



9-2016

Differences Between Afghan and American Gender Politics: Subtle Versus Blatant Sexism, and Both Their Dangers

Mary Amanda Breeden '20
Illinois Wesleyan University, mbreeden@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/firstyear_summer



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Breeden, Mary Amanda '20, "Differences Between Afghan and American Gender Politics: Subtle Versus Blatant Sexism, and Both Their Dangers" (2016). *First-Year Summer Reading Program Essay Contest*. 4.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/firstyear_summer/4

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Differences Between Afghan and American Gender Politics:
Subtle Versus Blatant Sexism, and Both Their Dangers

Mary Amanda Breeden

A surface comparison of Afghanistan and the United States may suggest that the two countries diverge completely on the spectrum of gender politics. It is evident, however, from reading Jenny Nordberg's *The Underground Girls of Kabul*, that parallels exist between the two cultures; gendered expectations exist in the United States similar to those in Afghanistan—just not to the same degree: though comparatively subtle, they are deeply ingrained and widely enforced, ranging from marriage practices to political and social discourse—and are perpetuated by people of all genders.

The parallels begin at birth. Nordberg states that “children [...] take a predetermined path in life. For girls that means marrying and having children of their own. For boys, it means supporting a family”; this is the foundation for nearly all consequent gendered norms (48). Because women bear children, their responsibilities and life goals are inherently perceived to be domestic: cooking, cleaning, and rearing children become feminine tasks. As men are expected to provide for their families, strength, dominance, and detachment develop into masculine traits. Due to these roles, men are taught to occupy more space; women shrink—only a minute component of a much bigger power dynamic. Compounded, these norms paint women to be more childlike and emotional, while men are domineering and stoic.

Such generalizations translate into constant speculation of a woman's potential relative to her physical attractiveness, reproductive status, and other irrelevant points of focus. As such, her identity is reduced to assumptions, and her right to exist as a multi-dimensional person is undermined. As constituents and peers critique every facet of Azita's life but her profession,

Nordberg learns that a woman's presence in politics is rendered trivial by incessant questioning: *"What is she wearing? Is she too loud? Does she move her hands too much when she speaks? Does she walk too confidently? Is she a good wife and mother? How many sons does she have? Does she look like a devout, modest Muslim woman? Does she pray? How many times a day?"* (58). Similarly, while American male leaders undoubtedly receive scathing criticism, rarely is it based on age, appearance, childbearing status, or implications of gender on workforce competence. Even women as accomplished as First Lady Michelle Obama, with résumés second to none, headline for fashion choices and aging anatomy, rather than for extensive humanitarian work or policy influence. While both Afghan and American women contribute enormously to their respective societies, their media portrayal conflates the tired stereotype that women are incapable of effective leadership and that, therefore, power should be a man's conquest.

Not only does masculine power manifest itself in the political arena, but it also affects family life. According to Nordberg, "Marriage is a core component of the patriarchal system" (152). She notes, "The ownership of an Afghan girl is literally passed on from one male—her father—to the one who becomes her husband (44). A girl is expected to maintain purity until her wedding night, and virginity is valued to the point of young women being stoned to death for suspected adultery or promiscuity. American culture reflects this ideology: if suspected of promiscuity a woman may be shunned, branded a slut or whore, threatened, or attacked. Unwanted advances are to be taken as compliments, but if a girl is observed to be engaging and is harmed, she is at fault. Double standards like this invalidate women's lived experiences, and perpetuate other dangers: Azita tells Nordberg, "it's not called rape in Afghanistan if your husband forces himself on you [...] you are a stupid woman if you call it that" (80). This

phenomenon, Nordberg asserts, is not isolated to Afghanistan—even Western nations condoned marital rape until recently (80).

Combined, political, marital, and social hurdles create a culture that normalizes sexism on a global level—even in those who bear its brunt. As Nordberg states, “no group can truly be suppressed until its members are trained and convinced to suppress *one another*” (152). Women in Afghanistan and the United States alike are taught to perpetuate their own subjugation. The solution is not simple, but it starts with exposure, education, and a change in attitude. Until women are empowered to define their own identities, and until men realize female empowerment is not to be seen as synonymous with male subjugation, the relative subtlety of American discriminative gender politics cannot be ignored; even the slightest oppression of half a society’s population is a gross violation of even the most fundamental human rights.