

The Inequality of Women

by Michael Curtis



The Neapolitan song, *O Sole Mio, Che bella cosa*, has been made famous by great Italian tenors, Enrico Caruso in the past and more recently Luciano Pavarotti who won the Grammy Award in 1980 for his rendition of the song, and warbled in a rewritten English version by Elvis Presley.

Now a soprano version of the song will be heard in Venice as a result of a historic breakthrough. A 24 year old mother of two named Giorgia Boscolo, after taking a six months course and 400 hours of training of a highly technical kind, has been officially recognized as a female *gondoliera*, the first since the profession of gondoliers came into existence in 1094. Usually the role of gondolier has been handed down from father to son. In this case Boscolo's father, himself a gondolier who assumed as everyone else did that the profession was a man's job, welcomed her. If women can go to space, take part in military activity, why not guide a gondola in the Grand Canal in Venice and sing *O Sole Mio*.

In spite of the commanding feats of the heroic Wonder Woman, at least in comic book form, women are not yet leading the world, or sharing equally in activities. Of course changes are occurring, as women become more prominent politically and in public offices, with Theresa May in Britain, Angela Merkel in Germany, Christine Lagarde at the IMF, Irina Bokova, director of UNESCO, Ann Hidalgo, Mayor of Paris, Nicola Sturgeon and Ruth Davidson in Scotland. Record numbers of women parliamentary representatives result from the recent elections in Britain (207 or 30%) and in France (155 or 27%). The new French President Emmanuel Macron has appointed women to half of the cabinet positions. Three members of the US Supreme Court are women.

Yet only about 20% of members of national parliaments are female, and the overall number of women heads of state, or governments, or in cabinet positions, is small. In at least five countries, not a single woman is represented in parliament, nor appointed as a cabinet minister.

Curiously, the highest proportion of women in parliament presently is in Rwanda (61%), and Bolivia (53%), while it is 21% in the U.S. House of Representatives, and 19% in the Senate. When Margaret Thatcher was British Prime Minister she appointed only one woman to her cabinet.

In spite of international attempts to reduce eliminate disparities the realistic issue is that women still do not have parity in life, behavior, economy, profession, or as partners in law firms or CEOs of major companies. The Beijing Declaration and platform for action in 1995 built on commitments made at world conferences on women held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Nairobi in 1985. It pointed out the lack of empowerment and the many human rights violations experienced by women, the existing inequality between men and women, and the need to eliminate discrimination against women and to raise the social status of women. It called for the full and equal participation of women

in political, civil, economic, social, and cultural life.

That remains to be done. Indeed, discrimination has yet again been exhibited in sport and by the media. A recent example is in July 2017 at the celebrated All English Lawn Tennis Club championship in Wimbledon, London. Gender bias favors male tennis players over women, and there is a disparity in the coverage of male and female players. Though women get equal prize money, one of the few sports in which this happens, about 76% of airtime in 2015, and 60% in 2016 was devoted to men. The disparity was aggravated by the fact that men's games are longer than those of women.

Analysis and commentary all illustrate the disparity and discrimination, and the difficulties women face. Figures show that women get about 75% of what men make in similar jobs. Women constitute a small number of the CEOs listed in the Forbes 500. Anne Marie Slaughter in her article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All", in *The Atlantic*, July-August 2012, based on personal experience as well as on objective reality, has indicated the difficulties, and the economic and cultural obstacles, for women in combining home and office, unless they are superwomen, wealthy or self-employed. There remain insuperable tensions between family and career.

Violence against women persists at alarmingly high levels, particularly in Arab and Islamic countries, but also in all countries. In normal behavior women are cautious and take precautions in meeting alone with males, especially in eating or driving situations. The media also cause difficulties in their stereotyping of women and their disproportionate amount of attention and photos of the appearance of women rather than on their accomplishments.

Despite progress, the impact of the lack of political commitment, persistence of sexist stereotypes of women, and increase in religious fundamentalism, all hinder reform. The Beijing Declaration has not been fully observed. There has

been only limited progress, such as removing certain discriminations, toward gender equality. It is obvious that women's participation in the labor force, in education, and in political representation has increased. Nevertheless, inequality and discrimination remain strong, and is worsened by the increasing global inequality and the persistence and use of gender stereotypes. Attention must be paid to the women's rights agenda and the removal or limitation of bias.