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International Not-All-Women's Day

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It is the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. A cause for celebration?

Yes and no. Women's emancipation will not progress as fast in the next 100 years as it has in the past century. In many cases it might even regress.

Political freedom (the right to vote, to run for office and to free speech), economic freedom (access to education and paid work), and sexual freedom (the right for an adult woman to conduct her private life as she

sees fit) are relatively new gains for women in the West. They were achieved at a breathtaking pace in the past century.

Yet the progress enjoyed by an overwhelming majority of women in the West stands in stark contrast to the different reality for women outside the West.

In the Arab-Muslim world, most women are deprived of access to education. Literacy rates for women are dismally low. Their sexuality is controlled by a patriarchal order, and they have limited opportunities for economic self-reliance.

In many parts of Asia, prejudices against the girl-child persist, resulting in the abortion of girl fetuses or the abandonment of baby girls. Asian girls and women also suffer disproportionately from the evil trade of sex trafficking--a modern day slavery.

Poverty and civil wars affect girls and women in Africa in ways that men are not affected, because mass rapes lead to unwanted pregnancies and infection with H.I.V. and AIDS.

Moreover, shocking numbers of girls die giving birth because their bodies are not ready to bear children, or because genital mutilation had caused them to suffer a fistula in childbirth, one of the most painful deaths imaginable.

Why in 2010 is there such a gap between the rights of women in the West and those in developing nations, especially in the Muslim world?

Poverty is one answer, and extensive research and a lot of money have been invested in hopes of reducing that. All sorts of programs help educate women in places like Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Micro-finance programs and other initiatives help women in poor countries not only survive but also escape poverty.

Poverty is not the only variable. Much of the oppression suffered by women outside the West, especially in Muslim lands, is the result of principle: of values, convictions, habits and traditions that are passed from generation to generation and enforced through persuasion, peer pressure and, too often, force.

History shows us that women in the West have also dealt with similar problems. Here, too, entrenched beliefs limited a woman's life to child bearing and other wifely duties. Laws in Europe and the United States once banned women from voting, holding public office, inheriting wealth or filing complaints if raped or beaten by their husbands. Yet in the past century all such forms of discrimination have been abolished.

When women look back in 2110, they should be able to laugh about how skewed things were then, when only Western women enjoyed equality.

Aside from the obvious differences between rich and poor countries, how can we explain the persistently inferior position of women outside the West? After decolonization, countries became independent and free to fly their flags and pursue their own path to nationhood. Why didn't women share in this freedom?

There are two interrelated reasons.

The first is a shift from the idea of universal human rights to cultural or relative rights. Former colonies wanted to define themselves against the West and revive their "authentic" cultures, which was generally bad news for women.

Second is the decline of Western power relative to non-Western civilizations, especially Islam. The end of empire meant that colonial powers ceased to enforce human rights, notably women's rights. We often forget that British officials in India campaigned against widow-burning and female infanticide.

A recent incident illustrates my point.

In January, a Saudi father, whose name has not been released, sold his 12-year-old daughter to his 80-year old cousin for the equivalent of \$22,600. The elderly man, who lives in the city of Buraidah, was denounced by human rights activists for raping the child. The girl screamed in protest and resisted the old man's advances. She ended up in a hospital, bleeding. Her new husband had apparently already married three other young girls.

As a sovereign nation, Saudi Arabia simply states that such situations must be seen in perspective. Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child as any person under the age of 18. It also signed and ratified Article 16.2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which states that "The marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory."

But Saudi Arabia did so with the stated reservation that "In case of contradiction between any term of the Convention and the norms of Islamic law, the Kingdom is not under obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention."

Other countries have tried to wiggle out of human rights agreements, and especially the protection of the rights of women. More and more nations and communities assert their "cultural rights" and have revived old religious and ethnic principles for regulating communal affairs.

This trend means a rejection of individualization and the dismissal of universal human rights as Western imperialist norms. Meanwhile, the rise in the West of movements that "celebrate" cultural diversity has provided old misogynistic traditions with the legitimacy they need.

Many left-leaning thinkers focus only on socioeconomic variables to explain the terrible plight of most non-Western women.

But all these factors--the decline of Western power, the rise of cultural relativism within the West, the one-sided preoccupation with socioeconomic issues and the revival of old ethnic and religious identities--combine to make the emancipation of women outside the West extremely difficult.

Western women once faced some of these challenges some of the time. But not all of them combined, as do most non-Western women, and especially those women born into Islam.

For these reasons, the next 100 years will not be as thrilling for women as the last 100 years. For women outside the West to achieve the same progress as Western women have achieved, we need to identify the principles underlying those ethnic and religious traditions that so many today aspire to revive and or preserve.

Feminists need to be wary of the celebration of "cultural diversity" unless they want to inadvertently celebrate polygamy, child-marriage, marital rape, honor killings, wife beating, selective abortion of female fetuses and other traditions that are now legitimized in the name of culture.

Those who are passionate egalitarians need to broaden their agenda from social and economic issues and find the courage to identify the cultural factors that often cause all sorts of poverty--not just material poverty but also intellectual poverty, cultural poverty and moral poverty.

The West may no longer have the power to enforce universal human rights as the British did in India. But Westerners run many aid programs in non-Western nations. Most of these programs are value-neutral, and pose no challenge to the cultures of recipient nations. That must change.

Aid organizations must identify precisely the female-unfriendly norms and practices of a community and offer help based on the understanding that they will adopt an alternative set of principles in exchange for aid.

Finally, we need to educate non-Western women to recognize the discriminatory beliefs and ethics of their own cultures and religions. The old Saudi man who married the child, after all, was following his religion.

Unless we in the West unite to assert the universality of human rights and women's rights, the next 100 years will be bleak for women in the rest of the world.

When women look back in 2110, they should be able to laugh about how skewed things were then, when only Western women enjoyed equality.

The challenge for the next century is to make sure the globalization of feminism trumps cultural relativism.

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