

THE UNESCO
March 2011
Courier
SPECIAL ISSUE

Excerpt from
April-June 2011
issue
Celebrating the
International Day
of Women
8 March 2011

Speaking for the **voiceless**

Five women in action

A matter of commitment

Michaëlle Jean (Canada)

Rights won, freedoms lost

Sana Ben Achour (Tunisia)

Crime without punishment

Aminetou Mint El Moctar (Mauritania)

Afraid of nothing

Sultana Kamal (Bangladesh)

Standing up to tyranny

Mónica González Mujica (Chile)



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

**International Women's
Day 2011**
**Journée internationale
de la femme 2011**

THE UNESCO Courier

Special Issue-March 2011

The **UNESCO Courier** is published by the
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural
Organization 7, place de Fontenoy 75352 Paris 07 SP,
France

Free subscription to on-line Courier:
www.unesco.org/courier

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Printing: UNESCO – CLD

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With thanks to: Elisabeth Cloutier and Marie-Christine
Pinault Desmoulins

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**The April-June issue is dedicated to women who are
conquering new expanses of freedom.**



📍 "Ahi vamos" (There we go), acrylic on canvas, by Mercedes Uribe
(Colombia). © M. Uribe



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Inequality costs lives

International Women's Day was first honoured one hundred years ago in a handful of European countries. Since then, the celebration has become global, and much has been achieved. The 2011 International Women's Day is an opportunity to celebrate achievements and mobilize against the challenges that remain.

There is no room for complacency. Less than 40 percent of countries provide girls and boys with equal access to education. Had we reached gender parity in primary education in 2008, there would have been an additional 3.6 million girls in school. Disparities have increased at the secondary level in Africa over the last decade. Only 29 percent of researchers in the world today are women. Two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate adults are women.

The impact is serious. Inequality costs lives in terms of child mortality. It blights lives in terms of poverty and marginalization. And it slights lives in terms of opportunities for growth and development.

Gender equality is a red thread weaving through all UNESCO activities to promote international cooperation in education, the sciences, culture, communication and information. We seek to promote basic human rights in order to transform our societies and lay the foundations for equitable and sustainable human development.

This year's International Women's Day is inspired by the theme of *'Equal access to education, training and science and technology: Pathway to decent work for women.'* This goes to the heart of UNESCO's mission. We work to strengthen the bridges between education, training, science and technology and the labour market in order to promote equal opportunity to decent employment. This starts early, with quality education for all girls and young women from the primary to the tertiary level. It continues with vocational training and education for women who have not acquired basic skills. It proceeds with creating positive role models and career tracks – especially in such areas as science and technology.

Message of the UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, on the occasion of the International Women's Day (excerpt)



📍 Street scene in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, one month after the 12 January 2010 earthquake. A mother and her children, “pampered, beautiful, proud” in Michaëlle Jean’s words.
© UN Photo/Pasqual Gorriz

A matter of commitment

Making sure we do not forget Haiti’s situation of crisis and vulnerability – this is the primary mission of Michaëlle Jean, former Governor General of Canada, recently designated UNESCO Special Envoy for Haiti. Here we trace the trajectory of an exceptional woman, who has inherited the courage, perseverance, pragmatism and sense of commitment of the women of Haiti.

Interview with **Michaëlle Jean** by **Katerina Markelova**

How does a Haitian woman immigrant become governor-general of Canada?

And, to top it all, with responsibilities as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces! (laughs) I think it’s first and foremost a matter of commitment. In Haiti I learned something very valuable – never remain indifferent! In a country where indifference has been responsible for some terrible problems, my parents always encouraged me to look around me, to develop a point of view and to act. I have inherited my courage, perseverance, pragmatism and sense of commitment from the women of Haiti.

When I first arrived in Canada as a child, I quickly understood that

integration meant participation. Very early on I started to become involved in the women’s movement in Quebec, particularly by setting up a network of emergency refuges for battered women and their children. That set me on the path of active and responsible citizenship.

That experience also brought me into journalism – 18 years in public television! Television journalists often find themselves moving into entertainment programmes, if they have the kind of look that stands out. But I was quickly assigned to the news service – in a newsroom, anchorwoman, head of broadcasting, and in front of the cameras.

Canada is the embodiment of diversity. For us, diversity is a reality, rooted in daily life. And, rather than see it as a threat, we see it as a valuable asset, despite all the challenges that go with it. Whenever I have been the victim of discrimination or racism – because no society is sheltered from these kinds of aberration – I always found plenty of people to support me, and resources and organisations that would stand up and, collectively, say “No! Not in Canada. That’s not acceptable!” That is why a black woman, militant feminist to boot, and a former political refugee, was able to become Governor-general of Canada.

What are your priorities as UNESCO special envoy for Haiti?

First of all, to make sure that we keep in mind the state of emergency and vulnerability of this country. Haiti was on the agenda of all the missions I have been on around the world, as Governor General of Canada. Whether in the West, in Latin America or Africa, I have always sensed the desire to be part of a pact of solidarity for Haiti. Given that the ground has already been prepared, I now intend to ask them for support. Haiti cannot get out of this alone. It’s a disastrous situation! But, at the same time, Haiti must also accept its share of responsibility.

I think that the entire world is watching what is happening in Haiti. How will the international community respond? Will the Haitian people – and the Haitian state in particular – act responsibly? We have to succeed and send a message of hope to all of humanity. Haiti is beset with emergencies and miseries of every kind. But it is still possible to act. On one condition – to make sure the citizens are included.

I usually say that, in Haiti, life and survival both depend on hope. This country has always been able to pick itself up after being knocked down. It triumphed over barbarity through the Revolution and escaped slavery by enfranchisement. But hope took a real body blow with the earthquake.

