



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Women conquering new expanses of freedom

**Global champion for women**

*Michelle Bachelet*

**Putting Kyrgyzstan on the map**

*Roza Otunbayeva*

**A matter of commitment**

*Michaëlle Jean*

**Rights won, freedoms lost**

*Sana Ben Achour*

**Crime without punishment**

*Aminetou Mint El Moctar*

**Afraid of nothing**

*Sultana Kamal*

**A lawyer with thick skin**

*Asma Jahangir*

**Standing up to tyranny**

*Mónica González Mujica*

**Slowly but surely**

*Humaira Habib*

**Stars in my personal galaxy**

*Luisa Futoransky*

THE UNESCO  
**Courier**

April-June 2011

ISSN 2220-2285  
e-ISSN 2220-2293



## OUR AUTHORS

# Gender Equality: A priority for UNESCO

Gender equality is a necessary condition for achieving all internationally agreed development objectives. Central to efforts to fight extreme poverty, it is also related to limiting the spread of HIV and AIDS, mitigating the effects of climate change and achieving sustainable development and peace.

UNESCO has always supported women's and girls' rights and has made gender equality one of its global priorities. In education, it strives to redress inequalities in access and quality at all levels. This includes the promotion of women's increased participation in science, technology, innovation and research.

UNESCO also aims to address the stereotyping of women and inequalities in women's access to and participation in all communication and information systems. It raises awareness among professionals of the need to include a gender equality perspective in media content and organizes training to enhance the security skills of women journalists.

The Organization also works towards women's empowerment and gender equality by integrating 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 is the key contact for ensuring the implementation of "Priority Gender Equality", the 2008-2013 action plan that serves as its roadmap.





United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# THE UNESCO Courier

April-June 2011

64th year

2011 - No. 2

The UNESCO Courier is currently a quarterly published in seven languages by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
7, place de Fontenoy 75352, Paris 07 SP, France

Free subscription to the Courier on line:

www.unesco.org/courier

Director of publication: Eric Falt

Editor-in-chief: Jasmina Šopova  
j.sopova@unesco.org

Assistant editor: Katerina Markelova  
k.markelova@unesco.org

Editors:

Arabic: Khaled Abu Hijleh

Chinese: Weiny Cauhape

English: Cathy Nolan

French: Françoise Arnaud-Demir

Portuguese: Ana Lúcia Guimarães

Russian: Irina Krivova

Spanish: Francisco Vicente-Sandoval

Photos: Ariane Bailly

Design and layout: Baseline Arts Ltd, Oxford

Printing: UNESCO - CLD

Information and reproduction rights:

+ 33 (0)1 45 68 15 64 - k.markelova@unesco.org

Web platform: Chakir Piro and Van Dung Pham

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

Articles and photos credited UNESCO may be reproduced and/or translated for non-commercial purposes providing the credit line reads "Reproduced from the UNESCO Courier" and includes date and hyperlink. Photos without UNESCO credit require special permission.

Articles express the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of UNESCO.

Photographs belonging to UNESCO may be reproduced freely. Photos must carry the following caption: © UNESCO and photographer's name. For high resolution, please contact the Photobank: photobank@unesco.org  
Boundaries on maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by UNESCO or the United Nations of the countries and territories concerned.



© All rights reserved



Editorial - Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

5

## SPECIAL REPORT: Women conquering new expanses of freedom

Global champion for women

7

Interview with Michelle Bachelet by Jasmina Šopova

Women political leaders - Shiraz Sidva

9

Putting Kyrgyzstan on the map

13

Interview with Roza Otunbayeva by Katerina Markelova

A matter of commitment

15

Interview with Michaëlle Jean by Katerina Markelova

Crime without punishment

17

Interview with Aminetou Mint El Moctar by Laura Martel

Mama Maggy and her 20,000 children

20

Jasmina Šopova meets Maggy Barankitse

Afraid of nothing

22

Interview with Sultana Kamal by Anbarasan Ethirajan

A lawyer with thick skin

25

Interview with Asma Jahangir by Irina Zoubenko-Laplante

Rights won, freedoms lost - Sana Ben Achour

28

Now or never - Giusy Muzzopappa

30

Standing up to tyranny

32

Interview with Mónica González Mujica by Carolina Jerez and Lucía Iglesias

Slowly but surely - Humaira Habib

34

Conquering the job market - Feriel Lalami-Fates

36

Gender Equality: a Global Public Good

37

Sanye Gulser Corat and Estelle R. Raimondo

Davos Forum: women are the future - Katrin Bennhold

39

Sowing the seeds of the future

41

Interview with Lorena Aguilar by Alfredo Trujillo Fernandez

Stars in my personal galaxy - Luisa Futoransky

43

Mother Teresa, the most powerful woman in the world - Navin Chawla

47

Manuela Sáenz, the liberator of the Liberator - Lautaro Pozo

48

## POSTSCRIPT

Homage to Édouard Glissant: The Philosophy of Tout-Monde

50

Ernest Pépin

Youth is the country's wealth

52

Interview with Princess Loulwah of Saudi Arabia by Linda Tinio

Universal thought: Tagore, Neruda, Césaire, poetry in the service of a new humanism - Noémie Antony and Jasmina Šopova



## In this issue

This year, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first international demonstration staged by thousands of women on both sides of the Atlantic to demand the right to vote. So much for the past. Looking to the future, 2011 marks a turning point just as significant for international women's rights – the launch of UN Women.

Michelle Bachelet, who headlines this issue as the first Executive Director of the new United Nations agency, explains its whys and wherefores (p. 7). Also prominent among the women who are taking over the international political scene, Rosa Otunbayeva describes her mandate as first woman president of Kyrgyzstan (p. 13) and Michaëlle Jean, former Governor General of Canada, the pact of solidarity with Haiti, her country of origin.

While progress towards gender parity in politics remains slow (pp. 9-12), women are gaining ground more quickly in the human rights arena. There too, women need a strong hand to

break society's shackles, like Aminetou Mint El Moctar from Mauritania (p. 17), Maggy Barankitse from Burundi (p. 20), Sultana Kamal from Bangladesh (p. 23), Asma Jahangir from Pakistan (p. 25) and Sana Ben Achour from Tunisia (p. 28).

And showing the determination necessary to ensure success, Italian women rallied all over the world to defend their dignity (p. 30).

This arduous campaign cannot succeed without the media. Two women who have risked their lives to defend freedom of expression, one from Chile and the other from Afghanistan, comment on what "women's journalism" can represent in certain situations (pp. 32-35).

Because decent work was a central theme of this year's celebration of International Women's Day, we also highlight the situation of Algerian women, caught in the trap of job insecurity. If we mention work, we are talking about economics, another crucial factor in women's freedom. We

see signs at an international level that women's image and place are starting to change in this realm, long the exclusive domain of men. Locally, we note that women's role in agriculture contributes to safeguarding the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change (pp. 36-42).

To close our special report, we rediscover, thanks to Argentine poet Luisa Futoransky, several women who earned distinction in the arts and literature (pp. 43-46), as well as Mother Teresa – we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of her birth – and Manuela Sáenz from Ecuador, fighting fearlessly for Latin America (pp. 47-48).

In addition, we present a tribute to Édouard Glissant (1928-2011), former editor-in-chief of the UNESCO Courier; interview Princess Loulwah of Saudi Arabia; and introduce a new UNESCO project about Rabindranath Tagore, Aimé Césaire and Pablo Neruda.

**Jasmina Šopova**

# Editorial

Irina Bokova

"To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below," wrote Toni Morrison<sup>1</sup> in "A Mercy", which to me is one of the most poignant novels ever written about being a woman. The lives of four women – European, African, Native American and a mysterious young girl who comes out of the sea – are intermingled, all of them tragic, inextricably linked to each other and deeply rooted in the soil that would a century later give birth to the United States. These four powerful female characters stand like caryatids supporting the emerging American society. And yet, the author says, they are "open wounds". Is it the common fate of women throughout the world to be both the pillars and the victims of society?

Obviously the situation of women has undergone considerable evolution. The International Council of Women (ICW), founded in 1888, followed by the International Alliance of Women (IAW) in 1904 and the Women

International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in 1945, have played a crucial role in the struggle for gender equality.

Gender equality lies at the heart of human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are essential for the dignity of individuals, for healthy societies, and for the rule of law. Second, equality between men and women is a powerful accelerator of political, social and economic transformation. Gender equality is a core development issue. It is also a security issue. Girls and women suffer disproportionately from armed conflict. They are also very often the best advocates for reconciliation. Finally, the last hundred years have taught us that gender equality is everyone's job. Governments are key, but so are civil society and business, teachers and administrators, cultural personalities and the

1. American novelist Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

🌀 "Ames" (Souls),  
sculptures by  
French artist Hélène  
Hiribarne.

© Alicia Cloeren, Texas

🌀 Irina Bokova visiting  
the Tombs of Buganda  
Kings at Kasubi (Uganda)  
with the Ugandan  
Minister of Education and  
Sports Geraldine  
Namirembe Bitamawire  
and the Permanent  
Delegate to UNESCO  
Elizabeth Paula Napeyok  
© UNESCO/Tosin  
Animashawun



media. The international community plays its part by setting goals and mobilizing support to reach them.

UNESCO seeks to tighten the link between gender and the internationally-agreed development goals. We made this case in 2010 during the 15th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. We took it to the Millennium Development Goals Summit in New York last September. Working with the Republic of Korea, we pushed education higher on the agenda of the G20 summit in Seoul. I made the same argument at the 2011 World Economic Forum in Davos. Throughout all of this, we worked closely with the United Nations Girls Education Initiative and we will continue with the newly-created UN Women, led by Michelle Bachelet.

Gender equality is woven through the work of all UNESCO sectors. It has inspired me in reforming the Organization itself. It guides our activities on the ground – including in difficult settings, in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as in Pakistan. During my recent visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo, I signed an agreement with the Government to establish a research and documentation Centre on Women, Gender and Peace-building. Located in Kinshasa, this UNESCO Category 2 Centre will address an issue of vital importance for human rights, social stability and development for the Great Lakes Region.

Remembering a visit in the 1980s to northwest Zimbabwe, her country of origin, Doris Lessing said, "That poor girl trudging through the dust, dreaming of an education for her children, do we think that we are better than she is - we, stuffed full of food, our cupboards full of clothes, stifling in our superfluities? I think it is that girl, and the women who were talking about books and an education when they had not eaten for three days, that may yet define us."<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the limits of her fiction, the author was reaffirming her faith in women, even the most

disadvantaged. UNESCO has other ways of reaffirming the same faith. Beyond the limits of her fiction, the author was reaffirming her faith in women, even the most disadvantaged. UNESCO has other ways of reaffirming the same faith. To empower the world's poorest girls and women, we will launch a new initiative on girls' education that will engage official and private sector partners. This will focus on the innovative use of new technologies to expand basic education and literacy, on the education of women and girls in situations of conflict and natural disasters, and on system-wide policy frameworks and teacher training. To empower the world's poorest girls and women, we will launch a new initiative on girls' education that will engage official and private sector partners. This will focus on the innovative use of new technologies to expand basic education and literacy, on the education of women and girls in situations of conflict and natural disasters, and on system-wide policy frameworks and teacher training.

There has been progress. The 2011 Education for All Global Monitoring Report shows that gender parity has improved in primary enrolment since the start of the decade, especially in countries that featured the greatest gaps. But disparities have increased at the secondary level, notably in Africa. And while women are making breakthroughs in higher education in all regions, they still account for only 29 percent of researchers. The share of illiterate women has not changed over the last 20 years: women still represent two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterates.

The French writer Antoine de Saint Exupéry once wrote, "If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." A longing for the endless immensity of the sea has guided us since 1911. It still inspires us today. ■

2. Doris Lessing's acceptance speech for the 2007 Nobel Prize for literature

## EXPLORE THE COURIER ARCHIVES

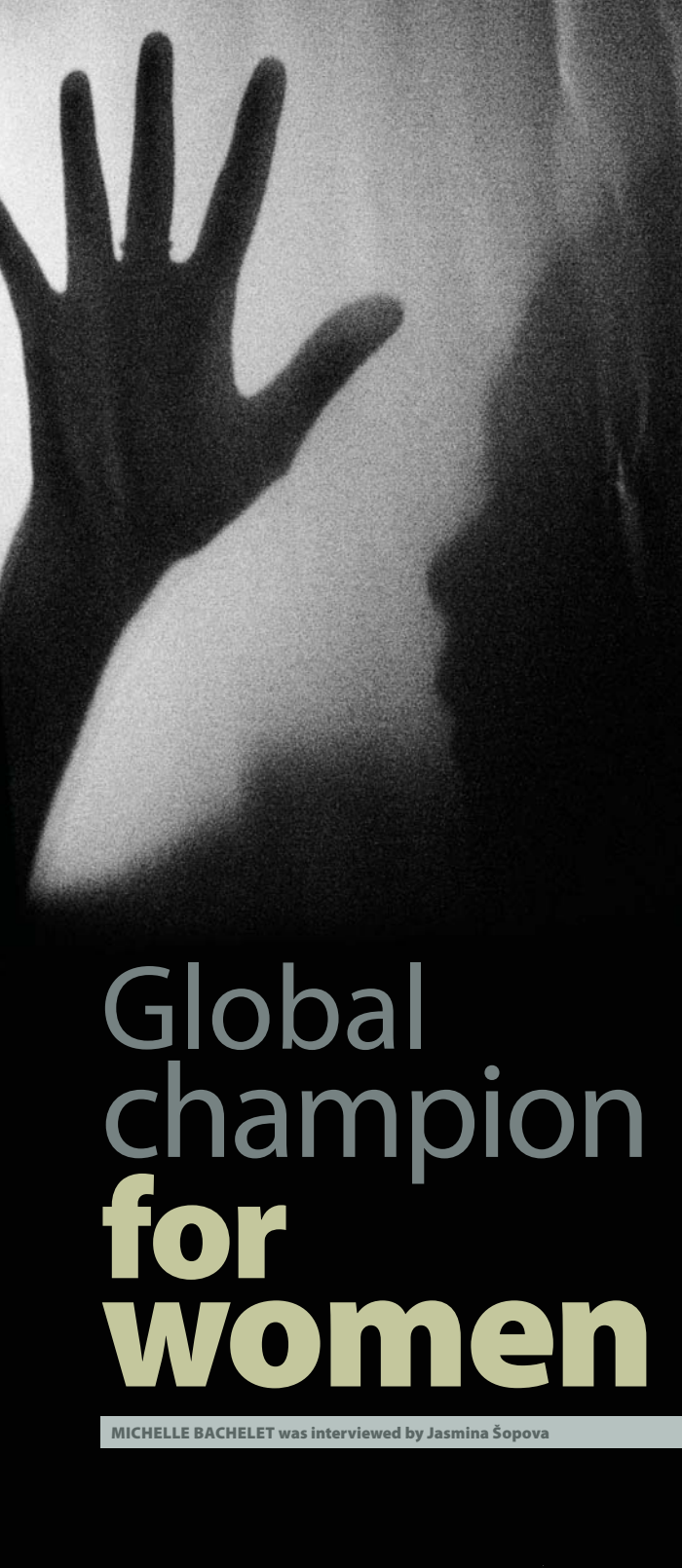
See a selection of special reports and articles on women. Enter title in the "Custom Search" box at: <http://www.unesco.org/>

### 10 SPECIAL REPORTS

**Women between two shores** (2008)  
**Women's long march to power** (2000)  
**Women: one half of heaven** (1995)  
**Women speak out on the environment** (1992)  
**Women: tradition and change** (1985)  
**The invisible woman** (1980)  
**Turning point for women** (1975)  
**International Women's Year** (1975)  
**Women in the new Asia** (1964)  
**Are women inferior beings?** (1955)

### 10 ARTICLES

**Chiapas women invest in the future** (2005)  
**Afghan women: knowledge and revolt** (2001)  
**For East Europe's women, a rude awakening** (2000)  
**Questioning the ABCs of women's literacy** (1999)  
**Kabul: women in the shadows** (1998)  
**When women are the spoils of war** (1998)  
**Women in the front line** (1997)  
**Africa's women muralists** (1995)  
**Dreams of twenty young women** (1994)  
**The forgotten ones** (1993)



# Global champion for women

MICHELLE BACHELET was interviewed by Jasmina Šopova

**Inequality between men and women remains deeply rooted in many societies. Women are too often denied access to education and health care, they face occupational segregation and gender wage gaps, they are under-represented in decision-making processes and they suffer violence. Michelle Bachelet takes on these challenges as the first Executive Director of UN Women, the new United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.**

***Can you tell us what inspired you to make violence against women one of the key priorities of UN Women? And what types of violence are women subjected to in the world?***

Violence against women is one of the most widespread human rights violations. It is one of five priority areas UN Women will focus on because making progress in this area can accelerate progress for women across many fields. For example, a woman who lives free from violence has much better prospects to find a good job, seek an education, care for her health and act as a leader in her community or elsewhere.

