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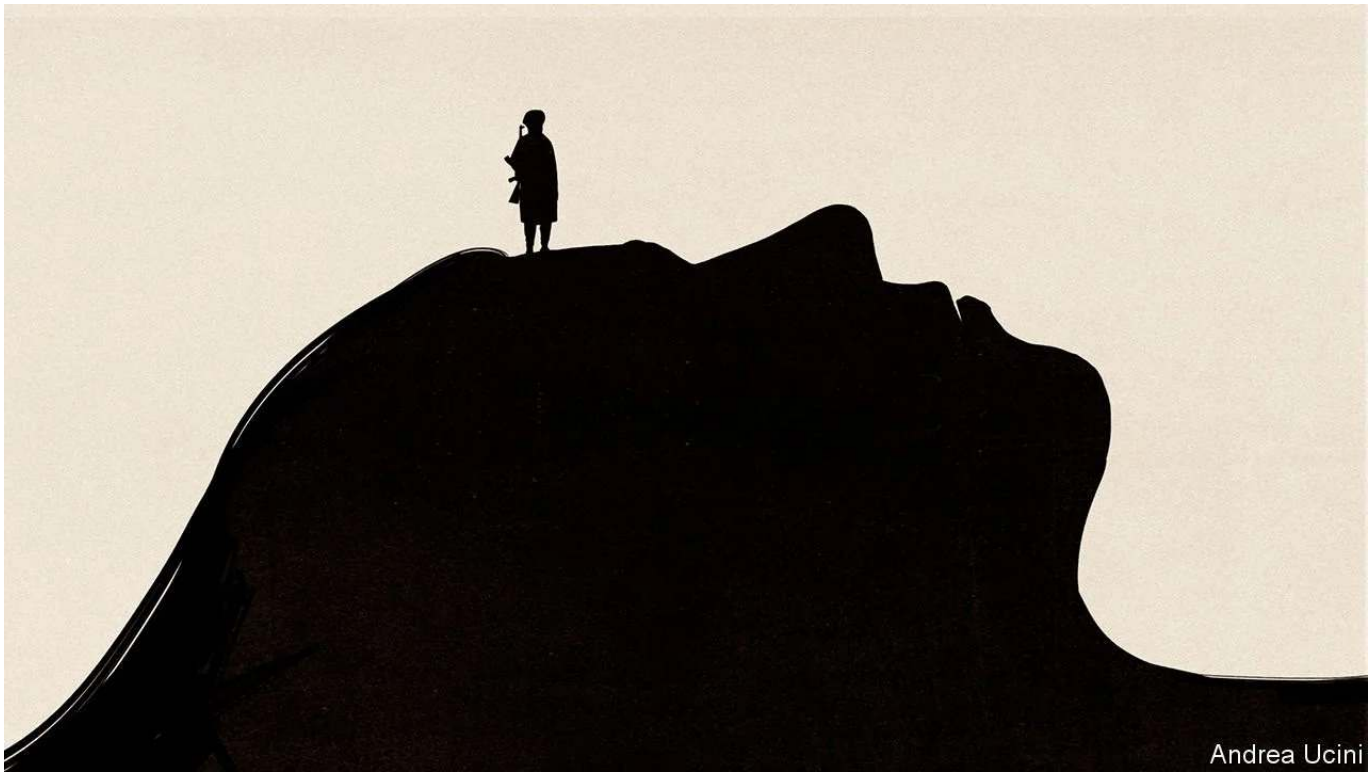
Sex and geopolitics: Why nations that fail women fail

And why foreign policy should pay more heed to half of humanity



AFTER AMERICA and its allies toppled the Taliban in 2001, primary-school enrolment of Afghan girls rose from 0% to above 80%. Infant mortality fell by half. Forced marriage was made illegal. Many of those schools were ropy, and many families ignored the law. But no one seriously doubts that Afghan women and girls have made great gains in the past 20 years, or that those gains are now in jeopardy.

The United States is "committed to advancing gender equality" through its foreign policy, according to the State Department. Bequeathing billions of dollars-worth of arms and a medium-size country to a group of violent misogynists is an odd way to show it. Of course, foreign policy involves difficult trade-offs. But there is growing evidence that Hillary Clinton was on to something when she said, a decade ago, that "The subjugation of women is…a threat to the common security of our world." Societies that oppress women are far more likely to be violent and unstable.

