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Subject: RE: phyllis platform
Date: April 4, 2008 10:36:21 AM EDT
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What I Learned About Women At The United Nation

by Phyllis Ehrenfeld

The greatest weapon in the war against poverty is the empowerment of women and the education of girls, said United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. "When it comes to solving the problems of this world, I believe in girl power."

The world needs the empowerment of women and the education of girls. It should be obvious, but I've learned nothing can be taken for granted. I've read in a U.N. publication a quote from an interview with the wife of a Nobel Peace Prize winner. "I have a good husband. He only hits me once a week." Why is the need for an improvement in their status worldwide not accepted? To start with a historical perspective on the Judaeo - Christian tradition --there is a deep ambivalence in ideas about the value--and virtue of this half of the human race.

In Genesis, in the Old Testament, men and women were created on the sixth day. Then, later on, in the Garden of Eden, Eve was created by God out of Adam's rib. But according to Jewish folklore, Lilith was the first wife of Adam. Unfortunately, she refused to make herself subservient to Adam. She was not politically astute and didn't take the one down position. After Adam complained to God, the problem was solved. Lilith was made into a demon. In the folklore, the sudden death of an infant was blamed on the demon Lilith. Women wore amulets to protect themselves from her demonic force. Second wife Eve was God's gift, fashioned from his rib, to ensure obedience to her man. In the Garden of Eden, Eve has become the disruptive one, by urging Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge. God punishes them both with toil for Adam to make his living and pain in childbearing for Eve, as well as the punishment of submission to Adam's rule.

No matter how you interpret the stories, women are the troublemakers, even worse-- the source of evil. If you believe that myths somehow express essential truths about feelings, you have to ask why, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition-- are women believed to be a source of evil, to be controlled only by male power. The Muslim tradition is actually more honest-- though infuriating. They acknowledge that it is the sexual power of women which frightens men. That must be why they wish to keep women's bodies and sometimes even their faces all covered up. Only after death can they be safely offered as unlimited pleasure in heaven. We're told that suicide bombers are rewarded in heaven by the company of 40 virgins. Nobody offers the 40 virgins a choice.

The Eve tradition has been adapted into the idealization of Mary--Mother of God, all compassion and love, but totally powerless. In the troubador tradition of the Middle Ages, women were the idealized love object of male chivalry, with virtue but no independence. Over time women have been idealized, demonized, viewed as temptresses, or as the "angels in the house." They have been thought of as too emotional and hormone-dominated to take part in public life. If uncontrolled they are a destructive force--or else as fragile beings requiring protection. Anything but independent agents.

Well, how does this context of ideas about women translate into the hope of a better world as expressed through the UN? Human rights is the central theme that underlies all UN activities, and the condition of women has begun to be documented as vital to the status of human rights worldwide. To start with the UN's history--after the chaos of World War II, the great powers wanted order, and the Security Council, the big boys, were given the task of enforcing peace. With a mandate from Franklin Roosevelt and later Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt was given the responsibility to be representative to the United Nations. At that time there was a great effort to maintain bipartisan support in the Senate for the UN, and Eleanor lobbied non-stop. She was everywhere. There was a joke circulating about Franklin's nightly prayer: Please God, make Eleanor tired.

In the midst of the cold war she never faltered in pursuing protection for the concept of human rights. In a cartoon of the time the UN dignitaries, the members of the Human Rights Commission were portrayed as a class of schoolboys, with Mrs Roosevelt as the teacher, saying "Children--all together now! The rights of the individual are above the rights of the state.." Recently in a local library, featuring a one woman dramatic portrayal of Eleanor, an audience member reminisced. There was a snow day at a local synagogue --the sexton went to the rabbi and said. "There's a woman outside who says she's Eleanor Roosevelt." Even blizzards couldn't stop her.

Still she was a woman of her time. In the formation of the wording of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" she expected to use the word "man" telling the delegation that in the US the word man means both men and women. But the delegate from India, said No. In India the word man means men only.

And so, the wording was changed.

At the founding conference in San Francisco, Eleanor, as a delegate worked to form a commission to focus on the needs the women. It was established in 1946. In 2004 the topics are: The Role of Men and Boys in Equality, and new, extremely important and useful--The Role of Women in Post Conflict Negotiations and Conflict Resolution.

To return to the UN's history--at the founding conference many of the women from Latin America demanded that the preamble to the UN Charter reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person and the equal rights of men and women. Doesn't this sound like Ethical Culture? We should call them the Founding Mothers because they were the first to legitimize from the very beginning the full equality and equal rights of men and women. They

also promoted that idea that fundamental freedoms belong to all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion-- a concept that was not a feature of the League of Nations.

Well, to move on from Eleanor Roosevelt, who is still worshipped by many elderly Americans, and the Founding Mothers, to a particular heroine of mine- Mary Robinson, formerly High Commissioner of Human Rights. She was fired from the UN at the behest of the Bush administration because she was too outspoken on the U.S.A's stand on human rights. She took her post in 1997 and lasted until 2002. Her task was to integrate human rights concerns into all the activities of the United Nations. She was a practical and grass roots oriented Commissioner who travelled in her first year to quiet peaceful and orderly places-- such as Rwanda, South Africa, Columbia and Cambodia. In 98 she was the first High Commissioner

to visit China, signing an agreement intending to increase cooperation for the improvement of human rights there. She sent human rights workers to Indonesia, and to countries in Europe and Africa. The UN uses workers whom they call rapporteurs, who blend into the population, and monitor what is happening. She has a great deal of respect and loyalty from her co-workers.

In her seven years as President of Ireland, before undertaking the task of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, she placed special emphasis on the needs of developing countries, linking the history of the "Great Irish Famine" to today's nutrition, poverty and policy issues--creating a bridge of partnership between the prosperous and the developing countries. Question: why was she asked to leave her post at the UN? Answer: She did not accept the idea that the United States had priority in ignoring the issues of human rights while asking the rest of the world to observe those rights. In her final days at the UN she sharply criticized the United States for eroding civil liberties at home and human rights standards around the world, after the Sept 11 terrorist attacks. She said the United States could combat terrorism while still upholding human rights.

In her farewell visit to a comparatively small human rights committee meeting I heard her say to the members that when she talked to governments after Sept 11 she was told ironically, "For goodness sakes, standards have changed." But her achievements have changed the lives of countries. As only one example, in East Timor she instituted public confessions for convicted criminals preventing a conflagration of revenge killings that could have overthrown the painfully negotiated peace with Indonesia. Like many countries all over the world, Indonesia is still a powder keg of economic differences and ethnic inequality, but in the words of Isaac Bashevis Singer, there's a big difference between dying and dead. There are people alive in East Timor because of Mary Robinson.

Since she was booted out of the UN she has been active in leading a new project called the Ethical Globalization Initiative. Please note the use of the word Ethical I quote their mission statement: The EGI brings key stakeholders together in new alliances to integrate concepts of human rights, gender sensitivity and enhanced accountability into efforts to address global challenges and governance shortcomings. This is UN speak, but its not doubletalk--it means lets really honestly try to put ideas together on how to do the job.

To return to the condition of women in acknowledging the misery and injustice which underlies the lack of human rights--a few facts can create the picture. Over one billion live in hunger, extremely low income, poor health, low education and low voice and power in society. Overwhelmingly this is a condition of women.

Nearly 70% of the world's illiterates are women. Three-fourths of the world's refugees are women. Women usually put the food on the table. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, they also grow it. But they have unequal access to land and help such as improved seeds, fertilizer and information. Only 7% of Africa's agricultural extension is devoted to women farmers.

Women contribute about two-thirds of the hours worked in the world, earn about one tenth of the world's income and own 1% of the world's property. But the facts are even more startling. Demographers have always known that nature produces more women than men-- but this biologically determined increase doesn't show up in underdeveloped countries. The Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen has calculated that there are "100 million missing women," women who would have lived if given the same care and attention as men. Girls and women get less food and medical care than boys and men. 100 million women have been killed, as it were, by discrimination. This ratio of men to women is a good indicator for the status of women.

There is a book called "Breaking The Earthenware Jar." In some areas female infanticide is still openly practised. When baby girls are born they are placed alive in a jar and the jar is buried. Why? Is it because this culture is naturally cruel? Well reducing the number of women serves as a primitive form of population control. The earthenware jar has the accuracy of fact, and the truth of metaphor. Girls are denied food, air, and space in the world, 100 million of them. An astonishing number.

The UN collects this data on the ratio of men to women and has established that the status of women is strongly connected both to economic development and quality of life. Where women have higher status, economic growth and quality of life has improved. Where they face great disadvantages, economic growth and quality of life is at its lowest.

The story of Kerala is instructive. Kerala, a state in southwest India, has matched the best of the underdeveloped countries in resource development, far surpassing other states of India. Why? Kerala's female literacy rate is very high, producing the lowest infant mortality rate in India, and a fertility rate that dropped so sharply that it is even comparable to Britain and France. Yet Kerala's per capita income is only 70% of the low Indian average. Still the poverty rate is low, much lower than that of the other poor northern states of India. This isn't as paradoxical as it sounds-- social services and distribution can make the difference between low income and poverty. Most remarkably--life expectancy in Kerala is nearly equal to that of the developed countries--76 years for women and 70 for men. This is without benefit of personal trainers at the spa. and medications at \$5 a pill.

Why has Kerala been relatively so successful in human development? One reason is the high priority given to state spending on education and health including women's needs. But even more important is the status of women. In Kerala, unlike the north of India, women inherit land and can own property. In Kerala, the high educational level has helped to attract industrial jobs. Since women make up the largest part of the population of the work force in India, this is not a trivial asset.

Why is the education of women so valuable for development? Educated mothers raise healthier families. In one report for every year a mother is in school, child mortality drops 10%. All the other benefits follow-- smaller families, slower population growth, more hope for a better life for the children. What else? Greater productivity. Educated women are better managers, increasing family income. Improved status. Educated women are more independent, able to contribute to make family decisions. The social effects of education of mothers are passed on to their children. They encourage their children to become educated. This is particularly important for girls. A UNICEF report shows that girls who are denied education are much more vulnerable to violence, hunger, poverty, abuse, exploitation and sex trafficking, as well as being more likely to die in childbirth and are at greater risk of contracting diseases, particularly AIDS.

Carol Bellamy, the Executive Director of UNICEF has said that a child's lack of education not only limits her individual potential but dramatically reduces hope that her children will be able to escape a lifetime of poverty and hardship. Two examples of two women's lives. Fanta lives in a village on the edge of the Sahara desert. The Niger River now carries diseases--parasites and the risk of river blindness. 30% of the children in the village may die before the age of five from water-borne diseases. But Fanta has learned reading and arithmetic and oral rehydration or "life water" as it is called, a simple formula that saves the lives of children with diarrhea. Fanta has learned healthier ways to prepare milk for her family and for sale in the market. Women come to her to write letters for them. Literacy has transformed her life and improved the life of women in her village.

In Bangkok, Thailand, in a teeming slum, Youphadee makes a living by selling food in the street. She joined a literacy program sponsored by the government and UNESCO and learned basic accounting. She knows how to calculate what she needs to run her business. She has joined with other women to form a credit union, which provides much-needed loans for family emergencies and business credit. For her and other women literacy and basic education has been their passport to progress in life and freedom.

The ideal of educating girls often encounters practical difficulties. Persuading mothers can be a problem. Girls are needed at home to fetch water and firewood, care for younger siblings, cooking, and often working to supplement family income. One innovative pilot program began recently in Brazil. According to the Education Minister of Brazil, "the problem with education here is largely a problem of access. If kids don't go to school because they have to work, and they have to work because they have to eat, you can't begin to talk about education until you figure out a way to get them to walk into the schoolhouse every day." Brazil has initiated a school stipend. The family of a child that attends school gets a certain amount of money. It's a very successful program. In seven years in one town the number of children attending school has doubled. Unfortunately, Brazil can't substantially expand this successful program. Brazil must pay about 43 billion dollars in yearly interest payments on its foreign debt.

Incidentally--from my own experience. I grew up in the province of Quebec. French Canadian farmers had about 18 children of whom about 10 usually died. The government offered a Family Allowance of \$7 a month per child. Some people said they'd only drink up the money, but they didn't. They bought the children shoes and sent them to school, and their birth rate is now the same as that of any developed country.

Most people don't know that vastly more money flows from the underdeveloped countries to the wealthier countries. It's not the other way round.

Over time--how has the UN developed its efforts on behalf of women? When it was founded in 1945 only 30 of the original 51 member states even allowed women equal voting rights, or permitted them to hold public office. Over the following three decades the UN concentrated on law-- codifying legal and civil rights. But as has become increasingly clear, laws are not enough. Subsequently, the UN has held four global womens' conferences: Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, and Beijing 1995, These conferences focused world attention, united women all over the world, and developed plans of action.

At the Nairobi conference, it became clear that past activities were ineffective, and the improvements in the status of women and efforts to reduce discrimination only benefited a small minority of women. Overall improvement in the status of women in the developing world has been marginal at best. The earlier belief that general development helped to improve women's lot has changed. Now there is a new consensus that real development is not possible without women's full participation. Women had been seen as passive receivers of support and assistance, but not viewed as full and equal partners with men. This is an important shift in thinking from a welfare approach, to a full participation empowerment approach.

Subsequently in Beijing, the approach became more radical. It had become clear that while assistance plans helped to improve women's conditions and access to resources, nothing changed in the basic inequality in the relationship between men and women. Decisions that affected all peoples' lives were made mostly by men.

The Beijing Conference was considered a great success both in its size and its outcome. It was the largest gathering of government and ngo representatives ever held, with 17,000 in attendance, including representatives of 189 governments. The ngo forum held parallel to the conference broke all records, bringing together 47,000 people from all over the world, all religions and many different cultures.

Out of this networking a consensus emerged. The entire structure of societies and all relations between men and women had to be reevaluated. This is a fundamental change in approach. Could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners with men in all aspects of life? This was revolutionary stuff-- a strong affirmation of the importance of empowerment. The history of these four conferences is the shift from a welfare approach to an empowerment approach.

(A little anecdote here. Sometimes we think changes take geologic time- then events suddenly explode, and life just isn't exactly the same. Something happens you wouldn't imagine to be possible. Walking in Brooklyn in a strictly orthodox neighborhood-- we see a group of women standing outside a building chanting in Yiddish: Gib a ghett! Gib a ghett! (Give a divorce!) My husband turns to a small group of orthodox men watching and smirking- he asks-what's happening? I can't ask of course, because they won't speak to me. An orthodox man has refused a divorce, and the women are demonstrating in the street. This event happened five or six years ago. Twenty years ago it would have been inconceivable.)

The beginnings of empowerment is reflected in a quote by the president of a peasant group meeting in Pakistan. "The worst part of women's oppression is that we accept it as natural. But we have the power to change it. The government won't do it for us, nor will funding from far-off places. We women should rely on ourselves and no one else."

The point of this quote is that it reflects an increase of confidence. Changes in thinking can be a source of empowerment. Money-- and access to money is another effective source of empowerment. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh lends money at low interest rates to women to start small businesses. Most loans are repaid and these ongoing loans become a source of independent credit and money. At first some men were unhappy at the change in roles. But after a while the help to the family income brought acceptance.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the empowerment of women is the UN push to have women participate in conflict resolution, peacemaking and peacebuilding. Britain has taken steps to ensure that women are included in the peace process in Northern Ireland. From Burundi to Guatemala, their participation has helped to provide support for vulnerable groups. One recent example is the Mano River Women's Peace Network, representing the kind of regional cooperation and fearless involvement in human rights issues, that does not attract much attention from the mainstream press. This network brought together women from the civil war torn countries of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. They were working with child soldiers who had been conscripted by warring armies and taught to commit atrocities. With these women's help the children were demobilized and reintegrated into communities. When peace negotiations failed, these women brought the heads of state of their three countries back to the table after negotiations had broken down-- a remarkable achievement. The Human Rights United Nations Prize is a testimony to their work.

Up to now, we have looked at women, particularly in developing countries, in the image of a touching poster--an emaciated African mother holding a starving child to her breast. It's still true and it's still happening in some places as much as ever. But we need to imagine a different picture of men and women in partnership at work, equal laborers and creators. We need to imagine this first, in order to make it happen. Many years of patient and persistent work and study by the United Nations have clarified the idea that true equality for women is vital for human progress, essential for the benefit of all.