

By [Ted Lapkin](#)

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The attack took place just a few months ago, and it was nasty, brutish and short. The three young men brandished axes as they forced their way through the apartment door, hacking to death two women who cowered in terror against the rear wall of their flat.

At first glance, this act of homicidal savagery might appear to be the sort of violent tragedy that could take place in the crime-ridden quarters of any city in the world. Yet these gruesome killings were not the work of deranged serial killers run amok. Nor was this slaughter the result of a turf war between rival gangs. A closer examination of these murders reveals they bear all the hallmarks of "honour killing", a cultural phenomenon that claims thousands of female lives each year throughout the Middle East. Not only did this incident take place in Amman, Jordan, but it was also a family affair in which brothers butchered their own sisters.

And what did the victims do to warrant such a fate? Well, it is reported that both of these women, aged in their 20s, had previously spurned their family's attempts to force them into arranged marriages. The more traditional segments of Arab society demand that women must serve, above all else, as the subservient repositories of their familial honour. Any hint of sexual impropriety, or act of insubordination by a female family member marks the entire household with a badge of disgrace that can only be expunged through the shedding of blood.

Moreover, the very day before this grisly murder, Jordan's Parliament defeated a bill to toughen the ludicrously lax prison sentences meted out to "honour killers". If past jail terms are a precedent, this fraternal homicidal trio will serve no more than a few months for their crime.

Some might argue that the far away practice of honour killings, tragic though it might be, should not be of any particular concern to Australians. Yet such indifference would be a mistake because the oppression of women in the Arab world flows from the same cultural wellspring that feeds the Islamist extremism that threatens us all.

Anthropologist G. M. Kessler describes the Arab world as an "honour and shame culture" in which the need to avoid the loss of face is overriding. It can be argued that this cultural preoccupation with acquiring prestige and avoiding humiliation is also a major contributory factor to the Islamist phenomenon of suicide bombing.

The traditional concept of honour in Arab society manifests itself through defensive and offensive forms. The defensive variant of Middle Eastern honour is called "ird", and features the obsession with female sexual purity that we have

already observed.

The sense of ird is also offended by the weakness of the Arab world, when compared with the West. This vexatious sense of societal inferiority is only exacerbated by the presence of a high-tech Western democracy named Israel in the heart of the Islamic Middle East.

The offensive form of honour is described by the Arabic word "sharaf", and it involves positive action that is taken to enhance one's social status by winning praise and renown. In the contemporary Middle East, the passion to acquire sharaf is often focused on the insult to the pan-Arab sense of ird that is posed by the existence of the infidel Israel, and the political, military and technological pre-eminence of the infidel West.

Thus, terrorists who murder Americans, Australians or Israelis are thought to reap the dual benefit of striking a blow on behalf of Islamic civilisation, while also elevating their family prestige in the eyes of the community.

Last year the United Nations published the *Arab Human Development Report 2003*, a study that analysed "the disabling constraints that hamper the acquisition, diffusion and production of knowledge in Arab societies". Written by Arab social scientists from throughout the Middle East, the UN report concludes that a key to economic prosperity and social progress rests with the liberation of that region's women.

Certain common traditional Arab concepts of dignity serve as the foundation for a ruthless regime of social oppression that reduces most women to the status of chattels. Yet the recent liberation of Iraq provides a sterling opportunity to shatter this anachronistic social paradigm through the establishment of a democratic government in Baghdad that practises gender equality.

The emancipation of Iraqi women from their state of social servitude will inspire changes to a Middle Eastern sense of honour that spawns the dual atrocities of honour killing and suicide bombing. Only when Arab women begin to enjoy the equal status that is taken for granted in Western society will the foundations of Islamist terrorism begin to crumble as well.