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“The Road towards Equality for Women”

It's been 25 years since the adoption of the international convention on women's rights, yet no country in the world has achieved full equality for women – either in law or in practice.

Can the United Nations advance the agenda of equal rights for women, and if so, how? Is progress being made – in education for girls, and political participation of women, for example? What can be done when discrimination against women is part of deeply-rooted customs and traditions?

These are some of the questions explored in this edition of World Chronicle in the company of Turkish academic Feride Açar, the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

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Zeeba

JENKINS: Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins.

It's been 25 years since the adoption of the international convention on women's rights...but no country in the world has achieved full equality for women – either in law or in practice. Can the United Nations advance the agenda of equal rights for women, and if so, how? Is progress being made – in education for girls, and political participation of women, for example?

Here today to help us answer some of these questions is Feride Açar, who is the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, also known as CEDAW.

Joining us in the studio are Judy Lessing, a correspondent for *Radio New Zealand* and a veteran of several UN peacekeeping missions, and Linda Fasulo, of *NBC*.

Dr. Açar... It's obvious to me why women want equality. It's not so obvious to me why men should give it to them. Can we start there? Can you tell me what's in it for men?

AÇAR: Well, I will try. First of all, what I would say is that men and women do not exist in different worlds they exist in the same world, so they share the same context, the same situations and if women were to have equality with men then it would be a better world for all.

JENKINS: In what ways?

AÇAR: For many reasons because, first of all, economically speaking just... if you make an analogy to an individual household, if there are two people working and earning money that makes for better living. And the same is true for countries and for the world in general. Women have been working and have been contributing all over the world, in fact, more than men since time started but they haven't been getting paid for it. And if they get paid for it, I think it would be better for everyone, for prosperity, for alleviation of poverty and all that. But not only that. On the psychological front too, if women and men were equal then men would have a chance to realize their full potential too. Women certainly would be entering into the public world, getting into politics and working and all that, but men have a lot to gain from this too because then they can become real people who don't have to confine themselves to offices or to political activities only but who can be members of families, who can be fathers and who can be full individuals.

JENKINS: I happen to agree with you, I think women's liberation has actually also been the liberation of men. But it that's the case, why is it that twenty-five years on from the signing of the convention there is still so much disparity in so many parts of the world where we ...nowhere in the world, as we said at the top of the show, have women achieved full equality. Why is that?

AÇAR: Well, what I would say is that first of all this is a difficult message to get across. It takes time for people to realize that things actually work this way and one of the reasons is because we are all used to having set positions in life and according to that ... in the existing structures some are considered powerful others are considered less powerful. Men are seen as powerful, they see themselves as powerful and they do not want to change that position, obviously nobody wants to relinquish power easily, and so they resist it. This is one area. But secondly, it's also because they cannot even, in many parts of the world imagine another kind of world. And they do not have any idea about what they are missing, if we are talking about what they are missing, that is often attributed to tradition to the way things have always been and so that's difficult to change. That doesn't happen overnight and we have to really work at it. Both men and women have to work at it.

JENKINS: Judy..

LESSING: But traditionally.... It's difficult isn't it... You use the term tradition, which I'm sure we've all used, and yet some traditions we might consider to be good traditions and some are perfectly lousy that we would want to get rid of. How do you differentiate between the two when we are coming from different parts of the world and we have different standards and if you like, different traditions?

AÇAR: That is true. And I'm very glad you mentioned that and you are entirely right. I agree that there are good traditions and there are bad traditions. As far as we are concerned in the CEDAW Committee, or among people who are working on women's rights, traditions that discriminate against women are bad traditions and they need to be changed, they need to be modified. And in fact, this is why we have these international conventions. States have promised to change these traditions.

LESSING: Can you tell us what sort of traditions you would want to have changed?

AÇAR: Anything that is discriminatory, meaning anything that restricts women; anything that treats women unequally; obviously anything that involves violence against women; anything that prevents women from making decisions about their own bodies and about their own lives as individuals; anything that considers women only extensions of families, for instance, and not as individual human beings in their own right. These are discriminatory traditions.

FASULO: Can I ask you just....looking around the world, where do you see perhaps some of the more dramatic achievements that have been made, particularly, I would say in what traditional societies?

