

The Montreal

The Gazette

Women in Africa and the Middle East have little to celebrate

By AVI BENLOLO, Freelance March 8, 2010

Will women living in apartheid-like conditions throughout the Middle East and Africa know that today is International Women's Day - the day the world is supposed to celebrate equal rights and opportunities for all women? The chances are very slim in countries like Morocco, where every second woman is illiterate. Saudi women, on the other hand, will need a note of permission from a man or a chaperone to attend a public celebration in their honour.

In Guinea, many women might frown at International Women's Day upon recalling this past September's brutality in the capital city of Conakry. Government security forces there are accused of killings and mass rape at an opposition rally where women were methodically targeted. The victims described being kicked, pummelled with fists and beaten before, during, and after the sexual assaults. Where was our outrage?

In the Middle East and Africa, deeply entrenched societal norms combined with conservative interpretations of religion relegate women to subordinate status. Women are significantly under-represented in senior positions in politics, business, and the judiciary. They face gender-based discrimination in personal-status laws and are subordinate to their husbands, who have control over their right to work, travel, and sexual relations.

And, let us not forget the prevalence of "honour killings" - the murder of women when it is believed they brought "dishonour" upon their families. Reasons might include infidelity, refusal of an arranged marriage, or non-conformity to family values. Statistics about honour killings are fragmented and largely under-reported or reported as domestic violence. A special UN report found that honour killings continue to occur throughout the Middle East and the Gulf region.

The dominance of men over women in the Middle East and Africa is best exemplified by the personal account of Ayaan Hirsi Ali in her book, *Infidel*. She tells of her escape from the shackles of religious submission in Mogadishu, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya to freedom in the Netherlands and then to America. She discusses in gruesome detail her own genital mutilation, brutal beatings, forced marriage, and demonization by her family and community.

Ali's story is not unique to that part of the world. She was simply determined and had the courage to speak out, despite the murder of her good friend Theo Van Gogh upon the

release of their jointly produced film, Submission. Ali has dedicated her life to fighting for women's rights - she will certainly celebrate International Women's Day this year.

Another woman who defied all odds and will celebrate International Women's Day this year is my good friend Marina Nemat, author of Prisoner of Tehran. Nemat was a prisoner of the infamous Evin prison in Tehran in the early 1980s when she and her friends rebelled against the Islamic revolution. Nemat was beaten and forced to marry a prison guard - in the prison - under threat of execution and harm to her family.

Millions of women in the Middle East, Africa, and around the world never reach their potential because they remain uneducated and subjugated by state-sponsored oppression.

Interestingly, many countries known for their extreme views of women are also those that have failed to modernize and are usually run by totalitarian regimes; there is likely a correlation between the advancement of women and the status afforded to them, and the advancement of the societies in which they reside.

On International Women's Day, let all good women and men of conscience call out in opposition to nations who subjugate and oppress their own mothers, sisters, and daughters. The provision of rights and freedoms to women in the Middle East and Africa will bring with it an additional benefit - advancement, democratization, and peace.

Perhaps that's what many of the world's most dangerous regimes fear most.

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

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette