

Equal Cultures or Equality for Women?

Why Feminism and Multiculturalism Don't Mix

By Cathy Young

Anyone who wants to be considered an enlightened, progressive, sensitive person these days, whether in the academic environment or in publishing or in the liberal media, has to believe a number of things, sometimes known as "politically correct." One of these beliefs is that women are equal to men and should be treated as equals, and that a society which denies equal rights to women is oppressive. Another belief is that one must respect all cultures, one must not judge non-Western cultures by Western standards, and one certainly must not regard Western culture as better in any way than other cultures. That's considered ethnocentric.

For instance, the recent American Association of University Women report which called for eliminating alleged gender bias in high schools contained, among other things, an enthusiastic endorsement of the multicultural curriculum program proposed by a panel headed by New York State education commissioner Thomas Sobol. Some proponents of multiculturalism say that it means nothing more controversial than learning more about the heritage of different cultures and the different ethnic groups that populate America. But in fact, the academic scene is currently dominated by radical multiculturalists whose agenda is to deny Western culture any central place in our education and to promote the idea that every culture should be judged on its own terms.

What I find rather paradoxical, and I find it almost incredible that this has hardly been noticed by anyone, is that these two beliefs—feminism and multiculturalism—are basically incompatible. If you are concerned about gender bias, how can you overlook the fact that different cultures are not equal in the way they treat women? As Islamic fundamentalists often remind us, equality of the sexes is a Western value judgment. Moreover, it is a standard by which most non-Western cultures—even if you allow for a few quasi-matriarchal tribes—come up short.

Progressive's Quandary. The attempts to avoid ethnocentric value judgments often lead progressive-minded people into a quandary when it comes to women's issues. About a year ago, *The New York Times* reviewed anthropologist Kenneth Good's memoir of life with the Yanomamo tribe in Venezuela. It is a tribe that treats women in an incredibly brutal way. If a female past puberty is not attached to a male, if she is unmarried, or even widowed, or if she has the audacity to run away from her husband, she is considered fair game for anyone. She will be routinely gang-raped and sometimes mutilated. The critic summarized all this and then went on to quote, approvingly, Good's assertion that "violence [was] not a central theme of Yanomamo life."

This angered a woman reader, who wrote to the *Times Book Review* denouncing "the myopia... where violence against women is concerned." But surely there was something else at work. One can hardly imagine such tolerance being extended to violence against women by American men. With a stone-age Amazonian tribe, however, it is safer to be myopic than "ethnocentric," even at the price of some painful mental contortions.

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How do the politically correct get around this contradiction? One way is by out-and-out lies. Last March, I think it was on March 2, *The Washington Times* published an fascinating story about a program to train federal employees in sensitivity toward cultural diversity. This program, paid for, of course, by your tax dollars and mine, includes seminars by one Edwin J. Nichols about cultural differences between whites and blacks. Most of the things that he says are really out-and-out racism. White males are the bane of civilization, whites are cold and acquisitive and logical—apparently being logical is a bad thing—whereas for Africans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Arabs, the highest value lies in interpersonal relationships and being intuitively attuned to the rhythms of the universe. But what I found most interesting is that Mr. Nichols, a retired industrial psychologist, tells people in his seminars that women in African societies have a higher status than in European societies and are more equal to men. He explains that white women became submissive to men because in the cold climates of Europe, they had to depend on men for survival. On the other hand, “African women see themselves as equal to men” because food in Africa was readily available to them on trees whenever they wanted it.

This would certainly be welcome news to Lydia Ochieng-Obbo, an African attorney for the Central Bank of Uganda who recently spoke at a conference called “Women at the Crossroads” at the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia. Traditionally, said Ms. Ochieng-Obbo, the woman in Africa always takes second place to the man. She was always brought up to be a mother and wife and nothing more, but she did not even have the same status and the same protections that European and North American women had as mothers and wives even at the time when their rights outside the home were severely curtailed by law and custom. For instance, in Uganda, the tradition is that after a man dies, his property goes not to his wife—or wives, as the case may be—but to his relatives. The widow may be left completely destitute.

According to Ms. Ochieng-Obbo, in most African societies the father also has an absolute right to the children. Though women do most of the backbreaking agricultural work, they do not own property. Women are not supposed to talk in public. If you try to interview an African couple, the husband usually talks for the wife.

Benefits from European Values. And Ms. Ochieng-Obbo said something that would probably sound absolutely shocking to the Afrocentrists and to some of the multiculturalists who now largely set the agenda in American education. She said that most improvements that had taken place in the status of African women, and in African societies in general, had occurred as a result of contacts with European civilization, the introduction of the money economy and urbanization. Some women had to earn money, which gave them more power in their families, and some women also got an education, though even today parents frequently send the boys to school and keep the girls at home. Education introduced European values and European cultural norms into African society; in Uganda, this mostly meant British values. Moreover, the British pressured for change in the marriage laws in Uganda, from polygamy to monogamy. Formally the laws were changed. Yet polygamy is still a common practice, as is child marriage and wife-beating.