We often hear about Haitians’ capacity for resilience. But I would prefer

that they were known for their creativity, their thinking and what they have to say. If we look only at their capacity for resilience, we will end up believing that these people can carry on waiting, because they are so good at holding on in the worst circumstances.

What do you think is the role of women in rebuilding Haiti?

When I went to Haiti in March 2010, I deliberately chose 8 March, International Women's Day, to go back. The women of Haiti needed to hear someone saying that reconstruction would fail unless they were involved. It was truly amazing, amid this scene of total devastation, where it was almost impossible to go anywhere, to see 5000 women turn out to tell me how much they wanted to see life triumph over this disaster.

The women's movement in Haiti is extremely well organized. Some leading women who helped to set up the movement across the country lost their lives, including some very close friends. All of those who survived were in mourning. But they were possessed by a limitless energy, determined to make sure life wins in the end!

And what part can the diaspora play?

The diaspora has had to overcome a number of challenges, and this is not the first time that Haiti has had to face difficulties. When the Duvaliers¹ left, in 1986, everyone hoped for great things. We saw ex-patriots selling up and moving back home. Men, women and children wanted to contribute to the renaissance of Haiti, to the construction of a democratic state and to new governance. At that time people were already speaking of refounding, reconstruction, a new start. But it turned out to be a minefield. A series of coups and the army's straitjacket stifled any hope there had been. After a fleeting moment of euphoria, life became painful for Haitians for a long time.

When the hurricanes struck in 2008 [taking the lives of nearly 1000 people], I saw a bad sign – the diaspora did not respond. Oh, how terrible it was to see that! In fact, Haitians living abroad had

been disappointed by the behaviour of their compatriots in the previous years – the aid they had been sending home lay rotting in containers or was appropriated by corrupt officials.

But the 2010 earthquake touched the hearts and minds of everybody! The diaspora pulled itself together and responded this time. As I speak to you now, people are struggling to join in this stage in the country's development, which could be a turning point. People have said it before me – this disaster has to become an opportunity to act!

On your visit to Haiti in March 2010, you emphasized the importance of education. It was during a round table discussion in Port-au-Prince that you chaired alongside the Director-General of UNESCO. What do you expect to do in this area?

Haiti is a country where it is possible to do a great deal in terms of education. Why? Because, in the very fabric of Haiti, in its culture, in the Haitian way of being, in its history, education has always been synonymous with emancipation and access to freedom. In the plantations, the slaves remained illiterate. But there was also another category of people – the children that the masters had with their slaves. These children were not sent to the plantations and were taught to read and write. These 'domestic slaves' as they were called, had access to knowledge. Some even went as far to show off their talents. And the plantation slaves saw all of this.

Today, when you see little Haitians going to school, you cannot imagine the dreadful circumstances they are being



📍 Celebration of International Women's Day, 8 March 2010, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. © UN Photo/Sophia Paris

forced to live in! But when they go off to school they are always pampered, they are beautiful, they are proud and their parents are proud, too.

All these families, even the poorest, bend over backwards to send their children to school! So the conditions are very favourable. If we invest in education, if we help Haiti to build a quality public education system, the people will immediately take it on board as something great and useful.

At the present moment, there is an incredible number of scattered educational projects, but there is no coordination. I think that UNESCO has all the necessary skills to play a leadership role in this area and to help the Haitian State to create a standard framework for schools. ■

Michaëlle Jean, was born in 1957 in Port-au-Prince (Haiti), and sought exile with her family in Canada in 1968, fleeing the dictatorship of François Duvalier. After a long career in journalism (the French network of Radio-Canada and the English network of CBC Newsworld) and militating for women's rights, Michaëlle Jean became governor general of Canada (September 2005 – September 2010). On 8 November 2010, she was designated UNESCO Special Envoy for Haiti. With her husband, the filmmaker Jean-Daniel Lafond, Michaëlle Jean chairs a foundation that bears her name, focused on youth and the arts.



Michaëlle Jean, UNESCO's Special Envoy for Haiti © Stg Serge Gouin, Rideau Hall

1. François ("Papa Doc") Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc") Duvalier seized power in Haiti from 1957 and 1986, a period characterized by corruption, the repression of civil rights and the institutionalization of fear.



Several thousand people marched in Tunis on 19 February 2011 to defend secular rights. Many of them were women under the banner of Sana Ben Achour's Association of women democrats.

© A. Gabus, Tunis

Rights won, freedoms lost

To understand the obstacles that block the path to women's emancipation in Arab countries, including Tunisia, where they have had the vote since 1957, the lawyer Sana Ben Achour delves into family law. She exposes the pretence of the State's endorsement of feminism, which falls far short of meeting the exigencies of gender equality and indivisible rights.

Sana Ben Achour

In the Arab region, the debate on women's rights is currently focused on the reform of family law. Indeed, in the name of an Islam raised to the rank of State religion, modern laws accord a lower status to women than to men. From the Middle East to North Africa a normative system has been constructed around women – and women in particular – that is subordinate to Sharia law or the *fiqh* [Islamic law and jurisprudence] and which, in a variety of forms, legitimizes a whole range of

amalgams, such as between religion and political affiliation, political commandment and the application of Sharia law, marriage and religious endogamy, etc.

Family law cements the links between religious and political orders, turning the family into a citadel of male domination. One only has to look at the rules on marriage, which include matrimonial subjugation, a ban on unions between Muslims and non-Muslims, and relationships between marriage partners based on a duty of maintenance, giving men the predominant role. And then there are

the rules of descent and kinship, which are based on patrilineal genealogy and also apply to laws on nationality – a woman cannot pass on her nationality to her husband or children.

Of the 22 members of the League of Arab States, 16 signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1981. However, they have nearly all voiced substantial reservations, whether specific or general, regarding one measure or another in the text. It is thus easy to understand that the feminist movements that emerged in the 1980s rallied around public policy issues to

protest against institutionalized discrimination and the differences between universal human rights and national laws.

Hostages of the political regime

It is interesting to note that economic, social and cultural reforms have been initiated by authoritarian governments – often the offspring of national liberation movements – exploiting family relations as leverage for their national politics. As a result, civil codes regarding the individual and the family, although they derive their origins from classic Muslim law, are part of a legislative policy that signals a certain conquest of modern legislative reason. This was the case for the Egyptian laws of 1917, 1920 and 1929, then laws on personal status in Jordan (1951 and 1976), Syria (1953), Tunisia (1956), Morocco (1957-1958) and Iraq (1959). Other countries recently rallied behind this model: Algeria and Kuwait in 1984 and, nearer home, Mauritania in 2001. In all of these cases, the reforms led to changes in the law and a restructuring of Islamic normative code around women. This is because what is at stake is *siyassa tachriya* (“the making of a legislative policy”), taking account of the need for arbitration between the principles of the organisation of identity and civil society’s demands for equality. It is precisely for this reason that the law on personal and family status oscillates between the spirit of tradition and the spirit of innovation.

Furthermore, not one of these policies has been implemented without authoritarian intervention by central government – such as decrees from the Head of State (as in Tunisia, under the presidency of Habib Bourguiba), regulations arising from a state of emergency (as in Egypt under President Anwar El Sadat) or *dhahir* of the King (as in Morocco). Almost everywhere, they have been accompanied by the establishment of National Women’s Unions, satellite women’s organizations, heavily embedded within the State apparatus and the party in power. And these organizations serve as a conduit to disseminate social policy regarding maternal and child health, education and literacy, rural planning and development, the popularization of new laws on personal and family status. These forms of “State feminism” ended up by taking women hostage and using them as a shield of stability for political regimes.



“Sisterhood Solidarity”, a sculpture by Italian artist Silvio Russo, was presented to the United Nations in 1996 as a gift from Arab women around the world.
© UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Maintaining the status quo

Today, in countries that have been taken over by Islamist movements and appeals for conformity, these texts, marred by a lack of democracy, still seem to have only a precarious hold. They may be called into question at any moment, as was the case in Egypt with the Jihan law of 1979 (named after Sadat’s wife), which allowed a woman to obtain a divorce automatically during the year after her husband’s second marriage. This law was revoked in 1985, under the new article 2 of the Constitution that made Islamic law the principle source of legislation. It was the same in Tunisia when President Bourguiba was deposed in 1987 and there were increasing threats of a “return to origins”. Once again the tutelary intervention of top State authorities was required to ensure that the law on personal status was not touched, that its

principles became an accepted national fact, and to come down hard on the Islamist movement – once it had been ‘normalized’ – and, while they were at it, on the democrats too.

In other words, behind the scenes of these legislative policies on the family, not only the reform of traditional law is at stake, but maintaining the status quo. Any questioning of the traditional asymmetry between the rights of men and the rights of women would be a threat to established public order. And those in power permanently renew this asymmetry when they grant legal guarantees to women without ever letting go of male superiority. And it is upon this arbitration that the reform of patriarchal consensus draws. If an example were needed, it would be Tunisia, because, in the wider landscape of family law in Islamic countries, it is undoubtedly the country that has gone furthest in terms of transgressing against holy law – divorce by mutual consent legalized as early as 1956, the right to vote for women in 1957, legalized abortion from 1962... But, like the other countries, it has not been able to halt male privilege. Which means the husband as head of the family, the continued practice of the dowry – even if it is just a symbolic dinar – as a condition for marriage, the two-thirds/one-third rule in favour of males for dividing an inheritance, etc. Under these conditions, one can measure the gulf that separates the words of politicians on reforms of the law on individual status or improvements in family law from the demands of feminists regarding women’s independence, and equal and indivisible rights. ■

In December 2008, **Sana Ben Achour** was elected president of the Tunisian association of women democrats (ATFD), whose main objective is the adoption of universal values of gender equality, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as campaigning for the financial and social rights of women. A graduate in civil law and lecturer in the Faculty of legal, political and social sciences of Tunis, Sana Ben Achour is also a member of the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH).



© Sana Ben Achour



In Mauritania, slavery has been replaced by domestic service, deplures Aminetou Mint El Moctar. She is particularly concerned by the plight of underage girls. © UN Photo/Jean Pierre Laffont

Crime without punishment

In Mauritania, the question of slavery is closely linked to women because, traditionally, slave status was hereditary and passed on by the mother. Since 2007, slavery has been a crime under Mauritanian law. But, in practice, it continues in more or less disguised forms while the perpetrators escape prosecution. Lawyer Aminetou Mint El Moctar has devoted her life to the rights of women, especially single mothers.

Aminetou Mint El Moctar answers questions put by **Laura Martel**, a journalist at RFI.

At 55, you have already spent over four decades fighting all forms of discrimination, especially against women. Where did this militant spirit come from?

I am a born rebel! The social context and my family environment only accentuated this aspect of my character. I took my first steps as a left-wing militant at the age of 11. I was living in the southwest of Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, in a National

Democratic Movement stronghold. This Marxist movement was calling for economic and social emancipation, while contesting the single-party rule of President Ould Daddah. So, I got many of my ideas after hearing them in the streets or from friends or at school. I read a lot – on the resistance of Vietnamese women, the Bolshevik revolution and especially the *Commune*. I even got nicknamed “Commune de Paris”! This ideal of the liberation of the

people and equality was in radical contrast with the old-fashioned ideas and feudal spirit that prevailed in my family. We were rich, we had slaves, and my father ruled as absolute patriarch. He beat me and chained me up whenever I stayed out of school to join demonstrations or hand out leaflets. All that cost me several stays in prison, from the age of 12. I was soon let out, because I was young, but the worst punishments were handed out at home. That only served to turn my spontaneous commitment into unshakeable convictions. Since then I have been fighting relentlessly for equality between men and women, for an end to slavery and for human rights.

