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Research Article

Sexual Violence Against Women, Incest, and Honor Killing in Arab Countries: A Sociological Appraisal

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Abstract

This study offers a sociological analysis of the cultural and structural factors associated with sexual violence, incest, and honor killings in Arab countries. The article employs feminist sociological perspectives and structural violence theory to analyze how patriarchal beliefs and ideologies contribute to permissive attitudes towards sexual violence against women in the region. The analysis points to three interrelated dynamics that sustain these forms of violence. First, sexual violence and incest in the family are regulated and perpetuated through cultural norms, namely the incest taboo and patriarchal kinship systems, which construct an environment in which the abuse is systematically concealed. Second, these cultural elements serve as tools of social control, repressing women's sexuality and autonomy within the context of honor killings to conceal sexual abuse by male family members under the guise of family honor. Third, the study highlights the contradictory role of social control forces, including the criminal justice system, which often fails to protect victims of incest and instead punishes these victims through tacit acceptance of honor-based justifications and procedural barriers that effectively return legal authority to the family. Based on a comprehensive review of sociological literature, legal frameworks, empirical data, and victim testimonies from several Arab countries, the article calls for a radical re-evaluation of legal and social responses so that they protect women rather than family reputation. The article examines recent legal reforms in Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon as possible models for change, while critically addressing continuing issues of enforcement, cultural change, and the gap between legislative reform and social practice. The study concludes with a call for dismantling the patriarchal systems of belief that devalue women's lives and privilege family honor over human rights, and for continued investment in legal reform, psychosocial support, and grassroots advocacy to end these forms of violence.

Keywords

Sexual Violence, Incest, Honor Killing, Patriarchy, Arab Countries, Gender-based Violence, Legal Reform, Structural Violence

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1. Introduction

Sexual violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon that crosses geographical and cultural boundaries, but the nature of the phenomenon and society's response to it differ widely, depending on the cultural and patriarchal fabric of a particular society [1]. Recent estimates published by the World Health Organization indicate that approximately 30% of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime [2]. The prevalence is higher in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where an estimated 40% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetimes [3], and the OECD has documented uneven legal and policy responses to violence against women across the region [4]. These statistics are alarming but are likely significant underestimates, in light of the pervasive culture of silence surrounding sexual violence in many Arab societies.

In recent decades, the Arab public sphere has seen growing discussion of sexual violence and incest, thanks to the testimonies of survivors and the advocacy of civil society organizations [5, 6]. Despite this increased awareness, these issues remain on the margins of mainstream Arab sociological, psychological, and mental health scholarship [7, 8]. A survey by the Arab Barometer on gender-based violence revealed that majorities of citizens in nearly every regional country believe violence against women has increased in the past year, yet formal reporting mechanisms remain insufficient and social stigma continues to hinder victims from seeking justice [5]. This article aims to fill this gap by offering a sociological appraisal of the intersection of sexual violence, incest, and honor killings in Arab countries, with a comparative analysis of the wider region.

1.1. Voices of Survivors

“My older brother has sexually assaulted me several times, and with the help of his wife, made me addicted to drugs (tramadol). It became normal for me after seeing he had sexually assaulted my three sisters who then became ‘prostitutes.’” — S., 23 years, Palestine, 2014.

“I am the victim of family disintegration: my grandfather, instead of protecting me and preserving my honor, raped me and destroyed my life. He deprived me of the most precious people—my husband and my family. Now, I am homeless on the streets, and everyone harasses me. All I want from this world is a birth certificate for my daughter without a stigma (unknown descent) and a decent job opportunity.” — R., 21 years, Egypt, 2015.

“After my mother’s death, my father would put me to sleep in his lap, and I would wake up at night to his strange touches. Despite the unsettling feeling, I never suspected that his touches were inappropriate, or perhaps my simple mind at the time refused to accept the idea.” I was forced to discover sex at the age of seven; my childhood was stolen and my innocence was defiled. I would give my whole life to forget what I lived through).

She was raped by her cousin; their houses opened onto each other. When she told her mother, her mother subjected her to an interrogation in front of family members to save her "honor." Her mother said to her: "What did he do to you? Tell me! Why didn't you tell me? You liked it, huh?" Then she slapped her. She added: "I found myself behind the curtain. My tongue failed me, and words disappeared. His mother said: 'My son is a man; there is nothing to be ashamed of; all the blame is on your daughter.'"

