicial

¹United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2000). *The State of World Population 2000: Lives Together, Worlds Apart — Men and Women in a Time of Change*. UNFPA.

²Welchman, L., & Hossain, S. (Eds.). (2005). *'Honour': Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence against Women*. Zed Books.

³Mayell, H. (2002). Thousands of women killed for family 'honor.' *National Geographic News*. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com>

⁴*Shakti Vahini v. Union of India*, (2018) 7 SCC 192.

⁵Abu-Lughod, L. (2011). Seductions of the 'honor crime.' *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 22(1), 17–63. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1218238>

⁶Welchman, L., & Hossain, S. (2005). Introduction: 'Honour,' rights and wrongs. In L. Welchman & S. Hossain (Eds.), *'Honour': Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence against Women* (pp. 1–23). Zed Books.

⁷Chowdhry, P. (2007). *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste, and Patriarchy in Northern India*. Oxford University Press.

⁸Das, V. (1995). *Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.



organizations like khap panchayats, which are unofficial village councils whose statements opposing inter caste or interreligious unions have been linked to multiple killings⁹.

That working of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women has provided foundation stone for developing international human rights law. Reports of mandate-holders to HRC starting from 2002 recognize honour killings as state condoned acts and conclude states were responsible under international law for acts of private persons due to state's failure to address acts, investigate and punish¹⁰. This relies on principle of positive duties of the European Court of Human Rights and criterion of Velasquez Rodriguez of Inter American Court¹¹.

One striking limitation of the existing scholarly literature on women trafficking to, through and from India has been the conspicuous absence of theoretically examining the male victim dimension. Whilst there are casual mentions of male fatalities and losses incurred by men within Mayell¹² and Vikram¹³, no rights-based and integrated research discourse, within which male victimhood, rights and justice could also be conceptualized. Furthermore, Indian jurisprudence focusing on women trafficking and illegal migration has so far solely concentrated on criminal law perspectives, almost entirely neglecting the human rights framework, its constitutional basis in India and links with international law¹⁴. This research proposal attempts to address these lacunae through an integrated comparative study.

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a doctrine-cum comparative law methodology; The doctrinal method is used to explore the material content, structuring and the interpretative history of related international human rights treaty Law, Indian Constitution, Indian Penal Code, 1860, The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bill, 2023 and other proposed enactments. Original material in the form of treaty text, General Comment of treaties, reports of UN Special Rapporteurs; decisions of the Supreme Court of India, High Courts; and judgements of ECHR and IACHR have been relied upon as primary sources.

A comparison of the Indian jurisprudence with international norms and jurisprudence would assist to contextualize the Indian jurisprudence within the ambit of international human rights norms, bring forth convergence, divergence as also areas of concern/reform for the Indian law in this regard. To derive some learning and conclusions for reforming the Indian law, comparison would focus on the legal systems and judicial interventions of Pakistan, Jordan, Turkey and the United Kingdom - countries which have faced similar issue of honour killings. Methodological research of peer reviewed studies, UN reports, law commission reports and research-based reports of human rights agencies provided secondary data used.

In light of widespread under-reporting of honour killings-making accurate estimation impossible through statistical means-this investigation is entirely non-empirical¹⁵. Instead, commonality in sentencing logic, legislative flaws and procedural discrepancies are identified through thematic analysis. Where victim identity

⁹Human Rights Watch. (2010). Marry Before Your House is Ruined: Discrimination and Violence against Women in Pakistan. Human Rights Watch.

¹⁰UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. (2002). Cultural Practices in the Family that Are Violent towards Women (E/CN.4/2002/83). United Nations.

¹¹Velasquez Rodriguez v. Honduras, Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Judgment (1988) Series C No. 4.

¹²Mayell, H. (2002). Thousands of women killed for family 'honor.' National Geographic News.

¹³Vikram, A. (2018). Honour killings in India: A socio-legal analysis. Journal of the Indian Law Institute, 60(2), 189–215.

¹⁴Singh, R. (2019). Constitutional dimensions of honour crimes in India. National Law School of India Review, 31(1), 45–72.

¹⁵National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). (2022). Crime in India 2021: Statistics. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.



does not appear in court documents, representative court cases have been anonymized in line with the ethical provisions herein.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Honour Killings as Multiple Violations under International Human Rights Law

Honour Killings as Many Violations of International Human Rights Law It is obvious that an honour killing represents multiple interdependent and cumulative violations of international human rights law that cannot be properly categorized as one single infraction. The most immediate violation is of the right to life enshrined in Art. 3 of the UDHR and Article 6 of the ICCPR. Yet, previous violations of the rights to liberty and security (Art. 9 ICCPR), privacy and family life (Art. 17), freedom of movement (Art. 12), and freedom from discrimination (Art. 2 and 26) normally prelude a honour killing. Table I identifies the multi-violation structure within various core human rights instruments.

Table I: Comparative Human Rights Framework — Honour Killings as Multiple Violations

International Instrument	Relevant Article/Provision	Right Violated by Honour Killing
ICCPR (1966)	Art. 6, 7, 9, 17, 26	Right to life, freedom from torture, liberty, privacy, equality
CEDAW (1979)	Art. 1, 2, 5, 15	Gender discrimination, stereotyping, equality, legal standing
CRC (1989)	Art. 6, 19, 37	Child's right to life, protection from violence and cruel treatment
UDHR (1948)	Art. 1, 3, 5, 7	Inherent dignity, life, freedom from torture, equality before law
UN Declaration on VAW (1993)	Art. 1, 2, 4	Gender-based violence constituting a violation
Indian Constitution	Art. 14, 15, 17, 19, 21	Equality, non-discrimination, abolition of untouchability, life and dignity

The Human Rights Committee (HRC) acknowledges in its 2019 General comment 36 on article 6 (2019) (2019, 10), where it regards a state's failure to act as a violation of the positive obligation to protect life, that the obligation of a state party necessitates action toward those factors of society which allow honour killing to happen¹⁶. As the HRC broadly adopts a gender-inclusive framework where men who deviate from hegemonic expressions of masculinity are equally vulnerable, the comment goes beyond traditional interpretations where, it could be argued, the predominant concern seemed to be for female victims of this practice.

¹⁶Human Rights Committee. (2019). General Comment No. 36 on Article 6 of the ICCPR: Right to Life (CCPR/C/GC/36). United Nations.



The scope of CEDAW is also critical to the examination. The Article 5 of CEDAW oblige State parties to modify social and cultural pattern of conduct which are based on stereo-types and to eliminate harmful attitudes/and behaviour that may result in the infliction of any kind of damage to women, which is illustrated by the case of honour killings. For the first time, in its General recommendation No 35 (2017) which replaces and upgrades its 1992 general recommendation No 19, the Committee defines honour killings as part of the phenomenon of 'gender-based violence and discrimination' constituting 'discrimination within the meaning of Article 1 of CEDAW. States are also obligated not only to punish the killing itself as a criminal act, but also to eliminate the deeper-seated causes of these acts, including by raising consciousness and awareness, educating populations and deconstructing harmful social models and norms¹⁷.

Rising trend of killing teenagers in honour killing acts. Thus; more significant role of the CRC becomes apparent. Honor killing is undoubtedly within the scope of articles 6 (life, survival and development); 19 (protection from violence); and 37 (no child shall be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment) where the article ensures that all measures must be taken to protect children against violence; and no child must be subjected to cruelty or degrading treatment; State parties still hide the cases of killing teenage victims, thereby resulting in lack of accountability¹⁸.

B. The Male Victim Dimension: A Reconceptualization

There are policy and legal implications to reconsidering honour killing as violating the rights of men and women alike. A number of honour killing cases involve the killing of the women's male partners, sometimes at the scene, in many cases, data from the NCRB and non-governmental organizations indicates ¹⁹. In some cases, where law enforcement agents are complicit, this can manifest into mass atrocities of which targeted males in an honour killing often do not survive and may experience enforced displacement, excessive physical violence, detention or torture, and involuntary disappearance.

Rights of Male Victims The protections accorded to male victims under international law mirror those of women. The anti-discrimination provisions of the ICCPR (Articles 2 and 26) prohibits discrimination based on sex and "other status," which the United States has stated may include "caste or other social origin."²⁰ Caste and social origin, under the same honour-shame framework previously described, affect men just as they do women who select partners for their marriage. The focus of the human rights analysis on women victims contributes to an unbalanced perspective on the nature of state obligations, as gender-neutral legal mechanisms that nonetheless recognize structural power imbalances are slow to develop.

In relation to these, even the Istanbul convention which focuses on women recognizes at its preamble and Article 2(2) that men also experience honour-based crimes and that to combat these phenomena, it is essential to tackle

¹⁷Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee). (2017). General Recommendation No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence against Women, Updating General Recommendation No. 19 (CEDAW/C/GC/35). United Nations.

¹⁸UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls. (2023). Report to the Human Rights Council on Femicide (A/HRC/53/36). United Nations.

¹⁹Irudayam, A., Mangubhai, J. P., & Lee, J. G. (2011). Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights.

²⁰Human Rights Committee. (1989). General Comment No. 18: Non-Discrimination (HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 Vol.I). United Nations.



the systemic gender power imbalances which cause suffering to both genders ²¹. India does not yet have a gender sensitive legal instrument yet a model has been provided.

C. Impact on Indian Jurisprudence: Judicial Milestones

The legal understanding of honour killing within India's constitutional law has evolved significantly over the last 20 years, but it is still scattered and rests primarily upon judicial action than upon legislative empowerment. II delineates the essential judgements that have reshaped the legal framework.

Table II: Key Indian Supreme Court Decisions on Honour Killings

Case	Year	Significance
Lata Singh v. State of U.P.	2006	Affirmed right to inter-caste marriage; condemned family violence
Shakti Vahini v. Union of India	2018	Directed states to prevent khap panchayat interference; protective guidelines issued
Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu	2011	Condemned caste-based violence; called for strict police action and prosecution
Manoj & Babli Murder Case	2010	Punjab & Haryana HC awarded death sentence; termed honour killing a 'barbaric' act

The most detailed exposition of Indian honour killing jurisprudence would be available in the judgment of the Supreme Court in *Shakti Vahini v. Union of India* (2018) 7 SCC 192 wherein Chief Justice Dipak Misra while examining such an issue held that "right to choose a partner as integral part of life & personal liberty under Article 21, any interference with right to choose spouse with respect of any matter whatsoever whether in name of marriage, family or honour killing and on interference the member family/any one interfering or coercing shall be under liable to be punished. The same interferes with constitutional rights to personal life and personal liberty and so therefore family/khap panchayat/person can't interfere. There is no mention of any such restriction anywhere in the constitution of India".

The Apex Court had set out twelve-point guidelines for states. This mandates that every state will constitute of protection cells for honour killings, sensitization of police personnel about the menace, safe houses for inter-caste or inter-religious couples, speedy trial tribunals to quickly deal with honour killings and others. Making of direct use of international human rights instrument like CEDAW, ICCPR to the reading of Article 21 has internationalised the constitutional law in India.

Recently, in *Lata Singh v. State of U.P.* (2006) 5 SCC 475, the Court clearly espoused the right to choose one's spouse from another caste, without interference from parents even though they may be adult ²², and condemned what was labeled familial violence as 'feudal, oppressive and brutal and alien to our constitutional philosophy'. In the *Manoj-Babli* honor killing case (Sessions Court, Karnal, 2010; confirmed on appeal, 2011), the Punjab and Haryana High Court pronounced the death sentence to various persons, including the khap panchayat chief

²¹Council of Europe. (2011). Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). CETS No. 210. Council of Europe.

²²*Lata Singh v. State of U.P.*, (2006) 5 SCC 475.



who issued the death warrant for the couple; this showed the trend to treat honor killings on par with premeditated killings.

Nevertheless, in *Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu*, 2011 6 SCC 405²³, the Supreme Court has, at the dawn of this century, addressed the caste element in honour crimes, condemned the killings of married couples who had got themselves married despite crossing castes and, inter alia, held police officials to departmental action for failure to protect these couples—an early incantation of the duty of due diligence placed on institutions²⁴.

D. Legislative Framework: Gaps and Reform Imperatives

Some provisions in the (now largely abrogated and replaced by the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*, 2023) India Penal Code, for example Sections 302 (Murder), 307 (Attempt to murder), 34 (Common Intention), and 120B (Criminal conspiracy) along with the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 deal with aspects like murder, attempted murder, etc. However, these laws are not able to encompass the aspect of crime as it occurs due to collaboration in the act, as if it has been done under an assumed quasi-judicial endorsement from the panchayat and specifically for the motive of the connection to 'honour'²⁵.

To combat honour killings, the 242nd Report of the Law Commission of India (2012) proposed a new law punishing Khap panchayat diktats mandating or threatening violence and enhancing punishment for honour killings²⁶. A draft Prevention of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition Bill that was being circulated, yet to be passed into law, exemplifies the politics around treading into community level social institutions. Comparative studies of experiences in Turkey (Criminal Code reforms of 2004 abolishing moderated sentencing for honour killings) and Pakistan (Qisas and Diyat amendments as part of the Criminal Law Amendment (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016) indicate that however flawed legislative reform will have been in its execution, it unmistakably sends out a message from the State²⁷.

In this regard, the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita* (BNS), 2023, came into effect from July 1, 2024 but contained no express outlaw of honour killing. Since Section 302 corresponding provision remains unqualified retention the \"provocation\" defence, it could continue to be employed by the accused as a means of attenuating their sentence in honour killing trial. This is diametrically inconsistent with ICCPR, Article 6, Human Rights Committee.

E. Due Diligence, State Responsibility, and Institutional Complicity

According to a key principle of international human rights law, once a state failed to fulfill due diligence obligation, to do everything reasonably possible to Prevent, investigate, prosecute, punish and redress, it is responsible for violations of individual's human rights committed by individuals or groups²⁸. Under CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, positive measures by the state in order to remove root and structural impediments are also required to fulfill this commitment. India reports where the police intervened in cases of

²³Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu, (2011) 6 SCC 405.

²⁴Kaur, R. (2010). Khap panchayats, sex ratio and female agency. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(23), 14–16.

²⁵Law Commission of India. (2012). Prevention of Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances (in the Name of Honour and Tradition): A Suggested Legal Framework (Report No. 242). Government of India.

²⁶Government of India. Pervizat, L. (2006). In the name of honor. *Human Rights Dialogue*, 2(10), 29–30

²⁷Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India. (2023). *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*, 2023 (Act No. 45 of 2023). Gazette of India, Extraordinary.

²⁸Ertürk, Y. (2006). The Due Diligence Standard as a Tool for the Elimination of Violence against Women (E/CN.4/2006/61). UN Commission on Human Rights.



honor killings to mediate a "compromise" between khap and victims' families, treating honor killings as personal family matter and colluding with khap panchayats are cases where such complicity exists²⁹.

Although this lacuna has been to a certain extent repaired by virtue of institutional accountability being made justiciable in the Supreme Court in the case of the landmark Shakti Vahini, the implementation has remained patchy with only certain states having enacted protective laws. Many States including Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh-the ones having recorded more reported honour killings- have still to put in place the protective mechanisms as ordered. It seems to indicate that there is a gulf between court orders and executive will given the repeated complaint by the NHRC of inadequacy of response by various states in their annual reports without contempt proceedings being instituted against the defaulters³⁰.

V. CONCLUSION

The argument in this essay has been that honour killings must be reconceptualised as the simultaneously occurring breach of multiple provisions of international human rights law with impact on both men and women through gendered mechanisms and mirroring social norms that perpetuate a patriarchal society. These provisions have included the rights to life, dignity, equality, liberty, privacy and the right to be free from torture. This mapping of violations across the ICCPR, CEDAW, CRC, UDHR and the DEVAW forms a rigorous normative framework within which a state not only has to take action on the criminalisation, but also on the structural, institutional complicities and failures in enforcement that facilitate these attacks.

With its judgement and precedents such as those relating to Shakti Vahini, Indian jurisprudence has moved far towards treating honour killings as an unconstitutional crime against the core constitutional guarantees and values embodied under articles 14, 15, 19, and 21. One might offer the consistent judicial use of the developing body of international human rights law as a positive model of constitutional adjudication. But however admirable its progress may seem on paper, the effectiveness of the judicial action is limited by absence of a targeted legislation, retention of mitigating practices in criminal sentencing, non-implementation of the orders by the judicial authorities, and reluctance of politicians to take on the power of khap panchayats.

The Recommendation to pass dedicated law on honour killings with no delay on an immediate basis which is consistent with human rights obligations and with the practices and standards from countries such as the Republic of Turkey, Pakistan and the UK. It is also been demanded to criminalise all diktats of Khap panchayat, to provide an obligation to public authorities for report, to set up dedicated tribunals with gender-sensitive procedures and to ensure that bottomland female survivors are provided full redress and compensation. As such India would be able to adopt dedicated recommendations regarding these reforms and translate international accountability into domestic legislative measure through upcoming periodic reviews of the country with the Human Rights Committee and the CEDAW Committee.

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²⁹People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR). (2010). 'Caste Panchayats and the Policing of Marriage in Rajasthan': Fact Finding Report. PUDR.

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