



A Story of Courage and Perseverance, Revisited*

The day will come when man will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union, between the sexes that shall result in the highest development of the race.

—Susan B. Anthony

Half of humanity suffers from discrimination and violence everywhere in the world. Women in developing countries are hampered by many of the same concerns that affect females in other nations, but they face numerous other challenges to their physical and economic security, their rights, and their dignity. These barriers include poverty; illiteracy; a lack of rights; sociocultural and religious factors that legitimize and condone everyday violence; discrimination; and marginalization in the family, community, and public sphere. The failure of states to comply with national laws, corruption without fear of reprisal, dysfunctional public services, deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions, tribal cultures, and conservative social norms keep women—especially those from poor backgrounds—in the vicious circle of violence and insecurity, excluding them from public life. Since in many states, discrimination is enshrined in law, women are denied equal rights in marriage and divorce, child custody, inheritance, and so forth. Violence against females continues due to the absence of legislation prohibiting it, obstacles to justice, or the inaction of public authorities. The fact that the perpetrators of such brutality go unpunished helps create a culture of impunity that contributes to the repetition of these crimes. Recent surveys have shown that early and forced marriages; domestic and sexual violence; the mutilation of female genitalia; trafficking in women; forced prostitution; and the denial of access to property, work, education, inheritance, or health care remain widespread.¹

However, women are not only victims but also the main actors in their own emancipation. Over three-quarters of African women still work in the agricultural sector—representing almost half of that labor force—and, according to experts, provide 70 percent of food production and handle 80 to 90 percent of the processing, storage, and transportation of food.² In rural Africa, women work tirelessly from morning to

*See Rémy M. Mauduit, “A Story of Courage and Perseverance,” *Air and Space Power Journal—Africa and Francophonie* 2, no. 1 (1st Quarter 2011): 3.

night, but they often do not have the right to own land. By virtue of their hard work, presence in the informal sector, methods of clever organization, and production of food items, they represent economic and social agents of the first order in Africa. In some countries, it is not uncommon to find women holding the traditional male role—that is to say, providing for the family. Indeed, they sometimes even take care of their husbands financially.

In North Africa, women played an important role in the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, they took to the streets in large numbers—well before the Islamists and other opportunists—to claim the right to democracy, social justice, and dignity. Inevitably, they faced exclusion from public life as well as discrimination and violence from extremist groups or security forces, who usually acted with impunity. Those women earned the right to participate in the political and decision-making process. Unfortunately, the risks of losing their gains are real because politicians who wish to cling to power will readily sacrifice women’s rights to conservative forces.

Gender equality should be everyone’s concern. In Africa, as elsewhere, such parity is essential to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth. States should not only talk about it but also initiate governmental programs that address the root causes of inequality. They can end the abuses against women by taking bold measures and adopting more effective laws that penalize all forms of discrimination—regulations supported by strict and appropriate prevention. Heads of state should be held accountable for compliance with their obligations to women.

In one of the main achievements of the World Conference on Human Rights (the Vienna Conference), this organization formally recognized, at the global level, that *women’s rights are human rights*, that they are universal, and that they should supersede cultural values particular to each culture/civilization. As long as women suffer from violence and discrimination worldwide, however, it is hypocritical and irresponsible to say that they enjoy fully and equally all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Promotion of women’s rights is inseparable from the advancement of human rights, democracy, and development.

Rémy M. Mauduit, Editor
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Notes

1. See, for example, “The Epidemic of Violence against Women in Africa,” Rainbo Organization, accessed 14 April 2014, <http://www.rainbo.org/the-epidemic-of-violence-against-women-in-africa/>; Mary Johnson Osirim, “Crisis in the State and the Family: Violence against Women in Zimbabwe,”

African Studies Quarterly 7, nos. 2 and 3 (Fall 2003): 153–69, <http://asq.africa.ufl.edu/v7/v7i2-3.pdf>; and Thomson Reuters Foundation, *Women's Rights in the Arab World: The Worst and Best States for Women* (London: Thomson Reuters Foundation, November 2013), <http://www.trust.org/application/velocity/spotlight-extensions/womens-rights-in-the-arab-world/english/documents/final-results.pdf>.

2. See, for example, Rori Kramer, "Gender and Agriculture: Unlocking Africa's Potential" (Washington, DC: Women Thrive Worldwide, n.d.), <http://womenthrive.org/images/agfactsheet.nov17.pdf%20.pdf>; Saquina Mucavele, "The Role of Rural Women in Agriculture," World Farmers' Organisation, accessed 14 April 2014, <http://www.wfo-oma.com/women-in-agriculture/articles/the-role-of-rural-women-in-agriculture.html>; and Steve Ember, "African Women Farmers Working for Better Lives," Voice of America, 7 January 2014, <http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/agriculture-africa-women-farmers-plantwise-protection-pests-diseases/1823596.html>.