She spent her teenage years and even until the age of 20 thinking she was a "dirty" girl. She says: "I was ashamed of myself and hated my body... I completely lacked self-confidence... I had a severe nervous breakdown at 17, and I couldn't pass the high school exam that year." She concludes: "It took me about 15 years before I could talk about it. Then another few years before I could talk about it without crying. Today, I decided to say it at the top of my voice: I am the victim and he is the perpetrator; he is the one who should be ashamed and blame himself, not me." — D., 38 years, Tunisia.

“One night, I was asleep when I felt hands pulling down my pants. I looked up in terror and saw it was my father. I said, ‘Papa?’ He put one hand over my mouth while the other continued pulling down my pants. My mind couldn’t comprehend it yet. That night marked the beginning of my nightmare of repeated rape by my father until I was 19… When I became pregnant… Yes, I became pregnant by my father! I fled to the capital while five months pregnant. I wanted to abort the fetus, but I couldn’t. I gave birth, left the baby behind in the hospital, and left for good.” — M., 40 years, Tunisia.

These testimonies, based on documented accounts of victims across the Arab world, highlight the horrific relationship between patriarchal authority and sexual violence within the family. They represent a pattern in which the very people who are supposed to protect women—fathers, brothers, grandfathers—become their perpetrators, and the social and legal systems that are supposed to provide redress instead serve to compound the victim’s sense of isolation and shame. The voices of these survivors provide both the evidence for, and demonstrate the crucial need for, the sociological analysis that follows.

1.2. Research Objectives and Methodology

Theoretically, this study is based on feminist sociological views and structural violence theory. Violence against women is not only an individual deviant act but a system of patriarchal control [9, 10]. Violence against women encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and legal harm [2]. Sexual violence is a widespread issue, but its incidence and acceptance are frequently increased in patriarchal societies

where moral codes value the family's reputation over the individual rights of women [11]. In Arab societies, patriarchal values, religious interpretations, and tribal customs combine to shape a unique setting where sexual crimes are often silenced [12, 13].

This article argues that the patriarchal system uses "honor" as a form of social currency to control women's sexuality. As a result, sexual violations within the family (incest) are often hidden, and once exposed, the victim—not the perpetrator—may be penalized to restore the family's honor, sometimes resulting in honor killings.

The research relies on a broad review of the literature, including academic journals, reports of non-governmental organizations, and laws of various Arab countries. Furthermore, qualitative data from victims' testimonies are used to reflect the human cost of these structural failures. The study seeks to offer a contemporary and evidence-based analysis of a deeply entrenched social problem by combining recent data from the WHO, OECD, UN Women, and regional human rights organizations with established sociological theory.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically informed by two related perspectives: feminist sociological theory and structural violence theory [84]. From feminist sociological perspectives, violence against women is conceptualized not as isolated incidents of individual pathology but as an expression of power relations embedded in patriarchal social structures [14, 85]. At this level of observation, sexual violence and incest are understood as means of reproducing male dominance within the family and within the larger society. This analysis is complemented by structural violence theory as described by Galtung and expanded by Farmer, who emphasize how social structures systematically harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs, including safety and bodily integrity [9]. Structural violence in Arab societies is manifested in the legal codes that minimize the punishment for honor crimes, social norms that silence the victims of incest, and the economic structures that render women dependent on the family units that may abuse them.

The theoretical framework hinges on the idea of the incest taboo, which functions as a cultural prohibition and a social mechanism. The incest taboo is a cultural rule or norm that forbids sexual relations between close blood relatives. All human societies have social norms that specify appropriate marriage partners, generally excluding close relatives [15, 16]. But the exact definition of “close relative” and the consequences for violating the prohibition differ from culture to culture. Structural functionalists argue that the incest taboo avoids role confusion and obliges families to associate with other families by exogamy, thereby forming larger social networks [17, 92]. Freud’s psychoanalytic theories suggest that the taboo is a required cultural repression of innate desires whereas Westermarck’s hypothesis suggests that natural selection has resulted in humans having a psychological aversion to sexual attraction to individuals raised closely with them during early childhood [18, 19].

