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International Human Rights Day: Women's Rights are Human Rights Too

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Source: [Make Every Woman Count \(MEWC\)](#)

By *Vibeke B. Thomsen*

As the world celebrates International Human Rights Day on 10 December, French-speaking countries celebrate it as "la Journée Internationale des Droits de l'Homme". Although this might look like a solely semantic problem, it nevertheless raises the paradoxical question of: what about the less famous "Droits de la Femme", as unfortunately, in countless regions of the world, human rights remain, in fact, the rights of men only.

Despite the important progress achieved across the globe, including in Africa, to encompass the rights of women today, African women still face a series of challenges and daily abuses of their human rights. Thirty years after the adoption of [CEDAW](#), many women and girls still do not have equal opportunities to realize rights recognized by law. In Africa, in some countries, women are denied the right to own property or inherit land. They face social exclusion, "honor killings", FGM, trafficking, restricted mobility and early marriage, among others.



MEWC covered the "[16 Days of Activism in the World of Young African Women](#)" from 25 November until today by publishing daily articles by young African women on topics relevant to them. As illustrated by the number of articles on this topic, one of the biggest scourges of the African continent is the one pertaining to women's bodies, including sexual violence in times of conflict and post-conflict, female genital mutilation (FGM) and trafficking into prostitution.

During conflict, women's bodies have repeatedly been used as battlegrounds for soldiers who have raped, abused and kidnapped women and girls to punish the enemy or to weaken other ethnic groups. Fortunately, the international community has begun to examine such atrocities and rape was declared a crime against humanity in 2001 during the trials of Bosnian war criminals. In the aftermath of African wars, the pursuit of justice for victims is essential in the peace and reconciliation processes and so is the implementation of [UNSCR 1325](#), an aim that MEWC is working towards.

Women's bodies have also been the ground for quieter forms of violence including FGM and other harmful rituals. While some argue it is cultural and essential for a girl to go through such procedure, the lack of freedom to choose, the perpetual and un-removable scar on a woman's body make FGM a crime that must be stopped, prosecuted and most importantly, spoken about. Moreover, in order to meet the growing demand for sex workers in Europe and elsewhere, an increasing number of women have been trafficked from Africa into slavery, prostitution and other illicit activities, which they did not choose. While this battle cannot be fought in Africa alone, stronger cooperation between international police forces is needed to end this scourge, which is a true human rights infringement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, women in Africa – as elsewhere in the world – have often been sidelined and have gained limited access and participation to the social, economic and political scene of their own countries. While the right to vote has now been granted to all women across Africa and the Middle East, their true access to political life remains limited and there is still only one elected female Head of State in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia.

Despite their lack of representation, women in Africa have continuously demonstrated their entrepreneurship, by creating small businesses, uniting with other women and gaining access to micro-credit financing (with repayment rates much higher than men). As such, women have repeatedly demonstrated that their participation is key to successful economic, social and political development in their home countries. To this extent, MEWC is aiming to create a platform for women's organizations and to give a voice to African women's organization, grassroots and activists by highlighting their work.



During the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, the world also witnessed women taking the street, participating on all fronts of the revolutionary processes and making the headlines. The true test case now for the former Middle Eastern dictatorships is not only to see whether the upcoming newly elected democratic governments will enforce the protection of human rights, but also if they will respect the rights of women and finally give them a voice.

In this light, MEWC's ongoing [Monitoring Political Participation project](#) will be observing and analyzing upcoming elections and monitoring the participation of women in the democratic construction of their society. The project will look and report the number of female candidates, the number of women elected as well as the representation of women in parliament and in government.

While the challenges women face to make their human rights respected varies greatly throughout the world, a key factor towards equality and participation is the access to education for girls. Numerous parents still prefer to educate their boys, perceiving girls as useless and not worthy of an education. High rates of literacy and of school and university attendance for girls is crucial to integrate them and to ensure the protection of their basic human rights. The implication of men, also through education, is crucial in ensuring that nations move towards freer and more participative societies for all their citizens.

The realization of women's rights is based on universal human rights and the rule of law. We need to continue the struggle to end traditions, practices and laws that harm women in Africa. It is only through efforts at all levels, from access to education for girls, justice for victims of sexual violence, equal access to political participation and through efforts to engage men, that human rights will truly become women's rights as well.

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