

UNESCO  
the Courier

PEOPLE AND PLACES  
**Chiapas: the magic  
of the mirror**

PLANET  
**The "miracle"  
of the Rhine**

SIGNS OF THE TIMES  
**Diving  
for dollars**

CONNEXIONS  
**Internet to the rescue  
of democracy?**

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Published  
in 27  
languages

June 2000



# Women's long march to power

USA: 4,25\$US. UNITED KINGDOM: £2,5



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## Women's long march to power

"Women's rights are human rights." This landmark slogan of the Beijing Conference on Women held exactly five years ago is more than ever brandished by women the world over. Already influential forces in their own communities, women are now demanding greater access to decision-making powers. But why does their quest to break into the male political bastion remain such an obstacle course?

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UNESCO  
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53rd year  
Published monthly in 27 languages and in Braille by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.  
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IMPRIME EN FRANCE  
DÉPÔT LÉGAL : C1 - JUIN 2000  
COMMISSION PARITAIRE N° 71844 -  
Diffusé par les N.M.P.P.  
The UNESCO Courier (USPS 016686) is published monthly in Paris by UNESCO. Printed in France. Periodicals postage paid at Champlain NY and additional mailing offices.  
Photocomposition and photoengraving:  
The UNESCO Courier  
Printing: Maulde & Renou  
ISSN 0041-5278 No. 6-2000-OPI 99-592 A

# THE MAGIC OF THE MIRROR

► Photos by Alex Webb, text by Fabrizio Mejía Madrid

**The uprising in Chiapas has forced Mexican society to look at the Indians straight on, perhaps for the first time, and to start weaving with them a truly common future**



© Alex Webb/Magnum, Paris

Children in front of a mural featuring Emiliano Zapata in Polhó, a village located in the Chenalhó municipality, in the heart of Chiapas.

I seemed to notice a movement from beneath her shawl, a kind of sudden vibration. I looked down at the woman's feet and was startled: her calloused heels bore all the dust and dirt of years walking barefoot. I placed a coin in the woman's permanently open palm, and ran into the Museum of Anthropology. I was seven or eight years old. I asked my father about the woman to whom I had just been told to give some money. "She's an Indian,"

he replied. "But something was moving inside under her clothes," I insisted. "It must have been her child," my father concluded, and we walked on into the Mayan room of the museum without saying a word.

The image of that Indian woman in Mexico City has haunted me every year since. It is not really an image, more like fragments of a body—an outstretched hand, the soles of her feet, the coppery colour of her arm—and the suggestion of another being moving beneath her clothes. When you come across them in the cities, you don't look at them directly. They, the Indians, lower their eyes as if to acknowledge that the colour of their skin, their "defective" Spanish and their rural

garments have made them invaders in this land of mestizo nationalism. They have never had looks or expressions. Nobody can remember their faces.

In contrast, the term "indigenous people" — as opposed to "Indians" — is part and parcel of Mexican history. Like millions of other Mexican children, I grew up seeing murals by Diego Rivera, where the Aztecs came to represent symbols and values, but not people. From as far back as I recall, "indigenous" has meant that under the earth on which we walk there are vestiges of women and men who erected pyramids to worship the sun, dreamt about the number zero, sacrificed virgins and predicted eclipses. But between the "Indian" and the "indigenous" ►

► Alex Webb is an American photographer with the Magnum agency.

Fabrizio Mejía Madrid is director of culture at the municipality of Mexico City. A contributor to the daily *La Jornada*, he is the author of three books, including "Small Acts of Civil Disobedience", published in Spanish in 1996.



Revolutionary images on a wall in Pollhó express some of the inhabitants' aspirations.

► there has never been any connection beyond the fact that neither had a face.

For centuries the Indians submissively joined the growing mass of invisible spectators of a distant country, of an ethereal land which changes without the need to involve those who are watching it. The image of the "Indians" was one of peasants always waiting for land, justice, education and health. We knew they existed because there were millions of them, though we stayed deaf to what they were trying to tell us. Taken into account because of their sheer number, the "Indians" ended up being tackled as a "problem" in the 1970s: that of migration to the cities. The so-called "Marias"—"Indians" who asked for charity dressed in highly coloured clothes—were the faithful reflection of the failure of our shared life and of the only offer that we made to help them belong to Mexico: stop being Indians.

When on January 1, 1994, the Indians in Chiapas rebelled once more against contempt, they did so covering the whole face apart from the eyes. They made the country look at them. They knew that morality started by looking at someone in the eyes. It is the source of empathy, of

identification, a form of magic and a mirror that creates a third party: neither oneself nor the other, but that which makes us similar, that in which we both recognize ourselves. This reflection of the other which is also my own self in another person's gaze was exactly what was denied to

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**The image of the "Indians" was one of peasants always waiting for land, justice, education and health. We knew they existed because there were millions of them, though we stayed deaf to what they were trying to tell us.**

---

me by the country to which I belong. For 500 years the Indians were not men and women who had to be wiped out, but simple non-humans who survived thanks to a national evasion: not looking at them head-on, in the eyes. Looking in the eyes

of the Indians made us capture in their reflection the very part of ourselves that exists in the other, the foreign in each and every one of us.

Four years on, the women from an Indian community displaced by a "low-intensity war" were the architects of another major change. After the massacre of women and children in Acteal on December 22, 1997, the women of X'oyep decided to rise up against the army's presence. Already forced out of their homes, they were not ready to be drawn into hostilities once again. They pushed the soldiers with their bare hands right to the village's boundaries, while one of them carried in her hands X'oyep's last hen. Riled by indignation, she defended the bird and together with the other women, triumphed over a professional army. The moral strength of the Tzeltal Indians of X'oyep rested in January 1998 on their physical weakness and on their small number, but also on their opposition to war. They are the poor people who refuse to be helped by a country which allowed the Acteal massacre to take place. In their resistance there is a moral stance that connects me to them: neither would I resign myself to a great "national plan" ►



Standing guard at the entrance to Polhó.

A rope marks off Zapatista territory, barring its access to foreigners.



Photos © Alex Webb/Magnum, Paris

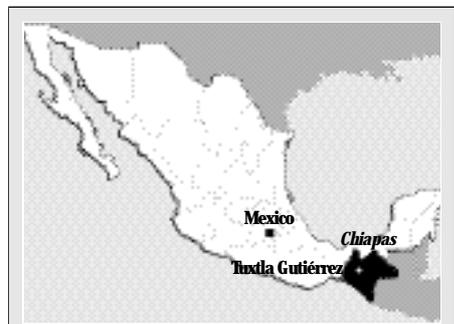
▶ that I have not chosen. Their actions have made them famous because they entailed a nationalism without patriots: they did not want any happiness that would destroy them for their own good. In the hands that pushed out the army, I saw the "Marias" of my childhood disappearing.

**The distance between looking and listening**

Although we have become more willing to tolerate difference, we are still no more ready to listen to and understand the voices of difference. The idea of diversity in Mexican society brings to mind

divided ghettos where contact between one tradition and another inevitably weakens one of them. Moving from the ethnic to the ethical does not mean we should strive to preserve that diversity, but rather absorb what it is trying to tell us. It is the gap between looking and listening, between accepting that the Other exists and experiencing its fragility as one's own, between opening windows and building bridges. It is this gap that we have to narrow: to go from living alongside each other to experimenting with living together. I know that with the X'oyep women we will travel that road. ■

A memorial to villagers killed in Acteal in 1997.



**MEXICO'S POOREST STATE**

Along with neighbouring Yucatan and Oaxaca, Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico, has the country's highest proportion of indigenous people: 42.5 per cent of its three million or so inhabitants are Mayans. Nationally, there are approximately 10.6 million indigenous people out of a population of 92 million, 80 per cent of whom are mixed-race.

Mostly rural, Chiapas breaks Mexico's poverty records. In 1995, it was estimated that 59 per cent of the population were living on less than the minimum income necessary for survival (then put at \$150 a month). That situation is partly explained by the fact that Chiapas, so far from Mexico City, is the state where land reform was the most weakly implemented. When the reform ended in 1992, half the land in Chiapas was still in the hands of large landowners.

That is the context in which the "Zapatista Army of National Liberation" (EZLN) led by "sub-commandante" Marcos burst upon the scene on January 1, 1994, a symbolic date because it marked the entry into force of the NAFTA free-trade agreement with the United States and Canada. EZLN rebels overran seven Chiapas municipalities, including the city of San Cristobal de las Casas, demanding "democracy, freedom and justice for all Mexicans." A ceasefire was declared after two weeks of fighting with the army in which, according to official sources, 159 people were killed, though human rights groups put the death toll at over 400. On February 21, 1994, the EZLN and Mexico's federal government began talks for the first time, mediated by the bishop of San Cristobal, Mgr Samuel Ruiz. Signed on February 16, 1996, the San Andres accords on the rights of indigenous peoples were rejected by the authorities, on the basis that national sovereignty had to be protected.

The cost of breaking off the negotiations has been high. For example, 45 alleged EZLN sympathizers were killed in the village of Acteal on December 22, 1997.

In March 1999, 2.5 million Mexicans took part in a consultation organized by the EZLN on integrating indigenous law into the Constitution. The strategy of the guerrillas, whose objective is not to seize power, consists of gathering support from national and international civil society for a democratisation of Mexican society. ■



Musicians performing in Polhó.

A refugee family in X'oyep, to the northeast of Tuxtla Gutiérrez.



Photos © Alex Webb/Magnum, Paris



Refugee children in X'oyep.

A government military post in Chenalhó.



Photos © Alex Webb/Magnum, Paris

# THE "MIRACLE" OF THE RHINE

► Urs Weber

## Fish are once again swimming in the Rhine River but it took an ecological catastrophe for the countries it flows through to clean up their act

For decades, the Rhine was one of Europe's most repelling waste dumps. Today, concerted efforts by all the countries along its banks have restored the river's health. The symbol of that recovery is the mighty salmon, which swims once more in its waters: over 200 have been caught since 1996. But the road to success was long and hard.

Europe's busiest waterway, the Rhine is navigable over a distance of 883 kilometers stretching from its source near Basel to its mouth in the Netherlands. For centuries, many cities and major industrial areas, such as the Ruhr Valley, have occupied its banks. One of the world's densest road and railway networks follows its course. The river also irrigates areas of intensive agriculture and vineyards producing highly-prized wines.

Other crops, such as maize, tobacco, sugar beet and market garden produce (often in greenhouses), which consume high amounts of fertiliser, are greater threats to the environment. Run-off from dairy and pork farms also cause damage. Thousands of people drink water drawn from the river, while urban waste flows into it. A glance at the Rhine's geography (see map and box) shows that civilisation puts huge strains on the river, which flows through five countries, making it a prototype of co-operation in international waters.

### A subject of treaties

An 1816 treaty, one of Europe's oldest, established the Rhine as a navigable waterway. The accord was updated in Mainz in 1831 and replaced in 1868 by the Mannheim Act, which set up the Strasbourg-based Central Commission of the Rhine, whose purpose was to guarantee freedom of movement on the "international waterway." Dikes were built along its branches and marshland was dredged to make it navigable for vessels with draughts of up to 3,000 tonnes.

In 1885, five countries along the river

signed an agreement of quite another sort, the Salmon Treaty. The International Salmon Commission was set up to protect the fish, which were vanishing from the river as a result of pollution and dams that prevented them from migrating. Salmon swim out to sea when they are about 18 months old and return to the place where they were born to spawn at the age of four or five years. The countries along the Rhine decided to encourage the introduction of young salmon into the river.

But during the nineteenth century, major civil engineering projects were built in and around the river without any prior bilateral agreements. Decisions were taken and work done which threatened neighbouring countries or towns further downstream. In 1807, the Grand Duchy

of Baden (stretching from Basel to Mannheim and later absorbed into Wurttemberg) unilaterally decided to canalise part of the river. The German hydraulic engineer in charge, Johann Tulla, straightened out its course, increasing the water flow. Those "improvements" had a disastrous impact on the water table of the upper Rhine plain, whose level fell. The softwood forests were no longer regularly flooded, a feature of the river's plain, and dried out.

### Joining forces against pollution

The Grand Canal of Alsace, which France began in 1920, was also built without consulting neighbouring countries. The decision was made by the victors of World War I as part of the Treaty of Versailles. The canal enabled France to build 10 hydroelectric plants and dams between Basel and Strasbourg, not to mention others on tributary rivers, which blocked the movement of migratory fish. The waterway, which was widened in 1950, lowered the level of the Rhine.

The river did not become Europe's cesspit until the mid-twentieth century. Huge amounts of liquid waste, mostly from towns, farms and expanding industries, were dumped into the river with impunity. The level of phosphates from fertilisers and household products such as detergents reached alarming levels. The fish population dwindled and in 1935 salmon vanished entirely. It was also increasingly difficult to draw drinkable water from the river, and it often smelt like carbolic acid and tasted salty.

After World War II, most European states refused to negotiate with Germany. But, unlike what happened in 1919, the idea of a joint effort to ensure the future of the Rhine gained ground. In 1946, the Netherlands asked Switzerland to take part in a discussion on pollution in the river.

The participants settled for a new international conference on salmon in Basel in 1948, when it was noted that the great fish really had disappeared from the

## A COMMISSION FOR THE DANUBE

The 2,857-kilometer Danube, Europe's second-longest river after the Volga, starts in Germany and irrigates Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine before flowing into the Black Sea.

After several unsuccessful attempts, a Danube Commission based on the Rhine model was set up in Vienna in 1992. An international convention on cross-border pollution and environmental preservation was signed in Sofia (Bulgaria) in 1994 and entered into force four years later.

The Danube's hydrographical basin stretches out over 817,000 square kilometers and drains parts of a dozen countries. Some of them—Switzerland, Italy, Poland, Albania and Macedonia—do not feel directly concerned and have not joined the Commission.

At the present time, the Danube is less polluted than the Rhine was in the 1970s. ■

► Rhine. The need to set up a permanent intergovernmental body to handle general pollution issues then became clear and the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR) was established on June 11, 1950 at a meeting of representatives from the countries along the river (plus Luxembourg) that agreed to fund it.

The results were slow in coming. Water pollution steadily worsened for over 20 years. But at least countries had decided to take regular samples of the Rhine's water, which led to a system to monitor water quality along the river's entire length.

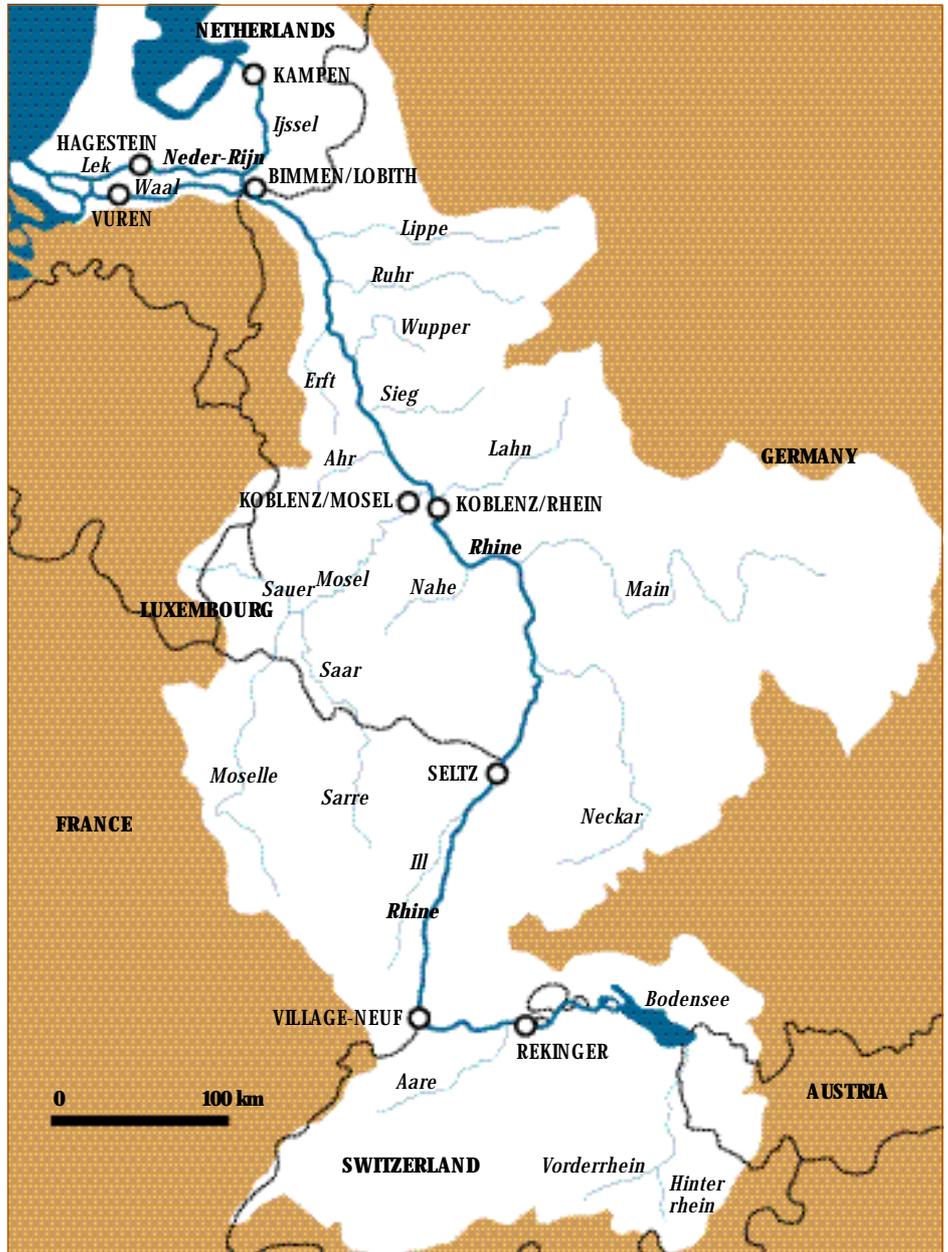
### The persistence of hard metals

In 1963, the first draft agreement to clean up the Rhine was signed in Berne. The same year, the ICPR was given a permanent headquarters, first in Luxembourg and from 1964 in Koblenz. Since then, a secretariat has collected and distributed valuable data on the river's condition and drafted progress reports on various ecological problems.

The Commission operates in a rather innovative way, which experience has proved to be useful. Environment ministers and officials from each member state gather at ICPR meetings on a regular basis. Decisions are taken jointly and each country, *Land* or regional government adopts the ensuing measures. But neither the ICPR nor its secretariat has any executive or coercive power to speak of, such as the authority to order the construction of new facilities. Similarly, the Commission draws up environmental projects for the Rhine, but if adopted they are funded and implemented by each member country. The secretariat simply monitors their application along the river's entire length.

In 1976, the European Community (later the European Union) joined the ICPR, lending it more authority, and subsequent measures began to show results. Between 1970 and 1974, the river's oxygen content was still between only two and four milligrams per litre—too low to support the growth of any organism.