This study considers the incest taboo not simply as a biological or psychological prohibition but as a social device which, when transgressed, is met with severe sanctions. In patriarchal Arab societies, an infringement of the incest taboo is not considered merely a trauma for the victim or a crime on the part of the perpetrator but rather a disastrous event that ruins the family’s social capital—its honor [20]. It is vital to distinguish between the criminalization of incest and the stigmatization of the survivor. The criminalization of incest is a mandatory legal protection for the vulnerable, but the misuse of this taboo often results in the “criminalization” of the victim. When the victim of incest is a woman or girl, she may be seen as the carrier of shame rather than the survivor of abuse [21]. The sociological problem, then, is not the existence of the taboo that defines legitimate sexual boundaries but the patriarchal enforcement mechanisms that hold the female victim responsible for the transgression. Recent studies on victim-blaming attitudes have also shown the link between patriarchal ideology and the assignment of responsibility to the female victims for the sexual violence inflicted upon them [22].

Furthermore, the notion of structural violence provides insight into why legal reforms alone are not enough to combat these phenomena. Changing laws to make honor killings crimes or to remove mitigating excuses does not remove the social structures that maintain the conditions in which violence occurs: economic dependence, tribal conflict-resolution methods, and cultural rewards for female chastity treated as family property. The 2023 prevalence estimates of the WHO confirm that despite decades of international attention, rates of violence against women in the MENA region remain among the highest in the world [2]. This suggests that structural factors exert a powerful inertial force that legislative change alone cannot easily overcome.

3. Prevalence and Patterns of Sexual Violence and Incest

Cultural and religious norms of a society have a great influence on sexual abuse and incest. This also represents an area of research that is still neglected, especially within Arab-Muslim circles where data are lacking due to the stigma and taboo surrounding these topics [23]. However, available reports point to a disturbing trend. In Egypt, a study by Majzoub [24] found that common patterns of incest were between brothers and sisters, fathers and daughters and stepfathers and stepdaughters, which represented 76% of the incest cases reported. The study, which surveyed 200 participants, also found co-residence to be an important factor, with family arrangements involving siblings, father-daughter, and stepfather-stepdaughter relationships being most common in homes with limited

space and privacy. The perpetrators were low in educational attainment and religiosity. This suggests that structural deprivation intersects with cultural norms to produce conditions conducive to incest. Recent studies on the contexts of child sexual abuse in families have identified inequality, poverty, patriarchy, poor sex education and lack of societal support as contributing factors [25].

A systematic review and meta-analysis reported in 2023 on domestic violence against women in North African and Middle Eastern countries found that the highest rates of sexual violence were in Iran (81.5%) and Turkey (74.6%), while the lowest rates were in Palestine (10.6%), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt [26]. However, the authors caution that these numbers are likely to reflect under-reporting rather than genuinely low prevalence, as cultural barriers to disclosure are greatest in the most conservative societies. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2005, 10.5% of women reported that they had been subjected to sexual violence at least once [27], and more recent data from OCHA indicates that among women who experienced violence, 8.8% reported sexual violence, 56.6% psychological violence, and 17.8% physical violence [28]. The Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling reported an increase in femicides, stating that 27 women were killed in the name of "honor killings" in one year [29]. Additionally, the Department of Applied Sociology at Al-Quds University reported 145 cases of incest in Palestinian society, 100 in the West Bank and 45 in the Gaza Strip [87].

Alarmingly, studies show that more than 50% of these victims were not virgins, having lost their virginity to sexual abuse by their own relatives. In many cases, the murder was not committed because the woman was guilty of a consensual illicit relationship, but to cover for the "shameful acts" of male relatives [29]. This pattern illustrates the conjunction of sexual violence and honor killing: the woman is killed to eliminate the evidence of a crime committed against her. Tunisia offers a comparative data set that underscores the regional dimension of the problem. According to the National Office of Family and Population, 14.2% of women have experienced sexual abuse in their lives, of which 10.7% were rape or sodomy [30]. The emergency unit of Ibn Rushd Hospital in Casablanca, Morocco, reported an average of four cases of violence against women per day, which probably represents the most serious physical cases that seek medical attention [23].

