

**Response to:**  
**Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?**  
**By Susan Moller Okin**

This chapter by Susan Okin, presents a dilemma faced by someone who upholds liberal values as the highest right. While it seems oppressive to ask minority groups that immigrate or are indigenous to assimilate with majority culture, what should one do “when the claims of the minority cultures or religions clash with the norms of gender equality that is formally endorsed by liberal states?” (Okin 9). To Okin, it seems that the highest priority is to protect the individual agency and feminist cause that is affected when multiculturalism is applied as a blanket policy. Religion and culture usually dominate the personal sphere of life such as, marriage, divorce, domestic responsibilities, control of property etc. and that has a big impact in participation and equality in public life. When left unchecked, it leads to control of women by men, dictate life choices of women and leave them economically vulnerable. Okin believes one’s culture is important but if “the culture is patriarchal (in that it instills in us and forces particular social roles), her healthy development is endangered” (Okin 22). From a feminist point of view, Okin thinks such cultures should be extinct and integrated into less sexist culture, while keeping in consideration the factors of discrimination. It is not just the outward, legal changes that matter but also the actions in the private sphere. Okin urges liberals to not just accept multiculturalism but care about the well-being of the members by starting a dialogue that includes the younger women of the group and not just the leaders and older women who are likely to protect illiberal views.

I had mixed feelings about this piece by Okin – more negative than positive. The issue she brings up is certainly a valid concern in a world that is continually globalizing, and clashes of

ideology and ways of life is inevitable. However, her approach is very narrow minded with an accepted superiority of liberal values. Though the title is posed as a question, her whole response is framed to prove that multiculturalism is bad for women. There is little consideration for why different cultures embrace different social roles and norms but a standing assumption that it is illiberal and wrong “to violate the individual member rights [by] requiring them to conform to group beliefs or norms” (Okin 11). Such an argument prompts liberal pluralists, like Richard Shweder to categorize her as an imperial liberal who would like to extend and establish “principle of autonomy on all domains of society, including private realm of family life...[that may] result in complete eradication of group differences” (Shweder 261).

Personally, I do not agree that it is fair to assume that liberal values are morally superior to the rest and there should be no remorse to the loss of cultural differences. At this time, this superiority seems to be guided by remnants of ignorance and intentional misrepresentation from colonial times. Non-European cultures were seen as backward and their culture was evaluated on the rubric of Judeo-Christian and western values which painted a distorted view of the world and justified much of the oppression and eradication of cultures. To continue in that path, when the world has got smaller through shared language, migration and greater connection in the name of liberalism seems irrational. Her single-minded ignorance is evident when she claims (more than once) “virtually all world’s cultures have distinctly patriarchal past” (Okin 16). Is that really the case or is this the Western understanding of the world’s culture viewed perpetuated due to the lens of West’s own deeply patriarchal past? If Ahmadu were to respond, she would deny that her own culture, Kono is patriarchal and was in fact a matricentric culture.

Okin also exaggerates her call to action against multiculturalism by clubbing together many issues of varying intensity. From cultural control on judgements for rape victims and violence or murder for infidelity to purdah and domestic responsibilities. There were many broad-brush generalizations to describe the demerits of the supposed patriarchal and “other” cultures. This make it difficult to ignore her claim or completely agree with it. One may think murder is a place to draw the line but find it completely acceptable for a woman to choose to cover her head to respect her own beliefs. Though it is does seem that a conversation with voices of different communities sharing their beliefs and choices would help broaden everyone’s understanding of other cultures, it should not be from a defensive position for all “illiberal” cultures.

I agree with Okin that the world is faced with conflicting ideals and a dialogue is needed to establish harmony for coexistence but I absolutely do not think liberal standards for feminism must be established above all and cultures should be eradicated because of its self-determined superior status.

## **References**

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