We talked about how things happen for different reasons, this happened to me, and how education for females not just males is one of our Islamic rights. I was speaking up for my right as a Muslim woman to be able to go to school.

—MALALA YOUSAFZAI

BACKGROUND

“Culture” is the social context of a group of people. Culture can include values, beliefs, religions, laws, and arts which shape life for that group. Culture can change throughout history. Throughout history and across regions, women have frequently faced discrimination and abuse in the name of culture. Pakistan became an independent country in 1947. From its inception, there were tensions between Hindus and Muslims. During Pakistan’s independence movement, there was heightened ethnic conflict, and women became targets of violence and discrimination. We see these trends continue in Malala’s story; as she grew up in Swat Valley, Pakistan under Taliban rule, girls tended to have far fewer privileges than boys—including the right to be educated.

Much of Malala’s story both illustrates and combats this “cultural privileging” of boys, particularly as it relates to education. A few examples of “cultural privileging” include:

- **Birth of a child:** The birth of a son is often greeted with celebration, whereas the birth of a daughter can be a cause for mourning. In some parts of the world, women who give birth to sons are honored, whereas women who give birth to daughters are shamed.
- **Son Preference:** In some parts of the world sons are preferred over daughters so much that families practice sex-selective abortion, favoring boys over girls.
- **Food distribution:** Men and boys are served food first; women and girls are served last. In times of hardship, women and girls may bear the brunt of food scarcity more than men and boys.
- **Education:** With limited resources, a family will invest in the education of a son rather than a daughter since the daughter is believed to inevitably marry and live with her husband’s family. Moreover, the predominance of male teachers contributes to the under-matriculation of girls, notably in conservative cultures where girls and boys are educated separately. In co-educational schools, sexism leads to boys getting more attention and praise than girls, particularly in regards to math and science. This unequal treatment affects female students’ self-conception and success.
- **Child Marriage:** Child marriage is the marital union a person enters into before reaching the age of 18. Often child brides are dependent on their husbands and denied fundamental rights to education, health, and safety. Child marriage often occurs due to cultural traditions and poverty.
- **Bride Price:** Bride prices are monetary sums given to impoverished families in exchange for a girl or woman to be married.

*Adapted from resource guide material written by Kavita Daiya*
Malala was raised in a culture that does not support female education. Some view the education of girls as counter-cultural and a negative Western conspiracy and ideology. As a result, Malala has met much opposition. But the challenges she has faced have only strengthened her mission and amplified her voice. Malala continues to challenge barriers to girls’ access to education around the world.

The U.S. has its own cultural privileges that favor men. For example, the No Ceilings Campaign reports that a U.S. woman on average earns about 78 cents for every man’s dollar (an African American and Latina woman, on average, earn even less); the U.S. is one of nine countries worldwide that does not provide paid maternity leave; and, while women make up a majority of moviegoers, they only constitute 7% of the directors.

It is often thought that culture is intractable and cannot be changed. The fact is culture CAN be changed. Everyone comes from a different culture and EVERY culture has elements that don’t serve the rights of all in the community. You CAN change it and people have changed negative elements of their culture across the world.

ACTIVITY

The purpose of this activity is to expose you to the different kinds of feminist organizations and activists across the globe—and to become one of them! By understanding the interconnected relationship between history, culture, and gender, we can better understand how to engage with these concepts to promote equality.

As a group, study one or two different feminist activists or women’s organizations. They can be based in the United States or abroad. Identify the focal issue for the activists or organizations—be it education, human rights, domestic violence prevention, rural development, etc. Be sure to also research the tools they use to accomplish their goals. (Tip: A great place to start your research is MAKERS, a website devoted to accomplished and powerful U.S. women across many different fields.)

Once you’ve chosen an activist or organization, think about the ways in which those focal issues are addressed. How do they spread their message? Do they have a website, make videos or use social media to promote grassroots campaigns?

TAKE IT FURTHER!

As a group, choose one issue you’d like to address and create your own action plan!

- **Talk about the history behind the issue**—find the context and the cultural or political factors that motivate each side—the Who? What? Where? When? and Why? of the issue will give you the background information needed for your action plan.

- **What are your goals?** What people do you want to educate? Your classmates, your parents, or the larger community? How do you want to educate people? You could write a blog post, table at your school, or find a real life organization at which to volunteer.

- **Spread the word**! Create a “Did You Know?” poster, photo series, Prezi, or PowerPoint and ask a teacher to share it in the classroom! Include information about your issue, what you think could be done to help solve it, and how others can join your movement.
LISTEN:
“THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN: INTERVIEW WITH LEILA”
http://muslimvoices.org/lives-women-afghanistan-interview-leila

Discuss:
1. How was Leila’s life shaped by cultural politics, particularly her status as a refugee?
2. How is Leila different than the stereotypical image that is generally presented of Muslim women?
3. What is Leila’s opinion of the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan?
4. Think about your own culture—is there anything in your culture that discriminates against women?
5. What groups are working to address any cultural discrimination that may be occurring in your culture?

WATCH:
“WAYLOWAYLO,” TOSTAN INTERNATIONAL
https://youtu.be/DFrEfByP89I

Waylowaylo takes place in the community of Tankanto Maoundé. Waylowaylo means “change” in Pulaar, and the film shows the changes in attitude in the community towards girls’ education through the story of a girl named Maoundé Baldé and her father, Mamadou Baldé, the Village Chief.

Source: Tostan International

Discuss:
1. What cultural factors led Maoundé’s father to initially not allow her to continue her education?
2. What role do men play in ensuring equal opportunity for women?
3. What impact will Maoundé’s education have on future generations? What impact will your education have on future generations?

WATCH:
“SASA! A FILM ABOUT WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND HIV/AIDS”
https://youtu.be/jzR_ULbVZg

“Sasa” is a Kiswahili word, meaning “now.” Now is the time to begin thinking differently about preventing violence against women and HIV/AIDS. The 30-minute documentary film tells two women’s personal stories of violence and HIV/AIDS.

Source: Raising Voices: SASA! A film about Women, Violence and HIV/AIDS

Discuss:
1. What are the commonalities between the women in the film?
2. What is a bride-price and what influence did it have on women’s relationships with their husbands?