

What Caused This Death?

What is the explanation for **this**?:

An Egyptian woman married to a man with six daughters from previous marriages drowned herself Saturday just hours after giving birth to a girl because she feared her husband's reaction to fathering another daughter.

Our explanation is simple: the husband is a vile bastard.

But does everyone else agree? Keen to welcome other voices into the gentle bosom of **Setting The World To Rights**, we asked others what they think, and here, in their own words, are their answers:

Psychologist: Clearly, this tragic event was caused by a clinical depression brought on by a post-natal hormonal imbalance.

Sociobiologist: A certain mutant gene, activated by her pregnancy, gave her an increased tendency to commit suicide.

Astrologer: Jupiter's alignment with Venus, which represents motherhood, shortened her lifeline.

Leftist: When people live in such poverty, desperation is the natural result, and this sort of sad event is inevitable.

Palestinian: What a waste! If she was going to kill herself, she could have taken some Jews with her.

Egyptian Government: We are investigating the possibility that this was not a suicide, and have already captured several Mossad agents.

Environmentalist: This is a catastrophe: dead bodies in the canal endanger the water snails. We demand that earth barriers be put up alongside all canals to protect them from such attacks in future.

Postmodernist Idiotarian: By Western logic, this was a tragedy. But the West is too powerful, and should stop assuming that its values are the only truth. The West should stop trying to suppress the freedom of other

cultures to live according to their own values. It is wrong for us to denigrate Egypt's amazing culture.

Idiotarian Economist: An individual's preferences are revealed in his actions. This individual clearly preferred to die. It was her choice, based on her perception of the costs and benefits of her options.

Muslim cleric: She killed herself virtuously, out of recognition of her personal failure to fulfil her duty to obey her husband and bear him sons.

Libertarian: During this suicide, the only force initiated was by the woman against herself. She had a right to do this. Therefore, nothing bad happened.

Frank's Rumsfeld: Rarr!

So, gentle reader, what do *you* think? Your voice is welcome too, dear friend.

Sun, 06/15/2003 - 16:31 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Your explanation sucks too!

It seems to me that **The World's** real explanation:

Our explanation is simple: the husband is a vile bastard.

is as bad as the fake ones.

Why don't you assign most of the responsibility to the person who made the insanely stupid choices (to marry a bastard, to bear his child, to kill herself when something fairly likely came to pass, etc.)?

Are you denying free will and individual responsibility for decisions?

If so, as I said, it seems just as foolish as the others you've "quoted".

My explanation is a little less simple but a lot more accurate:

The woman was an idiot. This tragedy is mostly the result of her stupidity and partially the result of her association with a bastard of a husband and a backward culture.

by [Gil](#) on Sun, 06/15/2003 - 21:09 | [reply](#)

Loony feminist nonsense

Your explanation is the loony feminist one, right?

Of course the man *must* be evil and the woman *couldn't* have acted any more rationally, despite that none of the personal details are actually known?

I wonder if she thought about the baby's future, at any point.

Alice

http://libertarian_parent_in_the_countryside.blogspot.com/

by a reader on Sun, 06/15/2003 - 21:42 | [reply](#)

None of Henry VIII's wives resorted to suicide...

Gil said:

>insanely stupid choices (to marry a bastard, to bear his child, to kill herself when something fairly likely came to pass, etc.)

Marrying a bastard is not a such a difficult thing to do in a culture where arranged marriages are prevalent, and where bf-gf relationships are frowned upon or forbidden, so there's no prior experimentation.

As for bearing his child, well, in many parts of the West it was not a crime for a husband to rape his wife until fairly recently. And I suspect that in rural Egypt the education of girls is not seen as a priority.

Alice said:

>Of course the man must be evil and the woman couldn't have acted any more rationally, despite that none of the personal details are actually known?

Presumably *The World* is asking us for the most likely explanation based upon what we know.

People who have just given birth are usually exhausted. Most people who try to kill themselves are surely in the most horrendous state of anguish and aren't capable of making rational judgements. The person most responsible for helping her through this plight was probably her husband. However, not only did he fail to do so, it seems that he helped to cause it in the first place, with his cruel and stupid threat (stupid because he could have chosen to murder or divorce her without telling her beforehand).

Also, the husband had divorced previous wives for the blameless act of not bearing him any sons, despite the fact that a divorced woman in his locality is shunned, and may have no economic independence.