Another glimpse into the life of African women can be provided by an October 1990 *New York Times* article about women and AIDS in Africa. It is a horrible story of how the spread of AIDS among women is exacerbated by legal and cultural norms that give a man the right to “unlimited numbers of partners according to his wishes,” as Ugandan social worker and lecturer Maxine Ankrah put it. It describes a society in which a woman who refuses to have sex with her AIDS-infected husband—who, by the way, has three other wives—is seen as rejecting her proper wifely role. One could mention other things, such as cliterodectomy and other forms of genital mutilation of girls, which also contributes to the spread of AIDS by causing infections and bleeding during intercourse.

My purpose here is not to attack African culture specifically. There are some African cultures in which women have a higher status than what I just described. There are cultures on other continents in which women are treated just as badly, and indeed there have been times in European culture when women were almost as powerless and deprived of freedom as in the picture outlined above. Thus, until quite recently in the South of Italy, a young woman who was raped was expected to marry her attacker in order to salvage the family honor.

My point is to demonstrate the fallacy of what passes for diversity education and multiculturalism in our academic system today. And Edwin Nichols is not just some eccentric. He was paid \$12,000 from the Environmental Protection Agency for five seminars on cultural diversity, racism, and sexism. He has also lectured since 1989 at the Agriculture Department, the Justice Department, the Treasury Department, and the National Institutes of Health. And there are other people like him who are teaching college students, who are in charge of kids in public schools.

Of course, the lies are rarely quite so extreme. Here is what may be a more typical case, from my own experience. About ten years ago, I took an "Introduction to World Civilization" course at a Community College in New Jersey. Our female professor, who was very liberal and certainly a feminist, explained that while the status of women in premodern India might seem low, women often wielded much power in the household and were revered as mothers of sons. I was astounded. After all, we were talking about a culture in which women had no rights at all outside the home, in which it was common for men to have concubines or visit prostitutes but a woman's adultery was punished by death, and a woman who was widowed or abandoned by her husband could never remarry. Of course, the highest virtue for a woman who was widowed was to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

Double Standard. So I raised my hand and told our professor that I could not believe that she, a liberated woman, would make excuses for such an oppressive patriarchy. "Well," the professor snapped back, "there's no reason for us to be smug. We still have a lot of discrimination against women in this society too." That is a very standard trick of the left. Because Western societies have some shortcomings or deficiencies, they are said to have no right to condemn atrocities in other societies, whether patriarchal or communist. As if female infanticide and the burning of widows equalled the unfair denial of a promotion.

There is a blatant double standard at work. The West is the only civilization that made an effort to overcome its injustices toward women, yet it is berated for failing to do away with them completely. Meanwhile, Third World cultures are treated as if they should not be expected to change, as if they had an absolute right to retain all of their cultural heritage. The Western past can be harshly judged by the standards of modern Western liberalism; the non-Western past or present cannot. Someone who tries to preserve traditional sex roles in the West is a reactionary bigot. But to try to protect the Yanomamo's ancestral customs from the onslaught of Western ways is a noble effort. Indeed, there is a great deal of talk about how the Yanomamo's traditional way of life is threatened by the logging industry and by industrialization in general and how it should be protected, although it seems to me that at least from the viewpoint of Yanomamo women, it's an open question whether the preservation of this way of life is a good idea.

In education schools, as Rita Kramer shows in her book *Ed School Follies*, future teachers are indoctrinated in the view that cultures which completely deny freedom and rights to the individual—male or female—and subordinate the individual to the group are not oppressive; they merely value the common good and social relationships over individual autonomy, unlike our Western society which encourages selfishness. This is now a politically correct line of reasoning, but only with regard to non-European cultures. When American conservatives try not even to take away but to somewhat abridge individual self-expression to accommodate community val-

ues, the same politically correct people denounce these efforts as narrow-minded and repressive. Again, the double standard at work.

The radicals in academia even claim that Western society is somehow uniquely hostile to women, because its central values of individualism, rationality, and competition are essentially male values, while most non-European cultures emphasize the supposedly female values of sharing, cooperation, collectivism, and so forth. One answer to this argument is that even if these values really are female—and talk about sexist stereotypes!—their importance in Third World cultures certainly has not helped actual women fare any better.

But this issue is not just an academic one. The United States is home to millions of immigrants from a diverse array of cultures. According to the “PC” gospel that holds increasing sway from history museums to kindergartens, these immigrants and their children should be encouraged by all means to preserve their distinct cultural identities and values; assimilation is viewed as a form of psychic violence. Yet in many cases, these values include the extreme subjugation of women. What’s a progressive to do?

