

## Equality nudge needed at home

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The progress and celebration of egalitarianism in the Muslim world affords those of us in the West another chance to consider what equality of opportunity for men and women can look like in our own homes, offices and communities.

Bridges Social Development, a Calgary-based humanitarian organization, offers training to women in the Middle East and Africa and routinely participates in initiatives to foster equality of opportunity for men and women in Muslim communities.

It has been a joy for Bridges volunteers to share in the celebration of these freshly earned rights. But, sharing this journey with our Muslim colleagues has also afforded bittersweet insight into the seemingly stalled western equality movement.

Canadians are superb advocates for equal rights in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Africa. But, why do we not manifest this egalitarian passion vis-a-vis women in our own communities, even young girls in our own homes?

Why are we not disappointed that so few Canadian women chose to run for political office in the last federal election? Why is it occupational suicide to observe the presence of a glass ceiling within a Canadian corporate work environment or industry associations?

Why is the face of poverty in Canada largely female? Put simply, the paradox is how to reconcile ostensible Canadian apathy for the imbedding of equality of opportunities in our own communities versus our fervent support of equal rights in other, including Muslim, communities.

Western advocacy in support of these rights for Muslim women is powerful and unequivocal. We are outraged by female genital mutilation and honour killings in Africa; we are infuriated by the denial of education to women and girls in Afghanistan; we are provoked by Saudi Arabia's denial of women's right to drive.

We may never fully understand the place for feminism in a Muslim community, and we may even be guilty of projecting our own values on Muslim sisters -- for example, assuming women in hijab are oppressed when it is very possible their individual choice to wear a veil or a chador is a manifestation of their faith. But, our western support for global equality is largely bona fide and authentic.

The globalization of equal rights is being achieved. Recent events marking the incremental steps -- even quantum strides forward -- in the progression of equality of rights for men and women in the Muslim world disclose a growing momentum. Even in the past few months, Bridges has been invited to:

- Share our training experiences with attendees of a human rights conference for Middle Eastern and North African countries hosted by Yemen's Minister of Human Rights in December 2005. The objective of the conference was to build clarity and regional alignment on women's political and legal rights;

- Participate in the animated celebration of International Women's Day in Yemen's capital on March 8;

- Contribute to a global leadership conference for women hosted this March in Abu Dhabi by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahayan of the United Arab Emirates. Eighty-seven countries were represented, and the initiative was endorsed by the direct engagement of such female luminaries as Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan, Mary Robinson of Ireland and Cherie Booth of Britain.

Women in the Middle East now taste the sweet victory of scoring human rights -- the right to primary, secondary and post-secondary education, the right to vote and to hold political office, the right of non-discriminatory access to work and to justice. Some of the braver women at these gatherings even admonish radical Islamists "who seek to hijack the goal of mothers to enable a better life for their daughters." Female pioneers in the Middle East are lauded for their selfless acts of courage in demanding equality for men and women.

The establishment of quotas for female political representation in many Middle Eastern and North African governments is now a legislated norm, not an exception. Women are increasingly seeking participation in informal power structures.

The challenge for all communities -- in the East and in the West -- is identifying how to foster confidence and risk-taking in female and male leaders. Canada must follow in the footsteps of many other countries that have followed our advice, acted on our principles.

We, too, must be a culture where limiting beliefs about equality are truthfully evaluated, both at a community level and within the hearts and minds of individuals. This I have no doubt we can do. Our Muslim sisters think so, too.

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