

## Humiliation, War and Gender: 'Worse Than Death: Humiliating Words'

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Currently, both, honor and equal dignity are cultural concepts that are significant for people worldwide. What we see today is the transition from norms of honor to norms of equal dignity but also the clash and incompatibility of these concepts. When fear of humiliation overrides the fear of death, this has far-reaching consequences and sometimes leads to the killing of the victim rather than the perpetrator.

January 11, 1998, in Nairobi, I met with Asha Ahmed. She is a young Somali woman, and was at that time Information/Dissemination Officer at the Somalia Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). She and her colleague described to me how they, over years, had struggled to explain the Geneva Convention and the concept of Human Rights to fellow Somalis. However, so she recounted, to their surprise all such difficulties went away in 1997. "How?" I asked. The explanation was interesting. The ICRC had invited historians from all Somali clans to do research and come up with what eventually became the *Spared from the Spear* booklet by the International Committee of the Red Cross Somalia Delegation (1997).

This booklet shows something remarkable, namely that women and children traditionally were "spared from the spear". It documents that traditional Somali war code explicitly protects civilians against warrior onslaughts. Women were not to be touched. Women represented potential bridges between families and clans, precisely because they could move freely, even in wartime. Asha pointed out: "When you look at this booklet, the Geneva Convention is all in there! At first the Geneva Convention was like Latin to the Somalis!"

In my doctoral dissertation<sup>1</sup> I give Ambassador Dualeh the word. I interviewed him on January 9, 1999. He backs up what I learned from Asha:<sup>2</sup>

There is one thing which never was part of traditional quarrelling between clans, and this is rape, especially mass rape in front of the family. This is new. It happened for the first time when Siad Barre's dictatorial regime sent soldiers to annihilate us. Soldiers would rape our women in front of their husbands and families.

...

It is somehow a "tradition" that young men of one clan steal camels from another clan, and sometimes a man gets killed. But women were never touched, never. There might have been the rare case when a girl was alone in the desert guarding her animals, and a young man having spent a long time in the desert lost control and tried to rape her. She would resist violently, and at the end the solution would perhaps be that he had to marry her. But mass rape, especially rape in front of the family, this never happened before, this is new.

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Have you noticed how many Somali families live apart? Have you ever thought about the reason why so many Somali women with their children live apart from their husbands? It is because the men cannot live with the humiliation caused by the fact that they were not able to defend their women against the soldiers who raped them. The husband cannot live together with his wife, because he cannot bear to be reminded of his inability to protect her. The perpetrators intended to humiliate their enemies and they succeeded thoroughly. Rape creates social destruction more "effectively" than any other weapon.

...

This is the reason why today Somalia is so divided. We Somalis are united through our common ethnic background, we speak one language, and are all Muslims. Why are we divided today? Humiliation through rape and its consequences divides us. The

traditional methods of reconciliation are too weak for this. It will take at least one generation to digest these humiliations sufficiently to be able to sit together again.

At the end of our conversation, Ambassador Dualeh sighed: “Evelin, believe me, humiliation, as I told you before, was not known to the Somali before Siad Barre came to power!”

### **Men’s pride hurt by rape**

Scandinavia houses a large Somali diaspora community. The divorce rate is very high. I remember one Somali woman angrily contesting Ambassador Dualeh’s framing, it was in an informal setting in 2001 in Norway. She called out, “It is us, the Somali women, who leave our husbands! Particularly in the diaspora! Because here we receive support for our quest to be treated like human beings! Do you know the saying that a Somali husband will fetch the doctor when his camels are sick, but not for his wives? How come that our husbands shun us after we were raped? Are we not human beings who need more support after being victimized, and not less? How come that these men are so consumed by their own pride and honor – and how it has been humiliated – that they do not see that we suffer and need help? Instead of helping us they sulk and nurture their feelings of humiliation and their hurt pride!”

When political scientists analyze what underlies cycles of violence and terror, they usually speak of individual depravity and social deprivation, both of which play critical roles. But if we look at the evolution of these human disasters, whether in Europe, Africa, Asia, or anywhere around the world, we consistently find that the force that keeps fueling the extremists, silencing the moderates, and driving the conflict to spiral out of control in humiliation.

During my fieldwork in Somaliland, with its culture of extreme pride and history of extreme violence, I learned an old Somali proverb, “Humiliation is worse than death; in times of war words of humiliation hurt more than bullets.”<sup>3</sup>

On December 3, 1998, I was a guest in a *khat* chewing “focus group” session in Hargeisa, capital of Somaliland. Such sessions typically last for many hours, starting in the afternoon and running through half of the night (typically, such meetings are not attended by “respectable” women. I tried therefore to keep “decent” by at least not chewing *khat* myself.). I asked the men in the round about humiliation. The hours were well invested and yielded many proverbs, such as the following: “I can only be with people who are equal,” or “A man deserves to be killed and not to be humiliated.”

For some, humiliation overrides fear of death – indeed, a formidable phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, in much of traditional warfare – and incidentally also in blood feud – women go free. They are, ideally, spared selectively, while men are targeted selectively.<sup>4</sup> And in case such rules are violated or neglected, stark feelings of humiliation may be rendered or maintained in the hearts and minds of those who identify with these codes of behavior.