But between 1970 and 1990, the countries along the river spent \$38.5 billion on building a string of purification plants. The oxygen level steadily rose and some of the river's biodiversity returned. However, experts noted that the purification plants did their work after the pollution had occurred, limiting the effects without tackling the causes. Furthermore,



## AN INTERNATIONAL WATERWAY

**T**he Rhine flows down from two Alpine springs in Switzerland's Grisons region. One of them feeds the anterior Rhine (Vorderrhein), the other the posterior Rhine (Hinterrhein). They converge at the Swiss village of Reichenau to become the Alpine Rhine, which forms the border between Switzerland and Austria before crossing Lake Constance. After the famous 25-metre-high Schaffhouse Falls, the river becomes the High Rhine (Hochrhein) and flows west, where it demarcates the border between Germany and Switzerland.

Downstream from Basel, the river turns north and becomes the Upper Rhine (Oberrhein) for the next 300 kilometers or so. Then it briefly forms the border between Switzerland and France and, for the next 180 kilometers, between France and Germany and, finally, between several German states (*Länder*). At Mainz, the river

turns west again, then north at Bingen. This is the Middle Rhine (Mittelrhein), which crosses the Rhine mountains for 100 kilometers.

At Bonn, the river becomes the Lower Rhine (Niederrhein), which, upon reaching the Dutch border near Emmerich, turns west once more and splits up into several waterways to form the Rhine Delta, into which the Meuse also flows.

From Reichenau to the North Sea, the Rhine is 1,320 kilometers long. The river's hydrographical basin stretches out over approximately 250,000 square kilometers that are home to 51 million people and cover parts of Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The Rhine's many branches include the Aare in Switzerland, the Ill in France, and the Kinzig, Neckar, Main, Lahn, Mosel, Ruhr, Lippe and smaller tributaries in Germany. ■

the plants could only eliminate a small amount of the heavy metals in the water.

"The river has some ability to clean itself, but this has been over-estimated," says Anne Schulte-Wülwer-Leidig, a biologist in Koblenz. So the Rhine still contained high amounts of heavy metals, such as mercury, cadmium and zinc, and harmful substances, including polychlorobiphenyls (PCBs), benzene and atrazine (from pesticides).

In 1976, the ICPR member-countries signed a convention on chemicals that ranked some as dangerous and put them on a "black" or a "grey list." Maximum levels were set for cadmium, mercury and other particularly harmful substances. Those steps were taken at a time when manufacturers were able to acquire technology to eliminate or separate out dangerous toxins during the production stage. Previously, they could only be filtered out at the end.

That same year, the countries along the river signed an agreement on chlorides to reduce the Rhine's salt content from 500 to 200 milligrams per litre along the German-Dutch border. The high level, which spoiled drinking water, was mainly due to waste from potash mines in

Alsace (slated for closing in 2004) and in Lorraine flushing into the Rhine and the Moselle, as well as to chemical waste from plants along the river Main. The salt level in the river Weser, polluted by potash discharges from the Werra, sometimes reached 3,000 mg/litre.

People living along the Rhine were in for a terrible shock in November 1986

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**'The Basel disaster enabled the ICPR to set higher goals in its 1987 Rhine Action Programme for Ecological Rehabilitation'.**

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when a fire broke out at the Sandoz chemical plant at Schweizerhalle, near Basel. The water that firefighters used to put out the blaze flushed huge amounts of insecticides and pesticides into the river, sparking an ecological catastrophe. Environmental awareness rose and the affected population and their representatives demanded that

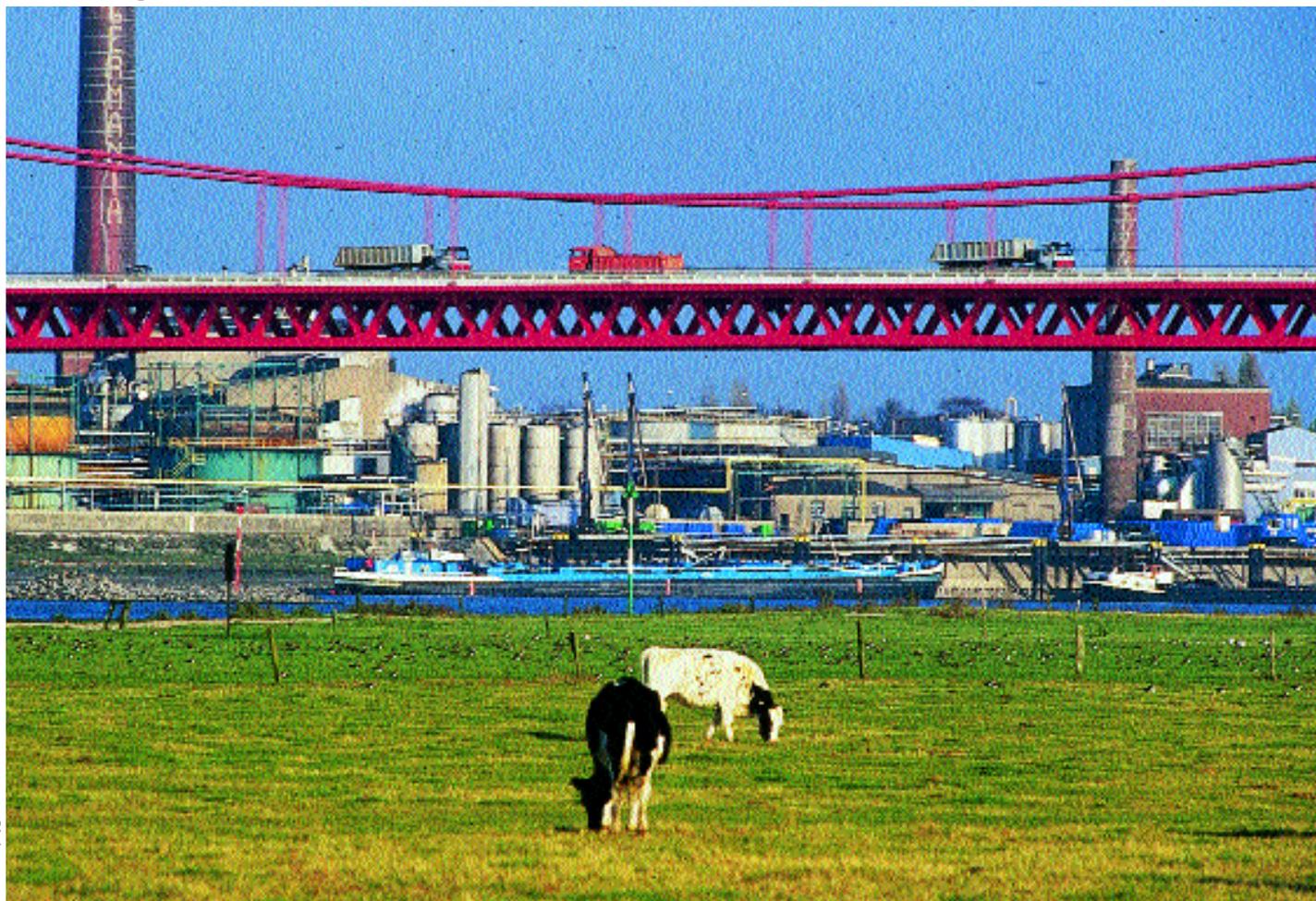
manufacturers take much tougher action against pollution.

"The Basel disaster enabled the ICPR to set higher goals in its 1987 Rhine Action Programme for Ecological Rehabilitation," says Koos Wieriks, of the ICPR secretariat. Commitments were made to cut the amounts of the most hazardous pollutants in half by 1995. Many experts thought this target could never be reached, but ICPR samples showed that from 1985 to 1992, mercury in the river at the German town of Bimmen-Lobith, near the Dutch border, fell from six to 3.2 tonnes, cadmium from nine to 5.9 tonnes, zinc from 3,600 to 1,900 tonnes, atrazine from 10 to 3.7 tonnes and PCBs from 390 to 90 kilograms.

Special chemical purification plants were built up- and downstream from Schweizerhalle. "The 1987 programme won credence for the idea that the Rhine was a total ecological system," says Schulte-Wülwer-Leidig. Under the programme, the Rhine was to become a place where salmon, pike, perch, trout and other fish could thrive once more. But to achieve that goal, the water quality had to be further improved, an objective that was reached before the 2000 target date.

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**Industrial development once transformed the Rhine into a veritable wasteland.**



► Since 1991, more than a million young fish have been released into the Rhine and its branches.

But the troubles of the migrating fish were not over. In 1996, the first salmon caught in the river for many years was hooked just before the Iffezheim dam, near Baden-Baden. The fish came from the North Sea but because of the dam could not reach the branch where it was born. Salmon only spawn in the places where they started life.

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**In 1996, the first salmon caught in the river for many years was hooked just before the Iffezheim dam, near Baden-Baden**

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With the help of ecology movements, the reluctance of power station owners to build costly bridges or complex networks of passageways for the salmon is gradually breaking down. Such facilities are already under construction at Iffezheim, at the confluence with the river Ill (which has no dams on it), at a cost of about \$6 million, and at Gambsheim, in Alsace.

Basel residents are being consulted about planned changes in the landscape that would help the salmon migrate. Egon Oberacker, a professional fisherman in the Swiss town of Nordbaden, is pleased that fish will be more plentiful now. But, he says, “we still can’t live off fishing alone, as we once did.”

The idea of an integrated ecosystem that will enable a rich variety of animal and plant life to thrive in the Rhine and its branches once more has come a long way. In 1998, the ministers of the Commission set targets to restore natural areas as part of a global ecosystem stretching from the mouth of the Rhine to the Jura, the Alps, the Rhine mountain range, the old soft-wood forests of the floodplains, and streams of the Rhineland-Palatinate, the Black Forest and the Vosges.

Meanwhile, not all the pollution problems have been solved. One of the most serious is in the Rhine delta’s huge basin in the Netherlands, where toxin-filled mud dredged from the port of Rotterdam has been dumped since the 1970s. Contamination levels are falling now, but several of the old toxins in the river’s sediment are only very slowly being eliminated. And all along the Rhine, the main source of pollution is still farm fertilisers, which seep into the river every time it rains. ■

**THE TENNESSEE PRECEDENT**

One of the oldest interstate bodies set up around a river is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the United States. It was created on May 18, 1933 by the government of President Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of the New Deal’s far-reaching public works programme. Since then, many federal and local bodies have delegated authority to the TVA. The hydrological basin of the 1,600-kilometer-long Tennessee River, a branch of the Ohio, drains sections of Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky.

Those states and the federal government set various priorities when the TVA was set up, including bringing the river’s erratic water levels under control to prevent flooding, building a series of hydroelectric plants and bringing electricity to remote areas. Twenty-one dams and six reservoirs were built. The entire system enabled the growth and modernisation of farming and the reforestation of some areas.

Today, the TVA is considered an outstanding example of regional planning. ■

**Agricultural fertilisers are one of the river’s main pollution sources.**



© Georg Fischer/Balderberg/Studio X, Limours

# DOING IT THEIR OWN WAY

► Jeff Archer

**Whether for religious reasons or out of a strong desire to do things differently, a growing number of parents in the United States are choosing to educate their children at home**

Twenty years ago, Christopher and Eileen Herman would have technically been breaking the law. Opting against conventional schooling, the parents are teaching their two children at their home in Washington state, where until 1985, the only legal way to home school was to hold a state teaching license—something they both lack.

But today, the Hermans not only can teach their children at home without fear of prosecution, they also have an extensive array of resources and supports at their disposal. They belong to three local organizations of parents who educate their children at home, attend state-wide home schoolers' conventions, and regularly cull advice from similar families on the Internet. "Just about everybody knows someone who's home schooling," Mrs. Herman says. "People may still think it's kind of odd, but there isn't as much suspicion or hostility anymore."

## Legal recognition

Indeed, the Hermans are part of one of the fastest growing educational trends in the United States. By some estimates, the number of home schooled children in the country has grown from roughly 50,000 in the mid-1980s to at least one million today. (Others peg the population as high as 1.8 million). While that still represents at most only three percent of the total number of the country's school-aged children, the rapid rise in the popularity of home schooling deserves notice. It has quickly become the second most popular form of non-government sponsored education in the U.S., now outranked only by the schools affiliated with the Roman Catholic church.

"One big accomplishment of the movement is that they've made home schooling a viable educational option," says Mitchell Stevens, a sociologist at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y. and the author of an upcoming book on home schooling. "It now has a small place in the menu of educational choices in this country."



**Stress-free learning?** By some estimates, at least one million American children are home schooled.

The forces behind the movement are complex, and the bigger it gets, the harder it becomes to describe a "typical" home schooler. Most experts see two very different lineages. One was born in the late 1960s from the alternative school movement, whose followers believe children learn best when liberated from the rigid structures of formal schooling and allowed to pursue their own interests. The other was largely fueled by the concerns of some conservative Protestant families who—at about the same time—began to worry that the public schools could no longer ensure the proper formation of their children's character. "Both are skeptical of the bureaucratic organization of education," Stevens says. "It's a matter of, 'I don't want someone else taking care of my children.'"

Until the 1980s, home schooling in the United States was still largely an underground activity, without legal recognition. But as the number of practitioners grew, judges and prosecutors became more willing to accept that home schooling was permitted under legal provisions allowing children who weren't

in school to be 'otherwise instructed.' In 1983, advocates formed the Home School Legal Defense Association to push the issue in state legislatures and to provide legal representation to individual home schooling families.

Today, the practice is recognized as legal in all 50 states, although its regulation varies greatly. Idaho, for example, places very few restrictions on home schooling parents, not even asking that they inform any state or local officials of their intentions. Oregon, meanwhile, mandates that such families periodically have a 'qualified neutral person' test their children. Nowhere in the U.S. are parents now required—as they once were in Washington state—to be licensed teachers. A few states call for parents to either have some college education or follow a home schooling 'qualifier' course at a community college.

State laws often stipulate the number of days of instruction and the general content areas to be covered by families. But while these provisions usually call on parents to keep records of their children's progress, they are generally not required to turn these over ►

► Staff Writer at *Education Week* (U.S.)



© Rick Bowmer-AP/Boomerang, Paris

Keeping in tune: taking part in extra-curricular activities outside the home is just one way of interacting with other children.

to a government body. “Even the most rigorously regulated states in America have some flexibility—a recognition that your child may be learning at a different pace,” says Patrick Farenga, president of Holt Associates, a Cambridge (Massachusetts)-based publisher of home schooling materials. State and local school districts vary in how they accommodate home-schooled children. In some cases, they are allowed to participate in field trips or sign up for certain classes while in others, school officials do not let them join any extra-curricular activities.

Although conservative Protestants appear to make up the largest single bloc of home schoolers, the movement is diversifying. In recent years, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish home schoolers have formed their own organizations, and the practice continues to attract a substantial number of more secular-minded families. Surveys by the National Home Education Research Institute in Salem (Oregon) suggest that religion still is the most common reason for home schooling, but the research centre also has identified five other strong motivations: concern about the academic quality of local conventional schools; a belief that the best education also is the most individualized; the desire to enhance relationships among family members; an attempt to mitigate the negative influences of peer pressure; and worries that schools are becoming increasingly unsafe. Often, these rea-

sons overlap.

Home schooling techniques vary as much as the motivations for doing it. In a country with no national curriculum, states are responsible for setting educational standards, which are generally only loosely applied to home schoolers. Parents generally put together their instructional plan themselves. Hundreds of publishers now produce materials geared toward home schoolers, their wares sold through the World Wide Web, in specialized magazines and conventions. They reflect a wide array of educational approaches and philosophies, from non-denominational correspondence courses to materials “built upon the firm foundation of scriptural truth” and not the “pseudo-scientific jargon of the secular educationists.”

### Trust in public schools

The few large-scale research projects that have been carried out in the United States suggest that the home schooled children whose families participated in the studies tend to perform well above the national average on standardized tests. But many researchers are hesitant to make too much of such findings, because of the obvious self-selection problem. Further, many agree that a substantial number of home schoolers remain underground, refusing to be counted by state or local authorities, and making it difficult to reach conclusions.

Perhaps one of the best indications of success is home schooling’s growing recognition by American colleges and universities. The Home School Legal Defense Association recently surveyed more than 500 institutions of higher learning and found that all but two had admissions policies for evaluating home schooled students who lack traditional high school records. Many colleges now accept evidence of student progress prepared by parents, portfolios of their work, and standardized tests in place of transcripts.

Despite its growing acceptance, parents still are sometimes brought before judges in disagreements over whether they’ve correctly followed state regulations. In a highly-publicized case last year, a Vermont home schooler was jailed for two weeks for refusing to let state examiners evaluate her 15-year-old son. State officials argued that they needed to make sure the boy—reputed by local school officials to have learning deficiencies—was being adequately served at home.

While public approval of home schooling has spread, it isn’t universal. A 1997 survey co-sponsored by the Gallup polling organization and the international education organization *Phi Delta Kappa* showed that 57 per cent of Americans think home schooling is a ‘bad thing’—though this was down from the 73 per cent reported 12 years earlier. The National Education Asso-

ciation, the country's largest teachers' union, also maintains a policy statement arguing that, "home schooling programs cannot provide the student with a comprehensive education experience." The National Association of Elementary School Principals has issued a similar warning, adding that government authorities should "make certain that those who exercise these options are held strictly accountable for the

academic achievement and social/emotional growth of children." A major part of their concern is that home schooled students may not learn enough about relating to children from other backgrounds.

Home schoolers themselves disagree about how big the movement will grow. Some predict a straight-line growth for many more years, while others see it soon reaching a point of diminishing returns.

Polls suggest that most Americans remain satisfied with their local public schools, which educate about 90 per cent of the country's students. But most observers agree that, however large, home schooling has established itself as a lasting feature in the landscape of American education. As parent and publisher Patrick Farenga puts it, "the concept of education is no longer held to the schools like monks in a monastery." ■

## EUROPEAN DISUNITY

▮ Cynthia Guttman

### Parents throughout Europe are becoming bolder about educating their children at home, even if it means defending their rights in court

The continent that has adopted a single currency is a long way from unity on home education. Although data remains scarce, support groups in several countries claim that they are receiving increasing numbers of requests from parents looking for alternatives to formal school systems, a movement being matched by legislative attempts to curtail its practice.

According to Amanda Petrie, one of a handful of European researchers on the subject, there is an underlying thread running through recent legislative changes suggesting that "if you are not in school, you are not learning." In Ireland, an Education (Welfare) Bill put forward for discussion in 1999 treats home education as a school attendance problem, rather than as a right guaranteed by the Constitution, which declares that the primary educator of the child is the family. With the expressed intention of cracking down on sects, the French parliament voted a new law in December 1998 obliging parents to follow the national curriculum more closely and inspectors to visit their children once a year in the home. The law was passed by a handful of deputies without consulting with representatives of the home education community. For Elyane Delmarès of the French support group *Les Enfants d'Abord*, "it's a bogus argument. The state already has a whole arsenal of weapons to fight sects. This is really about the state having a stronger hold on education."

Support groups say these controls cast home education in a negative light and reflect misconceptions about how learning takes place outside school. For Petrie, im-

posing a national curriculum and allowing inspectors into the home are two examples. The first assumes that "the state knows what education is, takes a certain formula, and if you apply this formula, your child is going to be fine." The second discriminates against people who are "not upper middle classes with reams of bookcases in the home."

#### The value of informal learning

But even in countries where the practice is tightly restricted, ambiguity often prevails. In Spain, where schooling is compulsory up to 16 years of age—special circumstances aside—a court ruled in 1999 in favour of parents from Almeria who are educating their seven-year-old child. In Germany, where home education is illegal, several families have gone to court and paid fines but they have been allowed to continue the practice. After returning from a posting in Micronesia, Dorothee Becker and her husband found that their two children were unable to adapt to the German school system. "It didn't offer the variety we had hoped for, especially in languages and science," says Becker, who has been to court once. In the Netherlands, authorities have refused 90 per cent of homeschooling requests, according to Syne Fonk, head of the support group Syntax. In response, a growing number of parents are starting up their own private schools.

Increasing research on home education would be a first step to breaking through some of the misconceptions surrounding the field, still widely shunned by the academic community. Studies are most advanced in the UK, which has Europe's strongest home education community, with an estimated

10,000 children. There can be one hundred different reasons for making the commitment, ranging from a simple question of philosophy, to concern about bullying and behavioural problems at school to religious convictions. Alan Thomas, a visiting fellow at the University of London Institute of Education, carried out in-depth research on 100 families in Britain and Australia to provide one of the first detailed accounts of how parents go about the task of teaching their children at home. Besides shorter lessons and extra individual attention, Thomas noted the far-reaching impact of informal and shared learning and the importance of conversation that is all too often lacking in school. He found that children had "high confidence in their ability to learn, high self-esteem and are socially mature in a way many who have been to school are not. They've not experienced failure. If you don't understand something, you deal with it there and then."

Petrie takes the debate one step further, emphasizing that the right to home education should be a principle of democracy. "I think it comes down to a question of how much confidence the state has in the parent's ability to know what is right for their own children. The debate hinges on that." ■



*Educating Children at Home*, Alan Thomas, Cassell, London, 1999

[www.worldzone.net/lifestyles/homeducation](http://www.worldzone.net/lifestyles/homeducation): a site drawn up by Amanda Petrie that provides information on legal aspects of home education in Europe

[www.rama1901.org/vens](http://www.rama1901.org/vens) for information on the French home education movement  
*Les Enfants d'Abord* is organizing a home education conference from Aug. 26 to Sept. 2, 2000. For information: 33-4-70 59 81 23

# Women's long march to power

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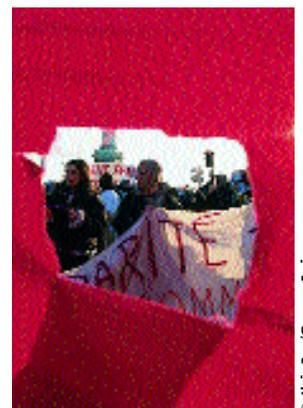
A century of feminism has failed to overturn several millennia of patriarchy: proof is the fate of women in many parts of the world today (p. 17). But from unrelenting battles to fragile victories (pp. 18-20), by the end of the twentieth century women had learned to defend their welfare and their interests. The two sexes, they say, are different but have equal rights and responsibilities.

Little by little, women have undermined the old order that sealed their inequitable fate. By standing in the forefront of struggles against apartheid and male domination, South African women are considered as role models: the power they have won has enabled them to impose laws sanctioning the violence to which they are subjected (pp. 20-21). Iranian women have not yet reached that point, but they are seizing every opportunity, from education to the ballot box, to strengthen their rights (pp.22-23 ). The struggle for equality in the workplace (pp. 23-24) and reproductive rights (pp. 24-25) are other aspects of women's emancipation that are still high on the agenda, five years after the Beijing women's conference.

Despite their massive and henceforth world-wide mobilisation, women still encounter obstacles to political participation, where they remain a tiny minority (pp. 28-29 and 30-31). Kept back by mentalities and societies that are moving ahead at a snail's pace, in the private sphere they are negotiating a new sharing of time with men (pp. 26-27). Following a path opened up in northern Europe, women in countries such as India (pp. 32-33) have obtained quotas that ensure more democratic representation.

In South Korea and elsewhere, they have created political breeding grounds to motivate and train the leaders of tomorrow (pp. 34-35).

A genuine renewal of political leadership seems to be under way. It promises to be one of the more important breakthroughs of the century that has just begun (pp. 35-36 and 37).



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# Opinion

► Taslima Nasreen



© Shahidul Alam/Sipa Press, Paris

► Born in Bangladesh, Ms. Nasreen has led a twin career as a doctor and writer. She is the author of six novels, several collections of poetry and essays, and an autobiography. Her works have been translated into over a dozen languages. Two of her novels, *Shame* and *My Girlhood*, were banned in her country, where Islamic fundamentalists issued a fatwa against her. Accused by her government of blasphemy, Ms. Nasreen has been living in exile since 1994. She has received numerous international awards, including India's Ananda Award, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize and the International Humanist Award from the United States.

Every day, women continue to be victims of rape, trafficking, acid-throwing, dowry deaths and other kinds of torture. At the opening of this new century, women are still not considered as equal human beings in many parts of the world. Religion and patriarchy continue to have an all-encroaching hold on their lives, maintaining and justifying their age-old oppression. In some South Asian societies, this hold is even increasing.

I do not believe that there can be real equality in a society dominated by religion. Western countries speak repeatedly about the necessity of economic development to alleviate poverty. But this is not enough. Societies such as Saudi Arabia may be economically developed, but women are deprived of all rights. The supremacy of religion is incompatible with freedom of expression, women's rights and democracy. This is why I see religion as the main enemy of women's development.

We have to act on several fronts at once. First of all, improving access to education. In a society like Bangladesh, 80 per cent of women are illiterate. For centuries women have been taught they are the slaves of men. It is very hard to change their minds, to make them aware of their oppression, to give them a sense of their independence. This educational effort has to go hand in hand with a secular feminist movement in society. Such movements have to start within the country and they cannot take hold when people are uneducated and unaware of their oppression. I'm not sure you can accomplish much from the outside, except to expose in the media the atrocities women in all too many countries face in their day to day lives.

In Muslim countries, this movement is emerging, but very timidly, and it has a slim margin of maneuver. It has the uphill task of fighting for the repeal of religious laws and the introduction of a uniform civil code. So far, it tends to be constituted by a few individual feminists who are forced to be diplomatic, to compromise with fundamentalists, be they men or women. But they are trying to change the system, step by step, and it will take a very long time. People are not yet ready to do away with religious laws that impact upon every aspect of society, from education and health to the workplace and the home.

For women's status to change, we also need enlightened leaders who believe in equality. In countries such

# No progress without a secular society

as mine, women with a strong voice do not have the support of political leaders, whether they be men or women. Look at the countries in which women are in politics, or even heads of state. Does it follow that women in those countries are emancipated? Because of long-standing vested interests, such leaders continue to back measures that oppress women. They are not ideologically committed to changing these conditions. In South Asia, most of the women who become heads of state are religious, and like men, they adhere to the religious objectives of the Establishment. I am the victim of a country where the prime minister is a woman. Because I went one step too far in denouncing religion and the oppression that it keeps women under, I had to leave my country.

**Until a society is not based on religion and women are considered equal to men before the law, I do not think that politics will advance the cause of women**

I have seen women oppose me when I talked about women's rights. They said straight out that God did not believe that women should have so many rights. And I have met men in my country who are against what is said in the religious scriptures and believe in equality between men and women. It does not depend on gender. It depends on one's conscience. Muslim women who are wearing the veil and glorifying their subservience are obviously not going to better the lives of the oppressed.

Until a society is not based on religion and women are considered equal to men before the law, I do not think that politics will advance the cause of women. In Western countries, women are educated, they are treated equally, they have access to jobs. In these conditions, their participation in politics has a meaning.

Education, a secular feminist movement, and leaders—both men and women—committed to equality and justice. This is what it will take to change the dire conditions which too many women still face today. It will take a very long time, but we are here to work towards that end. ■

The one whose wife dies is lucky. But not so the man whose cow dies.

Bengali proverb

## One battle after another

► Sophie Bessis

Women fought for their rights throughout the twentieth century. In the past several decades, their struggle has truly become global, but all is far from won

**W**e often hear that this will be the century of women, in light of the tremendous strides that have been made in the past thirty years or so. Although it is far too soon to confirm this prediction, it can safely be asserted that the twentieth century was marked by their struggle to leave the home, where they were confined by the ancestral division of roles along gender lines. Around the world, women have campaigned to win the rights they have been denied and to build, side-by-side with men, the future of the planet.

True, such struggles had already been waged in the past, although they were deliberately shunned in official historical accounts. But the brief revolts of this special “minority”, which accounts for over half of humanity, did not change the place of women in their societies. They may have ruled the roost, sometimes enjoying undeniable respect, but nevertheless they were still born to serve men and bring their husbands’ descendants into the world.

### Education: their first struggle

Yet, at the start of the twentieth century, the traditional distribution of roles, seemingly legitimised by every religion and frozen in a “natural” order, began to crumble under the two-pronged assault of modernisation and women’s struggle for their collective emancipation. They waged many battles to gradually obtain, despite setbacks, a change in their status—which is still far from achieved.

The first struggle of the twentieth century was for education. In 1861, a young woman graduated in France with a baccalaureate, a highschool leaving exam, for the first time. In 1900, the first female university was founded in Japan. The same year, girls won the right to secondary education in Egypt and the first girls’ school opened in Tunisia. Young women who could make the most of these new educational opportunities, not only to become better household managers and good educa-

tors for their children, as the main discourse of the period suggests, but also to do something unprecedented: to enter the forbidden spheres of public life, to exercise citizenship and to participate in politics.

Throughout the twentieth century, women waged a battle on two fronts: by fighting for their own rights and taking part in the major social and political emancipation movements. In 1917, the Russian Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai became the world’s first woman cabinet minister. African American Rosa Parks triggered the civil rights movement by refusing to give up her seat to a white man on an Alabama bus in 1955. Djamilia Boupacha was a heroine of Algeria’s war for independence. Women were entirely committed to the goals of these movements but seldom received anything in return for participating in them. Once their countries’ new masters took power, they often found themselves sent back to the kitchen. But they continued fighting for their own rights, and it is on this front that they achieved their greatest victories.

The earliest feminist movements, which first appeared in the West in the late nineteenth century, focused on workplace and civil rights issues. Industry needed women’s labour, which was underpaid in comparison with that of their male counterparts. ‘Equal pay for equal work!’ demanded American and European women, who began setting up their own trade unions and organizing strikes. They made unquestionable strides, but after more than one century of struggle, most women around the world still earn less pay for equal work.

### The right to vote

The second objective of the twentieth century’s pioneers was participation in public life, which hinged first and foremost on having the right to vote. The struggle was long and sometimes violent, as shown by the British “suffragettes” who demonstrated in the streets or Chinese women who made their demands heard

For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on women. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new.

Simone de Beauvoir,  
French writer (1908-1986)

by invading their country's new parliament in 1912. Everywhere, the fierce resistance of the political world progressively yielded to determined women's movements.

Scandinavia is where women first won the right to vote and to run for election, with Finland leading the way in 1906. The First World War thrust them into the forefront, with most European women winning the right to vote in 1918 and 1919, although French and Italian women had to wait until after the Second World War to at last be recognized as citizens. Outside the West, women also organized to demand their rights. Groups were founded in Turkey, Egypt and India. In 1930, the first congress of women from the Near and Middle East gathered in Damascus to demand equality. Throughout this period, women everywhere declared that, outside of motherhood, they had the right to be just like men, and that men could not deny them this right.

### Control over their own bodies

For a while, women's rights movements took a back seat to the Second World War and liberation struggles in the European colonies. The fight against fascism and, after 1945, colonialism, mobilized all their energy. Women distinguished themselves in these struggles, but that did not suffice to establish their rights as a gender. However, the world continued to change. With independence, many women in the South won access to schooling, salaried employment and, in a few exceptional cases, the closed world of politics. In Western countries, the post-war period saw them enter the work force on a massive scale. The gap between social reality and the discriminatory laws defended by exclusively male power structures grew wider.

In the West, the second generation of feminists emerged in the wake of the libertarian movements of 1968. Picking up where their elders left off, they broadened the scope of their demands, for late-twentieth century feminists no longer aspired to the right to be "just like men". Challenging the claim of the "white male" to represent universality, their goal was to achieve equality while remaining distinct as women. The women's liberation movement that first emerged in the American middle-class claimed the right to control one's own body. Feminists fought for contraception and abortion rights in many countries where one or both were against the law, and for autonomy and equality within the couple. "The personal is political," proclaimed women inspired by Marxism and psychoanalysis. "Workers of the world, who washes your socks?" chanted demonstrators in the streets of Paris in the 1970s. In France, the Veil law legalizing abortion unleashed emotional debate in 1974.

Many Third World women could not identify with the struggles being waged in the West and



In Munich, Germany, a poster printed for Women's Day on March 8, 1914 demands the right to vote for women.

© J.L. Charnet, Paris

insisted on leading their own battles at their own pace. However, these Western feminist movements breathed new life into the cause. Recognizing the changes and proclaiming their intention to accelerate them, the United Nations declared 1975 "International Women's Year" and organized the first international women's conference in Mexico City.

Already proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, sexual equality was reasserted in 1979 by the Convention on the Abolition of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which became a precious emancipation tool in the North as well as the South. At UN conferences in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995, women from both hemispheres found common ground, demanding the right to "have a child if I want it, when I want it," rejecting Malthusian principles and claiming their place in political ►

- ▶ bodies that until then had decided the world's future without them, struggling against religious fundamentalism that jeopardizes their modest gains.

### Misogyny of the political class

Of course, the struggle of Kuwaiti women against those who have denied them the right to vote or Indian women against the forced abortion of female foetuses is not the same as American women's battle against their own fundamentalists or French women's campaign against the misogyny of the political class. Women's movements take different approaches depending on the continent and do not necessarily have the same priorities, but the struggle has nonetheless become global during the past several decades. In the last twenty-five years, women have gradually increased their presence in public life, although it can hardly be said that the doors are wide open for them. From Africa to Asia, women's organizations have multiplied and acquired experience.

But their victories remain incomplete and the future is uncertain. From the nightmare of Afghan women to the ways in which equality is resisted in the so-called most advanced countries, the obstacles show that there is still a long way to go. Will women see the end of the struggle in this century that has just begun, the one which supposedly belongs to them? ■

## Beijing Plus Five

Five years after a historic women's conference in Beijing that gathered some 30,000 participants from 189 countries, the United Nations General Assembly will be holding a special session in New York from June 5-9, 2000. The goal of the meeting, entitled "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century," is to take stock of progress made in implementing the Platform for Action adopted in 1995. Divided into 12 areas of critical concern, this set of commitments calls for economic opportunity and security for women, quality education and health care, full political and economic participation and the promotion of human rights, among others. Meanwhile, women are on the march to demand an end to poverty and violence. Launched on March 8 by the Fédération des femmes du Québec, the World March of Women gathers some 4,000 groups from 153 countries. The initiative culminates at the United Nations in New York on October 17, 2000, the World Day for the Eradication of Poverty. ■



[www.un.org/womenwatch/daw](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw)

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# South Africa: a strategic ascent

▶ Shireen Hassim

Since the advent of their country's first democratic government, women have imposed far-reaching pieces of legislation. Making them effective remains an uphill battle

Right after South Africa's second democratic elections in June 1999, the newly elected President Thabo Mbeki appointed eight women to ministerial positions, double the number in the first government. The country ranks seventh in the world in terms of women parliamentary representatives (25 per cent), while the South African constitution and the African National Congress (ANC) government have entrenched gender equality as a key political value, significant achievements on a continent where women are all too often regarded as secondary citizens.

The moral support of leaders such as Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela notwithstanding, women's gains result from a well-articulated strategy that took shape within the ANC well before its 1994 electoral victory.

With a transition to democracy in progress in the early 1990s, this strategy focused sharply on representation issues. In 1991, women within the ANC demanded a quota of seats on the National Executive Committee. They failed, but in 1994, the ANC was the only party to adopt a 30 per cent quota of women on its electoral lists. When the ANC started drafting the Reconstruction and Development Programme, the backbone of its electoral manifesto, women's groups within the party lobbied hard for it to address their concerns regarding employment, health and land ownership. This lobbying was bolstered by a powerful grassroots movement that shared the aim of making South Africa a non-racial, but also a non-sexist democracy. Women from all walks of life formed a National Coalition in 1992, which tur-

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ned gender representation into a multiparty concern. Accompanying the drive to get women into power was an emphasis on getting them out to vote through targeted campaigns.

### Opposition from traditional leaders

Once in government, women were influential in drafting the constitution, adopted in 1996. The task was not always easy. Even though the country touted itself as a non-sexist democracy, in pushing for the insertion of an equality clause, women ran into strong opposition from several traditional leaders, including some within the political fold of the ANC, who argued that it conflicted with the protection of custom and tradition. Strong political lobbying efforts by women MPs such as Mavivi Manzini, Baleka Mbete and Thenjiwe Mtintso undercut the arguments of the traditional leaders. Women MPs were also instrumental in getting clauses included on reproductive rights as well as socio-economic rights.

women would not have been passed. In particular, the Termination of Pregnancy Act provides women with access to abortion under significantly broader and more favourable conditions than in the past. The Maintenance Act of 1998 substantially improves the position of mothers dependent on child support from their former partners. Free health services have been provided for pregnant women and children under the age of six. The 1998 Domestic Violence Act was important in sensitizing the judiciary to the fact that violence within families was a public matter. The committee has also stood behind a budget initiative which analyzes how different ministries allocate resources specifically to benefit women.

These gains are laudable. But despite the significant number of women in cabinet—many of whom come from an activist background—they have been unable to oppose cutbacks in social service spending or increases in arms expenditure (the deputy minister of defense is a Quaker and head of the ANC's women's parliamentary caucus). And although health minister Dr Manto Tshabalala is a woman and longtime gender activist, she has not supported women's organizations' demand for the HIV/Aids drug AZT to be offered to pregnant women and rape survivors.<sup>1</sup> The government has argued that the option is unaffordable, a position not necessarily held by women within the ANC, nor, for that matter, by the opposition.

### Securing leadership positions in political parties

In the 1999 election campaign, no party questioned the principle of gender representation. Instead, the focus shifted to specific policy issues such as violence against women, unemployment, housing and health care, with national television and radio allotting air time to debate the positions held by the competing parties. Women activists pointed out that despite the formal commitments to gender equality, political parties failed to outline policy positions on key gender issues. For example, not one party had a policy with regard to dealing with violence against women despite the fact that South Africa has one of the highest incidence of rape in the world.

These interventions during elections highlighted the need for women to become significantly more organized within political parties and to hold leadership positions within them. This will give women MPs the support they need to become even more effective within the legislative arena, but also ensure that internal party mechanisms exist to hold them accountable to women members and not just party leadership. Joyce Piliso-Seroke, chairperson of the Commission on Gender Equality, has commented that a long climb remains. The government, she said, "talks the talk of gender equality, without walking the walk. The Domestic Violence and Maintenance Acts will remain just so many words unless infrastructure and human resources are provided to make them effective." ■



An ANC gathering on the eve of the country's first democratic elections in April 1994.