Your commitment goes back a long way, but you have only recently set up your Single Mothers Association (AFCF). What sparked that?

For years I have been a member of a number of organizations, like the *Comité de solidarité aux veuves*

[Solidarity with Widows Committee] or *SOS Esclaves (SOS Slaves)*. In 1999, I was present at the trial of a woman who had secretly married the head of a company and was fighting for their two children to have a share of their deceased father's inheritance. The court refused to recognise his paternity. Hearing this verdict literally struck her down and she died on the way to hospital. With no husband, and so no money, no education, and therefore no chance of finding work, she knew that she and her children would find themselves in the street. She died because she was unable to claim her rights. It was then that I realised it was time to fight for these abandoned women, so I set up the Association. Today, the AFCF has over 10,000 members and employs 62 people. Our staff and running costs are all paid out of members' subscriptions, while our projects are funded by donor agencies.

Mauritanian society is multicultural, with two main ethnic strands – Arab Berbers and black Africans. Do women have the same status in both communities?

Women traditionally have the same function in both communities – they are “made for marriage and to satisfy the desire of men”, but that translates differently in daily life. The constraints aren't the same. For black Africans, a good wife pays her way essentially with household duties, educating the children and satisfying her husband. If she does earn money, she generally has to hand it over to the “master of the household”. Most Arab-Berber women escape household chores. This is not just because their families are generally better off, but also because a woman has to be “preserved” to make the best possible marriage. Pampering her and feeding her up are an investment. Family honour depends on girls marrying young – “she was married young” being an adage frequently used by *griots* as a form of praise. The nomadic tradition allows more freedom to Arab-Berber women than their black African sisters, in terms of what they can and cannot do. And Arab-Berber Mauritanian women have a traditional concept of divorce that is quite unusual. Not only is it acceptable, but it can even give a woman added value! A woman who has been divorced several times is

considered very sought-after. I, myself, have three children from different fathers and have been married 5, 6 or 7 times... but now it's finished! (laughs). But, for black Africans, divorce is, on the contrary, frowned upon, and they are more likely to practice polygamy than Arab-Berbers, although the current obscurantist trend means a resurgence of this tradition for them too. These are all, of course, generalisations, for which there are many exceptions.

Force-feeding, child marriage, excision, slavery, domestic service... the list of human rights breaches is a long one. What is your priority?

The most urgent task is to establish a legal basis for equality between men and women. For centuries jurisprudence has mixed up religious imperatives and tradition to create a cocktail of discrimination. In Mauritania, a woman has a legal guardian for her entire life. It might be her father, her husband or even her son. She has no rights of her own. Let us take marriage as an example. According to the civil code, the legal age for marriage is 18 years, but with the guardian's consent, it may be celebrated earlier. This, in a way, legalises childhood marriages and deprives women of the power to decide. That was how, one day, when I came home from school, I discovered I had

been married to a friend of my father. I was 13 years old.

Also, when inheritances are divided up, two-thirds go to the boys, one third to the girls, while only the husband can initiate a divorce. Mauritania signed the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*, but added two reservations, precisely on divorce and inheritance. AFCF is currently campaigning to get these two reservations lifted. It is by inscribing equality between men and women in the law that we will acquire the weapons to combat concrete acts of discrimination, even if this is just the first step because many laws are not applied.

This is particularly true of the 2007 law that makes slavery a criminal offence. You often point out that no one has been convicted since this law was passed. Does this mean that there are no more slaves in Mauritania?

It's difficult to quantify because the subject is taboo. Nevertheless, we know that slavery still goes on, because we regularly pick up victims. Along with other associations, AFCF has denounced

♥ *Down through the centuries, religious imperatives and ancestral customs have been combined to justify discrimination against women in Mauritania, says Aminetou Mint El Moctar.*

© Pepa Martin, Spain



cases of slavery to the authorities on several occasions, but so far, no action has been taken and no one has been convicted. The “masters” are people with high positions and are protected.

The question of slavery is intimately linked to women, since, according to tradition, it is hereditary and passed down through the mother. That means it is more advantageous for a “master” to have female slaves, because he can then appropriate their offspring. Even so, this traditional form of slavery, where individuals are the property of a master from one generation to the next, is on the decline. Unfortunately it is being replaced by a more ‘modern’ form of slavery – domestic service. Poor families place their daughters with rich families, where they often receive only board and lodging. These girls, who are usually very young, receive no education and it is not uncommon for them to be beaten. There are many of them in Nouakchott. They mostly come from rural areas of the country, but also from neighbouring states like Senegal, Mali or Gambia. In 2009, with the international human rights organization, *Terre des Hommes*, we launched a programme that enabled us to help 2200 minors.

One day, when I came home from school, I discovered I had been married to a friend of my father. I was 13 years old

Do you see Mauritania as a hub for trafficking children?

This form of traffic has existed for a long time, but has grown over the past few years. The traffickers seek out children in poor families in rural areas, promising their parents that they will find their girls work, or a religious pilgrimage, a favourable marriage, a sum of money, etc. The girls transit through Nouakchott, before being taken to the Gulf, where they are sold and married. If they are black, their skin is lightened. Once they reach the age of 18 or 20, their husbands throw them out into the street, because they are no longer young enough for their taste; most then fall into prostitution. If they are still minors, they may be deported. Three years ago I met 14 girls at the airport, all about 15 years old, who had lived

through this ordeal and did not know where to go. The prostitution ring also extends out to Europe. AFCF is currently looking for funding for a survey to determine the extent of this phenomenon.

Are there any areas where you can see progress?

Excision! Even though it is disappearing very slowly, this practice is beginning to be abandoned collectively, mostly as a result of a number of agreements and action by donor organizations, which have been providing substantial funding, as well as the commitment of some highly placed religious figures. A *fatwa* [religious law] was signed against excision in 2010. The police and the judiciary have also been made more aware of the issues, but once again, there have been virtually no convictions.

