

Erna Paris
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Thank you ...

I’ll begin with two stories, both having to do with women’s agency—in other words, with the ability of women to participate in, and even influence, issues of war and peace.

My first story concerns a 19th-century Austrian countess named Bertha von Suttner, who, in 1905, became the first woman to be awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#). The late 19th century witnessed the beginnings of international efforts to achieve world peace; in fact, the phrase “universal peace” was publicized at the first international peace conference – which was held in The Hague, Holland in 1899. The immediate goal of the conference was to stop the arms race and to continue to create international laws by defining which acts of war would be considered permissible and which would be prohibited as war crimes. It was an era of great optimism before the horrors of World War One cast a long shadow over peacemaking—a shadow that continues to haunt us 100 years later.

Countess Bertha von Suttner was the only woman invited to attend The Hague Conference. She was the internationally famous author of a book titled *Inventory of a Soul*, which detailed her passionate views about world peace and justice. When she won the Nobel Prize, the chair of the Nobel Committee said: “History constantly demonstrates the great influence of women.”

Well now... I think it’s fair to say that “History” did nothing of the kind. Women in von Suttner’s day were mostly invisible in the public sphere; and it is *precisely* because von Suttner’s influence was so rare and unlikely that her contribution to the cause of world peace is historically notable. For a century, her work has encouraged women *and* men to become peace activists. I urge you to look her up; she created a life for herself that was filled with learning and adventure.

The second story is a personal memory I’d like to share with you. It portrays the opposite end of the spectrum of female influence.

One November 11, many years ago when I was a student in France, I happened upon a war memorial in a small village in Alsace, a region bordering Germany that has seen much war and destruction. Excepting Remembrance Day ceremonies at my Toronto high school, this was the first such memorial I had seen. And what struck me about it was that it did *not* glorify the heroism of soldiers, many of whom may have been frightened young draftees, nationalistic propaganda to the contrary. The figures on this monument were women and children. Their sculpted stone bodies were crouched and bent in suffering; their faces were hidden beneath stony veils of mourning.

Staring at that timeless rendition of grief, I glimpsed for the first time the utter powerlessness of women in the face of war. They were victims of events over which they had neither influence nor control. In an accurate representation of reality, the artist had rendered them virtually faceless.

To me, both these stories demonstrate the pivotal quality of agency and how having it, or not having it, shapes our lives.

What is agency? It is power, no more, no less. We sometimes think of power negatively, as in ferocious people—usually, but not always, men—who fight one another to achieve it.

But the *underlying* characteristic of power is the ability to take action in a supportive environment that makes action possible. Agency, or power, is the right to physical safety. It is the right to receive respect from others. It is the opportunity to make decisions about the trajectory of one's own life.

Viewed from this perspective, power is *the* underpinning of gender equality. Without it, women will be unable to close the “influence gap” that continues to exist between the sexes. Without it, women cannot contribute to social and political change in effective ways. With agency we become the authors of our own lives.

This first dawned on me as a child while reading Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*. I can still see three of the book's magnificent illustrations in my mind's eye: the young mermaid visiting the witch's den at the bottom of the sea; the sight of her on the shore watching the prince dance on his ship; and her mermaid sisters calling to her from the foamy surface of the ocean when it was time for her to die.

What the little mermaid wanted—the love of a human man—is not central to this memory, although I certainly did want that; rather, it was her courage in choosing an independent life in spite of being warned about the dangers of failure. There was no Walt Disney in this telling; I remember accepting the sad fact of her death because she had understood and accepted this possibility from the start. She conveyed to me an early glimmering that a life of my own making was possible.

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I think we all understand that powerlessness can breed contempt. And that it encourages abuse among those who harbour such tendencies. It encourages abuse because the powerless usually lack protection, which means that there will likely be no consequences. Children are, by definition, powerless, although they are usually protected; adult women, on the other hand, have been historically without power, or agency, and they still are in many places.

It's not hard to find examples of powerlessness in Canadian society. The most blatant may be the abuse of First Nations children in Residential Schools. Aboriginal peoples and their cultures were devalued. Because they were devalued, children could be seized from parents, who were themselves socially and legally powerless. Finally, abuses could occur because these devalued children lacked social protection. Predators, as we know, choose the vulnerable.

A more recent example of powerlessness also concerns aboriginal Canadians. Between 1969 and 2013, more than 600 aboriginal women were killed across Canada. Up to 40 teenage girls, some as young as 12,

have been murdered and disappeared along the Highway of Tears, an 800 km section of highway 16 in northern British Columbia between Prince George and Prince Rupert. The actual numbers are hard to come by because many of these crimes were not properly investigated, if at all. The dead and the disappeared appear to have had little value in the minds of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who were charged with investigating these crimes and have largely failed to do so. Many of the women murdered on the Highway of Tears came from impoverished, sometimes socially dysfunctional, reserves and other small communities along this wilderness stretch of road. Few people own cars, and there is little in the way of public transportation; in fact the BC government has actually cut back on Greyhound bus service. So these young women were hitchhiking in order to get where they were going, in spite of known danger. For every kilometer of this paved road, there are hundreds of kilometers of gravel leading off into remote places. It's been easy for predators to get rid of their victims.

