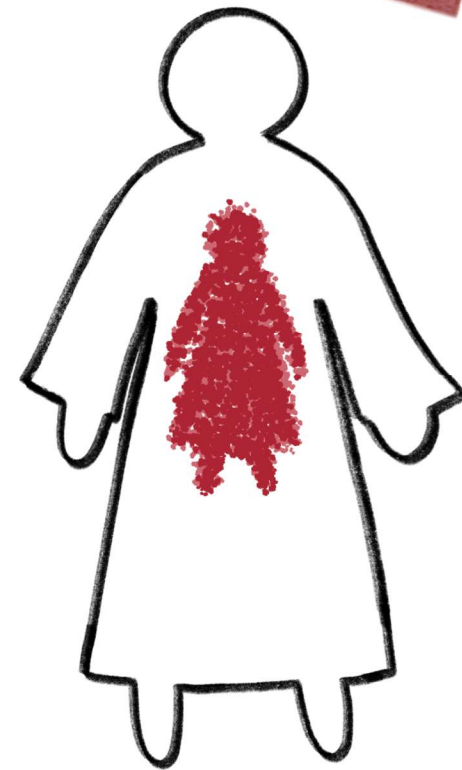
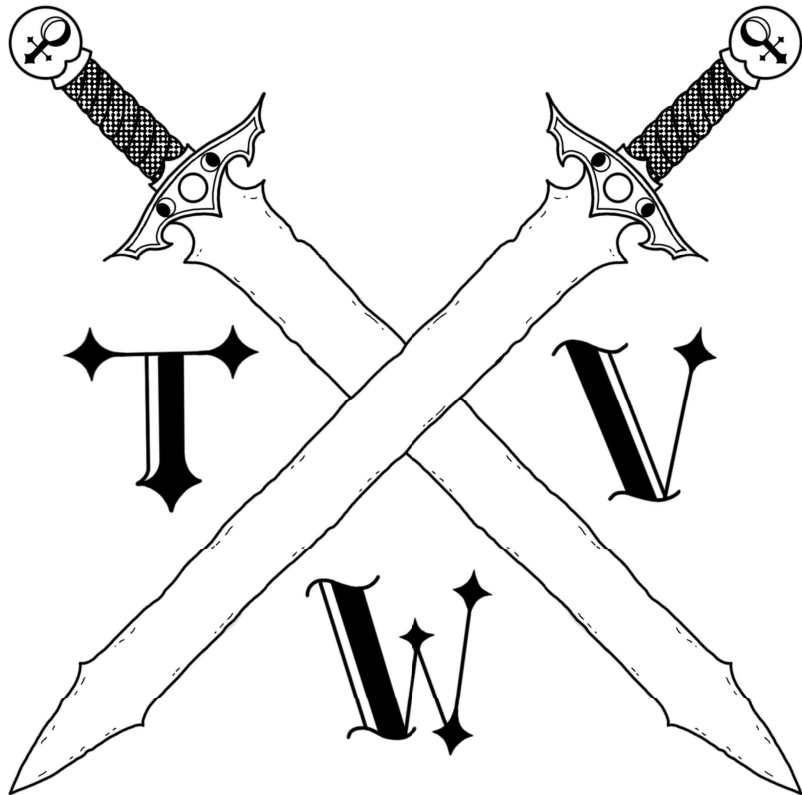


Honor

and

Sex



By Salwa
for Total Woman Victory

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The examples discussed here (psychological root of vaginismus, the agony of FGM, gruesome honor-motivated femicides) share a common thread: **systemic denial of women's rights over their own bodies**. We are socialized from childhood to believe that our worth is tied to our virginity, our submission, and our readiness to obey these rigid norms. We are burdened with the implacable weight of family honor, whereas men are accorded a free pass to live as they please. This double standard supports a cycle of oppression, whereby mothers, themselves victims of the same system, become instruments of such norms, passing on the shackles to their daughters. Nonetheless, there is resistance. The efficacy of CBT in the treatment of vaginismus, for instance, serves as a reminder that such conditions are not biological but cultural, that they can be changed through education and reclamation of bodily autonomy. Similarly, movements against FGM and honor killings led by brave women in these regions challenge these practices. We can never speak enough about these cases, we can never amplify the testimonies of women who survive through them enough, as they are a call to action for justice. There is no honor in dominating women's bodies.

Honor lies in the courage to free them.