Clearly he was indeed a vile bastard. If he hadn't been so, even in his backward culture, the outcome would probably have been different.

by [Tom Robinson](#) on Sun, 06/15/2003 - 23:17 | [reply](#)

Egypt isn't the USA

Gil,

Living in Egypt is different than the US. She almost certainly had no

choice in the marriage, and did not have a choice in bearing his child. You don't withhold sex from someone who is supported by society in beating you within an inch of your life. You don't defy your father, when he tells you to marry, for the same reason. She didn't choose her situation. However, her husband did choose to marry her, intimidate her, beat her, blame her for the daughter thing, etc

"Think like an American woman" isn't a possible choice for girls in Egypt.

Alice,

Do you really think we arrived at our position by examining their genders!?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sun, 06/15/2003 - 23:30 | [reply](#)

Reading this entry, what stood...

Reading this entry, what stood out at me the most was the similarity between the Astrologer's explanation and the "scientists'" explanation. Both are 100% blind to moral agency, so much so that they seem to be *motivated* by the desire to rid such situations as this one of any trace of morality. They seem to have constructed awkward, counter-intuitive explanations of the situation for the sole purpose of avoiding any mention of such things as blame, responsibility, choices, obligations etc. etc. etc.

Quite disturbing really.

by [Daniel Strimpel](#) on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 00:02 | [reply](#)

"Loony feminist nonsense", sc...

"Loony feminist nonsense", screeches Alice from the comfort of her Western life. "Of course the man *must* be evil and the woman *couldn't* have acted any more rationally, despite that none of the personal details are actually known?"

I wonder if she thought about the baby's future, at any point."

You can make such a harsh judgement of the woman if you want to but that judgement implicitly lets the husband off the hook, and that is a mistake. To say of the woman that she could have chosen differently is to assert that she should have been able to overcome the cultural pressures on her. While there is a grain of truth in that judgement--it would have been better all round if she had been able to resist the pressure--Alice's judgement implies that we have control over our unconscious minds. In fact we don't. Overcoming the sort of pressure that woman was under is not trivial as Alice

suggests. To get angry about this woman's "lack of rationality" is to

assert that knowledge creation is easy.

by a reader on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 09:10 | [reply](#)

Culture

In a sense, the husband was acting under pressure from their culture just as surely as the wife was. That does not exculpate him though, and it does not exculpate the wife either. Both must bear responsibility for their actions.

by **Chris** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 10:00 | [reply](#)

Re; Culture

If a business man jumps off the roof, and someone said the cause of death was stress, we would rightly insist that his own bad theories also played a role, and if he had a fairly normal US life, we could say the suicide was his own fault, and also wrong of him.

However, the balance of factors in this case is different. There were very few opportunities in this woman's life to choose better theories, so she is very little to blame. On the other hand, the husband had plenty of chances to not marry her, not go psycho about having daughters, not intimidate her, not beat her, not divorce/shame former wives, etc

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 10:13 | [reply](#)

Generalisations

If we want to learn about the world, we can and should draw generalisations from the evidence. What we shouldn't do is apply generalisations to individual situations as if they were iron laws.

Missing out a "probably" is blurring the line between rational judgement and bigotry.

The baby would be better off with a divorced mother than a dead one. I'm interested to see how entrenched the loony feminist meme actually is these days.

Alice

by a reader on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 10:18 | [reply](#)

Loony Feminist Explanation

The loony feminist explanation would be: "the man is to blame and the woman is the victim because society gives men all the power and all the choices and everything women do is caused by their situation which men have chosen to force them into".

The World's explanation is "given what we are told of this

particular situation and what we know of the society in question, it is overwhelmingly likely that this particular man is to blame because he made a series of egregiously (even by the standards of that society) immoral choices without which the whole thing would not have happened".

It's true that the woman must have made a choice to commit suicide, and that may have been morally wrong. But even if it was, suppose she had behaved rightly instead: the chances are that the situation would still be a catastrophic tragedy for her and the child (and the other six children), and that tragedy would have been caused by the immoral behaviour of the husband.

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 13:54 | [reply](#)

Loony Feminist Explanation

David,

I'm sorry but it seems to me that the only difference between the Loony Feminist Explanation and **The World's** explanation is that **The World** has applied the Loony Feminist Explanation framework to this particular case.

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 16:17 | [reply](#)

Loony Feminist Explanation

Gil:

I'm sorry but it seems to me that the only difference between the Loony Feminist Explanation and **The World's** explanation is that **The World** has applied the Loony Feminist Explanation framework to this particular case.

It seems to me that the only difference between your comment and

The World never gets anything right

is that you have applied the latter explanation framework to this particular item.

(Actually it doesn't. But the logic would be the same as yours.)

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 16:46 | [reply](#)

So we agree?

David,

Since you don't dispute any fact or make any argument, do we agree that **The World** has applied The Loony Feminist Explanation framework to this case, and is wrong?

Great!

If this is not the case, then please explain what flaws in the Loony Feminist Explanation it has recognized and applied to this case.

Also, I hope **The World** prefers its readers to adopt the initial stance that:

The World is sometimes wrong, let me think of criticisms...

over:

The World is always right, I'll adopt their position and defend it reflexively.

Also, I realize that **The World** was trying to give a pithy explanation rather than a long-winded analysis. I just think that it should have recognized the primary responsibility of the woman for her actions as well as the significant influences of the husband, the culture, etc. Failure to do this is precisely the error that the ridiculed explanations commit (to varying degrees).

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 18:05 | [reply](#)

Gil

I realize that **The World** was trying to give a pithy explanation rather than a long-winded analysis. I just think that it should have recognized the primary responsibility of the woman for her actions

Well you *would* say that, wouldn't you. Typical **man**.

by **Sarah Fitz-Claridge** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 18:33 | [reply](#)

So We Agree?

Gil:

If this is not the case, then please explain what flaws in the Loony Feminist Explanation it has recognized and applied to this case.

The World's explanation is fundamentally different from that of the loony feminists. It is not "this particular man has done to this woman what the loony feminists mistakenly say all men do to all women, and for the same reasons" -- though that would be a fundamental difference in itself. Instead, **The World** locates the prime cause of the situation in a series of individual choices made by the husband, which he could have made differently. The loony feminist explanation ignores individual agency and explains the cause collectively, either in his nature as a man, or in the way society allocates power. Likewise with the woman, the loony feminist explanation exonerates her on principle, with the corresponding collectivist reason. **The World's** explanation is again

about the individual and does not fully exonerate the woman ("

[she] must have made a choice, [which] may have been morally wrong"), and makes clear that her exact causal and moral role in the situation depends on the individual choices she made, not on her sex or what society she was living in.

The nature of the society (and the sexes of the participants) appear in the loony feminist explanation as determinants of the participants' actions, whereas in **The World's** explanation it appears only as evidence of what the facts (regarding who decided what) were. If it turned out that that evidence was misleading and those facts were different, **The World's** way of explaining the situation could just as easily put the blame elsewhere. The loony feminists' explanation is simply incompatible with certain facts being different, or with the conclusion being other than to blame the man and regard the woman as his victim.

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 19:55 | [reply](#)

Sarah

Well you would say that, wouldn't you. Typical man.

I resent that! I'm an *exceptional* **man**.

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 21:23 | [reply](#)

David

I accept your answer.

I just find it hard to believe that the meager evidence of that short article was sufficient for you to confidently assign primary blame to the husband. I would need a lot more information before reaching such a conclusion.

Perhaps it's that feminist intuition I've heard so much about.

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/16/2003 - 21:33 | [reply](#)

Sources

Gil,

If I were to find a source (two? three?) for "violence against women is the norm in Egypt" would you change your view?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 06/17/2003 - 00:33 | [reply](#)

Norm?

Elliot,

By "the norm", do you mean that it's common, or virtually without

exception?

Unless it's the latter, or close, then it doesn't make sense to apply it to this case, does it?

All I know about this case is that somebody claims that the husband threatened to kill or divorce her if she bore a girl. And that he has a history of divorcing (not killing) wives who bear girls. And (I assume) that she knew that when she married him.

I don't know about violence in this family, I don't know about how the marriage came about, I don't know what the woman's motives were for any of her actions.

Yes, you can probably say "But for the husband, the woman would be alive." But that doesn't mean he's the primarily responsible agent here (with the information we have, including stats about Egypt). We could also say "But for Mohammed she would be alive" or "But for the position of the moon, she would be alive" (people might be more concerned about flooding than this baby's gender...).

My view is not "The husband had nothing to do with it." My view is that I don't know enough about the lives of these people to say how much of the responsibility is his vs. hers vs. other factors'.

In the absence of substantial (more than I've seen) evidence to the contrary, I think it's a good policy to assign responsibility to the person committing the act.

by **Gil** on Tue, 06/17/2003 - 00:53 | [reply](#)

Gil's flawed logic

My view is that I don't know enough about the lives of these people to say how much of the responsibility is his vs. hers vs. other factors'. In the absence of substantial (more than I've seen) evidence to the contrary, I think it's a good policy to assign responsibility to the person committing the act.

