

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

by Mary Bentley Abu-Saba, Ph.D.,
Professor of Psychology, American University of Beirut

“The women of our age in most countries of the same degree of development are outgrowing the artificial restrictions so long placed upon them, and following natural lines of human advance. They are specializing, because they are human. They are organizing, because they are human. They are seeking economic and political independence, because they are human...Women will never cease to be females, but they will cease to be weak and ignorant and defenseless. They are becoming wiser, stronger, better able to protect themselves, one another, and their children...”

— Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*Harper's Weekly*, May 25, 1912)

While contemplating women's human rights, three recent television stories came to my mind. One is set in Afghanistan. After the overthrow of the government, the new leaders demand that women cover their heads, including faces, and refrain from further employment outside the home. We see shapeless bodies shuffling across the streets, head scarves billowing in the wind. They seem to be ephemeral, shapeless, and anonymous images of humans.

Shift to the West Bank, where a coterie of women are taking sculpture classes. They are shaping forms of women's and men's bodies as part of an exercise leading to self-empowerment. Each woman in the class has a story to tell of being a “misfit” in her society, a distinct narrative of her own search for personal freedom. One woman was married at the age of 13, but didn't produce any children, so her husband divorced her when she was 15. She was left to languish at home with her parents, shamed and forsaken. “I knew that life could hold more for me than this. I needed to find myself, and find my own worth. I have found it in my artwork.” Massive bodies of women, with deep curvatures and strong arms rising to the heavens protrude from the screen. A clay woman and man embrace; the woman engulfing the man because her size is twice as large as his. “I wanted a sense of myself not being dominated by any man, yet communing with him,” explained the artist.

Another woman eloquently states that, “We fight not only the enemy who oppresses us outside our homes (Israel), but the enemy within. We work against anything or anyone which lim-

its our freedom as full human beings. We also work against our own self-oppression. By forming ourselves with our hands, we discover ourselves.”

Flash to the United States: As many as 30 women have brought charges against their “superiors” in the U.S. Army for rape, sexual harassment, and forced oral sex. The Army Chiefs seem shocked and disturbed. “We will get to the bottom of this! We will make sure that this does not happen again in the Army,” they declare. Three Army officers have already been jailed, their names undisclosed. The investigation proceeds. A young female Army soldier declares on screen that “This is only the tip of the iceberg. It happens so much because the male culture is one of subjugation of women; this is taken for granted. In order for a woman to succeed in her chosen career in the Army, she feels she has to fulfill the usual female role as sex object.”

These images of women, though differentiated across cultures, portray women's common struggles to obtain their rights to full freedom and equality. Throughout the world, the message is out, argued, praised and damned: human beings need to be treated with respect and dignity. And this means women, not just men.

The invisible walls separating people are collapsing all over the world, as surely as the Berlin wall crumbled in 1989. Our television sets first, and now the Internet, bring us immediate and daily communication with each other that previous generations could never even have dreamed of. In these pictures, we see how people are treated fairly, and we see how people are mistreated daily. The awareness snowballs, hastening the breakdown of our denial of how far we need to go before we can obtain full human rights for all, and yes, to obtain full human rights for ourselves as women.

Television images of women can inspire us, or they can horrify us. Stripped of clothing, except for some flimsy tatters, the bared female bodies in advertisements and rock videos seem lurid, violated and distasteful. Is this the freedom of our own bodies we seek? Indeed, it is no surprise that such vulgar images could send some women back into the private sanctity of their veil, and me, a Westerner living in Beirut, into long skirts. In fact, some authors have noted that the renewal of women's interest in veiling is closely related to recently attained patterns of female mobility among educated women whose foremothers would have been limited to house and



Photo Credit: Delphine Garde

neighborhood (Kandiyoti, 1995).

How thoroughly intuitive, and precisely on target, is the comment of the West Bank women that we empower ourselves when we know our own bodies. Our concept of self begins with an awareness of self-as-body. Thus, one of the psychological underpinnings of women's rights is that she should have control of her own body. That means to be knowledgeable about her own anatomy and how it functions, to have control over the life-giving processes of conception and birth, in essence, to own and respect her own body.

Because of the importance of the affirmation of the body, I was dismayed when I discovered cases of eating disorders among Lebanese high school and university women. At the root of bulimia and anorexia lies an overriding concern for the body as object, a fixation on how the body looks to others, rather than how it feels to oneself. Bring on the art therapy of the West Bank; it's needed here!