Earlier this week I saw the first screening of a new documentary about these unsolved crimes. The film, called *Highway of Tears*, put a human face on the parents and siblings of these lost young women. They described themselves and their lost daughters as “throw-away people.”

Shamefully, it was left to the international non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch, in conjunction with Human Rights Watch Canada, to write a report on these injustices—and to call for a national *independent* inquiry, not one conducted by the RCMP itself. Last month, HRW and the Native Women's Association of Canada made a submission to the Canadian House of Commons committee studying the issue. Just yesterday the committee reported. There will be no national inquiry.

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Reconciliation with aboriginal Canadians in *all* its facets is the most important social justice issue in Canada today. Frankly, those of you interested in getting involved in useful peace work don't have to look outside our own country.

Mainstream Canadian women have fared better. In the heyday of the feminist revolution in the 1970s and 80s, Loretta Lynn sang, “We've come a long way, baby. Second class don't turn me on at all.” It's certainly an advance that we now drop the word ‘baby’ when referring to adults, but in spite of setbacks and unfulfilled expectations, the song title is actually true, especially in North America and other western places. Yes, we *have* come a long way.

If you're too young to remember the 1970s, it may surprise you to learn what your mothers and grandmothers were up against when they fought to make it possible for women to enter the worlds of business and academe; or the liberal professions of law, political journalism, medicine, and engineering, among other previously closed careers. Or what they were up against when they marched in the streets to stigmatize violence against women and to demonstrate the ways in which sexism and racism intersected in Canadian society. Forty years later, Canadian social attitudes are still changing incrementally. And every positive change has been built upon a growing foundation of female agency.

But let us be clear that even in the democratic West, including Canada, there's a long road ahead before

women acquire sufficient *collective* agency to influence policy making, which is where real power lies.

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I'll return to Canada in a few moments, but first I'd like to say a few words about the origins and depth of the cultural and, in some cases, *legal* obstacles women everywhere in the world have confronted in differing degrees. To comprehend these, one had only to visit the Mesopotamia Exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto last fall, where a stele of Hammurabi's Code, the world's earliest known codified laws, was on display. The laws were written by the Babylonian king Hammurabi in 1686 BCE—almost 4000 years ago—and intended to bring order and justice to society. The Code included laws to protect the poor from the wealthy and the weak from the strong. But many, if not *most*, of the laws concerned the place of women in society. Although several laws afforded women a degree of legal protection from the abuse of male authority, women were considered to be lesser beings, like children. They were chattels to be owned by their fathers, then by their husbands.

We sometimes avow that such and such an idea is not 'written in stone' in order to demonstrate our flexibility. But Hammurabi's Code *was* written in stone. It systematized what had been unwritten rules delineating the social condition of women. We might want to think of the collective history of women over the subsequent millennia as either voluntary, or forced, submission to variations on these laws as adopted by subsequent patriarchal religions; or, conversely, of brave sporadic attempts to lessen constraints. In a nutshell, the struggle for women's equality has been long and arduous. And it's not over.

I began my own career during the heady transformative era of the 1970s. I remember the exhilarating experience of writing feature articles on the status of women for *Chatelaine* magazine under the fearless editorial direction of the late Doris Anderson, who was the first editor in North America to bring so-called 'women's issues' to the attention of a general public. After Doris's death in 2007, Michele Landsberg, who also wrote for *Chatelaine* at the time, and who went on to become Canada's most influential feminist writer, recalled that Doris had used *Chatelaine* to decry women's poverty, militate against racism, and challenge laws that hindered women. She was decades ahead of her time, and canny enough to get away with promoting a women's revolution right in the heart of Maclean Hunter's deeply conservative publishing empire. And to do so at a time when the "women's sections" of Canadian newspapers were filled with society weddings, recipes and advice on etiquette.

Talk about investigative journalism. When I undertook to write *Chatelaine* pieces titled "Why Secretaries Get Mad," and "Women's Status: How The MPs Rate You," there *were* no secondary sources to consult. It was all new – and such articles were not necessarily well received, either. For the latter piece, I interviewed MPs from all parties in their parliamentary offices. Some spoke with unusual frankness, possibly because I looked like a harmless young woman writing for what they thought must be a harmless women's publication. On the day the article was published, I was awakened by a telephone call from David Lewis, then the leader of the NDP in the House of Commons. "How could you do this to me, Erna," he asked in a hurt voice. You see, I knew him slightly through his son Stephen; and he had apparently expected kinder treatment. The article did cause a small stir – the late Larry Zolf told me the Conservative Party held a caucus meeting to discuss what

some of their dinosaur MPs had said to me. Believe me, they had reason to be upset when they read their own words about women in cold print.

