

By Iga Motylska

Women's Wishbone: It Could Go Either Way

Gone are the days of gold medals for childbearing; gone, also, are the days of bra burning. These days the role of women and men are largely similar, save for childbirth. Women have long moved from the home into parliaments, boardrooms, the armed forces and space shuttles.

Despite this, much needs to be done for women's rights in the workplace so they may make their own path in business; shatter the glass ceiling and overcome the green ceiling—whereby male-led companies receive more investments than female-led companies.

The female politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists and entertainers featured on FORBES' 'The World's 100 Most Powerful Women' list, have done just that. Looking into the future, the African Union's Women and Gender Development Directorate wants gender equality in the corridors of power in each of its member states by 2020.

Too often women's rights are a write-off. A world away from progressive gender reform; women live in patriarchal societies. In some Islamic countries, women cannot attend school; open a bank account; marry or leave the country without the permission of a male guardian. Women are also not allowed to vote, drive or hold public office.

Change is in the air. FIFA recently allowed Muslim women to play soccer in headscarves; while last year the International Weightlifting Federation allowed women to cover their arms and legs. For the first time, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei allowed women to compete in the Olympics, in London. A little late in the day, considering women

have taken part in the Games since 1900. While, at the time, they could only compete in lawn tennis and golf; in this year's Olympics women have the upper hand: they were allowed to compete in any sport, while men—personally, I don't see why—are not allowed to compete in synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics. Women will compete in ski jumping at the 2014 winter Olympics, to be held in Russia.

While much is being done to ensure gender equality in sport, there are numerous cases in which women are incapacitated by religion and law.

Culture can put a heavy burden on women. Niger has the highest birth rate in the world, yet it's one of the top 10 poorest countries, with a GDP of \$5.55 billion, according to the World Bank. Population growth remains high in Africa and having many offspring is considered a blessing; however artificial birth control, sex education and family planning need to play a bigger role in order to help minimize poverty. Africa is a continent where half the population are children and the average woman bears five children.

Women should have the right to make decisions regarding childbearing and the use of artificial birth control: male condoms may also prevent the spread of STDs and HIV. Melinda Gates—number six on FORBES' 'The World's 100 Most Powerful Women' list—in hand with the United Nations Population Fund is empowering women. They aim to help 120 million African women in reproductive health issues and to minimize the number of women—over half a million globally—who die in childbirth each year.

There are many other traditional

viewpoints which relegate women into silence and submission. Female genital mutilation (FGM) for one. Its aim is simple: to reduce a woman's libido, decrease her sexual pleasure and to prevent premarital sexual intercourse. Not only is it a human rights violation but it also poses many health risks, especially if done under unhygienic circumstances. FGM is practiced in 28 countries worldwide, most of which are in the Horn of Africa, North Eastern parts of the continent and the Middle East. While proclaimed a criminal offence in Sweden, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States; there are 92 million incidents in Africa alone, according to the World Health Organization.

Overall, according to the World Economic Forum 'Global Gender Gap Index' Lesotho is the best country in Africa to live in as a woman and Chad the worst. Essentially, women have to be proactive in ensuring that their rights are not compromised; gender should not be a millstone, rather than a keystone. 

Birth control is the first important step woman must take toward the goal of her freedom. It is the first step she must take to be man's equal. It is the first step they must both take toward human emancipation.

Margaret Sanger, "Morality and Birth Control", *Birth Control Review*, Feb-Mar., 1918