



United Nations women

Female infanticide and honour
killings

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Introduction

Gender-based violence covers a wide range of harm, and female infanticide and honour killings sit among its most extreme forms. Neither is an isolated private act — both come from patriarchal power structures that treat women's bodies, choices, and relationships as matters of collective control. Infanticide denies girls the right to life because of their sex; honour killings punish women and girls for allegedly violating family or community expectations.

Infanticide is closely tied to gender-biased sex selection — sex-selective abortion, neglect, abandonment, killing after birth — driven mainly by son preference, dowry systems, patrilineal inheritance, and the expectation that sons support parents in old age. UNFPA estimates more than 142 million women and girls are missing globally as a result.

Honour killings, meanwhile, enforce control over women's sexuality, marriage, and movement — a woman may be targeted for refusing an arranged marriage, choosing her own partner, or seeking divorce — and persist through underreporting, police bias, and laws that reduce punishment or allow informal settlements.

History and Background

Both practices have existed across many societies and eras, sometimes defended as tradition or a matter of family reputation, but they're rooted in patriarchal systems that treat women and girls as subordinate. Modern international human-rights law rejects that defence and treats both as forms of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Infanticide has historically been linked to son preference, patrilineal inheritance, poverty, and dowry practices — girls were denied food, healthcare, education, or protection because they were seen as financial burdens. Prenatal diagnostic technology later extended gender-based selection from postnatal killing and neglect into the prenatal stage, giving families a way to act on son preference before birth rather than after.

Honour killings persist wherever family status gets tied to controlling women's sexuality, marriage, and behaviour, and international law has increasingly rejected the idea that reputation can justify murder.

Formal international attention grew through the twentieth century — starting with CEDAW in 1979 and continuing through later UN action on violence against women, covered in more detail below — shifting these practices from private family matters to human-rights violations that require state action.



Definitions of Key Terms

- **Female Infanticide** — The intentional killing of a female infant after birth because of her sex, driven by son preference, economic pressure, and discriminatory inheritance systems.
- **Gender-Biased Sex Selection** — Preference for one sex, usually male, before or during pregnancy or after birth — sex-selective abortion, abandonment, neglect, or killing.
- **Honour Killings** — Murders committed by relatives or community members to protect or restore family or community honour.
- **Patriarchal Kinship Systems** — Family structures that organise authority, inheritance, and lineage around male control, where sons are valued as heirs and providers while daughters are seen as temporary members of the household.
- **Son Preference** — Valuing boys more highly than girls in healthcare, nutrition, education, and inheritance — a major driver of sex selection, infanticide, and neglect.

- **Customary and Statutory Law** — Customary law is informal, traditional community practice; statutory law is legislation formally enacted by the state. Customary practice should never override constitutional rights or criminal law.
- **Forced Marriage** — A marriage conducted without free and informed consent, imposed through threats, violence, confinement, or financial pressure — distinct from an arranged marriage, where both parties can still refuse.
- **Dowry System** — Transfer of money, property, or goods from the bride's family to the groom's. Large dowry demands can make daughters look like a financial burden, reinforcing son preference, and dowry disputes can themselves lead to violence.
- **Compoundable Offences** — Crimes that can be legally settled through agreement between the accused and the victim's heirs. In honour-killing cases this creates direct conflict of interest, since the accused and the victim's heirs are often the same family.
- **Blood Money (Diyya)** — Financial compensation paid to a victim's heirs in certain homicide cases. Where relatives also support the perpetrator, this can let a family pardon replace real accountability.

Past UN Actions

- **1979 — CEDAW**

Established binding obligations to eliminate discrimination against women, forming the legal foundation for later work on harmful practices, inheritance, forced marriage, and violence against women.

- **1993 — Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (Resolution 48/104)**

Recognised violence against women as a human-rights issue and called on states to prevent, investigate, and punish violence by both public authorities and private individuals.

- **1995 — Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**

Identified violence against women and unequal inheritance as major areas requiring government action, and called for equal inheritance rights regardless of a child's sex.

