

SHARAF HEROES – MEN WHO FIGHT FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Sharaf Heroes is an anti-‘honour violence’ project launched in 2003 by the feminist, anti-racist, Swedish organisation *Electra*. It seeks to educate young men from different backgrounds and religions in human rights and equality. *Sharaf* means honour in Arabic. It is in its original meaning a beautiful word but today, in the western world, it has come to be associated solely with violence and patriarchal oppression. Sharaf Heroes want to reclaim the word and its positive meaning. In this report I will briefly describe Sharaf Heroes – who they are and what they do.



Sharaf Heroes, Award Ceremony 2008

Much attention has been given to the phenomenon of honour violence in Sweden after the murder of Fadime Sahindal in 2002¹. The murder of this young woman raised many questions: Why do men, young men who have lived in Sweden all their lives, have such a patriarchal view of women that they believe the honour of their families is related to their sisters’ sexuality, and how can attitudes be changed? Sharaf Heroes is one of the few projects launched after Fadime’s death that focuses on young men and their behaviour.

According to Electra, research shows that young people’s beliefs and thoughts are often influenced not only by their families, but also to a large extent by their peers. The project, Sharaf Heroes, was launched in response to these findings. Sharaf Heroes believes that the ones who can actually change old-fashioned patriarchal thinking among young men are other young men from similar backgrounds. Sharaf Heroes, therefore, offers educational workshops and a space for dialogue where men can discuss issues of honour and violence with each other. Education in

¹ Fadime Sahindal was murdered 26 January 2002, at the age of 26. Her father shot her in the head; the reason he gave was that she had had a Swedish boyfriend. The murder of Fadime Sahindal is not the first honour killing in Sweden, but it was the first one that attracted such huge media attention and provoked a public debate. Fadime Sahindal had escaped her family several years earlier due to threats by family members. Since she found a lack of support from Swedish society, she decided to turn to the media, to speak of the violence she – and many other women – are subjected to. She told her story, which made her case famous in all Swedish households. She participated in documentary films, wrote articles, and spoke in front of the Swedish government. She had become so well known that her murder provoked a wave of shock in Swedish society.

human rights and equality also gives them tools to further understand their actions and the consequences of their actions.

Sharaf Heroes educates young men from different backgrounds and religions. It is recognised that honour violence can be found in many religions and cultures. After a 10-week long course you receive your first diploma. From there it is possible to take more advanced courses, for example to become a group teacher or a lecturer. The 'qualified' Heroes then go on to deliver lecture in schools, organisations and authorities. Furthermore, Sharaf Heroes are now in the process of producing their third theatrical piece.

The objective of the project is to spread knowledge about honour violence, and to change attitudes among young men; this is a lifelong process, and it cannot be achieved within a few weeks. Sharaf Heroes know that they cannot completely change everyone's attitudes, however, what they can do is provide tools and inspiration to young men who are curious about how to live their life differently.

In 2006 the sister project Sharaf Heroines was launched. Sharaf Heroines offers education to young women on the issue of 'honour violence', and they work to strengthen girls' confidence. These young women - the Heroines - can then act as a support network for girls who have been victims of honour crimes.

Sharaf Heroes also act as a support for men who have rejected (honour) violence against women. Abandoning out-dated, patriarchal thinking (such as the belief that honour is related to women's sexualities) might be very uncomfortable for men. It is not uncommon that men are threatened by other males after making the decision to leave behind this world view. Sometimes these young men have to turn against their own families, friends, and communities.



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/bisonblog>
Nyamko Sabuni, Swedish Minister of Equality and Integration, awarded the new Heroes at the Price Award Ceremony December 2008.

Over the last 6 years the project Sharaf Heroes/Heroines has grown. It is now established in several cities in Sweden: Stockholm; Gothenburg; and Malmö. Today more than 100 Heroes and Heroines have received diplomas.

The ideas of Sharaf Heroes have spread to other countries and organisations, like Ni Putes Ni Soumises (France) and TransAct (Holland). Furthermore, Sharaf Heroes have given lectures in Norway and Germany, and have participated in several international conferences.

Useful websites:

www.elektra.nu

www.niputesnisoumises.com

www.transact.nl

Sources:

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