Women face many types of violence. Many societies in the world today have some elements of this, and the prevalence rates can be as high as 76% if you look at women across their lifetimes. Specific forms of violence include domestic violence, rape, sexual violence as a weapon of war, early marriage and female genital mutilation.

***What other priorities are you planning on tackling and how will you mobilize the necessary resources to achieve your goals?***

We will actively support and look for creative ways to empower women economically, increase women's roles as

© UN Photo/Martine Perret

leaders and advocates of change, bring women to the centre of peace and security processes, and integrate gender equality priorities across national planning. Part of mobilizing resources to achieve these goals will be to demonstrate how much of a contribution women make to development, not just for themselves, but for their societies at large. There is growing evidence of this. The most recent World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index Report, for example, shows that out of 114 countries, it is those with greater gender equality that are more competitive and grow faster.

***What human and financial resources does UN Women currently have at its disposal? Is it enough to achieve your mission?***

UN Women inherited the resources of the four UN entities that have been combined to create it. Building on these resources and moving forward, as recommended in the Secretary-General's comprehensive proposal of January 2010, a minimum annual budget of US \$500 million is foreseen. This is the target we will be working towards.

***Are you planning to prioritize certain countries? If so, which ones, and for what reasons?***

We will work with all UN Member States that request our assistance, both

developing and developed countries. UN Women currently has varying presence in approximately 80 countries and we will need to strengthen our exiting presence in some countries where there is the greatest need. We will be doing this over time and as we build our institutional capacities and resources. Within countries, a priority will be to reach the most marginalized groups of women. They are the most in need of UN Women's support and reaching them can make the most effective use of our resources. As UNICEF has started to demonstrate, investing in the most marginalized part of the population offers higher rates of return.

***What is the role of gender equality in the Millenium Development Goals? How do you plan to give it more importance?***

Achieving Gender equality – Goal three, is fundamental to achieving all of the other MDG goals. We will continue to advocate on the critical linkage between gender equality and all the other goals—on poverty, health, education, the environment—as we move towards the target date of 2015.

One MDG issue that is particularly important is maternal mortality. Globally, we have not made nearly enough progress. We can—and must—do much more. Saving more lives in childbirth requires basic knowledge and

inexpensive tools that could be readily available everywhere, if governments and the international community decide to really make that a priority.

***The number of women elected as Heads of State and Government and of UN Agencies has been rising in the past few years. Has this already had positive effects on critical issues concerning women around the world?***

If we look back in time, we can see that enormous progress has been made over the last 100 years. Although challenges remain, gender equality has a momentum that it has never had before at any other point in history. This is true both on the international level and in most countries.

This is because women have taken leadership roles as advocates for gender equality—at many levels, whether in communities or as heads of state. Women leaders have made sure that a growing number of people understand that we must bring women fully into our economies, we must end violence against women, we must tap into women's capacities as agents for changes that benefit everyone. And that we must bring resources and take the actions necessary to achieve these goals—as we have now done in part through the creation of UN Women as a global champion for women. ■



© UN Photo/John McLivaine

**Michelle Bachelet**, who trained as a surgeon, is the first Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women. The former President of Chile (2006 to 2010) was noted for her government's investment in pension reform, social protection programmes for women and children, and research and development, despite the financial crisis. Other initiatives included tripling the number of free early child-care centres for low-income families and the completion of some 3,500 child-care centres around the country. On 14 September 2010 when she became chief of the new UN agency, Ms Bachelet pledged to make it a "strong champion" for gender equality.

**UN Women**

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women to accelerate the Organization's goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Launched officially on 24 February 2011, UN Women merges four parts of the UN system: the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

UN Women's main goal is to support inter-governmental bodies and Member States in their formulation of global and national policies, standards and norms on gender equality. It can also hold the UN system accountable for its own commitments on gender equality, including regular monitoring of system-wide progress.

**Website:** <http://www.unwomen.org/>





# Women political leaders

Some of history's greatest leaders have been women, and yet, female political leaders are rare in modern democracies. There have been fewer than 50 female heads of state in recent times, and today, only 20 of the world's 192 countries have women leaders at the helm. In politics, progress towards gender parity may be slow but it is inevitable.

## SHIRAZ SIDHVA, USA-based Indian journalist

While most countries acknowledge that the representation of women in decision-making structures is crucial for change, women are rare at the highest levels of decision-making. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reports that despite increased numbers of women in parliaments, with an all-time global high of 19.1% in both houses of parliament, "the target of gender balance in politics is still a distant one in many countries."

There have been some remarkable stories, however, in the last few decades, of women who have managed to shatter the highest of glass ceilings, surmounting all odds to enter a

predominantly male bastion. These path-breaking women have managed to make a difference in their countries, while inspiring other women across the globe to make sure their voices are heard when policies affecting their societies are being formulated.

Women like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who made history in 2006, when she was elected President of Liberia, making her the first female head of state in Africa. A champion of women's rights, the Harvard-educated President said throughout her campaign that if she won, it would encourage women across Africa to seek high political office. The

devoted grandmother figure who has braved prison and exile in her 30-year political career, has shown a steely determination to install peace in a country ravaged by a decade of conflict.

Johnson Sirleaf was recently presented the African Gender Award 2011, recognizing "Liberia's efforts in the enhancement of women's rights with a strong emphasis on girls' education, economic empowerment and legislation to curb violence against women." "By promoting gender equality and empowering our girls, we are also

 Group shot of participants at the third forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in May 2010. The only woman: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President of Argentina. © UN Photo/Evan Schneider.

"lifting Liberia," President Johnson Sirleaf said in a recent speech to women graduates who participated in an economic empowerment programme.

Iceland's former President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir also stresses the role of education in women's empowerment. "My message to the women of the world: get educated as much as you can, and never accept a shorter education than your brother. Skills, reading, knowing what life is about, are very important. Not everybody can go to universities, but if your brothers are lorry-drivers, learn something that can be compared to that," she urges.

President Vigdís, as she is known in Iceland, became the world's first independently elected female president in 1980. "I paved the way, not only for women, but also for men, in politics. Because as soon as a woman succeeds, she is paving the way for other women and societies around the world," she points out.

Iceland, along with other Nordic countries, continues to top the world in gender equality, and currently has a woman prime minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, at its helm. But when President Vigdís got elected 30 years ago, "it was considered so absurd that a woman could lead a country. I think my Icelanders were so courageous to take that step. It was really breaking a tradition." Other women leaders that preceded her, including Indira Gandhi of India, Isabel Perón of Argentina, and Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, came to power as "legacy leaders", taking over from their fathers or husbands, while Israel's Golda Meir and Britain's Margaret Thatcher were nominated by their country's political parties. President Vigdís, who did not belong to a political party, was re-elected to the Presidency four consecutive times (between 1980 and 1996), making her the world's longest-serving female political leader. "The first time, I won by a narrow margin, the second time, it was not (narrow). Because then I had proved it was possible that I could succeed as a woman, and in spite of being a woman."

When it comes to leadership, does gender really matter and does it affect leadership qualities? The contexts in which these and other women leaders have emerged are entirely different, and yet, research by political pundits shows



**Mary McAleese**  
President of Ireland  
© UN Photo/Evan Schneider



**Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf**  
President of Liberia  
© UNESCO/Michel Ravassard



**Angela Merkel**  
Chancellor of Germany  
© UN Photo/Evan Schneider



**Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir**  
Prime Minister of Iceland  
© UNPhoto/Aliza Eliazarov



**Jadranka Kosor**  
Prime Minister of Croatia  
© UN Photo/Jenny Rockett



**Dalia Grybauskaitė**  
President of Lithuania  
© UNPhoto/Rick Bajornas



**Laura Chinchilla**  
President of Costa Rica  
© UN Photo/Aliza Eliazarov



**Pratibha Patil**  
President of India  
© Office of the President of India



**Dilma Rousseff**  
President of Brazil  
© Roberto Stuckert Filho/Presidência da República/Agência Brasil

that certain traits are common among women leaders. What are the obstacles that women face to attain the highest office in their lands? What are the qualities that have allowed these leaders to shatter the toughest of all glass ceilings to blaze new trails, often with no role models to follow?

These were some of the questions that intrigued Laura Liswood, a lawyer,

writer and international advocate for women's rights. As part of the Women's Leadership project in the United States, of which she was director, she embarked on an unprecedented journey across the globe in 1992 to interview 15 women leaders. Her interviews with women presidents and prime ministers – including Margaret Thatcher, Gro Brundtland, Benazir



**Tarja Halonen**  
President of Finland  
© UN Photo/Erin Siegal



**Iveta Radicová**  
Prime Minister of Slovakia  
© European People's Party



**Sheikh Hasina Wajed**  
Prime Minister of Bangladesh  
© UNPhoto/ Eskinder Debebe



**Julia Gillard**  
Prime Minister of Australia © UN  
Photo/Mark Garten



**Kamla Persad-Bissessar**  
Prime Minister of Trinidad and  
Tobago © UN Photo/Aliza Eliazarov



**Cristina Fernández de Kirchner**  
President of Argentina  
© UNPhoto/Jean Marc Ferre



**Micheline Calmy-Rey**  
President of Switzerland  
© Patrick Lazić/OIF



**Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé**  
Prime Minister of Mali  
© Primature du Mali



**Rosario Fernández Figueroa**  
Prime Minister of Peru  
© Prime Minister's office

when and under what circumstances gender becomes more or less important. There are built-in structural forces that all leaders face, forces which compel them to perform certain tasks and responsibilities in similar or expected ways: ceremonial duties, constitutional or legal requirements, role expectations. These all bring out more or less common responses from both male and female leaders. It is in new and unstructured, or crisis times that gender can make a great deal of difference, situations where there are not clear role expectations to fulfill. Here, personality and gender differences can make a huge difference."

Not surprisingly, most women leaders bring formidable educational and professional qualifications to their positions. Many of them are authors, lawyers, diplomats, and ministers before taking on the top job in their countries. A majority of claim that, besides education, their main inspiration came from a strong role model in childhood, invariably a father or mother, who made them believe that girls were as capable as boys when it came to achieving things.

Michelle Bachelet, who was the first female president of Chile, and before that, the country's first female Defence minister is no stranger to blazing new trails. "As a young mother and a paediatrician, I experienced the struggles of balancing family and career and saw how the absence of childcare prevented women from paid employment," she said, addressing a crowd in Liberia on International Women's Day. "The opportunity to help remove these barriers was one of the reasons I went into politics. It is why I supported policies that extended health and childcare services to families and prioritized public spending for social protection."

Do women have different styles of leadership that distinguish them from men? "It is commonly believed that men exhibit more of a command style, and women a more collegial style of leadership," explains Genovese, an authority on global and national leaders and author of 28 books. "While this generalization has many exceptions, there is something to the distinction. Men tell, women talk. Men do monologues, women have discussions," Genovese says. "In terms of different issues that might be promoted, it may

Bhutto, Corazon Aquino and Kazimiera Prunskiene, former prime minister of Lithuania, to name just a few – resulted in a seminal book: *Women World Leaders: Fifteen Great Politicians Tell Their Stories*.

**Women's leadership**

Political scientists have long debated the role of gender in leadership. "In

some cases, gender matters very little," explains Michael A. Genovese, Professor of Political Science, and Director of the Institute for Leadership Studies at Loyola Marymount University, California. "Margaret Thatcher serves as an example of this. In other cases, gender matters a good deal. Here, Corazon Aquino comes to mind." According to him, it is "better to ask

come as a surprise that women tend not to aggressively promote “women’s issues” when in office any more than most men. Here differences of ideology and partisanship are better indicators of support for what are traditionally thought of as women’s issues: education, welfare support, etc.”

### Entrenched prejudice

Unlike their male counterparts, female leaders in today’s democracies are compelled to navigate deeply-entrenched public prejudices, and are judged more harshly than men by the media and the people who elect them. “There is no glass ceiling, just a thick layer of men,” insists Liswood. In 1996, Liswood co-founded the Council of Women World Leaders with President Vigdís, and was appointed its secretary general. “The urgency lies in preparing women now for positions of influence, a goal that cannot be achieved without role models who are willing to foster others in this direction,” Liswood says, and this is where the Council is best equipped to step in.

In 1997, Liswood co-founded The White House Project dedicated to electing a woman president in the United States. “I kept hearing so many similar stories,” she says. “Experiences were the same, though the leaders were from different nations, cultures and backgrounds. They seemed to have received the same treatment for reporters and their readers – they were over-scrutinized. The press looked at them first as women, excessively critiquing their person – their clothes, hair, handbags and scarves.”

“The widespread perception that women are not competent leaders is probably the strongest barrier to greater participation of women in policy-making,” says Esther Duflo, professor of development economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States. Duflo and her colleagues, who co-founded the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at MIT, have done a series of ground-breaking studies in India which show that women leaders are evaluated more negatively than male leaders, even though they tend to provide better services like clean drinking water and took significantly fewer bribes.

In an experiment using actors, Duflo tested prejudices in hundreds of villages

in India, where one-third of the seats in rural village councils have been reserved for women since 1993, a proportion recently raised to 50%. The villagers were asked to listen to an identical political speech—some were exposed to speeches read by men, others by women. Villagers who had never been exposed to a woman leader were more likely to judge the female speech-readers as incompetent. Voters that had actually seen a woman in power, however, had no such bias. “Exposure reduces prejudices,” according to Duflo, whose findings show that public policy can influence simple voter prejudice.

Brinda Karat, a member of India’s Communist Party of India (Marxist) Politbureau and a member of the Upper House of Parliament, believes that “women leaders do tend to raise issues of concern to women more than men do.” According to her, the country’s decision to reserve 50 per cent of seats for women at the “Panchayat” or local level, is paying off. “The record of women’s participation at the grassroots, overcoming social and cultural barriers is an inspiring chapter in India’s political history and is expanding and intensifying every day,” she says. Yet, India’s parliament has less than 11% women, and in most state assemblies, there are even fewer women elected.

“Does it therefore mean that women are not capable or do not have merit on their side?” asks Karat, who has worked with women’s movements for the last 40 years. “Clearly this would be an outrageous and unacceptable conclusion. The truth is that discriminatory attitudes and practices in the distribution of tickets keep women out of elected politics. Just as women fight discrimination in economic and social spheres, it is necessary to fight discrimination in the political sphere. Any discrimination on the basis of gender weakens democracy. The struggle for equal representation is a struggle to strengthen democratic and citizenship rights.”

### Working their way up

Women’s empowerment may be slow in coming but both Genovese and Liswood believe change is inevitable. “Things have changed dramatically in the past few decades,” Genovese says. “When I published my book on women

leaders in 1993, I could literally name all the women heads of government. Today that number has shot up and women are more represented throughout the government than ever before (yet, still below their percentage in the population).

“One of the keys is that today, more and more women are serving in the entry positions in politics, at the local level, working their way up. This means that there are more women in the “minor leagues” of politics, more women in the political pipeline who might earn their way up the ladder. The chief cause for this change has been first the woman’s movement, second, that many political parties – especially in Europe – have quotas for women in campaigns, third, support groups that raise money for women (e.g. Emily’s List), and finally, changes in attitudes in society towards women in public life.”

“There’s no question that things have changed,” says Liswood. “More to the point is, have things changed quickly enough? In many countries, women are coming into colleges, getting degrees and entering the workforce. But they’re seemingly having a hard time upgrading to higher-level positions. That I think is where we have to focus.”

“There will be a woman president (in the United States) in my lifetime,” Genovese believes. “Perhaps the main reason it is taking so long, apart from the already mentioned issues, is that major powers, super powers, with significant military entanglements across the globe, tend to look for men who exude a certain toughness that suggests the ability to use force and even violence when it is deemed necessary. Prejudices in this regard still plague women, in spite of the fact that some of the toughest leaders of the post World War II era have been women (Thatcher, Golda Meir, for example). This stereotype is very hard to break.” ■

---

Excerpts and quotes taken from:

“Women World Leaders: Great Politicians Tell Their Stories,” by **Laura A. Liswood**, The Council Press, 2007.

Reprinted from First Edition: “Women World Leaders: Fifteen Great Politicians Tell Their Stories,” by **Laura A. Liswood**, Pandora, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.

“Women As National Leaders,” by **Michael A. Genovese** (Editor), Sage Publications, 1993.

# Putting Kyrgyzstan on the map

ROZA OTUNBAYEVA answers questions put by Katerina Markelova

The main problem for newly independent countries is their identity, says Roza Otunbayeva, first woman to become President of Kyrgyzstan. The country's Iron Lady has seen more than one crisis come and go and has overcome many obstacles in the long career that brought her to leadership in July 2010. On the brink of collapse, the nation nearly split in two – she did not let this happen.

*Reading your biography, we note a number of 'firsts': first woman Minister of Foreign Affairs in Kyrgyzstan, first woman Ambassador to the USA and then to the UK and, finally, Kyrgyzstan's first woman President. What is the secret of your success?*

During Perestroika, when I was Vice-President of the Council of Ministers in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, I was invited to Moscow, to join the Soviet Union's National Commission for UNESCO. I started as Executive Secretary, before becoming President of the Commission. It was no small thing to represent the Soviet Union. The country was a superpower at the time, and, because the USA was not a member of UNESCO, we were the main contributor. That is how I came to join the Cabinet of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where, incidentally, I was also the first woman.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Askar Akayev [first president of Kyrgyzstan, who was deposed by the March 2005 revolution] invited me to become Minister for Foreign Affairs. But as the USA was very important to us at that time, on the same level as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on which we depended,



© Janarbek Amankulov

I was appointed Ambassador to the USA, a post I held for two years, before returning to Kyrgyzstan as Minister of Foreign Affairs.

It was three years later, in 1997, that Askar Akayev became increasingly authoritarian. We no longer saw eye-to-eye. I spent my time criticising him; he got irritated. In the end, I suggested we go our separate ways. The idea was not to go against him – people still trusted him and wanted him to go through with his reforms. So I became Kyrgyzstan's first Ambassador to Great Britain. That was also a major pioneering effort, with members of the UN Security Council. At the time, our aim was to put Kyrgyzstan on the map.

In 2005, having united several opposition parties, we staged the Tulip Revolution. But Kurmanbek Bakiyev<sup>1</sup> usurped our revolution. He took over everything and installed a family dictatorship. For the next five years, we fought for our ideals, in opposition. I was head of the opposition in parliament. In 2010, finally, we took control!

**How do those around you, and ordinary people, feel about having a woman as Head of State?**

With the respect traditionally given to elders, women and mothers. And among my colleagues I am probably the one with the most experience. After all, I deserved this promotion. I have fought all the way and made many sacrifices. As

for the Kyrgyz people, they also know that I am not in politics by accident, I am not someone's protégé.

Of course there are some people who think that a woman cannot govern a country. And to them, I say: the year 2010 was one of the most critical in the history of Kyrgyzstan. We almost collapsed as a country and became a divided nation. But we managed to save everything. We got ourselves out of a situation of utter chaos and back onto dry land. Even though the rest of the world stood by and did nothing. Let someone else try to do that!

The news is full of stories about countries in turmoil, like Libya. In Kyrgyzstan, those troubles are behind us. Our young country still has many challenges to overcome, but the worst is over.

**Your energy and enthusiasm were rewarded this year with the International Women of Courage award from the US Department of State. What does this mean to you?**

I think the award is more for my country than for me. The events in the Arab world are showing that the whole world is beginning to understand that the movement of people, countries and whole continents towards democracy is unstoppable. What we have gone through demonstrates that my country is not out of step with the evolution of the rest of the world. What my country and my people have had the courage to show is that they are motivated by a love of freedom, and their faith in progress and democracy. I was just caught up in the wake of this movement.

**Kyrgyzstan has already done a lot for women's equality. There is a 30% quota for women in parliament. What more needs to be done, in your opinion?**

Gender equality is a never-ending battle. Making quotas part of the law, as we did in the last term of office, is not enough. These laws are not applied in daily life. Today, the National Audit Office, which also has a legal quota of 30% women, expects three candidates to be appointed by the President, three by the opposition and three by the coalition. The opposition and the coalition only put forward men, leaving me to put forward the women. This is just pure cynicism!

Women do hold some of our important posts, though. Apart from my post, which was the product of a consensus of political forces, the National Bank has a woman president, as do the Supreme Court and the Academy of Sciences. But, in the government, we have just one woman, which is quite simply unacceptable. And, in the business sector, there is not a single woman on the boards of any of our major enterprises.

This is a special year for Kyrgyz women. First, because this is the bicentenary of the birth of Kurmanjan Datka. This woman, who governed Alai, in the south, did a great deal to achieve the unification of this region and to annex it from Russia. She was progressive and had prodigious strength and determination. She is a figurehead for women and for the nation as a whole. And second, because my presidency is coming to an end. This year will undoubtedly see debates over the role of women in our country come to a peak.

**What would you say is the main priority for the country?**

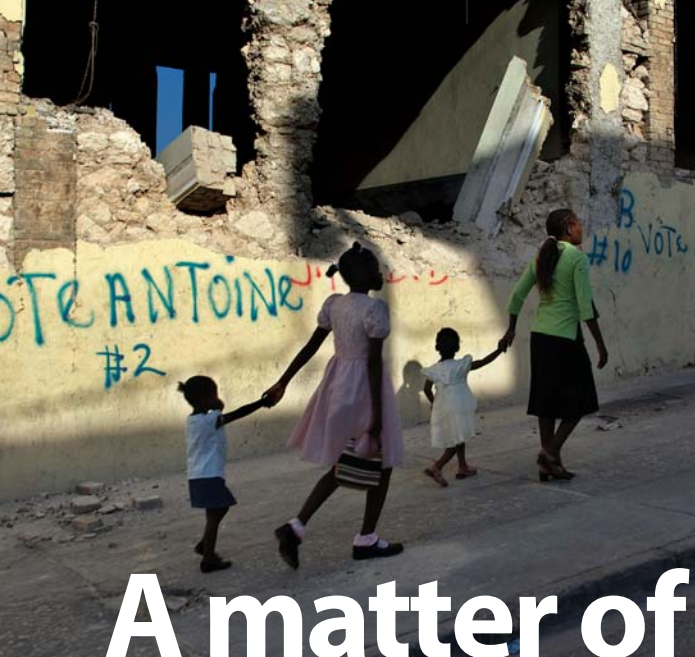
It is difficult to give a categorical answer to this question. But I would say that the most acute problem facing newly independent countries concerns their identity. This is a vast, complex and many-layered issue. All of us, all 200-odd members of the United Nations, are being swept along by the same tide, called globalization. Yet the question of identity is tormenting every nation and every thinking person. This is a serious obstacle to development. We are all suffering from it and have to find a solution. ■

1. Brought to power by the Tulip Revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiyev led the country from 2005 to 2010. He was relieved of his functions in April 2010 after a popular uprising in which 87 people died.

First woman Head of State in Central Asia, **Roza Otunbayeva** was born in 1950. With a degree in philosophy from Moscow State University and a lecturer early in her career, she was soon recruited to the party and rapidly climbed the political ladder. She played a key role in the overthrow of two authoritarian regimes in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 and April 2010. In June 2010 when a referendum voted in a new constitution, the people elected the single candidate, Roza Otunbayeva, as president of the country.



© UNESCO/Danica Bijejac



📍 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 Goritz

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

# 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.

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 Duvaliers' 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 forced to live in! But when they go off to



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

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.





# 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.

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

**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**

☞ *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



**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 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 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 NGO Women'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* (AFCF), organization representing single mothers..



© Cridem.org

# Mama Maggy

## and her 20 000 children

### A meeting with Maggy Barankitse

JASMINA ŠOPOVA

Maggy Barankitse was 37 when the civil war broke out in Burundi, one of the smallest and poorest countries in the African continent. From 1993 to the first years of the millennium, the conflict between Tutsis and Hutus saw over 200,000 people lose their lives, but hers was spared, and she saved thousands of children in her home region of Ruyigi, near to the border with Tanzania, as well as across the entire country. "Today I am the happiest mother in the world – I have 20,000 children," she says, with a radiant smile. "We have raised the children of a generation of fratricide and created a new generation. We made no distinction between the children of victims and the children of criminals – they were all just children who needed to be loved and comforted. Three quarters of my colleagues today – doctors, psychologists, economists, nurses, teachers – were Tutsi and Hutu children who grew up in the Maison Shalom."

One shouldn't think of this house as having four walls and a roof. For 17 years, "Mama Maggy" used different places that were lent or given to her to house the war orphans, before creating three large centres. "But I realized," she admits, "that children who grow up in orphanages lose their sense of responsibility. So I closed down the orphanages and opened a series of outreach centres for the association. I built 3000 little houses across the country where siblings could live together! I also placed children in families. I compare this house to a boat, with God as our captain."

A devoted Christian, Maggy Barankitse has just one religion – love.



© UNESCO/Danica Bjeljic

**Her country was still at war when she set about building her house. First she took a wheelbarrow. She carried and buried the remains of the 72 people who had been murdered in front of her, mostly refugees in the diocese where she worked. Then she went out on the battlefields to look for children who had survived. "Some of them had no eyes, others no arms." She cared for them, fed them... but they also had to be housed.**

"Men and women have enough love in their hearts to say 'no' to doom, no to fratricidal hate," insists this woman, who held a 'democratic poll' of the children when they were looking for a name for the association. "It was the children who gave their house the name Shalom. It is a Hebrew word, but has become universal, as it means 'peace'. The little Muslim children also raised their hands when it came to the vote."

Over the years she built the children a centre for vocational training – teaching plumbing, carpentry, agriculture, animal husbandry and dressmaking. But her greatest pride and joy is the hospital she founded in Ruyigi, with a mother and baby unit. "I opened a large hospital because, that way, I will no longer have to repair all the damage. I had enough of receiving children who had lost their mothers while they were still in nappies. No-one in the world can replace the tenderness of a mother. No institution, no centre can stand in for a mother. I built a beautiful maternity centre and started a nursing school. I knocked on every door to get hold of an ambulance. And then I went to see mothers in the villages to tell them they could call us if ever a mother was in need."

For those who are HIV positive or are suffering from AIDS, Maggy Barankitse opened a special centre where they can not only be fed, cared for and treated with antivirals, but also get advice. "They learn how to organize themselves through associations and set up little cooperatives. Look at this..." she says, pointing to the beautiful red dress she is wearing as she talks to us, "they made it! The main thing is not to help these women, but to help them help themselves."

It is difficult to put figures to the work of Maison Shalom. "As we work across the entire country, I cannot tell you how many people we have supported. The schools are for all the children living in the communities where we built them. The libraries and cinemas we set up are open to everyone."

Today, the association employs 220 people, without counting the volunteers, and receives support from over 40 charities, institutions and governments. Maggy Barankitse is very convincing, even though she does not hold back from criticising certain forms of behaviour – or perhaps it is because of

this. While UNICEF is one of the friends of Maison Shalom, she is outraged at the hundreds of plastic schools bearing the name UNICEF, dotted all over the country. "Rather than send us plastic manufactured in western factories that is toxic for the children, why not help us to buy straw, which is much better adapted to our climate, so that we can help build our own schools and earn money at the same time, to pay for our children's education?"

She pulls no punches with UNESCO either, where she recently came for the

no voice of their own and needing a spokesperson! Even if they speak neither English nor French, they have to be given a chance to have their say."

And to conclude the chapter of remonstrations – "I would like the United Nations agencies to take a good look at themselves. They should stop meeting for grand conferences, they should stop focusing on statistics, and be more present at grassroots level."

"I, myself, live in the back of beyond, in a region no-one has heard of," says Maggy Barankitse, becoming more and



© Maison Shalom, Ruyigi

Maggy Barankitse is particularly proud of this rural hospital she founded in Ruyigi, Burundi.

launch of the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, which is devoted to the impact of armed conflicts on education. "It is this little girl, a rape victim in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who we spoke about today at the conference – she is the one you should have brought here instead of me. She should tell her own story. The doors to conferences and meetings have to be opened to these people. They must not be considered as having

more animated. "I live in the 'danger zone' where journalists come to take a photo or two and high-tail it back out again, where foreign civil servants spend three weeks before setting off for Zanzibar for a rest! When I started my work, I was shocked by this kind of behaviour. But later on I understood – we have to let our tongues loose and speak. If I do not criticize, it means that I do not love. There is no love without truth."



# 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 country that claims to be secular but 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

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

© Faizal Tajuddin (Kuala Lumpur)

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 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? Bangladeshi identity or Islamic identity?**

Many people wonder whether they are Muslim or Bangladeshi 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 Bangladeshi, 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 religious dogma, 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. 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, Rohingya 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

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

we still have a very confused view of what is positive 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 from 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 provided free legal assistance to about 4000 women.





# A lawyer with a thick skin



© DR

**“It is the law that is delinquent,” retorts lawyer Asma Jahangir when a judge tells her she is always defending delinquent women. The Pakistani militant stops at nothing in her efforts to fight so-called honour crimes, to promote women’s economic rights and, above all, to defend the universality of human rights, applicable to all without exception.**

**Interview with ASMA JAHANGIR by Irina Zoubenko-Laplante**

***You have spent your whole life defending human rights. What inspired you to become a human rights lawyer?***

I was brought up in a politically active family. My father, Malik Jilani, was a political leader who had always been in the opposition and suffered all his life. I saw how you had to go to court even when you realize you are not going to get any justice. Day after day I understood the important work of lawyers.

In the early 1980s, you set up an NGO, the AGHS Legal Aid Cell, run exclusively by women.

Having finished my law studies and obtained an LLB degree in law from Punjab University, I realized that I was not going to get a chamber to take me in. To have one’s own firm appeared to be the best solution. I worked this out with two friends and my sister, Hina Jilani. This was the time of absolute oppression against women and side by side the women’s movement was coming along. There was also a lawyers’ movement. So we ended up being in

the centre of both movements. My activism started rather quickly.

***What challenges did you face as a woman human rights defender?***

In the last five or six years, I have been honoured with signs of recognition internationally and also in my own country. But if you ask people today who do not believe that human rights are universal, they will say that I am a Westernized woman - though I never studied or lived abroad; that I am anti-religion - because I believe people must have a right to have or not to have a religion; and that I am anti-Pakistan - because I believe Pakistan must live in peace with its neighbours...

But I also come from a society that is full of dichotomy. You have violence against women, women are looked down upon, and yet Pakistan did produce a very courageous woman, Benazir Bhutto, to be the first woman Prime Minister in a Muslim country. We have people like me who are under threat but also people who would stand by me, protect and encourage me. So I

have learned a lot and I have a lot to be thankful for.

As an activist, I have noticed three things: you have to be thick-skinned; you have to persevere; and you have to constantly look for more solutions.

I recall when I started to work with bonded labour workers – that is, slave type practices. The judge would ask them ‘Do you recognize her, is she your lawyer?’ Those workers were so scared they would say no. And I risked having my license taken away because my own clients said they had not engaged me. But I had to persist because then the litigant begins to have faith in you and finally begins to speak. And that was how the case of a woman bonded labourer was taken up to the Supreme Court and when that woman’s employer accused her of lying, she put her hand on her hip and said ‘Who is a liar - you

---

On Human Rights Day - 10 December 2010 - Asma Jahangir received the UNESCO/Bilbao Prize for the Promotion of a Culture of Human Rights from UNESCO’s Director-General, Irina Bokova, and the Mayor of Bilbao, Iñaki Azkuna. She gave an interview to the *Courier* on the day she received the Prize.

Irina Zoubenko-Laplante works for the UNESCO Division of Human Rights, Philosophy and Democracy



📍 This young woman is one of many displaced persons who fled fighting in the Swat Valley, Pakistan, in June 2009. © UNICEF/NYHQ2009-0931/Marta Ramoneda

or me? I will tell this court you are not only a liar but an exploiter too." That day I thought the case was won! Today bonded labour has not been completely discontinued but a large number of people have won freedom.

We have to have a thick skin too. I remember in 1983 when in the name of Islam a law was proposed that the value of a woman's testimony would be half that of a man's. Many of us, mostly upper class women, not realizing where we were going, came into the street and were suddenly beaten by the police, our hair pulled out. Eventually a mullah declared in the mosque that our marriages were dissolved and our husbands had to divorce us - actually none of them did. It was difficult but it gave us courage - not only to those 150 women in the streets and beaten by the police but to a much larger number. Since then we continued to multiply the number of activists.

When I was in danger, one of my children said to me "Mother, if you do not fight for women's rights, they will

come only a minute later than they are supposed to come." But I think it is that one minute that human rights activists work for.

***What in particular made you concerned about the situation of women?***

When I started as a lawyer many women were put in prison because of a new law: any sex outside marriage was considered a crime - as it is still regarded today but in a diluted form. Even women who were victims of rape but could not prove it were put in prison. And whenever I went to court, the judge would say: "Don't you get any other clients except these delinquent women?" And I would reply: "My Lord, the law is more delinquent to put them behind bars."

Women do face huge problems in many countries, including mine, starting with security of life. Women are expected to behave in a certain way, and if they don't, they are sometimes killed, which is known as "honour

killings". When I first raised this question, some judges said they did not see what I was talking about. Gradually our movement against honour killings took root not only in Pakistan but got the attention of people and organizations across the world. We now have a lot of support against this practice, whereas only a few decades ago politicians were saying they could not support people who were talking against honour killings, because it was against accepted social norms. Now those politicians are ashamed of having said that.

***What can be done to accelerate positive change for women?***

First, advance women's economic rights, which are very much missing in many countries. Women do not have the same status as men; even when they are working, they do not get equal pay. And violence against women is rampant. We have to start is by making women themselves more aware, which has increased tremendously. And secondly it is necessary to sensitize organizations

and institutions like the judiciary, the parliament, the media, in favour of women's rights. We have made some advances but not enough.

***Will we be able to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals, in particular to reduce poverty through promoting gender equality?***

I think we should commend the aspiration of the United Nations but obviously these are not going to be met by the anticipated 2015 deadline. That does not mean that we have to give up. I think the question of children and poverty is particularly acute today. Children in marginalized sections of our societies, children who have been abused for sex, for pornography, children who are often now abused for beggary, children who have been sold, they, I believe, are the first victims of poverty.

***Based on your experience as UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, what do you think about human capacities for tolerance?***

This very delicate and intellectually challenging mandate taught me many things. For example, there is no country in the world where prejudices do not exist and at the same time there is no country in the world where people are not fighting intolerance. But this must be recognized in the echelons of power that should be establishing policies to eliminate intolerance. Education is particularly important but it depends on what kind. In our own part of the world people have been radicalized and militarized in the name of education. We want quality education, not only through textbooks but through interaction of children from diverse communities. Education should inculcate a genuine respect for human dignity and not just teach taboos. For example, I do not see that children are taught to that people may dress differently, a man may be dressed as a girl but that does not mean that you should look down on them. A woman may cover her head but it does not mean she is different in her thinking. I do not see that in any educational books – West or East.

There are countries, often because of conflict, that get blocked inside and there is no cross-border interaction, which is very important. At the same

time, I believe the world must remain diverse, with different ideologies also. But we have to underline there are some red lines people must not cross. I cannot expect you to think like me at the point of a gun, I can persuade you within the limits, not through abuse or threat. If I begin to do that, it is clearly intolerance. And if I make discriminating legislation, it is clearly intolerance. And to give the justification of legislation being based on your own social and religious norms is something governments will have to rethink. It is an insult to your own people to say they have less dignity than others in this world. The question of dignity is therefore everywhere.

Human rights defender work is not easy. In my own country, we have conflict and Islamic militants killing people. Even they have rights. But when we human rights defenders have to talk about their rights, people wonder whether we are not Taliban supporters. Of course not, but even if a man is a suspected Taliban, you cannot make him disappear.

***What is the role of a State in ensuring a society's progress?***

I think the State is the last to come on board. It is the time of civil society, in particular of activists' groups and movements such as we can see at present in the Latin America, in the mass media. It is they who have carried out campaigns and taken up vital issues. For example, civil society and activist groups in the West were the first to talk about arbitrary detentions after the September 11th terrorist attacks. This movement received an input from lawyers, from human rights defenders, from students, so all this is the combination of civil society actors.

***How are democracy and human rights linked?***

You cannot have human rights flourish in a country that is non-democratic: we have seen this time and again. At the same time, we cannot say if there is democracy in a country, there will be automatically human rights.

Democracy can exist in all societies but cannot be transplanted from outside – democracy has to come from within societies. Democracy does not start and end with the electoral process which may be its very beginning but true a

democracy means much more: it means institution building, inclusiveness, empowering people. These are all ingredients of democracy linked with human rights.

In fact, human rights movements focus on deepening democracy because we need that in every society. Over the last decades, we have witnessed the stagnation of democracy even in the Western countries with a much longer experience of it. Human rights activists have to work to connect both civil and political rights and social and economic rights to make democracies effective.

***Do you believe that things are changing for the better?***

Changing mindsets is the most difficult thing. If I look back 30 years, I think there has been change. We have become more honest and this accelerates the change of mindsets and younger people really come forward to the scene of public life and give it a new colour. There was a time when you could not talk against the government and not risk prison. Today we do not have political prisons in our country. That does not mean we do not have human rights violations, but we have gone several steps forward.

But we have also gone a step backward as the world is becoming more complex with new challenges and threats. We should all be looking for solutions to common problems. We need to talk not just about human rights monitoring but also determine where we need sustainability, where we need to do better, and what strategies we should follow. One civil society leader said to me many years ago: "Asma, you can't simply be a human rights activist with two feet running on the streets, you must use your head too". I am learning now that the feet must move with the head. ■

**Asma Jahangir**, a lawyer and President of Pakistan's Supreme Court Bar Association, served as Chairperson of the Pakistan's Human Rights Commission as well as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The prize recognized her advocacy for human rights, especially those of religious minorities, women and children.



On 19 January 2011 in Tunis, thousands of people marched in support of a secular state. Sana Ben Achour's Association of Women Democrats was one of the main organizers. © 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 *siyasa tachiyya* (“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 *dahir* 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 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.

### 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. In the wider landscape of family law in Islamic countries, Tunisia is undoubtedly the country that has gone furthest in terms of transgressing against holy law – divorce by mutual consent legalized as



“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

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). Her father, the eminent religious scholar El Fadhel Ben Achour (1909-1970), became known for his criticism of dogmatism, extremism and obscurantism.



© Sana Ben Achour

# Now or Never

The feminist struggles of past decades often reduced men to enemies, to be fought with any possible means. Today, Italian women are mobilizing side by side with men, in order to keep their precious gains and to make new demands, such as equal pay for equal work and flexible working conditions that do not lead to precarity.

**GIUSY MUZZOPAPPA**  
Italian journalist

'We didn't expect it.' This was the first answer that the organizers of the demonstrations on 13 February 2011 gave to those persons who asked them to comment on their initiative. The organization in just a few days of a national day of action, which succeeded in spreading all over the world, must have seemed an enormous challenge at first. Everything started with a clear and categorical movement of indignation, which affected a very varied group of women, who were members of the *Di Nuovo* association and who had been involved in the defence of women's rights for a long time. Several hundred thousand people responded to their call, one million according to the organizers. Women who took to the streets with their partners, their fathers, their sons and their brothers, in order to clearly make a stand for the emancipation of Italian women. 'Every one of us made phone calls and contacted their networks, and in no time we got enthusiastic replies from everyone', said the young poet Elisa Davoglio.

The slogan of the demonstration, 'Se non ora quando?', which is a clear reference to the title of a novel by the famous Italian writer Primo Levi (1919-1987) – 'Now or Never' in English – clearly expressed the brutal degradation of the depiction of woman in the media and in Italian politics. The malaise that led to this protest found its roots in the erosion of gains that Italian women thought were permanent, the fruit of the struggle for civil rights and the equality of the sexes in the 1960s and

1970s. This period of political struggle, which forged an entire generation of Italian feminists, seemed to have led to major victories: family law was radically modified (with the authorization of divorce in 1974) and women obtained the freedom to decide about pregnancy (thanks to the abolition of a particularly restrictive abortion law in 1981). The fervour of those years seems to have gradually died down during the following decades, which saw a major divide developing between the first generation of Italian feminists and their daughters and granddaughters.

## Let's start again together

Comparing this era to the current mobilization of Italian women,

Francesca Izzo, a lecturer in the history of political doctrine at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale', observes how this movement 'very quickly built bridges promoting communication between the generations', as a result of mutual recognition. 'On the one hand, the generation that fought in the 1970s became fully aware that their gains risked being seriously challenged if they did not find the courage to speak up while recognizing the errors of the past. On the other hand, the young generations finally understood that the rights and benefits which they had enjoyed without realizing it were threatened with disappearance. Having reached that point, we said to ourselves: 'Let's start again together'.

© The demonstration "Se non ora quando" in the Piazza del Popolo, Rome, Italy, on 13 February 2011  
© Grazia Basile, Rome



Together, and with men. Elisa Davoglio is very clear about this point: 'Men gave us very precious assistance. The mobilization was born in a climate of sincere cooperation and spontaneous sharing of reasons for indignation.' Francesca Izzo goes further and identifies a radically new aspect of this issue compared to former feminist movements: 'Above all, young people could not understand, and rightly so, the demands of the feminist struggles of past decades, which often reduced men to enemies to be fought by any means. Young women today have the same fears, frustrations and aspirations as men of their ages, and they often feel fragile and inadequate. They would never support a mobilization where only women had the right to feel indignant.' Cristina Comencini, the film director and writer, who, with her sister Francesca, contributed to organizing the demonstration, noted, 'It is the first time that men have been on an equal footing with women and have taken to the streets side by side with them to show their political and human strength.'

### A political contest

'Italy is not a country for women' is another slogan that was found on many banners in the streets of Italy and elsewhere. Cold hard statistics confirm this. According to the 2010 OECD report about education in the world, women in Italy study more than men (they represent 61 % of graduates), but have great difficulties in entering the job market. According to the report *Salari in Italia, 2000-2010: il decennio perduto* (Salaries in Italy, 2000-2010: the lost decade) by the CGIL, the main Italian trade union, it also appears that their salaries are 12 % lower than those of their male colleagues, on average. According to the 2010 report by ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics), the female inactivity rate – i.e. the percentage of women who are not working or studying – is 48.9 %, which is the highest level in the European Union after Malta. The presence of Susanna Camusso, the first woman secretary-general of the CGIL, on the podium of the Piazza del Popolo in Rome on 13 February is therefore even more symbolic. Working conditions, the right to choose between a professional career and motherhood, the right to equal pay



◊ Scene from the demonstration "Se non ora quando". Piazza del Popolo, Rome, Italy, on 13 February 2011  
© Grazia Basile, Rome

with men, the right to flexibility which does not lead to lifetime precarity - these are the issues in the political contest started by the movement 'Se non ora quando?'

The discrediting of women's roles in society goes hand in hand with the monstrous and deformed depiction of women in the mainstream media. Last year, a documentary by the women's rights activist Lorella Zanardo, entitled 'Women's Bodies', made a considerable impact: no Italian woman who saw it can forget the grotesque atmosphere of this montage of extracts from the television programmes that are shown on every Italian channel every day. The idea of women being just bodies for consumption has profound repercussions, above all on younger generations. It is precisely this which enables the organizers of the mobilization to ask deeper questions. 'We launched this call in order to say that it is not the country we want', said Elisa Davoglio. 'To attain this, we decided to make the first move and avoid any exploitation of our message, by circulating it on our networks via Facebook and by creating a blog from which we could launch a debate that was not controlled by the traditional

media. We asked everyone to leave all political and group membership symbols at home, and we chose to spread the message and guidelines ourselves, with clear and simple words, so as to prevent the traditional media from taking over our mobilization in any way.'

What are the next steps and the next problems that the movement will decide to face? The question remains open. 'There is no lack of objectives', said Francesca Izzo, 'but we must know how we want to attain them. Democracy is fundamentally a constant struggle between objectives and means. The issue of women's rights is at the heart of the major crisis of democratic representation. The enormous task in front of us consists in reorganizing democracy, an objective which needs determination and patience.' The women in the 'Se non ora quando?' movement want to reclaim the 8 March, International Women's Day, which has lost its meaning in Italy. Elisa Davoglio concludes: 'It is not just about celebrating the fact of being a woman for one day, about being given flowers, or even about going to the restaurant. 8 March speaks about rights, work and emancipation.' ■

# 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.

Interview with MÓNICA GONZÁLEZ MÚJICA by 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

📍 Plaza Italia in Santiago, Chile, on 10 December 2006, day of General Pinochet's death.  
© Eduardo Aguayo, Santiago





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.



Journalists demonstrating in Mexico City against attacks and kidnappings targeting them in the country. © Raul Urbina, Mexico

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 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.

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



Sima and Storey, two Radio Sahar journalists, preparing an early morning broadcast in Herat, northwest Afghanistan.  
© www.valentinamonti.com



# Slowly but surely

HUMAIRA HABIB


**There are about 300 women journalists in Afghanistan today, for a population of 25 million. After the repressive 1990s, the new millennium has opened the door for greater freedom of expression. Threats, the weight of tradition and other obstacles remain, but despite the arduous journey, Afghan women journalists are moving forward with determination, says Humaira Habib.**

"I want to keep all the invitation cards I have received for press conferences for my daughters and grandchildren to see in the future and to be proud of me," Zakiyah Zaki, journalist and manager of the Voice of Peace Radio, in Parwan Province, Central Afghanistan, said to me when we were both participants in a conference for journalists in Kabul. She seemed nervous and was concerned about anonymous threats she had recently received. Two weeks later, she was murdered in her home by gunmen. It was in June 2007.

After three decades of war and destruction, Afghanistan is in transition. Affected by poverty, forced migrations, and national and international plays of policy, the country is now experiencing an unprecedented profusion of media, in a semi democratic society thriving with unlimited freedom of expression. Devoid of any experience of historical evolution, these media have grown suddenly, in the wake of political and commercial propaganda. According to Adila Kabiri, journalist and Professor of Journalism at Herat University, women had no place in journalism in Afghanistan's past. In its capacity as a new science, journalism found a footing in Afghanistan at the same time as the country's Constitution and for a long

time was an area exclusively dominated by men. And when women were gradually getting a share in the development of journalism, especially in central Afghanistan, the black rule of Taliban gained ground. As a result, women's journalistic life in Afghanistan has no long precedence.

In the 1980s, a very limited number of women such as Zakia Kohzad were active in journalism, while in the 1990s, under the Taliban's authoritarian regime, women journalists were almost entirely non-existent. A few women such as Belqais Maqiz and Fatana Ishaq Gailani nonetheless managed to publish The

 Herat tribunal. A woman petitioning for divorce is interviewed by Farawia, journalist for Radio Sahar.  
© www.valentinamonti.com





In a village not far from Herat, a woman listens to the radio while she works.  
© www.valentinamonti.com

Afghan Woman (*Zan-e Afghan*) and Hope (*Rozaneh*) in Peshawar in Pakistan during this period.

A significant achievement of post Taliban Afghanistan, 2001 onwards, is the rapid and widespread development of the media and support for freedom of expression. The country now boasts its tens of radio and television broadcasting stations, hundreds of magazines and publications as well as newspapers and periodicals and its many media agencies and printing offices.

Women have had an active presence in the media and the social arena within the past decade, reaching a level of participation unprecedented in Afghanistan's history. The country is now home to more than three hundred woman journalists and managers of publications. Women have established more than ten radio stations and in 2010 some provinces in Afghanistan, notably Herat and Bamiyan, were chosen to host women's centres and foundations.

Despite the many social and political restrictions, there are a lot of Afghan women who have kept up their activities in journalism. Yet a well-known Afghan writer and poet, Najiba Ayoubi, head of the media group *Kilid*, points out women journalists should not be satisfied, given the limited percentage of them who participate in the profession.

Examining the main challenges confronted by women in the media and the need to raise women's share in this area, Ms Ayoubi sees journalist training institutions and centres for journalism education as responsible for providing greater opportunities for women. The current situation reflects the fact that

women have undergone immense educational and literacy losses within three decades of war in Afghanistan, thus calling for positive discrimination in their favor. According to Ms Ayoubi, women have a lower share than men in leadership roles in the largely male designed media and fewer opportunities for work as journalists. In other words, gender issues should be brought to the attention of media officials and professionals in Afghanistan.

Like all other fields of activity, journalism is also a forefront of challenges for Afghan women. Farida Nekzad, winner of the Canadian Association of Journalists' award for Freedom of Expression in 2007, believes family restrictions are the main reason preventing Afghan women from entering the profession upon graduation, thus pushing them towards the teaching profession. Furthermore, women suffer from a lack of social relations, not much permitted for Afghan women, and a basic discriminatory attitude in their society that sees women's activity as less significant than men's.

Yet Nekzad believes insecurity in the country is the first and foremost problem facing Afghan women journalists. A large number of women have lost their lives for their profession in the last decade, among them Shaima Rezaei and Shakiba Sanga Amaj. Other journalists like Farida Nekzad and Najia Khodayar have been severely threatened, causing them to change their profession.

The head of the Women's Rights Group for Afghan Women, Manizha Naderi, sees the threats and attacks on women journalists as a representation

of military violence in the country. She believes Afghan women in general and women journalists in particular are attacked for their attributes, with the perpetrators seeking to weaken women's social position.

Fawzia Fakhri, founder of the Centre for Women Journalists in Herat, enumerates important factors for the growth of journalism among Afghan women, such as increasing the share of women journalists participating in international gatherings and adding value to their profession at country level. The more Afghan women enter journalism, she believes, the more their future will improve; better opportunities and conditions must therefore be provided for them.

Because Afghanistan is moving from a traditional society towards a modern society, everything has undergone sudden, unprecedented growth and all is imported from outside. In this context, Afghan women journalists believe patience is required to build a better future and time is the remedy for their security issues.

Afghan women call for the support of the international community to resolve their security problems and other challenges. They see international support as an effective step towards future development of their activities, making it possible to eliminate threats and spare women journalists the cruel fate of Zakiyah Zaki. ■



© www.valentinamonti.com

**Humaira Habib** is head of the Women's Community Radio Station, Radio Sahar, in Herat, Western Afghanistan.

Photographs illustrating this article are taken from "Girls on the air", a documentary filmed by Valentina Monti.



# Conquering the job market

**International Women's Day this year is focusing on the right to a decent job. Here, *The UNESCO Courier* looks at the case of Algeria, which has seen a rapid expansion in job opportunities for women since the 1990s. Today, Algerian women are entering the job market armed with diplomas, but they still come up against either job insecurity or the glass ceiling.**

**FERIEL LALAMI**

"My name is Hassiba. I am 38. Married, three children. I work as a technician in a private sector company. To get to work, I have to take two buses and start out at least an hour and a half before the office opens to be sure to get there on time. I don't want to risk getting fired. It's so difficult to find a job these days. I can't afford to lose my salary – our family couldn't survive on my husband's salary alone. The cost of living is very high and you have to add what I pay to the neighbour who feeds the

Algerian women training to teach English, a project funded by the United States State Department.  
© Ruth Petzold, Alexandria

children when they come out of school. My mother finds it hard to accept that I have a job – in her day, women only worked at home. But, despite the difficulties, I am happy to have a professional activity, to have colleagues and to contribute to the family budget."

The story of this young Algerian, from the Ain Naaja district of Algiers, which I documented in November 2010 as part of a research study on changes in the family, shows that despite the obstacles women in Algeria have entered the jobs market sustainably. A trend that has been confirmed slowly but surely over the past three decades, even if the results are not yet conclusive. Indeed, with women making up only 15% of the entire workforce (a figure

that remained steady between 2007 and 2010), Algeria lags far behind its neighbours Tunisia and Morocco, which have 25% and 28% respectively.

Even so, the proportion of working women increased by 10% between the 1980s and the early 2000's. Why? Above all because of the sad episode in history that some call the "Algerian tragedy of the 1990s" or "the second Algerian war." And also, the ending of State price controls, public sector cuts and rising unemployment that followed pushed families into poverty. Women started looking for work, with their families not daring to throw the weight of tradition on their shoulders – after all, they had to eat.

Added to all of this is something specifically Algerian – women who work are better qualified than men. Over half of working women, in 2003, had at least secondary school qualifications, compared to only one fifth of men. This is essentially due to a deliberate policy of democratising education developed by the State, which from the end of the colonial era saw a rapid progression in the numbers of girls in school. So much so that in 2010 girls made up 57% of the student population.

Another observation is that, up until the 1990s, the majority of active women were aged between 19 and 24 and were unmarried. In most cases, marriage or the birth of a child would put an end to their career. Today, there has been a considerable increase in the number of married women working, with almost as many (18%) as single women (20%).

But these statistics do not tell the whole story. There is also a wider range of jobs. Although their preferred sectors are still teaching, health and administration, women are now entering other areas, such as journalism. At present 60% of media workers are women.

## **The glass ceiling and lack of job security**

These jobs also allow women to gain a certain degree of visibility in the public arena. Even so, there is no escaping the fact that, as they move up in their careers, including those that are 'feminized', women come up against the glass ceiling – senior positions of responsibility are reserved for men. While women make up half of school staff, in 2005 they held only 9.15% of head teacher posts and 5.6% of basic education inspector positions.

On top of this, unemployment hits women harder than men – 19.1 % compared to 8.1 % respectively in 2010, according to the National Office of Statistics. Even worse, among those who are most qualified, three times as many women as men are unemployed – 33.6 % versus 11.1 %. Faced with a saturated jobs market, women often choose to set up their own small business in sales, service or cottage industries. According to the National Chamber of Commerce (CNRC), between 2006 and 2007, the number of small traders rose by 4%. While these are often micro-enterprises, the proportion of women employees rose from 3 to 6 %. And a new finding is that an increasing number of women are becoming estate agents, travel agents or agricultural managers.

The regular increase in the number of women in paid employment has also led to the creation of informal jobs, such as child minder or domestic cook. This informal economy, generally reserved for women, is also spreading to small businesses and the private sector. Creating yet more unstable, badly-paid jobs without social security benefits.

Women's access to the job market is also affecting family dynamics, bringing women greater independence. The model of "man as breadwinner" is slowly becoming obsolete. But where in the past women had to tackle a patriarchal culture to gain paid employment, they now face another obstacle, just as hard to overcome – the extreme scarcity of jobs. ■

An Algerian political scientist, **Feriel Lalami** teaches at the University of Poitiers (France).



© A.-M. Tournebise, Paris

# Gender equality

## a global public good

SANIYE GÜLSER CORAT and ESTELLE RAIMONDO

**Like other Global Public Goods, gender equality represents long-term collective benefits that run up against short-term special interests. UN Women, the new United Nations entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women, is called upon to surmount the main obstacles to adequate investment in girls and women.**

In the context of the international economic downturn combined with the food, energy and environmental crises, the reflections on "global commons" and finding global responses have gained a new momentum. Yet while there is an extensive literature on Global Public Goods (GPGs)<sup>1</sup>, gender equality and women's empowerment are conspicuously absent in these discussions, despite the fact that it will be impossible to achieve global economic growth, accountable governance and peace when half the world's population – women – are kept outside of the global agenda setting process.

Investments in girls and women are all the more important at a time of budget constraints when only investments with a high rate of return and a significant multiplier effect are placed on the agenda of donor countries. The time has come to change the perspective of development funding, or international development assistance. Altruism and geo-politics must give way to a vision of provision of utility for all. Girls and women must no

longer be viewed as victims of marginalization from the "mainstream" development efforts but as critical actors and agents of change who can add significantly to the overall productivity of national, regional and global economies.

We know that women spend, on average, 90% of their earnings on education, health and the nutrition of their families and communities while men invest only 40% of their earnings in these areas. Recent evidence demonstrates that at the corporate level, increased numbers of women in top management positions tend to have a positive effect on the performance of companies and on their stockholders' level of trust. Finally, at the macro-level, evidence also shows that the simple fact of having women in the workforce has a positive impact on productivity.

Gender equality in the political realm, i.e. women's inclusion in political decision-making structures and processes along with men, also has powerful spill-over effects. At the local level, for example, quotas for women in the Indian Panchayat (local government) show that women leaders are more effective in delivering public goods such as drinking water infrastructure than their male counterparts.

1. Global Public Goods have universal benefits and require collective action at the international level for their management. The environment and human rights are examples of GPGs.



📌 *Increasing the number of women executives improves the performance of companies.*  
© Den\_Bar pixburger.com 2011

Rwanda provides a good example of this correlation. Rwanda's constitutional reform imposed a minimum of 30% representation for women in the national parliament. Female members of Parliament succeeded in putting health and education at the top of the Rwandan national agenda. The fast rate of growth of the country is also intrinsically linked to the active participation of women in the labour force in general (80 per cent) and as heads of enterprises in particular – they head 42% of enterprises in the formal sector and 58% in the non-formal sector.

In rare instances, such as in Liberia or Guatemala, where women participated in formal peace building processes on an equal footing with men, peace negotiations became more constructive, inclusive and sustainable.

Gender equality as GPG becomes even more straightforward when the Millennium Development Goals are considered. Gender equality is critical for achieving gender parity in education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and eradicating poverty and hunger, as a majority of the poor are women. As for environmental sustainability, how can it

be achieved if women, who constitute the majority of those who safeguard biodiversity, are kept at bay? Finally, how can a global partnership for development be achieved if women either absent or are grossly under-represented in policy and decision-making?

What measures can be put in place to ensure that gender equality circumvents the fate of other GPGs regarding "under-provision"? There is a need to modify the incentives to overcome three major obstacles: lack of coordination among actors; "free-riding" – letting others provide the good while one enjoys its benefits; and time inconsistency and public choice, as gender equality is not at the top of the agenda of election platforms.

The United Nations as a system has significant comparative advantages. It can overcome the coordination problem as it is mandated to serve as a platform for Member States to come together and address global issues. It can overcome

the "free-riding" by holding international institutions and governments accountable for their commitments such as to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>2</sup> Last but not least, it can surmount the time inconsistency obstacle by putting pressure on the Member States and institutions to honour their obligations.

The new United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) has the potential to play this crucial role provided that it has vision and strategic leadership, sets an agenda and course of action accepted by the major stakeholders, and is equipped with the requisite human and financial resources to fulfil its responsibilities. ■

2. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action resulted from the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

A graduate of Bosphorus University in Istanbul (Turkey), **Saniye Gulser Corat** (left) obtained a doctorate in political science from Carleton University in Canada, where she was also a professor before becoming the Director of the Division for Gender Equality at UNESCO.

**Estelle Raimondo** holds a Master's degree in development economics from Columbia University (USA) and one in international affairs from Sciences Po (France). She is an Assistant Program Specialist in the Internal Oversight Service at UNESCO.



© UNESCO/Danica Bileljac

# Davos Forum: women are the future

Last January's World Economic Forum in Davos (Switzerland) brought together some 35 heads of state and government and 2,500 decision-makers, and only 16% of them were women. Nonetheless, the rate of women's participation has practically doubled since 2001 and according to Ben Verwaayen, one of the Forum's founders, the future of Davos depends on it.

**KATRIN BENNHOLD**, German journalist at the *International Herald Tribune*

Davos Man is a very particular kind of beast. Powerful, worldly and often very rich, he tends to be more familiar with stock market prices than supermarket prices and has all the right accessories: a villa on the Côte d'Azur, a private jet on call and a pet philanthropic project.

Davos Woman is worldly, wealthy and influential, too. But mostly, she is scarce.

Women attending this annual Alpine schmoozefest of the global super elite find themselves in a peculiar place: They are members of that elite — but relatively recent members with a minority status.

Female participants still account for only 16 percent of the total at the World Economic Forum. Indeed, with so many of the women shuffling through the snow in their fur coats being spouses, those who aren't can easily find themselves mistaken for one: "At a Davos cocktail party people tend to assume you're a 'wife' rather than a C.E.O.," said Françoise Gri, the president of Manpower France, who has made Fortune magazine's list of 50 most powerful women in the world for the past seven years. It is her second time in Davos.

"It still feels a little like a white men's club," she said. "As a woman, one doesn't entirely feel like one belongs."

Christine Lagarde, the French finance minister and a Davos regular for over a

decade, described how "the male-dominated chemistry" at the forum used to affect her confidence. "You know you're competent, you've looked at your files, but somehow you feel inhibited," she said.

**Female elites do not live in a bubble** It is tempting to think about the rich and powerful as a gender-neutral group that operates in a borderless bubble of privilege and whose disconnect to the everyday lives of the middle classes in their respective home countries has only been exacerbated by the current economic crisis.

*Even rich and successful mothers tend to bear primary responsibility for the children. That can hold back careers or make the work-life balance particularly hectic.*

But unlike many of their male peers, women at the top have something powerful in common with their less-privileged sisters: "Gender equality is a concern that cuts across the class divide," said Dominique Reiniche, who heads Coca-Cola Europe. "Women at all levels have a common cause."

That helps explain why the rising phenomenon of female philanthropy often focuses on seeking to improve the lot of less-fortunate women, said Jacki Zehner, vice chairwoman of the Women's Funding Network and the first female trader to make partner at Goldman

Sachs. Entertainers including Angelina Jolie [USA] and Annie Lennox [UK] — both recent Davos attendees — promote women's rights for the United Nations or other organizations.

There are other elements that put women perhaps less at risk of living in a hermetically sealed bubble.

Even rich and successful mothers tend to bear primary responsibility for the children. That can hold back careers or make the work-life balance particularly hectic. But they stay more in touch with society: they have the primary relationships with nannies, often women from more disadvantaged (and perhaps immigrant) backgrounds. They speak to teachers and interact with mothers of their offspring's friends.

They are also more likely to help with child-related practical tasks, like birthday parties and shopping. "There is nothing like teenage daughters to keep you in touch with the world," said Ms. Reiniche, a mother of three girls.)

Often, female elites lack the sense of entitlement among male elites, said Ms. Lagarde. "Women, for all sorts of historical, cultural and economic reasons, have a tendency to stay more connected with the real world," said Ms. Lagarde, herself a mother of two boys.

"I don't know many men at that level who would go to the supermarket to do their own shopping, but I do," she added. Among others who do the same, she said, are Anne Lauvergeon, chief executive of the nuclear giant Areva; Chancellor Angela of Germany; and Lubna Olayan, a Saudi businesswoman.

This article is reprinted by courtesy of the International Herald Tribune. Entitled "Women Make Their Mark at Davos, Though Still a Distinct Minority", it appeared in the supplement "The Female Factor" on 26 January 2011.



One of the women participants at the Davos World Economic Forum, January 2011.  
 © World Economic Forum/swiss-image.ch/Michael Wuerstenberg

Being out of touch with the real world is one of the most serious charges leveled at the elites – and elite institutions like the World Economic Forum.

**Gender equality: a must-have accessory**

If Davos wants to remain relevant in the decades to come, women need to feature much more not just on the participant list but as speakers throughout the program, said Zainab Salbi, founder of the humanitarian organization Women for Women

International and one of the World Economic Forum's Young Leaders.

"I know many women who already talk about no longer coming to Davos," she said ahead of this year's meeting. "The forum was a great 20th century event, now it needs to prove that it is fit for the 21st."

Or, as Ben Verwaayen, chief executive of Alcatel-Lucent and a member of the forum's foundation board, put it: "Gender equality is about future-proofing your organization — it's a license to be there."

The sense of urgency has certainly grown in recent years, particularly since a French businesswoman who was reportedly fed up at not being invited to Davos set up a Women's Forum in Deauville, France.

The share of women participants in Davos has almost doubled since 2001. Women-related events, once relegated to the early breakfast slot off-site, now occupy prime slots in the main Congress Center. There are receptions, dinners and cocktails dedicated to female networking.

This year, for the first time, forum organizers agreed a 20 percent female quota with their 100 top partner companies, insisting they send at least one woman among their five delegates or forgo the fifth place. The quota has more than doubled the number of women sent from these companies. Because it affects only 500 of the 2,500 participant slots, it hasn't increased overall female attendance, but it is, say organizers, about as much as they can force the issue.

*If Davos wants to remain relevant in the decades to come, women need to feature much more not just on the participant list but as speakers throughout the program*

"As a foundation that draws its individual membership from the world's leading thousand businesses, we reflect their gender balance," said Saadia Zahidi, Head of the forum's Women Leaders and Gender Parity Program.

Soon women might be getting help from a very Davos corner: Nicole Schwab, daughter of the founder of the World Economic Forum, is introducing a gender equality certificate to companies that live up to (yet to be defined) standards on equal pay, female representation and employee satisfaction with gender equality.

"The objective is that this certificate becomes a competitive advantage for companies who need to attract talent and compete for investments," said Aniela Unguresan, Ms. Schwab's partner at The Gender Equality Project.

Now the elites just need to be convinced that along with the yacht and the yoga guru, a gender equality label is a must-have accessory. ■





Women working in the fields in Kayanza, Burundi  
© IUCN/Intu Boedihartono

# Sowing the seeds of the future

As she speaks, Lorena Aguilar tosses her hair with the same energy she puts into every word and emphatic hand gesture. For over 25 years, she has worked on developing public policy on climate change, expanding knowledge on issues not yet addressed in terms of gender equality.

LORENA AGUILAR was interviewed by Alfredo Trujillo Fernandez, Spanish journalist

**Why is it necessary to look at climate change from a gender perspective? What do women contribute, in your opinion?**

Men and women have a different relationship to natural resources. So we need to make use of both points of view. Unfortunately when it comes to finding solutions, the scales are tipped in one direction. Strategies are all too often implemented with a bias, only from men's point of view. It is also a matter of defending women's rights. We have to remember that they make up more than half of the world's population. So they should be included when decisions are made, which has not been the case up to now.

Women are the guardians of crucial knowledge for combating climate change. For example, in many countries and regions of the world, like Asia, Africa, and South America, men have opted for monoculture, while women continue to cultivate a great variety of plants in their gardens and plots. According to the weather they predict for the current year, they will choose one kind of seed rather than another. This diversity is a goldmine for scientists who want to reintroduce species that have disappeared in certain countries because of farming policies.

In countries like Cuba, women have sometimes kept up to 250 varieties of

bean, and 75 varieties of rice... In Peru, there are as many as 60 varieties of yucca. And in Rwanda, up to 600 varieties of rice! This is what the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) claims, anyway.

This wealth of diversity in seeds and in the traditional knowledge linked to them is both a treasure in itself and a fantastic tool for combating climate change. Firstly, because these kinds of seed can adapt more easily to the climatic conditions we are seeing today. And then because this improved capacity for adaptation means we will be able to produce more and therefore better deal with the food needs of the world's population.



📍 Woman carrying wood for construction in Papua New Guinea ©IUCN/Intu Boedihartono

**How are women in particular affected by climate change?**

Women are more vulnerable, especially during natural disasters related to climate change. Researchers at the London School of Economics (LSE) looked at 141 disasters around the world, and found that in those countries where gender differences were most marked, four times as many women died as men! This is not because they are weaker but because they have less education. When a woman who has never gone to school hears on the radio that there will be winds of 260 km/h, this means absolutely nothing to her. She does not have the tools or sufficient knowledge to respond to the threat.

The same problem arises in Muslim countries where a woman is not allowed out of the home unless a male accompanies her. In Bangladesh, in 1991, a hurricane killed almost 150,000 people. No less than 90 % were women! They didn't want to leave their home without a man, or they didn't know how to swim.

The study also found that, in countries where the gender gap is less pronounced, a natural disaster causes

about the same number of deaths for each of the sexes. Our work at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) consists of emphasising the fact that women are agents for change, with special knowledge and skills, and the right to participate in decisions and political life.

**What are you doing to encourage this change?**

For a start, we present things differently. It is not a question of arguing that women are more sensitive or better, just because they are women, or that it's in our nature to hug trees. Sentimentality will get us nowhere! Our argument is about development, it is technical and scientific, positive and preventative. It is an argument based on rights with universal relevance. The Arab League has become one of our main allies, alongside countries like Finland and Denmark.

This year, we have developed three strategies that link gender awareness and adaptation to climate change – in Mozambique, Jordan and Central America. Our action mainly involves visiting each of these regions to see what has been accomplished in terms of combating climate change, and from that point developing strategies adapted to each particular situation. This is not a model to be applied uniformly. We take into account regional specificities.

In Central America, for example, the seven countries in the region (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) have developed a common strategy for mitigating climate change and adapting to its effects. Women have been consulted and asked to share their knowledge. By integrating their needs within this new strategy, we are able to incorporate the gender factor into the mitigation measures to be implemented.

Over 25 countries want to develop similar actions, which will enable us to reduce the differences that lead to a higher mortality rate for women.

**How do communities feel about these new projects?**

Some indigenous tribes in Central America have been actively involved, both in sharing knowledge and in building capacity. Their knowledge is

fundamental. But, even so, we still encounter a certain resistance. People are afraid of repeating past mistakes. We know for example that 70 % of the poorest people in the world are women, but when we look to see who benefits most from cooperating in projects, we find that the resources almost never go to the women. But when they do benefit, 95 % use these resources to improve living conditions for the family, while only about 15% of men do this. That is why they are afraid that these projects will once again be just for men, as was the case when financial compensation was paid to rural communities to combat deforestation. We have fears, and so do communities.

**Specifically, what are your fears for the future?**

We have many fears, because most development programmes have never taken gender inequalities into account, and that is what we want to put right. The World Bank evaluated over 200 projects on water resources and concluded that those that were most effective were always those that promoted gender equality. What we want to do is to attract global attention to this fact. To point out this is a battle that must be won and that we will campaign to see this happen. ■

**Lorena Aguilar** from Costa Rica is the first woman from Latin America to hold the post of Senior Gender Advisor to the World Conservation Union (IUCN).



© Andrea Quesada-Aguilar

➤ Else Lasker-Schüler: "Der blaue Jaguar und Freitag" (*The Blue Jaguar and Freitag*), circa 1928.  
© Michael Werner gallery, Berlin, Cologne and New York

**She left her native Argentina in 1974, shortly before the military junta took control, and travelled to the USA, China, Japan and Italy before deciding to settle in Paris (France), seven years later. During those years, an array of female role-models sustained her in her loneliness. Luisa Futoransky pays tribute to them here.**



# Stars in my personal galaxy

LUISA FUTORANSKY

"Where are you coming from?" was the question that feminists most often asked when someone, famous or not, spoke up in the heated debates of the 1960s. Where do you come from, to dare to give your opinion?

Inevitably I am speaking from my own territory, which in terms of time and space already has a long history. A

territory totally inhabited by an imagination built from the boundless treasure of books, but also mapped according to the real world, since life has led me to grapple with existence in countries passing through crucial moments in their history. I was lucky, then, to escape unscathed from the Latin American continent as it was being taken

over by some of the worst dictatorships. And I was able to follow, with my own eyes, the dizzying changes taking place in Asian countries like China and Japan.

But I have to say I was never alone in my travels. I moved amid a galaxy of exceptional women united by a common imperative: to observe, speak and create, no matter what.

It felt sometimes as if we were going backwards, but no, it was just that during difficult times, we were moving forward like crabs, diagonally.

As I emerged from my own romantic period, when I was attracted almost exclusively to artists with sad lives and tragic endings, like Sylvia Plath, Alejandra Pizarnik, Camille Claudel and Charlotte Salomon, I began to admire the battle of obsessive activists – who were not always dealt the best hand – like Janet Frame, Else Lasker-Schüler, Tina Modotti and Frida Kahlo, to mention just a few. And also great travellers like Isabelle Eberhardt, Alexandra David-Neel, Freya Stark and Ella Maillart.

Rereading these lines, I realise that in my attractions I have gravitated towards women who were unappreciated. The ultimate unloved woman would be Lilith, Adam's rebellious first wife, who turns up on the odd cathedral portico, as part of superstition, or in literature. I will illustrate with the examples of two ambiguous, contradictory figures who endured long periods of suffering caused by bodily vicissitudes and incredible tragedies but who like the phoenix ultimately experienced resurrection and vindication.

Just two women, out of the hundreds I would have liked to salute. There is not the space in this article to talk about the great leaders like Golda Meir, Bandaranaike – mother and daughter – Indira and Sonia Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Angela Merkel, Evita, Michelle Bachelet or Cristina Kirchner. And, even though I have profound admiration for the tenacity of Carla del Ponte and Mary Robinson, or the courage of Karla Michel Salas and her tireless campaign to bring the controversial case of the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, I cannot dwell on them here. I also cannot say more about Waris Dirie, the first woman to publicly denounce female circumcision. This may be essentially an African practice, but I feel that her struggle needs to be shouted from the rooftops, so that even more people will follow her example. Indeed, her cause has long been championed by a centenarian with more energy than many half her age, Rita Levi-Montalcini, nicknamed "Lady Neuron". Every day she



German poet Else Lasker-Schüler, circa 1925.  
© Private collection

goes to the office of her foundation in Rome to lend her support to education programmes for African women. An asteroid discovered in 1981 bears her name, an appropriate tribute.

The road to emancipation that women have trodden for almost a century has been hard going – and continues to be fraught with ambiguities, contradictions, traps and perpetual confrontations between the forces of light and those that do their utmost to relegate us to the kingdom of darkness. The lives of two writers, two dazzling stars that I want to extricate from obscurity here, will serve as examples – Else Lasker-Schüler and Janet Frame.

### **Else Lasker-Schüler, a foreigner in her own land**

I have kept her portrait and her letters close at hand for years. She was a mix of contrasting characteristics - surrender and arrogance, rebellion and submission.

The works by Else Lasker-Schüler illustrating this article are being shown from 21 January to 1 May 2011 at the Hamburg Bahnhof - Museum for the Present, Berlin. The exhibition is organized by the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt with the Berlin National Gallery and State Museum and supported by the Friends of the National Gallery.

*But Else was above all an inner voice, pursuing poetry, her poetry, to its ultimate consequences. A gift and a destiny.*

And so much destitution, so much poverty. But Else was above all an inner voice, pursuing poetry, her poetry, to its ultimate consequences. A gift and a destiny. "Everyone loves my poetry, but no-one loves my heart," she used to say lucidly and incisively.

Else Lasker-Schüler's life was filled with paradox. During the Nazi period, the Germans added her books to the pile to be burned as examples of *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art). And yet only shortly before, she had been awarded the Kleist prize, Germany's highest literary distinction. In Israel, they didn't like her much either, which is to say no one read her because she wrote in the language of the enemy, the cursed language. Today, her "bad motherland", Germany, where she was born, and Israel, where she is buried, are fighting over her, each claiming that she is "their" national poet, calling her "the Muse of Berlin," and "Star of Weimar," no less.



📌 Else Lasker-Schüler: "Prince Yussuf of Thebes", circa 1928, pastel and chalk, Indian ink, pencil and aluminum on paper, 26.7 x 21.6 cm.

© Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main. Ursula Seitz-Gray.

Else was never satisfied with the world as it is. She had to transform it, changing history to suit her. Starting with herself. She made up her age, her grandparents' occupations, the names of her husband and lovers – the Sulamite, the Prince of Thebes, Prince Yousouf, Tino of Baghdad. But the reality was more arid, and often the pain (the premature deaths of her brother and her only son), the terror (the rise of Nazism) and the poverty (writing never earned her enough to live on) lurked within the damp basements that were her temporary dwellings.

A very old bookseller in Jerusalem who is dear to me remembers coming across her in the one café where the city's insomniacs could go at the time, *Attara*. Bizarrely dressed almost in rags, eccentric as always and with no money to pay for her modest order, she pulled some gold foil wrappers from her blouse and offered them to the irate waiter as if they were gems or little suns.

*What Am I Doing Here?* was the title chosen by the publisher Salman Shocken, a refugee in exile in the USA, for his collected correspondence with the poet. It contains bitter recriminations against the earthly

Jerusalem's harsh climate, its inhabitants' lack of subtlety and the overall poverty of its literary and cultural life.

Expatriate nostalgia was Else's greatest sorrow. Her masterpiece, *My Blue Piano*, is dedicated "to my unforgettable friends from the cities of Germany – and to those who were driven out like me and are now dispersed throughout the world. Yours faithfully!"

Posterity's belated judgment avenged her. On 20 November 2003, in her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Elfriede Jelinek paid homage to her: "As a schoolgirl I loved the extravagant, exotic and colourful personality of Else Lasker-Schüler. I wanted desperately to write poems like her, and even though I never did, she made a considerable impression on me."

### Janet Frame, at the edge of the alphabet

In the 1950s, the mentally ill were given electroshock treatments – Janet Frame received about 200. Those who

📌 Janet Frame, novelist and poet from New Zealand (1924-2004).

© Janet Frame Estate/Reg Graham; Janet Frame Literary Trust; [www.janetframe.org.nz](http://www.janetframe.org.nz)

administered the treatments were conscientious, indifferent or relentless, but none had any effect on her passion for writing.

Literature saved her life. In 1952, she was at the Seaciff hospital in Otago, New Zealand, about to undergo an operation. The diagnosis – later proved wrong – was schizophrenia. A lobotomy was planned, to return her to 'normality'. But just then, out of the blue, the fairy godmother of literature appeared – her first book, *The Lagoon and other stories* received the country's most prestigious prize.

It was a miracle that the surgeon, Blake Palmer, and the Otago hospital administrator happened to read that very day in the papers that their patient, Janet Frame, had just received the *Hubert Church Memorial Award*.

To situate her in space and time – she was born in Dunedin on 28 August 1924, and passed away on 29 January 2004.

*An Angel at My Table*, the 1990 film Jane Campion based on Frame's three-volume autobiography, was awarded the Special Jury prize at the Venice Film Festival and propelled her into the limelight. "Until Jane Campion's film," said its subject, "I was known as the mad writer. Now I am the mad, fat writer." Her forte was to scrutinise everything fearlessly. She never forgot her friend Nola and all the other women that had no literary prize to save them from lobotomies and who were irreversibly turned into silent and docile zombies.



Janet Frame is the most penetrating and brilliant woman writer who ever attempted to explore madness from the inside. In her books, she defines her self as a "migratory bird".

In *Faces on the Water*, she notes that total madness or death never come when we seek or call them. Frame establishes her voice in another world, the world of the defeated, on the other side, behind the bars, the sedatives and the straitjackets – speaking for the bodies and minds locked up inside the prison of the asylum.

As she was to learn to her cost, there is a hierarchy among these patients: there are the "good", the "crazy" and the resistant ones like herself who continue thinking. They are the ones subjected to electroshock, a trap that springs shut "on the shadows of the deep".

*Janet Frame is the most penetrating and brilliant woman writer who ever attempted to explore madness from the inside. In her books, she defines her self as a "migratory bird".*

There were five children in the Frame family – a boy and five girls. Their father was a railway worker, their mother a maid, for a while in the service of the family of writer Katherine Mansfield.

Tragedy marked their lives several times – two of the girls died from drowning, ten years apart. The son had epilepsy.

As a child she was rejected because she was unattractive, and in adolescence she was mocked for her excessive shyness. A teacher she was in love with convinced her to have herself committed after a clumsy suicide attempt. She ended up spending eight years in a psychiatric hospital, "an imprisoned Now, an eternal Is-Land without its accompanying horizons".

Second amazing intervention by the fairy godmother of writers: at the end of her hospital nightmare she met Frank Sargeson, mentor to promising young New Zealand writers, who satisfied her hunger for books and persuaded her to write full time. He set her up in a cabin on his property in Takapuna, north of Auckland. A year later she finished her first novel, *Owls Do Cry*. Sargeson also

helped her find the money to go on a visit to Europe.

London, Paris, Barcelona, Ibiza and back to London, where she could not find work because of her history of mental illness. Once again, stigma, once again she committed herself voluntarily, this time to the Maudsley hospital. Third visit of the fairy godmother in the guise of the doctor, Alan Miller, who rejected the initial diagnosis and erased any trace of schizophrenia. He encouraged her to undergo psychoanalysis and to exorcise her past by putting her ordeal into words.

As the magic of numbers requires, having written seven novels, she returned home seven years later. And so life goes.

From then on it was a succession of prizes, grants, writer's residencies, distinctions, voyages and honorary doctorates, but also controversy surrounding her work and herself. And periodic nominations for a Nobel Prize that never came.

"The edge of the alphabet where words crumble and all forms of communication between the living are useless," she writes. How true. ■

**Luisa Futoransky**, born in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in 1939, wears several hats: she is a poet, novelist, translator, journalist and essayist. In English she has published *The Duration of the Voyage* (Editorial Junction Press, San Diego, USA, 1997). (She has a website, in Spanish: [tp://www.luisafutoransky.com.ar](http://www.luisafutoransky.com.ar))



© Tamara Pince

**Michelle Bachelet**, born in 1951, has been Executive Director of UN Women since 2010. She was President of Chile from 2006 to 2010.

**Sirimavo Bandaranaike** (1916-2000), Prime Minister of Sri Lanka for three mandates, between 1960 and 2000.

**Chandrika Bandaranaike**, born in 1945, was President of Sri Lanka from 1994 to 2005.

**Benazir Bhutto** (1953-2007) was twice Prime Minister of Pakistan.

**Jane Campion**, born in 1954, is a film director and scriptwriter from New Zealand.

**Camille Claudel** (1864-1943), French sculptress.

**Alexandra David-Neel** (1868-1969), Franco-Belgian orientalist, also opera singer, journalist, writer and explorer.

**Carla del Ponte**, born in 1947, is a magistrate. Former Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), she is currently Ambassador for Switzerland to Argentina, since 2008.

**Waris Dirie**, born in 1965 in Somalia, is Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

**Isabelle Eberhardt** (1877-1904), Swiss writer.

**Janet Frame** (1924 - 2004), New Zealand novelist and poet.

**Indira Gandhi** (1917-1984) was Prime Minister of the Indian Union from 1966 to 1977, and from 1980 until she died.

**Sonia Gandhi**, born in 1946 in Italy, entered Indian politics in 1991, after her husband, Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister, was assassinated.

**Elfriede Jelinek**, born in 1946, is Austrian and laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature, 2004.

**Frida Kahlo** (1907-1954), Mexican painter.

**Cristina Kirchner**, born in 1953, has been President of Argentina since 2007.

**Else Lasker-Schüler** (1869-1945) German poet.

**Rita Levi-Montalcini**, born in 1909, is Italian and laureate of the Nobel Prize in Medicine, 1986.

**Ella Maillart** (1903-1997), Swiss explorer, writer and photographer.

**Katherine Mansfield** (1888 - 1923), writer and poet from New Zealand.

**Golda Meir** (1898-1978), former Minister for Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister of Israel.

**Angela Merkel**, born in 1954, has been Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany since 2005.

**Karla Michel Salas**, a Mexican lawyer, is laureate of the International "Abogados de Atocha" prize (Castilla-La Mancha, Spain).

**Tina Modotti** (1896-1942), Italian photographer.

**Evita, alias Eva Perón** (1919-1952) was First Lady of Argentina, from 1946 until her death.

**Alejandra Pizarnik** (1936-1972), Argentinian poet.

**Sylvia Plath** (1932-1963), American poet.

**Mary Robinson**, born in 1944, was the first woman president of Ireland, from 1990 to 1997. She then became United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 1997 to 2002.

**Charlotte Salomon** (1917-1943), German sculptress and painter.

**Freya Stark** (1893-1993), British writer and explorer.

# Mother Teresa

the most powerful woman in the world

**She devoted her life to serving the weakest, founding a multinational charity in the process. Portrait by a Hindu author of Mother Teresa, an Albanian Catholic who was born in Skopje<sup>1</sup> under the Ottoman Empire and died in Calcutta, India. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and in 2003 she was beatified by Pope John-Paul II.**

NAVIN CHAWLA

Mother Teresa, with whom I had a 23-year long association, was a multi-dimensional figure, both simple and complex. Her attention to whomsoever was with her at any point in time — whether poor or rich, disabled, leprosy afflicted or destitute — was complete. Yet she also simultaneously ran a huge religious order, the Missionaries of Charity, that had taken root in 123 countries by the time she died in 1997. This included feeding centres, schools, soup kitchens, hospices, homes, leprosy stations for orphans and abandoned children, drug rehabilitation centres and home-visiting to comfort the sick and elderly. All these were achieved with a fair amount of precision and regularity by the Sisters and Brothers of her Order.

The biography I wrote on Mother was an accident. I had known her for a number of years and helped her with her concerns in Delhi. In all that time it never struck me to write a book. One day when we were in conversation she said



📍 *Mother Teresa, with Navin Chawla and his family.* © Navin Chawla

something enormously funny and we both laughed. It was then that I remarked that none of the books that I had read about her had brought out that side of her personality. Perhaps I should write a book, I said. She was not inclined to agree: "So many books have already been written." I blurted out: "Why, Mother, does one have to be a Catholic, can't a bureaucrat and a Hindu write?" I immediately regretted my words and fell into an embarrassed silence for she had never discriminated in any way. However, she took that seriously and said: "All right, but don't write about me, write about the work."

Although she herself remained fiercely Catholic, her brand of religion was not exclusive. Convinced that each

person she ministered to was Christ in suffering, she reached out to people of all faiths. The very faith that sustained her infuriated her detractors who saw her as a symbol of a right-wing conspiracy and, worse, the principal mouthpiece of the Vatican's well-known views against abortion. Interestingly, such criticism went largely unnoticed in India, where she was widely revered.

Once called her the most powerful woman in the world. She replied: "Where? If I was, I would bring peace to the world." I asked her why she did not use her undeniable influence to lessen war. She replied: "War is the fruit of politics. If I get stuck in politics, I will stop loving. Because I will have to stand by one, not by all."

1. Capital of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The large bequests and donations were gratefully received and immediately ploughed into wherever the need was most pressing. Yet, it was the “sacrifice money” that she always remembered — the Kolkata beggar who emptied his day’s earnings of a few coins into her hands; the young Hindu couple who loved each other so much yet refused a marriage feast so that they could offer her the money they thus saved.

When Mother Teresa was alive, I had expressed concern to her whether the organization she had built from scratch could be sustained after she passed on. I had seen several other organizations begin to wither away soon after their charismatic founders died. The first time I posed this question to her, she merely pointed her fingers heavenwards. The second time I asked, she set my question aside with a smile saying, “Let me go first.” On my persistence, she finally answered, “You have been to so many of our ‘homes’ (branches) in India and abroad. Everywhere the Sisters wear the same *saris*, eat the same kind of food, do the same work, but Mother Teresa is not everywhere, yet the work goes on.” Then she added, “As long as we remain committed to the poorest of the poor and don’t end up serving the rich, the work will prosper.”

As a Hindu, armed only with a certain eclecticism, I found it took me longer than most to understand that Mother Teresa was with Christ in each conscious hour, whether at Mass or with each of those whom she tended. It was not a different Christ on her crucifix and a different one who lay dying at her hospice in Kalighat. For Mother Teresa, to love one’s neighbour was to love God. This was what was essential to her, not the size of her mission or the power others perceived in her. She explained this to me simply but meaningfully when she said, “We are called upon not to be successful, but to be faithful.” ■

A retired high-ranking civil servant, **Navin Chawla** had a long association with Mother Teresa. He wrote a biography of the founder of the Missionaries of Charity.

*The 100th anniversary of Mother Teresa’s birth will be celebrated globally between August 2010 and August 2011.*

# Manuela Sáenz liberator of the Liberator

LAUTARO POZO



© Oscar Monsalve, Coll. Casa Museo Quinta de Bolívar, Colombian Culture Ministry, Bogotá

The bicentennial commemoration of Latin American declarations of independence (2009-2011) has given official historians a chance to glorify the heroes of this era. Manuela Sáenz Aispuru from Ecuador is one of them. Born at the end of the 18th century and nicknamed “liberator of the Liberator” by her lover Simón Bolívar, she survives in memoirs only for saving his life in an assassination attempt in Bogotá, the Colombian capital, in 1828. She did much more.

By this time, this very beautiful woman and admirer of Bolívar had already taken up arms on many occasions. As early as 1809-1810, while she was still a teenager, she had supported the uprisings in Quito, her birthplace, where the struggle for independence started. In 1821, she helped to liberate Lima (Peru), where she married and received the decoration “The Order of the Sun” from General San Martín. Back home in Quito, she joined the battle of Pichincha, which established the independence of Gran Colombia. It was when the Liberator marched triumphantly into the city on 24 May 1822 that our two heroes met. They remained inseparable until Bolívar died in 1830.

From 1823 she became his secretary and official archivist. A wise advisor and skilled politician, she worked behind the scenes for the great man, acting as both confidant and mediator for the military chiefs, from Sucre to San Martín.

But, above all, she performed miracles on the battlefield, recruiting, arming, providing supplies, organising, caring for the wounded, putting her

energy into any task where she could be useful. In her diary, she wrote:“(…) we recruited entire villages for the revolution, the motherland. Women made uniforms, others dyed the cloth (...). We dragged children around with us, asking them to gather scraps of iron and tin so that we could melt them and make rifles, cannons, nails, horseshoes, etc. In a word, I was a real war commissioner, and I didn’t rest for a moment until our revolution was won.”

In 1824, after the decisive battle of Junín for the independence of Peru, she was made captain of the hussars, then colonel of the army of Gran Colombia. The tireless Ecuadorian died in exile, in Paita (Peru) in 1856.

Yet her story does not end there, as, in 2007, many years later, she was posthumously promoted to General of the Republic of Ecuador by President Rafael Correa. ■

**Lautaro Pozo** is Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Ecuador to UNESCO



# Postscript



"When I heard of the death of Édouard Glissant a flood of images came to me from a long and fertile friendship." This is how the Guadeloupien writer, Ernest Pépin, opened his vibrant homage entitled "An unquiet global soul!" We publish an excerpt here, in memory of Édouard Glissant, Editor in Chief of the UNESCO Courier from 1982 to 1988.



Seeing the present as "a very exciting time" for Saudi Arabia, Princess Louwah evokes youth – and not oil – as the country's wealth. Interview by Linda Tinio, UNESCO Bureau of Strategic Planning.



The work of three global giants of poetry underpins a new UNESCO project, entitled "Tagore, Neruda, Césaire: for a reconciled universal."

# Tribute to Édouard Glissant

## The Philosophy of Tout-Monde

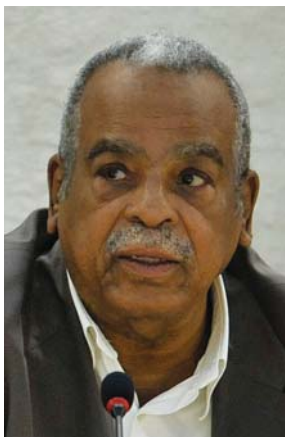
**“When I heard of the death of Édouard Glissant a flood of images came to me from a long and fertile friendship.” This is how the Guadeloupean writer Ernest Pépin opened his vibrant homage entitled “An unquiet global soul!” We publish an excerpt here, in memory of Édouard Glissant, Editor in Chief of the UNESCO Courier from 1982 to 1988.**

**ERNEST PÉPIN**

In the frenzy of his poems, plays, novels and theoretical works, it is sometimes difficult to follow the thread of Édouard Glissant's thinking. Yet we find his ideas alluring, like the ‘field of islands’ he wanted to build at the tip of *Tout-Monde*<sup>1</sup>. Endlessly expanding the concentric circles of writing in a state of high alert, he irrigated a proteiform ‘system’ of a rare density [...]

For Glissant, the idea of the *Tout-Monde* did not mean kowtowing to the humbug of globalization. On the contrary, it meant substituting the “trembling” of the world for the myth of an immutable identity. It stood for its unpredictability! Its ‘globality’!

1. First formulated in a novel in 1993, then in a 1997 theoretical work, “*Tout-Monde*” became a fundamental concept of Glissant's universalist thinking. An institute devoted to it was founded in Paris (French-only website: [www.tout-monde.com](http://www.tout-monde.com)).



© UN Photo/ Jean Marc Ferré

By investigating the world, in all its incessant movement, Glissant taught us to renounce the idea of a levelling and, when all is said and done, imperialist unity.

He made it impossible to make assimilations, encouraging us to appreciate the frictions, the lightning strikes, the variations of a heterogeneous intellectual and cultural effervescence. How a Frenchman can become Chinese, a Chinese person Caribbean, a Caribbean, Finnish, without losing anything of their identity. Glissant taught us about plasticity versus rigidity. All one has to do today is to watch or listen to some of the younger generation to understand this alternative way of thinking of the world and oneself. Glissant taught us that identity is not a rosary to be recited but a risk that one faces up to with the imagination of the world. Not a denial of others but an opening to others. ‘A loss of identity!’ cry those nostalgic for ‘purity.’ ‘No’ replies Glissant, a reorganization of the self within the creative instability of the world!

His legacy to us is no less than a philosophy fit for the 21st century. All

others condemn the components of the world to endless and pointless confrontations. A way of *inhabiting* the world, without putting up barriers!

His more recent work consolidated his thinking about the *Tout-Monde*. Places defy national straitjackets. Connections defy borders. Exchange abolishes isolation, bringing in its wake a global-identity. An identity without cultural hierarchies, without imperialism, which is neither exclusive nor excluding, and which is able to accept without begrudging unexpected forms of creation of humanity by humanity!

Because that was the issue – the humanization of a world that is conscious of and responsible for its diversity!

What emerges from this work and this examination is its *indiscipline*.

What I call ‘indiscipline’ is the non-respect for ready-made theories, rigid writing, aesthetics by consensus. It has not been said often enough that Glissant's is a philosophy of dissidence, of rupture.

Breaking with European and Eurocentric reasoning. Breaking with rigid anti-colonialist reasoning. Breaking with notions of identity as the hostage of essentialism. Breaking with the disguised hegemony of globalization. Breaking with language gaps. Breaking with the dictatorship of imperial languages. Breaking, finally, with a certain conception of literature!

With each break there emerges an adherence to other values, other ways of knowing, other aesthetics of writing, other functions of the writer and of the human being.

He did not invite us to follow the world. He invited us to run ahead and wait for it where it was not heading! He invited us not to write but to produce a work of writing. He invited us not to look for transparency but to respect opacity where it appears.

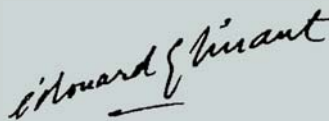
Looking more closely, he stood, alone, in defiance of that most deadly of imperialisms – a mutilated and mutilating vision of the world. That is why he refused to be confined, while always remaining loyal to his Martinique and Caribbean.

Before him stood the vast continent of black identity, the sovereign empire of a form of western philosophy whose rebels he admired (like Rimbaud, Breton, Arthaud, Segalen, etc.). While refusing to be colonized, he chose to build his own cathedral. And in his honour, it was always built on the foundations of human emancipation, as can be seen with his creation of a research institute in Martinique, setting up a journal, *Acoma*, his constant devotion to the Caribbean Carbet Prize [*Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe*], launching the Édouard Glissant prize, founding the *Institut du Tout-Monde*, etc.

Few have really understood him! Many have admired him! Now the time has come to read him!

To me, a writer from Guadeloupe, he has given the scope of his questions, the fervour and generosity of his responses and the exigency, devoid of all chauvinism, of living in the world. May he be thanked for all of this! ■

## THE INDELIBLE SIGNATURE OF ÉDOUARD GLISSANT



"This intermingling, [in the Caribbean] however, was not passive assent to the values imposed," claimed the Martinican writer, Édouard Glissant, in an article in the UNESCO Courier published in 1981 under the title "Creative contradictions, the Caribbean genius has given birth to a new civilization". A year later he was to be appointed Editor in Chief of that magazine, a post he held until 1988. "The Caribbean stands forth as a special setting in which nations and communities interrelate, each with its own originality, sharing nevertheless a common future," wrote this philosopher of the universal, to whom we owe the concept of 'Tout-Monde'. He defined *métissage* not as a simple mingling of cultures, but as a meeting of differences, thus helping to forge the notion of cultural diversity that UNESCO defends today, just as it did then.

A few months after he took over as Editor of the UNESCO Courier, Édouard Glissant had published an issue entitled 'War on war; poets of the world at UNESCO' (November 1982), with contributions from internationally eminent writers such as Adonis, Guinsberg, Labou Tan'si, Voznesensky, to name just a few. Soon to follow were 'Theatre of the World', 'Civilizations of the Sea', 'The Artistic Genius of Latin America', 'The Story of the Universe'... He had set the tone: The UNESCO Courier was going to establish itself as an open forum for intellectual debate on an international scale. This 'mark' of Édouard Glissant still remains indelibly imprinted on the pages of our magazine. – **J. Šopova**

For articles by Édouard Glissant in the UNESCO Courier, see:  
<http://www.unesco.org/new/fr/unesco-courier/edouard-glissant/>

🕒 Édouard Glissant was buried on 9 February 2011 at the Diamant cemetery in Martinique, not far from the slave memorial in Anse Cafard. © Elena Spasova





© UNESCO/Michel Favasard

# Foresight

## Youth is our country's wealth

Seeing the present as “a very exciting time” for Saudi Arabia, Princess Louwah evokes youth – and not oil – as the country's wealth.

Interview by LINDA TINIO, UNESCO Bureau of Strategic Planning

**To what do you attribute Saudi Arabia's progress in moving toward the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education?**

It has always been planned with forethought and according to the country's need. We had no problem asking for help from UNESCO or the United Nations to do some of the planning for us. It is our will to do so. As for the goal of having perfect education, I don't think anybody will reach it. Hopefully we (Saudi Arabia) have reached the point that we are aiming for, supplying efficient service to the nation and meeting the needs of the country.

**What are the prospects for giving Saudi education a more international character?**

Exchanges have always existed. If you go back in our educational history since the time of King Abdelaziz (founder of the kingdom in the 19th century), students have been sent to acquire specialties all over the world. It is an international system. I think the future is being made at the moment in a lot of areas in education. It is a very exciting time for us in Saudi Arabia. We have great examples like the King Abdullah University. We are concentrating on research now. And this is an area that has been given a boost by the creation of the King Abdullah University, which is based on research.

**What is the role of Saudi Arabia in the dialogue of cultures?**

The King is the one who launched the whole idea of dialogue, both in Saudi Arabia and outside. He has been behind it all the way from the very beginning. Saudi Arabia has always believed in dialogue. It is very important. You cannot do anything without dialogue. I think that all the projects that the king has put forward, all include dialogue – in religion, culture, personal life, even the way he is doing politics... Hopefully everybody will follow his example.

**How do you see the future of UNESCO-Saudi Arabia relations?**

Collaboration with UNESCO is not only with the Arab Thought Foundation. There are many areas in which we are cooperating. I hope the university I'm responsible for (Effat College) will also collaborate with UNESCO. Not enough people have either contributed to it, or used the wonderful work that UNESCO has done for the world. The dialogue area is where UNESCO is well-known. The whole policy of Saudi Arabia is dialogue. I'm sure it will get better and better.

**What is the value of the younger generation today in Saudi society?**

They are our wealth. It is not the oil. Youth is the wealth of our country. So they are the people we need to concentrate on. I was born in a generation that was doing everything

for the country. The generation before me who built the country did everything for the country. Hopefully the generations after us, we need to give them that opportunity to serve their country. ■

*They are our wealth. It is not the oil. Youth is the wealth of our country. So they are the people we need to concentrate on.*

Her Royal Highness **Princess**

**Loulwah Al-Faisal** is dedicated to promoting women's education and social and family welfare. Since 1994, Princess Louwah has been the President and Chair of the Board of Trustees of Al-Maharat Cognitive and Skill Development Center, Jeddah. Since 1999, she has served as Vice Chair and General Supervisor of the Board of Trustees of Dar-Al-Hanan School and Effat College, both institutions reserved for women.

*This column, launched by the Foresight Section of UNESCO's Bureau of Strategic Planning, tackles topics of interest to the general public and the Member States of the Organisation. It features intellectual opinions likely to foster UNESCO's reflection, programming and action in its various areas of competence.*

# Universal thought Tagore, Neruda, Césaire

## poetry in the service of a new humanism

NOÉMIE ANTONY and  
JASMINA ŠOPOVA

**“Even though they moved in very different cultural circles, and almost never came across each other in the course of their lives, the vision of these three giants of philosophy and poetry converged,” says Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, about Rabindranath Tagore, Pablo Neruda and Aimé Césaire.**

The work of these three global giants of poetry, born, respectively, in India, Chile and France (Martinique), underpins a new UNESCO project, entitled “Tagore, Neruda, Césaire: for a reconciled universal.” It was launched in June 2011 with the objective of inspiring reflection, in both academic and artistic milieus, on the universal values of human society.

“The idea was put forward in 2008 by Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yaï, Permanent Delegate of Benin to UNESCO and Chairman of the Organization’s Executive Board,” explains Françoise Rivière, who, at the time, was Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO. “He received the backing of the permanent delegations of Chile, France and India,” she adds, then sums up the gist of the project. “The main objective was to establish a link between these writers who have marked their era and the current global context, and to observe contemporary problems in the light of their work.”

*“Poetry is always like an act of peace. The poem is born just as bread is born of the flour”*

Pablo Neruda

One of the most acute issues arising today, which is of particular interest to the project, is *otherness*, explains Annick Thébia-Melsan, one of the project’s

creators. “Our relationship with the other is no longer a theoretical question,” says this Aimé Césaire specialist, who published an interview with the father of Negritude in the May 1997 issue of the UNESCO Courier. “We have never regarded our specificity as the opposite or antithesis of universality [...]. Our concern has always been a humanist concern and we wanted it to have roots,” said the poet from Martinique, adding “the universal is reached by a deeper exploration of the particular.”

Rabindranath Tagore had said much the same thing, in his own words, in a letter to a friend in 1921, “...but by nature all men are *dwija* or twice-born...first they are born to their home, and then, for their fulfilment, they have to be born to the larger world” (*UNESCO Courier*, December 1961). In a letter to another friend in 1934 he added “Individuality is precious, because only through it can we realize the universal.” (*UNESCO Courier*, January 1994).

And Pablo Neruda, in a lecture given at UNESCO in 1972, when he was Permanent Delegate of Chile, said “I am far from being an individualist – I believe that man is only free to the extent that he is a collectivist.” This idea had appeared in his 1945 poem *Song to the Red Army on Its Arrival at the Gates of Prussia*: “I wanted to sing for you all, for the whole of the earth, this song of obscure words, to make us worthy of the light that is coming.”

Other areas of convergence have been identified within the “Tagore, Neruda, Césaire: for a reconciled universal” project, which aims to stimulate thinking on five subjects in particular: – poetry as mediator between man and the world; a new pact between humanity and nature; emancipation versus all forms of oppression; a certain vision of the relationships between science, knowledge and ethics; and the educational heritage of these three writers. UNESCO is also setting up a sponsoring committee made up of academics, scientists and artists whose task will be to oversee the development of the project and to help establish a network for research and the exchange of ideas. “A whole network of partners has been established to implement this project,” explains Edmond Moukala, the programme’s coordinator. “We have established links with universities, research centres, NGOs, non-profit associations, festivals as well as the media, to plan conferences and exhibitions and to encourage scientific research projects and documentary films.”

*“The revolution in Martinique will be made in the name of bread, of course, but also in the name of the air and poetry”*  
Aimé Césaire

As socially committed writers who have helped make history, Rabindranath Tagore, Pablo Neruda and Aimé Césaire shared a vision of the world that was both humanist and poetic. The task of this project, dedicated to them, is to challenge minds in the contemporary world to think about what humanism means today. A task defined subtly by the Haitian poet René Depestre: "This expedition should lead us from the homes of each of the three authors towards other cultural areas and to a whole, unified universe." ■

For further information on the project, contact Edmond Moukala, programme coordinator and a specialist in intercultural dialogue: e.moukala@unesco.org; tnc\_reconclied@unesco.org

### FURTHER READING:

"The liberating power of words", interview with Aimé Césaire, *The UNESCO Courier*, May 1997, pp. 4-7.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001059/105969eo.pdf#105954>

"Rabindranath Tagore: a greater awareness of truth", *The UNESCO Courier*, January 1994, pp. 44-45.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000969/096900eo.pdf#9689>

"Rabindranath Tagore: Rebel with a Universal Cause", *The UNESCO Courier*, December 1961, pp. 4-27.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000643/064331eo.pdf>

"Rabindranath Tagore: 'I have fallen under the enchantment of lines'" *The UNESCO Courier*, August 1957, pp. 16-20.

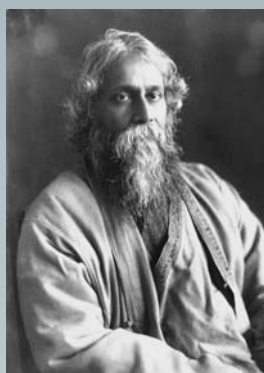
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000676/067651eo.pdf#67668>

"Rabindranath Tagore, Sentinel of the East", *The UNESCO Courier*, Supplement, May, 1949, p. 7.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0007/000739/073970eo.pdf#73982>

*"Every one of us is like an isolated line of a poem, knowing full well that he rhymes with another line, that he has to find or fail to find himself."*

Rabindranath Tagore



© UNESCO/Délégation permanente de l'Inde

#### RABINDRANATH TAGORE

(1861-1941)

Indian aristocrat, poet, playwright, musician, painter and teacher, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. His work promotes respect for cultural and linguistic identity, as well as the dialogue between East and West. He tackles the fundamental questions facing peoples who have fought for their political independence.



© Fondation Pablo Neruda

#### PABLO NERUDA

(1904-1973)

Chilean poet, diplomat and playwright committed to the defence and recognition of American Indian civilizations. He opposed dictatorships, oppression, social and racial exclusion, injustice and economic exploitation. His work was recognized with the award of the Nobel Prize in 1971, two years before his death and the military coup in Chile.

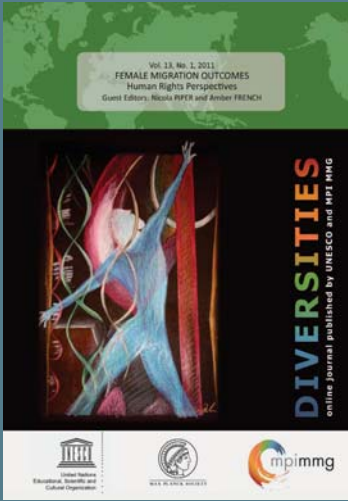


© UNESCO, Paris

#### AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

(1913-2008)

Martiniquan poet, playwright and politician, is one of the founders of the Negritude movement. His work is a virulent critique of colonialism, imperialism and slavery. He is one of the great writers on the political and cultural liberation of colonized peoples, especially in Africa.



## Female Migration Outcomes: Human Rights Perspectives

Do women benefit from migration, and if so, how? UNESCO's on-line journal *Diversities* tackles this complex question, examining how migrant women fare in terms of gender justice, empowerment and rights. Its purpose is to accompany ongoing work on migration and gender at the international level.

Guest editors are Nicola Piper, Senior Research Fellow at the Arnold Bergtraesser Institute in Freiburg, Germany, and Amber French, Consultant in International Migration at UNESCO.

*Diversities* ([www.unesco.org/shs/diversities](http://www.unesco.org/shs/diversities)) provides a platform for international, interdisciplinary and policy-related social science research in migration, multicultural policies and human rights.

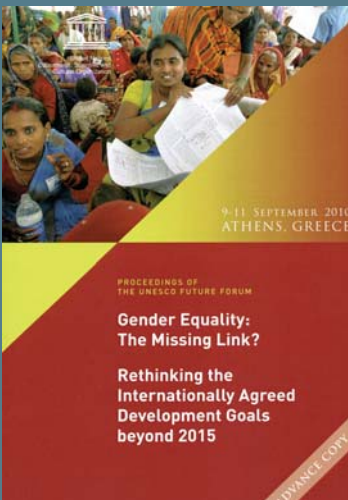


**Museum International N°236** proposes a gender-oriented approach to heritage, with articles containing insight into the key role that women play in shaping and preserving world cultural heritage.

Chapter 1 explores women's rights in relation to two UNESCO Conventions: *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005). Chapter 2 describes the different levels at which women are present in the heritage Sector. Chapter 3 reviews the experience of women creating museums around the world.

*Museum International* N°236 redresses an imbalance by recognising women's role in culture and upholding their right to access it.

For more information, please contact: [clt.museum@unesco.org](mailto:clt.museum@unesco.org)



## Gender Equality: The Missing Link?

Rethinking the Internationally Agreed Development Goals beyond 2015, Proceedings of the UNESCO Future Forum held between 9 to 11 September 2010, Athens, Greece

Prior to the High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2010, UNESCO held a Future Forum in Athens, Greece, with the participation of a distinguished group of female leaders to focus on the crucial role of gender equality for the realization of both women's rights and for the achievement of the wider goals of development and peace. The Forum allowed for a rethinking of the internationally agreed development goals in terms of the missing link of gender equality, as none of the IADGs (Internationally Agreed Development Goals) and MDGs can be reached without empowering girls and women.

Pub: 2010; 172 pp

BSP/2010/RP/H/2

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001894/189403E.pdf>



Five exceptional women scientists, one from each continent, received the 2011 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Awards on 3 March at UNESCO Headquarters.



**Silvia Torres-Peimbert (Mexico)**  
Astrophysics

© V. Durruty and P. Guedj for L'Oréal Corporate Foundation

**Vivian Wing-Wah Yam (China)**  
Chemistry

© V. Durruty and P. Guedj for L'Oréal Corporate Foundation

**Faiza Al-Kharafi (Kuwait)**  
Chemistry

© V. Durruty and P. Guedj for L'Oréal Corporate Foundation



**Anne L'Huillier (Sweden)**

Attosecond Physics

© V. Durruty and P. Guedj for L'Oréal Corporate Foundation

**Jillian Banfield (USA)**

Earth Science

© V. Durruty and P. Guedj for L'Oréal Corporate Foundation

