

## A Matter of Honor, Your Honor?

Rhea Wessel | 27 Sep 2006

*Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of six articles by Rhea Wessel on the rights of Muslim women in Europe, particularly Turkish women in Germany, which will appear occasionally on World Politics Review.*



"When she was in the kitchen again, I went back and slipped the gun into the back of my pants. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen. . . . Gönül kept on saying, 'Leave me alone. This is none of your business.' She ranted and raved in Turkish and German. . . . 'You're a loser! Failure'. . . I got angry. . . . She came toward me with her finger raised. 'What do you want from me? You can't tell me what to do!' . . ."

"I erupted. . . . I have never been so angry. I didn't want to hear any more. . . . I only saw the first shot. It went into her stomach, and she hunched over. I don't know how many times I fired, but eventually the cartridge was empty."

Ali Karabey read these words from a prepared statement midway through his year-long trial in Wiesbaden, Germany. The 25 year old is facing the court for murder. Not the murder of a lover or friend. He is standing trial for the murder of Gönül Karabey, his little sister. The one he helped raise after their mother died of tuberculosis.

Karabey has admitted to killing his sister last June in a cottage in a garden allotment outside Wiesbaden, where vineyard-lined hills meet up with the Rhine. He says the two were arguing over whether Gönül had stolen from her boss. The prosecution imagines this last conversation between Gönül and Ali quite differently, however. The state has charged Karabey with a so-called honor killing.

In his closing arguments last week, public prosecutor Mathias Dressen said Ali, a German citizen born and raised in Turkey, killed his sister because his family pride had been bruised since Gönül wanted to marry her German boyfriend. Gönül, 20, had fled the family's home and was hiding out in her boyfriend's garden cottage, afraid she would be forced to move to Berlin and marry a man chosen by her father.

The motive in the case is decisive. If the judges rule with the prosecution that the killing was an honor crime with special gravity and what Germans call "low motives," Karabey will get life and will only be able to apply for parole after 25 years. If the defense prevails with its manslaughter argument, Karabey will receive a much shorter sentence.

The Karabey case captured national attention last year because it seemed to fit the pattern of other honor crimes in Europe: Young immigrant girl rejects ideas and restrictions of family in favor of the cultural and moral norms of her host country. Family decides girl must be punished, and brother, father or uncle is selected to inflict the consequences. Girl either gives in to forced marriage, runs away or, in the worst case scenario, is murdered or forced to commit suicide.

Sibylle Schreiber, an expert on honor crimes for the German branch of Terre des Femmes, a women's rights organization, says, "Many immigrants come from patriarchal societies in which the honor of the woman is linked to the man, where sexual relations before marriage are forbidden and men determine how women should dress and how they should behave at home. If a woman breaks these rules, a man has lost control over his women -- his wife, his sisters or his daughters. If a man can't keep control of his women, he loses his honor in the community. Honor can be cleansed, in the worst-case scenario, through

murder. It's like erasing a dirty mark on the family."

Honor crimes are distinct from crimes of passion since the act of the perpetrator in a crime of passion is usually condemned by the families of both the perpetrator and the victim. Honor-related violence, on the other hand, tends to be encouraged or at least accepted by the family and the community, including the victim's own family. In other words, a crime of passion is committed to salve an individual wound while honor-related crimes attempt to ease the pain of collective wounds.

The United Nations estimates that some 5,000 honor crimes occur worldwide each year. These crimes most often take place in strict Muslim countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan, or in Turkey. But across Europe, nestled in the heart of the continent's secular societies, hundreds and maybe thousands of immigrant women may be living in fear of their families.

In Germany, officials estimate 55 honor killings occurred from 1996 to 2005. Terre des Femmes says it worked on 151 cases of honor crime in 2005, and more than 100 of these were related to forced marriage. Officials believe 12 honor killings, including six in London, have occurred in Britain in recent years, and police have set up a forced marriage unit to investigate such claims. In Sweden in 2003 and 2004, more than 1,500 young people contacted authorities or community centers because they were at risk of honor-related violence. In the Netherlands, no figures were available, but researchers point out that the suicide rate among immigrant girls is three to four times higher than that of non-immigrant girls. These figures come from a 2005 report called "Honour Related Violence" that was compiled by delegates to a conference in Sweden about preventing violence against women and girls in patriarchal families. The report was funded by the European Commission DG Social Affairs and Employment.

Integration and migration have become topics of discussion across Europe in the aftermath of 9/11 and the bombings in London and Madrid carried out by European-bred terrorists. These events have led to greater scrutiny of Muslim life across Europe. The murder of Gönül Karabey was of particular interest to the German media because it came only shortly after that of Hatun Aynur Sürücü.