- **UNFPA guidance and programmes**

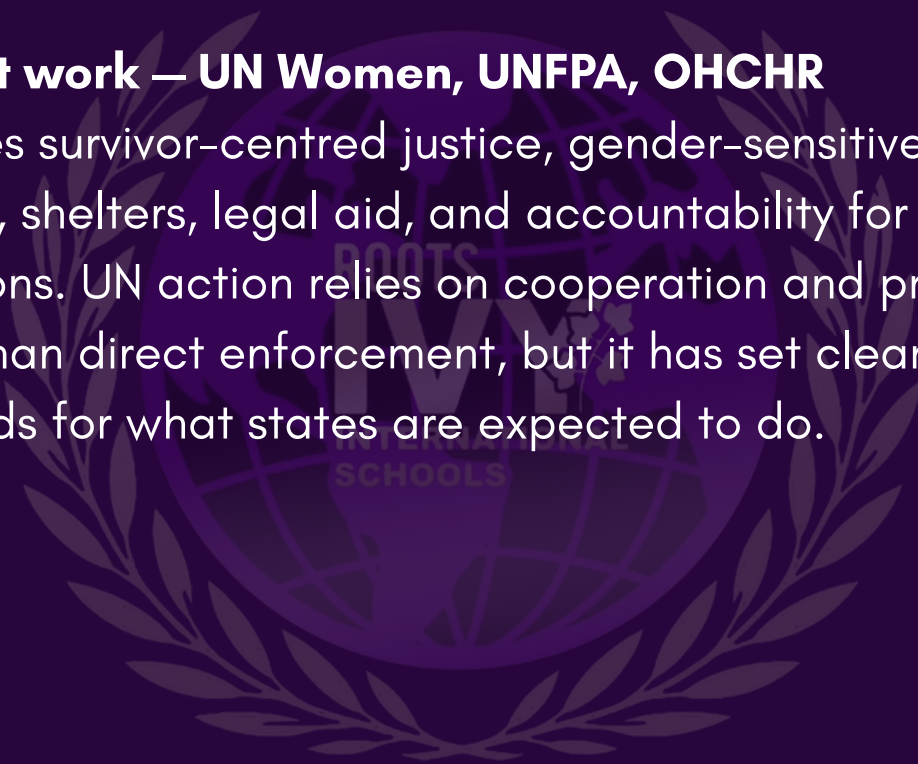
Focused on reliable data collection, addressing son preference, improving girls' access to education and healthcare, and strengthening inheritance rights, while protecting women's reproductive autonomy.

- **2000, 2002, 2004 — Honour killing resolutions (55/66, 57/179, 59/165)**

Called on states to use legislative, educational, and social measures against honour killings, establish confidential reporting, and address root causes; later resolutions expressed concern about continued failures to investigate and punish perpetrators.

- **Recent work — UN Women, UNFPA, OHCHR**

Promotes survivor-centred justice, gender-sensitive policing, shelters, legal aid, and accountability for state institutions. UN action relies on cooperation and pressure rather than direct enforcement, but it has set clear standards for what states are expected to do.



Causes

Female infanticide is driven mainly by son preference and patriarchal family structures that treat boys as heirs and providers. Dowry expectations, unequal inheritance, and limited social protection make daughters look like a financial burden, which can lead to sex-selective abortion, neglect, abandonment, or killing.

Prenatal diagnostic technology and declining fertility rates intensify this — when families expect to have only one or two children, they can feel pressure to ensure at least one is a boy. Technology doesn't create son preference, but it makes acting on it easier where the underlying discrimination already exists.

Honour killings come from patriarchal beliefs that tie family reputation to controlling women's sexuality, relationships, and behaviour. Women may be attacked for choosing a partner, refusing an arranged marriage, seeking divorce, reporting abuse, or simply being suspected of violating social expectations. These crimes continue because of underreporting, police bias, family pressure, informal tribunals, and legal systems that fail to hold perpetrators accountable.

Need to Stop the Problem

Ending both practices means acting on the immediate violence and the systems behind it. Governments should enforce equal rights to inheritance, property, education, healthcare, and employment, and run public and school campaigns that challenge son preference and the idea that family reputation depends on controlling women's choices — UNFPA recommends pairing this with family support, childcare, and women's economic empowerment.

States also need stronger protection systems: police, judges, healthcare workers, and social services trained to spot risk and respond fast, plus confidential reporting, shelters, legal aid, and safe relocation for women at risk, with suspicious infant deaths and gender-related killings investigated and prosecuted independently of family pressure or honour-based arguments.

Legal provisions that let murder be forgiven or settled through family relationships shouldn't block state prosecution, and community or tribal councils should never be allowed to order violence or stand in for formal courts.

Under the principle of due diligence, states must act on foreseeable risk, investigate and punish perpetrators, and provide real remedies — and none of this holds without reliable data, civil-society cooperation, and engaging men, boys, and religious and community leaders to shift the norms that sustain these crimes.



Specific Case Studies

Farzana Parveen — Pakistan, 2014

Farzana Parveen, pregnant at the time, was beaten to death outside the Lahore High Court by members of her own family after marrying a man without their consent. Her case shows how women can be targeted simply for exercising their legal right to choose a spouse; UN Women condemned the killing and called for justice, stressing that family reputation cannot justify violence.

Qandeel Baloch — Pakistan, 2016

Qandeel Baloch, a Pakistani social-media personality who challenged traditional expectations of women's behaviour, was drugged and strangled by her brother, who later said he killed her to restore the family's honour. The case shows how a woman's public expression, clothing, and online presence can be treated as threats to patriarchal control.

The Shafia Family Murders (Canada, 2009)

In 2009, three teenage sisters and their stepmother were found drowned in Ontario, Canada, staged inside a submerged car. Investigation revealed they were murdered by their father, mother, and brother after defying traditional expectations to live independent lifestyles.

Gender-Biased Sex Selection — India

Son preference in India has long meant unequal healthcare, nutrition, education, and family investment for girls, and the later availability of prenatal diagnostic technology enabled sex selection that has distorted sex ratios in some states and districts. UNFPA points to son preference, unequal inheritance, and dowry pressure as the main drivers.