International studies provide more context for these regional patterns. Muratoglu et al. reviewed the sexual crime cases referred to forensic units in a 4-year period (2013–2016) and reported that of 737 sexual crime cases, 57 (7.7%) were incest cases with 84.2% of the victims being women and the mean age of victims being 15.3 years [31]. In 42.1% of incest cases the defendant was the father. In a similar study, Yildirim et al. [32] evaluated 43 incest cases referred to forensic medicine department in Turkey between the years 2008 and 2012 and found that the most common type was father-daughter incest (34.9%), followed by brother-sister incest (14%); and all perpetrators were male. Gomes et al. [33] performed a retrospective study on 215 cases of alleged biological paternal incest where the victims were under 18 years of age and observed that the abuse started at an early age and was repetitive, and that the sexual practices were intrusive, leading to physical injuries that differed from those in cases of extra-familial abuse. A recent study published in 2024 on the effects of sexual abuse on PTSD in children and adolescents found that the prevalence of PTSD in cases of child sexual abuse ranged from 20% to 70%, with girls displaying more symptoms than boys [34]. Collectively, these findings highlight the pervasiveness of incest as a gendered phenomenon that requires urgent attention across the region and beyond.

4. Historical Roots and Patriarchal Relations

Anthropologists have long associated kinship with social characteristics, not with purely biological factors. In the past, incest was performed in some ancient societies, such as royal Egyptian dynasties, in order to maintain political power and bloodline purity [35]. However, contemporary Arab societies are based on a patriarchal system that strictly separates men and women. The patriarchal structure of Arab society is characterized by male dominance and gender inequality, which are deeply ingrained in customs and traditions [36, 85]. According to Barakat [36], the patriarchal system in the Arab world is a psycho-social and economic system dominating the family, clan, and authority structures. Relationships are hierarchical, based on submission to male authority: father, brother, husband. This hierarchy is not just a residue of tradition but one that is continually reproduced through socialization and legal and economic arrangements that maintain women's dependence on their closest male relative.

In this structure, the family is the basic unit of society and its unity is more important than the well-being of the individual [37]. Hence, issues such as sexual abuse that threaten the honor of the family are often handled privately within the family to avoid state intervention or public scandal [38]. This "sanctity of the family" becomes a roadblock to justice, where perpetrators can be hidden and victims can be isolated. Al-Heidari [39] divides the persecution of women in these systems into three types: qualitative persecution (control over social interests and access to social resources), patriarchal persecution (male control over women's mobility and behavior), and legal persecution (laws that institutionalize inequality). These three dimensions of persecution combine to limit women's autonomy and to maintain their subordination within the patriarchal family structure. The family is thus not a place of safety but, the locus of violence and control, where patriarchal power is exercised with little external oversight.

The father-son relationship is the dogmatic basis of the whole familial system. It is based on the strong feeling of kinship through which society manifests the total submission to

the will of the father. The Palestinian family has played a unique role in the preservation of the socio-cultural identity shaped by difficult political and economic circumstances [90, 91]. The father-daughter relationship also plays an important role in the family hierarchy, as the father has the exclusive right of consent to his daughter's marriage and thus creates the basis for another relationship. The girl's affiliation and belonging are still oriented to the father's family, and the responsibility for the girl is on the fathers and brothers in her life [40]. Polygamy is one of the risk factors for incest, according to Myers and Brasington [41]. It creates dynamics that dominate the family. Some studies suggest that fathers who commit incest may invoke religious justifications for their actions [20]. Molako [42] argued that mothers in families where incest occurs exhibit "personality traits" that "justify the incestuous attack"—a claim that requires critical examination given the structural constraints on mothers in patriarchal systems. The role of the mother in these dynamics is especially complicated: she may be a victim of patriarchal violence herself, economically dependent on the abuser, or complicit through silence as a survival strategy within a system that offers her no viable alternative.

The effects of long-term occupation, political turmoil and economic deprivation on family structures in the area cannot be ignored. Research has shown that conflict-affected populations have higher levels of domestic and sexual violence, as displacement, unemployment and the breakdown of traditional social controls provide a fertile ground for violence to thrive [7, 8]. In this context, the patriarchal family is a site of oppression and a site of survival, where women are doubly oppressed, both by political violence and domestic abuse. The United Nations Development Pro-gramme estimates that approximately 37% of ever-partnered women in the eastern Mediterranean region have experienced intimate partner violence with a dramatic increase in conflict zones [43]. Women and girls live in an especially deadly environment created at the intersection of political violence and domestic patriarchy, and they are menaced from both outside and inside the family.

5. Psychosocial Consequences of Incest

The effects of incest go far beyond the act of violation. Survivors suffer devastating and lasting psychological, social, and behavioral effects. The literature consistently reports increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and social dysfunction in survivors of incest [44, 45]. A recent umbrella review of long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse further corroborated associations between such abuse and a number of psychosocial and health-related outcomes such as self-harm, substance abuse, and chronic mental health conditions [46]. The psychological damage of incest is amplified by the secrecy that usually surrounds it, resulting in what researchers have termed a "double violation" — the initial abuse and the denial of the victim's reality by those meant to protect her. A 2024 study on the impact of childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse verified that long-term consequences include problems with physical and mental health, adverse emotional regulation and interpersonal difficulties [47].

