Why feminism still matters

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 4, 2011

Irene Parlby was one of the Famous Five.
Photograph by: Handout, Vancouver Sun

It's been a century since the first International Women's Day was marked in Europe by working women gathering to talk about equality in homes and village halls, while others demonstrated, demanding the right to vote.

Sixty-five years later, the United Nations officially recognized March 8 as International Women's Day and some member countries declared it a national holiday.

Sadly, some of those countries are among the worst in the world when it comes to women's rights.

In the world's richest countries, women have gained some measure of the equality their foremothers spent hundreds of years yearning and fighting for. In those countries, it has been a century of firsts, with women taking on roles and responsibilities that had previously been denied them. Not only has equality changed workplaces, it's reshaped families and traditions.

The changes have been legal, social and economic and they've occurred not only because of activism. Birth control, for example, was only legalized in 1969 in Canada, while abortion was decriminalized in 1988.

But changes have also resulted because of revolutionary scientific advances that have given us the

Internet, social media and reproductive technology.

Yet in many nations, women continue to live as they have for millennia, as uneducated chattels and slaves, bartered and traded by men and often forced to live hidden by burkas and walls.

Across the globe by almost every measure, women lag well behind men.

Even though women do 66 per cent of the work and produce half of the food, UNICEF reports that they earn only 10 per cent of the global income and own just one per cent of the property.

Nowhere in the world do women account for even a third of the national parliamentarians and, in most regions, including Canada, it is considerably less.

Still, this represents progress.

In 1927, the Supreme Court of Canada — the court that for the past 11 years Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin has presided over — ruled the legal definition of person did not apply to women and upheld the status quo. The court's ruling denied them access to public appointments, practising various professions and voting in all but a few provinces.

The Famous Five — Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney and Nellie McClung — successfully appealed the Persons' Case to Britain's Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

In his 1929 decision, Lord Sankey wrote: "The exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours. And to those who would ask why the word 'persons' should include females, the obvious answer is: Why should it not?"

His conclusion, sadly, remains current today even though it echoed what Mary Wollstonecraft wrote 130 years earlier in A Vindication of the Rights of Women.

In it, she argued that women are not inferior, but appear to be so only because the majority are denied education and opportunity.

As far back as medieval times in Europe, upper-class women were educated. In the merchant class, some women were full partners in family businesses. Widows and daughters could inherit property and carry on family enterprises, including the business of ruling countries (a notion still not universal in Europe's creaking monarchies).

Of course, it didn't last. By the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe and England, guilds began to exclude women. As men began to do surgery and practise medicine, they pushed aside women who for centuries had held exclusive domain as midwives, herbalists and healers.

Fast forward to the last century.

The suffragette movement not only successfully lobbied for the vote, but women also convinced

governments to provide “mother’s pensions” — a precursor to family allowance cheques and child tax credits — in the 1920s across North America.

But not all women were eligible. In Canada, Asian and aboriginal women were specifically excluded. In the United States, African-Americans were excluded.

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During both world wars, women were the backbone of the economy. But when the men returned, the women were forced to retreat into their homes, don their aprons and devote themselves to child rearing.

They and their daughters reinvigorated the drive for women’s rights in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Still, progress came slowly. It was the mid-1980s, for example, before Canadian women were finally able to sign for loans and mortgages without having either a father or husband co-sign.

Canada’s 1982 Constitution Act enshrined the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and guaranteed gender equality. Its promises have yet to be fully realized.

Married aboriginal women living on reserves still do not have matrimonial property rights. They are exempt from provincial family law, and family law amendments to the decrepit Indian Act died on the parliamentary order paper in 2009.

Not only do they have fewer legal rights, aboriginal women are twice as likely as other Canadian women to live in poverty, five times more likely to die as a result of violence and to lag well behind the national average in life expectancy.

In short, their lives are more like those of women in developing countries than those of women living in one of the world’s richest nations.

Immigrant women fleeing discrimination in their home countries also face unique challenges. Breaking free from cultural and religious restrictions isn’t as easy as simply changing countries. In North America and Europe, ethnic and mainstream leaders use multiculturalism to justify overturning the democratic principle of one law for all and imposing religious laws such as Islamic Shariah law.

Still, looking back over the century, an optimist would say that progress toward equality is now so far advanced that the clock cannot be reset.

