

## A Casebook on Gender and Sexuality

It would seem to be the easiest characteristic to define, the most basic classification into which we can sort human beings: Are you a man or a woman? Is your behavior feminine or masculine? And yet the dazzling variety of human responses, preferences, fears, and favors blurs these apparently simple distinctions into a never-ending source of pleasure and conflict. Not surprisingly, the similarities and differences between men and women have inspired poets and storytellers as well as provoked the interests of social scientists and essayists. In the following casebook, writers across genres and perspectives attempt to define and classify the concepts of gender and sexuality.

### “Choosing Clothes, but Not Husbands”

BY JOSEPH BERGER

Journalist Joseph Berger immigrated to New York City from Russia as a small boy just after the Second World War. He began his professional career as an English teacher at a Bronx, New York, public school and joined the staff of the *New York Post* as a reporter in 1971. He has covered religion, education, and science for the *Post* and *New York Newsday* and since 1985 for the *New York Times*, where “Choosing Clothes, but Not Husbands” first appeared in November 2004. In his 2001 memoir, *Displaced Persons: Growing Up American after the Holocaust*, Berger eloquently explored the tensions of a family caught between historical events, lost cultures, and missed opportunities. His insight and experience are evident in this article about female Afghan immigrants in New York City who are balancing tradition and possibility in their own lives.

By all appearances, Ashrat Khwajadah and Naheed Mawjzada are thoroughly modern American women.

Long-haired and dark-eyed, they spurn the headscarves and modest outfits customarily worn by Afghan women, preferring hip-hugging slacks. Both of them are in their early twenties and both of them have taken a route still somewhat controversial among Afghans in Flushing, Queens—going to college to pursue professions. Ms. Khwajadah studied speech pathology at Queens College and Ms. Mawjzada majors in political science at Adelphi University. Both also defy the ideal of a reticent Afghan womanhood, with Ms. Mawjzada speaking up forcefully when men talk politics at the dinner table.

But there are incongruities. Both of them, by design, have never dated. Like most young women in their Afghan enclave in Flushing, they are waiting for their parents to pick their spouses.

into your head since you were a little girl: 'Don't talk with guys, don't ruin your reputation, everyone will gossip about you,'" said Ms. Khwajazadah, a high-spirited woman who came here as a two-year-old with her refugee parents. Nevertheless, she added, "I'm happy with my decision."

"I'm very close with my family and that helps me because they want to do what's best for me," she said.

In testing how far they can go in forsaking tradition, these women illustrate the delicate balance younger Afghans, particularly women, have had to strike as they grow up in a comparatively freewheeling society with parents—often uneducated and unable to speak English—who have held tight to their Afghan conventions.

To be sure, the Afghans' transition is an old immigrant story—one that could be told about the Irish, Italians and Jews of the nineteenth century or the newer groups that have seasoned New York City's stew. Those newcomers too looked on with anger or resignation as their children gradually (and their grandchildren more cavalierly) adopted the prevailing culture.

But the Afghan version has its own endemic twists, community advocates say. Older Afghans, particularly women, often have had no schooling whatsoever. Even today, some families insist that girls, whose non-Afghan friends roam freely, return home immediately after school. It is not uncommon for girls to be engaged as young as thirteen and be married by sixteen.

The Afghan story in New York has garnered more than the usual curiosity because Afghanistan has drawn so much attention on the world stage, first in the military response to September 11 and now as the fragile government of President Hamid Karzai tries to establish democracy, including expansion of women's rights.

There are 5,446 Afghans in New York City and over 9,100 in the metropolitan area, according to the 2000 census. A large proportion came here with grants of asylum after treacherous odysseys to escape either the Soviet occupation of 1979 or Taliban rule that began in 1996.

Manizha Naderi, the twenty-eight-year-old director of Women for Afghan Women, which offers counseling and instructional programs, remembers how at four years old she crossed the desert into Pakistan on a single motorcycle that also carried her parents, her two-year-old brother, nine-month-old sister and the driver.

The two largest enclaves of Afghans are in Flushing—north of Queens College and in the largely Chinese and Korean area north of Northern Boulevard. Flushing has four Afghan mosques, a half-dozen kabob houses and the Kouchi Market, which besides native spices and breads carries Afghan mandolins (rababs) and billiards-like board games (karams).

New Yorkers commonly encounter Afghan men in the fried chicken restaurants they own and in the ubiquitous sidewalk coffee carts of Midtown. But women are more out of sight. A quarter of Afghan women have never been to school and only half have completed high school, according to a study by Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociology professor at Queens College, and Kaisa Hagen, a student there. Only one quarter work outside the home, compared with 60 percent for other New York women.

Ms. Naderi said that “Afghanistan has a very patriarchal culture and women don’t have rights,” and those views migrate here.

“Men have corrupted views of Islam and actually believe women are second-class citizens and are there to take care of them,” she said. “They don’t let them go to school or to work.”

Afghans from the capital, Kabul, are less bound by tradition than those from the villages, and those who fled the Soviets are more conservative than those who fled the Taliban. Some Afghan Muslims who have been here for decades are so acculturated they put up Christmas trees, but in general Afghans here are trying to sustain crucial remnants of their culture.

For more than a few families even the notion of educating their daughters beyond high school is regarded as daring, Ms. Naderi said. But more leaders are encouraging it. Mohammed Sherzad, the imam of Masjid Hazrat-I-Abubakr Sadiq, on Union Street in north Flushing (there is a similarly named mosque nearby from which Imam Sherzad was ousted) looks favorably upon women who postpone having children until they finish college.

“A good woman is one who is educated, both for her children and her society,” he said.

Dr. Tahira Homayun, a gynecologist whose husband is an economic adviser to President Karzai, said some Afghan girls have more successful school careers than their brothers because struggling families often press boys to work.

Ms. Naderi said that as a result of the community’s lingering patriarchal structures, violence toward wives is much more common than the community admits.

“There’s a saying that the food your husband feeds you doesn’t come for free,” she said. “And men actually think they have a right under the Koran to beat their wives.”

But no characteristic seems more ironclad than the convention of having parents arrange their children’s marriages.

“Afghan people can’t meet each other prior to getting engaged,” said a sixty-five-year-old mother of six who was taking English classes given by Women for Afghan Women. She asked that her name not be used because seeing her name in print made her uncomfortable. “It’s an embarrassment for the family.”

Much of that stigma derives from the treasured principle of family honor. If a daughter chooses to find her own spouse, her father’s stature will be diminished, the family name tainted by gossip, and her sisters may find it harder to marry.

“The girl is a trophy piece,” said Ms. Mawjzada, the daughter of a coffee vendor who in addition to studying at Adelphi works in customer service at Geico insurance. “If the girl has a good reputation, the family has a good reputation.”

Parents are more willing to close their eyes to a teenage Don Juan, and marriage customs for a man are also more lenient. Bashir Rahim, a twenty-nine-year-old computer technician, says if he meets a girl that interests him at a family gathering, he might ask her for her address, then send his parents to her home to start a conversation about marriage.

Girls learn by trial and error how far they can stretch tradition, but defying the code outright exacts a steep price. Ms. Naderi was married at sixteen to a man she chose on her own. Her mother and grandmother did not speak to her for ten years.

“My mother still tells me she can’t look at people because they know her daughter married in this way,” she said.

Masuda Sultan, a twenty-six-year-old Flushing woman who is doing graduate work in public administration at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, was not even sixteen when her father, the owner of a fried chicken restaurant in Harlem, contrived with an acquaintance to have her married to a doctor twice her age. She got to see her future husband three times before the wedding.

“I actually thought it could work,” she recalled. “When your actions are limited and you’re from a certain world and you’re young and you respect your family, you go along with their wishes even if you have extreme doubts.”

Key issues like how far she could go in school were left murky. But when it became clear after the wedding that Ms. Sultan wanted to put off having children until she finished college, the tensions became irreconcilable. Ms. Sultan lapsed into what she called a deep depression, and after three years she and her husband agreed to divorce, a rare and humiliating event in the Afghan community and one that often attaches blame to the woman. Ms. Sultan, who moved back with her parents into the same room she had shared with her sister, recalled that female friends found it so difficult to believe that she could leave her husband for the reasons she did that they asked if he beat or betrayed her.

“The core issue was really a different philosophy of what it means to be Afghan and what it means to be American,” she said. “Ultimately I was being treated as a child and my role was set and I was told what I could and couldn’t do.”

## QUESTIONS FOR ACTIVE READING

1. How does the author, Joseph Berger, use comparison and contrast to suggest conflict? What concepts does he compare and contrast?
2. What kinds of evidence, illustration, and authority does the author cite in order to give substance to his thesis?
3. Why would the subject of this article be of interest to readers of the *New York Times*? What other kinds of readers or audiences does this subject appeal to, and why?

## QUESTIONS FOR THINKING CRITICALLY

1. How do the young Afghan women portrayed in this article negotiate the different concepts of femininity and women’s social roles held by their traditional families and their new American communities?
2. How are certain concepts—such as *reputation*, *gossip*, and *honor*—used by the writer of this article and by the people he interviews? How does each concept and the impact of the word *used to express it* change according to its cultural context? (See Chapter 6 for more on the impact of language choices.)