

How Goes It With Women Around the World?
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I am writing this on International Women's Day, March 8, a holiday I remember well from its start in 1975. In 1999, I was heading the UN Association of San Francisco, responsible for public lecturing about UN issues: what the UN can and cannot do.

The UN can set standards, but has no real enforcement mechanism, such as stopping a war or protecting citizens from abuse. It can provide help in emergencies: such as food in a famine, aid in natural disasters, and programs that provide vaccines against Polio, which it almost eradicated globally. And it does have an international court that has no enforcement provision. Obedience is voluntary.

Women's conditions became a global issue after modern countries began permitting women to vote. The emancipation of women from status of property to personhood has been slow but steady since the 1920s, except in those countries with dictators or religious rule. Dictators poison elections and all that goes with them, such as equality of women. But representative governments eventually put dictatorships out of business---until the next time.

The UN created the International Year of the Woman in 1975, and hosted a series of conferences, the first in Mexico City in 1975 and the fourth in Beijing, most notable because the American delegation was headed by Hillary Rodham Clinton. Before the conference, she solicited input from American universities, UN Associations, and women's societies. Most notable was Clinton's speech, in which she said that "women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights." This notion offended delegations from religious fundamentalist countries, who stood up and walked out.

Progress for women has been very uneven around the world. Even in 2023, in countries such as the United States, the battle against women's equality still rages. The two forces against recognizing the equal humanity of women and men are political conservatism and religious fundamentalism.

Political conservatism has its roots in the belief that the past was better than the present, particularly on gender issues. Political progressives believe that the future will be better than the past, and have been in the forefront of improving the status and lives of women. Historically, the progressives have dominated modern governments, which puts them in the majority as voters. Polls confirm this.

Formerly progressive, the US suffers from a flawed democracy. Elections are not determined by simple majority votes; rather we have a system that grants equal power to states, regardless of population, which gives us the undemocratic Electoral College and the US Senate. In elections, we see the gap between Electoral College numbers and popular vote. Our flawed democracy is responsible for the reversal of laws supporting women's autonomy and the unpopular and undue power of the gun lobby.

A law with a 50-year history that gave women autonomy over their bodies (Roe v Wade) was overturned by an unseemly conservative Supreme Court, again a flaw in democracy. Now the various states can decide whether women have the right to abortion or not---an issue that should be medical and not political. We now have the spectacle of formerly conservative and autocratic Latin American countries catching up to the liberation of women while the US is retreating to the bad old past.

The world is going through a phase of retreating from democracy to autocracy, as we see in Hungary, Poland, and Russia, and liberalization in China is in retreat as a leader rids himself of any competition. I believe this is a phase which will be reversed once more.

Conventional religion has had a parallel fate, with progressivism seeking to provide more equality and democratization. But orthodox religion is punching back. Reactionary Islam has completely reversed the modernization of Afghanistan, returning women to the traditional status of slaves.

Angry progressives are demonstrating in dictatorships and religious fundamentalist states such as Iran and Turkey, and in democracies such as Israel, fighting against fundamentalists and an authoritarian elected president seeking to cancel judicial independence.

When women are the canaries in the coal mines, their loss of equality endangers democracy and progress everywhere. History is on their side. Human rights indeed include women's rights.

686 words

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