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Addressing Honour-Based Suicides in the Criminal Justice System

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Introduction

Honour-based suicides are a severe and often overlooked form of violence against women, particularly affecting South Asian women in the UK. These suicides occur due to coercion, prolonged abuse, and societal pressures related to honour and family reputation. The current legal framework fails to adequately address this issue, allowing perpetrators to evade justice. This briefing paper highlights the challenges within the legal system and presents recommendations for reform to ensure better protection and accountability.

Understanding Honour-Based Suicides

Honour-based suicides take two main forms:

- 1. Forced Suicides** – Where families pressure women into taking their own lives to avoid responsibility for murder, often presenting the death as voluntary or accidental.
- 2. Honour-Based Suicides** – Where women take their own lives due to extreme family and societal pressure, without direct coercion but as a result of ongoing abuse and restrictions.

Unlike honour killings, which involve direct violence, these suicides are often misclassified, leading to a lack of accountability for perpetrators. Studies show that South Asian women, especially those aged 15-24, are at a significantly higher risk of suicide, often due to cultural barriers that prevent them from seeking help.

Legal Gaps and Challenges

The legal system struggles to address honour-based suicides due to:

- **Lack of Proper Recording:**
Police and statutory agencies do not systematically document these cases as honour-based deaths, making it difficult to track the scale of the issue. This includes the police and coroner's courts.
- **Difficulties in Prosecution:**
Proving coercion or pressure leading to suicide is challenging, as victims cannot provide testimony. Perpetrators rarely confess, and family or community silence further hinders investigations.
- **Insufficient Application of the Suicide Act 1961:**
Section 2(1) criminalises encouraging or assisting suicide, but prosecutions remain rare. Honour-based suicides are seldom prosecuted under this law due to evidentiary challenges.
- **Unlawful Act Manslaughter Limitations:**
Current legal interpretations fail to recognise psychological harm as bodily harm under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Cases like *R v Dhalilwal* (2007) highlight the difficulty of establishing causation between prolonged domestic abuse and suicide.

Recommendations for Reform

- 1. Improve Data Collection and Police Investigations:**
 - o Require statutory agencies to record and track honour-based suicides systematically.
 - o Ensure police investigate suspected honour-based suicides with a focus on identifying coercion and abuse, with guidance from the College of Policing.
 - o For coroners to record deaths by honour-based suicide, and recording the ethnicity of victims.
- 2. Strengthen Prosecutions Under the Suicide Act 1961:**
 - o Prioritise legal action against those who encourage or pressure victims into suicide.
 - o Raise awareness among law enforcement and prosecutors about the applicability of the Act in cases of honour-based suicide.
- 3. Introduce a New Offence: 'Suicide Aggravated by Harassment, Violence, or Abuse'**
 - o Establish a legal framework holding perpetrators accountable for actions that contribute to a victim's suicide.
 - o Recognise patterns of abuse, including psychological harm, as contributing factors.
 - o Shift focus from proving the victim's mental state to assessing the perpetrator's conduct.
- 4. Enhance Support for Vulnerable Women**
 - o Improve access to culturally sensitive mental health services for South Asian women.
 - o Address language and trust barriers that prevent victims from seeking help.
 - o Increase funding for specialist support groups like *The Halo Project*.

Conclusion

The criminal justice system must evolve to address the complexities of honour-based suicides. By improving data collection, strengthening legal accountability, and introducing a specific offence for suicides linked to abuse, the UK can take significant steps towards protecting vulnerable women and ensuring justice for victims. These reforms are essential to dismantling the systemic barriers that allow honour-based abuse to persist.

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