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Women and Human Rights

—How Much Progress Have We Made?

Is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) worth the paper it's written on as far as women are concerned? We may well ask this question when we consider the position of women in the world today, because for millions of women, human rights are, at best, an abstract concept far removed from the daily realities of life. For women, human rights have proved much easier to invoke than to realise. Of course many people, men as well as women, across all continents, find their human rights infringed upon and violated in a variety of ways; but in practice women are often disproportionately affected by the collective failure to secure and implement human rights effectively. While there's a tendency in some quarters to draw a theoretical distinction between civil and political rights ('hard' human rights) and social and economic rights ('soft' human rights), in practice a deep interconnection between economic agency and political agency betrays the falseness of any firm distinction. In other words, poverty and political marginalisation often walk hand in hand.

WOMEN IN THE WORLD TODAY

Extreme poverty is possibly the most stark example of unequal gender relations (often compounded by race issues) contributing to the denial of human rights. Of those suffering extreme poverty today, that is, the billion-plus people who survive on less than $1 U.S. per day, seventy percent are women and girls. Access to food, water and shelter—the key essentials of life that ensure our most basic human rights—are distributed in such a way that systematically excludes and discriminates against women.

Very simple medical interventions could save the lives of almost all the women who die as a result of childbirth—one woman every minute—and yet, even the minimal health care required to support the natural process of childbirth is denied to millions of women in developing countries. It is not simply that resources are scarce; rather, the problem rests with the uneven distribution of resources and the low priorities attached to meeting women's needs.

Similar patterns can be observed in other areas of social and economic life. Of the hundred million children missing out on primary schooling today, two thirds are girls—a discrepancy that becomes even more marked in secondary and higher education. Three quarters of the world's illiterate adults are women.

On a global level, women put in two thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of its food (incidentally, a reality far removed from the European stereotype of women as homemakers rather than breadwinners). Yet women earn only ten percent of income globally, and own only one percent of the world's property.

It's not simply economic, though. Even in countries where women have some degree of economic independence, they are still under-represented within political structures and institutions. Women constitute only eight percent of persons in government worldwide and hold a mere fourteen percent of parliamentary seats. These figures reflect the reality in rich countries with strong democratic traditions, as well as that of poor countries or those with more fragile governance.

Another indicator of the status of women around the world that bears no direct correlation to poverty, geography, nationality, or ethnicity, is that of violence against women. This encompasses a range of actions, from domestic violence, to sexual abuse, to human trafficking, all of which not only violate women's rights, but also destroy women's lives. The United Nations estimates that one in three women experiences some form of gender-based violence during her lifetime.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Yet this rather depressing global picture is not inevitable. Rather, it sets us a historical challenge. Back in 1929 the English cultural theorist and novelist Virginia WOOLF claimed that with 'a room of one's own' and £500 a year, a woman could soar to the heights of cultural achievement. For women of WOOLF's generation this was a luxury open only to an economically privileged elite. Yet, even if few of us are destined to match the artistry of Virginia WOOLF, as I write today from my own desk, in my own home, I cannot but be aware of the benefits women of my generation have accrued from the efforts of our foremothers to secure rights for women.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that women really enjoy full equality in the UK (or many other parts of Europe, for that matter). We don't. There is a sizeable 'pay gap,' in that women earn significantly less than men in the workplace, even when 'optional' career breaks (such as those to care for young children or elderly relatives) are factored into the calculations. Women are disproportionately represented amongst people living below the accepted poverty 'breadline.' And there is significant under-representation within the political system (only 15 percent of elected representatives).

Unlike women in some parts of the world, however, we do enjoy equality before the law. We have voting rights, property and inheritance rights, employment rights, reproductive rights. We can live independently, we don't need chaperones on the streets, and for the most part we can choose whom to love, whom to marry, and how to live our lives. That wasn't necessarily true for women of my grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' era, so change definitely happens! What would those women think of our situation today, and the situation of women around the world?

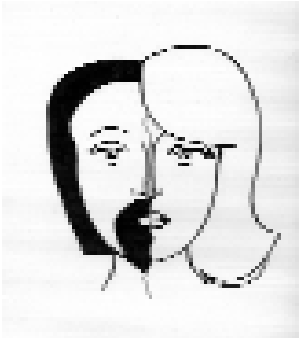
My great-grandmother, who was dead many years before I was born, was part of the women's suffrage movement in Scotland in the early years of the XXth century. She was a committed socialist who, with the limited formal education available to women of her background, was more than capable of making the intellectual connections between gender and class issues that too often seem to tax more highly educated minds in our own time.

