

*Disharmony in Blues and Pinks*  
:the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day

By J. Beth Ciesielski

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March 8 was the 100 th International Women's Day in Europe. It comes after Valentine's Day, which was originally celebrated only in the United States but is more and more celebrated abroad. On these days men are expected to show affection for the women in their lives by sending cards, candy, or flowers, having dinner out together, giving gifts of jewelry – and especially with visits. It is the time of year when spring and thoughts of love turn a young man's fancy to women and vice versa. It can be a sweet time for a woman to be respected and appreciated, if one ignores the rest of the year.

Since March 8 last year there have been many developments along the path to women's rights and equality in the world, some of them improvements but many discouragements. Of course, what has been achieved and what may come to pass cannot be framed in any year's time. But this 100th-year celebration might shed some light on our future. The Arab Spring of revolts against dictators that brought about huge street demonstrations and political changes in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and now even in below-zero weather in Russia, have brought about significant changes in the perspectives of women and men toward each other.

In this past year women were nominated for, and won, world prizes for their efforts. Interestingly enough, Time magazine chose "The Protestor" as its person of the year. Many thought The Protestor's portrait represented a woman with her hair and mouth covered but still speaking out. Only 12 women have received the Nobel Peace Prize, but this year three were recognized for their efforts on behalf of women in countries, "where they are routinely ignored or violated." Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first democratically-elected female president, is credited with bringing peace to formerly war-torn Liberia, while activist Leymah Gbowee led marches against rape and use of child soldiers in the country's civil war. The youngest-ever Peace Prize winner, Tawakkul Karman, held weekly protests against the Yemeni government beginning in 2008 with members of her

"Women Journalists Without Chains" group. Sirleaf said as she collected her prize, "My sisters, my daughters, my friends; find your voice."

It seems this year some women are finally finding the courage to speak out in countries where silence has long been a requirement for survival. Samira Ibrahim was one of seven women protesters subjected to humiliating virginity tests by the Egyptian military in Tahrir Square last March. The Egyptian Spring has yet to fulfill its promise of a more open and democratic Egypt, having in many ways been coopted by former President Murabak's followers and the military. But Samira filed a case for sexual assault against the military officer, not a doctor, "who kept his hand inside her for five minutes to check her virginity."

"I felt like I was raped," she said. The military tried to portray the women as dirty prostitutes rather than dedicated protestors and claimed a virginity test was needed to prove they had not been raped by soldiers, as though only virgins can be raped. A military court later found the officer not guilty. Human rights are not yet an intrinsic part of this patriarchal society. Samira vows to continue her fight.

"The future of Egyptian women is in danger," she said, from the Islamists and the military.

This primitive attitude is not limited to Islamic countries, however. In Norway, a country well-respected for its equal rights, it is still not clearly a criminal offense to rape one's wife. In 126 countries all sex is legally considered consensual in a marriage. That this is not a true reflection of what can happen shows that women are still treated as property. It is time for the world to agree that the best antidote for any sexual violence is greater gender equality across the board.

In Saudi Arabia, Shaima Jastaina protested the rule that women are not allowed to drive a car. There has been an ongoing protest since the 1990s when 50 women lost their jobs for flouting the rule that forces women to rely on male relatives, taxis or drivers. Jastaina claimed driving is a basic human right and deliberately challenged the law, becoming the first woman to be tried and sentenced for this "crime" against an unfair law. She was charged with ten lashes of the whip, which was overruled by the late King Abdullah. But the judicial decision has not been dismissed.

In Israel, a vocal sect of ultra-Orthodox Jews has gained more dominance in politics. It demands no women on buses, as speakers, or as singers for mixed groups. It advocates the separation of sexes in public and at religious events, and clothing limitations. These are the usual ways that some religious men, who claim to speak in the name of god, use god to dominate women. The expression *hadarat nashim*, the exclusion of women, is mentioned frequently now in public discussions as though it should be an accepted policy. It seems ironic that there are Israeli rabbis who have so much in common with fundamentalist imams: both ensuring their religious and political power by controlling women.

In Egypt in December, where the inspiring revolution for democracy has turned into military control with religious support, a woman dressed in a loose covering garment known as an abaya, was severely beaten by the police at a protest. Her robe was torn off, revealing a blue bra. The shock of seeing that bright blue bra on a helpless woman set off a storm of protest against the military, and even against the woman for not wearing more modest clothes underneath her robe. In countries where the media is not hampered entirely by politics or religion, it has long been known that under their required public clothes, the *habibs* and *abayas*, some Islamic women dress in western clothes for each other and to please themselves as some release from their confining life. It seems that for some men, however, any display of independence, even a private one, must be stopped. This obsession with controlling others has been proven again and again by world research to be detrimental to the health of men and to the economies of their countries. An Egyptian flag featuring a blue bra in the center instead of an eagle was waved in the streets in this woman's defense. There is hope that this indicates some understanding of the rights of women. But it may have only been a short moment of sanity in Egypt's increasing turmoil.

