



Arab women must rise up against their oppressors

National Post March 7, 2011

By Avi Benlolo

Democracy in the west could not have arisen without the liberation of women. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published the first feminist declaration of independence, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The author, a major influence in the feminist movement, made history by seizing the moment and connecting with the cathartic social revolutions already taking place in England, France and the United States.

The French Revolution of 1789 saw the collapse of the monarchy, the stranglehold of religion and the introduction of inalienable rights brought upon by masses of people on the streets — not unlike the movements we have witnessed recently in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and other countries in the Arab world. Similarly, the American Revolution of 1775 and the resulting independence of the United States was, in part, a social, political and intellectual transformation to shake off Britain and create a free and democratic society. Wollstonecraft was able to synthesize these cataclysmic changes from London, the epicentre of the evolution of democratic freedom (starting with the Magna Carta in 1215) which eventually saw an end to absolute monarchy, just as the nation was speeding through the Industrial Revolution and social and parliamentary reform. The author took full advantage of the changing social climate by publishing a manifesto that would give a voice to women and eventually lead to their full and equal rights.

In similar fashion, this is the time for the Wollstonecrafts in the Arab world to raise their voices and demand their freedom. Wollstonecraft had many vicious detractors in her day who fought to maintain the status quo and the subjugation of women by keeping them illiterate and in domestic slavery, financially dependent and insecure. But if the Arab protesters are truly calling for freedom and democracy, it must surely include women — who appear in nightly newscasts standing shoulder to shoulder with men on the Arab street demanding the very same.

They must insist on the right to vote, an end to gender apartheid, to honour killings, to stoning and to acid throwing, and to inequality in the courts and in the

schools. They must gain their freedom in order to live a full life and to bring about true democracy.

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her book more than 200 years ago. Unfortunately, she saw very little change in her life to ease the plight of women; the campaign for women's suffrage took many years and unimaginable commitment by many women and men. In England, for instance, it took 136 years from the time of her book's publication for women to finally receive the right to vote in 1928. It was not until 1979 that women's suffrage was explicitly stated as a right by the United Nations under the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination.

Freedom is never given; it is taken. The awakening in the Arab world is miraculous and women must seize this moment to achieve their rights and freedoms now, while the whole world is watching and cheering them on.

National Post

Avi Benlolo is the president and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.