Force-feeding is also on the decline, mostly because of a gradual change in concepts of beauty. But over 20% of Mauritanian girls jeopardize their health in an effort to put on weight, even if the traditional methods have nowadays been replaced by food supplements, often with dangerous side effects.

And then there is political representation, where we made clear gains between 2005 and 2007, particularly with the establishment of a 20% quota for women in elected institutions. Today, we do have a female Minister of foreign affairs, but the number of senior positions held by women (such as Secretary of state, police chief, governor) has been falling since 2008. Symbolically, the Ministry for the Advancement of Women has once again been merged within the Ministry of Social Affairs. Meanwhile, Mauritania, like some other countries, is under pressure from right-wing factions that want to reassign women to a more primitive role.

What do you recommend women should do to defend their rights?

Traditionally, women do not follow any in-depth religious instruction, learning “just what is needed to pray”. But a better understanding of religion would enable them to free themselves from certain practices. They would know, for example, that the Koran does not impose excision and polygamy. I also think that religions, including Islam,

have to adapt to the modern world – we should be lobbying religious scholars for a ‘modern’ exegesis of the scriptures.

In Mauritania there is a majority of women – some 52% of the population. There is, then, the potential to develop a female elite, able to overcome racial and ideological schisms. AFCF, in collaboration with the American NGOWomen’s Learning Partnership trains 100 women each year in leadership skills. Politics is one means towards our ends, but it may not necessarily be the best, because many women, once in power, look after their own interests first. What is needed is collective awareness of the issues. It is starting.

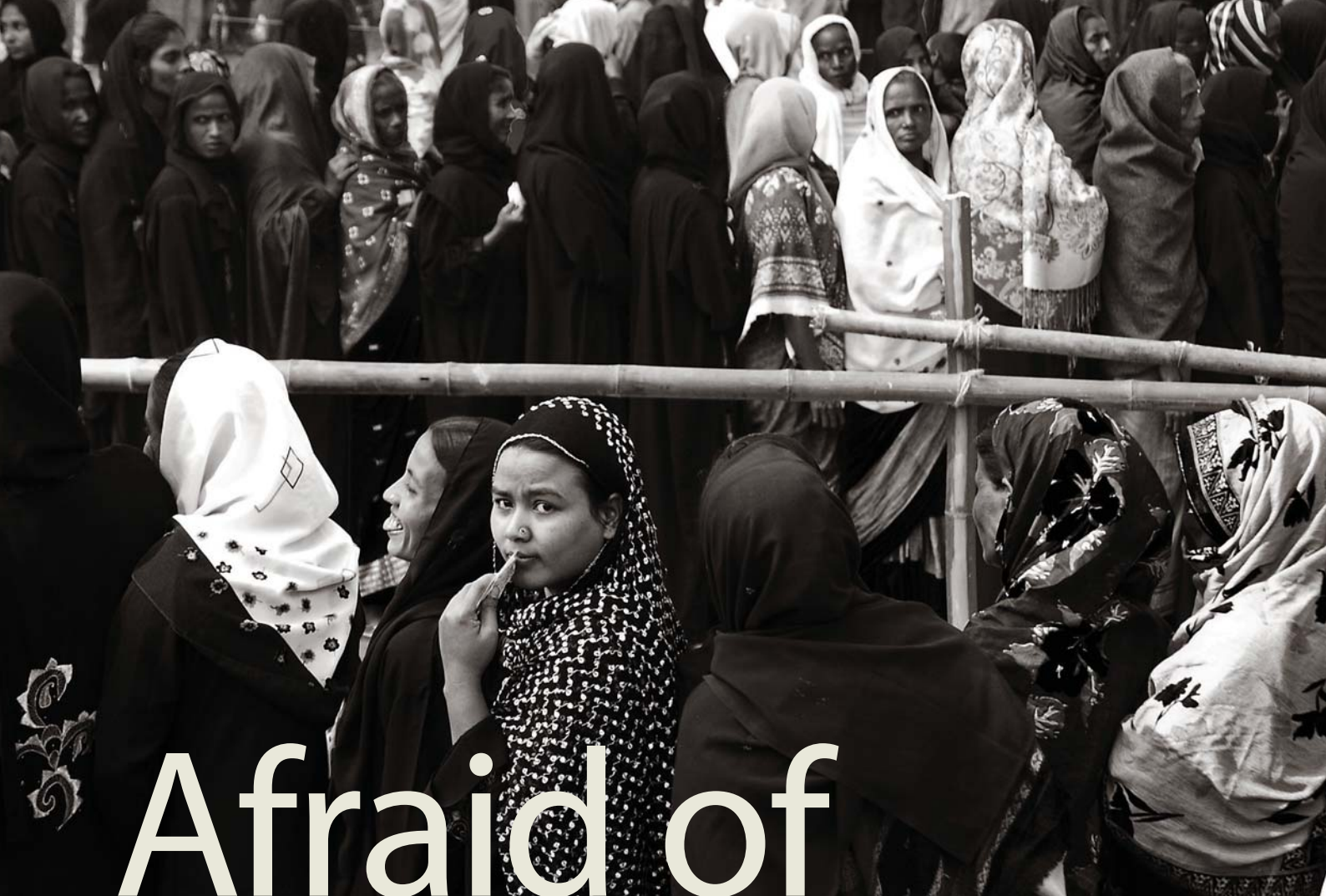
Why did you not go into politics?

Because I prefer to work at grassroots level, with the victims. It is by getting women into the streets that we will gain most power. I know that it is a slow process, but I do get the feeling we are at a turning point – the efforts of our Association were rewarded with France’s Human Rights Prize in 2007, and the Heroes Acting To End Modern-Day Slavery Award from the US Department of State in 2010. This encourages more international organizations to fund our projects. ■

Mauritanian-born, **Aminetou Mint El Moctar** is a lawyer and founded the *Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille* (Association of single mothers) that combats all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and their children. In 2009, the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre (Jordan) placed her amongst the 500 most influential Muslim figures in the world.



