

Battered Afghan Women and Divided Loyalties

by Phyllis Chesler



Back in the day, I could only work with battered women for a short while, after which I burned out. I continued to raise money and consciousness for the shelters and for the shelter movement but I was not saintly enough to keep working with a battered woman who insisted upon returning to her batterer again and again.

Many feminists did so for as long as it took for those poor women to finally side with themselves against the men who were breaking their bones. Many women finally left for the sake of their children, not to save themselves.

And now – I want to say this carefully – we are running into a similar problem with our educated, spirited, even heroic Afghan women. Most will not leave without their families. Women, like men, internalize tribal psychology and cannot conceive of living without being enmeshed in a family network.

Many Afghan women rather admirably feel responsible for both younger siblings and for ailing or disabled parents, especially if they have endangered them by their own feminist activism. According to the women with whom I'm currently in touch, the Taliban are hunting down precisely such women in house-to-house raids. It is feared that they will kill whomever has been left behind.

Just as the first wave of mainly male interpreters brought their families with them, so, too, have Afghan women brought their husbands, brothers, and fathers along with them.

Here's the problem. These men treat "their" women as if they were all still in Kabul, Herat, or Kandahar. The women, who've been rescued by those involved in what I've called a "digital Dunkirk," are now somewhere in Europe or America, in hotels, apartments, and in small houses. The women are being verbally demeaned, hit, threatened, ordered about, and forced into domestic servitude by their men.

We helped "Aisha" (not her real name) get out after she made clear what her fate would be after American forces withdrew: "I will be one of the first persons that would be targeted by my relatives, or if that does not happen, I could be forcibly married or killed if I continue to refuse."

Or, because of her activism, her life would be endangered by the Taliban. "The U.S. provided all the opportunities and I became an educated girl who works for education in Afghanistan. I am known. The Taliban and my own family will come for me."

No, not all abusive Afghan men are Taliban. They are not even Taliban supporters, but they are very serious misogynists. Brothers still "mind" their sisters. Fathers and husbands still order daughters and wives around. The women now have the upper hand: they can report such behavior to their European social workers and potentially challenge the men's right to asylum. But they refuse to do so because they are compassionate, loyal, and dutiful.

Some Afghan women who are still trapped in Afghanistan and [have recently told us](#) as much.

In fact, the FBI is [was charged](#) with sexually assaulting two young boys in Fort McCoy, in Wisconsin. Separately, another Afghan man [Germany](#) and [raped and killed](#) a 13-year-old girl in Austria. "I find it intolerable for people to come to us, say they are seeking protection and then commit cruel, barbaric crimes in Austria," said Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

According to *The Express*, also earlier this month, an Afghan refugee stabbed a female gardener in Berlin because he [Shafia case](#) in Canada in which an Afghan father, brother, and second wife murdered three biological daughters and a first wife for being “too Western.” This family was wealthy and educated. The defendants were all found guilty.

It must be noted that only criminal atrocities make the news. Perfectly peaceful and assimilated Afghans and Muslims in general rarely get written up for their good qualities. Muslim atheists, agnostics, and converts to other religions, must fly beneath the radar in order to survive. We do not hear much about them, either. I know many Afghan men who are peaceful and productive citizens.

However, what we’ve learned is this: the more fundamentalist a Muslim family is, the greater the likelihood that the members will insist on practices that I term “gender apartheid,” e.g. face veiling, arranged marriages, child marriages, domestic servitude, daughter- and wife-battering, monitoring and “stalking” daughters and sisters, forbidding infidel friends, honor killing a daughter who becomes too “Western,” etc.

On the other hand, are Western concepts of humanitarian rescue based on evacuating only those who are most worthy, virtuous, and “in our best image” so to speak? Will we hold the stranger at our gate to higher standards?

Assuming that the West continues to allow immigration, is there any evidence that education can change such deeply held religious or cultural beliefs about men’s rightful power over women? Has any program been able to successfully re-educate such men and the women who stand by them? Do we even have the tools to vet those who are applying for asylum?

I think not.

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