

Human rights from a woman's perspective

Rarely is the negation of human rights purposefully or knowingly propagated. It is rather in the implementation of legislation and policies that such negation comes about.

On the 10th of December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and nations. Commemorating the 70th anniversary of this Declaration this year, we have before us an opportunity to revisit its contents and take stock of the progress made to date.

The Declaration focuses on the protection of the fundamental human rights to equality for all free from discrimination, to life, liberty and personal security, to be free from slavery and degrading treatment; to be equal before the law; the right to fair public hearing, to be considered innocent until proven guilty, right to marriage and family life, to own property, to free movement and to seek asylum from persecution; right to nationality, to belief and freedom of thought and opinion; right to social security, education and adequate living standard; right to political participation.

These rights were propagated for all. However, their unequal enjoyment between women and men was acknowledged through the setting up of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1947, and then through the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW, 1979). More recently, the 2014 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) states clearly that there can be no real equality if women experience gender-based violence on a large-scale with institutions turning a blind eye.

Even with these international treaties in place, 35 per cent of women globally continue to experience either physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their life.

Without the basic human right to life, personal security and freedom from violence, the enjoyment of other rights is even less possible. It can be stated that the overall situation has improved in other areas. There are more girls in education with further efforts being made to address child marriage. The numbers of women in paid employment and of women owning their business are increasing, enhancing women's economic empowerment and added control over their lives. More women own their own property. Women's health worldwide is slowly improving. Women's participation in decision-making is on the increase both in the political as well as in the public and private sectors.

This progress has however been slow and not across the board. Education is still segregated, with few girls studying science and technology - ever more important fields in the digitalised world of work. This is reflected in the labour market with horizontal and vertical segregation, and the gender pay gap - 10-30% worldwide - that develops into a pension gap during the life course. Moreover, although more women are working, they are often still worse paid than men, in part-time jobs or in the huge informal employment sector with little protection and few rights. Women still count among the most-at-risk of abuse and poverty worldwide.

Political participation continues to be quite low globally, with some progress shown in those countries that have introduced special measures to address the situation. Women still made up only 21.4% of parliamentarians in 2013 and 17.2% of ministerial posts worldwide. In addition, women who are in

powerful positions often find themselves facing a daily salvo of sexist behaviour in spite of the fact that in many countries this is outlawed in the workplace.

One might ask what is at the heart of this slow development when so much effort is being made worldwide to bring about equality between women and men.

Undoubtedly, our societies have not been effective enough in addressing prevailing gender stereotypes. Moving away from the traditionally set roles of women and men remains a challenge not yet surmounted. Society still expects women to be the main carers of children and dependents despite their sharing with men of the family's financial responsibilities. Thus whilst women work longer hours, they earn less with limited control over their life that puts them at high risk when they find themselves in abusive situations. Women end up even poorer in old age as a result of the accumulation of these disempowering experiences.

From a woman's perspective, women are better off today, than seventy years ago, yet still far from being equal with men in the enjoyment of their human rights. On a daily basis, men and women in powerful positions worldwide applaud women's abilities, experiences and overall merit. Yet the much needed progress is still far on the horizon. Much still remains to be done for women to truly enjoy their human rights on a par with men. Words need to be put into practice.

It is time for effective action backed by robust commitment of all stakeholders including politicians and policy makers, be they women or men, as well as NGOs. It is time to decide on strategic plans with targets, timeframes, resources that obligate the reaching of objectives to bring about equality in all sectors, be they economic, cultural, social or political adopting a multisectoral approach. All concerned should be held accountable for the outcomes.

It is when women and men can celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a *fait accompli* that our societies can boast of the enjoyment of human rights by both women and men.

We need to act now and act decisively.