However, the fact that women are spared in certain settings, does not necessarily signify that women are too valuable to lose, or that women stand for more “peaceful” attitudes than their fellow males. Sometimes, I was told in Somalia, it was the women who drove their men into tribal war to address their grievances.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, women were not spared under all circumstances. In different situations, women were – and in numerous cultural contexts still are – the ones to be killed selectively, for example, in cases of so-called honor killings. When family honor is perceived to be soiled and humiliated through the rape of a daughter, for example, it

is first and foremost the raped daughter who is killed, and rarely also the rapist.<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon is to be found in many parts of the world, even though they occur most in Muslim countries, despite the fact that Islamic religion and law do not sanction it. According to Stephanie Nebehay (2000), ‘honor killings’ “have been reported in Bangladesh, Britain, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sweden, Turkey and Uganda”. Afghanistan, where the practice is condoned under the rule of the fundamentalist Taliban movement, can be added to the list, along with Iraq and Iran”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, women and men – in what I call *traditional hierarchical honor-based societies* – are either selectively identified as persons to be spared or selectively identified as persons to be killed, according to certain rules. And the violation of such rules carries the potential to elicit or maintain feelings of humiliation. In all these cases humiliation and gender – or, more precisely, humiliation and the gender selective taking or sparing of lives – are interlinked in very precisely defined ways.

Apart from such cases, clearly, in the course of human history, killing and dying also occurred with no gender selection involved and no humiliation being invoked. History offers ample examples. Often men, women and children died from the ravages of war, indiscriminately. Wars destroyed whole regions so that their inhabitants withered away from famine and lack of resources. In pre-human-rights times, the latter case typically was not regarded as any violation or humiliation; it was rather seen as “fate” or “God’s will” or “natural disaster.”

In contrast, nowadays, wherever Human Rights ideals are guiding moral deliberations, the killing of people is deplored and seen as illegitimate, under whatever circumstances (except in clear cases of self-defense, or for military personnel in wars that are perceived to be legitimately waged, or for those waiting in the death row in countries that legitimize capital punishment). In present times, predominantly in the West, but also in many non-Western cultural spheres, the overall ethical framework is in the process of changing. Human rights ideals stipulate that people ought to be offered so-called “enabling environments” that give them the chance to build dignified lives. People should not be victimized by warlords who render their homes unsafe and bring famine upon them. And the killing of raped girls in order to redress humiliated family honor is not condoned by Human Rights either. On the contrary, a Human Rights promoter may claim that the act of killing a girl – who has been victimized through being raped – victimizes her doubly and thus compounds humiliation instead of redressing it. Incidentally, as is widely known, rape has lately increasingly been used as “weapon” in war, thus intensifying the moral dilemma entailed in such cases.

### **Passive Victims of Humiliation**

In my work I use the following definition of humiliation: Humiliation means the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed, against your will (or in some cases with your consent, for example in cases of religious self-humiliation or in sado-masochism) and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what you feel you should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established

expectations. It may involve acts of force, including violent force. At its heart is the idea of pinning down, putting down or holding to the ground. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of humiliation as a process is that the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless.

People react in different ways when they feel that they were unduly humiliated. Some just become depressed – anger turns against oneself - others get openly enraged, and yet others hide their anger and carefully plan for revenge. The person who plans for revenge may become the leader of a movement. ... Thus, feelings of humiliation may lead to rage, that may be turned inwards, as in the case of depression and apathy. However, this rage may also turn outwards and express itself in violence, even in mass violence, in case leaders are around who forge narratives of humiliation that feed on the feelings of humiliation among masses.

There are many points that would merit closer attention but that are not discussed here. For example, what is the difference between humiliation that is felt genuinely and feelings of humiliation that are instigated by propaganda or prescribed culturally? Or, if feelings of humiliation are felt by individuals, how are they elevated to group levels, if at all? Or, what about people who are resilient to feeling humiliated even in the face of serious attempts to humiliate them? Why did Nelson Mandela find a constructive way out of humiliation, and a Hitler unleashed a world war? Why did Mandela not instigate genocide on the white elite in South Africa?

My conceptualization is that honor codes had their respected place in a world that did not yet experience the coming-together of humankind into *one single* family. Today, we live in a new reality, the vision and emerging reality of a *global village*, and this new reality can, according to my view, best be tackled with Human Rights norms. With the Human Rights ideals, human worthiness and dignity is regarded to be equal for every human being.

Therefore, I stand in for Human Rights not because I enjoy presenting myself as an arrogant Westerner who humiliates the non-West by denigrating their honor codes of ranked human worthiness. On the contrary, people who endorse honor codes may not be looked down upon. I believe that Human Rights represent a normative framework that is better adapted to an emerging *global village*. Thus, I wish to encourage every inhabitant of the globe to abandon “we” and “them” differentiations and define herself as “we,” as “we humanity,” who *together* searches for the best ways to provide our children with a livable world.

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<sup>1</sup> Lindner (2001), pp. 342-343

<sup>2</sup> See also Lindner (2000)

<sup>3</sup> Lindner (2006), p. 12

<sup>4</sup> Blood feud has become rampant in Albania since Hodscha's downfall. Today, around 10,000 men sit in their homes and cannot go out, because they fear blood revenge. At the same time, their women can go around freely, thus they have to shoulder all family responsibilities and tasks alone.

<sup>5</sup> Militarism has been examined from a feminist point of view in, for example, *Women and War* by Elshtain (1995). Jean Elshtain examines how the myths of *man as just warrior* and *woman as beautiful soul* are undermined by the reality of female bellicosity and sacrificial male love, as well as the moral imperatives of just wars.

<sup>6</sup> Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a criminologist of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, feels uneasy with the term "honor killings" and prefers to use the term "femicide". Personal communication, November 2003, Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> Nebehay, 2000