© Cridem.org



Afraid of nothing

Sultana Kamal was interviewed by Anbarasan Ethirajan, Indian journalist for the BBC in Bangladesh.

Women may hold top political posts in Bangladesh, yet discrimination because of gender is institutionalized, says women's rights activist Sultana Kamal. In this secular country where Islam remains the state religion, the rise of fundamentalism and disruptions in the democratic process are having a direct impact on women's status.

Bangladesh will be celebrating its 40th anniversary of liberation this year. How has life changed for women over these decades?

Lots of things have changed in the last 40 years. To begin with, generally women are much more conscious of their rights now. They are much stronger on demanding their rights and also very vocal on the political and social scene.

Of course it is not the same everywhere in the country, and it could have been much better, if not for the interruptions in the democratic process or the rise of fundamentalism. But in general, the people have never ever endorsed the orthodox type of religion.

That is why women always benefited from a very liberal atmosphere that gave them the leverage to debate and to take part in lots of things.

The prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, and the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia, are women, which is quite unusual for a Muslim majority country.

I like the way you put the question – you think it is very unusual for a Muslim majority country. Yes, Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country but we do not call ourselves a Muslim country. It is a country where people of many religions live, many cultures are alive in Bangladesh and very well loved and

respected. But we have to be very honest about the women we see at the top. They are not there because they are women or because they have come through a process which has actually supported women's emancipation. They are there because they bear a legacy.

I would be very honest here – when we vote for Sheikh Hasina, we in fact vote for her late father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first president of the country. When we vote for Khaleda Zia we vote for her late husband, General Ziaur Rahman, the former military dictator. People still bear the images of these two very well known leaders.

But then again the very fact that the two women are there, running the

📍 Elections in 2008. In Bangladesh the lines of women waiting to vote are almost always longer than the men's.

© Faizal Tajuddin, Kuala Lumpur

country and really taking control of situations, gives other women a sense of confidence, a belief that women can do it.

Which identity is dominant in Bangladesh? Bengali identity or Islamic identity?

Many people wonder whether they are Muslim or Bengali first. This struggle has its roots in the Pakistani period. The main challenge to the people of East Pakistan from the Pakistani military rulers was that you had to prove you were a loyal Pakistani. You had to prove you were a true Muslim. They actually merged two identities together.

But people in Bangladesh generally believe that we can have multiple identities. Yes, I am a Muslim or born to a Muslim family, I am also a Bengali, a woman, a human rights activist. I am known by many different names. So likewise, there will be Hindus and Christians who will have multiple identities. The people of Bangladesh basically believe in pluralism, they believe in Sufism. Their way of relating to nature, to God, to whatever mysteries of life, is dependent on their own perception of self and nature.

People's love of Bangladesh is mixed with love of the rivers, trees and nature. It is very much related to the basic harmony that they want to see everywhere. It is not a confrontational culture, but one was created artificially, constantly supported by forces in the society that have been able to capture power and influence through the economic system, educational system and cultural inputs.

Have Islamist fundamentalist forces changed social and cultural life within Bangladesh?

The fundamentalists have captured the main sectors of the society, like banking, insurance, medical and education. And the worst influence is on education because they have changed all the curricula, they have changed all kinds of information methods in the country. People must accept the lessons they teach or surrender to what they think is the correct path of religion.

They get into power or stay in power by using the tool of fear. Whatever degradation in society we see in Bangladesh was because they used weapons. They use religion, which tell us you cannot question anything, so it is absolute surrender or nothing. It's a question of faith, nothing else.

They are using freedom of expression, democratic opportunities, to give religious orders. They keep saying we want the head of this person or this individual should be hanged because he is a traitor, whatever this person has said is sacrilegious. These tactics scare people. But you also notice that not many people actually support all these efforts. They talk against them and make their opinions known as soon as they know there will be not be any repercussion or retaliation by the fundamentalist forces. But there are other forces in the society which support them, give them courage and will protect them when they are at risk and that is what happens each time we have an election.

There have been a number of court rulings in recent years that no woman should be forced to wear a burqa or veil. But if you go outside the capital people are still wearing traditional Islamic dress.

We have to remember women in rural areas have little means of supporting themselves economically or socially. All these people probably belong to the lower middle class or poor sections of

the society, so their struggle is very basic. They are using these tactics to at least get out of the house. As they tell us, 'Unless I wear a burqa, my family will not allow me to go out.' So, only to go to school, or work or a meeting, they have to use the burqa.

How does it happen? In the rural areas the men are also denied opportunities and bullied by the social leaders. Unfortunately, the social leaders are also connected to religious hierarchy and push the men to control their women in that way. And since for many years this country was ruled by the generals who had a very strong alliance with the religious forces, all these things were promoted, deliberately nurtured and protected by the state. That is why it will not be so easy for all women to refuse from one day to the next to wear the burqa.

You see many more burqas now in Bangladesh than we saw in the Pakistani time. This is an outcome of disruptions in the democratic system where people were forced to surrender to certain powers, to be silenced so that they do not revive the spirit of the liberation war of 1971. There was a direct conflict between hard line groups opposed to our independence and the powers that actually fought for the liberation of Bangladesh.

📍 Khaleda, 15 years old, Rohyngia refugee in Bangladesh.

© UNHCR/S.Kritsanavarin/November 2008




Let's talk about another major issue, attacks on women that include throwing acid on them and sexual harassment of young girls, which lead to suicide in many cases. Can these practices be controlled only by enacting law?

