



Counterclockwise from left:
Zainah Anwar, the executive director of Sisters in Islam. © REUTERS/ALBERT GEA, 2005.
Wangari Maathai, Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize laureate. © REUTERS/RADU SIGHETI, 2005.
Kavita Ramdas, president and CEO of the Global Fund for Women. © TERRY LORANT.



Nothing Short of a Revolution

REFLECTIONS ON THE GLOBAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

By Kavita Nandini Ramdas

IN TOGO, WEST AFRICA, A WOMEN'S legal rights group mobilizes widows to claim inheritance rights and demand pension payments from the government. A few years ago, they were living in penury, denied their rights to inherit their husbands' land, unable to support their families and often vulnerable to sexual abuse by male neighbors. Today they are leaders in their community and working to educate young women about their rights and their vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

In Yunan Province in China, the group Ecowomen leads a regional campaign to reduce the use of pesticides in agriculture, drawing connections to the impact on women's health and reproduction, the well-being of children and the safety of agricultural workers, most of whom are women. The group educates children on environmental sustainability and works to influence policy.

In Serbia and Montenegro, the Anti-Trafficking Center seeks to protect and defend the rights of girls and young women at high risk of being trafficked into sex work or other forms of exploitative labor. Its work begins with self-help groups of high school girls who are experiencing violence, abusive relationships and incest. The group's male allies also launched an initiative to deconstruct

patriarchal stereotypes and behaviors among men and boys who have grown up in a culture of violence in the aftermath of the recent Balkan wars.

In Bolivia, Mujeres Creando organizes indigenous women to ensure that women's voices are included in the new Constitutional Assembly that is to be launched under the leadership of President Evo Morales. Women hold very few positions of political power in the country and continue to live under situations of extreme poverty, lacking access to basic health care and education.

Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon find hope and economic independence in the programs of Association Najdeh, which trains and educates women in income generation skills and business management. At the same time, women and girls receive education about their own rights and support for their struggles against violence at home and in the community.

Five stories, five continents, five examples of women-led initiatives for change in their own communities. Each one of these examples is local, small scale, surviving on volunteer efforts and small grants. In many ways these may seem far from the kind of massive social interventions we have come to associate with the word "global." However, viewed through the lens of the Global Fund for Women, it is clear that these five efforts are part of an extraordinary, irreversible and growing movement to advance women's rights and participation in every part of the world. In its 18-year history,

the Global Fund for Women has heard from more than 25,000 women's organizations from countries as tiny as El Salvador and as huge as China. Indeed, its creators, Frances Kissling, Anne Firth Murray and Laura Lederer, were at least in part inspired by the burgeoning women's movement already apparent in 1985 at the UN sponsored Nairobi conference for women when independent nongovernmental organizations organized the first parallel meeting to a UN conference.

WHAT IS A GLOBAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT?

The dictionary defines the women's movement, or feminism, as a movement to secure legal, economic and social equality for women. It has its roots in the 19th century women's movement, which sought, among other things, to secure property rights and suffrage for women. The modern feminist movement in the West was galvanized by the publication of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Increasingly visible mobilization by women activists for equality began in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s across the United States and Europe. Among other goals, its advocates sought equal access to employment, equal pay for equal work, improved day care arrangements and the right to safe and legal abortions.

Although the modern feminist movement became best known in the West as a struggle by women to be allowed into previously exclusively male preserves, in

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much of the rest of the world, women's liberation efforts were closely linked with broader social justice movements. This was particularly true of women in the so-called third world who had been active and equal partners to men in anticolonial or anti-imperial liberation movements. Thus women in the Arab world struggled both against British and French imperialism and the traditional restrictions on women's freedom and mobility in their own societies. In South Africa, women played a critical leadership role in the African National Congress' battle against apartheid, while they also challenged long-held patriarchal beliefs that justified domestic vio-

OUR DISTINGUISHING MARKS

A Shared Analysis: Women's movements worldwide are too scattered and too diverse to claim a narrowly defined ideology, but there is a broad, shared analysis that sees discrimination in the prevailing social structure that privileges men over women as the main problem; in a word, patriarchy. Although the phrase was coined by early feminist theorists who emerged from the West, its analysis and fundamental quest for equality, dignity and justice are shared by movements of women in many different parts of the world. In the deepest sense, this analysis goes beyond merely seeking to make women equal with men. It dares to ask the

barriers to women's emancipation. Thus the movement seeks to dismantle the barriers that are used to control and restrict the free mobility of individual women and is determined to challenge those barriers in its own structures.