© John Spaul/Panos Pictures, London

Most women who entered Parliament in 1994 were committed to advancing the rights of South African women—an inevitable source of tension when their positions came into conflict with those of their respective parties. Still, a number of routes were pursued to break through this 'loyalty' dilemma. By far the most successful structure for advancing women's rights has been the Joint Committee on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women. Grouping women from across party lines, this parliamentary committee consults with women's organizations in civil society and has played a critical role in proposing and fast tracking legislation so that it is put on the roll for debate. Had it not been for this committee, it is more than likely that several far-reaching pieces of legislation directly concerning

1. AZT has been shown to reduce transmission of HIV from pregnant mothers to their babies.

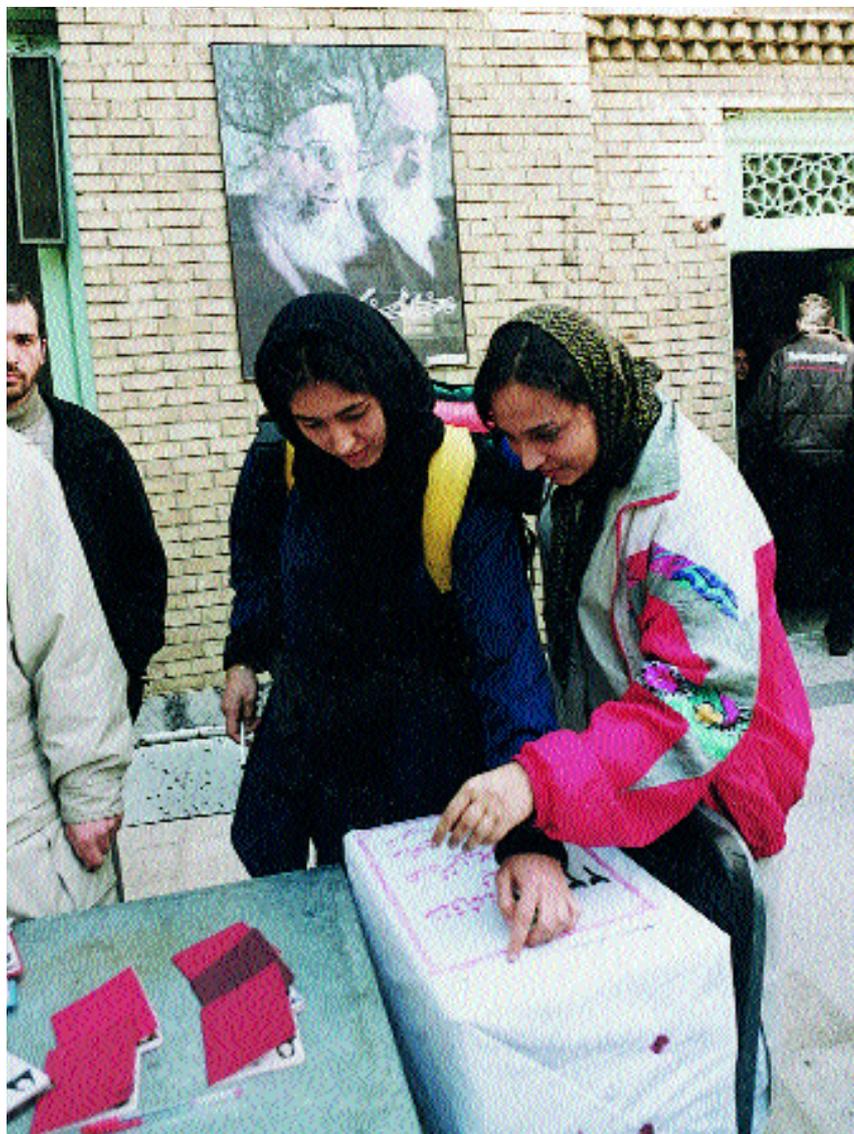
The women were courageous, persistent, enthusiastic, indefatigable, and their protest against the pass system set a standard for anti-government protests that was never equalled.

Nelson Mandela, former South African president (1918-)

# Emancipation under the veils

► Siavosh Ghazi

Despite the Islamic revolution, women have never stopped standing up for their rights. In head-scarves or chadors, they are at the heart of the struggle to modernize society



© Peter Turnley/Black Star/Studio B, Limours

Young Iranian women at the ballot box in the first round of the February 18, 2000 legislative elections.

“I’ll go to parliament dressed as I was during my campaign, in an overcoat and a head-scarf. No way will I put on the chador.” Elaheh Koulāi, a university professor elected to parliament as a representative of Tehran in the February 18, 2000 legislative elections, unleashed a political storm when she made this quasi-revolutionary proclamation. Since the advent of the Islamic Republic in 1979, all women holding official positions have worn the chador, the long, black fabric covering that conceals the entire body from head to toe.

Marzieh Dabagh, an outgoing member of parliament who was not re-elected, reacted to Koulāi’s statements by threatening to “box the ears” of any woman

who would dare come to the *Majlis* (the Iranian parliament) without the traditional chador. The brother of the Guide of the Islamic Republic, Hadi Khatamenei, a leading member of the reformist camp, had to step in and cool tempers down, saying that all forms of veils, from the simple head-scarf to the chador, are acceptable.

This debate may seem trite, but it reveals the assertiveness of women in Iranian society, including outside Tehran, where they are seldom seen without the chador. Fatemeh Khatami (no relation to the president) was elected to parliament in Mashhad, not far from the Afghan border, even though she does not wear the chador, an unprecedented event in the provinces.

## An educated generation

A symbol of the Islamic order, the obligation to wear the veil has never prevented women from standing up for their rights. At the beginning of the revolution, the government tried to send them back into the home, primarily with offers of early retirement and incentives to work less. But officials soon gave up in the face of resistance (women were accustomed to gentler treatment under the Shah, especially if they belonged to the elite) and the needs of the country, then at war with Iraq. Today, women account for 12 per cent of the work force. Although the figure is the same as in 1979, it is likely to rise as new generations of better-educated women enter the labour market.

For women have taken full advantage of the literacy for all campaign launched after the revolution, especially in the countryside, which had remained backward under the Shah. Today the percentage of girls in school is almost the same as that of boys (nearly 80 per cent). Young women account for 40 per cent of university students and, two years ago, for the first time more girls than boys were admitted to the competitive national entrance examinations. This year, they even make up 58 per cent of the accepted candidates. “Almost all leisure activities are closed to girls,” explains lawyer and women’s rights advocate Mehranguiz Kar. “So they focus on their studies.”

Women are still overwhelmingly underrepresented in political decision-making bodies, but they play a decisive role as voters. “Their turn-out has been outstanding since the May 1997 legislative ballot, which helped elect President Khatami,” continues Kar. “The women’s vote is a conscious vote. They carefully choose candidates who are in favour of their rights.” In February 1999, they made use of their power to vote some 300 women into municipal councils during the first local elections since 1979. In the rather traditional

► Freelance journalist based in Tehran

provincial cities and towns, these results reflect a "revolution of mentalities", says Fatemeh Jalaipour, a Tehran municipal council member responsible for women's issues.

The women's vote also helped reformers win the legislative elections. Some interior ministry officials say that women outnumbered men voters: 55 per cent compared with 45 per cent. But, as journalist Saïd Leylaz points out, "this time they didn't vote specifically for women candidates," even though their number increased by 70 per cent compared with the last legislative elections. Like the outgoing *Majlis*, the new parliament has only fifteen women deputies (out of 290), but they are moderates rather than conservatives.

### A voice in the press

Women must still settle for a backseat in politics, but they hold a growing number of senior civil service positions. Since taking office in 1997, President Mohammad Khatami has asked his ministers to appoint women to head up the various ministerial departments. And his brother, Mohammad Reza Khatami, who leads the Islamic Iran Participation Front, said after that movement won the last elections, "We are in favour of women entering the government."

The rise of Iranian women is partly due to their own mobilization efforts. After the Iran-Iraq war, many of them organized all kinds of activities within religious organizations, often spurred on by the government. Since 1997, they have rushed into the liberalization process begun by Mohammad Khatami to set up more independent non-governmental organizations, despite resistance from conservatives, who until now have controlled the committee in charge of issuing permits. Today, the social fabric is partly based on women. "In Tehran, several hundred grassroots mutual aid, environmental protection and

other groups are headed by women," says Jalaipour. Likewise, the number of young women on student councils is steadily on the rise. And, says Kar, women head over 40 publishing companies, most of which print books on women's issues or by women authors.

The press has also played a key role. As early as 1990, women Muslim intellectuals founded the monthly *Zanan* (*Women*, in Farsi), where they campaign for a revision of their legal status and a more modern form of Islam. They are demanding the same rights as men with regard to inheritance (under sharia, they are entitled to only half as much as men), divorce (they can be repudiated for no apparent reason) and child custody (which is denied them if their daughter is over seven and their son over two). Only a few minor touch-ups have been made in the past several years to correct these inequalities. For example, a woman may now request that her right to ask for a divorce be recognized in the marriage contract.

Widely read by young women, *Zanan* boasts a circulation of 30,000, one of the highest runs of any Iranian monthly. However, there as elsewhere, the debate over the interpretation of Islamic rules still dominates the issue of gender equality, which limits the scope of the feminist movement. "Advocates of secularism still cannot organize as such," says Kar. They have voiced their concerns on several occasions within non-governmental groups such as the Organization of Women Journalists and through the women's press, in *Zanan* and the daily *Zan*, before it was shut down less than one year ago.

"We're going to have new laws passed in favour of gender equality," said Elaheh Koulaï after she won the election. The deputy's determination is likely to put her on a collision course with irate conservatives, who view the "loosening of moral standards" as a sign of their political defeat. ■

It is not possible to develop a country without first advancing the status of women.

Habib Bourguiba,  
first president of Tunisia  
(1901-2000)

# Sweden: court battles for equal pay

► Elisabet Ornerborg

Even in the country with the world's highest number of female cabinet ministers, the gender gap is not closed in the workplace

**D**espite an Equal Opportunities Act passed in 1979, Swedish women earn 15 to 20 per cent less than men. Five years ago, an economist won her case, proving that she took home less than her male counterparts in the same borough, although her responsibilities and education were identical. But when it comes to comparing different jobs deemed of equal value, the task is much more complex.

In 1995, almost 400 Stockholm area nurses lod-

ged a wage discrimination complaint with their Equal Opportunities Ombudsman. Because cases are dealt with on an individual basis, three different proceedings were filed in the Labour Court. A fourth was filed separately in 1996 by two midwives from Orebro county council, in southern Sweden.

Five years down the line, none of these cases has been resolved. The nurses and midwives claim that their work is of equal value to that of male medical technicians, but that their wages are about 15 per cent ►

► Swedish journalist,  
with Lag&Atval, a magazine  
specialized in labour issues

lower. The former look after hospital apparatus and require less education.

The case has revolved around job evaluations. The midwives' employers maintain that there is no salary gap between the two work categories since they receive compensation for night shifts and work four hours less. The medical technicians work days only. The Ombudsman has argued that basic monthly wages should be compared, not those taking compensation for shift work into account. The Labour Court turned to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, which ruled in April that basic salaries should be compared, taking the case back to the Swedish court.

"The most significant thing about these cases is that they are all focusing on the difference in pay between different professions, one dominated by women, one by men. How do you prove that work

is of equal value? There is no precedent in our court about this," explains Raija Lounavaara, of the Equal Opportunities office.

If the nurses and midwives win their respective cases, their employers will be held liable for damages. It does not follow that the 400 nurses who filed complaints in 1995 will benefit. "But rulings stating that these persons have been discriminated against will send a very important message to trade unions and employers," said Lounavaara. Nevertheless, the nurses' union does not support the court cases which break with the Swedish tradition of collective agreements. It argues that wages are best set through negotiation and by relying on market forces, given the shortage of nurses. Since 1995, the union has strengthened this negotiating process and obtained the sharpest wage hikes on the labour market. ■

# Peru: skewed planning

► Natalia Tarnawiecki

Two Peruvian organizations working on behalf of women's rights have waged a successful campaign to reverse coercive family planning policies

The first rays of morning sun appear through the window. The water boils, the dry clothes must be brought in, the children woken up. In the humble house where Damiana Barrientos lives in one of Lima's southern suburbs, a new day is beginning. But for Damiana, this is no ordinary dawn: today she must go to court.

In February 2000, Damiana won the right to free medical care from the Peruvian health ministry until she makes a full recovery from an operation performed against her will. "Everything began in the maternity ward of a Lima hospital in 1998 when I gave birth to my baby, who died a few days after I had a caesarean," says Damiana. "There they cut my fallopian tubes and forged my signature on a paper saying I had consented. But complications emerged afterwards, and now I'm suffering from a dropped uterus." She went to the courts, but though the state acknowledged that there were "deficiencies in the quality of care," her case was closed. Thanks to lawyers from the Committee for the defence of women's rights in Latin America and the Caribbean (CLADEM-Peru) and to the Movimiento Amplio de Mujeres group (MAM), Damiana's case was taken to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, where it is now awaiting sentence. To date, CLADEM has filed legal complaints over 243 cases of forced sterilisation.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1996, when the first evidence emerged of

serious violations of human rights through the implementation of voluntary surgical sterilisation, MAM and CLADEM have sought to reform the family planning policy embraced by the Peruvian government in 1995, and aimed at reducing the birth rate in rural areas from 5.6 children for each woman to an average of 2.5 children by the year 2000. "Our goal was to ensure that women could freely opt for one of the various methods of family planning and get the government to provide information on all the alternatives rather than impose voluntary sterilisation as the only possible method," says CLADEM's Giulia Tamayo.

## "Health festivals"

According to CLADEM, the family planning programme heralded by President Alberto Fujimori as a way to make health services more democratic and transform women into "masters of their destiny" has been converted since 1996 into a policy of forced sterilisation devoted to meeting national quotas, with surgical sterilisation as the only option. To make the latter more popular, "health festivals" were organized in which women were goaded into agreeing to undergo the operation. "We decided to have only two children. That's why we chose to have our tubes cut, and we are happy!" Messages like this featured prominently on the colourful banners hoisted in villages to announce the health festivals, which would last between one and three days and include sporting activities and public concerts.

During the festivals, vaccination campaigns, tests for breast and uterus cancer and dental check-ups were promised, but not all of these services were provided. No official information is available on the number of festivals held between 1996 and

1. These 243 complaints, which included 30 deaths, are collected and detailed in the report *Nada personal. Reporte de derechos humanos sobre la aplicación de la anticoncepción quirúrgica en el Perú* ("Nothing personal. A human rights report on the implementation of surgical sterilisation in Peru"), released in mid-1999. The author, lawyer Giulia Tamayo, was awarded Amnesty International's Ginetta Saga prize for her work on behalf of women's rights.

► Journalist based in Lima (Peru)

1998, though according to the health ministry, there were 463 "campaigns" in the first half of 1996, which were attended by 120,000 people in remote rural areas.

"These massive campaigns were preceded by home visits carried out by medical workers with the aim of winning over fertile women with more than four children. People lived in a state of permanent anxiety," declares Tamayo. Reports collected by Tamayo indicate that couples were explained the benefits of the surgery, which was presented as the only option, before being forced to sign a document. Those who underwent the operation were then presented with 15 kilograms of food, while the health worker who successfully persuaded the woman in question was awarded a bonus.

CLADEM gathered together a large number of complaints proving that the poor sanitary conditions in which the sterilisations were carried out had caused serious complications, sometimes leading to death, and that these after-effects were not just limited to isolated cases as the government had claimed, but were

blems we saw were medical negligence and a lack of information for women," she adds. MAM has since decided to distribute pamphlets listing the rights of health service users, and urging them to contact an emergency advice hotline in the event of any abuses of those rights.

Official statistics report that 800,000 couples were attended by state family planning services in 1998, but that only 3.5 per cent chose voluntary sterilisation, and that so far the total number of sterilised men and women in Peru stands at 300,000—in a proportion of 10 women to each man. Unofficial figures, in contrast, suggest that almost 500,000 people have undergone the surgery.

Following the campaigns mounted by CLADEM and MAM, the health ministry has been forced to change its methods, and now incorporates the MAM pamphlet in the information it distributes, as well as offering two advice sessions to would-be patients: one on contraceptive methods, and the other on the contraceptive method chosen, including (if necessary) a briefing on the possible complica-



Nela Julcarine leaving a healthcare centre on the outskirts of Lima. She is one of several social workers who denounced the ways in which state medical officers pushed women into undergoing surgical sterilisation.

© Martin Mejia-AP/Boomerang, Paris

part and parcel of a vast systematic practice. In the absence of any official answers to its questions, CLADEM called on the press at the end of 1997 to make the complaints public and put direct pressure on the government.

"Not all of the family planning programme is wrong. We don't oppose it, but we want to point out the traumatic results of the coercive implementation of voluntary sterilisation," observes MAM's María Esther Mogollón. In 1998, her organization decided to check out reports that had emerged from Lima and the country's interior. "Fifty volunteers visited hospitals in 19 out of the 25 districts where the programme had been applied to talk with those affected and with doctors," says Mogollón. "The two most serious pro-

blems and irreversible nature of surgical sterilisation. A 72 hour-period between signing the consent form and the operation has also been granted to allow for any second thoughts.

A year after the introduction of these reforms, Peru's family planning programme now maintains a much lower profile. No health festivals have been staged this year, while according to authorities, demand for voluntary sterilisation has dropped by 30 per cent. The main goal of the women's rights groups has been to condemn the devastating effects and psychological damage that have followed the operations, but their campaigns have helped ensure that poor rural people can plan their family freely, and learn the ways of responsible parenting. ■

The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled.

Aristotle,  
Greek philosopher  
(384-322 B.C.)

## For a fair sharing of time

► Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira

Women may have entered public life on a massive scale, but they are still on their own when it comes to running the household. A new balance must be struck if there is to be genuine democracy

**A**t the dawn of the 21st century, states and the international community can no longer refute the fact that humanity is made up of two sexes, not just one. This discovery, a precious legacy of the century that just closed, has brought women's existence into the limelight. One of the great democratic challenges for societies over the next century will be to mature so that both sexes are able to live their lives on an equal footing, with all their differences, contrasting history and culture, but also with equal rights and responsibilities.

Women's rise to power and their participation in politics are the vital signs of a healthy democracy. If only this vision that emerged from the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference could spread worldwide! I would call it a radicalisation of democracy. When women take part in the public arena, contributing to the ongoing, shared effort to shape better ways of living together, a qualitative leap occurs. Their participation fills a gap which has until now prevented the emergence of a truly democratic culture.

### Archaic attitudes

Equal sharing of decision-making by men and women is a pre-requisite for democracy. In Brazil, women hold half the civil service jobs (they are more qualified than men), but only 13 per cent of supervisory positions. The ultra-modern buildings in the federal capital, Brasilia, stand in sharp contrast with the persistence of intellectual and emotional outlooks which hark back to the 19th century and hinder women's empowerment.

But attitudes are not the only obstacle to women's ambitions. The structure of society and the way men and women run their daily lives are other stumbling blocks.

The Inter-American Development Bank has had the good idea of giving the Institute for Cultural Action, an NGO in Rio de Janeiro, the task of setting up a pilot programme to train Brazilian women for positions of political and social power, an experiment which is to be extended to the rest of Latin America. Participants include trade union and NGO leaders, key figures from the black and indigenous communities, company executives, civil servants and policymakers.