It is a social problem and it has to be dealt with by social forces. We should create an atmosphere where women will get enough confidence that they can fight it. Also, the state, the society and the families will have to be involved in protecting women. We need to explain this to the families. We have to make it clear that women have equal rights and dignity in the country and that has to be maintained. There cannot be any compromise there. There has to be a social movement about it. But then laws are also helpful because they give you a kind of a power and confidence that you can also fight these legally.

Gender bias and prejudice against women – is it institutionalised in Bangladesh?

I would say yes, if you look at the personal laws that exist in the country. According to these laws, people are governed by their religious laws and those are very clearly discriminating against women. But the state is not doing anything about it. We have been demanding since 1972 that there should be a uniform civil code or family code for everybody. The government is not able to do anything about that and we still have a very confused view of what is positive

 *Sultana Kamal at the launch of a project to build a school for disadvantaged and orphaned children (2010)*
© ASK, Dakha

discrimination, what is equity, what is an affirmative action? So there is a lot of resistance within the society reflected in the state policies.

There is controversy over how Bangladesh is treating the Rohingya ethnic refugees who fled alleged persecution in neighbouring Myanmar. What's your view on this?

One impression I have is that these people are also being used by supporters of fundamentalist forces in Bangladesh. That's one thing. The other problem as I heard from our foreign minister is economic. The minute you recognize them as refugees and you start dealing with them according to the treaties, it represents an economic burden Bangladesh is not prepared for.

Population is another problem. Bangladesh is not being able to deal with such a huge population.

On the other hand, as a human rights activist I would like to say yes, all these problems are there. But there should be a decent way of dealing with them. I strongly feel that these people also have certain rights and those rights should be respected.

Tell us about yourself. What prompted you to become a women's rights activist?

I was brought up among people who were social activists, political activists. My parents were deeply involved in the anti-British movement. Then my mother became the pioneer of the women's movement in Bangladesh. She took a leading role in the language movement and also in the 1950s and 1960s cultural movements.

I got involved in public life during the country's liberation war. I was in India for some months during the nine-month war. With my sister, I set up a hospital for the wounded freedom fighters. Before then I was engaged in helping people with information, shelter, assisting them to cross the border.

After our liberation in 1971, I started working with women affected by the war, because many came to my mother with a lot of problems. A number of women had lost their husbands and had difficulties with their in-laws. Many women wanted to remarry and keep their children. That is how I became interested in law and became a lawyer. I felt I could be useful to those people, to help them realise they do have rights and they can live with dignity.

You were threatened on many occasions and there were attempts on your life. Did you ever feel you were ready to quit?

Not really, because I learnt from my parents that the minute you quit, that is half the defeat. Why let others feel that they have won and abandon the causes you are fighting for? That is the strength of life: you will only lose your life once.

The fundamentalists did not approve of my marriage to a Hindu, or to the people that I associated with, so they set fire to my house in 1995. We almost died. Later they threw a bomb. But I never worried about my own well-being or my own life. Yes, I have responsibility towards my husband and my daughter. They have a claim on my life. But the way I was brought up and the way I started understanding the issues of life taught me that you should never be afraid. Being afraid is not the solution. ■

Bangladeshi women's rights activist **Sultana Kamal** is Executive Director of Ain-O-Shalish Kendra, a national legal aid and human rights organisation. Founded in 1986, the NGO is funded notably by the Dutch embassy, the German agency NETZ and Save the Children. It also raises its own funds through activities such as training and publications. In 2010, ASK_a provided free legal assistance to about 4000 women.



Standing up to tyranny

If we do not speak out, we are accomplices, says Mónica González Mújica, laureate of the 2010 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. Jailed and tortured during the dictatorship in Chile, she never relinquished her right to free speech. Denouncing injustice is what counts for her, beyond gender barriers.

Mónica González Mujica gave an interview to Carolina Jerez and Lucía Iglesias (UNESCO)

Do women do journalism differently? As a woman journalist, what were your advantages and the obstacles you had to overcome throughout your career?

Let's talk first about the advantages of being a woman, because there are some. We have a particular sensitivity, which I think is very useful for investigative journalism – a greater capacity for perceiving who is telling the truth, who is lying, who is hiding behind a shield, a mask or a disguise. I also feel that when women undertake something, we are more persistent and we only ease up when the work is done. We're hard-headed! And I say that without being a feminist.

Of course there are obstacles, particularly when aggressors, torturers, attack us sexually in order to destroy us. I discovered under the dictatorship that rape is primarily intended to break us. No one could enjoy raping a woman. The pleasure is to humiliate a woman and rob her of her identity. But in my case, on the contrary, it made me stronger.

What do you consider your greatest professional success?

The most important accomplishment for me was to be able to go from dictatorship to democracy without giving up journalism. I never gave it up during the dictatorship, not in jail, not under torture, not when my friends were killed, or when I had to be

separated from my daughters, or when I shared the pain of so many people in this country. When democracy came, I felt that there was so much to build. What I did right was not to give up journalism and I found a new way to continue every time I was unemployed. I managed to do this thanks to the assistance of many people - I am not a Superwoman. I am grateful to have met people who supported me and encouraged me to persevere when I was the most afraid. In this profession, you are put to the test every day and I want this to go on until I die.

What is the situation of investigative journalism today?

It is without any doubt the type of journalism most severely under attack everywhere. Investigation was the first victim of the economic crisis of 2008. It was the most expensive journalists that were laid off first, those who were dedicated to investigation. As the investigation's journalism often is source of problems and conflicts, the crisis was a wonderful excuse to get rid of the desk best equipped to investigate the real, pressing issues that were decisive for the lives of citizens.



However, I must stress that the quality of investigative journalism in Latin America is at least as high as that of investigative journalism in English-speaking countries. And not only today, because we also did this type of work under dictatorships. In Chile, for example, journalists denounced the Pinochet regime crimes under his dictatorship, running incredible risks. Either journalists have to denounce crimes and atrocities or they become accomplices. And it is true that investigative journalism always involves great personal sacrifices and the use of the journalist's own funds, because, let's face it, no media organization will pay journalists for months so they can carry out an in-depth investigation into an issue and reveal it to the world.