Equality: The movement is fueled by its belief in the equality of all human beings. From the earliest suffragettes to current activists there has been support for efforts that extend beyond gender equality—a vision that does not stop at equality between men and women, but calls for equality between slave and slave owners, between minority communities and majority populations and between other

Women's movements around the world define their struggle for justice and equality within the larger context of their own cultures and political realities.

lence and early marriage. In the Indian subcontinent, women fought alongside male colleagues in the freedom struggle while demanding changes in practices that harmed women and girls, such as dowry and the terrible treatment of widows. In the indigenous cultures of South America, women also waged a dual struggle, working alongside their men to push back the forces of industrialization and capitalist exploitation of natural resources while demanding recognition and dignity as women within their homes and communities. In each of these instances, women defined their struggle for justice and equality within the larger context of their own cultures and political realities. They eagerly sought solidarity and support from women around the globe, including Western feminists. But their movements were not anemic copies of a Western feminism; because of their connection to larger mass movements for national liberation, they tended to have a stronger class analysis than their counterparts in the developed world.

fundamental question: equal to what? It does not simply seek to give women the opportunity to participate in the existing world order as it is, but rather asks what is the most beneficial and effective way to organize society—not in order to simply maximize profit, but to enhance the quality of life for all human beings, women and men. It challenges the underlying premises of current social, economic and political structures with their assumptions of hierarchy, use of force and the privileging of the individual over society and the earth. In turn, feminism privileges a sense of shared possibility, equal opportunity, compassion and community over narrow linear definitions of tribe, nation and state.

Linkages: The global women's movement has from its earliest stages seen itself as being in a struggle to transcend traditional boundaries of class, religion, nation and region. It has a strong emphasis on building and strengthening alliances and networks and an understanding that isolation is one of the worst

groups of oppressed or marginalized people. Among a certain subset of feminist activists, sometimes referred to as ecofeminists, it also calls for equal consideration and care for other living beings and the planet earth.

Freedom/Liberty of Individuals: A common theme for women's movements across the globe is a challenge to restrictions on personal freedom and mobility. Women are often not free to move outside the home on their own, nor free to make decisions about their own bodies or their education and marriage. Even in countries where they have formally been accorded these rights, the environment of violence, insecurity and traditional expectations continues to confine and restrict women from exercising them.

Dignity of the Human Person: The women's movement is deeply concerned with preserving bodily integrity and places a high value on liberating women's bodies from the physical control of others. It also encourages women to take

comfort, delight and pride in the well-being and health of their own bodies. Around the globe, women and girls are often little more than beasts of burden who carry backbreaking loads and perform incredibly hard labor, mostly in service of others and with little control over the outcome or income generated as a result of that labor. In addition, women's bodies are routinely subjected to incredible violence both within and outside the home through rape, battery and assault. Women's bodies have, from the earliest times, been viewed as the property of male guardians—fathers, brothers, husbands. Women and girls have traditionally lacked the ability to control what is done to their bodies by others. In particular, women's sexuality has been seen as something to be controlled by practices that range from mutilation (foot binding in China and female circumcision in Africa) to death (honor killings in many parts of Latin America and the Middle East). Today discrimination against lesbians and transgendered individuals continues as a legacy of this fear of women's independent sexuality. In most societies women's ability to move freely outside the home and/or to take pleasure in their own bodies has been tightly controlled and restricted.

Diversity and Tolerance: Ours is a movement that believes in diversity—it understands that the conditions and circumstances within which women live are incredibly varied and complex, and that movements for justice emerge from a specific context within which women articulate a need for their own independence, freedom and equality. This is both the movement's greatest strength and its greatest challenge since it does not have the cohesion and centralized decision-making structures that can ensure it achieves the clout and influence it needs to make a consistent impact at national and international policymaking levels.

Nonviolence and Peace: For the most part, the women's movement worldwide

repudiates violence as inimical to the goals and objectives of true freedom and equality for all. Women and girls are so often the subjects of violence that women's movements have sought to make non-violence and peaceful strategies a high priority in all aspects of their work. This does not mean that women's movements cannot be forceful, determined and engage in resistance, but it does mean that activists for women's rights tend to be deeply



Mu Sochua, Minister of Women's and Veteran's Affairs in Cambodia. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GLOBAL FUND FOR WOMEN.

suspicious of the use of force as a method of resolving conflict. This is especially true since throughout history, wars have often been waged allegedly to protect the weak and defenseless, i.e. women and children, yet war almost always has the most devastating impact on the same women and children, leaving them homeless, vulnerable to disease and sexual assault and lacking in economic security.

