

WOMEN

Continued from page 1

WAB: What are the effects of cultural and economic globalization for women?

MK: Cultural and economic globalization has played a very important role in providing women worldwide with a platform to build international feminist networks to address the negative impact of globalization on women. This networking between women from different parts of the world is facilitated by the unprecedented access to information technologies like the internet and other forms of social media. The result is the transformation of the world into global communities. As the world becomes more and more connected, women are able to share their individual experiences with each other and bring awareness to their respective local experiences with gender discrimination and oppression.

WAB: Are there negative consequences of globalization?

MK: Absolutely! As

globalization continues to fulfill capitalistic and imperialistic demands for cheap labor and cheap raw materials, and as more armed conflicts and economic crises are created, women and children become disproportionately affected in the form of rolling back social programs, and structural adjustment programs. This results in increased poverty among women and children, displacements resulting from war, sex trafficking and other forms of sexual violence against women. Globalization has led to what feminist scholars refer to as the “feminization of poverty.”

WAB: How are women around the world dealing with their situation?

MK: Although women constitute more than half the world's population, their subordination and oppression on a global scale remains undeniable. This grim assessment of the plight of women globally led to an

outrage that such blatant injustice is unacceptable. Consequently, women from the Global South and the Global North have used national and international forums to engage in regional, national and international networking in order to advocate for social justice and enact positive change through grassroots and local efforts. Women's activism has led to an unprecedented involvement of women in politics. Throughout the world, a record number of women are running for and being elected to political offices. Feminist scholars say it is important for women to be at the negotiating table where important issues that directly impact their lives are discussed for positive change to happen. In order for this to take place, there must be at least 30 percent to 50 percent of women elected to political power. Feminist scholars refer to this percentage as “critical mass.”

WAB: Do you see women in general becoming more fit

physically as a manifestation and expression of empowerment?

MK: Women becoming more fit physically can be seen as a manifestation and expression of empowerment in the sense that women's participation in sports is an illustration of the confidence they possess to make decisions regarding their lives. The ability of women to participate and compete in sports has been proven to significantly diminish socio-cultural taboos surrounding the physical and mental ability of women. It is also a matter of equality. Besides the fact sports can be used as a powerful tool for dismantling social and cultural gender stereotypes worldwide, sports and physical fitness also provide women—who make it an integral part of their lifestyle—with a tremendous sense of selflessness, accomplishment and agency in their lives. As women become physically and mentally fit, they gain the confidence to tackle any hurdles life throws at them. Moreover, as women become more fit they are better able to fight for gender equality. They can also prolong their life expectancy. Furthermore, women's participation in organized sports can contribute to exposing existing enduring and blatant gender discrimination, especially the gender wage gap. The recent lawsuit the American female soccer players filed against the U.S. Soccer Federation is an example that gender discrimination in sports is alive and well in one of the most developed countries in the world. This also brings to our attention the fact that, as more and more women venture into sports that have been traditionally dominated by men, they will continue to both expose instances of gender discrimination and, more importantly, devise strategies for

fighting to end it.

WAB: The United Nations web site says empowering women adds fuel to the global economy yet gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched. What's your view?

KM: Yes, gender-based inequality still remains one of the most pervasive forms of inequalities found in every society in the world. The 1995 Beijing conference identified economic disparities between men and women as one of the 12 critical areas of concern requiring action by member states, the international community and civil society. Women make up more than half of the world population. Consequently, the oppression of the majority of the world population constitutes not only a grave injustice, but also socio-economic and political suicide. Indeed, ostracizing women—by not allowing them to reach their full human potential and fully participate in the social, economic and political development process of their countries, solely based on their gender—has greatly hampered development outcomes on a global scale. Thus gender equality does matter a great deal to the process of development.

WAB: Several women have said to me that, while growing up, the fashion doll Barbie was promoted as the ideal look for a woman. What impact do big advertisers, Hollywood and the media in general have on how women view themselves?

