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**Gender Equality**

In each issue, the editors of Global Agenda invite contributors to explore one of the big questions of the year. In this issue we asked: What does Gender Equality mean? Is it achievable? Below are responses from Naomi Wolf, Ronan Farrow, Chloe Breyer, Naina Lal Kidwai, Caitlin Moran, Ellen MacArthur, Nicholas D. Kristof and Leta Hong Fincher.

**NAOMI WOLF** *Author of ‘'The Beauty Myth'’ and ‘'Vagina: A New Biography'’*

When I hear the words ‘'gender equality,’’ or ‘‘feminism,’’ I am always baffled as to why these concepts could ever be contentious. To me, these ideas are so mainstream, so much a part of our basic cultural heritage.

What ‘'gender equality'’ or ‘'feminism'’ should mean — I suppose if gender equality is the goal, feminism is the process of how we get there — is the logical extension of the core idea of democracy.

I date my feminism to the Enlightenment — to Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote, at the end of the 18th century, ‘‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.’’ Her essay was squarely aligned with other Enlightenment thinkers’ appeals to reason, to the rights of man, and to the notion of equality of dignity among all people. This Enlightenment vision is so powerful, and so right, that it has spread around the world, from the ‘‘one person, one vote’’ advocates in Sierra Leone, to the Tahrir Square protesters in Egypt, to the furious parents in Sichuan Province in China, who fought the regional Communist Party’s refusal to release information about how their children died in a poorly-built school during an earthquake. Underlying all of these movements is the democratic ideal from the 1790s that asserts: No one person has the natural right to suppress, silence or dominate any other person, simply because of where both are situated in society.

But what that set of beliefs isn’t is as important as what it is. Feminism, in my view, should always have kept that original precept in sight as it pursued its aims from one generation to the next. It doesn’t prescribe lifestyle choices. It doesn’t dictate sexual decisions. It doesn’t define itself in terms of cultural battles. True feminism empowers anyone to be free and to have equal opportunity and access to equal legal rights and the rule of law. But it doesn’t dictate what that free person should be doing with her or his freedom.

Unfortunately, Western feminism is too often bogged down in cultural battles, in asserting a checklist of political policies. For two decades, I have been insisting that there can certainly be a right-wing, a libertarian, and a left- wing feminist agenda — because what makes a ‘'feminist'’ is not the policy outcome. Democracy is a concatenation of voices arising out of many individual free lives.

I think we need to reassert our Enlightenment heritage in the fight for gender justice in the West. The feminists of Africa, Asia and the Middle East have now outstripped Western feminists as pioneers for gender justice — partly because they do not see women’s fight for justice as pitting them against men, against family life or even against faith. They draw on the Wollstonecraftian heritage of democracy and human rights, which is very hard to mock or dismiss.

**RONAN FARROW** *Writer and diplomat, most recently special adviser to Hillary Clinton*

I grew up with seven sisters. I tolerated boy bands. I learned to put the seat down. I also witnessed the power of women’s leadership. My childhood dinner-table fights would still be raging without steely negotiation from girls. Years later, watching an argument rage in a dusty Islamic classroom in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I remember seeing that same power. At first, only the men talked. But finally, Nipa Masud, seated in the back with a dangerous glint in her eye, leapt to her feet, unleashed a torrent of critiques. The floodgates open, every girl spoke up, swiftly ending the debate. The girls didn’t speak first, but they spoke loudest. There can be no confronting our challenges without those voices. Countries with more women in their governments are less likely to suffer internal armed conflicts. Goldman Sachs projected that leveling women’s and men’s employment rates would add 9 percent to the United States’ G.D.P., 13 percent to Europe’s, and 16 percent to Japan’s. In some ways, we are closer to securing equal space for women to participate than ever. Gender gaps in primary and secondary education rates are closing. More than half a billion women joined the work force over the last 30 years. But women everywhere still face senseless obstacles. In October, militants in Pakistan gunned down 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai for her activism supporting girls’ education. Countless stories like hers never reach the world. It is up to all of us to protect women, their rights and their opportunities. In a recent McKinsey survey of successful female businesswomen, an overwhelming majority said they don’t aspire to top positions. Women who have made it to the top need to stay there and fight for a world where Nipa, Malala, and countless girls like them are not just able, but expected, to lead.

**CHLOE BREYER** *Episcopal priest and Executive Director of the Interfaith Center of New York*

Were you to stop someone in the street and ask them if the world’s great religious traditions would help or hinder the achievement of gender equality, my guess is they would conclude that religion was a hindrance. In Christianity and Judaism, the first book of the Bible, Genesis, describes Eve emerging from Adam’s rib. A few lines later, Eve succumbs to the serpent’s temptation, takes a bite of the forbidden fruit and offers it to her partner. For centuries, authorities within the church patriarchy attributed to Eve the majority portion of guilt for original sin and taught that the pains of childbirth were just atonement for Eve’s misstep. With so many obstacles like this within many religious traditions, what possible hope could there be for gender equality unless humanity becomes less religious? There is an alternative. I would propose that a less-religious world is not one in which gender equality will be more quickly achieved. Indeed, Christianity has untapped resources when it comes to achieving gender equality: Today’s women of faith who occupy two-thirds of the pew benches in churches around the globe. It is a matter of time before we will share power with men of our faith. From an earlier passage in Genesis come the explicit instructions that both men and women are created in the image of God: ‘‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'’ (Genesis 1:27). These words offer hope and a way forward.

**NAINA LAL KIDWAI** *Head of HSBC India*

The reality of gender equality is complex and diverse, even more so in India. What is theoretically simple — that men and women have the same rights and opportunities in every walk of life — is more difficult to implement and measure. An increasing number of companies recognize that a healthier gender mix makes for good business, helping talent retention and enhanced innovation. What must also be recognized is the revolution in the smaller towns and villages that is even more important, as it will impact a larger number of women. HSBC has given me opportunities to interact with rural women in India and I have seen their contributions and progress — albeit at a slow pace — at close hand. Once a woman steps out to earn her livelihood, she becomes independent, not just economically but psychologically. She gains better control over the family’s finances and acquires stronger decision-making powers. With a rise in the number of schools and vocational training centers, women everywhere now have the opportunity to gain knowledge and acquire skills. As a result, we see women from smaller regions in India becoming engineers, doctors and even astronauts, which was unimaginable a few decades ago. I remain optimistic on the ever-greater participation of women in public, corporate and political decision-making.

**CAITLIN MORAN** *British journalist and author of ‘'How to Be a Woman'’ and ‘'Moranthology'’*

Gender equality simply means ‘‘women being equal to men’’ — however nuts, dim, deluded, underachieving or ill-kempt the men may be. I mean none of this to belittle menfolk. On the contrary. As a woman, that’s the bit I want in on. That’s the sweet stuff. For when we imagine the fully emancipated 21st-century woman, we are apt to think of some toned, immaculately dressed overachiever, leading a Fortune 500 company while bringing up bilingual twins. And that’s what simultaneously stresses women out to the point of living on a Pinot Grigio drip, and terrifies insecure men. This idea of perfect, sexy, superhuman lady-titans, winning at everything. That’s what scuppers moves toward gender equality. For my feminist money, I don’t see gender equality as ‘‘women exhausting themselves to be more incredible than any other human beings have ever been at any other point in time.’’ Mainly because it sounds a) pretty unlikely to happen terribly often and b) like a massive administrative headache. For me, true equality would be getting in on a bit of that male, ‘‘14 pounds overweight but I don’t care,’’ ‘‘getting sexier as I get older,’’ ‘‘confidently chipping in at meetings with crazy idea,’’ ‘‘I definitely need some golfing me-time’’ action, instead. While one hugely important part of equality is to have extraordinary people’s achievements facilitated and recognized — whatever their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion or ability to accessorize — an arguably even bigger part of equality is for everyone to feel comfortable being a massively average schlump.This, clearly, is not the case for women, who treat themselves like a massive ‘‘To Do’’ list. What an intolerable burden! And that’s why gender equality means ‘‘women being equal to men’’ — however nuts, dim, deluded, underachieving or ill-kempt the men may be.

**ELLEN MACARTHUR** *Yachtswoman and charity founder*

I am a sailor and have been, at the pinnacle of my racing career, the fastest solo sailor to ever circumnavigate the globe. Focus, hard work and belief in one’s potential do not have a gender. Offshore sailing is one of the rare sports that offers the opportunity for men and women to compete on equal terms, so was my gender relevant? I never thought so. This does of course not mean that, in the grand scheme of things, gender equality is a nonissue and that we live in a fair, balanced world. But in my particular case, it has no importance and in fact focusing on that specific element would equate to missing the bigger picture. By analogy, and to talk about things that occupy my life now that I’ve created the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, only looking at one piece of the economic puzzle will not give you the full scope. Taking a restrictive approach to complex issues amounts to flicking one switch on a giant switchboard, not considering its impact on others. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation aims to accelerate the transition to a circular economy by shifting away from the ‘‘take-make-dispose’’ model we’ve inherited from the Industrial Revolution. What we’re talking about is a systems-level change, not tweaks to the existing model. The circular economy keeps materials flowing so they can be used and reused, while waste is phased out by design. When it comes to reinventing progress, we need all the determination, creativity, enthusiasm and talent we can get. And these have no gender.

**NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF** *Columnist for The New York Times*

We’ll know we have gender equality when we’re no longer talking about it. And this is definitely achievable. One of the problems with journalists and humanitarian organizations is that we’re sometimes so focused on problems that we don’t adequately acknowledge the progress that is being made. And that progress on gender issues is pretty stunning. Look at the education gap. In the United States it has disappeared, with girls doing better than boys in school. Globally, the education gap in primary school has disappeared as well and although it persists in secondary school it is diminishing. Even a poor Muslim country like Bangladesh now has more girls in high school than boys. In the United States, rape and other kinds of sexual violence seem to have diminished significantly (as best we can figure from flawed reporting), in part because the police now take date rape seriously. Domestic violence is now often taken seriously by American police departments and more and more police departments abroad are starting to tackle it as well. Sex trafficking remains a huge issue around the world, but traffickers are now sometimes going to jail. It’s striking that every aid organization and N.G.O. now seems to market itself as focused on women and girls. Even in the State Department and the Pentagon, officials recognize that a focus on girls’ education is useful to bring about stability and change. So I imagine a world a couple of decades from now where sex trafficking is largely behind us, where girls have as much chance to go to school as boys, where reproductive health for women isn’t a taboo. We will all be benefiting from a more equal world, and then finally we can stop talking about gender equality.

**LETA HONG FINCHER** *American doctoral candidate in Tsinghua University’s Department of Sociology*

A century ago, Chinese feminists fighting for the emancipation of women helped spark the Republican revolution, which overthrew the Qing dynasty. After the Communist revolution of 1949, Mao proclaimed that ‘‘women hold up half the sky.’’ In the early years of the People’s Republic, the Communist Party sought to transform gender relations with expansive initiatives such as assigning urban women jobs in the planned economy. Yet those gains are now being eroded in China’s post-socialist era. Women’s labor force participation has fallen dramatically, the wealth gap is widening, and women’s legal rights to property are under attack. So what would gender equality in China look like? All parents would welcome their baby girl into the world with as much love as if she were a boy. Rural parents would give a plot of family land to their daughter as well as their son. Villages would protect women’s rights to land. Urban parents would no longer buy their son an expensive apartment while leaving their daughter to fend for herself. Young women applying to university wouldn’t need to outscore men to gain admission. The state feminist agency would no longer shame single, professional women over the age of 27 by calling them ‘‘leftover.’’ Women who report domestic violence wouldn’t be blamed for ‘‘exposing family ugliness.’’ The saying ‘'men belong in public, women belong at home'’ would become a relic of history. Half of the country’s leaders would be women. Is gender equality achievable? Yes. It may take several generations, but it is worth fighting for.