Education and Economic Independence: Although women do more than two-thirds of the world's labor, they own less than one percent of the world's assets. They are paid less for the same work and remain vulnerable to poverty and abuse because they are dependent on others for

their own security and that of their children. Women have fought for decades for what has only recently been confirmed by numerous studies—giving women equal access to education and work and the ability to control their own income and inherit and own property benefits society as a whole by improving the health of children, reducing fertility levels and providing higher levels of education for both girls and boys.

OUR CHALLENGES

The women's movement has never had an easy time; its challenges to the fundamental ways in which most societies have been organized have ensured that it has struggled from its inception. Among current social movements, it is one of the youngest, barely a century old.

As well as playing itself out on the world stage, ours is the only social justice movement that locates its struggle in the most private and personal of venues—the family and the home. For other movements, whether national liberation struggles, worker's rights efforts or peasant mobilizations, the venues have tended to be public spaces: the factory, the fields, the polis, the state. But women's struggle

must be fought and has always been waged on two extremely different yet connected levels. It is a struggle for equality and justice in the public venues of workplace, government and international institutions, but it is also waged in the most intimate spaces where the individual woman and girl also faces the most significant threats to her safety, mental and physical well-being and personal self-esteem. As Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi said recently: “The women’s movement does not have big offices across the country, but we have a branch in every home in Iran!” The nature of this struggle is what makes the famous feminist saying “the personal is the political” so true.

This dual nature of the women’s struggle poses a special challenge for the movement. Contrary to the commonly held

But this reality is a challenge for maintaining momentum. If there is no “enemy,” then what do we go after? Where do we seek to make an impact and how can we achieve sweeping changes in the ways families, societies and laws are structured so that women and girls have a real chance? How can the movement challenge long-held assumptions about male roles and female roles without alienating men? How do we measure progress and what kinds of indicators are needed to show that the movement is making a difference?

OUR WEAKNESSES ARE OUR STRENGTHS

The contradictions outlined above are reflected in the fact that our strength arises out of those challenges. This is an intensely global and profoundly local

thing, but together on the broad issues) to advance an agenda for women’s human rights. This was most evident in the Beijing Platform for Action, approved in 1995 at the UN Conference for Women. Today, there is not a country in the world that does not at least claim to be doing something to improve the status and position of women and girls. In most democracies, women have won the right to vote and run for office; within families women have gained the right to control their own financial resources, own and inherit property and the ability to fight for the custody of their children. These are not insignificant achievements and they have certainly contributed to a world in which women’s rights are hailed as a global good from almost as many pulpits as the equally celebrated notion of “democracy.”

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view that it is a movement that is “anti-men,” it is not a movement against any particular group of people—capitalists, colonialists, factory owners or landlords. It is a movement against a system called patriarchy in which men benefit by oppressing women, gaining greater power and wealth in the process. It is a system in which both women and men are trapped in roles that prevent them from achieving or aspiring to their fullest potential. It is a movement in which both women and men can participate. Indeed what is striking about women’s movements, particularly in the developing world, is how closely they work with and rely on male allies in their struggle. As a Zapotec woman working to end domestic violence in her village said to me some years ago in Oaxaca, Mexico, “We explained to the men that if they beat us we cannot be strong and they need us to be strong so that we can stand next to them and support them as their partners. We do not try to be strong against them—we want to be strong for them and for us.”

movement all at once. It is not restricted to one country or one region—it is fought in small villages and big cities, in highly developed economies like Japan and desperately poor ones like Zambia. It is fought inside the home and at the workplace—to quote Eleanor Roosevelt, “in small places, close to home.” Indeed, it seems that from its inception, the women’s movement has understood the power of the personal connection that transcends boundaries of region, state and nation.

Women’s organizations in the global South have long counted on their sisters in the industrialized world to be allies in the struggle and have greatly valued the exchange of ideas, strategies and tactics that has marked the international women’s movement. From Mexico in 1975 to Nairobi in 1985 to the groundbreaking work done by women’s groups at the Cairo conference in 1994, women’s groups from North and South have worked in concert (not always in agreement about every-

WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

The dramatic world events of the past 10-15 years, including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, rapid globalization and its accompanying discontents and the rise of the United States as the global hegemon, have had a significant impact on the women’s movement. The challenges faced by women in the developing world and in countries of so-called “transition” have been dramatic and extreme. They are also deeply connected to the inequality underlying the current economic and political status quo. In particular, the women’s movement sees clearly how many aspects of globalization reinforce the oppression of those in the global South, with women, as always, bearing the brunt of new economic policies, even as narrowly defined structures of electoral democracy and free markets claim to be a source of liberation for women.

