

**A Critique of  
‘Honor Diaries’**

(A production of the Clarion Project)

By

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## Criticisms of the film discussed in this piece:

- 1) The film doesn't actually help us to understand the issues  
It gives no context to the various issues it mentions  
It uses statistics selectively
- 2) The film promotes racist stereotypes
- 3) The film works against the cause of those in Canada and the West working on ending violence against women  
Misallocation of resources  
Diversion from systemic patriarchy
- 4) The film offers no productive suggestions for action

## **1) The film doesn't actually help us to understand the issues**

Raheel Raza (one of the nine women starring in the film, who organized the Toronto (and other) screenings) says that the first step towards solving issues of violence against women in Muslim communities is promoting knowledge. And yet the film does not produce any real understanding of the issues that women face; on the contrary, it actually creates a lot of *misunderstanding*:

### It gives no context to the various issues it mentions

- The nine women starring in the film are originally from different parts of the world (Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, and India), now living in different parts of the West (the UK, USA, and Canada). Although the movie supposedly focuses on Muslim countries and diaspora, one of the nine women (Jasvinder Sanghera) is neither Muslim nor from a Muslim-majority country (her family background is Sikh Indian). Her inclusion in the *Honor Diaries* 'salon session' is supposedly legitimised by the claim that many of the female victims of violence she works with in England are Muslim; however, a significant portion of her testimony related to the suicide of her own (also Sikh) sister following a forced marriage. (And her mispronunciation of 'hijab' as 'hajeeb' betrays her unfamiliarity with the basic cultural referents of Muslim life.) The film moves seamlessly between stories and experiences of women in different parts of the world – forced marriages in immigrant communities in Britain, the ban against women driving in Saudi Arabia, the 'honour killing' of young women in Europe, North America and Pakistan, the enforcement of 'shariah dress' in Sudan, the corporal punishment of women in Afghanistan, the cutting of women's genitals, the sexual assault of women during Arab Spring protests, and oppression of women in post-revolution Iran. Graphic news clips interspersed throughout the film showing female victims of "honour violence" often fail to specify the location or the date - as if this were unnecessary, because these incidents are emblematic of the global Muslim reality.
- Of course, all of the issues mentioned in the film require serious attention. But is framing them as a singular, distinctly Muslim phenomenon actually helpful in understanding and addressing them?
- Analysing those issues collectively is as useful as conflating: the [global trafficking of Eastern European women](#), [rape chants at North American universities](#), [stiletto heels, incidences of sexual assault and murder of female students at York University](#), [deaths of American women from liposuction](#), [the sexual proclivities of Silvio Berlusconi](#), [gang-rapes in France](#), [the forced sterilization of Roma women](#), and the [provocation defence in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States](#). All can be said to originate from "Western" cultures of patriarchy and violence – but without any understanding of the specific historical, cultural, religious, legal, economic and other contexts in which they take place, they cannot be but crudely addressed.
- Of the issues mentioned in the film, for example, female genital cutting is not prevalent throughout the Muslim world, but is predominantly practiced in sub-Saharan and North

Africa, where it pre-dates the introduction of Islam. And the prohibition on female driving – far from being a universal ‘Islamic’ commandment – is unique to Saudi Arabia.

- The social contexts for many of the Eastern countries mentioned in the film include histories of occupation, colonization, and civil war, which have had long-lasting effects on the rights and status of women. For example, the film informs viewers that Pakistani law permits lighter sentencing for men who murder or maim women. However, it fails to mention that leniency for “honour crimes” has often been accorded “[through the channel of grave and sudden provocation,’ a \(Western\) principle introduced by the Pakistan Criminal Code of 1860.](#)” This mitigating provision was originally legislated by British colonizers, and was based on British law’s own provocation defense. Without such basic knowledge of the various factors, including the lasting effects of colonialism, on Pakistan’s legal and social climate, how can we legitimately claim to understand ‘honour-based violence against women in Pakistan’?

#### It uses statistics selectively

- One statistic displayed during the film shows the very low rate of female literacy in Afghanistan (according to the film, under 15%) – without acknowledging alongside this that [male literacy in the country is also under 50%](#). The film also fails to mention that in Iran, [youth \(15-24\) female literacy rate is 98.5%](#) - just below male rates of 98.8%.
- Indeed, women in both countries face barriers to advancement but the facts presented are simply misleading – they, both, fail to represent the significant educational and other barriers facing *all* children and people in Afghanistan, and to explain why literacy is an indicator of female suppression in Afghanistan but not in Iran.
- Admittedly, one 60-minute film would be hard-pressed to answer this question in adequate detail – but this just points to the impossibility of properly addressing the different issues faced by women in different regions and countries through the sweeping generalizations made in this film.

