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GENDER EQUALITY & EMPOWERING WOMEN:
MINORITY RIGHTS & DISCRIMINATION

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In 1893 New Zealand gave women the right to vote. A few years later, Australia gave women the right to run for elected office. It wasn't until 1979 that the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which recognized women's suffrage.

Here we are a hundred years later and we still haven't achieved gender equality. We can fly to the moon, we can clone mammals, we have our Apple gadgets that have transformed our lifestyles and , we have yet to eliminate many of the basic barriers to ensuring that girls and women are given the same chances as boys and men. We are familiar with the facts that demonstrate the still pervasive inequalities for women when it comes to access to education, health care, bank loans, equal pay for equal work.

What concrete steps can we implement that will ensure that we won't still be talking about gender equality another hundred years from now.

¹Tina Rosenberg writes; “ It is rarely good to be female anywhere in the developing countries to day, but in India and China the situation is dire: In India and China 1.5 million fewer girls are born each year than demographic predicts, and more girls die before they turn 5 than would be expected”.

Today, forced prostitution, sex trafficking, brides burning, violence against women is a wide world problem. Harmful cultural and traditional practices, continues to disfigure women with irreversible morbidity. There is still 5 thousand honors killing a year, the majority in the Muslim world.

¹ NY Times Magazine August 2009

Women are subject to arrange marriages due to poverty and also for variety of other reasons, they do not have the right to go school, work or travel without their father or husbands permission in many parts of the world.

²Throughout the world, women suffer a greater burden of ill health than men and are further disadvantaged by inequality of access to health care. **The report of the 1995 Beijing Conference stated, that “a major barrier for women to the achievement of the highest attainable standard of health is inequality, both between men and women and among women in different geographical regions, social classes and indigenous and ethnic groups.”** “Women’s health is also affected by gender bias in the health system and by the provision of inadequate and inappropriate medical services to women. (Beijing)”[14]. Gender bias in research has had an impact on our knowledge base about women’s health and illness.

³While trying to remedy the manifest inequalities that currently disadvantage women, it is also important to identify the ways in which gender stereotyping may damage men. Where societies expect men to be the “breadwinner” for example, some men will feel obliged to work extremely long hours with resulting damage to their physical and mental health. Similarly, the social expectation of what it means to be a “real” man may make it difficult for men who are ill to admit weakness. Men are expected to fight in wars and to undertake dangerous work such as mining, fire fighting and fishing. Societies train boys from early childhood not to admit fear and not to identify what they are feeling in order to prepare them for these roles. This can lead to health-damaging behaviors such as adolescent risk-taking, inability to communicate about feelings, and delays in seeking care for injury and illness.

When I consider my own journey, the journeys of my mother and grandmother and the stories that I have heard over the years as a gynecologist, I see many common obstacles that most women share.

We tend to be undereducated when it comes to finance. And we tend to be less physically developed which makes us more vulnerable to physical abuse. So instead of teaching our girls how to bake cakes, we need to teach them how to invest their money. And instead of teaching them how to sew buttons, we

2& 3, MWIA, publication on Gender

need to teach them karate. Perhaps training to use TASER for self-defense will be a solution to reduce violence against women.

Of course, the biggest challenges we face are still access to education and control of our reproductive systems. So we need to get our girls to school and equip them to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

So having traveled around the world, my prescription for solving the gender dilemma is as follows:

1. Take our girls to schools and teach them it is cool to be smart.
2. Teach our daughters how to avoid unwanted pregnancies
3. Get Physical and know how to fight back
4. Learn how to invest money.

Gender inequality is affected by socioeconomic status, cultural and traditional practices, access to education and health care, nationality, war and conflicts, religion, sexual orientation, age, statehood, displacement, immigration, ethnicity, aboriginal status, physical and mental abilities and disabilities.

Drawing on my life experience as a Moslem woman physician, growing up in a middle eastern country, studying and working in Europe, North America and many African countries, I would like to share with you few of my life journeys challenges and how I succeeded to rise from ashes again and again.

Hard work, commitment, discipline, perseverance and focusing on my life long dream and love for what I was doing was my blue print.