These women of different ages, educational backgrounds and ethnic origins are all aware of one fact: they are paying a very high price for a social contract that was negotiated when women were in a position of weakness, and agree that this has to change.

### Re-mapping the division between public and private life

Women account for 46 per cent of Brazil's working population and hold 51 per cent of the university degrees, but still perform almost all tasks at home, in the private sphere. A study of 300 women in positions of responsibility by the Centre for Women's Leadership (CELIM) in Rio de Janeiro revealed the difficulty they had in making choices, their temptation to give up and the risk of pulling back in the face of increasing obstacles. Their difficulties show that there is an urgent need to re-organize the use of time, to strike a new balance between responsibilities and to re-map the division between public and private life. Household tasks must be recognised as time-consuming, socially and economically vital and a serious check on women's ambitions.

Women in positions of power must constantly prove that they can behave like men. They keep

► President of the Centre for Women's Leadership (CELIM), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

quiet about having to look after children, run a household and care for elderly parents. Bringing those issues out into the open would mean admitting “flaws” that men do not have, for the simple reason that they delegate such work to their wives.

By drawing a veil of silence over their home life as if it were something illicit, women are allowing a basic fact to be hidden: the world of work relies on a domestic zone run by them. Women have changed, but the world of work has not and they are reaching the point of exhaustion. Filled with a deep sense of injustice, they are asking themselves: “Where did I go wrong?”

Understanding that humanity is composed of two different but equal sexes has several implications. Society must redefine itself because women are turning up in public carrying children in their arms and breast-feeding them, and because they have their own awareness and language that come from life experiences which are different from those of men.

### An untenable double burden

Articulating issues affecting public and private life is complicated, but that does not mean the equation is impossible or that the problems they raise should be brushed aside—especially since the two worlds of public and private life are intertwined and mutually supportive. The balance between the two has now been upset. Women have entered public life on a massive scale, but the organization of home life—how time is used and who is responsible for what tasks—is still the same, as if nothing had changed. And yet such a world, where women are expected to soldier on just as before, “simply” adding to their lives experiences hitherto reserved to men, is called egalitarian.

That misunderstanding is fueled by an age-old tradition of dismissing the world of women, even by women themselves. Because society does not consider what they do in the home as having any major social significance, it fails to add this part of their lives to the other side of the equation.

This is why the massive migration of women from the home to the public arena is occurring without societies having to think seriously about how and by whom domestic work will be done in the future (and which women still do, but at what cost!). The double burden, resulting from an outdated social contract, is putting women under mounting pressure by speeding up their lives to an untenable pace. We are facing a social problem that society as a whole must solve and not, as many think, a problem that women must settle by working even harder.

As new areas of power open up to women, both sexes must take a fresh look at how they use time. Re-arranging it is a challenge to society's imagination. But has this necessity sunk into the minds of decision-makers? I do not think so. This



**Being there: A woman nursing her child during a political rally in Tokoza, South Africa.**

Ken Coesterbrook/Camma, Paris

poses a major problem because it is a missing building block in the construction of our democracies.

The everyday work of CELIM is proof of this. Women must put these issues on the political and economic agenda, thereby contributing to a more radical definition of democracy. Feminism's new demand for a different sharing of time also opens a debate that goes beyond the interests of women alone. In the final analysis, time and its constraints define the limits of our own lives and the range of choices we make, in accordance with the meaning we give to our own existence.

The equality equation is increasingly complex. It is not enough to wipe out the last traces of discrimination in public life. A new definition of equality will emerge when both sexes start sharing responsibility in the private realm. Otherwise, the issue will be distorted and women will lose all chance of succeeding in public life. ■

If you say,  
“I’m for equal pay,”  
that’s a reform.  
But if you say,  
“I’m a feminist,”  
that’s a  
transformation  
of society.

Gloria Steinem,  
American writer and  
feminist (1934-)

# Unfinished democracy

Nearly everywhere, with the notable exception of countries like Kuwait, laws entitle women to vote and be elected. But in reality, the proportion of women in legislative bodies falls far short of representing their percentage in the general population. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), a Geneva-based organization comprising 139 parliaments, says that men still account for 86 per cent of the world's parliamentarians and that no country—not even in northern Europe—has achieved total parity. In the former communist countries, which once boasted some of the world's highest rates of female representation in politics, the percentages have fallen sharply since 1989.

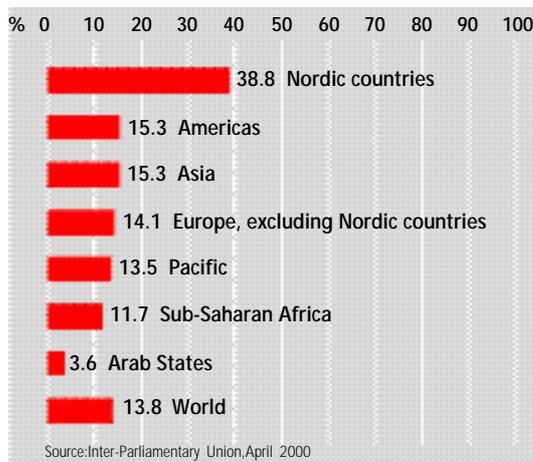
Likewise, the IPU says, "there has been no significant increase in the number of women heads of government and, above all, ministers throughout the world." The average number of women heads of government is around 12 per cent. And, they seldom obtain strategic portfolios such as finance, the interior

or defence but are more likely to be given the ministries of social affairs, the family, health and the environment, which have lower funding and less political clout. ■

The 1980s has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: (...) it stands the truth firmly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall.

Susan Faludi, journalist and American author (1959-)

## Women in national parliaments (in percentage, by region, both houses combined)



## The 20 countries where women hold at least 25% of parliamentary seats



# Women in politics: still "the second sex"

Regardless of their political affiliation, in all countries women must overcome a host of stumbling blocks that limit their political careers. "Most obstacles to progress consist... of deficiencies of various kinds," the IPU says, including lack of time, training, information, self-confidence, money, support, motivation, women's networks and solidarity between women.

In every culture, prejudice and stereotypes die hard. The belief still holds sway that women belong in the kitchen and with the children, not at election rallies or in the Speaker's chair. The media often reinforce traditional images of women, who, upon entering politics, also often bear the brunt of verbal and physical attacks.

In impoverished countries racked by civil stri-

fe and deteriorating economic and social conditions, women are strapped by the tasks of managing everyday life and looking after their families.

The IPU stresses the general lack of child-care facilities—often reserved for a privileged few—the reluctance of political parties to change the times and running of meetings and the weak backing women receive from their own families. That support, which is moral as well as financial, is all the more vital because women have internalised negative images of themselves since the dawn of time and often suffer from low self-confidence.

Another obstacle is the lack of financial resources, especially as election campaigns become increasingly expensive. To make matters worse, women encounter more or less overt machismo in the form of closed political circles barring entry to the “second sex”. Lastly, they deplore the lack of solidarity between women, exacerbated by the fact that the number of available positions is limited. ■



● [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)

● Politics: Women's Insight. The views of some 200 women politicians in 65 countries—from why they run to how they feel their involvement in politics makes a difference.

Series Reports and Documents No 36,  
Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000

## Women in the Executive

<b>Heads of State</b> (Bermuda, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Panama, San Marino, Sri Lanka)	7	3.7%
<b>Heads of Government</b> (Bangladesh, New Zealand and Sri Lanka)	3	1.6%
<b>Number of countries whose government includes a woman</b>	145	76.3%
Minister of Defence and Veteran Affairs	4	2.1%
Minister of Agriculture	7	3.7%
Minister of Finance/Budget	9	4.7%
Minister of Science, Technology and Research	9	4.7%
Minister of the Economy/Development	14	7.4%
Minister of Foreign Affairs	15	7.9%
Minister of Justice	23	12.1%
Minister of Education	23	12.1%
Minister of Labour/Employment/Vocational Training	25	13.2%
Minister of Family/Children/Youth	26	13.7%
Minister of the Environment	28	14.7%
Minister of Health	30	15.8%
Minister of Culture	32	16.8%
Minister of Social Affairs	44	23.2%
Minister of Women's Affairs/Gender Equality	47	24.7%

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1999

# Strategies of change

**H**ow can women—a “minority” that makes up 52 per cent of the world's population—take their rightful place in the management of the world's affairs? The controversy surrounding various measures intended to encourage them will continue for a long time to come. As the fierce debate over France's recent parity law showed, the two camps are divided into the advocates of practical efficiency and the defenders of a theoretical universalism.

“Some feminists view the demand for parity in decision-making forums as a step towards the rebuilding of a dividing wall between the sexes, a development conducive to hierarchy-building and discrimination,” says the IPU. “Others, on the contrary, view it as a means to eliminate barriers and as an alternative to strategies that have failed to work: entry into parties (in which women regularly fail), partial redistribution by means of quotas. . . or pious hopes for a change in mentalities.”

In northern Europe, where the feminist move-

ment is very strong, parties set up quotas in the 1970s and have been raising them periodically to the point of achieving near-parity. That policy is starting to spread to the rest of Europe, especially left-wing parties. But in some countries, such as Portugal, bills in favour of such measures have recently failed to pass (February 2000).

The situation in developing countries is more varied but seems to be changing. Many parties and governments—especially in Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chile, Guatemala, India, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa and Sri Lanka—have taken steps in favour of quotas or announced their intention to do so. ■

# A woman in the lion's den

► Hinde Taarji

For years, Moroccan member of parliament Badia Skalli has put her long-standing loyalty to the Socialist Party before her feminist beliefs. Now she is at the centre of a tough battle

**B**adia Skalli had the good fortune to be born at a time when the world made sense, and everything was linked to some kind of cause. First came the struggle for independence, then the big push to build a new and freer country. Cold reality eventually dashed these hopes, but from the outset, there had been that dream.

Skalli was born in 1944 in El Jadida, about 100 kilometers south of Casablanca. At 10 she had her first taste of political activism. A pro-independence demonstration passed her house, and suddenly she was marching in step with the protesters. This earned her a good hiding when she got home, but the seed had been sown.

When Skalli enrolled at the University of Casablanca in 1962 to study law, the National Union of Moroccan Students (UNEM) was at its height and spearheading the left-wing opposition party, the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP).

"You just had to join in," she remembers. "You just felt it so strongly. The students were the elite." Women students were few and far between, and only

a handful were activists like her. They were fussed over by the men in the organization, who wanted to show they were modern-minded and strongly in favour of women's emancipation. The UNEM executive committee welcomed Skalli and she took on her first political responsibilities.

King Hassan II, who came to the throne in 1961, soon called a halt to these "antics." In 1965, a high-school student rebellion grew into a popular uprising and a state of emergency was declared. The UNEM was decapitated when all its leaders were drafted into the army. Except for Skalli, that is, who greatly resented being treated differently because of her sex. "I had dreams about an army truck that would pick me up and take me away with my comrades."

Skalli acquired her yen for politics during these years of activism. But the state of emergency drove the UNFP, of which she was a member, underground. Morocco entered a period of political repression. Women party members busied themselves with looking after political prisoners' families.

► Freelance journalist based in Casablanca

In Casablanca, thousands of Islamic conservatives took to the streets on March 12, 2000 to protest a proposed reform of the family legal code, which governs the status of women.



Alain Buuy/Camma, Paris



Badia Skalli

The young Skalli married, but her husband was killed in a road accident three years later. It took her several years to recover.

The call of politics was too compelling. When the UNFP split in 1975, she sided with the party's "democratic" wing to help found the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which meant giving up the tempting dream of revolution. The battle was now to be fought within the institutional bounds defined by the law. Skalli was one of the party's few female candidates in the 1976 local elections, the first to be held under the state of emergency.

She campaigned in a poor, predominantly Berber-speaking area, where she found women cut off from the world because they were illiterate and did not understand Arabic. She had put her finger on the plight of Moroccan women. The young candidate also found that voters had no preconceptions about women in politics and judged her by what she said. But the party asked her not to mention the fact that she was a widow—a woman without a husband—in her nomination papers.

Skalli's election bid failed, and she took it badly because the party had lost a seat. The issue of women's participation in politics sparked little

### Now that she had entered the fight for political power as an equal, Skalli saw repressed machismo coming to the surface again.

public interest. But she was leader of the USFP's women's organization, founded in 1975 during International Women's Year. Awareness was rising, but female party activists still put women's issues on the back burner.

"Next to the historic figures who had fought for independence or spent time in prison, we felt small and tended to fade into the background," she says. Though a key figure in the USFP, it was a long time before Skalli gained enough self-confidence to assert her rightful place in the party.

After another defeat at the polls, this time in a parliamentary election, she won a municipal council seat in 1983. Two women Socialist Party candidates were elected in the same town and the party planned to make Skalli the council president. The proposal triggered an uproar. Despite being socialists, some "comrades" were dead-set against the idea. "A people who entrust their business to a woman are heading for ruination," the prophet Mohammed is supposed to have said. The party leadership backed down and the job went to a younger and less qualified man. Skalli had to settle for being the council vice-president.

The practical experience of sharing power with men was highly instructive. "Everything happens behind the scenes, in the framework of a male complicity that shuts out women," she says. Women's issues rarely interest men, she notes, and because

female politicians are so few, they are "like clay pots against iron ones."

Now that she had entered the fight for political power as an equal, Skalli saw repressed machismo coming to the surface again. The USFP's decision to put her up as a parliamentary candidate sparked rebellion in the ranks and she encountered her first sexist attacks, such as "she smokes. . . she's a widow." But she was pleased to note once more how little her gender mattered to the voters. In fact, many people believed she was more trustworthy than men because of her sex.

Skalli's political career continued to prosper and she remained a staunch party stalwart. She campaigned for women's rights, but "the party still came first." Until the 1993 parliamentary elections, the USFP wanted her to be its only female candidate. At that point, she protested and threatened to withdraw if other women were not allowed to stand. The party gave in.

Two women entered parliament that year, a milestone for Morocco—Skalli and Latifa Bennani Smires of the Istiqlal (Nationalist) Party. Just two women among 300 men. After the 1997 elections, there were still only two. But the political scene changed. The left-wing opposition, kept out of power for nearly 40 years, took over the reins of government and USFP secretary-general Abderrahmane Youssoufi became prime minister. In his inaugural speech, Youssoufi said he wanted to promote women's rights. The secretary of state for protection of the family and children got to work on the matter with the help of women's NGOs.

### Bitter attacks over proposed code

A year later, a draft programme to "make women part of the development process" was presented to the prime minister. It included a reform of the *mudawana*, the family legal code based on sharia (Islamic law), which governs the status of women. The planned reforms include abolishing polygamy, raising the marriage age for girls from 15 to 18 and, in every case, replacing repudiation with court-approved divorce. "It was too good to be true," says Skalli. "But we believed in it. We didn't expect such a fuss."

The first attack on the project came from a member of the government itself, religious affairs minister Abdelkebir Alaoui M'daghri. A broad range of conservatives led by Islamic fundamentalists took up the cry. They put on a show of force, bitterly attacking the reform's supporters as bad Muslims and even atheists. Bugged down by internal divisions, the government is playing for time. The reform is a burning issue, and the government has no intention of getting burned.

The government, says Skalli, bears an important responsibility and has clearly displayed a lack of courage on the issue of women. She recognizes that much is at stake, for women in particular and Moroccan society in general, and finds the situation distressing. But what can you do when you are "a clay pot"?

It is better to be a man than a woman because even the most miserable of men has a wife to order around.

Isabel Allende,  
Chilean writer (1942-)

# India's nurseries of politics

▮ Mrinal Pande

Over a million women hold the reins of power at the village level but a law to boost their presence in parliament has been deadlocked for several years

Nothing short of a small revolution occurred during President Bill Clinton's visit to India last March. In the rural heartland of Rajasthan, a dozen village women sat around on plush blue sofas, in resplendent dress, to discuss issues of democracy and power with the U.S. president. First they introduced themselves: all are elected representatives of their village councils (*panchayats*). Together they run a women's dairy cooperative and have initiated several small credit and loan schemes for poor, landless women in their communities. They had discarded the age-old custom of hiding their veiled faces behind home walls. Now, they explained, they had to go to the bank to draw and deposit money, and to their district headquarters to attend monthly meetings.

Even as they spoke in their native tongue, the women freely used English words such as 'loan', 'credit', 'Internet', 'public' and 'no confidence'. They complained about the lack of jobs for their educated sons, spoke about the need to open a school close by for their adolescent daughters, and their ongoing fight for drinking water, better roads, seeds and farming tools for their villages.

## A lingering debate

Some might like to dismiss this meeting as a clever act of 'feel-good' politics on the part of the President or as a showcased stunt on the part of the Indian government. But the meeting was really about women entering politics and staying on. Along with some million others across the country, these women are the daughters of the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian Constitution. Passed in 1993, these two amendments oblige all states to reserve one third of seats in the three-tiered system of local government (village, block and district levels)—known as *panchayati raj*—to women. Elected directly by and from among the villagers, the *panchayats* can make decisions concerning a wide range of fields, from agriculture to health, employment and primary education.

In a short time, women have shown their potential to wield power effectively at the village level and challenge feudal traditions. According to some observers, this is one of the reasons why the passage of the Women's Reservations Bill, which seeks to reserve 33 per cent of all seats in the national parliament and state assemblies to women, has been repeatedly blocked in the parliament. First put forward in 1996, the bill was reintroduced in 1998 but lapsed following the government's fall the same year. It was resurrected in December 1999 but has continued to create havoc in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the parliament. There are only 43 women MPs in the current

Lok Sabha, out of a total figure of 543, and the majority are from the elite.

Opponents of the bill, which include the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Party (both centre-left), along with some constituents of the ruling coalition, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), claim that the bill should include a sub-quota for Other Backward Classes<sup>1</sup> and Muslim women. Otherwise they argue, the quotas will only promote the interests of the elite. The debate has been characterized by an ugly display of male muscle and lung power: in one instance, the Speaker had to adjourn the House, in another, opposing lawmakers grabbed the bill off his desk. Meanwhile, Congress (I) president Sonia Gandhi staged a walkout with her party members protesting against the delay in the bill's passage.

As the debate lingers, a number of organizations are intent on highlighting the success of women in the *panchayats*. They are also working hard to build up leadership among the most marginalized groups, namely Dalit and Tribal communities, and to give women a better understanding of their powers and rights at the local level. The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) for example, helps to groom women candidates for elections through education and training and gives *panchayat* representatives the oppor-

**In a short time, women have shown their potential to wield power effectively at the village level and challenge feudal traditions**

tunity to meet with their counterparts from other states. At another level, these organizations are seeking to mobilise women to vote, and if need be, stand up against election malpractices, such as giving bribes or distributing liquor to win votes.

A recent study prepared by the Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), a Delhi-based NGO, concluded that the constitutional amendments have indeed acted as a catalyst for greater participation by women in governance, but the legislation now needs to be fine-tuned: women should be given more than a single term in a reserved constituency to make a real difference, and every effort should be made to provide

1. Other Backward Classes account for 52 per cent of India's population. They belong to kinship groups that are entitled to certain benefits because they are considered disadvantaged, although less so than 'scheduled castes' (previously referred to as untouchables) and 'scheduled tribes'.