This is not just an American problem. At the same Philadelphia conference where Ms. Ochieng-Obbo made her very eloquent remarks, another speaker was Anne Summers, an Australian journalist who was the editor-in-chief of the feminist magazine *Ms.* in the late 1980s. Prior to that she had been a cabinet member in Australia, dealing with human rights issues, and at the time the Australian government decided to encourage immigrant groups to retain their cultural traditions and values.

Bizarre Reasoning. Ms. Summers admitted that it was a wrenching issue for her because, she said, “there were some customs that I considered barbaric towards women.” But apparently being a good multiculturalist was more important. As she put it, “You can’t pick and choose and say, ‘We like this culture but we don’t like that culture, and we’re not going to find it acceptable.’ If you are going to respect cultural traditions and customs you have to apply it equally.” She added that there were some practices that she would have banned if she had her way, “but the decision was made to let such practices continue, and hope that these communities will outgrow them as they get more integrated into the mainstream despite multiculturalism.”

I should say, with all due respect, that I find this line of reasoning rather bizarre. You hope that people will get integrated into the mainstream but at the same time you pursue policies that push them in the opposite direction. Unless maybe they figured out that this is exactly how government works.

The question for us is: As Americans, are we going to condone polygamy, or the selling of nine-year-old girls into marriage? Are we going to condone the slaying of unfaithful wives by husbands avenging their honor if that was the custom in their native countries?

If you think I am pushing the multiculturalist logic to an absurd extreme, think again. Because the answer to the last question is: we already do.

In 1987, a Chinese immigrant named Dong Lu Chen killed his wife, Jian Wan, smashing her head with a claw hammer after she confessed to an affair. At the 1989 trial, which included the testimony of an anthropologist, the defense argued that Chen’s cultural background—“the special high place the family holds in the Chinese community” and “the shame and humiliation” of a wife’s infidelity—made him lose control. Mostly on the strength of this “cultural defense,” a Brooklyn judge sentenced Chen to five years probation on a reduced manslaughter charge. (I might add that the “cultural defense” has since cropped up in several spousal homicide and rape cases involving immigrants from Laos, Ethiopia, and other Third World countries.)

The sentence initially sparked protests among women's groups and Asian activist groups alike. But the coalition fell apart because Asian groups were fearful of undermining the very notion of a cultural defense. Margaret Fung, executive director of the Asian-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, angrily stated that to bar this defense "would promote the idea that when people come to America, they have to give up their way of doing things. That is an idea we cannot support."

Opportunities in America. Yet is it possible that many people come to America because they are attracted to the American way of doing things? This may be particularly true of women, who often relish their liberation from the patriarchal customs back home. After I wrote an article for *The Washington Post* on this very issue of feminism and multiculturalism, I received a very moving letter from Ms. Nora Femenia, a scholar from Argentina who is here on a fellowship. She wrote to me that other women from Latin America she had met here, whether they were professionals or cleaning women, had one thing in common: they profoundly appreciate the rights and opportunities they have gained in this country *as women*. It's not just that their lives are better, but that finally they feel they are as good as men. That's a personal example. Here is another one, from *The New York Times*. An October 1991 article examined the experiences of Bangladeshi immigrant women in the United States, and the conflicts between the independence and assertiveness they have developed in America and the expectations of their traditional culture where women are expected to be subservient to men, to the extent that they are not even supposed to talk in front of males.

And what a cruel mockery it would be if, out of deference to multicultural sensitivities, American institutions began to mimic these customs.

What is the lesson we can learn from all this? One is: I think we can see that the politically correct, for all their noble claims, are not concerned about women's rights or human rights. Their real purpose is to denigrate and tear down Western civilization. If they can do that by attacking the West, and America in particular, as sexist, then they are concerned about the rights of women. When it is more convenient to attack the West as ethnocentric, imperialistic, insensitive to other cultures, then women's rights go out the window.

I believe another conclusion we can make is that the assault on Western culture can be fended off by pointing to such contradictions. I think it is important to say that we who cherish the values of Western civilization, whether we are conservatives or classical liberals, are not at all opposed to real learning about different cultures around the world, as long as what students learn about these cultures is not sugarcoated to conform to someone's ideological dogma. And despite all the excesses of contemporary radical feminism, which is usually allied with the multiculturalists in assailing the West as the root of every evil, we certainly can agree that the ideal of equal opportunity and individual rights regardless of sex or race is really the fulfilment of the best that there is in Western and American tradition.

After all, it is no accident of history that women have achieved a higher status in the West than anywhere else in the world. Perhaps that's why the multiculturalists are so loath to admit it. Women may actually owe something to such uniquely Western (and supposedly male) ideals as reverence for the individual, freedom of choice, and even technological mastery of nature—which helped ease the biological constraints whose weight on women has always been especially heavy. Far from attacking the West and joining the multiculturalists in looking for salvation in mythical visions of Third World cultures, those feminists whose motivation really is to improve the lives and status of women should build on the heritage of Western culture. We are told that because this culture was created by white males, it can only serve them. The real believer in racial and gender equality will work to make sure that the Western heritage belongs to everyone.