

Misogynist Cultures Threaten Women's Rights

by Brenda Walker

Why is it never mentioned in immigration debates that women's rights are endangered by the demographic mix now entering the country? Do Americans blithely assume that millions of foreigners steeped in misogynist cultures will be magically transformed into egalitarian citizens when they arrive on our shores? Or have the soapbox multiculturalists so dominated the discussion that the wonderfulness of all cultures is accepted with no question whatsoever?

Traditional societies so extolled by multi-culturalists are not wonderful places for women. Consider a few examples. Sex-selective abortion and infanticide are widespread in places like India and China. The People's Republic has 120 males for every 100 females, a gap that is increasing. Such practices have made tens of millions of women and girls "missing" in China. One region in India has 10 boys for every six girls. The form of child abuse and torture known as female genital mutilation (FGM) has afflicted 130 million women in around 40 countries. According to Amnesty International, hundreds of Pakistani women are murdered every year by male relatives for slights against the family reputation, such as choosing one's own husband or initiating divorce. Similar instances of "honor killings" happen throughout the Moslem world. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has instituted total gender apartheid, in which women are prohibited from having employment, leaving their homes without a male relative as a chaperone or receiving any education. The smallest disobedience can result in beatings or death.

The emphasis on "diversity" in immigration policy has brought many of these horrors to America. The Centers for Disease Control reported that in 1990 there were an estimated 168,000 girls and women living in the United States with or at risk for female genital mutilation.

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The federal government and 10 states have criminalized the practice. Gov. Pete Wilson signed a bill in 1996 outlawing FGM in California after the legislature became aware of the practice among immigrants. It is appalling that such laws are necessary in the United States of America.

The majority of current and likely future immigrants come from countries where the rights of women are few or nonexistent. American women should question how safe their recently won political and reproductive rights will be with millions of misogynist men added to our society. Most non-European cultures still regard women as inferior, yet we are urged to embrace this anti-woman ideology — multiculturalism — as better than our own. Exactly where are these marvelous egalitarian societies that we should emulate?

Multicultural Myths; Women's Reality

The proponents of multiculturalism present an idealized picture of the human community, of rainbow-hued ethnic peoples joining hands around a cheerful planet. But this confabulation is at odds with the reality of women's lives in most of the Third World. It certainly does not approximate women's experience in Afghanistan and other fundamentalist Islamic states. In Afghanistan, women are regarded as little more than animals.

Multiculturalism should be recognized as containing a hidden agenda — male supremacy wrapped in a package of political correctness.

American women should be suspicious when someone tries to convince them of the evil nature of the United States in comparison to some mythical egalitarian Avalon. Though far from perfect, the modern U.S. still offers enormously more autonomy for women than the traditional cultures we are pressured to embrace. If in doubt, women should ponder the wisdom of a solo vacation to Egypt, Iran or Mexico. Closer to home, how comfortable is a stroll near the local day-labor hang-out?

It is not unusual to find "immigrant rights" in direct opposition to women's rights — with women often

getting the shaft. *The Nation* reported (10/4/99) that the American Civil Liberties Union announced that it would oppose laws against polygamy, which the ACLU regards as a constitutionally protected arrangement. Despite the ACLU's preference for the gender neutral term "plural marriage," polygamy remains an abusive practice for women, both in Mormon Utah (where it persists) and in Third World cultures. If polygamy is just an ethnic custom with no gender bias, why are there no cultures where a woman may choose multiple husbands?

Certainly women's rights are being addressed worldwide as never before, but the ball and chain of millennia of male privilege will not be fundamentally changed any time soon. So-called "honor killings" persist in Jordan despite a government campaign against the practice. These murders are instances where the slightest suggestion of sexual misbehavior results in the death of the accused woman or girl by the hand of a male family member. Kuwait still does not allow women to vote, though since the Persian Gulf war the media have erroneously predicted the approach of suffrage.

Why then would American women choose to import cultures with such misogynist practices in the name of "diversity?" Like male Americans, they were not asked. The Immigration Act of 1965 was supposedly designed to remove obnoxious racial restrictions from earlier legislation. In fact, it exceeded that mandate and instead opened the door to cultures that support customs that Americans would judge criminal. Immigrants are entering in from countries like Sudan (home to slavery and genital mutilation), Laos (where arranged marriage for girls as young as 12 is normal) and China (in which there is widespread infanticide). Yet diversity proponents insist that all cultures are equally worthy. Perhaps for men.

Multiculturalism's Legal Strategy

Multiculturalist lawyers have pursued a "group rights" legal agenda which put women's rights at severe disadvantage. The groups in question are the ethnic immigrant enclaves which increasingly insist upon the autonomy of their cultures. This demand extends to the point of denying that U.S. law applies to them, particularly when it encroaches upon perceived male prerogatives of violence against women. Murdering one's wife is a cultural right, according to this view.