Skewed Sex Ratios — China

China has seen significant sex-ratio imbalances linked to son preference, smaller family size, and access to sex-selection technology. UNFPA reported the sex ratio at birth rising with birth order — 108 boys per 100 girls for first births in 2005, 143 for second births, and 156 for third — showing how the pressure to have a son intensifies as families have fewer children.

Honour-Based Violence in Palestine

A UN human-rights study on killings committed under the pretext of honour in Palestine documented women murdered by family members over allegations involving relationships or behaviour, and showed how this violence is reinforced whenever authorities fail to protect women at risk or investigate deaths properly.

Impacts of the Agenda

Economic Effects:

Denying girls nutrition, healthcare, schooling, or the right to live costs countries future workers, professionals, and taxpayers, while violence against women drives absenteeism, lost productivity, and medical and legal costs — UN Women estimates the global economic cost of violence against women at roughly 2% of GDP. Skewed sex ratios also raise long-term social-service and justice costs by fuelling trafficking and forced marriage, which require more spending on policing, shelters, and legal services, while affected families face their own medical, funeral, relocation, or legal expenses on top of the income they've already lost.

Humanitarian Effects:

There's a humanitarian dimension as well: women and girls fleeing forced marriage or threats of honour violence often need emergency shelter, medical care, and safe relocation on short notice, and in regions with skewed sex ratios, trafficking and forced marriage can cross borders — turning this into a cross-border protection issue rather than a purely domestic one.

Political Effects:

When legal systems let families pardon a killing or treat honour as a defence, courts stop applying the law equally, and rule of law erodes alongside public trust — not just in that one case, but in the wider political system, once communities see police or local councils protecting perpetrators instead of victims. These practices also keep women out of politics: girls who are killed, neglected, or confined by threats of violence never get the chance to run for office or lead a community organization, so skewed sex ratios and constant fear translate directly into weaker female political representation. States are judged on this record too — CEDAW reporting and UPR reviews put real pressure on governments that fail to prosecute these crimes, and how a state handles honour killings or sex selection can become a genuine point of diplomatic friction.

Social Effects:

Both practices reinforce the belief that women and girls are worth less than men, restricting their freedom to pursue education, employment, healthcare, marriage, divorce, and public life, and weakening trust in police, courts, and health institutions. Skewed sex ratios and neglect of girls also raise vulnerability to trafficking and forced or child marriage; UNFPA links son preference to poorer nutrition, shorter breastfeeding, and reduced

schooling and healthcare access for girls. Honour killings leave lasting psychological and social harm on survivors and families, who may face isolation, threats, or pressure to stay silent, and when perpetrators are shielded by relatives or weak legal systems, impunity encourages further violence and lets patriarchal control substitute for the rule of law.



Bloc Formation

Blocs on this topic are shared interests, not fixed rosters—a country's actual position depends on its own legal system, religious and cultural context, and political priorities. Treat the groupings below as a starting point for research, not an assignment, and confirm your own country's real position before writing policy.

- ***Rights-Based Reform***

States pushing to close loopholes for family pardons or honour-based mitigation, and to fund shelters, legal aid, and gender-responsive justice systems — Sweden, Canada, Mexico, and Costa Rica are typical examples.

- ***Sovereignty & Cultural Context***

States that want reform to run through national legal and religious frameworks rather than external mandates, and that resist one-size-fits-all approaches to family law — Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia are typical examples.

- ***Capacity & Resources***

States that point to underfunded police, court backlogs, and rural areas without shelters or forensic capacity, and want funding and training rather than condemnation — India, Nigeria, and the Philippines are typical examples.

- ***State-Led, Monitoring-Wary***

States that favour state-run prevention programmes but resist independent international monitoring or aid tied to human-rights conditions — China, Belarus, and Myanmar are typical examples.



Questions a Resolution Must Answer

- How should UN Women define “female infanticide” and “honour killings” to capture all gender-based killings without limiting them to specific cultural or religious contexts?
- What legal and policy reforms should Member States adopt to criminalise these practices, and how can this council support implementation where national capacity is weak?
- How can this resolution address root causes such as patriarchal norms, economic dependency, and lack of education without alienating the communities it seeks to protect? What protection measures, including shelters, hotlines, and legal aid, should be prioritized, and how can they be made accessible in rural or conflict-affected areas?
- How should UNW engage religious and community leaders to challenge justifications for these killings while respecting cultural sensitivities and avoiding backlash?

VI. What role should this committee play in improving data collection on these practices, given that many cases go unreported or are misclassified as accidents or suicides?

VII. How can this resolution ensure survivors and families of victims access justice, reparations, and psychosocial support when perpetrators are often family members or community figures?

VIII. What international cooperation mechanisms should be strengthened to prevent cross-border impunity for honor killings and female infanticide?

IX. How can this resolution integrate prevention of these practices into existing frameworks such as CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention without duplicating efforts?

X. What accountability measures should be recommended for states that fail to protect women and girls from these practices, and how can this committee monitor and report on progress?