Honor culture in the Global South refers to a belief system where a person's reputation, family dignity and social standing are all directly tied to their behavior and adherence to collective values. Family honor and gender roles are valued and emphasized in these cultures, while violations sometimes lead to marginalization, punishment or even violence. They especially regulate women's behavior—their modesty, relationships and obedience are regarded as a reflection of their family's honor.

Across the Arabic-speaking world, we have numerous words to express shame, which vary from region to region: **فضح** (fdaha), **حشومة** (hchouma), **عيب** (aib), **حرام عليك** (haram a'lik), etc. It's not just any type of shame, but a specific, accusing and directed shame. The type of shame that lays bare the meticulously concealed defects of a highly reputed family. Often, the source of this shame is a non-complying daughter. The objects of these expressions are not exclusively female, obviously. But I find there to be a subtle variation when these words are spoken against a woman as opposed to a man. There are types of shame that are easily forgivable, humiliations that are brushed off the shoulder when committed by a son. Sons have unconditional, inflexible love, they're easily forgiven. Their mistakes are inconsequential. Daughters, on the other hand, carry with them the weight of the family's honor. The higher the status of the family, the bigger the pressure. Sons live free whereas daughters live under hypervigilance, under a

perpetual state of surveillance. This isn't a temporary state of affairs, this is training for life.

For instance, I was once having a conversation with my aunt. We were speaking of a girl we knew, who was 21 years old and had just had a baby overseas after secretly marrying a foreign man. We spoke of her mother, who was bordering on depression due to this situation. Words from my aunt that stuck with me were **“Our society doesn't forgive mothers”**. What is a mother if not a daughter that was raised to take careful steps, to watch as her brother's mistakes are forgiven, whereas hers are punished? A daughter taught to repeat the cycle, to ensure her children won't stray away from the “right” path, to ensure they won't attract judgement from the neighbors and the family's acquaintances? She knows this judgement will be inflicted upon her, since fathers are absolved from any responsibility they might've had in raising their kids. If children stray from the model they were instructed to follow, it is the mother who failed to raise them.

In these cases, there is a very specific dynamic between the mother and the daughter. As a girl, your mother will let you know that she holds responsibility for everything you might do. You are a girl; you don't get to grow in innocence or be shielded from societal expectations the way your brother does. Whatever you're doing, you're doing it to your mother. It's like a leash tied to the mom that simultaneously strangles the daughter.

own, retreating in trauma, creating an impenetrable wall, like the case of vaginismus. They make sure you will never experience anything close to sexual pleasure in your life, thus guaranteeing your chastity and purity, your eligibility for marriage.

Countries such as Jordan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia uphold so-called “honor killings” to this day, operating as culturally and religiously motivated femicides for disobeying the rules. Fathers, brothers, and uncles tend to participate in these, indicating that any male relative has a right over a woman's sexuality, a right to punish it by death. A woman may be killed for having a boyfriend or a girlfriend, for dressing “inappropriately”, for having premarital sex, refusing an arranged marriage, for apostasy, for even getting raped—whatever her family grasps as a violation to their damned honor.

In conclusion, honor culture in the Global South, and particularly in Africa, as well as the regions of the Middle East and South Asia, is a deeply entrenched system that binds women's bodies to family honor and dignity. It is based on control, surveillance and silencing of female agency, which reduces women to vessels of familial honor rather than agents of their own lives. From policing of modesty and virginity to forceful imposition of patriarchal values in the form of acts like FGM and honor killings, the female body becomes a war zone of societal norms and expectations.

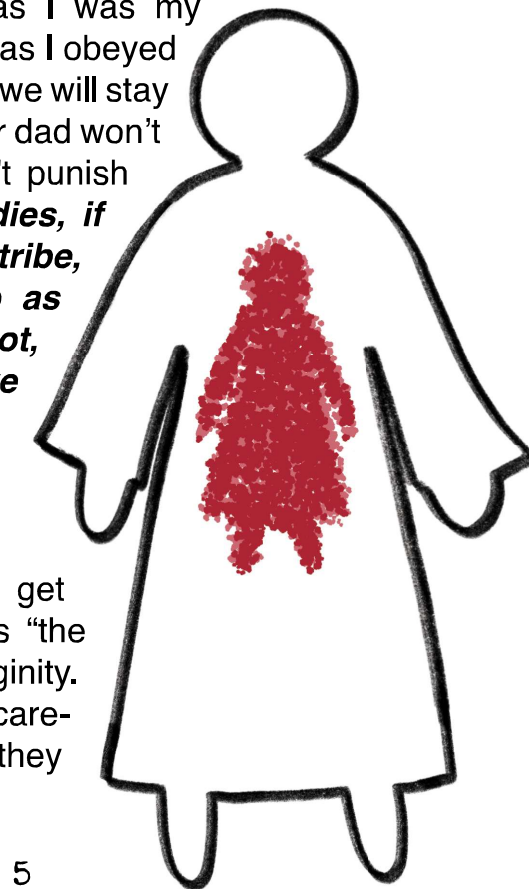
a woman, her sexuality, her family and her husband's family (the husband's family even more in certain cultures), the education and beliefs instilled in her, reputation, and the complete disregard towards her boundaries and her rights over her own body.

