

Davos 2006, Gender Issues and Female Evangelism

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Like every year, I came to Davos with hope, holding in my portfolio the belief that “women’s issues matter.” I greatly admire the way in which Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum, envisaged the need for an informal setting to have a dialogue amongst the leaders of the world. Since its inception in 1971, the WEF has emerged as an evolving center of world debate and global dialogue. WEF is indeed a place where we can search for answers, where we can realize the diversity of opinions and their confluence, where we can see the human face of the men and women who lead the world. Over the past three years I have taken on the role of a “women’s evangelist” at Davos with the belief that I could perhaps make a difference in my own way.

Three years ago, when I was asked to speak at the opening plenary of the WEF along with Jack Straw, Nigerian President Obasanju, James Wolfensohn and Carly Fiorina, I was obviously thrilled by the opportunity. I chose as my theme the growing concern of poverty and its link to world security and the fact that today’s scientific and technological advancement could ensure solutions for the eradication of poverty, provided we all had the will to do it! In addition, I emphasized the need for greater participation of women in all spheres, particularly at the policy making level. I was particularly proud to mention at that time that in my country, Pakistan, 22% of the seats in the parliament were held by women, which is a far better statistic than even that of Western Europe where, at best, 14% of the representatives in the parliament are women. I stressed my dream that in my lifetime I wished to see poverty relegated to a museum. I believe and still do that if we correctly utilize our resources and leverage on advances in human knowledge and combine it with political will, we can still realize this dream.

It was great to appreciate that one year later, at the next WEF meeting, the emphasis I had placed on poverty eradication was reflected in the global agenda for 2005. Speaker after speaker at the Forum emphasized the interconnectedness of the world and how inequity, particularly in terms of wealth distribution, could hold hostage all the advances made in economic development. President Clinton spoke extremely eloquently about the tsunami and how he had been able to raise millions of dollars through the Internet, in other words emphasizing that individuals do carry influence, that individuals do matter. I wish that the world had been equally generous in the support of the earthquake that affected Northern Pakistan; however, it was heartening to see that the WEF has set up a special disaster committee to raise funds for the earthquake survivors this year. President Clinton’s message was indeed one of hope and was combined with the positive political changes that were taking place in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt with its first free and multi-party election. Leaders from the Muslim world spoke about the need for having democracy, eradicating extremism, building human talent, providing jobs and doing more to improve Islam’s image in the West.

With all that as a backdrop, I arrived at the WEF 2006 with a great sense of hope. I believed that, together, the leaders of the world could resolve the issues that plague over 4 billion people, especially those issues that affect women. One of the themes at Davos this year was “New mindsets and changing attitudes.” Is this rhetoric or does this really mean something? I was struck by the words of Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard University, who said that increasingly we live in a world that is governed more by fear than by hope. The debate on mindsets explained that we live in a world of four different mindsets that are competing against each other for power. These include the mindset of modernity, the mindset of egotism (which relates to any form of “ism,” e.g., communism, fascism etc),, the religious mindset and the mindset of interconnectedness amongst the

people of the world. There is also a strong belief that politics, particularly democracy, as perceived by the West can deliver the answers. However, we are all aware that after 1991, 30 different African countries were practically forced into democracy and a majority of them ended up as tyrannies! So does the problem lie with Africa or with democracy? The question in my mind was whether democracy could deliver on women's issues. Looking over to India, I had realized that perhaps democracy alone was not the answer, for gender inequity continues to be an irritant in the eye of the Indian subcontinent.

Armed with these thoughts, I participated in the session on eradicating Islamic extremism. Panelists emphasized that extremism was not about Islam and that "terrorist" in Muslim countries had wrongly taken on the role of being vanguards of the Islamic world. Some panelists emphasized the need for changing rhetoric around this issue and doing away with the language of condemnation. However, Al Hasani, the leader of the newly elected National Assembly in Iraq, had a very interesting point that religious parties should be allowed to be part of the political process. He referred in particular to the role President Nasser had played in popularizing the Muslim Brotherhood when their leaders were imprisoned and the organization banned in Egypt. These thoughts were also echoed by President Musharraf in his address on Muslim societies in the modern world. In this whole debate not once the "extremism" practiced against women in many Muslim countries was mentioned. I raised this point with a representative of Saudi Arabia and asked him when would women be allowed to drive vehicles in his country? The curt response I got was when women in Saudi Arabia come out on the streets to demand this right! From my own experience of being in Saudi Arabia, I know that's not going to happen soon! It was only later that Queen Rania mentioned in another session that one way of addressing this issue was by revamping curriculum and educational systems in the Muslim world.

The reply from the Saudi official reminded me of a question that I had posed three years ago to the president of Pakistan about eradicating discriminatory laws against women. At that time, he had responded by saying that it was women like me who needed to raise this issue and that the onus of this change really was with the civil society in Pakistan. I had the opportunity of listening to the president yet again this year. He was able to speak on many topics, and it is good to see the evolution of our president from a military man, a man of war as he referred to himself, to that of an economist, a sociologist, an anthropologist and ultimately to that of a politician. He spoke eloquently about democracy, human rights, terrorism, economic development and peace. There is no doubt that the Pakistani economy is showing signs of sustained recovery and the roles of women are becoming more visible. There is no doubt that laws like the law governing honour killings will make a difference for women, but will this law be implemented in the spirit with which it was promulgated if many judges continue to believe that honour killings are socially acceptable? It is simply not enough to promulgate laws. Leaders need to make tough choices in tough places. With his usual sense of humour when asked to define leadership, the President said that above all else the leader needs "luck" on his side. After much raising of my hand, I was allowed to ask the president of Pakistan whether he would repeal the Hudood Ordinance and whether there were ways of strengthening the role of an independent judiciary in Pakistan. He responded to me very much like the Saudi Arabian prince by saying that in his view the judiciary is completely independent and that he believes he had done a great deal for women in Pakistan as mentioned earlier. I guess from such answers it appears there is no problem of gender anywhere in the world, and especially not in the Muslim world, and perhaps it is time for me to go back to theoretical economics and forget about gender inequity.