

Is Guatemala A Toxic Place for Women?

Posted On:December 31, 1969

About 15 years ago, when I was running the UN Association in San Francisco, I was asked by women immigration lawyers to address their legal society to convince the male lawyers that women could qualify as a category suffering state persecution. This would make them eligible for US immigration\227but there was fear that such eligibility would become a flood. The women lawyers were already on board, but their colleagues were not.

At that time, there was a notorious case in Canada of a Muslim woman being persecuted by her family for wanting to choose her own husband. The benighted Canadian judge urged her to cooperate with her family, setting off a feminist firestorm.

In the United States, there were cases of battered women from Guatemala who were seeking refuge from husbands threatening to kill them. On the surface, this seemed as domestic violence only. However, when it became apparent that police and other Guatemalan officials were complicit with the husbands, these cases took on the aura of state persecution. I argued that this was the case in many lesser-developed countries. But an even larger question was that Muslim women, the few who by luck were able to escape their family and state persecution, should be given refugee status.

Many of these lawyers felt that this might be letting in a flood of refugees that could overwhelm our facilities. My counter argument was that most women have no money of their own\227and that this would scarcely be a trickle, not a flood. But principle mattered here.

At last, recently, the US Court of Appeals backed up a federal court in San Francisco that had blocked the deportation of an undocumented Guatemalan woman who was in fear for her life if she were sent back. The court recognized that Guatemalan society is so dangerous for women under 40 that the plaintiff faced the threat of physical harm if forced to return to Guatemala.

Even the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (located in the US) noted that only about 2% of the killers of women get convicted. The Commission thinks that law enforcement is in on that violence.

The UN has listed Guatemala as the \223most dangerous place for women in the Western Hemisphere and one of the worst in the world.\224 They can say this only because there are pretty good statistics from Guatemala. Guatemalan human rights activists claim that in the past nine years, almost 5,000 women were murdered, and the numbers are rising.

But what does the UN have to say about the millions of women in the Muslim world who are persecuted just because they are female? What human rights group can get into Saudi Arabia, for example, and get statistics? Totalitarian countries do not gather statistics; they make them up.

When Iran planned to have a woman accused of adultery stoned, only a world-wide protest halted this savagery\227and this only temporarily. Does the Muslim bloc of the UN protect women\222s rights? You can be sure that it does not, nor will it.

Guatemala is a violent place\227and we hear that this violence travels with Guatemalan immigrants in Florida, where women are just beginning to organize against their endemically violent abuse in their homes. The California court\222s action will be watched by immigrant Guatemalans giving the hopeless some hope\227particularly in Florida, where it is so sorely needed. At least for those immigrants living in the US, there are protections against the freewheeling brutality of their culture. Wife beating is not OK here.

Women in Afghanistan, on the other hand, are just out of luck. They have neither the education, money, nor cultural institutions to give them any status. To be blunt, they are no different than slaves in their society, and we need not fear that they will \223overwhelm\224 our immigration service.

636 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and writer. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net