

I generally do an annual "status of women around the world" column, and this year is an important year to see some progress. Historically, in every civilization from the first ones in Sumeria, women have been oppressed, deprived of any autonomy, and doomed to lives of drudgery if poor or being ornamental playthings, if rich.

Despite this, some bold and lucky women throughout the centuries have had power---either as rulers or with husbands whom they could manipulate. One exception to the rule of powerless women was in Western Civilization, where widows could enjoy remarkable independence if they had control of their inheritance and were lucky enough not to get pregnant. Elsewhere, widows were under the control of their sons, and in some cases (India) could just be kicked out of their homes, given the choice of becoming beggars, temple drudges, or prostitutes.

The world's great religions have not been kind to women. The fault may not lie in the religion itself, but in its interpretation. To our knowledge, Jesus never authorized beating women or burning them as witches, yet Medieval Christianity did both, considering it religiously mandated. Medieval Christianity even adopted a Muslim rule for wife beating: the rule of thumb. They should be beaten by a stick no larger than the man's thumb.

Mohamad was reputedly kind to his women, especially his first wife, who was his first boss as a merchant and who was his only wife until her death. But through possibly mistaken Muslim history, women were in enforced seclusion and veiling, daughters receiving half the inheritance of sons, and in some Muslim countries, having their genitals cut to prevent them from the sin of sexual pleasure. The concept of honor is still, in many Muslim majority countries, dependent upon family control of their women's virginity and "purity." Women perceived to disobey this stricture are even today murdered by their menfolk to restore family "honor."

The UN's annual Population Fund report published this year's numbers: more than 140 million females are considered "missing" today because of a preference for sons over daughters and extreme neglect of young girls, leading to their deaths.

Also, one in five marriages today has an under-age girl, and an estimated 4.1 million girls are at risk this year of being subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM), a practice condemned by the UN. This horror has traveled to Western countries with immigrants from Sudan and Egypt, but western laws have finally punished the perpetrators and prevented travel to home countries with young girls to ruin their lives with a stupid and cruel practice, but not in their homelands, until now.

A UN survey in Sudan found that 87% of women between 15 and 49 have been so maimed. What about girls 3 to 7? But world pressure has finally shamed Sudan's government to outlaw the procedure and set punishments for those who carry them out. FGM has finally been criminalized. Sudanese women know that it will take many years to kill this practice. Bad ideas have a long life.

Another UN report lists at least 19 harmful practices, ranging from breast ironing to virginity testing, all human rights violations. The entrenched gender inequality has begun to reduce some populations (a good thing, I think), but also leads to more gender based violence, including rape, coerced sex, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and child marriage. Although child marriage is almost universally banned under law, it continues to happen 33,000 times a day, every day, all around the world.

But there is a glass half full here too. There would be no such reports, nor any awareness of such abuses, without the values of Western Civilization, which dominate the world, shaming the traditional cultures into trying to make changes.

A wrong-headed notion in our academic world is that cultures are relative, no one better than another, and that to praise Western Civilization overlooks our colonialist past. I would remind those, who rightly condemn the institution of slavery, that Western Civilization is the first, and for a long time, the only one to outlaw slavery, including the virtual slavery of wives and daughters.

687 words

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