

A LIFE FOR A LIFE: AN UNACCEPTABLE PROPOSITION

Do executions really provide justice to victims of violent crime and their families?

Many of those who advocate the death penalty do so in the name of “victims’ rights”. They argue that the victims of violent crime and their loved ones have a right to see the life of the perpetrator taken by the state. However, the understandable anger that victims of violent crime and their families feel towards the perpetrators of such acts cannot be used to justify the violation of the human rights of those convicted of these crimes. The finality and cruelty inherent in the death penalty make it incompatible with norms of modern-day, civilized behaviour. It is an inappropriate and unacceptable response to violent crime.

Death penalty advocates who claim to be acting on behalf of victims imply that all those affected by violent crime support the death penalty universally. This is far from true. Many relatives of murder victims object to the death penalty being carried out in the name of their loved ones. In the USA, the campaign group Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights has become a powerful voice against executions:

“We believe that survivors of homicide victims have a recognized stake in the debate over how societies respond to murder and have the moral authority to call for a consistent human rights ethic as part of that response. Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights is the answer to that call.”

Marie Deans, whose mother-in-law was murdered in 1972, states:

“After a murder, victims’ families face two things: a death and a crime. At these times, families need help to cope with their grief and loss, and support to heal their hearts and rebuild their lives. From experience, we know that revenge is not the answer. The answer lies in reducing violence, not causing more death. The answer lies in supporting those who grieve for their lost loved ones, not creating more grieving families [by executing their relative]. It is time we break the cycle of violence.”

The same people who justify the death penalty by citing victims’ rights rarely address the suffering caused to others by executions. The trauma to prison officials and guards involved in executions, the emotional pain suffered by the family and loved ones of the individual executed, the defense lawyers who may feel that they have somehow failed their executed client and the numerous other people brutalized by executions are simply ignored by political leaders espousing the “advantages” of executions to the electorate.

“People don’t understand that the death penalty has an impact on families that is so far reaching,” says Jonnie Waner. Her brother, Larry Griffin, was put to death by the state of Missouri, USA, in 1995. “My mother has never gotten over it [the execution of her son]. She has changed so much since it happened. All of the kids have a hard time understanding it. The death penalty creates so many more victims.”

“**TO THOSE WHO SAY SOCIETY
MUST TAKE A LIFE FOR A LIFE,
WE SAY “NOT IN OUR NAME.”**

Marie Deans, relative of murder victim, USA



LIVES HELD TO RANSOM

Some countries, most notably Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, employ a system that allows relatives of the murder victim's family to waive the death penalty for free, or in return for financial compensation – otherwise known as *diyya* or “blood money” – or set any condition they see fit. The blood money is paid in compensation for the killing, thereby foregoing the execution. Such systems make the administration of the death penalty arbitrary and discriminatory in the extreme. It is arbitrary because those accused of similar crimes can be treated differently from each other. The person guilty of murdering the relative of a merciful family is not executed, while someone whose victim's family is less forgiving is executed, despite all other elements of the crime being similar. It is discriminatory because those with money are more likely to be able to tempt the families of the victims into accepting a large payment.

The relatives of those murdered have every right to expect to see those guilty of inflicting such harm held to account by a fair judicial process. But allowing them to influence the judicial process risks the removal of one of the central tenets of modern jurisprudence: that everyone stands equal before the law.



An opponent of the death penalty protests against the execution in California, USA, of Clarence Ray Allen, aged 76, a blind wheelchair user. Clarence Ray Allen was executed by lethal injection on 17 January 2006 after spending 23 years on death row.