Sexism is alive and well in most of these cultures which are represented as superior to modern America. Indeed, male supremacy is often a core principle in

traditional societies. It is generally agreed that one of the biggest strains on new immigrant families is the freedom available for women and girls. One reads about male-on-female violence among immigrants in the press, usually called "family tragedies" — a description that disguises more than it reveals. Many of these episodes follow the same pattern: Family from a traditional culture immigrates to America. Wife or daughter begins living a more liberated life. Threatened male injures or murders the offending female. And the man may get off with lessened punishment by using cultural rights as a defense in court.

In an all-too-familiar story, the *Los Angeles Times* (12/10/98) described how an Iranian immigrant shot his wife in the head for leaving the house against his wishes. He was convicted of assault with a deadly weapon rather than attempted murder after a defense that focused on how wives in Iran are expected to be obedient.

So-called "immigrants' rights" groups aim to create a body of legal precedent distinct from American jurisprudence. Separate and unequal, such a legal philosophy would continue male privilege as a cultural right at the cost of women's equality. Each use of the "culture defense" in a case of violence against women is a blow against women's rights and safety.

Consider Mormonism in Utah as an example of the intractability of some cultural practices. Polygamy was supposedly ended as a prerequisite for statehood. However, news stories demonstrate the continued existence of the custom and how it creates conditions of violence and servitude for women. Cultural practices often survive in spite of laws if the community is large and distinct enough.

The Vatican's Misogynist Policy

A serious threat to women's well being around the world is the Vatican. (It is that powerful political institution being criticized here, not individual American Catholics.) Many centuries of being the government of western Europe have left the Papacy with little regard for the puny sovereignty of mere nations. It wields influence over even non-Catholics through a combination of vestigial spiritual authority and hardball power politics. It particularly harms the lives of women worldwide by continually blocking voluntary family planning programs for overpopulated Third World countries plagued by grinding poverty. At the same time, the Vatican calls for open borders everywhere (except the ones around

Vatican City), saying that the rights of the poor to immigrate supersede national sovereignty and law.

It should be noted that the Vatican and its American hierarchy regard mass immigration to the U.S. as very advantageous for them, since a large number of the immigrants are Latin American Catholics. Many have minimal education and maximum sized families — ideal for an obedient and growing congregation. (One wonders when changing demographics will lead to a majority-Catholic America.)

The Catholic hierarchy already has flexed its financial muscle on the healthcare front, as reported in *The Nation* (1/25/99). The current spate of hospital mergers has seen formerly community institutions joined together with Catholic hospitals. When Catholic rules prevail in such cases, then some or all reproductive healthcare gets axed even though these hospitals may be subsidized by tax money. Contraception may be totally unavailable, even to rape victims. The nonprofit Catholics for Reproductive Choice found that about half of the Catholic/secular hospital mergers in the last eight years (around 100) resulted in the partial or total loss of reproductive medicine.

A Struggle Just to Maintain Current Rights?

A healthcare insurance sales representative entered a clothing store in Los Angeles and extended her business card in greeting to the owner. The Middle Easterner responded by screaming, “Get out” and concluded by spitting on her shoes.

A writer sought to seal a roofing deal by stretching out her hand in the traditional American fashion. However, the intended Arab recipient refused, saying, “It is against my religion to shake your hand.” (Islam allowed him to accept her money, however.)

Why should American women have to put up with behavior like this in their own country? American men do not receive such disrespect. As the U.S. becomes a more diverse place, it becomes more hostile to women. Why isn't this loss of ground considered a problem?

Another danger is possible alliances between patriarchal religious groups that wish to subvert women's rights. The urge to keep women subservient is a major agenda item for many fundamentalists, from Iranian clerics to southern Baptists (remember the “submission” flap several years back). Women's liberation has hardly begun in most places on earth and is certainly not set in

stone in our own society, where male backlash continues, ranging from violence and harassment to small insults. What happens if male supremacist cultural groups form political coalitions to return women to second-class status — what rights will be safe? In addition, the construction of a separate body of law for cultural groups may eventually seep into the legal framework as a whole, with dangerous consequences for women.

If multiculturalism simply urged a more open-minded examination of human society, that would be beneficial. Indeed, it might make some Americans see our own mixed history in a new and more balanced light. But multiculturalism offers nothing for women but more oppression, even as its mouthpieces assert moral superiority compared to our imperfect culture.

As feminist writer Katha Pollitt has remarked, “In its demand for equality for women, feminism sets itself in opposition to virtually every culture on earth. You could say that multiculturalism demands respect for all cultural traditions, while feminism respects only traditions that indeed deserve respect.”

The question must be asked: Why import this problem through policies of mass immigration? Isn't homegrown sexism bad enough? American women who care about hard-won freedoms should consider the future under our present course.

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