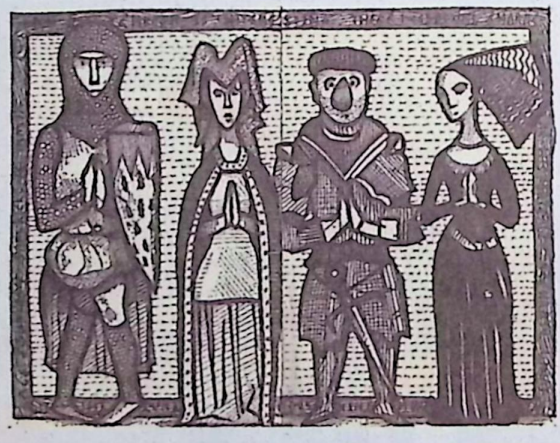
Mad Men

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A recent report in the Guardian online edition says that women are being told not to vote in the upcoming elections in certain remote areas of Pakistan as it is considered 'un-Islamic'. Letters have been circulated warning men not to allow their wives, sisters and daughters to go to polling stations. Women activists in Pakistan are trying to organise protection teams to encourage women to come out and vote despite such intimidation.

Malala Yousafzai, the fifteen year-old girl who we know, was shot by Taleban assailants because she wanted girls to have an education, a better future.

During Pakistani dictator General Ziaul Huq's regime some religious zealots - men obviously - wanted TV coverage of cricket to be banned as women watching at home would get titillated by the dashing Imran Khan (we shall leave out the titillating details lest some of you women get too excited)



But nothing can top this little nugget in the Crusade Against Womankind: An Islamic city council in Aceh, Indonesia, has banned women from passing wind loudly as it is considered unwomanly and un-Islamic. Now while women are instinctively too polite too do something so disgusting intentionally, it is possible that 'accidents' may happen and which are beyond a woman's control. Surely that should not be considered a punishable offence. And in the event that it is well then men should be included too as it is, equally obnoxious to have them express flatulence in public.

For any sensible person reading this the reflex would be: What nonsense!' But it all boils down to the extremes that self-righteous religious clerics will go to in their obsession to control and cleanse the apparently wanton sex. All through the ages we have seen how men in the guise of upholding religious values (whether Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Islamic), have gone out of their away to come up with parochial, tribal rules, professing that they are religious, to kill women's spirit and turn them into compliant zombies.

So far in Bangladesh, besides the odd fatwa or two, women have exercised their right to vote for many decades. Women are still thankfully 'allowed' to watch cricket no matter how sexy the game gets. Women's cricket, moreover, is gaining popularity, with no objections (so far) regarding the uniforms they wear. Even the Rab, army and policewomen can wear trousers.

But what's all this we hear about scrapping the women's development policy and education policy that calls for a widespread increase in girl's education? Recent happenings in Bangladesh cast a heavy shadow over all the positive signs of women becoming more independent, confident, productive and free.

The obsession to suppress and control women is still a thriving occupation of males. It is as if *that* is all religion is about: how to keep women in check, how to clip their wings so they cannot fly how to muffle their voices so they cannot speak out.

Honestly, why are men are so afraid of women?

Having girls educated, giving them skills to work and earn, will somehow put religion at risk. Or is it their fragile machismo that is at stake? Allowing them equal share of property will give them too much power, one presumes. And letting them out to earn a living will emasculate the male population and make them feel useless right?

Perhaps men who think like that need a wake up call. It would be nice if they could be physically shaken like rattles in the hands of a maniacal infant but let's not go there... Millions of women in this country are engaged in work, work that helps them supplement or contribute wholly to family income, work that drives the economy forward. Countless women are the sole breadwinners of the family - their men have either abandoned them or are physically disabled or just plain lazy. Women often have to fend for themselves. With better education and skills, women will earn more and in turn improve the living standards of the entire family.

Unlike many men women are not bothered about who earns more than whom. They will work if they have to for their family's survival and future of their children.

For those misguided men who think that confining woman within the four walls of a house and taking away her power to voice her opinion, cast her vote, learn and earn for herself, is the righteous way to live, please go check your heads and the calendar. This is 2013 not 1013. ■