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Global Feminism: A Comparison of Gender Roles in Afghanistan and the United States

Alexa Letourneau

I was born without a penis. As a result, I face discrimination. I face this whether my home is in Afghanistan, the United States, or anywhere else; however, the extremity of this discrimination is heavily dependent on the society in which a woman finds herself. Afghan women have it far worse than American women. This fact is obvious upon even the most rudimentary examination of the societies of both nations. Whether in matters of social status and work opportunities or in those of familial hierarchy and spousal interactions, women in Afghanistan are treated as almost less than human. Despite the severity of this gender gap and the contrasting privilege exercised by American women, gender expectations placed on citizens of the United States echo those in Afghanistan. Though the degree to which this dichotomy manifests itself varies from culture to culture, there is one unifying trait among every society on earth; whether or not it is a fact acknowledged, or even realized by, the general public, women are consistently viewed as lesser: less capable, less useful, and less wanted.

The simple fact that some families turn to treating their daughter as a boy, whether to bring the family more social status, to give their daughter more self-confidence, or to help birth a son, demonstrates that the gender gap is much more substantial in Afghanistan than it is in the United States. For example, women are only allowed to work if their father or husband permits it. A man treats his wives and daughters as his property, telling them what they can do, where they can go, and what they should think. The way she speaks is heavily monitored, especially if she is an advocate for women's rights; few women refer to themselves as feminists, the inflammatory term doing more to separate activists than unify them. In America, "the other f-

word" can be inflammatory, but self-identifying as such causes one to face no real threat of prosecution. The same cannot be said for Afghanistan, where women's rights are steeped in centuries-old traditions that perpetuate extreme male superiority. Champions of women's rights in both nations are trapped, stepping exceedingly carefully on the web of patriarchy.

Despite these pronounced differences between women's rights in Afghanistan and those in America and other western countries, many of the gender expectations placed on women and men hold true in both societies. Afghan and American women are expected to tend the house and rear the children, regardless of which spouse is home more often or otherwise better suited to the task. They also face similar trouble getting jobs, as even men who are less qualified are seen as more desirable workers. Breaking down a deeply ingrained custom such as male-dominated society is an incredibly challenging problem, with a complexity rivaled only by the complexity of the situation it is addressing. One of the largest ways that gender inequality can be broken down is through education. When coming from a place of privilege, equality feels like oppression, and those in power can object to the work of feminists. Spreading education about feminism is the most helpful tool we have in breaking down the patriarchy because it can demonstrate to the men in power the need for equality, and by realizing the perpetuation of an oppressive cycle, they can do the most to help break it down. With a problem as unintentional yet expansive as gender inequality, the only way to solve it is by working together as a community, a country, and a world.

I believe that the gender expectations in Afghanistan hold true in my midwestern United States society. While women in Afghanistan live in a society with a much greater rate of inequality and fewer opportunities for female self-government, women in America, and women the world over, face the same style of prejudice. I, as an American woman, will get to pick my

spouse if I choose to marry. I can leave my house by myself. I can get a job in whatever career I choose. But I won't be hired as often as I would be, were I a man. I'm expected to be the spouse to take care of the children. And I still see women objectified, patronized, and scorned, whether they live in my own country or halfway across the globe. The way women are treated in America is a filthy residue of the inequality that refuses to come off, despite multiple cleanings; in Afghanistan, they never cleaned it off at all.