



COMMENTARY

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Disposable Women

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As the Mother's Day is celebrated world over to honour motherhood, the events and realities undermining and continuously denying women's rights, honour, dignity, and humanity persist in much of the Middle East and the Muslim world. In case anyone missed a critical point in the Osama bin Laden assassination, his "young wife" who was shot in the leg was wife number five. He divorced one of his four wives in order to marry this one, who was "given to him as a gift." Since Islam caps the limit of wives at four, the practice of divorcing one to marry again and stay within the maximum allowed limit is not uncommon.

Meanwhile, in response to the pro-democracy wave of protests reverberating throughout the Middle East, Saudi Arabia decided to hold municipal elections, while still prohibiting women from voting. Imagine that, in the year 2011, somewhere on earth women are still not allowed to vote. No one should be surprised that place being Saudi Arabia, which continues to treat women as less than human.

The media does not embrace the importance of women's rights issues either. Recently, I wrote an opinion piece for a newspaper in the US, in which I criticized the acquittal of gang-rapists in the Mukhtar Mai case in Pakistan. The newspaper decided not to publish it. Having just attended the US Institute of Peace symposium about *Women and War*, this point about the deficiencies in the male-dominated global media in reporting about and building awareness of women's rights issues was underscored. Ownership of media, as the panelists at the symposium pointed out, is predominantly male, and so it is in the interest of women's rights and freedoms that greater media ownership by women is achieved.

Again in the context of Mother's Day, indicators of maternal health and rights in the Middle East and many parts of the Muslim world are some of the lowest and damning statistics in the world. Maternal mortality and health constitute a human right, which many countries fail to improve. Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, reported a maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 228 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2010. According to the World Bank, in 2008 the MMR in Algeria was 120, Egypt it was 82, Iran 30, Iraq 75, Jordan 59, Lebanon 26, oil-rich Libya 64, Mali 830, Mauritania 550, Morocco 110, oil-rich Oman 20 and Saudi Arabia 24, Pakistan 260, Somalia a staggering 1,200, Sudan 750, Syria 46, Tunisia 60, Turkey 23, and Yemen 210 per 100,000 live births. Afghanistan's MMR is the worst in the world at 1,400 (2008).

In the Middle East, Israel's MMR statistic in 2008 was the only one that represented that of a developed country's figure at seven deaths per 100,000. Qatar's 2008 MMR was also close at eight. There was no data available for Gaza and the West Bank. These statistics tell us that despite some of these countries' vast oil wealth, women's maternal health indicators remain at unacceptable levels. This data also indicates the direct and indirect impact of conflicts, instability, insecurity, and even poverty and corruption, all pervasive in the Middle East. But, the most glaring point is that policy makers are predominantly men, who focus primarily on policies and issues favouring men, and neglecting and perhaps even deliberately suppressing those pertaining to women.

The MMR is just a glimpse of the bigger picture of the plight of girls and women in the region and in Muslim societies. The latter must be included in this critique, because much of the violations of girls' and women's rights and freedoms are often cloaked in religious terminology and contexts, such as the so called personal status laws, or family legal codes, which are based on some aspects of Islamic law, which in turn is interpreted by men. Issues such as polygamy, inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody rights, child marriages, female illiteracy and denial of education, suppression of women's participation in politics and business and women serving in the judicial system, women's immobility and enforced dress codes, so called "honour killings," and in some cases sexual violence are pressing crises in Middle Eastern and Muslim societies that sullen the meaning of Mother's Day.

Since we are discussing motherhood, even the rights of orphans, which Islam claims to uphold with great fanfare, are violated by insanely narrow-minded policies and absurdity. Orphanages throughout the Middle East and Muslim world are overflowing because of certain interpretations about the illegality of adopting children, and in some countries adoption is prohibited outright, to the detriment of countless orphaned children, even in high conflict areas. The description of conditions of orphans and orphanages in Iraq alone is nightmarish. One source described Iraq's orphanages as: "making Russian orphanages look like paradise."

Osama bin Laden's polygamy and the young age of his fifth wife are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the treatment of women in the Middle East and in many Muslim societies. Of course, these societies are not the only guilty parties in mistreating girls and women worldwide, but they are on record as committing some of the world's worst violations of girls' and women's rights and freedoms, and, what's worse, much of these acts are embodied in cultural, legal, and in some cases religious sanctions. These are uncomfortable truths, but they must be confronted

and corrected, rather than repeatedly denied and swept under the rug, or, as is common, explained away apologetically as socio-cultural and religious practices.

It is about time that these societies catch up with the standards of universal human rights, and also embrace a belief that God would not treat his own creations the way that so many humans do, and that equality is not a bad word. To summarize, these policies and practices illustrate the widespread attitude that girls and women are disposable, and their freedoms and rights are dispensable. Now that's something to ponder on Mother's Day.

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