AÇAR: It's difficult to actually name places. But what I would say is that all over the world we see a trend that is towards improvement of these and towards changing of traditions. But in those areas where there has been greater contact with universalized norms, I think the achievements have been better because traditions are a way of sort of keeping societies sometimes away from universal principles and something like the convention the CEDAW Convention talks about the universal rights of women all over the world. They are the same for all women. They are supposed to be the same for all women no matter where they live. And societies that have opened up more towards the universal standards are where we see considerable achievement. But other factors also: economics, of course, is also a big force in this; poverty is difficult to fight against and when people are fighting poverty they have unfortunately a way of keeping to traditions that help perpetuate poverty too. So those need to be broken. But it's very difficult to say....

JENKINS: Feride Açar, I can understand why you need to be a diplomat. Fortunately we don't have to be diplomats. CEDAW presumably monitors the compliance with the Convention. Can't you name names? I mean which are the worst offenders? If not names, at least give us some regions where things aren't progressing as fast as they should be.

AÇAR: What I can do is that, and it's not because I'm a diplomat because I'm not a diplomat, I'm an academic and academics are known to say their minds. The thing is that it's really not possible to give names of countries or regions as progressing on all accounts. Some countries, some regions progress on some accounts. For instance, in the Western world in the ...

in Europe and in the United States and Canada and Australia and New Zealand, in places like that, there is considerable advancement with respect to political rights. OK? With respect to women being open to public sphere but then we can always question these places where economic rights of women are as much realized as their political rights

JENKINS: But surely, those places that you just mentioned are opening up the work place to women? Is that the part of the problem? As they are doing it they are not supporting them? In other words, for example, in this country, in the United States, about fifty percent of the workforce is female. The country relies on it. Without those women in the workforce the economy would collapse. But at the same time we haven't seen, if you like, the support structure that frees women from some of the chores at home. So in fact we are expecting women to fulfill that role in the public sphere and at the same time still fulfill their traditional role. Is that what you are driving at?

AÇAR: That is very much true. And that leads to women being burdened with double responsibilities, triple responsibilities and thereby really forcing women to cope with unrealistic expectations. But that's not all the case. Even those societies where there is fifty percent or more of participation of women in the labour force, the question to ask is that, what kinds of jobs do women hold? Do they have the same kinds of jobs? The same type of pay? Do they receive the same pay for the jobs that they are performing? And nowadays, we are talking - the standard we use is not equal pay for equal work any more. It's equal pay for work of equal value because men and women all over the world, because of tradition, have done different kinds of work and so are nurses less valuable than doctors? Or are those professions or jobs that women have... I mean, that women are more found in, less valuable than positions or jobs that men are found in?

LESSING: Like teachers, for example. I mean, there is a group of people who certainly in this country and in my country are overwhelmingly women.

AÇAR: Exactly. All over the world we see that those positions, those professions where women are the overwhelming majority, the pay scale is less than those where men are. So that is inequality for you, that is discrimination for you. It's not only a concept of what we need to be concerned

about, it's not only some abstract sense of inequality, it is whether there is discrimination and where there's restriction....

FASULO: Moving a little bit, perhaps from economic discrimination or women's role and the economy to women's roles at home, sort of their very personal lives, how prevalent is it these days around the world for women to be very restricted in terms of laws that affect marriage and divorce? For example, we know that in parts of the world polygamy is acceptable. I mean, where do women stand - I mean, on these kinds of issues? Is progress being made in terms of reaching these women?

AÇAR: Yes, there is progress being made. But of course, the private sphere, the family life is where most women's lives around the world unfold. And so what happens, good things or bad things that happen to women, mostly happen in the private sphere. And, for instance, violence against women that we so much aware of in the world now is primarily taking place in the home situation and women are getting violent responses, women are being treated violently by their most intimate partners in most cases. So when you look at it from that perspective it is difficult to say that one region is better than any other region coming back to your question. But then violence against women, wife battering or whatever you want to call it, you know, in the household, is prevalent all over the world and different forms of other kinds of violence can be found in some regions and not in other regions. But this, for instance, the home situation unfortunately contains the worst violence against women all over the world.

JENKINS: Judy I know you want to jump in... but I just want to follow-up on what Linda was asking because you are something of an expert on women in Islam, you come from Turkey. There is a perception around the world certainly in the west, perhaps, given some prejudices that I think have become accentuated since 9/11 that there are some incompatibility in Islam between the rights of women and their religion. Is that the case?

AÇAR: Well, yeah. Let me just first say that I'm not an authority on Islam or on women in Islam, but I do come from a Muslim country, a country where everyone is Muslim more or less....

JENKINS: But you've written about it?

AÇAR: I have written on women in the Islamic movements and that sort of thing. So, well your question is basically, "Is there something is

Islam that is discriminatory against women?" I think there is something that is discriminatory towards women in all religions. And that is something that all monotheistic religions share, Islam, Christianity and Judaism and others. And there have been strides ... some of the issues that are most striking to most of us - like polygamy, like unequal inheritance, are of course allowable under Islam. So, the key here, is that countries and states that have laws that are based on Islamic principles sometimes have a harder time adapting to what I call the universal standards and they are slower in adapting. But strides are being made in that direction. You know, in many countries like in Egypt, also in Morocco there have been laws passed on limiting polygamy, actually making it practically difficult and impossible for facilitating or making divorce easier for women. So these things are being done in the Islamic world as well, and one danger that one should avoid falling in is, in the aftermath of 9/11, to think that violence against women or women's confinement to the home-life is something that is characteristic to Islam. And it happens way out there in that part of the world and not in other parts. That's not true. That's - I was just reading in American papers these last couple of days how the whole debate in the United States now is on who the women are going to vote for... but

JENKINS: Let me just take a quick break. Sorry to be a patriarch here but we have to have just a quick break. This is **World Chronicle**, and our guest is Feride Açar, the Chairperson of CEDAW -- the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Judy it's your turn....

LESSING: Well, I almost feel like I'm interrupting, but the last time I was on a UN peacekeeping mission, it was in West Africa, and I had no sooner arrived there then I met a large group of NGO women, non-governmental organization women supported by UN Development Programme and they had sixteen days of action to draw attention to violence against women at one, and they did a lot of street theater. So I went down into the main part of Freetown and I saw some performances, one of which absolutely shocked me, which was a little play about a boy and a girl who are in school, they would have been about ten, twelve, thirteen and the teacher was particularly hard on the girl and gave the brother good marks because the girl would not sleep with the teacher. And I sat there... I stood there and I was horrified and then I asked people around, I

said, you know, that seemed a bit extreme and they said heavens no that happens a lot in this part of the world, where men who are teachers exercise their power. Now these are things that are very hard to fight because we are talking about children, we are not really talking about adults who can stand up and say no and make that stick.

JENKINS: We are talking about sex aren't we?

LESSING: Well, yes we are

AÇAR: But that is exploitation. It's a weapon, it's exploitation and of course what happens to women is extended to girl children and it happens to girl children too. And it's the power that is misused and the way we know it. So working for equality, working for rights of women hopefully will not only relieve women from this kind of abuse but also will make men, I would think, better individuals for not finding themselves in this position.

FASULO: Can I just ask you what do you think the international community can do to be more pro-active, to, you know, put pressure on government leaders and these kinds of societies or on NGOs or on the power figures to stop this? You know, we have all these conventions most of these countries have signed on yet we all know that it's the big-I, implementation that's critical. Would you have any advice?

JENKINS: Well, first of all, I think in addition to the international kinds of monitoring, I think, the governments that have the power over other governments, economic power or political power should make women's human rights agenda part of their policy, part of their priority, and they should insist on this. But to do this you first have to clean up you own home. These governments have to have a clean record in their own countries, in terms of violence, in terms of discrimination on pay, for instance, and then when they give out assistance, for instance, economic assistance to developing countries to insist on gender equality should be a precondition. And when they are setting up governments abroad, they should make gender equality a priority...

JENKINS: Should parliaments legislates say that fifty percent of the seats in parliament be reserved for women? And I put that in the context, I mean, advancing women's rights is something that one can put in terms of advancements of all democratic rights. For true democracy shouldn't people be able to vote for whoever they want, isn't it a good idea to say that half of the

parliament has to be for women?

AÇAR: Well, it is a good idea in the long run, of course, but I don't think it's realistic to do that all over the world in the short run because, first of all, it's not only forcing people to vote for women, but you have to get women interested and actually functioning in the political sphere. You have to have women who want to be in those roles.

JENKINS: You can't open a door if there's nobody to walk through?

AÇAR: Exactly. So... but you need to do both. You need to open the door so we need quotas, we need some kinds of ... what we call... you know, affirmative action and positive discrimination or whatever you want to call that. But at the same time you need to get women to see themselves in a different light too, to realize that they can come into these fields that were closed to them for ages.

LESSING: So then how do you empower them to see that?

AÇAR: Well there are... law is one way. You cannot legislate women's rights by ... only. But you certainly start by legislation. You have to have laws that give them that power. And then you have to have political commitment of governments. This is very, very essential. And that political commitment does not start and end in the United Nations by ratifying treaties. Committed governments make an effort to implement these things at home. They put in policies, they make examples and they sort of reward behavior, good behavior, and punish bad behavior in terms of discrimination. And when you get these then the legislated rights can become real rights for women and women start using them. This is what has happened all over the world, in those countries that we see now having a better record in terms of the public sphere, this is what has happened and hopefully it will happen for the private sphere too where, for the family, for violence and all that..

