

Neither Heard Nor Free:

The Unending Exploitation of Women, East and West

By Rabia | Age 45 | Blossom Group

I am a forty-five-year-old woman who has watched the world speak endlessly about the liberation of women — in conferences, in parliaments, in glossy magazine spreads — while women themselves remain precisely where they have always been: used. The form of the cage changes depending on which longitude you stand on, but a cage is still a cage.

Let me be plain. This is not a comfortable essay. It is a reckoning.

In the East: The Sin of Being Heard

In much of the Eastern world, a woman's greatest transgression is simply having a voice. She is raised to be agreeable, to lower her eyes, to take up as little space as possible — not only physically, but intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. Her opinions are an inconvenience. Her needs are a burden. Her suffering is expected to be silent.

Millions of girls never even draw their first breath — extinguished before birth simply for being female. In communities where a son is an investment and a daughter is a liability, the violence begins in the womb. This is not ancient history. This is now. This is today.

She grows up, if she is permitted to, in a world where the patriarchal structures around her are presented as natural, divine, immovable. And here lies one of the great crimes of history that is rarely spoken about with enough honesty: many of these structures were not ancient at all. They were engineered, fortified, and calcified by colonial powers who found patriarchy useful. Colonisers disrupted matrilineal societies, dismissed women leaders, codified discrimination into law, and then — with breathtaking audacity — left these systems in place when they departed, allowing local elites to inherit and deepen them. These same powers then point at the women crushed beneath those systems and call them backwards. The cruelty of this is almost beyond language.

In the West: The Trophy Standard and the Global Export of Exploitation

Turn westward and the exploitation wears a different costume — one that is considerably harder to name because it drapes itself in the language of freedom, choice, and empowerment. Here, a woman is not silenced. She is displayed.

The more she reveals — her body, her vulnerability, her sexuality — the more she is celebrated. She is told that exposure is liberation. That visibility is power. But who profits from this visibility? Who built the platforms, the industries, the algorithms that reward a woman's willingness to bare herself? Not women. The machinery of display was built by men, and women are invited to participate in it and told this participation is progress.

The West dominates the global adult entertainment industry — an industry worth hundreds of billions — and controls the vast majority of the social media platforms through which this content flows into every corner of the world. These platforms operate under the banner of free expression, but the content they amplify most aggressively is overwhelmingly that which objectifies, commodifies, and sexualises women's bodies. Other nations, rather than resisting this, copy and absorb it. The drip feed is relentless and deliberate: a slow, sophisticated form of cultural brainwashing that reshapes what is considered desirable, normal, and modern.

What is created is a version of womanhood that is miles apart from what innocence might have produced — from what women themselves, given true freedom, might have chosen to be. Instead, a template has been manufactured for them: show more, be less, perform always. And this template crosses every border, every culture, every religion. The girl in Lagos and the girl in Leeds are fed the same images, the same aspirations, the same narrow definition of worth.

This is not freedom. This is exploitation with better marketing. A woman objectified by compulsion and a woman objectified by cultural pressure toward 'empowerment' are both, at their core, being reduced to their surface. The gaze has not changed. Only the woman's willingness to perform for it has been reframed as her triumph.

The Colonial Sting in the Tail

What is most infuriating — and most dishonest — is the narrative that follows. Having helped construct the oppressive structures of the East, and having built equally exploitative structures in the West, the architects of global power now point at Eastern women and declare them backwards. Primitive. In need of saving.

Women have never been part of the solution because they have never truly been allowed to author it. The conversation about women has always been held over women — by male politicians, male

clerics, male philosophers, male colonisers, male media executives. We are the subject of the debate, never its sovereign. Our liberation is defined by those who have historically benefited from our subjugation, and then packaged back to us as a gift.

The Hierarchy of Whose Lives Matter

One of the most damning indictments of the global women's movement is its silence — its selective, strategic, carefully calibrated silence — when the women being killed are the wrong kind of women.

In Gaza, women and children have been killed in catastrophic numbers. Women burned in their homes, buried under rubble, giving birth in corridors without anaesthesia, watching their children die in their arms. And yet many prominent Western women's organisations — the same groups who fill their social media feeds with solidarity, who march for rights in capital cities — have been notable for what they have not said. Their silence is a statement. It reveals what most women already know but are not supposed to say aloud: some women are more important than others. Some grief is more acceptable. Some bodies count.