There are some positive signs. If economics and power are keys for women to achieve equality in the world, then we need more women in the work force with equal pay and equal rights. To achieve this, we need more women in politics. For the first time, there are women candidates for the presidency of two countries long known for their patriarchal systems: Egypt and Mexico. The Arab and Latin worlds have long held traditions of male dominance in the home, in religion, and in politics, often combining all three in a triumvirate of destructive macho behavior. That there are women candidates for president of these countries is only a first step; whether these women are supportive of other women is the next.

In China, women and men now must share property equally. As with most things Chinese though, there is a different understanding of what that means. Chinese women have been "educated" by their parents to only choose a husband who already owns a house. For many Chinese men, this has been a great impediment to marriage unless they are much older, or their parents buy them a house that the bride cannot inherit. Now, both the groom and bride can contribute to their home and both can share equally in it if there is a divorce. It appears that some parents are not pleased with this new financial equality.

In Iran, long considered a country where daily choices are severely limited by politics and religion, which are often intertwined with no distinction, women are divorcing men at an unprecedented rate. The historical Persian saying that a woman enters her husband's home in a white wedding dress and leaves in a white funeral shroud is no longer true. The skyrocketing divorce rate has changed that view of a woman's life, but not always for the better.

Switzerland is now considering enforcing a policy banning forced marriages as contrary to Swiss culture. Some critics, however, worry that this is less about protecting victims of forced marriage than it is about targeting Muslims. That fact that theft is also against Swiss culture, but still occurs, implies that the policy is focused more on Muslim ideology than protecting women. But at least there is finally public discussion of the consequences of forced marriage.

And then there is the United States, which considers itself the guiding light for human rights – but is viewed that way by other countries less and less. The Republican presidential primary debates have shown the obsessive need of many religious political male leaders to try to mandate what women can and cannot do. Some analysts refer to this effort to control the bodies of women as "pelvic politics." Sex in politics used to refer to the bad behavior of bad boys with bad women. Now, it means how to legally control the private behavior of half the population. Where is the wisdom in making general laws to deal with complex situations and personal decisions? But then this obsessiveness seems to have nothing to do with wisdom at all.

Dogma is often referred to as that form of indoctrination where self-proclaimed judges of the human condition claim perfect and complete knowledge of what others should and should not do. Nazism, Communism, McCarthyism, Marxism, Stalinism, and other religious and political ideologies have all been detrimental to the rights and obligations of people to make their own decisions and be responsible for them. The Catholic Church has lost trust worldwide because of its long failure to protect women, and to protect children from pedophile priests. One wonders at the connection between those with little self-control and their unquenchable need to control others. Certainly data shows that Catholics are not listening to their bishops concerning contraceptives and

abortion rights. According to the Guttmacher Institute, a large majority of American Catholics ignore the Church's teaching against contraceptives; 98 percent of Catholics already use some form of birth control. It appears that the shameless bishops are turning to politics to mandate what they cannot control through faith alone.

The Pink Ribbon trademark has been carefully protected by the non-profit Komen Foundation in its efforts to raise money for cancer protection. Naturally, one would assume that women's health is an issue that all can agree on. But Komen's recent efforts to deny further funding to Planned Parenthood on the grounds that the women's health care provider was being "investigated," (clearly nothing more than a political effort against abortion rights) brought such a backlash against Komen that it quickly reversed what it ironically claimed was an effort "to avoid controversy." It fired the official blamed for the fiasco while thousands of women sent their donations to Planned Parenthood instead. The Pink Ribbon looked mighty tattered in contrast with the Blue Bra Flag.

There are three ways to alleviate these continuing efforts to control and dominate women. One: eliminate all public funding of religious organizations. Two: eliminate all exemptions from local, state or national laws for any organization. Three: complete separation of church and state, for the protection of both.

If men were subjected to any of these examples of demeaning and life-threatening treatment, I am sure they would recognize that equality of the sexes is also in their best interest. We must articulate and emphasize the political and economic empowerment of women, grounded in a framework of human rights. Secular Humanism is an ethical way of thinking and living that respects others and encourages everyone to act wisely and responsibly, with kindness and concern.