
Reviewed by Susan Sorek, Research Affiliate, Open University, UK

This book utilises articles, reports of human rights activists, and various web sites to compile a dossier of harrowing tales involving the abuse of women. It documents a wide-ranging catalogue of incidents, from the women murdered by *tznius*, to the ultra orthodox modesty police that patrol the streets of Jerusalem. The authors demonstrate by their choice of stories that misogyny is a worldwide phenomenon; men dominate women sexually, socially, intellectually and psychologically. Indeed the stories are disturbing and one becomes mindful of a world that appears to condone the worst cruelties humans can inflict upon one another.

However, there is more to criticise in this work. The most obvious blunder can be found in the authors’ use of facts and sources. They pay tribute to Safia Amajan, a female poet living under the Taliban regime, where women are prevented from attending school or pursuing any intellectual endeavour; and if they do, they face death by hanging. According to the authors, in November 2005, her husband beat her to death, but escaped punishment by claiming that his wife had committed suicide. This story relates not to Amajan but to another woman, Nadia Anjuman, who was the victim of this crime. In fact, Safia Amajan was the Head of the Department of Women’s Affairs in Kandahar. She was gunned down a year later (2006) by the Taliban. Such an obvious oversight reflects unkindly on the integrity of the research presented by the authors.

Another major drawback of the book is its bias. It should be noted that Benson and Stangrom run an atheist website *Butterflies and Wheels*. In their attempts to prove that religion is the main culprit for men’s inexcusable behaviour towards women they ignore real efforts made by various religious establishments to do just the opposite, as seen recently in the issue of FGM (female genital mutilation). It seems that the authors blame the belief in...
Allah as the cause for the mistreatment of women. And one is left wondering why the title of their work is not “Does Allah Hate Women?”

The targets of their indignation are often wrongly attributed. One such case is Karen Armstrong (*Muhammed, a Biography of the Prophet and Islam: A Short History*, 2001), who is portrayed by the authors as an inveterate Muslim apologist. This sounds rather risible given the restraint that characterises her work on world religions. However, the main issue lies in the fact that the authors use a wide range of inaccurate data to blame God and religion for the sins committed by the Taliban, Vatican and others who allow the rape, murder, humiliation, and death of women. People of different faiths seem to attribute the mistreatment of their wives to God’s will or religion and by doing that they falsely interpret the spirit of their respective religion.

Like the fundamentalists so despised by the authors, this work is literal in its comprehension of the language of faith. Their readings of holy texts and deciphering of religious traditions do not venture beyond a basic level of analysis. Furthermore, for millennia women have found in God an ally and muse; women held important offices within the church, while others devoted themselves to the worship of God. For instance, Maryam, the mother of Jesus, and Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife, both play a crucial role in the Quran. One may also argue that in several Muslim countries, women like Benazir Bhutto and Megawati Sukamoputra of Indonesia held the highest offices possible. Moreover, The authors fail to consider the atrocities committed against women by cultures that renounced religion in favour of other ideologies, for example Mao’s China.

In conclusion, this is a weakly argued work: the issues raised did not provide any useful or thought provoking analysis. To add insult to injury, the book is also inadequately annotated; the endnotes in two chapters are confusing and inconsecutive. One cannot, nor indeed should, ignore the horrific ordeals suffered by women throughout the world in the name of God or religion. The real challenge is to change misconceptions, which are embedded in the various religious beliefs.