MK: The impact the media have on women is undeniable. Stories and images of the female body constitute a central part of global media. The media sell unrealistic image of the female body and packages it as real. Thus, many young girls and women are deceived by those images and go to great lengths to try to achieve those unrealistic bodies. The more young girls and women realize those images in magazines and other forms of media are ideals and have nothing to do with reality—the better. Those photos are photo-shopped. They use different women's body parts and put them together to get that ideal picture. The Barbie doll ideal is indeed unrealistic. The media have set the standard for feminine beauty in America, which equates beauty with whiteness and thinness. It is an illusionary image that does not reflect the reality of women's bodies. As such, it is a pursuit of an unattainable perfection that is not natural. Women come in different shapes. In order to counter such unrealistic images of feminine beauty, several counter narratives have been launched aimed at empowering young girls and women, and making them feel good about their bodies. More and more women are being taught to accept themselves and to be happy with their bodies and not chase after unrealistic and unattainable body images the media are selling. I think things are changing for the better. Parents are having those necessary conversations with their children. We are socialized to perform social scripts and to conform to socially constructed gender roles. Resisting those social scripts can be liberating and empowering for young girls and women. Neither men—nor the media—should be setting the standards for women. Women should.

WAB: When I see photos in the media of women in Africa, they are usually working, physically carrying or hauling something. Is that a stereotype?

MK: Well, that picture of the African woman might not apply to all women on the African continent, just like photos of overweight women do not apply to all women in America. We have to remember that Africa is a vast continent. It is actually the second largest continent after Asia, with 54 countries. Therefore,

we cannot really paint all African women with the same brush. This is where the concept of intersectionality becomes key.

Women who live in different parts of Africa have completely different lived experiences based on such markers as age, nationality, ability, gender, class, sexuality, religion, culture and ethnicity. Some might live a sedentary life, and others might not. Such is the beauty of the diversity among women. Moreover, I believe that the West tends to portray the majority of African women in general as hard working and poor mainly as a result of stereotyping and misconceptions about the African continent in general. The idea behind that depiction of African women as always working, physically carrying or hauling something as you have stated is not that these women are purposefully doing so to get fit and healthy, but the assumption is that they have to work hard to survive. It is not a luxury for them. It is not like deciding to go to the gym for the purpose of getting fit and healthy. These women have no other choice. Nonetheless, it is indeed because those women are always engaged in physical activities that they do look so fit, as you put it. There are also cultural beliefs about women and gender expectations that are important.

WAB: What are some of those beliefs and expectations?


MK: In my culture, for example, and in many other African cultures, a skinny woman is not sought after by a man. A woman is expected to be plump and rounded in order to be attractive. A skinny woman, especially a skinny married woman, is said to be either unhappy in her marriage, or poor in the sense she does not eat well and therefore her husband is not taking good care of her. I remember being teased a lot in elementary school because I was very skinny. Twenty, thirty years ago, in some African cultures, young girls were routinely forced to become chubby. Also, a bride-to-be is actually force-fed for weeks before her wedding so she puts on weight. We find such cultures in Mauritania.

WAB: What positive changes do you see happening for women around the world? Does the future look bright?

KM: The fact more women have entered the labor force in the last 25 years than at any time before is a positive change. Employment does not, however, always translate into better economic outcomes for some women. Globalization has led to the cheapening of women's labor in many instances. Another positive change is the fact women have longer life expectancy, and more young girls and women are going to school now than ever before. Globalization has also facilitated an unprecedented opportunity for networking and political organizing between women from different parts of the world. Women are fighting for equality, the right to dignity and the recognition of their humanity by advocating for their rights and speaking up against gender discrimination in all its forms. This will certainly continue and we will all benefit in the long run. Though there are challenging problems that remain to be solved, women are up to the task. The future is definitely brighter when every single member of society works together to end all forms of gender discrimination.

WAB: Thank you.

The next Q&A in the Women on the Go series is an interview with HealthTrac personal trainer Kerry McClain on the benefits of strength training for women. Stories and essays by William Allen Baltz may be read on his web site at williambaltz.com.



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