"What do women want?" wailed Freud in unknowing despair. After the hours he spent listening to women's stories, he still did not know. Nor could he know, since he did not believe that women are thoroughly human, desiring only their freedom to

pursue their development. Instead, in his mistaken notions about women's inferiority, he fantasized about their "penis envy," their striving for "vaginal orgasms." (We suspect deeply the existence of "womb envy" on the part of men who may speak of female "penis envy." We suspect ignorance of female anatomy in the denigration of the clitoris.) He turned women's claims of having been sexually abused as children into a fantasy theory of possessing their fathers, *i.e.*, the "Electra complex". No such truth! Had he instead been able to see women as humans, he would have known what we wanted: to love, to work, to play, unfettered by abuse, domination, or ownership. Such a human psychological need!

I was heartened by Fatima Mernissi's description of women's sexuality as being active and affirming, according to Muslim concepts expressed by the twelfth century Imam Ghazali. "By contrast with the passive, frigid Freudian female, the sexual demands of Imam Ghazali's female appear truly overwhelming, and the necessity for the male to satisfy them becomes a compelling social duty" (Mernissi, p. 39). At least we see here a more realistic assessment of the female as having her own internal sexual needs.

Though Freud had a negative effect on women's development

in the first half of this century, fortunately for women in the West, psychology neither began nor ended with him. (And fortunately for non-Westerners, they did not have to live with the restrictive yoke he placed on women's psyches.) Karen Horney broke away and saw women's reality with more clarity: women's need to fulfill their biological role, while also staying connected to others, while also developing their potentialities. And she was followed by so many other female psychologists who perceived women similarly: Frieda Fromm-Reichman, Melanie Klein, Carole Gilligan, Virginia Satir, and Jean Miller, to name only a few. All these women psychotherapists had a common theme: women want to be free to develop themselves throughout their lifetime.

Alfred Adler, far ahead of his time, perceived the inequality between the sexes, and broke away from Freud in disgust. He established as one of his principle goals of therapy that mentally healthy humans would embrace equality. Erik Erikson joined with Adler in eschewing the emphasis on the sexual dimension of humans in favor of their development as social beings. Do humans struggle with a raging libido? No way, says Adler. Humans struggle against inferiority, our childhood state of having so much to learn. We have an innate need to develop our competencies, to move from a position of inferiority to superiority. This is not a superiority over other people, but an empowerment of self from within (Ansbacher, 1956).

Thus, we discern the psychological principle underlying the demand for increased education of females. This has become a prime goal world-wide as we move into the twenty-first century. The spread of education for women has a snowballing effect on the pressure for more rights to public spaces, for gainful employment, and economic independence. This struggle will continue, since we cannot say that it has been fully achieved in any country of the world. In the U.S., women are acknowledging the reality of the "glass ceiling", that invisible obstacle to highest governmental and business positions. Although women's educational level is high, they still have not found the routes to the top decision-making positions of national power and influence. Only three women occupy seats in the U.S. Senate, the same number occupying seats in the Lebanese Parliament. Contemporary American culture has produced its own backlash against women's rights, as Susan Faludi (1991) has so aptly demonstrated.

Thank goodness for Elizabeth Davis, a child psychologist who urged Carl Rogers to pay attention first and foremost to the emotional content of his client's revelations. He was thereby able to conclude succinctly that human beings (yes, all of us, as well as all organisms) have an innate tendency to grow toward autonomy and actualization. Human beings' deepest motivations tend toward development, differentiation, and cooperative relationships; their life tends fundamentally to move from dependence to independence; their impulses tend

naturally to harmonize into a complex and changing pattern of self-regulation; and they tend to preserve the species and move it further in an evolutionary movement of continuous development (Kirschenbaum, 1989).

Herein is another psychological underpinning of the struggle for human rights, and therefore women's rights. Since the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, followed by conferences in Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing, there have been significant changes in thinking about individuals' rights. These changes keep moving in the direction of the ability of humans to actualize, to grow, and to become more autonomous, while also being connected to fellow humans. Out of this change of thinking has come the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This has become a key rallying point around which women's rights activists can operate throughout the world. That it places us all in "the same boat" can be seen in the fact that even in such developed countries as the U.S., activists have not been able to ratify this basic document.

Non-Westerners have good reason to look askance at the human rights development in the West, in which an individualistic conception of freedom leaves humans seemingly lonely and disconnected from each other. The movement toward a greater span of human rights needs the energy and thoughtfulness of people from all cultures. No single culture has proven to have found "The Way." The psychological principles for the demand for human rights can be found in all cultures, though expressed differently from place to place. These principles uphold: our rights to own our bodies, our need for education and development of the self, our need to contribute to the wider world through work, our right to freedom and safety in public and private, and our needs for contributing to the wider social order. A tough agenda, but pursue it we must.

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