Woman is born free and her rights are the same as those of a man (...) All citizens, be they men or women, being equal in the state's eyes, must be equally eligible for all public offices, positions and jobs, according to their capacity and without any other criteria than those of their virtues and talents.

Olympe de Gouges,  
French writer and revolutionary  
(1748-1793)

▮ News anchor for the state television network Doordarshan, former editor with the Hindustan Times Group, founder of the Indian Women's Press Corps, author of several works of fiction and plays, all published in Hindi

them with literacy training. A separate study conducted in three states on the government's behalf by the Centre for Women's Development Studies also highlighted the fact that the reservations had benefited women from the Other Backward Classes.

Despite this, the barriers to participation remain sizeable. Rural areas are plagued by illiteracy and poverty, and patriarchy remains deeply entrenched. Practices such as wife beating and dowry deaths are still prevalent. Furthermore, as Ela Bhatt, the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) points out, rural women do not represent a unified group. Caste, clan and family considerations still overshadow political and gender-based priorities for large numbers of women in rural areas. As such she says, women *panchayat* members are easily manipulated, coerced and coopted by their male counterparts. Also, dress, election campaign meetings and strategies for women are still often decided by male members of the family.

### Reaching a critical mass

Feminist economist Devki Jain feels that political empowerment through affirmative action is essential for women to 'break this hard-rock of patriarchy.' There has been much debate in the country about whether illiterate rural women have the skills to stand for elections and take office. The late Gita Mukherjee, a Communist Party of India member and six-time MP from West Bengal, who headed the special parliamentary committee on the Reservations Bill, repeatedly asserted that the first step was to allow women to break into politics; their awareness would automatically rise. The *panchayati raj* institutions, she said, are to be valued as the real nurseries of political lea-

dership for women. Poverty and violence, she stressed, can only be fought against effectively if women form a critical mass in all decision-making bodies, from village *panchayats* to the parliament.

It may seem ironic that Madhu Kishwar, an activist and editor of the Delhi-based feminist journal *Manushi*, is one of the bill's critics. She argues that party leaders will merely flood the reserved constituencies with the "Bibi (wife) Beti (daughter) brigade." With the Forum for Democratic Reform, an umbrella organization of women's groups, she has proposed an alternative bill that would make it legally binding for political parties to present women as one third of their total candidates and to give proportionate tickets to those from Dalit and Backward Classes. However, Mukherjee's long time associate Bidya Munshi has criticized the proposal, claiming that women are likely to be relegated to seats where political parties are unlikely to win.

Still, despite entrenched patriarchy, there are obvious signs of change, even if they seem anecdotal. The chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh, recently organized a meeting with women in Bhopal. Chairs were laid out for the ministers and high officials and mats on the floor for elected women representatives. As the meeting began, Remmebai, a tribal woman stood up and questioned the chief minister: "You keep talking about women's equality and reservations for women. We are in politics now, the people have elected us. Is there a shortage of chairs in your city?" A hundred years ago Remmebai and her family would have been hung from trees for their audacity. But the chief minister thanked her humbly for raising the issue and the next day all of them sat on similar chairs. ■

I became a feminist as an alternative to becoming a masochist.

Sally Kempton,  
American journalist (1943-)

Raising awareness: a panchayat gathering in the village of Haryana, in northern India.



© DNP, New Delhi



© Lim Myung-sook, South Korea

Lim Myung-sook (at left) participating in a protest against a school closure.

# South Korea's campaign school

► Glenn Manarin

Prejudice and cronyism traditionally bar Korean women from politics but a non-profit training centre offers keys to success – from fashion tips to campaign strategies

**I**n the industrial city of Ulsan, Lim Myung-sook represents a rare coup in Korean society, a woman in a position of public power. In this traditionally male-dominated nation, the 45-year-old local assemblywoman is one of the success stories of the non-profit Center for Korean Women and Politics (CKWP).

Historically, the public visage of Korea has been a male one, while a woman's role has been confined largely to the private world of the home, a fact reinforced by the still strongly persistent values of Confucianism and a male-run corporate world. "Korea is not really feminized at all," says Sohn Bong-Scuk, a political scientist and the founder of the CKWP. "The value system has prohibited women from getting involved in politics," says Sohn, pointing to the fact that municipalities and the National Assembly have seen just a handful of female representatives.

Sohn established the CKWP in 1990 to help bridge the gap between the ideal of equal representation and reality. Funded largely by foundation grants, the center employs a staff of eight and operates on an annual budget of \$180,000. For Sohn, there are three major obstacles to greater female representation: the powerful male-oriented political culture, a deep-rooted old-boys network and economics.

"Korean political parties are very much private, person-centered parties with many medium-level bosses. If you want to be an important person in the party you must belong to someone else in the family

tree, so it's not easy for a woman to enter that kind of informal inner-circle," says Sohn.

Most women also don't have the large sums of money needed to run for office. By law, national assembly candidates must have a minimum of \$210,000 for their campaigns. However Sohn says some candidates will spend up to two million dollars.

## Backing with strings attached

Furthermore, corporations have proved unwilling to back female candidates. "When business or industrial sectors support a candidate, there is a kind of string attached. In the case of a woman candidate, they don't feel they'll get anything back," says Sohn. "As a minority in politics, women are very cautious and tend to be less involved in any dirty business. They are also usually first-year congresswomen so they are not in positions of power yet to help them."

Lim Myung-sook struggled to raise the \$9,000 minimum to run for office in her local assembly. But with the financial support of the CKWP and another local non-profit group, she managed to raise the minimum but far less than most candidates. However, more than money and the expected prejudices stood between her and office: Lim was sorely lacking in political experience. In 1994, she was working as an environmental campaign activist when friends suggested she run in the upcoming local assembly election. While preparing her bid, she received a call from Sohn who invited her to attend the center's "Campaign School."

As a woman, I have no country.  
As a woman, I want no country.  
As a woman, my country is the whole world.

Virginia Woolf,  
British writer (1882-1941)

Lim attended a three-day session with about 40 other women, five of whom were also candidates in other local assembly races. At the theoretical level, the women learned to see female political participation as a means to the ultimate goals of equality and true democratic representation. At the practical level, they focused on speech-making skills, political and campaign strategy as well as making voter contact. In Korean election campaigns, image is all-important. So the women were advised on fashion and hair styles, while those who used regional dialects were coached in standard Korean. Finally, participants were assigned roles as candidates, electoral officers and campaign managers and a model election was held.

### Different policy preferences

Lim was among three women from her session who went on to electoral success. In 1995, she became the first woman to be elected to the Ulsan Local Assembly, and she was re-elected in 1998. Since then, another two women have attained office in Ulsan.

Last April, CKWP also had reason to celebrate. A candidate who they had trained in Seoul and also sent abroad to Germany and the United States for further preparation was elected to the national assembly. In most cases though, the center focuses on the grassroots, urging housewives to run for local rather than national office, whose candidates tend to already be savvy politicians.

In addition to the campaign school, the center holds annual training sessions for women interested in political issues. For three days, university students,

housewives and established businesswomen gather to discuss a chosen theme, such as sexual harassment or affirmative action. After seminars and discussion on the topic, they are assigned roles, such as minister of labour or minister of foreign affairs, and they are divided into two camps: pro-feminist and anti-feminist. They then hold a mock congress to hone their debating skills and get a taste for politics. "I like to give them motivation from a young age to be a leader in the future," says Sohn.

Another major activity is research on political gender issues like female voting and governing patterns. Perhaps most importantly, the CKWP has found that "women have different policy preferences than men," says Sohn. "They are more concerned about minorities, the marginal, the aged and children." For example, in the blue-collar city of Ulsan, assemblywoman Lim has concentrated on factory pollution and recycling, social welfare issues, the rights and needs of the disabled, and women's rights.

Despite the progress, Korea is still far from the day when politicians like Lim will comprise a healthy chunk of the political base. In the previous national assembly there were 11 women among 299 representatives. Recent elections in April placed a record 16 women into office (11 of whom were elected through affirmative action legislation implemented in 1995 after extensive lobbying by CKWP and other groups). Progress indeed, but in its 273-seat national assembly, Korean society is still represented overwhelmingly by men. Sohn says the slow rate of change has been discouraging but feels the CKWP has contributed to an important shift in thinking. "The political consciousness has been raised," says Sohn. "Now even men can accept the words, *women and politics*." ■

# Betty Friedan: debunking the mystique of politics

► Judy Mann

Women account for just 13 per cent of the U. S. Congress and 10 per cent of the Senate. But a pioneer of the contemporary feminist movement keeps the faith

**B**etty Friedan burst onto the American scene in 1963 with *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that transformed the way women thought of themselves not only in the U.S. but also around the world. She gave voice to the silent malaise gripping housewives as they tended chores and wondered silently, 'Is this all?'. Friedan called it the problem that had no name, but one society had to face.

Since then, Friedan, often called the mother of the U.S. women's movement, has published a series of seminal works. Her most recent book is

a memoir, *Life So Far*, published this spring by Simon & Schuster. I interviewed her just before the start of her book tour. At the beginning of the interview, she quipped: "The trouble is when you write a memoir, you finish it, and now you think 'I'm dead.'"

Given the historical strength of the U.S. women's movement, why are there still so few women in politics?

It takes so much money to run for office in the U.S. Women don't make that much money and ►

► Columnist for The Washington Post, author of *The Difference: Discovering the Hidden Ways We Silence Girls – Finding alternatives that can give them a voice* (Warner Books, 1996)

► they don't have as easy access to it as men do. I wouldn't mind running for the Senate but I certainly would not want to have to raise the money.

In addition to the issue of money, women also have the main responsibility for [raising their] kids. That takes some years off most women's career life.

How has your work facilitated women's entry into politics?

The things I wrote helped women break through certain barriers in their own psyche—the way they looked upon themselves and their possibilities. The feminine mystique, that miasma of influences, would keep women modest, shy, silent and invisible. I told them to shout—don't whisper. I organized women to break through the feminine mystique, to run for office, to get weapons against sex discrimination enforced.

You've worked hard for equal rights and affirmative action. How effective do you think they've been and how could they be strengthened?

Women today in the U.S. are getting the same number of professional degrees as men. The discrepancy lies in the childbearing years and women never catch up. We are the only industrialized nation without a national programme of childcare. It's outrageous.

Turning to equal pay for equal work, the principle is right but there are a lot of ways of sidelining it. Too many women are segregated in jobs that may be even more valuable than jobs men do, but because women do them they are paid less. So we began to say equal pay for work of equal value. Why should janitors get more than a schoolteacher? Or where would doctors be without nurses?

Do you think women's issues like economic equality and reproductive rights are considered marginal and difficult to construct a campaign on?

These issues affect 52 per cent of the population. Women in this country have far more power than they are using. They vote in higher proportion than men do. The real question is why aren't we using our power to make the issues that are important to us a higher priority and get more women elected to office. These issues are not as marginal as they might once have been considered. I doubt anybody running for office in any metropolitan area would dare to have as their slogan, "Women Go Back Home." Although you never know what would happen if there were an economic downturn.

What more could the women's movement do to support female candidates?

It will be interesting to see what happens with Hillary (Rodham Clinton) in New York. Will there be a big upsurge of support for her from women crossing party lines? One thing didn't really please me: when Hillary became visibly vulnerable to her Monica [Lewinsky] problems, her ratings went up. It was as if women couldn't identify with her

superiority. They were more able to identify with her when it became clear that everything wasn't easy than when she was so in control. I want to see women really identifying with their own empowerment and getting out of the 'victim' state.

What are some strategies that would facilitate women's entry into politics?

There are more and more women mayors—women who are going through the ranks on their way up. It used to be the only women you saw in Congress were widows sitting in their husbands' seats. That's not the way it is anymore. Maybe for me or for you the progress isn't fast enough but it's fair and it will get better as more women study political science and head student governments in colleges and go to law schools. Up to now, law has been the way into politics. More than 40 per cent of law students are women. So in another generation, the talent pool will be nearly equal.

Any parting thoughts you'd like to share with readers?

Women are not defined any longer as mothers or housewives. To the degree I've had a hand in making that happen, I feel very pleased and very proud. I'm impatient for the next step. Now women make up only 12 per cent of government. What would it be like if they were 50 per cent? I think politics would be different. Some research done a few years ago found that by adding two women to a state legislature the agenda changes. And not just in the direction of women's rights, but in all directions having to do with life—children, sickness, old people, health, quality of life—and not just highways. ■



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## Networking on the Web

A number of organizations in the U.S. are gearing up for the 2000 election. Many have experience in supporting women candidates and training campaign staff, others are focusing on informing women and encouraging them to vote. Here are some of the players.

**Emily's List** ([www.emilyslist.org](http://www.emilyslist.org)) is a major source of early funding for pro-choice, Democratic women.

The **Women's Campaign Fund** ([www.wcfonline.org](http://www.wcfonline.org)), the **National Women's Political Caucus** ([www.nwpc.org](http://www.nwpc.org)) and the **National Organization for Women** ([www.now.org](http://www.now.org)) all provide support to pro-choice, feminist candidates.

**The Wish List** ([www.thewishlist.org](http://www.thewishlist.org)) supports pro-choice Republican women candidates.

**Village.com**, one of the largest Internet sites geared to women, offers on-line registration, interviews with candidates and chat rooms to exchange information with them.

**The White House Project** ([www.thewhitehouseproject.org](http://www.thewhitehouseproject.org)) is working to change the political climate so that women can be elected to the presidency and other key positions.

**League of Women Voters** ([www.leagueofwomensvoters.org](http://www.leagueofwomensvoters.org)) runs voter registration campaigns to encourage women to vote.

**Lifetime Television** ([www.lifetimetv.com](http://www.lifetimetv.com)), has formed a partnership with the National Council of Women's Organizations, (made up of 110 national women's groups), for a bipartisan campaign to educate women about issues that affect them and to underscore the importance of their vote. ■

# Closing ranks

Every victory feminists win is a fragile one, says former cabinet minister Yvette Roudy. ▶ To defend their rights, women have to be at the helm of a strong social movement

The long march of women towards an equal share of political, social and religious power is far from over, whatever the country or system of government.



© Pascal Lafey/Editing, Paris

France has just passed a parity law to break down the resistance that has stymied the advancement of women in politics for the past half-century. From now on, political parties must run an equal number of women and men candidates in local elections and, more broadly, in elections based on the proportional system, although the law is flawed with regard to legislative contests. In any event, of course resorting to legislation is an admission of those parties' resounding failure to meet women's expectations, even though they are shared by the public at large. In the belief that a seat for a woman means one less seat for a man, France's highly conservative political leadership does all it can to stop progress in its tracks.

I call these faint-hearted advances a "piece-meal" policy. Things look different and machismo is less fierce, but at the end of the day there are still not enough women to make their voices heard. We know from the Scandinavian experience that they need to hold at least a third of the seats in parliament to form a critical mass.

Women look at politics in their own way. Much less attracted to the exhilarating feeling that power can bring, they view it mainly as a way to change things. As mayor of a town with 25,000 inhabitants, I tend to consider parks more important than parking lots. Housing lay-out can set off lively discussions about how to design kitchens, which for me are friendly places that should open up onto living rooms. I have noticed that male politicians tend to talk much while we women are much better at organizing our time.

▶ Former French minister of women's affairs, mayor of Lisieux, a deputy in the French parliament and chair of the Council of Europe's committee on equal opportunity for men and women

I am tempted to say that women and men have different attitudes about how to organize space and time. Our participation leads to the emergence of a certain, unknown reality which escapes the focus of political action because it remains hidden in a corner. It is there, but it cannot be seen. For example, is it normal for a woman's career to be penalised by a function—motherhood—that only she can fulfill?

The landscape of women's rights is one of stark contrasts. In Western countries, the march towards equality has achieved uneven results. In others, it is fraught with alarming setbacks, the cruelest example being Afghanistan, where women are deprived of the most basic rights. The women of Kosovo whom I met recently still lack access to health programmes at a time when mother and child mortality rates there have reached alarmingly high levels.

Major United Nations conferences from Mexico City to Beijing have helped women emerge from the shadows. They need laws to defend their rights, and institutions to give those laws teeth. Laws may be necessary sometimes, but they are not enough. They must be accompanied by a social movement led by women. Nothing can ever be taken for granted when

**Women can indeed breathe new life into politics and make it more accessible, more human and non-violent as soon as they realise the power that comes from working together.**

women's rights are concerned, and every victory feminists win is a fragile one because feminism, though it fits the textbook definition of a movement for social change, is not yet recognised as a political fact.

Everything depends on women's will when their rights are won: the right to education, work, control their bodies, move about freely, own property, and so on. And the women who have come the furthest must not forget to stretch their hands out to those who have been left by the wayside. In Algeria, women have succeeded in pushing back all forms of fundamentalism.

Women can indeed breathe new life into politics and make it more accessible, more human and non-violent as soon as they realise the power that comes from working together. ■



© Alain Buzy/Camma, Paris

# GYPSIES: TRAPPED ON THE FRINGES OF EUROPE

► Alain Reyniers

**Across Europe, Gypsies live in dire poverty and are frequently the target of violence and racism. But some governments are finally taking notice of the continent's largest minority**

The figures are shocking. Between 60 and 80 per cent of Hungary's working-age Roma are estimated to be unemployed. More than 60 per cent of Romania's Gypsies are said to live below the poverty line and 80 per cent have no formal qualifications. In Bulgaria, the same percentage of Gypsies living in cities are jobless. The figures are believed to be much higher in the countryside.

In some villages of southern and eastern Slovakia, all Roma of adult age are destitute. In Britain, an estimated 10 to 20 per cent of the "travellers," as they are called, live in absolute poverty. In some French cities, between 70 and 80 per cent of the Gypsy population are on welfare payments paid out to the most destitute.

Their housing conditions are appalling, while their bill of health is another cause for concern: most Roma have a life expectancy of under 50.

## Valued skills and masters of their own time

A glaring gap separates Europe's peoples from the continent's largest minority. Why, despite repeated attempts to assimilate or exclude the Gypsies over the past 600 years, have they remained cut off from other peoples and for the most part, pushed to the fringes of society? After all, not every group of people who came to live in Europe has been systematically ostracised. The Hungarians were a nomadic people of Asian origin but they managed to become a nation. And there are others.

Probably not all the Roma—who first came from India—were nomads when they arrived in the Byzantine Empire in the 12th or 13th century. But as far as we can tell from various writings, they had talents that enabled them to participate in the economies of the regions they crossed. They had no ambitions to conquer,

but wherever they went, presented themselves as craftspeople, artists and traders. They were independent workers, committed to being masters of their own time, intent on making an earning from odd, on-the-spot jobs and with enough skills to meet the requests and needs of a dispersed clientele.

Many Europeans no doubt frowned upon the Gypsies' working habits: how they sought out jobs each day, their trust in luck, their spontaneous way of approaching strangers and their persistence. It set them apart from farming communities who worked for the long term, in tune with the changing seasons. Despite this and the inevitable friction between people from different backgrounds, nomads and farmers needed each other. The nomads provided

tools, baskets, veterinary care, music or temporary manpower to the farmers, who gave them food and other goods in exchange.

For a long time, the Roma managed to make a living in this way, mainly as itinerants but also by staying in one place when there were opportunities. There were plenty of such cases in the Ottoman Empire and in central Europe, where the Roma served in the armies of invaders. They were also active in the Iberian peninsula, where they took over from the Moors and Jews expelled towards the end of the 15th century, at the time of the *Reconquista*, until they too were forced out.