Incest is characterized by enforced secrecy and the denial of the social and psychological reality of the sexual acts, often with the complicity of non-offending family members. Genital touching and non-contact behaviors such as sexualized language are common to incest. These behaviors violate the victim's basic trust toward the aggressor and society in general [48, 49]. The lack of protection of the victim from the aggressor by non-offending family members worsens the damage and causes acute and long-term psychological consequences, such as PTSD, social dysfunction, physical and behavioral problems, low self-esteem, and lack of self-confidence [50, 51]. Studies show that incest is a symptom of serious family dysfunction. Regardless of the time elapsed since the assault, it continues to affect the emotional behavior of victims, their self-image, and their personal relationships, often leading to depression [52, 53]. Of particular importance is the experience of shame: survivors often internalize the stigma associated with sexual abuse, resulting in what clinical literature refers to as "sexual abuse-related shame," which mediates the relationship between the traumatic event and subsequent psychopathology [54].

Incest affects personal relationships, and this is especially true for young women. Research indicates that several variables—including prior victimization, family instability, disruption of family hierarchy, loss of the mother, and health concerns—differentiate incest survivors from non-abused individuals. Incest survivors also exhibit higher rates of self-harm [55]. Snyder and Rubenstein [56] found that incest histories were associated with a doubled risk for heavy substance use, but only in females, among emerging adults ages 18 to 25. This suggests that the trauma of incest interacts with gender-specific coping mechanisms. In addition, for female survivors whose pregnancy is a result of incest, the experience of childbirth may elicit traumatic memories of the original assault, further underscoring the need for individualized and trauma-informed care by healthcare providers [57-59]. A 2023 study on the identification of psycho-socio-judicial trajectories among sexual assault survivors suggested that the interaction between psychological trauma, social isolation, and legal obstacles produces complex pathways that can either facilitate or hinder recovery [60].

The incest experience in Arab societies is further complicated by social norms that usually stigmatize the victim with harsh labels, expel them from their homes, and make it impossible for them to form families, which leads to mental disorders, social isolation, deviation, and prostitution. The lack of specialized psychosocial support services in many Arab countries means that survivors are often left to cope with the aftermath of abuse without professional help. Research on holistic group-based therapeutic approaches for incest survivors has demonstrated promise in addressing complex trauma in re-

source limited settings [86]. Services, where they exist, are often limited to urban areas and inaccessible to women in rural or conflict-affected areas. The UNFPA has documented that close to two-thirds of women and girls in the Arab region have suffered some form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence [61]. This is a rising phenomenon that introduces new dimensions to the psychosocial burden borne by survivors. The intersection of traditional forms of violence with digital harassment and online exploitation creates an environment where the trauma of sexual violence is constantly reinforced and inescapable.

6. Honor Killing and Family Honor

Honor killing is the murder of a female family member by male relatives (father, brother, uncle) who believe the victim has brought shame upon the family, often for alleged sexual misconduct or violations of chastity norms [62]. It is believed that hundreds of women are killed in the name of honor each year in the Arab world, but it is difficult to obtain exact figures due to underreporting and the fact that these crimes are classified into other categories [11]. A narrative review of honor killings in the Eastern Mediterranean Region published in 2023 documented the epidemiology of the practice and highlighted the social and cultural factors sustaining it [63]. A study by Aksoy and Szekely [64] published in the American Sociological Review in 2025 investigated how honor killings occur when women are perceived to have violated norms of purity and brought “dishonor” to their families, raising serious moral and societal issues. Sociologically, honor killings function as a violent mechanism of social control. They are not simply crimes of passion, but often premeditated actions to redeem the family’s status in the community [65, 66].

A key aspect of this phenomenon is its link to incest. Women who become pregnant as a result of incest – sometimes by their own fathers or brothers – are often killed to cover up the evidence of the crime and the ‘illegitimacy’ of the offspring [67, 68]. The concept of “honor” is a twisted version of social accounting: the family’s social status is determined by the perceived sexual conduct of the women in it, and any deviation from that, whether consensual or abusive, is a debit that can only be compensated for by violence. Research from 2025 on the attitudes of Palestinian students toward crimes of honor killing found that although awareness of women's rights is increasing, a substantial number of respondents supported honor-based rationales for violence [69]. This suggests that cultural attitudes towards honor-based violence remain entrenched, even among younger and more educated populations, and that legal reform alone is insufficient to shift such deeply held beliefs.

