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Oppressing Women: Who Benefits and How?

Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann
Wilfrid Laurier University

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Oppressing Women: Who Benefits and How?

Abstract

Women are the world's oldest marketable commodity. "Good" women are marketed by their fathers, or brothers, to other men as wives. "Bad" women are incarcerated, raped, killed, or prostituted. Methods of marketing women range widely in kind: from simple one-on-one bargains, where two men exchange daughters or sisters; to exchange of women for material goods; to use of women to pay debts; to renting out women by the hour or minute to other men for sex.

Keywords

Human rights, Afghanistan, Taliban, NATO, Women's rights

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Oppressing Women: Who Benefits and How?

by Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann

Women are the world's oldest marketable commodity. "Good" women are marketed by their fathers, or brothers, to other men as wives. "Bad" women are incarcerated, raped, killed, or prostituted. Methods of marketing women range widely in kind: from simple one-on-one bargains, where two men exchange daughters or sisters; to exchange of women for material goods; to use of women to pay debts; to renting out women by the hour or minute to other men for sex.

The standard question in political science is "who benefits?" How do [Pashtun](#) men in Afghanistan today benefit from the seclusion of women—particularly in the areas of work and education—and from their persecution if they try to participate in the public sphere? One might simply argue that these men do not benefit; that these practices are so extreme as to simply be a reflection of a pre-Islamic culture, reinforced by cultural rage against both Afghanistan's various invaders, and the emergence of an urban, modernized society in which women begin to enjoy some human rights.

Certainly, one cannot argue that Pashtun men "benefit," in a moral or ideological sense, by a rigorous adherence to Islam. Pashtun cultural beliefs about women pervert Islam. Islam permits women to work and own property and it encourages women's education. Even the most conservative readings of the Qur'an do not permit the violence against women endemic in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan today.

But, perhaps (some) men do benefit from this [severe oppression of women](#). In a society in which women are mere pieces of property, men monopolize education, employment, and the public sphere. Moreover, however inferior some of these men may feel in public, in private they are petty dictators. They enjoy the services of the women in their households. They also enjoy sexual freedom, for enslaved and prostituted women are always available. However, hypocritically, these same men disapprove of prostitution when they are in public or in their house of worship. And some men can enjoy, with impunity, the sadistic/sexual pleasure inherent in being a torturer. Where women have no rights men can be as sadistic as they wish, without censure of any kind. Women, to them, are chattel, to be raped, tortured, or killed at their convenience.

Ann Jones blames George W. Bush for the situation of women in Afghanistan today. I agree that he bears part of the blame, for [diverting resources from Afghanistan to Iraq](#). Prior American administrations also bear part of the blame, for supporting various ethnic armies in their fight against the Soviet Union after its [1979 invasion of Afghanistan](#). The former Soviet Union itself also bears some of the blame. All Afghans are victims of all these international actors.

Another set of actors that perhaps bears some responsibility are those who advocate [cultural relativism](#) in human rights. Women are both carriers of and victims of culture. Women are made to stay at home and embody traditional values, even as men migrate, adopt Western clothes and mores, and populate public space. Freedom for Afghan women and female children requires severe cultural change, just as it required severe cultural change in Western and other societies before women and female children began to enjoy their human rights. The culturalist "left,"

denying universality of human rights, is a handy Western ally of all who oppress women and female children—and other social groups such as gays and lesbians, or [India's Dalits](#)—in the name of culture.

But those Afghan men who advocate and engage in the oppression of women bear the chief responsibility for denial of women's rights. They are the ones who enjoy sadistic and sexual pleasure, as well as material benefit, in the control of "their" women. They may believe that they are merely protecting their family "honor" in so doing, but it is incumbent on them to consider the price "their" women pay for such honor. Men elsewhere have learned to function in a world in which individual honor and respect is not based on control of other human beings: Taliban men can learn this too.

If we are to respect the "agency" of the people of the global "South"—a fashionable academic position nowadays—then we must acknowledge everyone's capacity to do evil as well as good. The members of the Taliban who arrest, torture, rape and murder women can see the suffering they cause. Their actions are no more excusable than the actions of anyone who rapes, tortures, or murders for political reasons. Culturally-entrenched or not, religiously sanctioned or not, violation of women's rights is inexcusable, wherever it occurs, for whatever reasons, and regardless of the stress the men who maltreat women may be suffering themselves.

Rhoda Howard-Hassmann is Canada Research Chair in International Human Rights at Wilfrid Laurier University, where she is affiliated with the Global Studies Program and the Department of Political Science, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She has published on human rights in Africa and Canada, on women's rights and gay and lesbian rights, on economic rights, and on various theoretical and methodological aspects of international human rights. Her current research project is on Reparations for Africa. She has also established a website on political apologies and reparations.