There are several possible reasons for this. In many places girls are selectively aborted or fatally neglected. This has led to skewed sex ratios, which mean millions of young men are doomed to remain single. Frustrated young men are more likely to commit violent crimes or join rebel groups. Recruiters for Boko Haram and Islamic State know this, and promise them "wives" as the spoils of war. Polygamy also creates a surplus of single young men. Multiple wives for men at the top means brooding bachelorhood for those at the bottom.

All conflicts have complex causes. But it may be no coincidence that Kashmir has one of the most unbalanced sex ratios in India, or that all of the 20 most turbulent countries on the Fragile States index compiled by the Fund for Peace in Washington practise polygamy. In Guinea, where a coup took

place on September 5th, 42% of married women aged 15-49 are in polygamous unions. China's police state keeps a lid on its many surplus men, but its neighbours sometimes wonder whether their aggression may some day seek an outlet.

Outside rich democracies, the male kinship group is still the basic unit of many societies. Such groups emerged largely for self-defence: male cousins would unite to repel outsiders. Today, they mostly cause trouble. Tit-for-tat clan feuds spatter blood across the Middle East and the Sahel. Tribes compete to control the state, often violently, so they can divvy up jobs and loot among their kin. Those states become corrupt and dysfunctional, alienating citizens and boosting support for jihadists who promise to govern more justly.

Societies based on male bonding tend to subjugate women. Fathers choose whom their daughters will marry. Often there is a bride price—the groom's family pay what are sometimes hefty sums to the bride's family. This gives fathers an incentive to make their daughters marry early. It is not a small problem. Dowries or bride prices are common in half the world's countries. A fifth of the world's young women were married before the age of 18; a twentieth before 15. Child brides are more likely to drop out of school, less able to stand up to abusive husbands and less likely to raise healthy, well-educated children.

Researchers at Texas A&M and Brigham Young universities compiled a global index of pre-modern attitudes to women, including sexist family laws, unequal property rights, early marriage for girls, patrilocal marriage, polygamy, bride prices, son preference, violence against women and legal indulgence of it (for example, can a rapist escape punishment by marrying his victim?). It turned out to be highly correlated with violent instability in a country.

Various lessons can be drawn from this. In addition to their usual analytical tools, policymakers should study geopolitics through the prism of sex. That index of sexist customs, had it existed 20 years ago, would have warned them how hard nation-building would be in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today, it suggests that stability cannot be taken for granted in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or even India.

Peace talks should include women. Between 1992 and 2019, only 13% of negotiators and 6% of signatories of peace deals were female. Yet peace tends to last longer when women are at the table. This may be because they are more ready to compromise; or perhaps because a room without women implies a stitch-up between the men with guns without input from non-combatants. Liberia got this right and ended a ghastly civil war; Afghanistan's new rulers have not.

More broadly, governments should mean it when they say they want to liberate half of humanity. Educate girls, many of whom have quit school to work or marry since covid-19 impoverished their families. Enforce bans on child marriage and on female genital mutilation, hard though that is in remote villages. Do not recognise polygamy. Equalise inheritance rights. Teach boys not to hit women. Introduce public pensions, which undermine the tradition whereby couples are expected to live with the man's parents, because the elderly have no other means of support.

Most of these are tasks for national governments, but outsiders have some influence. Since Western donors started harping on about girls' education, more girls have gone to school (primary enrolment has risen from 64% in 1970 to nearly 90% today). Campaigners against early marriage have prompted more than 50 countries to raise the minimum age since 2000. Boys need to learn about non-violence from local mentors, but ideas about how to design such programmes are shared through a global network of charities and think-tanks. Donors such as USAID and the World Bank have done a fair job of promoting property rights for women, even if their Afghan efforts are about to go up in smoke.

The radical notion

Foreign policy should not be naive. Countries have vital interests, and need to deter foes. Geopolitics should not be viewed solely through a feminist lens, any more than it should be viewed solely in terms of economics or nuclear non-proliferation. But policymakers who fail to consider the interests of half the population cannot hope to understand the world. |