Looking at the issue of inequality from an obstetrician point of view,

I believe :

Discrimination against girls starts from before birth. The advance of technology has enabled us to identify the sex of the unborn child and sex selection for the families who prefer boys for economical and other reasons, has resulted in criminal acts of infanticide and so called missing girls in many parts of the world. Forced prostitution, Sex trafficking, acid attack, bride burning and mass rape are few of the brutalities that are inflicted on women in 21 century.

Girl child receive less nutrition, has less chance to receive education and has to carry the burden of the household chores.

Teenage girls pay higher consequences for premature sexual behavior than boys.

Girls become pregnant, before physically and mentally being prepared for caring for a child. She is also more prone to sexually transmitted diseases and their consequence

Violence against women at home, in the work place and across all ages and classes has not been eliminated as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the adoption of Resolution 1325. by the United Nations.

Safe motherhood, my life long concern and passion, has direct relationship with access to appropriate healthcare facilities and socioeconomic and cultural factors that affect power relations between man and woman in the family. Today still 1000 women die every day as a result of preventable pregnancy related problems.

Mature age, empty nest, mid life challenges and aging years are harder for women especially the marginalized group.

The fabrics of the society, has enabled men to remain active and have gainful employment into their old age. Even have the option of choosing much younger spouses. They have power, money, status and they remain connected and active. Good things, happens to powerful people.

Gender development and equal participation in decision-making in one's destiny influences the health and self worth. Feeling Powerless and lack of self-esteem affects the health and well being of women of any class, race or religion.

According to the World Health Organization, the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, and political beliefs, economic or social conditions.

In 1998, the World Health Organization defined health as “the dynamic state of complete physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

The Alma Ata Conference articulated the goal of “health for all by the Year 2000.” As was stated at the Beijing Conference in 1995, “the enjoyment of this right is vital to women’s life and well-being and their ability to participate in all areas of public and private life. However, health and well-being elude the majority of women.

We need more women with clear understanding of gender development and biological differences of men and women in high-ranking decision-making in the governments, universities and research institution.

Professional and well educated Women must be active partners in all health practices;

Health promotion & research

Disease treatment

Rehabilitation

Support and Palliation

Women physician must be savvy how to handle the finances. When the unexpected happens, in the business or in the marriage, lack of economical control and understanding is a major handicap.

Inequalities and discrimination at home, in the work place and society can be remedied only by investing in your mental and physical health, by acquiring skill and knowledge as well as advancing with the time .

Self-pity or self-destructive behavior is not an option.

The harder the barriers and injustices the more vigorously, must be the training and discipline to overcome and to succeed.

To compete in an environment, which are not so women friendly, we need to have more education, skills, knowledge, and healthier mind and body.

We will gain our rightful equal place on the table of life by;

Gaining knowledge, believing in ourselves, having vision for a better life with accomplishment, inner peace and happiness and owning our destiny.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the remarks of His Excellency Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury at the symposium; The role of Women in World peace sponsored by IHAN & Lehman college in spring of 2005. The publication is available on line www.ihan.org.

“An equitable advancement and involvement both men and women is a foundation for a sustainable culture of peace, which entails” respect for life, for human beings and their dignity, and for all human rights, as well as justice. Solidarity, tolerance and understanding.”

He also calls attention to the fact, however, that women’s interest, by and large, have been neglected in the peace process in most countries, resulting in male centered approaches to peace and security.

Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury points out that although recent work has noted the connection between war and masculinity, the role of women

continues to be the fertile ground for new and creative solutions to violence (see Braudy 2005)

To overcome the obstacle, that prevents, greater momentum in the movement for gender equality, we must examine not only the attitudes of specific genders but also social, political and economic policies. Gender equality hold out the promise of peace that begins in individual families and slowly spreads through out communities, our nations and, ultimately our world.

Sustainable peace is inseparable from Gender equality as said eloquently by Ambassador Anwarule Chowdhury, former Under Secretary General of United Nations for the Least Developing countries.

It is thus crucial to promote greater inclusiveness among women and men, among girls and boys, to build cross -gender solidarity, a prerequisite for a culture of peace.

Gender Equity is instrumental to shaping new forms of leadership and democratic institutions that will harness a culture of peace.

