



Can Feminism be Saved?

By Avi Benlolo

Today is International Women's Day - a day to ostensibly celebrate women and promote equality. Unfortunately, it feels to me that women's rights are no longer of great concern to western intellectuals. Instead of taking the fight for women to the world stage, intellectual feminists in academia and beyond seem to care more about squashing democracies like Israel that safeguard women's rights. When faculty associations and unions on university campuses are more focused on promoting "divestment" and "boycotts" of the only safe haven for women in the Middle East, they are not just acting in an immoral manner - they are letting down women who are oppressed and marginalized.

Let's take a look at the plight of women in Saudi Arabia who suffer from gender apartheid. They cannot leave the country without the permission of a male elder. They cannot drive a car and they cannot travel unchaperoned. The World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report ranked Saudi Arabia 127 out of 136 countries for gender parity. In comparison to Canadian women who were liberated in 1917, Saudi women were finally given the vote and were allowed to run in local elections in 2015. Where were the feminists in all this time?

I also note very little care and concern emanating from the feminist movement regarding the global trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls. This is one of the fastest growing enterprises - not just in 134 countries around the world, but right here at home in Canada. In fact, Canadians were devastated to learn about horrific stories of hundreds of aboriginal women exploited, raped and murdered by criminal enterprises, as detailed in the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. According to statistics, about 20.9 million adults and children are bought and sold worldwide into commercial sexual servitude and forced labour. Women and girls make up 98% of victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Where is the feminist movement and the public outrage?

The Washington Post recently reported that 1,000 women die annually in honour killings in Pakistan. In one case, a pregnant 25 year old woman was stoned to death by her family because they disapproved of the man she loved and married. Approximately 83% of Pakistanis agree with stoning for adultery, while only 8% oppose it. And it's not just in Pakistan. Stoning and honour killings happen in many Islamic centered countries and the numbers of female victims are nearly impossible to quantify because the crime is often so pervasive. Even here in Canada honour killings occur: the case of Mohammed Shafia who, along with his wife and son killed four female relatives in a horrific honour killing by faking a car accident, comes

immediately to mind. Where is the university campaign against honour killings?

Women's lives have dramatically changed throughout the Arab world and the Middle East as Islamization and repression takes hold. In Turkey for example, once a bastion of secular rights, women are feeling the strain of conforming to traditional clothing - a far change from the climate of equality once so highly regarded in that country. In places like the Gaza Strip that is ruled by Hamas (designated by Canada as a terrorist group), women have had to contend with increasing repression and curtailing of rights and freedoms since Israel's withdrawal in 2005. Hamas has often been accused of Taliban-like repression in the Gaza Strip. Where are the feminists for Gaza?

Far from radiating out feminist principles, the western phenomenon has largely failed to ignite the fire of freedom and liberation for women around the world. Worse, it has left women vulnerable and oppressed in many countries where they continue to fight for equality on their own. Who remembers #BringBackOurGirls - the girls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram a few years ago? What happened to them? Where are the voices of the feminist intellectuals perched in their ivory towers crying out on their behalf?

They must have been distracted slamming Israel - the embodiment of the very people who spearheaded the feminist movement in the first place. Perhaps today is the day western feminists should turn their attention to the issues of gender apartheid, honour killings and sex slavery faced by millions of women worldwide.