This is not a new lesson. It is the same lesson written into every genocide, every colonial occupation, every war. The women of the powerful are worth protecting. The women of the powerless are collateral. And the feminist establishment, so often led by those who are themselves part of the privileged class, reproduces this hierarchy with perfect fidelity.

The Epstein papers offer us another window into this world. What they reveal — beyond the specifics of the crimes — is the casual, institutional view of women held by the rich and powerful across the globe. Women as objects of transaction. Women as entertainment. Women as things to be acquired, used, and silenced. These were not fringe figures. They were the most powerful men in the world: financiers, politicians, royalty, heads of institutions. And the women who suffered at their hands were, in their eyes, beneath consideration. The papers are merely the documentation of what was always already true.

The Culture Machine: Music, Film, Theatre, Comedy, and the Erosion of Innocence

The exploitation of women is not confined to explicit industries. It is woven into the entire fabric of culture — mainstream, celebrated, award-winning culture — and has been for as long as culture has been recorded.

Look at music. Female artists across every genre are subject to a commercial standard that has almost nothing to do with their talent and everything to do with how much of their body they are willing to display. The more they reveal, the more they are promoted. Those who resist this standard find their careers quietly capped. Meanwhile, their male counterparts release albums in ordinary clothes and are judged solely on the quality of their work. This double standard is so normalised that we barely register it. We have accepted the terms of a transaction we were never asked to agree to.

The same is true in film and television, in theatre, in stand-up comedy. The male gaze is not a metaphor; it is a business model. The jokes men make about women — in comedy clubs, in sitcoms, in period dramas dressed as prestige entertainment — follow the same structure across every culture, every language, every era. The punchline is always the woman's body, the woman's desire, the woman's lack of intelligence, the woman's place. These jokes are not harmless. They are the constant background radiation of a culture that has decided women are funny to look at rather than important to listen to.

Theatre, often considered the most elevated of art forms, has not escaped this. The stages of the world are populated with plays written by men, directed by men, in which women's primary dramatic function is to be loved, betrayed, destroyed, or saved by men. When women do get to tell their own stories, they are often categorised as 'women's theatre' — a genre, as if women's lives are a subcategory rather than the substance of human experience itself.

The Language We Use Every Day

And then there is the ordinary world — the world of everyday conversation, of banter among friends, of the humour that passes between people in homes and workplaces and schools. Innuendo is getting stronger. The sexualisation of ordinary language has become so pervasive that we no longer notice it. What would once have been considered inappropriate in mixed company is now the currency of casual conversation.

The tragedy — and it is a tragedy — is that we feed this to children. Younger and younger children are being exposed to content, language, and imagery that no child is equipped to process. The innocence of childhood is being eroded not by accident but by design: by algorithms that prioritise engagement over welfare, by platforms that profit from clicks regardless of who is clicking, by a culture that has decided that shocking is the same as interesting.

Children who grow up marinated in this content do not emerge with a healthy understanding of themselves or others. They emerge with distorted templates: girls who believe their value is decorative; boys who believe women exist for their entertainment. These are not radical outcomes. They are the logical, predictable result of what we have chosen to normalise. And we keep choosing it, because the system that profits from it is the same system that shapes our choices.

The Weaponisation of Sacred Texts

I will not shy away from this: religious literature — across faiths and traditions — has been systematically exploited to justify the oppression of women. This is not a condemnation of faith itself, which in its purest form has often been the last shelter of the powerless. This is a condemnation of those who have wielded scripture selectively, who have elevated certain verses and buried others, who have appointed themselves sole interpreters of divine will — and always arrived at the same convenient conclusion: that God, too, prefers women silent.

The spiritual and the patriarchal have been so thoroughly fused in so many communities that to question one feels to many like an attack on the other. This fusion is not accidental. It is strategic. And it is the same across East and West, across Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and others — the same technique, the same purpose, the same outcome: women kept in their place, and God invoked as the reason.

It is also worth noting — and this must be said with care but without apology — that patriarchy is frequently sustained not only by men but by women. Mothers who enforce the same restrictions placed on them. Aunts and grandmothers who police the behaviour of younger women in service of a system that has never served them. The matriarch who upholds the patriarchy is not the villain of this story, but she is a part of it. She is the most visible face of a machinery built by others. Understanding this is not about blame; it is about seeing the full architecture of how oppression perpetuates itself.

The Icons We Are Given: False Gods and Managed Voices

There is a particular kind of woman we are told to celebrate. She is placed on a pedestal — by the media, by the establishment, by the very industries and power structures we have been discussing — and presented to us as proof that women have arrived. She is glamorous, articulate, successful in the terms the system recognises, and above all she is unthreatening to those who elevated her. She is the icon we are given, not the one women would have chosen for themselves.

These icons arrive pre-approved. Their image is managed, their message is palatable, their success is calibrated to be inspiring without being destabilising. We are told that their visibility is progress. But visibility handed to you by the powerful is not the same as power. It is a performance of power, designed to create the impression that the door is open while the walls remain intact.

The women we are shown as 'great' — whether in entertainment, in business, in politics — are defined by criteria that were not written by women. Greatness, as the world currently understands it, means wealth, credentials, institutional recognition, and the ability to command a platform. It means being able to sell your ideas. It means having access to education of the right kind, from the right institutions, translated into the right language for the right audience. This is not a definition of greatness. It is a definition of access. And access has always been rationed.

The woman who cannot sell her opinions because she has no platform is invisible. The woman whose scholarship exists outside the Western academic tradition is unrecognised. The woman whose wisdom was passed down through lived experience rather than university corridors is dismissed. The extraordinary intellectual and moral lives of women who never had the opportunity — or who actively refused the terms — of institutional legitimacy are simply erased. They do not exist in the record. And so the record lies.

The 'Acceptable Leader': How Power Manages Dissent

Nowhere is this more visible — or more damaging — than in the world of ethnic minority women's leadership. In communities that have historically been marginalised, there is a genuine and urgent need for representation: women who look like those communities, who speak their languages, who understand their specific experiences of being multiply excluded. The need is real. But what is offered in its place is often something else entirely.

The title of 'leader' — who receives it, who is funded, who is platformed, who is invited to the table — is controlled by whoever controls power. And those who control power have a consistent interest in ensuring that the leaders they elevate are leaders who will not fundamentally challenge the system. And so we see, again and again, women given the designation of community leader, diversity champion, or minority voice who have, in practice, simply continued the status quo. They have made peace with the structures of power in exchange for a seat at the table those structures built.

This is not always a conscious betrayal. Sometimes it is the slow, almost imperceptible process by which an institution absorbs a critic by rewarding them. A grant here. A speaking invitation there.

An honour, an award, a visiting fellowship, a profile in a respectable publication. With each accolade, the distance between the leader and the community they were supposed to represent grows wider. With each financial reward, the incentive to speak uncomfortable truths diminishes. The leadership becomes a career. The cause becomes a brand.

And the communities left behind — the women who cannot afford to monetise their pain, who do not have the education the gatekeepers require, who speak in ways that do not translate well into policy documents and conference presentations — they watch their 'leaders' ascend and feel, accurately, that they have been abandoned. Their needs are presented to power pre-digested, de-radicalised, and stripped of anything that might actually disturb the comfortable. This is how dissent is managed. Not suppressed — that would draw attention — but absorbed. Made decorative.

The woman who raises her voice and refuses to be managed is rarely given accolades. She is more likely to be isolated, defunded, dismissed as extreme, or simply not invited to the rooms where decisions are made. The message to other women is clear: there is a version of leadership that is acceptable, and it is the version that does not threaten those who grant the permission to lead.

The Oldest Industry: Women's Bodies Through the Ages

The adult industry is often spoken of as though it were a modern phenomenon — a product of the internet age, of the twenty-first century's particular moral looseness. But the commercial exploitation of women's bodies is as old as recorded civilisation. What has changed is not the nature of the transaction but its scale, its reach, and the sophistication with which it disguises itself as something other than what it is.

