

Women's Rights: Where We Are and Where We Are Headed

Alice Bonvicini (October 04, 2010)



The Italian Cultural Institute of New York held a symposium about women's rights, equality, and empowerment. Participants included the Italian Minister for Equal Opportunity Mara Carfagna and Emma Bonino, Vice President of the Italian Senate and co-founder of No Peace Without Justice

On Friday September 24, on the occasion of the 65th United Nations General Assembly, the Italian Cultural Institute hosted the International Conference on the Protection of Women's Rights.

Minister for Equal Opportunities, Mara Carfagna, opened the event with an historical overview on women's rights on both sides of the Atlantic. She stressed Italy's paramount role in the protection of women's rights, especially its commitment to eradicating the practice of female genital mutilation. In that regard, Emma Bonino, Vice President of the Italian Senate and co-founder of [No Peace Without](#)



[Justice](#) [2], an Italian non-profit organization whose mission is to protect and promote human rights, spoke of the importance of passing a UN general resolution calling for a worldwide ban on FGM. “Female genital mutilation, beyond health and psychological consequences, is a violation of human rights,” said Bonino. She also acknowledged how in the last several years the “wall of silence” surrounding FGM has collapsed, although the difficulty in bringing together international forces to end the practice remains intact.

Prof. Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Hon. Flavia Lattanzi, Judge for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and Prof. Susan Akram, Boston University School of Law, spoke about women within the framework of international law. They touched on the landmark UNSC Resolution No. 1325 which plays a key role in preventing and resolving conflict while protecting women from gender-based violence. Prof. Anderlini stated, “If half of the world faces discrimination and violence, we can’t say we have peace.” Recent UN peacekeeping efforts that have seen an increase in women’s participation and have incorporated gender perspectives. While Lattanzi and Akram acknowledge the lack of positive news with respect to the state of women’s protection in extraordinary situations such as wartime violence and political refugees, Suzanne Goldberg, Columbia University, who also moderated the afternoon session, argued that in 10 years the outlook on women’s rights could be brighter if we managed to include cultural identities within a global framework in the women’s rights discourse.

During the afternoon session, President Emeritus of the Constitutional Court of Italy, Antonio Baldassarre spoke of the unconstitutional nature of gender based discrimination, and Hope Lewis, Northeastern University, discussed the economical, social, and cultural aspects of trans-national women’s rights in the English-speaking Caribbean. Rachel N. Mayanja, [Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the UN on Gender Issues](#) [3], acknowledged the many forms of discrimination women face but stressed the importance of closing “the gap between rhetoric and action, between commitment and implementation.” Along with the UN, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ([IACHR](#) [4]), represented by Dinah Shelton, George Washington University, is highly committed to the promotion and protection of women’s human rights. Angela del Vecchio’s paper analyzed the correlation between women’s rights and the values of each geographical region, from Europe to the Americas. Federiga Bindi from the Italian National School of Public Administration broadened the perspective on women’s leadership and stressed the importance of being assertive and developing an active voice. It was a point also expressed earlier by Emma Bonino, who said that the limit to women’s empowerment is not due the lack of qualified players but lies in that there are men who are already in power and are unwilling to give it up. “Women have fully demonstrated they can be leaders,” Bonino said, “and the only path to leadership is by taking the risk and reclaiming that power.”

Italian dignitaries attending the event included Ambassador of Italy to the US Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata, Director of the Italian Cultural Institute Riccardo Viale, and Consul General of Italy Francesco Maria Talò. The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini, closed the conference reiterating the priority of women’s rights in the past, present, and future of Italian foreign policy. He concluded by underscoring that the protection of women is inextricably linked to peace, sustainable development, growth, democracy, and stability. For this reason, Frattini asserted that gender issues should be at the top of the international agenda and stated that “it is not just something to protect half of population, it is something we must do to protect all of our interests.” And if the condition of women worldwide is directly connected to the well-being of humanity as a whole, it should, in fact, be a top priority for the UN.

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