Meanwhile, in the West and especially in the US, a certain kind of complacency

has set in—there is a flawed assumption that the issues raised by both the women’s movement of the 1970s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (from which it learned so much) have adequately addressed the needs of both women and minorities. Indeed, the gains that were hard won by the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s—in schools, in sports, in higher education, in access to professional development and in the protection of their basic reproductive health and rights—are all but forgotten by many young women in the US. I often hear from individuals who speak about women’s rights being natural to Western culture—forgetting that barely 100 years ago, US women, like slaves, were considered the private property of white men.

Thus in many parts of the United States today, the word feminist is either derided or dismissed as describing a dated and irrelevant movement. Young women who are strongly committed to equality and justice are somewhat ambivalent about being described as feminists. Among the general population, there are widely held misconceptions about feminists being anti-male or men-haters. This is puzzling for many activists in other countries who are well aware of the achievements of previous and current generations of US feminists, who took the lead in raising awareness about a range of issues, including female circumcision or genital mutilation, fistulas, early marriage and pregnancy, inheritance rights, the position of women under regimes like the Taliban, honor killings, unsafe abortions, the increased vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS and the connections between

violence and the spread of STDs. It is important to note that the US remains the only Western industrialized country to have failed to sign CEDAW (the UN convention against discrimination against women), apparently for fear that this would force a re-examination of the struggle over equal pay for equal work. Under



Asma Jahangir, Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.
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the Bush administration, much of the energy and efforts of the current US women’s movement have been directed to preserving the gains of the past few decades, particularly in the areas of reproductive health and rights. Simultaneously, in the age of the war on terror, there have been conservative forces pushing the women’s movement further to the center and challenging its traditionally strong ties to women’s struggles in the

rest of the world. Indeed, to many outside observers, the women’s movement in the US seems to have lost much of the popular support, momentum and energy that defined it in previous eras.

AN EMERGING LEADERSHIP

Yet, even as women in the United States seek to cope with growing conservatism within their own communities, there has been an explosion in creative, innovative and inclusive strategies for revolutionary change in gender relations and social justice from women in the South. Despite pessimism about the state of play in the North, we are, in fact, witnessing a period of exciting growth and the flourishing of an increasingly strong and articulate leadership in the global women’s movement.

The leaders of the new women’s rights movement are not known well in the West. In fact, they often work on issues that are not even considered “women’s issues” and often are groups of women working collectively rather than charismatic individuals. They are environmental activists like **Medha Patkar** in Gujarat, **Oral Ataniyazova** in Uzbekistan and **Wangari Maathai** in Kenya; they are parliamentarians like **Mu Sochua** in Cambodia, **Pregs Govender** in South Africa and the newly elected presidents of both Chile and Liberia; they are judges like **Navi Pillay** in South Africa and human rights lawyers like **Shirin Ebadi** in Iran, **Asma Khader** in Jordan and **Asma Jahangir** in Pakistan; they are teachers like **Sakena Yacoobi** in Afghanistan and **Betty Makoni** in Zimbabwe; they may be re-interpreting religion in ways that empower and celebrate women like **Fatima Mernissi** in Morocco

and **Zainah Anwar** of Sisters in Islam in Malaysia; they are entrepreneurs with new ideas about how to organize and protect women's labor rights like **Nari Uddug Kendra** in Bangladesh and the **South Korean Workers Union** in Seoul. They are young girls, often not more than 14 or 16 years of age, in places like Juarez, Mexico, or Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Uganda, who have shown amazing leadership in challenging traditional practices like FGM, sexual abuse and early marriage—not by running away from their communities but by seeking to work with their elders, their mothers and aunts, their fathers and brothers; they are peacemakers brokering dialogue between rebels in Liberia and Guinea like the **Mano**

isolation of individuals in a community is what they should aspire to as an indication of development. Many grassroots organizations across the developing world are questioning the Western model of development—its reliance on petro-chemicals, large dams, nuclear power plants and genetically engineered food crops. There is growing pressure among women's groups to look for more sustainable strategies to ensure sufficient energy and food for all. They would like more equality and democracy in their societies, but they do not think that elections in and of themselves are a substitute for grassroots participatory processes, representation of all population groups and the rule of law.

