

Women with No Choices
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I wrote about Pakistan's hideous culture last week, about a woman accused of "blasphemy" who was sprung from execution by a brave court after a decade in prison. Pakistani men held violent demonstrations, outraged that the woman was being released from prison and not executed. They threatened the life of the judge too.

This time, Pakistan is my target once more. National Public Radio (NPR) jolted me by exposing what seems to me the most horrible situation that a woman can have, a common situation in Pakistan's rural villages. The importance of this report is that the United States can do something about it, but our current government will not.

A reporter talked with a village woman with a desperate dilemma: she had borne four daughters and her husband told her that if she gave him one more daughter, he would throw her out of the house. A woman with a husband like this in the western world would divorce him. The Pakistani woman could not do this, could not refuse sex with him (he refused to use a condom), and had no access to contraception herself.

She became pregnant and had to endanger her life trying to abort, or scrape up the money to find a midwife-abortionist. Her life is much like that of every other woman in her village: brutal husband, bad sex, too many children, and threats of being thrown out into the street if she bore another female child.

What does this have to do with the United States? Meager as it is, the US helped fund the UN program of providing women's health centers such as Planned Parenthood, which is the only refuge Third World women have at all. Since the Tea Party Republicans came to power, Republican governments that used to support this UN program now withhold funding because the anti-abortion movement is now calling the shots.

I cannot understand some American women so upset by the thought of a single pregnancy being aborted, no matter the circumstances, that they would forbid it. I think instead of women with no choices in their lives, bearing child after child that they can scarcely afford to feed, enduring beatings and sex on demand from husbands with life and death control over them, and spawning more girl children to face the same wretched lives.

Pakistan has no law against abortion, but for a woman to get it, she must have the permission of her husband and the cost is daunting. The woman interviewed by NPR had already endured three abortions, and surviving another one could endanger her life.

Unlike this Pakistani husband, many husbands in Africa refuse to let their wives have contraception or abortion. Their manhood is enhanced (they think) by how many children they have. I cannot think of which is worse: the regularly impregnating husband with his worn-out wife (or wives), or the brute like that Pakistani who threatens his wife with being thrown out if she bears a child of a gender he scorns.

The biggest difference between the modern world and the Third World status of women is that the latter are slaves with no choices over anything. We American women have nearly unlimited choices, the most important of which is autonomy over our own bodies. We have choice in our educations, our marriages, our child-bearing or not, our occupations, and our voting. It would be the height of self-absorption for any of us to not have sympathy with women having none of these choices.

Furthermore, we do not have to look very far to find some in our own country, in certain red states, whose access to women's health and sexual care is just as much in jeopardy as those in Pakistan. As one after another Planned Parenthood clinics are closed down in majority-Republican states, what choices do poor women have? Do we have to replicate Pakistan to see the worst conditions under which women can live? Are we creating like situations in our very own enlightened country? Is The Handmaiden's Tale a warning of what can happen when women lose choices? Think about it.

685 words

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