JENKINS: Plus their education, of course. Judy

LESSING: I was just looking at some of the statements that you've made over the last year and a bit. One of the areas that the Committee, working in a sense for the convention, is looking at, is the situation of women in Iraq. Can you.. is there any way of encapsulating the situation as you see it - the short and long term?

JENKINS: Can we bring in Afghanistan into this as well because...?

LESSING: We can. But isn't it in slightly different?

JENKINS: Well, I don't know. What do you think?

AÇAR: Well, in the case of Iraq you are very right, of course.

The Committee has been very concerned about this. Now I want to say something here. Traditionally, the way the Committee functions like many other committees, is to monitor the reports of these countries. But lately, we have beenwe have started to take a more focused, sort of, attention into certain places too, like Afghanistan or like Iraq where things are really happening and in the case of Argentina, when the economic crisis happened, what's happening to women in these places? And even if it's not time for these countries to report or whatever, the committee has taken an interest. So in the case of Iraq we have kept up the pressure, if that terminology can be excused, by reminding the authorities there, the interim governments, the foreign powers that are in there, to make sure that women's human rights as they are under CEDAW should be respected in the governments that they set up, in the laws that they make. So there's no reason in starting a new state, so to speak, where you have obviously discriminatory laws against women.

JENKINS: Especially because Iraq was actually quite a model in the Arab world..

AÇAR: Exactly.

JENKINS: How about Afghanistan because that seem to be something of a success story now?

AÇAR: In the case of Afghanistan, there is a certain degree of success of course, a very important degree of success, in that fact that women are actually franchised now. They are going to the polls and voting and all that. They are benefiting from education much more than they did before. But this is where exactly, when I said, you know it doesn't stop with legislation. The fact, when I see in the newspapers women who are still in the burqa and who are queuing up to put their votes, then the question to ask is "Are these women really expressing their own individual free opinion? And is the burqa a symbol of their confinement and their control by some others in society?" So I think there's a long way to go in Afghanistan, but a good step has been taken and it has been

started.

LESSING: But when you look at Iraq and you've been looking very carefully at it for the last two, three years, are you seeing things that are steps backwards as well steps forward just from an observational point of view.

AÇAR: There was one point when last January, when the Committee was in session in fact, there was a lot of news reporting from Iraq that said that there would be a reinstatement of Islamic personal laws in Iraq and with some discriminatory articles about women. To that the Committee reacted for instance. That has been for the time being repealed and I don't know, we don't know of any specific laws that have been passed but the situation... that are discriminatory to women ... but the situation itself is by definition discriminatory to women because the lack of security affects women more than even men in many cases. Women cannot use the kinds of rights that they had or that they should have freely and that should be something that the international community should be aware of, it should be constantly talked about and it's not really talked about that much in the case of Iraq.

JENKINS: You've talked about how one shouldn't necessary think that North America or Europe are the perfect places. There's a conversation that started in this country about women who are highly accomplished, who've got to quite advanced in their careers, who are then deciding to give it up to go back home and raise their kids. And there are some women who are saying that by doing that they are actually betraying the cause of feminism. That when people in the Arab world, for example, look to the United States and say well there the women are getting into the public sphere and then they see them abandoning it they're somehow abandoning those women. What's your take on that?

AÇAR: Well, first of all, I think that the women who are under a lot of pressure, who suffer from early burn out by being under demand from the family side and from the occupational side...

LESSING: Doing two jobs....

AÇAR: Doing two jobs... exactly. Two and more than two so many times.. jobs, feel that they can ... that they want to say no to all this. And that should be their right to say no to that if that's what they want but it's the societies responsibility not to put them in that position. And so they shouldn't be

blamed for not being good examples to everybody else. The political structure should be blamed for not making it possible for these women to have a job, to have a good career and also to have ... to enjoy their families and to be happy about the whole thing. This is what we should all aim at. And secondly, I don't think, really that, you know, I tried to talk about this in the beginning, but I don't think necessarily many women look up to the Western World as having achieved the ideals women around the world.

JENKINS: Not yet, anyway. So it's a question of creating choices rather than legislating equality.

AÇAR: Exactly.....

JENKINS: I'm afraid that's all the time we have. Our guest has been Feride Açar, the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. She was interviewed by Judy Lessing of Radio *New Zealand* and Linda Fasulo of *NBC News*.

I'm Tony Jenkins. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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