their allies in the West, especially women's organizations, to stand by the human rights principles they uphold and apply them fairly to **all** societies, not just the ones that are the current favorites of the US government. They want fair trade, not free trade that provides huge subsidies to Northern farmers, while demanding that Senegal and Sri Lanka open their economies to large multinational corporations. They need our respect and our support for their own powerful efforts to re-envision their societies. They want us to acknowledge that cultures are not static, but are continually evolving. They know that there is nothing inherently democratic about Western societies. The best thing we can do for them is to set a good example

Women's groups in the rest of the world...do not need to be empowered—rather they need their allies in the West, especially women's organizations, to stand by the human rights principles they uphold and apply them fairly to all societies, not just the ones that are the current favorites of the US government.

River Women's Network, or between Arabs and Israelis like the **Jerusalem Women's Center** in Palestine and **Bat Shalom**, Israel.

And, because the West in general (and this includes Western journalists, policymakers, academics, politicians and, yes, some Western women's groups as well) is not used to recognizing or accepting leadership that does not come with titles, degrees or even Western education, it will take time to develop a new relationship based on respect, trust and equality. In this 21st century, the rest of the world is questioning many of the givens in so-called Western civilization. Women's rights organizations are delighted by the promise of some aspects of science and technology, but are not sure that the model of excessive consumption and disregard for the environment is the best one. They are not sure that the atomization and

In other words, they are challenging some of the underlying assumptions of progress as defined by the West. They are doing this in a fiercely contested space, since religious extremists of every faith are also reacting to the pressures of globalization and modernization with a reaction that is regressive and seeks refuge in a simplistic interpretation of religion (whether that is Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Judaism) and is determined to re-impose control over women as a way to return to a mythical golden era when men were men and women knew their place.

Women's groups in the rest of the world are grateful for the support and solidarity of their like-minded sisters and brothers in the West. They need investments and financial resources that are given with respect, but they do not need charity or missionary zeal. They do not need to be empowered—rather they need

ourselves and not be hypocritical (e.g. bringing liberation to Afghan women while Southern Baptists require women to "obey" their husbands or turning a blind eye to Mormon polygamy even as we gasp about the harmful traditions of the Middle East or South Asia).

Lastly, women's groups in other countries urge US women's organizations to strengthen the women's movement here to be more inclusive of poor women, of migrant women, of native or indigenous women, of black and Latina women. They urge them to recognize that the policies of the US have damaging impacts on women—not just women-specific policies such as the "global gag rule," but other policies such as NAFTA, subsidies on cotton and sugar, unfair trade practices, the export of tobacco and substandard drugs and the refusal of pharmaceutical companies to provide retroviral drugs at low cost to AIDS victims in order to

preserve their intellectual property rights. They welcome tough laws on trafficking but urge the US to remember that patriarchy, poverty and lack of economic choices fuel trafficking in women and that women are worthy of dignity and respect regardless of what forced them into the sex trade. Most importantly, they are concerned that women and the women's movement in the US do not recognize the huge impact of the US war on terror and the export of military might and weapons on women in the rest of the world. They are concerned that the women's movement in the US appears to be relatively disconnected from the global peace movement and that the fear factor created after 9/11 has made it difficult for women in the US to understand their country's policies have actually made thousands, if not millions, of women and their families around the world less secure and safe. This is not just because in places like Iraq, Israel and Afghanistan, war and conflict have actually threatened women's lives and those of their families, but because the war on terror has enabled both the US and other governments to divert desperately needed development resources in the fields of health, education and social services into military and defense expenditure. Jeffrey Sachs, an economist at Columbia University, recently stated that the US government gives "just \$16 billion in development assistance, but our defense budget is nearly \$450 billion each year....We are flying a lopsided plane and it is bound to crash."

Women's rights groups around the world want to be given the chance to shift and change attitudes within their own communities from within—without the pressure of feeling that they are being "saved" from either their own cultures or their own backwardness by Western forces of modernization and progress. They cannot do this if they feel that their societies as a whole are under attack from the West. They cannot successfully challenge domestic violence while their fathers, brothers and husbands are assumed to be terrorists and their faith is dismissed as tribal. This does not mean



Shirin Ebadi, Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

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they have all the answers and it does not mean that they do not make mistakes. It does mean that all of us in the West—and not just the women's movement—need to re-examine our relationships with women in the rest of the world and to

proceed with a degree of humility and openness as we listen to and learn from and with them, allowing them to be their own articulate advocates for an alternative vision of a future that is just, peaceful and sustainable. ■