

When violence against women is 'honorable,' 'religious' and 'legal'

Joan Chittister | May. 24, 2007 From Where I Stand

All right, now we've seen it with our own eyes. So now what?

The picture of a small girl, naked and screaming, running down a dirt road in Vietnam covered with U.S. napalm all over her tiny body galvanized this country against the Vietnam War. For the first time, we could see exactly what was happening there, exactly to what lows the God of War had taken us.

After that picture ran in every newspaper in the country, it became even more difficult to excuse that war on the grounds of our political ideals. It became all the more difficult to go on driveling about the glorious service we were doing for the people there. It became all the more impossible to go on congratulating ourselves for what we were doing for the simple people of another country. It became impossible to applaud ourselves for the great sacrifices we were making to destroy that country.

The poetry of war had been particularized in all its horror, in all its excess, in all its bloody sinfulness in one tiny little girl.

Now we have another picture to deal with.

This girl is 17. She is being stoned to death, half-naked, by the men of an Iraqi village for fraternizing with a boy from another religion. And all the while it is happening other men look on cheering and take pictures of the carnage with their mobile phones. The police stand by and do nothing while other men disrobe and dishonor a woman for the sake, they say, of restoring their own.

By the end of the television news report, the girl is not writhing anymore. She is dead. And not one man did one thing to stop it.

People watched speechless at the sight.

But not all.

Instead, women everywhere are standing up, speaking out, screaming "Stop!"

The only problem is that they have been shouting that for years: Stop looking the other way when we're beaten or raped. Stop paying us less for the work we do as well, or better, than you do. Stop leaving us out of your deliberations about our lives. Stop telling us what our relationship with God is supposed to be and start asking us to tell you what it is. And now, stop murdering us for your pleasure, for your sense of proprietorship, for your honor and, finally, finally, recognize our own.

Yanar Mohammed, president of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), in an interview with Women's Human Rights Net highlighted the effects of this war on women (whrnet.org/docs/interview-yanar-0603.html [1]).

The list is a long one: They are homeless, alone, destitute, raped, beaten and inmates of refugee camps as dangerous as the streets.

Most of all, they are prey.

Mohammed, in a CNN interview, May 19, 2007, made two points no U.S. citizen wants to hear.

First, she said, the number of honor killings in Iraq have increased by the hundreds since the invasion.

Second, she went on, 10 years ago, long before the country was "freed," honor killings did not exist.

Pressed by the CNN reporter to explain the difference, Mohammed was short and to the point: "Someone came in from the outside and gave us "democracy," she said. The problem, she went on, is that the new democracy became Islamic -- not secular.

Now, she reports, men come to a house, bang on the door, say "This is a whorehouse" and murder all the women there. ? It is sectarianism hiding behind religion."

The situation is even worse than that, however. With the change in the Iraqi Constitution, articles that protected the rights of women were eliminated. Now discrimination against women is, indeed, "honorable," is "religious," is legal.

In the new constitution, she says: "Islamic Sharia was considered the base source of legislation. This automatically aborted decades of feminist struggles in Iraq. It was an enormous setback in women's status and made Iraq into a country ruled mostly by religion. With the current government, the resulting family law will be one that legalizes polygamy, disciplining of women, stoning of adulteresses and sexual apartheid. The first results were clear in the recent days, when the current Al Jaafari's government passed a resolution of segregating sexes in the universities and colleges.

The temptation, of course, is to say something like, "You know how those people are" or "What kind of a religion is that?"

But not so fast:

Not too many years ago, in our own country, when high school girls became pregnant, they were not permitted to graduate from our high schools. The boys who impregnated them, on the other hand, walked proudly across the stages to pick up their diplomas. We never said a word. That had something to do with honor, too. His, of course, not hers.

That was a kind of stoning, too.

Not too many years ago, those same boys walked away from the baby, no proof of paternity, no financial obligations attached, while the woman and the child went on in poverty. In fact, in some states today, men can still walk away from obligations that are not being enforced.

That is a kind of stoning, too.

And in our time, women can get jobs but, unlike women in many other countries, have no access to state-supported child care.

That is a kind of stoning, too.

The stoning of 17-year-old Dua Khalil Aswad is not a woman's issue. It is a human issue. It is simply the rawest indicator of the mindset that underlies any society that privileges men over women in any socially structured ways at all.

The truth is that this is as much a male issue as it is a female issue. It is, indeed, dishonorable -- but not of women. It dishonors governments that call themselves honorable. It dishonors the men who can stand by while women are stoned -- one way or another -- and say nothing. It dishonors the religions that dare to justify such stonings in the name of God.

It is time for men to stand up, too, to call their own systems, to stop hiding behind the women who are risking their lives to save other women, to stop calling a human issue a woman's issue.

From where I stand, the picture makes it all too clear: Women of courage are not enough. We need men of conscience, as well, if the human race is ever to become fully human.

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[1] <http://whrnet.org/docs/interview-yanar-0603.html>