In the case of Patient 4, we read about an extreme case where the woman lives through traumatic rapes repeatedly by her husband; she is isolated as her family believes he has the right to do with her as he pleases, and her education provides no comfort for her as she has been indoctrinated to hold these beliefs. This research highlights the importance of sexual education for women, not just for the sake of health but to retrieve the sense of ownership over our own bodies.

As if the psychosexual effects of honor weren't enough, female genital mutilation still exists and is a common practice to control female sexuality in countries like Somalia, Mali, Sudan, and Egypt. Knowing that sex isn't supposed to be painful for a woman, that a woman's body has its own mechanisms to experience pleasure, assuming that lies and threats won't suffice to make a woman obey, she is cruelly robbed of her own bodily autonomy. Her body is violated and mutilated to fulfill their societies' sick fantasy, to "close" her off and ensure she will be property to no one but a single man. This is all done most commonly when she's a child, robbing her of her childhood and preparing her for marriage way before she even understands the concept of it. They don't even give your body a chance to "close off" on its

This is due to the fact that we are not regarded as individuals of our own. As daughters, we are as much a part of our mothers as their organs are. We belong to our mothers, because they know what's best. Our bodies belong to our mothers, because they know what's best. Don't cut your hair. Don't dye it. Gain weight. Lose weight. Don't wear that. Cover your chest. Don't talk like that. You can befriend boys, but not too much. If I find you too interested in boys, you're a whore. If I find you too disinterested, are you a lesbian? If you are, you're no daughter of mine. As soon as I find you old enough, I will make sure you know you can only marry who I want you to marry. You're mine as I was my mother's, you'll obey me as I obeyed my mother, and that way, we will stay a respectable family. Your dad won't punish me, society won't punish me. ***"If we were nobodies, if we came from a low tribe, you might as well do as you like. But we are not, and you have to make sure you won't bring shame to your family name."***—My mother.

As soon as you get your period, here comes "the talk": take care of your virginity. Women are fed lies, scare-mongered, made sure they



know that their worth resides in the construct that is virginity. To avert a woman from exploring her own sexuality, she is made to believe that her body is dirty (e.g. periods, body hair, masturbation), that trying to delve into that world makes her filthy, discardable, unlovable. She is made to believe that she must not get close to men, that penetration is inherently painful, that vaginal sex is a gift she must reserve for her husband, that she must not feel pleasure during it. When these beliefs are inculcated in a woman's mind continuously, they can be reflected on her body as a reaction of self protection.

“What is a mother if not a daughter that was raised to take careful steps, to watch as her brother's mistakes are forgiven, whereas hers are punished?”

This is the case of vaginismus. Vaginismus is one of the most frequent causes of “non-consummation” of marriage and infertility in Muslim countries. A study was conducted in which cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) was carried out for four different patients, with the objective of proving the link between the attitude towards female sexuality in these cultures and vaginismus (Zgueb et al., 2019). This CBT consisted essentially of two techniques: sexual education and hierarchical exposure. I highlighted the next sentences in the paper:

“Several risk factors have been identified for the development of vaginismus: for example the way sexuality is taught in families and schools, or the way it is viewed by religion.”

(On Patient 1): **“Her mother-in-law was very intrusive (...), she was worried about the status and reputation of her son within the larger family structure”.**

(On Patient 2): **“The patient had a strict and very conservative religious upbringing which also gave her the belief that men were superior to women. She felt guilty because she was supposed to satisfy her husband in every way.”**

(On Patient 4): **“Her education was mainly focused on the necessity to stay virgin until marriage, and to keep away from men, because ‘they are all dangerous’.”**

“Her husband repeatedly raped her. The family of the patient was aware of these rapes but accepted them as they stated ‘it was the husband's right to have sexual intercourse with his wife’.”

In all the cases CBT proved effective, as the root of their condition was psychological. The reason why I highlighted these sentences is because I felt like they convey concisely the relationships between