Basically, I think that Latino-American investigative journalism is facing a major problem: the drug cartels are eroding our societies. Their final objective is to deprive us of pleasure, happiness and life. This is why it is so important to attack them, and it is also why it is so important to guarantee that journalists can investigate and inform, contrary to the current practice in most countries' regions.

What is your view of the media landscape in Latin America?

Two problems pose an increasingly urgent threat to the right of society to be informed. First: the formidable concentration of media ownership. Groups take control of several media companies thus consolidating television, radio and the written press, while they maintain interests in other sectors of production, such as agriculture, mining, services, real estate, etc. A media company cannot provide objective reporting on corporations of which its owner has shares. This is very serious. Journalists are losing their independence, their dignity and essential skills.

The second threat comes from authoritarian governments, which, although they came to power democratically, make journalists their enemies and submit them to constant threats. Here, once more, there is unfortunately no opposition able to defend freedom of information properly. Because freedom of information is not about supporting the government or the opposition, it is about providing quality journalism. Just as it is intolerable that



Journalists protest in Mexico City. Journalists demonstrated against attacks and kidnappings in the country. © Raul Urbina, Mexico

organized crime cartels go to war on journalists, it is unacceptable for democratically elected governments to engage in authoritarian practices.

All this to say the Latin-American landscape of media industry is, objectively speaking, discouraging; it shows the precariousness of journalism. This is having a deep effect on society.

It is democracy as a whole that is undermined, because a badly informed citizen easily becomes prey to petty tyrants. We who lived through dictatorships and who regained freedom only at the cost of people's lives consider that we cannot let democracy get weak and be manipulated by authoritarian powers again. ■

Mónica González Mujica is one of the most committed and tenacious journalists in Chile. Exiled in France after the coup d'état in 1973, she returned to Chile in 1978, but was not able to practice her profession again until 1983. She has managed the Centro de Información e Investigación Periodística (CIPER) since May 2007. This journalism and investigation centre is an independent non-profit institution specialized in investigative reporting.

She has received many awards for her work, dedicated to defending freedom of the press, and has written the following books: *Bomba en una calle de Palermo* (Bomb in a street in Palermo) with Edwin Harrington, in 1986; *Chile entre el Sí y el No* (Chile between yes and no) with Florencia Varas, in 1988; *Los secretos del Comando Conjunto* (The secrets of the Comando Conjunto) with Héctor Contreras, in 1989; and *La Conjura. Los mil y un días del golpe* (The conspiracy: The thousand and one days of the coup), in 2000.



Mónica González Mujica speaking at the international conference on freedom of expression held at UNESCO on 26 January 2011. © UNESCO/Danica Bijeljic



Gender Equality

UNESCO's Global Priority

“Gender Equality concerns and affects us all. (...) Ensuring women’s full and equal participation in development and in peace-building processes is a sure way of building stable and open societies, and ensuring sustainable development.”¹

Gender Equality has long been of central importance to UNESCO. Since its inception over 60 years ago, UNESCO has been at the forefront of efforts to support women’s and girls’ rights, women’s empowerment, and gender equality through all its domains. Starting with the promotion of girls and women’s right to education, UNESCO’s work to promote this goal has extended to all levels and aspects of education, the natural and social sciences, the information and communication sector and the complex and rich field of culture.

In a landmark decision taken by UNESCO’s Member States in 2007, UNESCO made its greatest commitment to the achievement of these goals by designating “Gender Equality” as one of its two global priorities for the 2008-2013 period.

What is Priority “Gender Equality”?

For UNESCO, gender equality is a fundamental right, a commonly shared value and a necessary condition for the achievement of all internationally agreed development objectives. Gender equality is not only central to efforts to fight extreme poverty but it is also related to the global quest to limit the spread of HIV

and AIDS, mitigate the effects of climate change and achieve sustainable development and peace.

UNESCO’s approach and selected initiatives

In its Member States and within the Organization, UNESCO pursues gender equality through a dual approach: on the one hand, it is engaged in actions that specifically seek to redress inequalities by targeting women and girls or men and boys alone and, on the other, it ensures that all of its programmes support gender equality goals through gender mainstreaming.

In the area of Education, UNESCO strives to redress gender inequalities at all levels in terms of access, retention, completion, and quality. This includes the promotion of women’s increased participation in science, technology, innovation and research, as well as in areas such as the ethics of science, culture and human rights.

UNESCO’s Communication and Information programme aims to address the stereotyping of women and inequalities in women’s access to and participation in all communication information systems. It raises awareness among professionals regarding the need to include a gender equality perspective in media content.

The Organization also works towards the promotion of women’s empowerment and gender equality through the integration of these considerations into its normative work in areas such as the ethics of science, culture and human rights.

Within UNESCO, the Division for Gender Equality in the office of the Director-General is the key contact for ensuring the implementation of UNESCO’s Global Priority Gender Equality. The Division aims to raise awareness of gender equality issues within the Secretariat - and among its Member States.

UNESCO formulated a *Priority Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP)* for 2008-2013 as a road map to translate its commitment to gender equality into practice, to ensure that UNESCO programmes and initiatives contribute fully and actively to the pursuit of women’s rights, women’s empowerment and gender equality.

The road to gender equality may yet be long and there is still a lot of hard work to be done, but on this 8 March 2011, we wish to celebrate women and the creation of the historic new UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – UN Women. ■

Saniye Gülser Corat, Director of Division for Gender Equality

1. Irina Bokova on the occasion of her installation as Director-General of UNESCO, 23 October 2009



"SCUTUM", bronze
sculpture by French artist
Annette Jalilova. The
work has become the
emblem of UNESCO's
Division for Gender
Equality.
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