These few examples go to show that Gypsies were not excluded because of a deep-rooted failure to adjust to local economic conditions, as it is too often suggested. Rather, it seems clear that governments and officials—first in western Europe, especially Spain, and then in central and eastern Europe—have, over the centuries, gone to great lengths to portray the Roma as a foreign and antisocial people without a culture of their own.

A Gypsy camp in Trent, in northern Italy.



► Ethnologist, lecturer at the Catholic University of Louvain and editor of the magazine *Études Tsiganes*

The contrived image of the Gypsies as an idle, roaming and dangerous people was one of the devices—along with violence, coercion and ideology—that was used to help forge the national identity of peoples belonging to specific territories with well-guarded borders. In the 19th century, when these peoples rose up against foreign rulers, the nationalist struggle was always on behalf of a single majority people, whose sturdy peasant values were often played up, to the detriment of all other elements in society, including the Roma.

The influence of this past on forging a common identity as an excluded people

cannot be underestimated. The nomads of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, for example, settled in the 18th century as “new peasants,” but were not given any land. It contributed to a culture of mistrust and resistance towards *gadjes* (non-Gypsies).

Even though the Gypsies had been the long-time economic and cultural partners of European peoples, they were always kept out of political decision-making, though it can be questioned whether they were interested in becoming involved at this level. At best they were regarded as juniors to be dominated, at worst trouble-makers to be pushed aside. Some closed

off from the world and scratched a living on the edge of *gadjo* society, while others took another path, making contact with non-Gypsies as best they could.

In the process, some collective traits of the Roma—wariness of the outside world, the tendency to mix with one’s own and a fatalistic attitude towards events—became accentuated and encouraged their separation from other peoples.

### Mutual distrust

Children were understandably taught to be weary of the *gadjes*. Their education was geared at following in their parent’s footsteps and focused on the practical, ▶



© Gianni Berengo Gardini/Contrasto, Milan

▶ with their environment serving as the starting point for learning.

The tendency to exclude Gypsies grew steadily throughout the 20th century. Police in western Europe cracked down on them with increasing harshness. These days, Gypsies are confined to a limited number of parking plots and camping grounds that are often ill-equipped for the needs of travelling families.

The growth of market forces and changes in consumer tastes, along with newer, more sophisticated production methods, have helped to drive some Gypsy communities deeper into poverty. Their trading practices are restricted by

laws against selling door-to-door, against street activities and against recuperating objects from dumps. Such legislation takes absolutely no account of their skills, nor of the stakes at hand for Roma in this domain. If they had no access to social assistance or credit (although the public image of Roma is hardly conducive to respect), many would find themselves in desperate situations.

### Targets of violence in eastern Europe

Under communism in central and eastern Europe, Roma were first seen as a social aberration, a relic of the "bour-

geois" world that would eventually disappear. The Gypsies were shipped en masse to work in menial jobs on collective farms and in state enterprises. The lack of political attention to the Roma's culture—their ancestral language, their education geared to sharing and their economic flexibility stressing income from odd jobs—and the crying indifference to the xenophobia that developed towards them, did not facilitate the assimilation of young Gypsies into the socialist societies.

The collapse of communism in eastern Europe brought great suffering and violence to the Roma, whose neighbourhoods have been repeatedly attacked by skinheads and others. In Bosnia and more recently in Kosovo, Gypsy communities were even destroyed. Unemployment among them has further increased.

In a sense, this new marginalisation, which has produced emigration movements towards a utopian El Dorado (namely western Europe), is simply another consequence of the political and nationalist attitudes that have harmed the Gypsies time and time again in the past. Gypsies often have little lifeline outside their communities, which are refused any territorial rights by the host societies. They are often prevented from settling in a region that seems more hospitable because they are ill-equipped to cope with the demands of today's economy and lack a decent level of education.

### Recognizing national minorities

The Roma have nonetheless made a few significant strides in recent years. Several international bodies and many NGOs have taken up their cause and have pushed programmes to foster their integration—both economically and socially. Governments are finally recognizing them as national minorities or are taking measures to encourage their development in the longer term.

Not all Roma have had their spirit broken by centuries of being shunned. Some have adapted, occasionally by assimilating but more often by highlighting their traditional know-how and showing a willingness to become involved in the host society.

The future of the Roma probably does not depend on a single solution. Given the problems and obstacles they face, it is more than ever linked to a collective determination to build a humane and democratic society where individuals and groups can blossom and flourish. ■

## A ROMA GHETTO IN FLORENCE

▶ Nicola Solimano and Tiziana Mori

**F**lorence, a cosmopolitan city where the world's greatest art and architecture attest to a blending of cultures, has for ten years been debating the fate of some 200 Roma families—approximately 1,000 people—living within its boundaries. Like other major Italian cities where Roma have spontaneously settled, Tuscany's capital has opted for the solution of "nomad campgrounds": in essence, reserves where newcomers are herded together.

Most of the Roma in Florence are from Macedonia and Kosovo. They came during the past fifteen years, driven from their homes by the economic crisis and wars that have racked the region, where they had almost completely given up their wandering ways and settled down in certain neighbourhoods of large cities.

At first, the Roma of Florence and the surrounding area constantly moved around in small family groups, driven from one place to the next by protesting neighbours or by real estate projects launched in new, expanding suburbs. In the early 90s, the municipality decided to concentrate them in two "nomad campgrounds". One is on the site of a former rubbish dump located in a flood-prone area near the river Arno. The other is a strip of land wedged between the railroad tracks and the highway. These unusable spaces were of interest to no one. In Florence and elsewhere, the areas chosen for "nomad campgrounds" revealed a widespread attitude: Gypsies must be kept apart from the general population, and the general population would do best to keep their distance from them.

The city's government considered these campgrounds a temporary solution. In fact, they were the first in a series of other "temporary solutions" and have never been called into question. All the classic earmarks of ghetto pathology have appeared there; the risk of fire is especially high. On several occa-

sions, children have died in blazes when their parents were unable to rescue them. Sanitary facilities are collective. Each is used by several families, with obvious consequences on health, maintenance costs and relations between families.

The deterioration of facilities, living conditions and social relations was inevitable. Scourges such as drug abuse, partly due to contact with disadvantaged members of the local community, have led to increased control by the authorities. The campgrounds are closed spaces; their entrances are under surveillance; the comings and goings of Roma and non-Roma alike are recorded. All the features making up a ghetto are in place.

In the past few years, Roma organizations and volunteers supported by a few rare but well-known intellectuals, such as the writer Antonio Tabucchi, have pressured the municipality into finding alternative solutions. Under a regional law based on a Michelucci Foundation project, the authorities have built a small sub-division of six housing units assigned to Roma from Macedonia. The project was so successful that some 30 other families have been re-accommodated in city-owned units. These experiments show that, when they are taken out of the degrading living conditions and exclusion in which they had been living for years, Roma families seize the opportunity to integrate themselves socially and economically.

However, the building of the sub-division met with fierce criticism in Florence, exploited by right-wing parties, which dissuaded the municipality from undertaking similar projects. Not enough families have been relocated to permanently close the "nomad campgrounds", where Roma refugees fleeing the war in Kosovo have arrived in the meantime.

Florence continues presenting the face of a city of art and culture to the world, while at the same time it is incapable of striking a dialogue with a small minority from a different background. ■

▶ Members of the Michelucci Foundation, Florence



© Patrick Aventurier/Camma, Paris

Underwater treasures: exploring the wreck of a 16th-century galleon that sank off the Philippine coast.

# DIVING FOR DOLLARS

► Vincent Noce

**New technology means shipwrecks swallowed up by the deepest waters can now be reached. But who owns the precious finds? Some countries allow a free-for-all of plundering**

The world's biggest museum lies under the sea. Over the centuries hundreds, perhaps thousands of ships—nobody has even a remote idea how many—have sunk in storms or the heat of battle, bringing Roman amphorae, gold bars, cannons and crates of Chinese porcelain with them.

Maritime trade began booming in the sixteenth century: the ships of the Dutch East India Company made 8,000 round-trip voyages to China in a 200-year period. But until the mid-twentieth century, there was no way reach this underwater museum, and the world's oceans were like a gigantic safe containing civilisation's treasures.

► Journalist with the French daily newspaper *Libération*

Two of the oldest ships found recently came to a grim end just over 2,700 years ago, when they were probably on their way from Tyre to the Pharaohs' Egypt laden with wine-filled amphorae. American underwater archaeologists Robert Ballard, who discovered the wreck of the *Titanic*, and Lawrence Stager, of Harvard University, found the two Phoenician vessels, each less than 20 metres long, off the Israeli coast in June 1999.

They had been asked to locate an Israeli submarine, the *Dakar*, which sank in 1969, taking its 69 crew members down with it. Two small underwater robots, Jason and Medea, descended to 300 and 900 metres to film and inspect the Phoenician vessels, which led to the

discovery that they were still in an excellent state of preservation.

The deeper the water the less oxygen, so wrecks there are much better preserved than those closer to the surface, according to Ballard. "The great depths, the absence of sunlight and the great pressures seem to preserve history far more than we thought," he says. A 3,300-year-old ship was found off Turkey in more shallow waters, and two more Phoenician vessels, dating from the seventh century BC, were located near Murcia, Spain, but all were in much worse condition.

The discovery of the two wrecks off the coast of southern Israel came as a surprise because historians were unaware that the Phoenicians conducted trade ►



© Patrick Aventureur/Camma, Paris

Drawing up an inventory of Ming dynasty porcelain found in a 16th-century shipwreck.

▶ along that route. A wine decanter (showing that wine was decanted in those days), stone anchors, food crockery and a censer were found among Tyrrhenian amphorae typical of the period, which allowed researchers to roughly determine the date the ships went down as well as where they sailed from.

“More important discoveries should come in the near future that could significantly alter our understanding of ancient maritime trade,” predicts Ballard. The discovery off Sicily of Roman ships dating from between 100 BC and 400 AD has already confirmed a long-disputed theory according to which the Romans were quite capable of sailing in deep water a long way from the coast.

### A question of ownership

Yet until only half a century ago, when the autonomous deep-sea diving suit was invented, it was still impossible to go anywhere near deep-sea wrecks. In 1952 Jacques Cousteau led the first underwater archaeological expedition off Marseilles, which was a very busy Mediterranean port in Roman times. His team brought up Greek and Roman amphorae, which puzzled specialists at first because they were at least a century apart in age. Then

the divers realized they had been excavating two wrecks that had sunk one on top of the other.

At that time, no laws or official bodies regulated underwater archaeological exploration in France or anywhere else. In 1966 President Charles de Gaulle’s minister of culture, André Malraux, set up an underwater archaeological exploration division and made it compulsory to declare finds in French territorial waters.

In 1989, two years after a similar law had been passed in the United States, France adopted legislation that gave the state sole ownership rights to all sunken treasures found in its territorial waters. Until then, it had been possible to share them. As a result, the number of declarations plummeted from about 250 a year to under 50. Seven years later, the government tried to counter the drop by announcing rewards of up to 200,000 French francs (approximately \$30,000) for discovering such treasures, depending on its scientific value. But those rewards are rarely paid: explorers risk breaking the law since a single amphora can fetch up to 10,000 French francs (\$1,500) on the market.

Unaware amateur divers think amphorae do not “talk.” That is a big mistake, because they do. They can tell us

when the wreck occurred, the nationality of the crew and how the cargo was shipped. And the discovery of amphorae is what usually indicates that an ancient wreck is nearby, concealed in the sand.

For the 14 centuries between 700 BC and 700 AD, these large jars were used to transport wine, oil, pickled products, spices, tea and other goods. After that, hundreds of years went by before vessels once again began carrying items—cannons and porcelain this time—that future archaeologists and treasure-hunters could use as clues to detect the locations of shipwrecks. The years in between are a blank, either because wrecks disintegrated or remain invisible, or because maritime trade collapsed.

### Site leasing to private investors

For example, a barnacle-encrusted cannon tipped archaeologists off to the presence of a wrecked French fleet off Venezuela’s Las Aves islands. King Louis XIV had dispatched the warships to drive the Dutch out of the Caribbean. Commanded by Count Jean d’Estrées, the French looted Tobago before heading to Curaçao, where they would have defeated the Dutch had not half the 13 warships and 17 privateers sunk in a storm on May 11, 1678. Five hundred of the 5,000 crewmen were drowned and 1,000 died of starvation or disease after being stranded on desert islands. The disaster put an end to France’s dream of ruling unchallenged in the Caribbean, which quickly became a haven for pirates.

Though they no longer fly the skull and crossbones, pirates are still there today. About 15 years ago, a Venezuelan, Charles Brewer-Carias, and an American, Barry Clifford, one of the world’s best-known shipwreck hunters, found the French flagship *Le Terrible*, which had 70 cannon and a crew of 500, amid other wrecks at the site.

Clifford says he was shocked by the lease of the site to a private investor. “The Venezuelan people will someday look back in horror at what is being permitted to happen to Las Aves,” he says. Venezuela, which does not have a public archaeological body that could explore the site, gave a construction company called Mespas exclusive permission to excavate and sell whatever they could find. “We had an archaeologist on board the research vessel,” says the firm, which admits it wants to make a profit by setting up a discovery “industry”.

“In every single case where countries

have issued permits for treasure hunting, they have always ended up the losers," says Florida archaeologist John de Bry. "Piracy is alive and well." Mespa thinks it can find Count d'Estrées' and his officers' personal valuables, but archaeologists doubt a war fleet would have been carrying much "treasure." However, they fear the historical and archaeological value of items will be lost, as well as the wreck's position.

The wrecks also cast light on how ships were designed and built in the days French minister Colbert was creating a royal navy and an entire industry around it. Recording the exact position of the various items on the sea's floor before bringing them up to the surface is an extremely delicate, costly and time-consuming task. All underwater exploration is very expensive and comes without any guarantee of success.

Since profit is the treasure-hunters' only motive, and every day of exploration costs a small fortune, they are in a hurry to bring up whatever can be sold, even if it means destroying everything in their way. Some even use explosives to reach what they want.

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**Since profit is the treasure-hunters' only motive, and every day of exploration costs a small fortune, they are in a hurry to bring up whatever can be sold, even if it means destroying everything in their way.**

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They have no interest in items that cannot be sold but which may be of inestimable value to historians, such as a pottery shard bearing an inscription that may provide clues about a ship's route, a piece of shoe that can tell much about how the sailors dressed or a skeleton showing wounds or nutritional deficiencies. The hull of the *Maurithuis*, which sank off Guinea on its way back from China in 1609, was still lined with nearly 20,000 plates of almost pure zinc, showing that Chinese metallurgists were very far ahead of their European counterparts.

The problem of granting exploration permits is much greater in Portugal's Azores island chain, which has one of the world's biggest concentrations of wrecks

because it was a necessary stopover for ships crossing the Atlantic. Portugal's museum of archaeology has listed 850 sunken Spanish and Portuguese ships there, many loaded with gold.

Eighty-eight of them lie in the Bay of Hangra de Heroismo, where the British treasure-hunter John Grittan showed up in 1972, eventually spending two months in jail and being banned from exploring. Nearly a quarter of a century later he returned—after the law changed to allow private firms to explore—as manager of Arqueonauticas, chaired by Rear Admiral Isaias Gomes Texeira, one of the first companies to obtain an exploration and excavation permit.

One of the most famous treasure-hunters, Florida-based Bob Marx, joined the undertaking, lured by a deal giving him half of whatever was discovered at a depth of up to 50 metres and 70 per cent of what was found further down. "This law has sacrificed our history to money," says Francisco Alves of the national archaeology museum. Meanwhile, the Spanish are frantically poring over legal documents to see if they have a right to save galleons that are their own heritage.

Sometimes treasure-hunters hit the jackpot. One of them, the impetuous Michael Hatcher, netted about \$15 million from the piecemeal sale of Chinese porcelain he found in the wreck of the Dutch ship *Geldermalsen*, which sank in the China Sea in 1752. Christie's, the world's biggest auction house, sold the pieces off for a while but then quietly stopped, probably because of the controversy and legal problems raised.

Hatcher claims he found the wreck in international waters, but researchers say it was lying within Indonesia's territorial limits. Jakarta opened an investigation, and one of the investigators drowned in a diving accident at the site, adding to the detective novel aspect of the case. Eventually the Indonesians dropped the enquiry, but rumours tied that move to the corruption of the Suharto family then ruling the country.

"All this money going around just makes matters worse because it is recycled to pay for new explorations," says Lyndel Prott, a legal expert on world heritage matters with UNESCO. "Countries allow the kind of pillage of their underwater treasures that they would never tolerate on land." ■

## FINDERS KEEPERS AND MILITARY EXCEPTIONS

Patrick O'Keefe, an Australian lawyer and cultural heritage specialist, says the discovery of the *Titanic* was a turning point. Exploration teams now have the technology to go anywhere and to excavate at once-unthinkable depths. "International regulations are urgently needed because no wreck is safe anymore," he says.

But the international community is lagging far behind the technology. Some countries have more or less successfully established rules on underwater archaeology within their territorial waters (usually 12 miles, or 22 km., from their coasts). However, few are developing the resources to carry out their own undersea explorations. In international waters, anything goes. Individuals are entitled to keep what they find, and every ship that is "saved" belongs to whomever discovered it, in keeping with the maritime tradition of "salvage on the high seas."

But UNESCO's Lyndel Prott says, "the wrecks aren't saved when they're found by a treasure-hunter. On the contrary, they're the ones who endanger them." The 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea barely touched on the issue of underwater treasure. ■

UNESCO has drawn up a planned convention that would ban all commercial use of underwater wrecks. Unfortunately, the world's major maritime and technological powers—the United States, Britain, France and Japan—want to keep their hands free and look askance at any attempt to take away their freedom of action.

Their navies cite the tradition that warships forever belong to the country that launched them to keep others from touching their wrecks, even when they are four centuries old. The United States used this argument to win its right to the wreck of the *Alabama*, a Confederate privateer sunk by the Union navy off the French port of Cherbourg towards the end of the American Civil War. And what about a Spanish galleon wrecked in the Portuguese Azores? When is a wreck deemed to have been abandoned by its country or its owner?

Two meetings of specialists—a third has been set for July 2000—have so far failed to sort out the mess, or to obtain a firm political commitment from the international community to lay down the law in Davy Jones's locker. ■

# INTERNET TO THE RESCUE OF DEMOCRACY?

► René Lefort

**Advocates of e-democracy profess that the Internet is the only way to bridge the gap between disaffected citizens and politicians. "Nonsense" say others**

A "dumb rage of impotence" is how Richard Askwith, a senior editorial writer for the British newspaper *The Independent on Sunday* described his feelings in a recent article. "Everything our government does it does in my name, yet what say have I ever had? One vote in five years, for a choice of scarcely distinguishable bands of disingenuous careerists. What kind of choice is that?"

Askwith is implacable: "Parliamentary democracy, invented in the days of the horse and cart and perfected during the steam age," has had its day. "It's time governments found a new way to let the people decide."<sup>1</sup>

The solution? The Internet.

