



THEME 2: Intercultural dialogue

Teaching and learning aids

Germany

Honour killing

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Starting point

A murder that is carried out to restore the wounded honour of a man or of a family gives rise to a serious question:

What is worth more, the life of a human being or the wounded honour of a member of the family?

Western civilization's answer:

The killing of another human being is considered murder according to the western sense of justice if it happens for base motives.

Paragraph 3 of the 1945 UN Declaration of Human Rights states:
 "Every person has the right to life, freedom and personal safety."

For the western world the life of a human being has beyond any doubt a higher value than the claim to honour for another member of the family. If this claim leads to the deliberate planned killing of another person, then it is clearly a question of murder for a base motive – such as greed, revenge or jealousy.

The answer of followers of an archaic patriarchal social order:

If the honour of a man or of a family is wounded by the behaviour of a female member of the family, the man or another member of the family is entitled to restore the family honour by punishing the accused, and this can in the worst case even mean murdering the accused. According to this conception, the family honour clearly has a higher value than the life of a human being.

In what instances is the man's or family's honour wounded?

- If there are doubts as to the virtuousness of a wife or daughter.
- Sexual intercourse before or outside marriage, regardless of whether it occurs with consent or through violence
- In some families or tribes honour is even wounded when female members of the family leave the house unescorted or when strange men are present in their immediate vicinity, such as in the same room.
- Even an adult daughter living according to her own individual ideas outside the family can be seen as an insult to the family honour, with the respect and reputation of other members of the family being damaged.

What is there – from a western point of view – to be criticized in these patriarchal conceptions?

- The above-mentioned conceptions are extremely sexist, for they tie family honour one-sidedly down to the behaviour of female members of the family only, while the males can take any liberty they want and are not bound to any sort of limitations.
- The patriarchal conceptions of family honour therefore go against the principle of equality between men and women
- They prevent women's freedom of movement and their right to developing freely their own personality, and in particular their right to education.

With this I do not mean to say that virtuous behaviour is unimportant in a western-orientated society, but it has to be just as valid for men as it is for women.

Any one-sided emphasis on female virginity as a question of destiny for the honour of a family or tribe gives rise to the suspicion that it is only an instrument for maintaining patriarchal power. And that has absolutely nothing to do with a virtuous life.

Is the murder of Hatun Sürücü a special case?

(cf. Collection of materials Tf 203/1)

This is not a special case at first sight, when you can read in the press that in Berlin there were some 45 "honour killings" between 1996 and 2004, i.e. within a period of eight years, which means some 5 or 6 per year. The UN Commission for Human Rights speaks of about 5000 women world-wide who are killed every year in the "name of honour", mostly in Islamic countries. Certainly there has recently been an increase in so-called "honour killings" in Berlin alone, and Mrs. Sürücü was the sixth victim in the space of only four months.

If we compare the horror caused by the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in Holland, then public reaction in Berlin to the "honour killings" has so far been shameful. Nevertheless, some 150 to 200 people turned up to a memorial wake for Mrs. Sürücü that the Lesbian and Gay Association in Berlin had organized. Representatives of Islamic associations or Imams protesting against Islam being used to justify murder were not to be seen.

Representatives of the Muslims in Germany just let it briefly be known that such deeds had "nothing to do with Islam".

Unfortunately many members of the so-called „Turkish Community“ in Berlin see it in a completely different light. For when children in the third generation of Turkish immigrants declare publicly in their schools that Mrs. Sürücü was herself to blame for being murdered, an alarm signal is sent out.

Where have Germans been going wrong up till now?

Obviously German courts have classed honour killings up to now as "culturally influenced actions" and counted them as manslaughter, but not as murder. It is high time to abolish this "cultural discount" and to make "restoration of family honour by killing" a base motive and in consequence deserving a life sentence for murder.

This assessment has nothing to do with xenophobia or hostility towards Islam, but with respect for human rights in general, which must apply to immigrants as well.

German judges who do not understand this must expect to be asked whether they mean to say with their cultural relativism that human rights can be separated and only be valid for western civilization, but not for the roughly 2,5 million Turkish immigrants living in Germany. Such an interpretation of justice would be a two-class system of justice or, to put it even more clearly, a ganging-up with patriarchal powers for whom western legal thinking is irrelevant.

But as is well known, even tougher punishments cannot completely stop murders. It is so much the more important to take measures that will change the way immigrants think and make them aware of the fact that they cannot live merely physically in another country, but that at the same time they must also accept important areas of its values and legal standards.

Teaching of values in Berlin schools

As has been seen in the article Tf 203/2, the murder of Hatun Sücürü in Berlin accelerated the discussion on the introduction of the new school subject, "values studies". In it both German and immigrant children are to be taught important values of European culture.

According to Paragraph 7 of the constitution of the German Federal Republic religious instruction must be taught in all state schools throughout the country. After German reunification in October 1990 this also applied in principle to the whole of Berlin. But in west Berlin, on the basis of an exceptional ruling, there had been no religious instruction in the state schools timetable since 1949, and after about 40 years of Marxism-Leninism there are only a few people with religious faith in east Berlin. For this reason it has been difficult in the last few years to introduce religious instruction as a compulsory subject in all schools in a city with few believers.

It is, however, surprising that unacceptable conceptions of values in immigrants with an Islamic background are now forcing the Berlin education authorities at last to introduce counter-measures in the school system. For the school system is almost the only chance left to influence the way of thinking of a ghetto or parallel society.

Possible work tasks for pupils

On the basis of the texts reproduced in the relevant materials Tf 203/1 and Tf 203/2 the following questions or tasks can be worked on:

1. Is the murder of Hatun Sücürü a crime or a just punishment?
Give reasons for your answer. .
2. Is the deed only culturally conditioned manslaughter with a prison sentence of 5 years or more?
3. Is the deed to be regarded as murder, i.e. as intentional killing from a base motive with life imprisonment?
4. What social problems become evident through honour killings?
5. What can be done to break down conflicts between differing conceptions of values?
6. Look for further information in internet by typing in appropriate key concepts (in foreign languages too).
7. What do you learn from your internet searches about the roles of men and women in civilizations of western and Islamic character?