ABSTRACT:
Where are the men who will fight for gender equality? Where are the men who will insist that women and girls get an equal welcome into the world, equal food, education, and healthcare? Too often men stay silent in order to maintain the benefits of their dominant status. For their part, religious leaders have not led in the fight for gender equality. Often they are part of the problem.

KEY WORDS: GENDER EQUALITY, ROLE OF MEN, ROLE OF RELIGION

For several years, Canadian Stephen Lewis was the U.N. Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa. I have his words posted right above my computer: “I challenge you to enter the fray against gender inequality. There is no more honorable or productive calling, there is nothing of greater import in this world. All roads lead from women to social change.” He is right. We have to imagine a world where all people, men and women in equal partnership, with no artificial legal, cultural, religious, or other barriers work together for the greater good. We have a long way to go.

Very recently in Nigeria, 14-year-old Wasila Umaru was forced by her father to marry 35-year-old Umaru Sani. Her husband told her to prepare a celebratory meal for himself and 4 friends. She put rat poison in the rice dish, ending both the “celebration” and 4 lives. She was caught in a vice from which she saw apparently no escape. Early and forced marriage is classified as modern-day slavery by the U.N. labor organization, and Nigeria’s Child Rights Act prohibits marriage before 18.

But the ruling is often ignored in favor of Islamic Sharia law that holds particularly in northern Nigeria. For humanists, there is of course no God to be a prophet of but Muslims say that, because the “prophet” Muhammad
married Aisha when she was 6, and consummated the marriage when she was 9, child marriage is sanctioned by God.

Where is justice in this case? What man, father, husband, or imam will stand against this evil? What man will go to the barricades to fight for girl children, for gender equality?

The title of the cover story of a 2010 issue of *The Economist* asked “GEN-DERCIDE: What happened to 100 million baby girls?” The answer of course is sex selective abortion, female infanticide, and neglect of the girl child. A holocaust many times over. My letter printed in a subsequent issue stated that women are complicit in the preference for having sons over daughters, and that they must be so discouraged by their own low status in society that they commit or permit this evil.

What I absolutely do not understand is that patriarchal cultures, which in the 21st century are universal, seem not to understand that there has never been a human being who has not come out of the womb of a woman. It might seem silly to say, but if all men disappeared, yet there remained sperm in sperm banks, humanity could start over. In contrast, if all women disappeared, that’s the end of humanity pure and simple. So men, if you cause your daughters in utero or your infant or girl child to disappear, for the sole reason that she is female, you are killing half of your chances to pass down your DNA. Where are the men who will say this, who will teach this to their cultures?

Right now, I’m reading the book, *I am Malala.* The author says that in her Afghan family, even with her enlightened father, the women ate the wings, and backs of the chickens; the men, the breasts and thighs. Joan Holmes, former president of the Hunger Project, has said, “In much of the developing world, a little girl eats last and least. She is up to three times more likely than boys to suffer malnutrition.” Where are the men who understand that malnutrition in girls will result in both physical and perhaps mental handicaps for the babies they will eventually bear? I notice that in this last sentence I am defining a girl by her child bearing capacity. Ridiculous. Shame on me. She should be fed because she is a human being. Equal food for equal humanity. Where are the men who will say that?
The first few pages of Jimmy Carter’s new book\textsuperscript{6} struck me as very profound. He grew up in the deeply racist south with a system of racial apartheid supported by the entire power structure. He says: “Even those in the dominant class who disagreed with the presumption of black inferiority remained relatively quiet and enjoyed the benefits of the prevailing system.”

And then he goes on: “There is a similar system of discrimination, extending far beyond a small geographical region to the entire globe, it touches every nation, perpetuating and expanding the trafficking in human slaves, body mutilation, and even legitimized murder on a massive scale. This system is based on the presumption that men and boys are superior to women and girls, and it is supported by some male religious leaders who distort the Holy Bible, the Koran, and other sacred texts to perpetuate their claim that females are, in some basic ways, inferior to men, unqualified to serve God on equal terms. Many men disagree but remain quiet in order to enjoy the benefits of their dominant status.” Wow! He might have called it the “sin” of not speaking out to right a wrong. Or worse yet, the “sin” of not sharing that chicken breast with your wife. Actions speak louder than words.

Where I profoundly disagree with Carter is his insistence that “people of faith offer the greatest reservoir of justice, charity, and goodwill in alleviating the unwarranted deprivation and suffering of women and girls. This includes popes, imams, bishops, priests, mullahs, traditional leaders, and all their followers who search for ideals and inspiration from a higher authority.” Balderdash! It is the fairy tales (Adam and Eve, sons and prophets of a non-existent God) perpetuated by all of the above which have contributed to the lamentable state of gender inequality in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. We have to start “worshipping” reason and common sense.

When you look around the world, the countries where life is the most stable, prosperous, peaceful, and predictable are those where there is a fairly decent approximation of gender equality, where education and health are priorities, and where there is an approximation of separation of church and state. Where human life is the most miserable, unstable, and violent, you find enormous gender inequality and little separation between church and state.

We need all governments to prioritize education and health. Secularly educated healthy people who can read and understand the written word and
who understand the basics of science generally make better choices than those who don’t. If only people understood the 4 billion year old process of the evolution of life on planet earth! Do people think that God would create human beings where one in every fifteen females sans access to reproductive healthcare would die in childbirth at some time in her life? That is what an existing God who “loved” humanity would never dream of, right? Humanity’s monotheistic God loves women who have wide pelvises so that they can survive childbirth without medical intervention? Huh?

Is it any wonder that of all the illiterate people on the planet today, two thirds of them are women and girls? Think of how circumscribed your life would be if you couldn’t read. Illiteracy and ignorance have been tools used by male dominated cultures to keep women in their place. The strategy has been very effective.

