

Fundamentalism, women and news

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The rising influence of fundamentalist religious and political leaders around the world is a staple of discussion in mainstream media and the alternative press, in online chats on web sites operated by NGO activists and bloggers, and in media controlled by fundamentalists themselves. Among all these entities there are wide disparities in how often and how candidly they explain how fundamentalism is affecting the lives of women and girls.

Of particular concern is how traditional daily journalism, with its pyramid of editors and beat reporters, is being flattened in the name of corporate cost-cutting. With that diminution of resources and experience we can expect to lose much of the journalistic enterprise that has ferreted out poignant stories of women whose lives have been limited by religious and cultural conservatism.

At the same time traditional journalism is faltering, faith-based conservative groups are establishing and acquiring their own media holdings, the better to propound their doctrines and build audiences for their messages. The result is fewer platforms for reporting, objectively, on the consequences of fundamentalism that force women and girls into second-class personhood.

Fundamentalism as news about women

Of course, there have been times when fundamentalism's impact on women made big headlines. Here are just two examples: when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and gave, as one of its reasons for doing so, the liberation of Afghan women and girls from the tyrannical Taliban then in control of the country; and more recently, in November 2006, when the leader of a fundamentalist sect practicing polygamy was charged in the U. S. state of Utah with rape as an accomplice for forcing a 14-year-old to marry her 19-year-old first cousin.

The latter case confronts the practice of marrying underage girls to older men, common in this group, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Its members believe that 'plural' marriage guarantees exaltation in heaven. FLDS teachings also require a woman to submit herself to the will of a husband without question.

The virtual enslavement of women by the Taliban and the FLDS – organizations vastly different in scale, in nations thousands of miles apart – has been possible because these two groups have many elements in common: iron rule by patriarchs; a God-surrogate or surrogates controlling every aspect of women's lives; isolation of women from education, from civic life, and from travel. Yet news coverage of these suffocating conditions for women occurs in a virtual vacuum, lacking the context that would show that this betrayal of the human spirit is a persistent phenomenon with severe social consequences not limited to Afghanistan or several closed communities in Utah and Arizona.

Daily news coverage is usually event-driven, and never more so than in an intensely visual age in which the availability of images influences story prominence and placement. However, much of what happens to women via fundamentalism can't be readily photographed or videotaped. We have very few photos and video, for example, of female genital mutilation; of women ceding all decision-making to their husbands because their religion requires it; or of one being turned out of her home after she is raped so her family can avoid the 'dishonor' her defilement has brought them.

Those stories require a different kind of storytelling, in which words are more compelling than images. Fortunately, there are journalists telling these stories with compassion and skill, but there are not nearly enough of those journalists nor enough of those stories.

There also are not enough editors and reporters probing for the gender angle in coverage of health, war, education, public policy, civic participation, and crime. The third annual Global Media Monitoring Project's report, released in February 2006, found that only 10% of all stories in the global spot check of media in 76 countries focused specifically on women. News about gender inequality represented just 4 % of stories.¹

With that performance, it's easy to see why the news media are not delivering the full story of fundamentalism's impact on women around the world.

Critiquing news coverage of gender and fundamentalism

I am sympathetic to reporters and editors struggling to make decisions about how to use dwindling newsroom resources. However, the media's overall inattention to women's plight in fundamentalist-dominated cultures and communities, and the gradual mainstreaming of fundamentalism into broader culture – such as when pharmacists refuse to fill prescriptions for contraceptives on religious grounds – needs to change. If it doesn't, we will have an under-informed populace excusing oppressive fundamentalist practices as simply the local exercise of religion or the exotic norms of faraway cultures, rather than violations of human rights.

Even though we need more stories about these inequities, it's not just the quantity of news reports that matters, but the comprehensiveness of their content. That means reporters should draw upon diverse sources and provide enough context for the reader to 'connect the dots' and draw an informed conclusion from the information provided.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter Tim Townsend produced an article on the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' recent reaffirmation of that church's stance that artificial contraception is immoral, even for husbands and wives. Townsend quoted bishops, academics, theologians, and Catholic documents on the subject. In The Washington Post's edited version of Townsend's story, published Nov. 22, 2006, not a single woman was quoted. However, in a version of his article published by the San Jose Mercury News, two women – both employees of the Catholic Church – were quoted.²

In none of the various other published versions of Townsend's story that I read were ordinary Catholic women, or women who disagree with the bishops' positions, quoted. No reproductive health care providers were quoted. By omitting comment from those who would be most personally affected by the bishops' action and from secular family planning experts, Townsend's piece flunked the diversity of sources and 'connect-the-dots' tests, and made women's stake in this matter seem smaller than that of the church hierarchy.

In contrast, a few days later The Washington Post produced a story that did everything right. 'Nicaragua's Total Ban on Abortion Spurs Critics' ran on Page One, bylined by N. C. Aizenman of the Post's foreign service.³ Aizenman described the quandary of a five-months pregnant woman who arrived at a Managua hospital with a fever and abdominal pain. Two days later she was dead, and accusations are flying that a law passed a week before she died that eliminated any exceptions for abortion played a part in her death.

Aizenman's story included quotes from women's advocates, the hospital administration, the Catholic archdiocese which had lobbied for the legislation, the nation's OB-GYN society, and the dead woman's family. It also cited pertinent information from the country's health ministry. It was a 360-degree reporting job that in my view was complete and fair to all involved.

