



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

Overcoming Barriers, Violence against Women and Girls

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London, 18 April 2018

A hundred years since the beginning of women's formal political enfranchisement; 70th years since the drafting of the UDHR; a quarter of century since the Beijing Women's Conference affirmed powerfully that women's rights are human rights; now, today, with far greater recognition of the unconscionable suffering that denial of women's rights imposes; with much more evidence in hand of how widespread are violations against women's rights; how can it be that still, yet and once again, we must gather together to persuade, explain, defend and assert that fundamental and humanizing notion that women too have the right to live free from violence.

Violence against women in the work place, on the street and in the home; preventable maternal mortality deliberately not prevented; child marriage tolerated; the leaving unchallenged those cruel, multi-laned intersections between gender-discrimination and other discriminations – by race, by age, by disability, sexual orientation, by whom we love; nationalistic discourse that invents in the “other” someone less than worthy; continued instrumentalization in public policy of the State's often perverse preoccupation with the body of the woman, such as the calculated effort to deprive her of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, knowing well that to so deprive her is to sign a death warrant for thousands of women and the new born?

Today these dynamics combine to make of common garden variety misogyny and its offspring - violence against women and girls, something that continues to be deeply persistent in its change-resistance.

Sticky, viscous, adaptive and enduring — for all their differences, for all their distinctiveness - it seems our societies are each - over time - constructing and reconstructing a persistent, change resistance, dominant form of masculinity that requires, feeds off, even seeks to justify the subordination of women and of particular women in particular.

The ranks of those whose conduct helps to construct this narrow, confining toxic version of masculinity are legion, of course – ranked among them scions of the corporate sector and of religious authority; Hollywood fat cats; parliaments’ pontificates and technology’s geeks, stars of sport and stage; leaders even of countries, of communities; among them teachers in schools and doctors in the examination room ... they lend their entitled hands to mark out the boundaries of - and secure the bounty from - a narrowly construed *masculinity* that depends for its enjoyment on the subjugation, even the degradation, of women.

Styming, stifling narrow boxes that confine men and boys too – tiny boxes with so many “out you go” exit doors: “If you cry, you are not a man”; “If you stay home to care for children, you are not a man”; “If you negotiate consensual sex in marriage or out of marriage ...”, “If you are

not the boss", "If you don't have the last word .." then out of masculinity's tiny box you shall go.

Any identity walled in so rigidly by bigotry, either about the self or the other, imprisons human possibility, restricts human potential and undermines human creativity – **for the boxed in, the boxed out and the boxed about.**

Albert Einstein observed that "you cannot fix a problem with the same thinking that you used to create it". To achieve a future for women and girls that is sustainably different from the troubles of the present, we must not only think out-of-the-box, we must get out of these gendered boxes. Masculinity and femininity after all are not the primary states – human-inity is.

Today, these things cannot be left only as questions of tradition, opinion or even political preference. They are matters of law, international law and norms, and made so by the United Nations Member States.

International human rights standards establish equal enjoyment of all rights for all – not merely of some rights for the few – and from this prohibition of gender-based violence, in both the public and private spheres, national laws cannot rightly waiver, no matter the context history, culture, tradition or practice.

Friends, slavery was a tradition; colonization a custom; arbitrary killings of minorities a longstanding and still heinous practice. Long established, long justified, long tolerated, long accepted. But there is nothing magic about familiarity, longevity, ritual or popularity that makes a wrong right.

Any custom or practice rooted in disregard for the physical, sexual and mental integrity of the relatively less powerful by the more powerful is not a valuable tradition – it is a violation.

Even when disguised as “marriage”, still no culture’s integrity needs or depends upon the sexual violation of a girl child – that is not culture, that is abuse.

No rite of passage into adulthood, however treasured, requires the mutilation of a girl, the rape of an adolescent or her systematic enslavement – that is not initiation, that is degradation.

No marriage worth its name provides only for the sexual dignity of a husband – that is not a marital contract, that is a prison.

Excellences,

Discrimination, bigotry, xenophobia and are just repugnant. The incomparable Nelson Mandela – who would have turned 100 this year, emphasized that such “hate is learned.” We are not born to hate. No prejudice floats ready made in our blood from birth. No instinct for

contempt of a particular skin color, gender or sexuality lurks ready-made – pret-a-manger - in our cerebral cortex. All of it is learned. It thus all of it can, and must, be unlearned.

The world's future will not be made sustainable so long as its fruits are enjoyed by only some and never by all; so long as our social and economic systems stratify our societies not by effort, contribution or achievement but by where we are born, how we look, whom we love, how we worship and whom we identify as.

In an age of scarcity and a time of austerity, if we are to want **not**, then we must waste **not**. Neither through bigotry nor exclusion; nor by neglect or design, can we, should we, tolerate this continued waste of human talent and contribution. The wisest investment in this most renewable of energy is simply this – investment for the realization of human rights for each of us, to the exclusion of none of us, so that we can more surely better act in the interests of all of us.

For their talent, creativity and contribution to be more fully available, women and girls in particular must be more fully free – free from gender-based violence; free to decide on the number and timing of their children; free to walk the streets, path and laneways of their camps, town ships, villages and suburbs without fear; free in their marital beds and in their family homes - free from fear from the courtroom to the cabinet room to the boardroom to the school room to the bedroom.

It is not too late, but it is most certainly overdue, for the world to convert the power of condemnation of gender-based violence and inequality into effective action at scale for gender-based justice.

Yes, even today, still there are some – almost invariably self-serving, even cynical – claims that the human rights framework somehow is merely western, northern even imperialist and thus devoid of credibility. But were this true, frankly, we have to admit that not even the West is western.

Mesopotamia's 6th century BC Cyrus Cylinder which promised rights for the internally displaced; sub-Saharan Africa's 13th century Manden Charter which promised equality for women; Olympe de Gouges' 18th Declaration of the Rights of Woman; the 19th century anti-slavery struggle; the 20th century anti-colonial struggles for independence; the India and Pakistan delegates insistence that Article 1 of the UDHR be made gender neutral; the 21st century #metoo movement: down the centuries, across culture, faith and traditions - people have hungered for food, they have thirsted for water, but, as vehemently, they long for justice.

In this, there is no North or South, no right or left, neither East nor West. There is only the humane and the inhumane.

So, in our mid-wifery of this troubled and turbulent world, do recall that you don't have to be like me to respect my rights. I don't have to like

you to uphold your rights. We do not have to agree with each other to defend each other's rights.

Rights are not a beauty parade or a reward system. They are not the kindly dispensation of the powerful to the powerless nor some kind of nepotistic prize for good behaviour. Rights are that which cannot be taken from us. Rights are for the best and the worst of us; for each and every one of us; to the exclusion of none of us, in the interests of all of us. And against attack, they must be defended.

We must stand up. Stand up for that which is in our common good, to guard our common interest, to uphold our common rights, for that is the common wealth - the fact, the reality, that born you and I are, equal in dignity and rights.