“In women the world has the most significant but untapped potential for development and peace.” Those are words of a man, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. Two thirds of the extremely poor as defined by the United Nations are women and girls. Illiteracy equals poverty. If what the Secretary General says is true, and it is, then as a world leader, gender equality should be his one and only calling.

I am co-founder of a grassroots movement called 34 Million Friends, which dates from 2002 when the George W. Bush administration refused to release $34 million to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). 34 Million Friends asks 34 million people to take a stand for the women of the world and for their access to reproductive health and family planning with $1. The effort has raised a lovely $4.3 million over 12 years. Colin Powell, as then-Secretary of State, was made to announce Bush’s decision (of which he disapproved) to the world. He sold women down the river. He should have resigned that day, July 22, 2002. He would have saved himself a lot of grief.

As a guest of UNFPA in Senegal in 2003, I visited a co-ed elementary school where I obtained a little children's writing booklet. Its front bore both the seal of UNFPA, and of the Ministry of Education of Senegal, along with this message: “Little girls have as much right to food, education and health care as little boys.” Over the years I have shown this to thousands of Americans. They are all shocked by it. The present head of UNFPA, Dr. Babtunde
Osotimehin, a Nigerian, has been one hell of an outspoken man. He emphasizes family planning, asking states to ease abortion laws, and using the bully pulpit to tout the centrality of gender equality to any hope for a decent future for humanity. He wonders why 8.7 million young women ages 15 to 24 resort to unsafe abortion every year. He asks governments to explore why more than 200 million women in developing countries who want to prevent pregnancies don't have access to contraception. He calls men to account. UNFPA calls village men together to educate them on the health implications of family planning for their wives and children. In so many cultures women have to ask permission from their husbands and/or their religious leaders to use family planning. I have previously written that lack of access to safe legal contraception and abortion is a form of gender based violence. I think I am the first person to do that.

If you are not aware of the omnipresence of gender based violence in our world, you are not paying attention. It took our own Congress many months to finally reauthorize our own Violence Against Women Act. With the current male dominated religious bent of the present House of Representatives, there is no chance that the International Violence Against Women Act will be approved by Congress. Some CongressMEN have decided that it would be exporting feminism and trying to impose our “western” values. So it’s OK to export US values like the profit motive and unfettered capitalism, but not US values opposed to violence against women?

The United States is one of 6 countries including Iran, Sudan, and Somalia that have not ratified the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Of course, there is enormous hypocrisy in these matters. For instance, Saudi Arabia has signed on, but still prohibits its women from driving. If I were a Saudi woman, I would “drive” right out of the country. When will the US ratify CEDAW?

June 20 was World Refugee Day. There is an unprecedented number of refugees today to the tune of 51 million. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has become the emergency room for women and children fleeing the barbarous wars and conflicts waged by men over power, religion, and resources touching vast swaths of the globe. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted unanimously on 31 October 2000, called for the
adoption of a gender perspective that includes the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction.

It was the first formal and legal document from the Security Council that required parties in a conflict to respect women’s rights and to support their participation in peace negotiations and in post-conflict reconstruction. It passed after lobbying by dozens of women’s organizations and the U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which is now U.N. Women. My comment would be two-fold. The resolution has been more honored in the breach than in the implementation. I would argue that if it had been lobbied for by dozens of men’s organizations, it would have been enforced. Where are the men?

Lastly, at age 73, I am absolutely flabbergasted at the misogyny and the hypocrisy afoot in the United States today. Substantial numbers of American women have bought in. The best way to ensure gender equality is for women to be able to choose if and when to bear children. And yet state after state under Republican control have adopted measures to micro-manage women’s reproductive lives, to remove choices. The huge majority of these state legislators are married, enjoy sexual intercourse with their wives or paramours, and probably wouldn’t dream of having “their women” obey waiting periods or undergo sonograms if an inopportune pregnancy were to occur.

One in three women in the United States has an abortion before age 45. This is not ideal to be sure, but it’s what women all over the world do and have done ever since human beings evolved the intelligence to know that it was possible. Twenty percent of all pregnancies anywhere and everywhere end in abortion safe and legal, or not. It makes almost no difference. And here in the U.S. these same “pro-life” legislators want to cut Title X funds and defund Planned Parenthood, whose family planning services prevent more abortions than all their rantings and ravings will ever do. These men would NEVER submit to the same limits on their own freedom and liberty, two words they love to throw around ad infinitum. Hypocrisy up the wazoo! I wrote a cute piece once about a male politician who found out he was pregnant. Wanting to avoid embarrassment at all costs, he rushed to make an abortion appointment and became furious about having to go through the same rigmarole that he had voted to put women through.
Why are more men not marching for women's lives and choices? After all, these women are their mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, grand-daughters, and nieces.

I refer you back to the words of Stephen Lewis. The fight for gender equality has no equal in importance. And quite frankly, men have more influence and power than do women. Their sharing of chicken breasts with their wives and daughters and their insisting on pro-women budget priorities in the hallways of power can help eliminate the unconscionable gap for which humanity is paying an incalculable price.

Jane Roberts is a retired French teacher and tennis coach from Redlands, California. She has been recognized for her work for 34 Million Friends by Ms. Magazine, Women's eNews, the American Public Health Association, and the United Nations Association. In 2005, she was one of 1,000 women worldwide nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize as part of the 1,000 Peace Women Project sponsored by UNESCO in Bern, Switzerland. The nomination was in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the first woman to win the prize, Baroness Bertha Sophie Felicita von Suttner from Bern. Roberts’ book, 34 Million Friends of the Women of the World, was published in 2005. Her article “Atheism: The Last Closet” was published in the February-March 2013 edition of Free Inquiry magazine.

Endnotes

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