Looking forward, an optimist would point to the images of veiled women in places like Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Libya and Afghanistan who are fighting for democracy shoulder-to-shoulder with men.

However, history reminds us that after social/political revolutions where women have been important players, their quest for equality rights are often ignored or even diminished by new regimes, whether in France, the United States, India or the former Communist states.

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Recently, much has been made in the media of the fact that female students outnumber male students in many university programs, including medicine and law, and that the first wave of layoffs during the 2008 global recession affected more men than women.

Yet Canada's female labour force participation rates have scarcely changed since the 1990s.

Three years out from the economic meltdown, data indicates that women and men have suffered almost equally from job losses related to what was once called the man-cession.

Queen's University professor Kathleen Lahey points out that when it comes to wages, women have gone backwards over the past two decades.

At the end of 2010, full-time working women earned only 71.3 per cent of men's average full-time income. In the late 1980s, women earned 77 cents for every $1 a man earned.

More shocking, she says, are Statistics Canada data from December 2010 that show women with university degrees now only earn 68.4 per cent of men's average university-degree incomes, as compared with 86.8 per cent in the late 1980s.

Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise.

Worldwide, women continue to be significantly under-represented at the highest levels of both governments and corporations. That's despite recent evidence that institutions with higher levels of female participation are better managed and more profitable.

But the most troubling and blatant example of gender discrimination falls broadly under the label "missing women".

On a micro-level in Canada, it refers to women — most of whom were survival sex workers — who have disappeared without a trace. Some were victims of mass murderer Robert (Willie) Pickton; others have disappeared along British Columbia's Highway of Tears.

Disproportionately, the missing women are aboriginal and the official response over the years has largely been a gigantic shrug.

Worldwide, the United Nations' most recent estimate is that 200 million women are missing.

In 1990, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen first coined the phrase, pointing out that there are 92 million women fewer in the world than there should be based on the fact that male and female births are almost equal.

Initially, Sen postulated that selective abortion and infanticide in countries such as India and China explained the difference.

But University of B.C. economist Siwan Anderson's recent, groundbreaking research found those

only account for a small portion of the missing women.

Millions of women go missing in every age category and not only in China and India. In fact, Anderson is certain that the number far exceeds the UN estimate of 200 million.

Nearly 40 per cent of the missing women in China and India are 45 or older. In sub-Sahraran Africa, a third of the missing are in that age category.

Gender discrimination is the only explanation, according to Anderson and co-researcher Debraj Ray of New York University, who did both current and historical research.

In the 1900s, they found the same missing women phenomenon in the United States. In fact, the number was actually proportionately larger than in modern-day India and China. It was, however, slightly lower than in sub-Saharan Africa.

But how that discrimination plays out varies vary from country to country and region to region.

China, for example, is the only country in the world where women have higher suicide rates than men.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where more women than men die of AIDS.

In India, a disproportionate number of young women die in fires.

Anderson believes the fires are related to dowry.

Indian widows also die at higher proportional rates than other parts of the world.

Why do women go missing in states with the greatest inequality?

Anderson is optimistic that they will have some answers within the next two years.

Despite her research's depressing conclusions about discrimination, Anderson is also optimistic that the equality gap is closing.

"Gender is on the agenda of big organizations," she says. "A hundred years ago, I wouldn't have been a professor and this research wouldn't have been done."

That said, Anderson notes that her own field of economics "still has a [male] gender bias."

But there are other issues that continue to challenge women's equality.

There's the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, which has reopened debates about everything from Shariah law to working mothers to polygamy.

There's the explosion in pornography, sex tourism and human trafficking that's resulted from greater access to the Internet.

At the nexus of liberalism, freedom of expression and women's rights is a renewed debate about prostitution.

Should it be an occupational choice legally available to women? Or is it modern-day slavery, antithetical to equality and human dignity and another form of violence against women?

Around the world, those questions are being answered in different ways.

And what too few nations have tackled so far are the many issues related to reproductive technology.

They range from the bizarre, with octo-moms and grandmothers acting as surrogates, to the chilling, where children are being conceived to provide "spare parts" and surrogates are warehoused in poor countries in an echo of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale.

And, of course, it remains to be seen whether the continuing revolutions in the Middle East bring not only democracy, but real freedom for women as well as men.

But on this century celebration, I choose to be a pragmatic optimist. I choose to believe that equality is not only worth fighting for, it is inevitable.

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