Gil, quit while you are ahead (figuratively speaking since you lost long ago). David is right and his explanation clarifies succinctly why. Also, there is plenty of information about how common, indeed, institutionalised is oppression of women and violence towards them in Egypt and other muslim countries. With internet at hand (and many books written about the subject), your insistence on lack of 'evidence' seems pretty feeble.

Also, there is a common fallacy perpetrated by those who argue against feminism and any position that is perceived as such. Feminism is collectivist, destructive and as such to be abhorred, however, its existence does not invalidate the reality that women have been oppressed by both the society and individual men (taking advantages of the legal and social rules) in the past. Women, as a rule, had no freedom of choice nor education to change their situation.

However, just because, despite these conditions, there were

examples of loving marriages or occasional respect for female mind in those time, that did not make it any easier for the womankind in general. (I am just reading a book about the woman's lot in 17th century Britain by Antonia Fraser. Both an informative and horrifying reading...)

Gil, there is plenty of information and evidence out there. Just go and get it, instead of building straw feminists on this blog...

Gabriel Syme at gabriel at samizdata dot net

by a reader on Tue, 06/17/2003 - 11:10 | [reply](#)

Gil's flawed logic

Ok, this is the last comment I'll make on this topic.

My only point in commenting at all here was to point out that assigning responsibility to the husband on such meager specific evidence as that in the referenced article seemed to discount the moral agency of the woman.

I'm well aware of the oppression of women in that society and others, but I'm reluctant to assume that things that are common must hold for a particular case. This seems prejudicial to me, and disrespectful to the woman at least as much as to the man.

David's "succinct" explanation of **The World's** pronouncement was that it was based on the specific facts of this individual case and the choices those individuals made. I didn't see enough such facts to warrant such a pronouncement.

Apparently the suggestion that people here are guilty of some of the mistakes of collectivist "loony feminism" has touched the nerves of many who fancy themselves as individualists.

Perhaps reflexive denial is not the best response to the suggestion.

These are easy mistakes to make. We all make them.

by **Gil** on Tue, 06/17/2003 - 18:53 | [reply](#)

Sexism & suicide

Gabriel,

If what you are saying is correct then female suicide rates in Egypt would be high. In fact according to this website (sorry I don't know how to do the linking): <http://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/IASR/suicide-rates.htm> it shows that Egypt has the lowest female suicide rate in the world. If the typical Egyptian male is a 'sexist pig' (who is likely to want a son much more than a daughter) it would still be highly untypical for his wife to commit suicide as a result.

I'd wager my house that there were other more significant factors

involved.

Paul P

by a reader on Thu, 06/19/2003 - 12:35 | [reply](#)

Something...

Something I agree with **The World**, how odd. And it's funny too.

And the Leonist says: Vile bastard husband indeed, death to all vile bastards!

Alice, Gil, shame on you! Get down of your pedestals!

Leo,

<http://eraserewind.blogspot.com>

by **Leo** on Wed, 06/25/2003 - 16:05 | [reply](#)

Sociobiology and scientific illiteracy.

"Sociobiology" is supposed to consist of blaming things on "mutant genes"? Sheesh. Now that's just sheer scientific illiteracy. I recommend **a remedial dose of Cosmides and Tooby**.

by a reader on Sat, 07/05/2003 - 22:21 | [reply](#)

Re: Sociobiology and scientific illiteracy.

Cosmides and Tooby say:

Evolutionary psychology is not behavior genetics.

Behavior geneticists are interested in the extent to which *differences* between people in a given environment can be accounted for by *differences* in their genes. EPs are interested in individual differences only insofar as these are the manifestation of an underlying architecture shared by all human beings. Because their genetic basis is universal and species-typical, the heritability of complex adaptations (of the eye, for example) is usually low, not high. Moreover, sexual recombination constrains the design of genetic systems, such that the genetic basis of any complex adaptation (such as a cognitive mechanism) *must* be universal and species-typical (Tooby and Cosmides, 1990b). This means the genetic basis for the human cognitive architecture is universal, creating what is sometimes called the **psychic unity of humankind**.

By that definition our criticism, and our mockery, are intended entirely for behaviour geneticists and not at all for 'evolutionary psychologists'. However, we doubt that the latter science, thus defined, can possibly discover anything of philosophical significance about human beings. It is on a par, in that respect, with the equally

worthy sciences of, say, botany or entomology.

Moreover, Cosmides and Tooby hint that they doubt the claim of *behaviour genetics* to have a subject matter in the case of humans. Though it is not clear that they doubt it strongly enough, we are not inclined to quibble.

by **Editor** on Wed, 05/18/2005 - 16:49 | [reply](#)