"E-democracy will wake politics up," says French MP André Santini, mayor of the Paris suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux, which he has made into a model Internet-connected town. "I'm sure it can cure people's disaffection with politics, just as the Internet economy is beating unemployment."<sup>2</sup>

## The Arizona experiment

The clearest sign of this political apathy is low voter turnout, to the point that "these days universal suffrage is now only universal in name," says Santini. The first Internet voting experiment was the Democratic Party primary election in the U.S. state of Arizona that took place from March 7 to 11, 2000. Opponents of e-voting went to court, arguing that it discriminated against poor people without Internet access (the "digital divide").

1. *The Independent*, September 4, 1999.

2. The French daily *Libération*, April 21, 2000.

The court threw out the case. Yet the system's technical shortcomings, including the inability to prove a voter's identity and to ensure the secrecy of the ballot, were deemed unimportant. Nearly 86,000 Democrats cast ballots, 40,000 of them through the Internet. Three-quarters of the e-voters were between 18 and 35, an age group that is usually less interested in voting than their elders. Only slightly over 12,000 people bothered to turn out for the previous such primary four years earlier.

Was the experiment conclusive? A local paper, the *Tucson Citizen*, said many voters were drawn more by the method's

widespread Internet access. Until everyone has interactive digital television, the Net seems to be the quickest, cheapest and only truly interactive way for citizens to exchange information and opinions between themselves as well as with their elected representatives.

Most political parties now have their own websites to present their platforms. Numerous public services use them to explain their structure, operations and aims and to answer people's questions by e-mail. And many municipalities provide information and consult citizens by e-mail before taking any major decision.

## A chance to voice views

New citizens groups that believe in a different kind of globalisation also make intensive use of the Internet. In South Korea, where nearly half the population is on line, 600 community organizations recently posted a "black list" on the Web of 90 parliamentary candidates with murky pasts, including some who had been convicted of corruption. Fifty-eight of them were defeated in the subsequent election, some by virtual unknowns.

Askwith suggests going one step further. He sharply criticised the way a typical British Royal Commission set up to study a controversial issue operated. In practice, only the views of the panel's members and the "experts" who appeared before it carried any weight, he said. The citizens who attended the hearing were few and unrepresentative. They were "mostly the retired and unemployed, since the ill-publicised event took place on a Thursday afternoon." They did not really understand the issue at hand and were asked to speak only at the end of the hearing, and even then only briefly and for appearance's sake.

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## E-voting is "an amazing opportunity for our exhausted democratic system."

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novelty than by the candidates. More generally, Stephen Hess, of the Brookings Institute, thinks that "procedural questions are not what prevents people from voting." But Santini believes that e-voting is "an amazing opportunity for our exhausted democratic system."

The American firm Election.com has announced it will provide such voting services for next November's U.S. presidential election. And Steve Case, of the huge Internet service provider (ISP) America Online (AOL), thinks experiments like the one in Arizona are further proof that the Internet is "transforming the way people interact with their local and national governments."

Political parties, new citizens' movements and public authorities are increasingly quick to grasp that fact, at least in countries wealthy enough to have



© Matt York-Ap/Boomerang, Paris

New ways: casting votes via the Internet during the Democratic Party's primary in Arizona in March 2000.

In contrast, he says, stand the potential advantages of the Internet, which is already used by campaigners who, though scattered across the world, are all on-line at the same time, sometimes several hundred of them for days on end, delving deeply into an issue and expressing informed and considered opinions. These groups are known as amphinets. It all costs very little compared with a face-to-face meeting of all the participants.

Askwith asks, why not use this method and open it up to ordinary citizens chosen at random? Their views, representing public opinion, would reach the "representatives of the people," who would no longer just vaguely hear them but be forced to take their views seriously.

Other e-democracy advocates go even further. Rather than settling for using electronic means merely to improve the flawed representativeness of elected officials, why not do without them altogether? Marc Strassman, executive director of the Campaign for Digital Democracy,<sup>3</sup> suggests an electronic system good enough to eliminate

any possibility of fraud. Voters would use it to voice their views on every possible and imaginable issue, from whether a country should undertake a military operation to deciding on the content of a proposed law.

The system would be advanced enough to immediately and electronically analyse the full range of opinions. Strassman says it would correct the "large and growing imbalance in political influence between common people and the professional political class and its clients who increasingly dominate the initiative process."

The time has gone when parliamentary decisions were taken after "consulting dozens of people whose opinions and views are highly privileged at the expense of millions who are disadvantaged by this concentration of power," Strassman says. We should switch to "direct electronic democracy" where "millions of e-mail votes determine the direction of the republic." In short, he argues, "the Net becomes so powerful, so ubiquitous and so easy to use" that it can "let us govern ourselves."

Santini thinks this will be the key to "a shift from an occasional democracy to a continuous one." It would be akin to revi-

ving the agora in ancient Athens, the cradle of democracy where the city's 20,000 citizens who were entitled to meet and debated. The Net would make such a forum permanent, instantaneous and, when every person on the planet is on line, worldwide.

### Over-reliance on technology

"Nonsense," says Frenchman Jacques Attali, the founder of Planetfinance,<sup>4</sup> an electronic microcredit network. First, the agora would not be a democratic ideal: nobody has thought of reviving it where that would be possible, such as a village of a few hundred inhabitants. Why? Because the representative system would remain indispensable.

There is no doubt the system is in crisis, says Patrick Viveret, who writes for the French magazine *Transversales Science Culture*. He notes a tendency in representative systems towards delegating authority that could go as far as confiscating it altogether. So citizen participation would be absolutely vital to genuine representation, and the Net would ▶

3. [www.digitaldemocracy.org](http://www.digitaldemocracy.org)

4. [www.planetfinance.org](http://www.planetfinance.org)

► provide “substantial opportunities” in that regard.

But making e-democracy a “global alternative” would mean giving too much power to the “technicism” which is taking over the modern economy, the idea that “problems can be solved by technology, independently of the players involved,” warns Viveret. Democracy requires “collective intelli-

gence”, which is much more than merely the sum of different opinions, as they are instantly served up by opinion polls today and will be by the Internet tomorrow (the “democracy of opinions”). There needs to be “time for careful reflection, nurtured by opinions and counter-opinions bringing together mediators who say what they think in the public arena,” he says.

Also needed, says Attali, is the “time for political initiatives to prove their worth.” That might entail a period of unpopularity before they eventually gain widespread support. The alternative, he says, is an “Internet world” that would lead to “excessively reversible and contradictory decisions”, and consequently to a “dictatorship of the here and now.” ■

# AFRICA: CELL PHONES FOR CITIZENSHIP

**Ibrahima N’Diaye, the mayor of Mali’s capital Bamako, is banking on the Internet to boost democracy in Africa via specially-outfitted cell phones**

**Do democracy and the Internet go together in Africa?**  
They don’t, because the Internet has only just started appearing on the continent. To become a tool of democracy, the Internet must become democratic itself! The Web has penetrated every country in the world, but only two per cent of the globe’s population have access to it. In most African countries, the Internet is used only by an elite living mostly in big cities. To make it more widespread, we need support from the wealthy countries.

**What do you expect from them?**  
That they help us develop an infrastructure as cheaply as possible while taking local conditions into account. We’re not asking for hand-outs. If they decide to invest, they have everything to gain, especially in economies of scale. Ninety-eight per cent of the world’s population is not on line yet—that’s billions of people. However poor they are, they represent an incredible market. The countries of the South will gain too, because new technology helps to spread information, which is a tremendous asset in promoting the growth of democracy.

Then there’s the issue of solidarity. Rich countries invest a lot to foster democracy around the world. If the Internet is a means of helping to achieve that end, we’d be baffled if they didn’t help us overcome the obstacles in our way.

**What are those obstacles?**  
The first major stumbling block is illiteracy, which concerns about half of Mali’s population. What’s the point of giving all citizens Internet access if they can neither

read nor write? Of course we must teach them how, which is a long-term undertaking. We can also make use of technology. Nowadays, voice-activated computers and Braille give blind people access to the Internet. It’s easy to imagine similar devices for illiterate people. The energy situation is just as bad. Fewer than 10 per cent of Malians have access to electricity or telephones. What can be done? In the short term we must settle for equipment that runs on batteries, for example.

**Which medium encourages the broadest participation in the democratic process in Mali today?**  
There’s no question it’s radio, which overcomes the dual problems of illiteracy and communication in the various national

languages. Transistor radios are small, cheap and battery-powered. What the transistor radio is today, the mobile phone will be tomorrow. Soon the Internet will be accessible by mobile phone, and I’m sure that will help us take a big leap forward.

**Mobile phones with Internet access will be tremendously expensive.**  
True, but radios were also very expensive when they first appeared. It might seem illusory to picture the spread of mobile phones in Africa, but technology is developing very quickly, which brings prices down just as fast. Political determination and the commitment of companies will be crucial to the future of such technology in Africa.

**If the Internet was widespread in Mali today, how would it affect democracy?**  
It would encourage more citizens to take part in the democratic process. It would probably be more effective than radio in helping them to learn things and to voice their opinions. At election time, computerised voting would solve major problems, such as the participation of Malians living abroad (20-25 per cent of the population) and of villagers who must sometimes travel 20-30 kilometers to reach the nearing polling station. But, technical problems aside, Malians are not exactly flocking to the voting booth. They seem to have lost faith in the country’s political leaders, and we mustn’t rely on the Internet to make up for their lack of motivation. ■

Interview by Jasmina Sopova,  
UNESCO Courier journalist



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# MARGARITA SALAS: KNOWLEDGE TO DISPEL FEAR

**Margarita Salas, a Spanish pioneer in molecular biology, dismisses alarmist reactions to recent scientific advances and stays thoroughly optimistic on all fronts**

**Do you think research to decode the human genome should be placed in the public domain?**

We cannot patent basic knowledge of the sequence. What we possess in our own organisms, biologically speaking, cannot be patented even by law. But applications derived from knowledge of our genes can be. The U.S. company Celera Genomics seems to be leading the race to decode the entire human genome sequence. According to press reports, the firm has already decoded the entire sequence—some 50 million “bits” of DNA—though they still have to fit the pieces together, rather like a jigsaw puzzle. On the other side is the public consortium, made up of teams from a number of countries working through their national public health institutes, which are proceeding more slowly and hope to finish the sequencing in two years’ time. But they are progressing in a more orderly fashion. So that when they do finish the sequences, they will know exactly where each part goes. At first the private company tried to patent the sequences, and there were many public figures, including some very renowned scientists such as the presidents of the American Academy of Science and of the British Royal Society, who opposed the “patentability” of gene sequences. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair also protested. The company seems to have backed down and will make its results public. However, what can be patented are the possible uses of those sequences in methods to cure specific illnesses.

**Are we witnessing the excessive commercialisation of science?**

Partly, yes. There might be excessive commercialisation if the proper limits are not imposed. There is an interesting case in connection with cloning: scientists from a research institute at the University of Wisconsin succeeded in 1998 in deriving



**A life's vocation: Margarita Salas in her lab at Madrid's Universidad Autónoma.**

and culturing human embryonic stem cells—cells that are the parent cells of all tissues in the body. The achievement has profound implications for transplant medicine. Only private firms currently fund this work, because in the United States there is a law banning the public funding of research based on human embryos. It is very dangerous to let this sort of work remain solely in private hands. These firms will be able to patent their findings and make people fork out presumably large sums of money when they have to undergo transplant operations. If the funding came from public sources, this monopoly wouldn't exist.

**But are governments investing enough in basic research?**

It's impossible to make generalisations. The percentage of gross domestic product earmarked for research in places like the United States or in some of the most developed European countries hovers around two to 2.5 per cent, sometimes even more. Spain has one of the lowest levels of research funding in Europe, standing at 0.9 per cent, one point below the European Union

average, so there's a long way for us to go. The interesting thing about private funding is that it comes not just from businesses, but also from foundations and even from individuals. In the United States, for example, people who contribute to research funding are entitled to deduct it from their taxes, which is not the case in countries like Spain. It's vital to promote fiscal policies that encourage people to fund research.

**What are the potential risks of privately funded research?**

It's dangerous if the results are withheld and patented in such a way that licenses are required to use the data.

**Scientific research is a highly competitive field. Is there room for cooperation?**

In the first place, scientists do not work alone. This is no longer the era of Ramón y Cajal.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not they share affinities, scientists must work in ▶

1. Santiago Ramón y Cajal. Spanish neurologist (1852-1934). Nobel prize for physiology and medicine in 1906.



Green deputies protesting against cloning at the European Parliament in Strasbourg

► teams for the simple reason that it's impossible for an isolated individual to gather enough knowledge to have an international impact. In the European Union, for instance, we are seeing increasing cooperation, because support and funding are granted to teams formed by groups from different countries. But in the private sector, groups working at the cutting edge of science strive to get there before their competitors because of the huge economic stakes involved.

#### **Are scientists doing anything to narrow the research gap between North and South?**

Researchers from the South take part in some collaborative projects and attend major international congresses, but in general this cooperation has more to do with institutional reasons than with any political will to narrow the gap.

#### **Why does cloning frighten people?**

Because they think of human cloning and that scientists will run amok with it. That's ridiculous. First, the technology we have at the moment falls far short of enabling us to produce cloned humans, though it's clear that it will improve until

that becomes possible. But then, what is the point of making individuals who are all alike? Over 20 years ago, when the issue of *in vitro* fertilisation arose, people said it was horrific, that it wasn't natural. They wondered what sort of children would be born from this technology. Would they turn out like monsters? All sorts of things were said. The first girl born via this technique is now 23 or 24 years old. She's perfectly normal and *in vitro* fertilisation has solved many fertility problems. So has it been good or bad for humanity?

#### **So do you defend cloning?**

Once again, we have to make a few distinctions. I think human cloning to produce individual human beings is repellent, and in some countries there are laws against it. But we can envisage cloning a few stem cells to produce useful organ tissues towards therapeutic ends, or animal cloning for the same purpose or to make drugs. For example, a given gene can be implanted in a sheep. These genetically-modified animals can then be cloned to produce large quantities of factor IX, which is necessary for blood coagulation and is used in the treatment of haemophilia.

#### **Should limits be placed on scientific research to prevent abuse?**

Scientists themselves have demanded that their discoveries not be used against humanity. Furthermore, bioethics committees involving scientists have spread all over the world in the past ten years and are working with the same aims. The main purpose of cloning is to obtain useful tissues which can, for example, mitigate the problem of the body rejecting organ transplants. There was a proposal to keep cells from the umbilical cords of newborns so that in the future stem cells could be obtained in order to make tissues. That way, if someone needed an organ transplant, his or her own cells would be readily available, and doctors would be able to culture new tissue from them. That would circumvent the problem of rejection and therefore be a very positive step forward.

#### **Another scientific advance which has sparked an uproar is genetically modified organisms. What is your opinion?**

Those fears are entirely based on a lack of knowledge. Nature changes slowly all the time so that it can adapt. In the laboratory, those changes are simply accelerated.



► which I head and which includes the eight national academies, offers a series of conferences that give scientists the chance to discuss and popularise physics, mathematics and genetics in a rigorous but simple way, using language the public can understand. We must work towards popularising science more widely. That means extra effort by scientists, but it ought to be a duty.

**What do you think the most important areas of research will be in this century?**

I think one of the most important is the brain. It is the essential key yet to be discovered: why we think, why we speak, what the molecular mechanisms are behind our thought processes. Many people are working in that area. Besides, as John Maddox, who was editor of *Nature* magazine for many years has said, the human being's intellectual capacity is so great that at some point in the future there will be nothing left to discover.

**Will that lead to boredom?**

Well, neither you nor I will be around to see it. Take the example we just discussed concerning sequencing the human genome, which is known as "the beginning of the end." It's one thing to have the sequence and quite another to know what it is worth and to understand the function of each one of our 100,000 genes. By current estimates, that will take another 100 years, so I don't think we'll have time to get bored.

**You've spent the last 30 years working with the phagocytic cell Phi-29. Could you explain what this is?**

It's a virus which infects the *Bacillus subtilis*, a non-pathogenic bacterium which is widely used in biotechnology. When the virus infects this bacterium it destroys it, but causes no damage to other organisms. Phi-29 is simple and easy to handle; it has only 20 genes, in comparison to the 100,000 which the human genome contains. Nevertheless, the control mechanism of this virus is pretty sophisticated, which makes it something of a model system. As a result, what we are studying in the virus can be extrapolated to other virus systems in more complex animals and organisms. The protein that we have studied in this virus also exists in a similar form in other viruses which are not innocuous, or "bad" shall we say, because they cause diseases like poliomyelitis, hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

**What professional achievement are you most proud of?**

Actually, there are two. One is very personal. When I was working in the Severo Ochoa laboratory, I found two previously unknown proteins necessary to start synthesising proteins. It was a very important breakthrough and very satisfying for me, especially since I was just starting out and working alone. My second major achievement was in Spain. I was part of a team that discovered another protein which is closely linked to the nucleic acid of the virus on which we are working. We proved that it was necessary for the replication of viral DNA.

**And your greatest disappointment?**

A scientist cannot expect success every day. There are disappointments

throughout a scientist's life. There are times when experiments don't work, or when you get stuck in a dead-end and have to change direction, but they are minor setbacks and never too serious. I don't think I've ever had a major disappointment. Besides, I'm an optimist.

**Would you say that there is a feminine and a masculine way of conducting research?**

In over 20 years of teaching I've had male and female doctoral and post-doctoral students, and I don't think there is any single feature that really sets them apart. Having said that, women have perhaps been less aggressive and more patient, while men have tried to be the first to come up with results. Nowadays, women are beginning to acquire a level of education that is making them bolder about not always staying one step behind men and always being more patient than they are. Apart from that nuance, I don't see any differences.

**What would you say to a female student who wants to dedicate her life to scientific research?**

My advice would be the same for a woman or a man, which is that if they really enjoy scientific research, they must understand that they will have to dedicate themselves 100 per cent to it. There are no half measures. You either give your life to it, or you don't. If you are really prepared to devote all your time to research, then go ahead. And then I tell them it's for life. ■

Interview by Lucía Iglesias Kuntz,  
UNESCO Courier journalist

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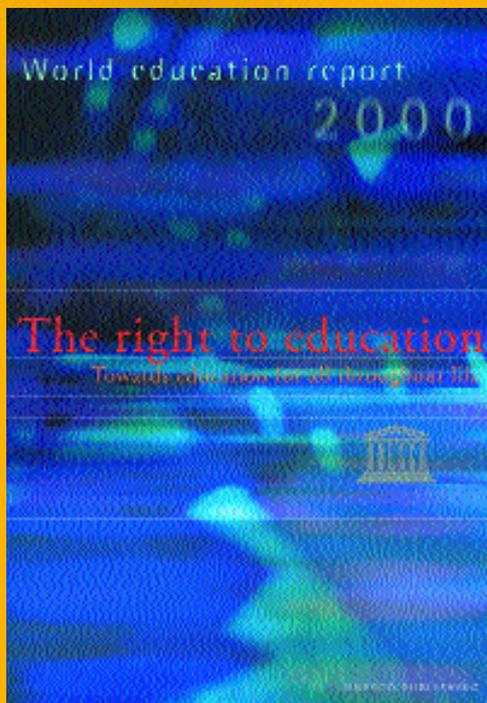
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