I suspect that women of her generation, who campaigned not only for the right to vote, but also for the right to decent wages for their work, and for the right to a decent education, would find a lot in common with women around the world who are campaigning for women's labour rights and girls' access to education today.

By contrast, I suspect that my great-grandmother might find her world very far removed from *mine*—a life punctuated by higher degrees, the stresses of professional life, and international travel, though unencumbered by the demands of children or household management. Nevertheless, I hope we would be able to celebrate together the choices and opportunities her activism opened up to the daughters of subsequent generations.

The other perspective I hope my great-grandmother and I could share would be the recognition that the far-reaching political and economic changes brought about by the campaign waged by her and her sisters were hard-won and keenly contested. The most significant changes to the position of women did not come about due to some civilized discussions that led to a neat consensus.

Quite the contrary, there were big arguments, a hard-fought struggle and bitter divisions before women gained the right to vote, gained access to universities, and started to enter professional life. Many men played a positive part in that struggle, but ultimately women had to lead it for themselves. Then as now, we should not expect our stance on gender equality to make us universally popular.



MOVING FORWARD

To return to the question I posed at the outset, does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights make a difference for women? At the end of the day, international legislation enshrining human rights does not, on its own, change anything very much. But people do make a difference, by how they live and how they act.

As human beings with a shared understanding of our collective responsibilities, we can *use* the framework of human rights to assert the equality and dignity of all people, and to challenge the terms of any cultural discourse that posits women's subjugation and marginalisation as either natural, inevitable or ordained. That in itself is a significant step forward.

Suggested Reading

WOOLF Virginia, *A Room of One's Own.* London, 1929.
DE BEAUVOIR Simone, *Le Deuxieme Sexe.* Paris, 1949.
DAVIS Angela, *Women, Race and Class.* New York, 1981.
United Nations, *Progress of the World's Women.* www.unifem.undp.org (Note: all facts and figures in this article are drawn from this report.)

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Human Rights in Early Christian Writings

Human rights are not simple secular inventions. The Christian Church also fought for these values even before the edict of Milan (313 A.D.) during the time of the persecutions. Christian communities spread and developed in the Roman world—the centre of civilisation but also an unjust empire. The inhabitants of this state were not equal, women and slaves being the exploited social categories. In those difficult conditions, courageous Christian writers raised their voices against opression and discrimination.

THE CONDITION OF WOMEN

Women certainly had better conditions within the Christian communities than in the traditional Roman society. For this reason, Adalbert HAMMAN stressed that "women embraced Christianity also because the new religion offered them the chance of equality and emancipation, freedom of decision and expression."

Over the centuries there were attempts to improve the condition of women in the Roman world, but the results were not that visible. The Stoics and the Platonists realized the importance of this step, but they didn't succeed in changing the old traditions.

Girls were forced to marry when they were very young and they had to choose between the authority of their husbands (*cum manu*) and that of their fathers (*sine manu*). According to Roman law, the other possibilities were: *usus*—they had to accept the authority of the husbands after one year of marriage; and *coemptio*—in this case they were bought by their future partners.

The adultery committed by a woman was punished through the *Lex Iulia de adulteriis*, while men were free to have concubines. The wives were forced to eat separately, together with their children, and had no access to education. The feminine descendance (*cognatio*) was accepted only in the year 178, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, while before only the masculine (*agnatio*) was accepted.

Men were able to divorce and the procedure was quite simple. According to the Law of 12 Tables, they only had to ask for the key of the house and to banish their wives (*claves ademit, exegit*). This procedure was, however, much more complicated in the case of women and the post-marital situation was very hard for them. They were not accepted in public life, in politics, administration of justice, literature or sport.

The Christian writers of the first centuries condemned the discrimination of women, particularly their image as "possessed objects," and defended their freedom to marry the persons they loved. Clement of Alexandria stressed that women must be treated the way men are treated. They should love their husbands by conviction and not by force.

According to the same writer, women are different only from the physical point of view, but they are endowed with the same nature that men are. There is only one human nature (*mia fisis*). There is not a good and bad nature, but there are good and bad persons, men or women, who belong to the same nature. Virtue must be