As it happened, my first published article was about rape. I had been called to jury duty. Women were still allowed to opt out of juries in those days, presumably because their household duties might suffer in their absence—the chicken pot pie might burn in the oven, heaven forbid. I was the only woman on that jury and it opened my eyes forever. Not only to the antiquated law surrounding rape (it was not yet called sexual assault) but to the attitudes surrounding it. I remember the experience vividly. The judge advised the jury that the complainant was not “chaste,” information he clearly thought was relevant to our deliberations.

After days shut up in a room together, we were stuck: 11 in favour of conviction, one against. The sole individual who could not be persuaded, in spite of irrefutable evidence, finally explained his reason. He told us he didn’t believe in rape. There *was* no such thing. “That’s what I told my son,” he blurted out. After the judge sent us back to reach a verdict, this man broke down in tears. Someone took him into the washroom. We could hear him sobbing. Thirty minutes later he returned, head bowed, to say he would base his vote on the evidence.

After my article appeared, I heard from a lawyer of my acquaintance that it was against Canadian law to talk publicly about what goes in the jury room. Fortunately, I didn’t know this. And fortunately, I wasn’t charged—or I might have come to Kingston a lot sooner.

The experience of serving on that jury changed my life. It was my first encounter with social attitudes surrounding sexual violence, including a sworn juror’s entrenched refusal even to acknowledge its existence; and a judge’s use of the word “chaste” to effectively undermine our perception of the complainant’s case. Slowly, I began to understand that a woman’s right to justice and equality was a *human* right, an awareness of the world that has never left me.

So, how have things changed for Canadian women? I’d say a lot, although there’s certainly been backsliding. *Chatelaine* is once again the repository of recipes and advice columns; on the other hand, magazines have far less influence in the Internet age, so it matters less. And sexism, even hatred of women, hasn’t disappeared, as seen in the prevalence of hostile threats masked as fun. In recent months, students at several Canadian universities – one on the east coast, one on the west coast, and one in the centre—in Ottawa—have been punished for belittling rape with chants that normalize sexual violence.

In other ways, Canadian society is unrecognizable. For example, in the 1980s I asked a young man of my acquaintance whether it seemed odd to hear a woman’s voice reading the national news. He said it did.

That has changed. Canadians have become accustomed to hearing smart women radio hosts interviewing people around the world on global affairs. Since 1991, eleven women have served, or are serving, as provincial premiers in this country; one of them, Kim Campbell, was prime minister—for 132 days, admittedly an inordinately short period of time! There are, however, four incumbent provincial premiers. The presence of women in politics may amaze me more than it does you, given the attitudes towards women and power that were prevalent when I reached young adulthood. For it is demonstrably true that

every woman who exerts power, or agency at a high level, opens a hundred doors to those who may be inspired to follow in her footsteps.

Economically, women have moved ahead, but not into income parity. Shamefully, Canadian women still earn 25% less than men for work of equal value.

The situation is a lot worse in the developing world, where millions of women lack the personal agency to direct their own lives, let alone the lives of others. But there *are* interesting exceptions that may help open the way to a different future, and I'd like to tell you about two of these stories.

A few years ago, I had the honour of meeting Navi Pillay, a lawyer and peacemaker, and the present head of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights. She was born into the stigmatized Indian community of Durban, South Africa, the daughter of a bus driver. Her teacher recognized her outstanding talent, and in her last year of high school, he took up a collection in the neighbourhood so she could continue her education. Navi Pillay became a lawyer, against all odds, including multiple attempts by the apartheid regime to block her because of her race. Later, she was appointed the first woman judge of a High Court of South Africa. Still later she became the only female judge on the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and later still a judge on the International Criminal Court, which is where I met her when I was researching the rise of that remarkable institution.

Navi Pillay changed international law with regard to female victims of war. You may remember that during a 100 day period from April to July, 1994, an estimated 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis were massacred by Rwandan Tutsis in a sustained attack that was later designated a genocide. Four years later, Pillay was president of the United Nations Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which was trying the major perpetrators of the genocide. Under her leadership, the court convicted a local Rwandan mayor for murder, torture—and *rape*. This legal decision marked a turning point in international criminal law. When rape was employed as a weapon of war—ie, when it was used as a weapon of humiliation and as an attempt to destroy a target group through pregnancies and the birth of children belonging to the “victor” class—under these circumstances, rape would henceforth be classified as a crime against humanity. It was an extraordinary moment in legal history, in women's history, and for universal human rights. