

UPF UK: Keith Best Chair of UPF UK on International Women's Day 2023

Robin Marsh
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Universal Peace Federation UK: International Women's Day 2023, Thursday 9 March 2023, Keith Best Chair UPF UK

It is always a pleasure to be with you on International Women's Day as I have always been passionate about gender equality and angered by the waste implicit in its absence in so many communities. None of us would be here without our mothers - it is worth contemplating that for a moment as in itself it is a powerful message - and it is not likely to change in the near future!

The prejudice against women, thousands of years old in a male-dominated culture, is unnatural, unrealistic, uneconomic, unpalatable and shameful but goes back to biblical times. Those of us who are Christian and attend church will have been read at the beginning of Lent (the period of self-denial akin to Ramadan/Ramzan) the chapter in Genesis chapters 2 and 3: first, we learn that God placed a man, Adam, in the Garden of Eden and that, in order to provide a companion, created a woman from one of the man's ribs and it is, of course, the woman Eve who commits the sin of eating from the fruit of the tree; she gives some to Adam who, when confronted by God, blames the woman for having given it to him! Apart from inadvertently pointing to the vacillating weakness of the man, who seems to have done as he was told, it is small wonder, particularly among earlier and more credulous generations who will have believed this story literally, that the prejudice against women is so deep-seated.

I appreciate that the traditional roles of men and women can be regarded as having been imposed by a male-dominated society but the fact remains that, generally, the male hunter-gatherer has been far less able to multi-task than the matron of the home who has to juggle childbirth and rearing, a career, home management both practically and economically, domestic purchasing and planning and food distribution - a tall order! What I believe is an innate ability of women to manage all these often competing interests alive and well - i.e. to multi-task - makes them far more rounded and able in many spheres, not least, politics where the need to do so many things simultaneously is so important - apart from the fact that women seem to be far less rowdy and polemical than men.

Many years ago I helped found a charity which we called the Bangladesh Female Academy which provided a school in a very poor part of north-east Bangladesh where none existed. It was a conscious decision to educate girls rather than boys as we knew it was the girls who were going to influence the rest of the family on issues of domestic science, health, nutrition and cohesion. I am pleased to say that it flourishes to this day and now has the support of the Government.

We see some of those primitive positions to which I referred alive today in Afghanistan and among peoples who have not heard the modern call of human rights and equality. Yet, perhaps we should not be too surprised: those rights have evolved only recently in the history of the world and have been developed only in living memory. It was only since the Married Women's Property Act 1882 which I studied as a young barrister that women ceased to be a chattel. Hitherto, on marriage, all the property they brought with them became the property of their husband because they were not allowed to own property in their own right. Upon marriage, the husband and wife became one person under the law, as the property of the wife was surrendered to her husband, and her status as a separate legal personality, with the ability to own

property and sue and be sued solely in her own name, ceased to exist. Women were limited in what they could inherit. On the other hand, women who never married or who were widowed maintained control over their property and inheritance, owned land and controlled property disposal. The Act did away with that anomaly. An Act of the same name 12 years earlier had enabled wages and property which a wife earned through her own work or inherited to be regarded as her separate property.

Bearing in mind the Genesis text it should come as no surprise that all Abrahamic faiths have seen such discrimination. In Jewish biblical law a husband could divorce a wife if he chose to, but a wife could not divorce a husband without his consent. In Islam we still see Talaq, a unilateral repudiation of the wife by the husband which does not require the wife's consent. What I find interesting is that in so many of these male-dominated societies there is nevertheless a reverence given to the matriarch - only this week a Muslim friend of mine has had to postpone a major event involving a large number of guests because, sadly and unexpectedly, his mother has died and he has hastened back immediately to Bangladesh. The Roman Catholic church has not fought institutionally against discrimination of women yet reveres Mary, mother of Jesus. Women cannot become priests and, although that is now different in the Anglican church, it has changed there only in living memory.

Maybe because it is so uncontroversial it has gone largely unnoticed but only by the Succession to the Crown Act 2013 (which came into effect in 2015) was the primogeniture law of succession to the British throne (which had entitled only male heirs to become monarch) altered so that for those in the line of succession born after 28 October 2011 the eldest child, regardless of gender, precedes any siblings. We may look back to a supposed golden age of Elizabeth I but she became Queen only because her younger half-brother Edward VI had come to the throne first and neither she nor Mary had any other male siblings.

In so many fields there is still so much catching up to do before we can declare that women hold their rightful place equal to men.

My condemnation of this discrimination which I voiced at the beginning is based not just on ethical grounds, although I believe these to be paramount, but also on economic ones. According to the UN Development Programme the Afghan economy lost 5 billion US dollars since August 2021, wiping out in less than a year "what had taken it 10 years to accumulate". As the report states about the cost of excluding women: "No country has prospered by leaving half of its population behind, and the loss to the Afghan economy alone is estimated at a billion dollars a year in addition to any future losses through limits placed on education, skills, dignities and capabilities investments."

In neighbouring Iran under another perverted form of Islam there are some 1200 girls in hospital and the youthful unrest continues following the death by the Iranian authorities of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16 while in police custody for allegedly wearing a head scarf improperly. It is another example of ageing male clerics seeking to humiliate women and deny them their rights. We should salute and support the women of Iran.

I have never understood why certain men feel so uncomfortable about having educated and sophisticated women as their equals unless they are fearful of their own inadequacies being exposed in comparison.

Advances have been made. We have the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. It entered into force as an international treaty on 3 September 1981 after the twentieth country had ratified it. By the tenth anniversary of the Convention in 1989, almost one hundred nations had agreed to be bound by its provisions. The Convention currently has 189 states parties. Thus, the vast majority of the member states of the UN (193) have voluntarily agreed to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of women under all circumstances. The six UN member states that have not ratified or acceded to the convention are Iran, Palau, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga, and the United States. The one UN non-member state that had not acceded to the convention is the Holy See/Vatican City. We must do all that we can to bring these states on board and to scrutinise those are bound by it to ensure that they respect its provisions.

May we all, women and men together, have the strength and perseverance to succeed.