

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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The importance of equality and freedom in the Commonwealth and throughout the rest of the world cannot ever be stressed enough. It is one of the cornerstones of modern democratic society, and as such must remain one of the foremost ideals towards which we constantly strive. Women have been subjected to discriminatory treatment since the beginning of time, and instilled within the mindsets of far too many is a tendency to equate femininity with inferiority, and whether by values instilled through cultural or religious dogma, it is unfortunately an idea that is very well entrenched.

The issue comes linked with a multitude of other problems; whereas in the developed world the recognition of women's rights and equality focuses mainly upon employment and empowerment, in the impoverished nations of the developing world it bears huge consequences. To firstly take the pressing issue of women's education into consideration it's a simple conclusion that there are great correlations between literacy levels and the types of employment to be expected by women seeking jobs, and therefore to their income levels. Looking further though, the effects of poor education and literacy are widespread, and in many cases entirely unexpected. As an example, it has been found to be linked to the explosive population growth in much of the world; India being a prime example, where there is a female literacy rate of 54.16% as of 2001 coinciding with one of the world's most rapidly expanding populations, expected to hit 1.7 billion by 2050. As well as this, Women within India are subjected to a variety of injustices, tradition requiring them often to eat last and last in their families, resulting in a cycle of malnutrition which is passed on from generation to generation. This is the same nation in which a male dominated view of society has possibly caused the abortion of around 10 million female births over the last twenty years; and why? what has allowed for the justification of such a tragedy? what are the consequences of having a society which is now not only intellectually dominated by men, but numerically so as well?

Or to take much of developing Africa, where the education of women is severely limited by different cultural values and economic conditions. With rapidly

expanding populations comes the often forced responsibility of remaining within the home and acting as the sole caretaker of a large family. This, coupled with the fact that having many children requires more resources and more time, diminishes the opportunities for advancement in society tenfold. This bears its own ramifications; Thinking sequentially one will realize that without time, participation in any democratic system becomes difficult, getting a proper education becomes difficult, finding jobs becomes difficult, and achieving any form of equality becomes nearly impossible. Women within Uganda are at this very moment trying to have a bill passed in government that will only now abolish forced marriages and grant them the right to divorce their husbands on grounds of cruelty, amongst other things, a change which runs straight into the traditions and the moral outlook of the nation. It's been pending for 45 years. Even in examining developed nations, such as the United Kingdom or Canada, one may see that there is a great discrepancy between the amount of men and the amount of women holding office in the government. Canada rests at 20th place on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, down from 14th in 2006. The U.K. places at 15th, Sri Lanka at 16th.

It's not just statistics though, not solely employment and politics. The physical and emotional abuse of women runs rampant throughout the world, and remains as one of the most shameful facets of the inequality they face on a daily basis. About three million young girls are forced to undergo female genital mutilation every year, with nearly 24,000 at risk within the United Kingdom alone. The abuse of women plays a key role in the degradation of their rights, with both lasting physical and psychological effects. It is a manifestation of the disregard for the idea of human equality, and therefore serves only to perpetuate further injustices. In many countries it is completely overlooked, or is generally accepted as a valid means to resolve conflict or exert power within the family. Women within these countries often do not have the organization or the representation in government to speak up in their own defense.

In India and Bangladesh, two countries well known for extremely high levels of child marriage, the International Centre for Research on Women has noted that girls married before the age of eighteen are nearly twice as likely to report instances of domestic abuse as those married at a more advanced age. This bears true even despite laws put in place against the tradition; it continues on without heeding the apparent desire of the government to put a stop to such practices. In many cases it is both economic and traditional circumstances which cause parents to believe that it would be more beneficial to marry their daughters young. They wish to find a husband who might support their daughter, thinking that their perceived inability to achieve a sufficient income would be in the future a burden to the parents. In many cases this "perceived inability" is actually a reality, as in fact the opportunities for employment or the necessary education are few and far between. But in some cases this isn't so,

free education and decent jobs are available; resources which can give a girl the power to contribute in just as equal a manner. Yet the practice continues. Pushing a child into an early marriage invariably spells death to any sort of chance they might have for advancement.

The Commonwealth considers the improvement of the female condition to be an integral part in the development of a robust and democratic world community. As such, their rights, and most crucially the very idea of their equality as human beings must be fought for.

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