It is a common fallacy that these acts are not punishable by law. Honor killing is illegal in all Arab states, but many legal codes historically included mitigating clauses that reduced sentences for perpetrators. For instance, Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code used to stipulate a reduction in penalty if a man caught his wife in the act of adultery and killed her. Similarly, other nations considered “honorable motives” to be a mitigating factor in sentencing [68]. However, legal reform is a growing trend. In 2017, Jordan abolished Article 308, which allowed rapists to avoid punishment if they married their victims, and amended the penal code to remove “fit of fury” as a defense for honor crimes [70]. In 2017, Tunisia passed a landmark law (Law 58) that specifically addresses violence against women, removes the “marry your rapist” loophole, and explicitly criminalizes economic and political violence against women [71]. Lebanon also repealed its rape law provision in 2017, in line with a regional trend to remove legal provisions that perpetuate violence against women [72]. These legal gains are undermined by the difficulty of enforcement and the fact that social attitudes are often slow to follow legislative change [73].

7. Legal Frameworks: A Comparative Overview

In the Arab world, the legal treatment of incest is extremely diverse, often reflecting the tension between religious interpretations of family law and penal codes. In the West Bank, the Jordanian Penal Code No. 16 of 1960 (still in force) defines incest under Article 285 as adultery between ancestors, descendants, siblings, or relatives by marriage of a similar degree [74]. The law has penalties but often necessitates a complaint from a relative to begin prosecution, placing the power of justice back into the hands of the family, the very entity that may want to hide the crime. In the Gaza Strip, Law No. 74 of 1936 (British Mandate) includes incest under "crimes of misconduct." Article 155 provides five years of imprisonment for sexual intercourse with an unmarried female descendant or a woman in one's trust between the ages of 16 and 21 [75]. This law focuses primarily on the violation of trust, but it imposes a higher age limit than many international standards on the age of consent. This law is most concerned with the “trust” part, but it imposes a greater age limit than many international standards on the age of consent.

Algeria’s criminal legislation does not explicitly use the term “incest” but criminalizes the acts constituting it under the laws on indecent sexual relationship. The punishments vary from 2 to 20 years in prison, depending on the degree of relationship, with the heaviest punishment being for relationships between ancestors and descendants or between siblings [76]. Al-Rashed [77] documented crimes of adultery, incest and prostitution in Saudi Arabia. The vast majority of perpetrators were in the 20–25 age group and women of low education were disproportionately represented among victims. The study found that the father was responsible for 55% of the assaults, and the brother for 10%. 55% of the participants did not want to tell anyone what had happened, which demonstrates the deep silence that surrounds these crimes. A legal

review of incest in Iraq showed that current laws do not sufficiently cover the complexity of intra-familial sexual abuse, often subsuming it under general categories of sexual crimes that do not take into account the power imbalance present in incestuous relationships [78].

These legal frameworks point to a fundamental paradox: the state wants to punish sexual immorality, but the procedural requirements (such as the need for a familial complaint) often protect the perpetrator. If the family chooses to silence the victim in order to avoid scandal, the legal system is circumvented. Furthermore, categorizing incest as "misconduct" or "adultery" instead of a distinct crime of sexual violence against a minor or a dependent person fails to capture the power relations in incestuous abuse. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network [79] has underlined the importance of adopting a comprehensive Family Protection Law as a critical step to putting an end to violence against women and girls, given that legal provisions in place are still inadequate to deal with the complexity of intrafamilial sexual violence. Similarly, the OECD's 2024 report on tackling violence against women in the MENA region found that although most countries in the region have implemented some form of legislation to address domestic violence, the scope and enforcement of such laws differ widely and many of them do not explicitly address sexual violence in marriage or within the family [4].