## **2) The film promotes racist stereotypes**

- Raheel Raza claims in the film that Islamophobia is a “manufactured term” (as if all terms aren’t ‘manufactured’) used to silence any criticism of Islam and Muslims.
- This suggests that Muslims are currently not subject to the laws that are applied to non-Muslims in Canada and other parts of the West, because authorities fear being branded as racist. However, as the highly publicized trials of the Shafias and the family of Aqsa Parvez (both in Canada) demonstrate, concerns about avoiding stereotyping do not prevent perpetrators from being punished to the extent of the law (and thankfully so). They also do not prevent efforts to address violence in Muslim communities - last fiscal year, Status of Women Canada gave nine grants to groups dealing with honour-based violence out of a total 34 grants it distributed that year to address violence against women. Clearly this government

agency is not allowing the threat of ‘political correctness’ to prevent it from working on this issue.

- Raza’s appeal to do away with ‘political correctness’ silences important critique about the proliferation of unfair stereotypes of Muslims – and this film is full of them:
  - It intersperses discussion of violence against women with images of women wearing burqa, and niqab (the home page for the movie even features a picture of women wearing niqab with the words ‘break the silence on honor violence’) – thereby reinforcing the popular trope that those garments are necessarily a sign of female oppression and subjugation. This is in contradiction to the findings of the [Canadian Council of Muslim Women’s recent report ‘Women in Niqab Speak’](#)
  - In failing to distinguish between different areas of the world and different issues ([as mentioned above](#), ‘evidentiary’ video clips of disturbing incidents of abuse against women often failed to even identify location and date); making only scant and misleading use of statistics ([see above](#) regarding literacy rates); relying heavily on anecdote; and with the tagline for the film reading “culture is no excuse for abuse”, the film leads to the general demonization of Muslims by promoting the narrative (intentionally or unintentionally) that: Muslims as a collective are uniquely, overwhelmingly, and inherently prone to violence against women. This narrative is contradicted by [statistics about violence against women in Canada](#) (as one example) which indicate that perpetrators are not predominantly or disproportionately from one particular ethno-cultural group. These demonstrate that violence against women may manifest itself differently depending on cultural context, but it is not a culture-specific phenomenon. The Federal Minister for Status of Women, Kellie Leitch, is cited to have said that honour crimes are “[very infrequent in our country](#).”  
[According to the government, there have been 13 crimes since 1991 labelled as ‘honour killings’, involving 17 victims](#) (compared to an average of 60 women per year in Canada killed by an intimate partner). The narrative propagated by this film is in keeping with the mandate of the production company, The Clarion Project, which dedicates itself to exposing ‘Islamic extremism’ (to see a rebuttal of the Clarion Project’s other films, please see [here](#)). As [Rabia Chaudry](#) points out, the fact that this film is a product of the Clarion Project is reason enough to be skeptical about whether it reflects an honest concern about Muslim women, comparable to the skepticism warranted “if Pakistan ever puts out a documentary about the abuses of Hindu women in India, or the KKK produces a film on the struggles of single Black mothers”
  - The film mentions only in passing the roles that women in the ‘Muslim world’ themselves have played in fighting the oppressions and violences they experience. Several issues it cites in which scant or no mention is made of internal efforts by the affected women:
    - [Saudi women driving ban](#)
    - [Female genital mutilation](#)

- [Girls from Pakistan prevented from attending school](#)
- [Women in Iran being forced to cover their hair](#)

Of course women in the West should support women in other parts of the world – but not in ways which demean them through invisibilization of their own activism.

### ***3) The film works against the cause of those in Canada and the West working on ending violence against women***

- The film contributes to the perception that violence against women is prevalent among Muslims and in Muslim countries, while the West has largely been able to overcome it. As Margaret Wente (Globe and Mail) writes in an article about this film: “Most Western feminists are curiously silent about these issues [i.e. violence against Muslim women]. It seems they’d rather spend their time warning about “rape culture” and denouncing the misogyny, abuse and discrimination that permeate our society (or so they claim).”
- The belief that violence against women in the West is insignificant is not supported by the realities of women – across all races, religions, and cultural backgrounds - who live in Canada and in other parts of the West. [Statistics for Canada show:](#)
  - On average, every six days a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner.
  - On any given day in Canada, more than 3,300 women (along with their 3,000 children) are forced to sleep in an emergency shelter to escape domestic violence. Every night, about 200 women are turned away because the shelters are full.
  - Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16.
  - Each year, over 40,000 arrests result from domestic violence—that’s about 12% of all violent crime in Canada. Since only 22% of all incidents are reported to the police, the real number is much higher.
  - As of 2010, there were 582 known cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. According to the Native Women’s Association of Canada, “if this figure were applied proportionately to the rest of the female population there would be over 18,000 missing Canadian women and girls.”
  - In a 2009 Canadian national survey, women reported 460,000 incidents of sexual assault in just one year.
  - More than one in ten Canadian women say they have been stalked by someone in a way that made them fear for their life.
- This belief that the problem of violence against women does not exist here – or that when it does, it is an imported practice from other countries – hinders our ability to appropriately address the problem, because it leads to:

#### Misallocation of resources

- Last fiscal year, the Canadian government allocated \$1.7 million to ‘honour crimes’ – [as mentioned above](#), the Canadian government claims that there have been 13 crimes popularly described as ‘honour killings’ since 1991 in this country. On the other hand, the government gave \$335,000 to agencies dealing with [violence against Aboriginal women](#), despite the fact that:
  - As of 2010, there were 582 known cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada or between 12 and 84 cases every year since the year 2000
  - All of Canada’s provincial premiers have called for an inquiry into the situation of missing and murdered Canadian Aboriginal women; and at the June 2013 General Assembly of the UN Human Rights Council, 11 countries, including the United States, Finland, and Iran expressed concern for the high number of murdered aboriginal women in Canada – but the government has refused to act, saying that it is too expensive
- In other words, Status of Women Canada spent five times more money on ‘honour crimes’ than it did on missing/murdered aboriginal women last year—a problem at least eight times larger.
- The extent of the problem of violence against women in Canada isn’t even entirely clear because the [government has also not collected data on the issue in 20 years](#) – another regrettable failure.

#### Diversion from systemic patriarchy

- As [Amy Awad](#), Human Rights Coordinator for the National Council of Canadian Muslims, notes: "Labelling [certain] crimes with the term ‘honour’ provides Western societies with an escape clause. They can appear to be addressing the ‘foreign’ issue, without examining the roots of violence against all women."
- The use of the term ‘honour’ allows certain types of violence to be racialized; in focusing on this racialized form of violence, the government can distract from its own record of slashing funding and hindering progress on women’s issues in this country. [Since 2006, this government has:](#)
  - Cut funding for Status of Women so significantly that 12 of 16 offices across the country had to be closed in 2005
  - Changed the mandate of Status of Women Canada to exclude “gender equality and political justice” and to ban all advocacy, policy research and lobbying.
  - Reduced funding to 42 women’s organizations and programs
  - Cancelled the introduction of a National Child Care Program in 2006 (in favour of the much less substantial National Child Care Benefit)
  - Ended the Court Challenges Program in 2006, which provided an essential source of financial assistance for important court cases that advance equality rights guaranteed under Canada’s Constitution.
  - Ended the Mandatory Long Form Census, which provided a vital source of data about unpaid work, among other data that was used for social policy development

- Eliminated of the Long Gun Registry, statistically proven to reduce gun-deaths of women

#### **4) *The film offers no productive suggestions for action***

- The film focuses on the efforts of the nine women starring in it, creating the impression that they are part of a rare few who do such work. In one of the final scenes of the film, Raheel Raza says to the eight other women starring in the film : “in these last two days, we have been able to address issues that I have never been able to address with groups before...we are going to do something and we'll ask the whole world to help us”
- Instead of being inspirational, the film actually suggests that the situation is quite hopeless, because the weight of the problem of violence against Muslim women depends upon these nine women.
- Indeed, according to them, there's not much the rest of us can do - the website for the film suggests only two ways of making a difference: sending a letter to Congress (an option not even available to those of us outside of the United States where the film is also being shown), and hosting a screening of the film. At the Toronto screening, two more ways of helping were mentioned: donating to the film (to help translate the movie into different languages), and supporting the Canadian Conservative Government (which, [as explained above](#), is not the best tactic for advancing the rights of women)
- Alternatively, the film and its website could have mentioned the efforts by groups all over Canada and other parts of the West who work to advance the rights of, and end violence against, women in Muslim and South Asian communities. By doing this, *Honor Diaries* could have actually provided a meaningful outlet for those who were left wondering what they could do (including people in the audience at this screening who inquired). In Canada, these groups include (but are certainly not limited to):
  - [South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario](#) (since 1999)
  - [Social Services Network](#) (since 2002)
  - [Canadian Council for Muslim Women](#) (since 1982)
  - [Muslims for White Ribbon](#) (since 2011)
  - [Federation of Muslim Women](#) (since 1998)
  - [Reh'ma Community Services](#) (since 1999)
  - [Islamic Social Services Association](#) (since 1999)
  - [Muslim Welfare Centre](#) (since 1993)
  - [Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office](#) (since 1985)
  - [Canada Zakat](#) (since 2013)
  - [Mercy Mission Women's Resource Centre](#) (since 2012)
  - [Muslim Resource Centre](#) (since 2009)

**Please see these resources on violence against women in Canada:**

- 1) '[The Gap in the Gender Gap](#)' (2013) – The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- 2) '[The Facts about Violence against Women](#)' - Canadian Women's Foundation
- 3) '[Violence Against Women: Health and Justice for Canadian Muslim Women](#)' (2013) – Canadian Council of Muslim Women