This Turkish Kurd was shot down by her youngest brother at a bus stop in Berlin in February 2005 while her young son slept in his bed. She had been forced to marry a first cousin, plucked out of school in Berlin at age 15 and shipped off to Turkey. Aynur fled the marriage and returned to the family home, but soon after, she moved into a women's shelter. She pieced her life back together. She got a job, met a German man and moved into her own apartment. And she had long since traded in her head scarf for mini skirts and spaghetti straps. But Aynur's family continued to disapprove of her lifestyle. Shortly before she was murdered, her youngest brother, who has been convicted of the crime, told a friend that he would have to take care of what his brothers should have done long ago. The case didn't get much attention until a few days after the shots were fired when school children in a Turkish neighborhood publicly cheered the killing. German citizens were shocked and insulted when they heard what the children said: Aynur got what she deserved. She was, after all, living like a German.

To the dismay of many activists, Aynur's family tried to adopt her son Can after the case was closed. Although Aynur's youngest brother, Ayhan, claims he acted alone, activists say decisions to murder are usually made in a family council and the youngest male is chosen to do the duty since juveniles face reduced penalties. Indeed, Aynur's brother was sentenced to only nine years and three months in prison. For many following the story, it is hard to believe that the family implicated in Aynur's death might be able to adopt her son. If the activists are right, Can would be growing up with his mother's murderers. Katrin-Elena Schönberg, the spokeswoman for the local family-law court handling the matter, says the court has not yet made its decision.

Nerves taut from Aynur's case, activists and concerned citizens organized a demonstration in Wiesbaden

last summer condemning Gönül's murder. Led by Serap Çileli, the small group marched and carried signs. One said: "Murder is not a matter of honor." A friend of Gönül read from a sheet of paper: "Shot by your own brother because of love and sincerity. . ." Çileli and fellow activist Fatma Bläser were later awarded a prize and money from the city of Wiesbaden for showing civil courage by standing up for the victim.

The two activists are thorns in the sides of many Turks in Germany. More than 3 million Turks have made Germany their home since the first wave of immigrants came as guest workers during the post-war economic boom. Many Turks, and many Germans as well, believe stories of honor killings should not be highlighted -- that they only shed bad light on Turks and hinder the process of integration. Çileli defends herself by saying: "What if this were your daughter?" Both women have championed the rights of young Muslim women to get an education, choose their mates and make their own decisions about life. Bläser and Çileli are regularly threatened because of their work as activists, and they are shunned by some Turks for going public by publishing intimate books about their lives and the violence they survived.

As guests sweated out the July heat at the ceremony awarding the Ludwig Beck prize to Bläser and Çileli, Çileli applauded a Danish court for its recent sentencing of nine people in an honor killing. The group was sentenced for the murder and accessory to murder of a 19-year-old Pakistani woman. She and her husband, who had been married only days, were lured to a reconciliation meeting at a train station west of Copenhagen, where the woman's brother gunned her down because the family disapproved of her choice of mate. In the Karabey and Sürücü cases, the prosecution tried but failed to prove that the family was involved.

Elsewhere in Europe, in Italy, the body of a 21-year-old Pakistani was found buried in her family's backyard in August. Her father and uncle have been charged with slitting her throat, apparently because she had an Italian boyfriend and wouldn't conform to an Islamic lifestyle.

Back at the trial in Wiesbaden, Karabey held his chin in his hands and fidgeted as the prosecution summarized the case. A short and beefy man with a buzz haircut, Karabey wore a black blazer and a cream colored button down. Prosecutor Dressen, mustached and balding and wearing a black lawyer's robe over a white tie and collar, spent more than an hour reading a protocol of the killing and the days that led up to it.



Karabey and his lawyers reject all talk of an honor killing and want to set the record straight, given the media hoopla.

Throughout the trial, the Karabey family was described as open minded. They welcomed Gönül's marriage plans, and she was never forced to wear a head scarf, the defense claims.

During the closing counter arguments, Eva Schrödel, the leading defense attorney, crossed her arms, bit her lower lip and spoke off the cuff. In half an hour, she summed up her version of the story: "There is no motive to prove because there was no motive."

Head judge Steffen Poulet and his two assistant judges will present their verdict on September 29.

*Rhea Wessel, a freelance writer based in Frankfurt, is at work on a book about honor killings in Europe called "Honor Killings in Our Midst."*

*UPDATE: Ali Karabey was sentenced to life in prison for murdering his sister. The judge said Karabey*

*shot her because he did not agree with her moral conduct. He also said it was intolerable that people are killed because they want to live an independent life. Karabey's lawyer plans to appeal the verdict.*

*Photos: Above right: the defendant, Ali Karabey. Below right: the prosecuting attorney.*