Recent legal developments in the region offer tentative reasons for optimism, but a 2024 review of efforts to reduce violence against women and girls in the Arab League region shows progress remains slow and uneven [88]. Jordan has continued to strengthen its legal framework, with amendments to the Domestic Violence Protection Law providing improved safeguards for survivors and increased focus on accountability [80]. Tunisia's Law 58 has been groundbreaking in its comprehensive approach to violence against women, but its application is not without challenges, especially in cases of domestic violence, where social pressure may cause victims to not pursue legal remedies [81]. According to UN Women's 2023 country reports on gender justice and the law in the Arab states, only Tunisia has a law that explicitly criminalizes violence against women in elections and politics while Lebanon and Jordan have partial legal frameworks that address some forms of gender-based violence [82]. Significant legal gaps in the region, particularly in areas related to marriage, parenthood, and assets, continue to be documented by the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law index [83]. These findings highlight the need for holistic legal reform that goes beyond criminalizing violence to also tackle the underlying structural factors that perpetuate it, including economic dependence, discriminatory family legislation, and inadequate protection frameworks.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, the sociocultural factors that contribute to sexual violence, incest and honor killings in Arab countries have been examined from the perspective of feminist sociological theory and structural violence theory. The analysis shows that these phenomena are not isolated deviant acts but are systemic outcomes of deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. Cultural emphasis on family honor, legal loopholes, and social stigma create an environment where sexual violence is silenced and the victim is punished twice—once by the perpetrator and again by society or the family trying to restore "honor." The theory of the incest taboo shows that the taboo is there to establish social boundaries but its violent enforcement in patriarchal societies serves to subordinate women. The data reveal that many so-called honor killings are actually murders designed to conceal incest, transforming the victim into the defendant. Recent empirical research confirms that, despite some legal progress, the prevalence of violence against women in the MENA region remains among the highest in the world, with one in three women having experienced or at risk of experiencing physical or sexual abuse [89], and cultural attitudes continue to sustain the conditions in which violence flourishes. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach.

First, legal reforms should be pursued to continue to remove any mitigating excuses for honor-based violence and procedural barriers, such as the requirement of a familial complaint, for incest cases. Jordan, Tunisia and Lebanon have made encouraging recent steps, but these must be supported by rigorous enforcement and sustained commitment. Legal reform must also tackle discriminatory family laws that perpetuate women's economic dependency and legal subordination within the family, including guardianship regulations and the legal status of children born out of wedlock.

Second, public health and social policies should aim at changing cultural attitudes. This involves working with religious and community leaders to redefine 'honor' as being in the protection of women, not the dominance of their sexuality, and introducing comprehensive sex education programs that challenge patriarchal norms from a young age.

Third, psychosocial support services should be strengthened to address the long-term effects of incest, including PTSD, depression and substance abuse, paying particular attention to the needs of women and girls in conflict-affected areas. There is a need to establish specialized trauma-informed care centers with trained professionals and ensure their accessibility to women in both urban and rural locations. Fourth, civil society and feminist movements in the region must be supported. Organizations such as the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women have played a key role in breaking the silence and supporting survivors. These organizations need sustained funding and political protection to continue their vital work. Further research should continue to examine the effects of modernization and educational attainment on attitudes toward violence, particularly whether increased literacy and exposure to global human rights norms are associated with reduced tolerance of patriarchal violence. In addition, there is a

pressing need for research on the effectiveness of legal reforms in changing actual prosecution and conviction rates for honor crimes and incest. Ultimately, ending sexual violence and honor killings requires breaking down the patriarchal ideologies that dehumanize women and prioritize family honor over human rights, a transition that requires a long-term commitment from governments, civil society, and the international community.

Abbreviations

GBV	Gender-Based Violence
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VAW	Violence Against Women
WCLAC	Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling
WHO	World Health Organization

Author Contributions

Khalid Hreish: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing

Iyad Khamaysa: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Khalid Hreish is a Professor in the Social Work Department at Al-Quds University. He earned his B.A. in Social Work (1992) and Master of Social Work (1997) from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He received his Ph.D. in human relations from New Bulgarian University in 2008. He has numerous publications in both Arabic and English in local, regional, and international journals. His research interests include obstacles and challenges in the work of social work supervisors and practitioners, drug addiction, various forms of domestic violence, and problems faced by university students.

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Research Field

Khalid Hreish: Social work theory and practice, Human relations and development, Family and community social work, Palestinian social welfare systems.

Iyad Khamaysa: Migration and refugee studies, Traumatic stress and PTSD, Quantitative and qualitative research methods, Social adaptation and mental health, Sociology of martyrdom and conflict, Gerontology and elderly quality of life, Social work and policy analysis, Collective memory and displacement.