In ancient civilisations — Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, Imperial China, the courts of medieval Europe — the sexual availability of women was institutionalised, codified, and taxed. Temple prostitution in ancient Sumer framed the use of women's bodies as a religious act. Greek and Roman society maintained elaborate hierarchies of women available for men's use — from the educated hetaerae who could at least earn relative autonomy, to enslaved women who had no choice whatsoever. The law in most of these societies made no pretence of ambiguity: women's bodies were a resource to be allocated by men, for men.

The medieval period brought the brothel under municipal management across much of Europe. Cities licensed and taxed the sexual exploitation of women as a public service, on the reasoning — argued openly by male theologians and civic administrators — that providing outlets for male

desire protected 'respectable' women from assault. Women's bodies were thus divided into two categories: those worth protecting, and those designated for use. This architecture of female worth — the virgin and the whore, the wife and the prostitute — has never fully been dismantled. It simply acquired new vocabulary.

Colonial expansion carried this architecture across the world. Wherever European powers established themselves, they established also the systematic sexual exploitation of colonised women — women who had no legal personhood under colonial law, no recourse, no voice. The racial dimension of this exploitation was inseparable from the economic and the sexual: colonised women were considered available precisely because they were considered less than fully human. The language changed across centuries but the logic did not.

The twentieth century brought photography, cinema, and eventually the internet — and with each technological leap, the scale of the industry expanded exponentially while the conditions of those within it remained remarkably similar. The women who built fortunes for the film studios of Hollywood's golden age were simultaneously subject to a casting couch culture so normalised that it was openly joked about. The women who populated the early adult film industry of the 1970s and 1980s were overwhelmingly those with the fewest options: the poor, the young, those fleeing abuse, those with addiction, those who had been trafficked. That some women entered of their own volition does not change the structural conditions that made their bodies the commodity and other people's the profit.

Today, the industry is worth an estimated hundred billion dollars globally. Its largest platforms are owned by a small number of Western corporations. It operates, in significant part, through the unpaid or underpaid labour of women who are told that their participation is self-expression. The language has become fluent in the vocabulary of feminism — autonomy, agency, reclaiming — while the power dynamics beneath that language remain unchanged. The profits flow upward. The harm flows downward. The women are still the product.

What is new is the reach. Content that would once have required deliberate effort to find is now a default proposition for any child with a smartphone. The average age of first exposure to explicit material continues to fall. Boys are forming their understanding of what women are, what women are for, and what constitutes acceptable behaviour toward women, through material produced by an industry that has never had their healthy development as its concern. Girls are forming their understanding of what they must offer to be wanted. Neither is learning anything true about themselves or about human intimacy. They are learning the logic of a transaction, dressed as desire.

This is not a peripheral issue. It is foundational. Everything else we might say about the status of women — the pay gap, the violence, the political under-representation, the silencing — is downstream of a culture that has, for the entirety of recorded history, maintained that women's bodies are available for purchase, and has spent millennia building the institutional, legal, religious, and now digital architecture to ensure that this remains the case.

The adult industry is not an aberration. It is the purest expression of a world that has never stopped seeing women as a resource. And until we are willing to say that plainly — without euphemism, without the fig leaf of 'choice' — we cannot begin to dismantle it.

What Justice Actually Looks Like

True liberation for women does not look like being permitted to speak within male-designed systems. It does not look like being celebrated for one's appearance by an industry that profits from insecurity. It does not look like trading one form of control for another and being asked to be grateful for the exchange.

It looks like women authoring the terms of their own lives — in boardrooms and in bedrooms, in mosques and in parliaments, in what they choose to wear and what they choose to say and whether they choose to say anything at all. It looks like being listened to not because it is fashionable, but because it is right. It looks like the millions of girls who were killed before they could breathe, honoured by a world that finally decides they were worthy of life.

It looks like a women's movement that refuses to rank women's suffering by the nationality or religion of the woman suffering. It looks like entertainment industries that are dismantled and rebuilt from the ground up — not reformed around the edges, but fundamentally restructured. It looks like protecting children from a culture that is consuming their innocence in real time and calling it progress.

Until women are at the centre of solutions — not as symbols, not as statistics, not as cautionary tales or trophies, but as fully realised human beings with sovereignty over their own stories — nothing will have changed. The cage will simply have been redecorated.