Missing vital coverage

The saga of fundamentalist Warren Jeffs' polygamist sect and the legal case against him were recounted in many press and broadcast reports as his Nov. 21 hearing on rape charges approached and then occurred. Most of the coverage focused on the star witness' testimony of the marriage Jeffs forced her into when she was 14. But none of the stories I read broadened the perspective to also consider the common practice of forced marriages of girls to older men in the world's poorest nations (which the United Nations says means the girls cannot complete their

education and are at greater risk of being exploited and contracting sexual infections, including the HIV virus that causes AIDS).⁴

Rather, the Jeffs case is being reported as if Utah is the only place that the forced marriage of girls occurs. It's an approach that echoes what journalist-researcher Ammu Joseph found in her analysis of news coverage of rape in India, in which the greatest attention is paid to victims (and offenders) from the middle or upper classes, 'while crimes against the poor, the powerless and the distant tend to receive little, if any, media and public attention.'⁵

After the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan in 1996, they began forcing Afghan women and girls into tighter and darker corners of society, depriving them of employment, health care, and schooling. But the world's media didn't turn a bright light on these practices until October 2001, when the United States and other Western countries invaded Afghanistan in search of al Qaeda operatives. 'The oppression of Afghan women by fundamentalist groups was barely addressed by the corporate media until it proved rhetorically useful for U.S. elites to argue for military intervention as a means to liberate the women of that country,' argued scholars Carol A. Stabile and Deepa Kumar.⁶

Several months after the invasion, in March 2002, U.S. first lady Laura Bush gave a sunny report on the future for Afghan women and girls on International Women's Day to an audience at the United Nations. Subsequent press reports focused on the positives in Mrs. Bush's speech: Afghan women starting bakeries, their daughters returning to reopened schools, American schoolchildren collecting money to buy books for Afghan students. However, by December of that year, Human Rights Watch said that Afghan females had suffered mounting abuses, harassment and restrictions of their fundamental human rights during 2002.⁷

According to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, the incidence of rape and forced marriage is on the rise again, and most women continue to wear the burqa out of fear for their safety. 'The level of everyday violence in Afghanistan is something we would find it hard to imagine,' the RAWA web site says. 'The "war on terrorism" has removed the Taliban, but it has not removed religious fundamentalism, which is the main cause of all our miseries. It will require a very different approach indeed for those evils to be eliminated... And in fact, by reinstalling the warlords in power in Afghanistan, the U.S. is ultimately re-placing one fundamentalist regime with another.'⁸

Womankind Worldwide says: 'It cannot be said that the status of Afghan women has changed significantly in the last five years.'⁹ An Oxfam report released Nov, 27, 2006, said that only one in five girls attend primary school, the ratio reaching one in 20 at secondary school level.¹⁰

The point about exchanging one set of oppressors for another has not gone unreported in the world's media. But the continuing crisis for Afghanistan's women and girls has received much less notice than the early optimistic and, as it turns out, exaggerated reports of their liberation did. An exception is the excellent Nov. 28, 2006 report by Natasha Walter of The Guardian, ('We are just watching things get worse')¹¹ which compares women's situation in Afghanistan today with five years ago.

Many stories waiting to be told

These are but a few examples of recent reporting on the intersection of gender and fundamentalism. Many others can be explored: the re-emergence of the long-banned practice of sati (widow immolation) in India, female feticide in India and China, feminine genital mutilation (also known as female circumcision) in Africa.

It's also important that journalists track fundamentalist trends in mainline religious denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention. The second largest religious body in the United States (after Roman Catholics), the SBC requires a married female member 'to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband,' and bars women from being pastors.

In this form of fundamentalism (which obviously is not limited to the Southern Baptists or to Christians) subordination of women to men is formalized, not only curbing the full expression of their spiritual selves but also implying that they are ill-suited to any role that would elevate them to a position of authority over a male. That – and the considerable influence proponents of such a philosophy have in politics, especially in the United States – is a story worth following.

To the extent that journalism fails to 'connect the dots' between fundamentalism and societies made fragile by denying women equal rights, we will be disadvantaged in a quest to achieve politically stable environments in which all can thrive.

Notes

1. Global Media Monitoring Project 2005, <http://www.whomakesthenews.org/>
2. Tim Townsend, Bishops at odds with parishioners on subject of contraception, Nov. 18, 2006 <http://www.mercurynews.com/mlD/mercurynews/news/nation/16047550.htm>
3. N. C. Aizenman, 'Nicaragua's Total Ban on Abortion Spurs Critics,' The Washington Post, Nov. 28, 2006, p. A1
4. UN joins in 16-day campaign to fight violence against women, Nov. 24, 2006, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=20722>
5. Ammu Joseph, 'Days of our lives: women and news in India,' presentation to the Symposium on Women and News, Dresden, Germany, June 18, 2006
6. Carol A. Stabile and Deepa Kumar, 'Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan,' Media, Culture and Society 27(5), 2005.
7. Human Rights Watch, 'Afghanistan: Women still not liberated,' Dec. 17, 2002, <http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/12/herat1217.htm>
8. <http://www.rawa.org/rawa.html>

9. Womankind Worldwide, 'Don't forget the women of Afghanistan,' <http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/full/1383/59/>

10. Oxfam, 'Seven million Afghan children missing an education, warns Oxfam ahead of NATO summit on Afghanistan,' http://www.oxfam.org/en/news/pressreleases2006/pr061127_education

11. Natasha Walter, 'We are just watching things get worse,' *The Guardian*, Nov. 28, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,,1958707,00.html?gusrc=rss&feed=1>)

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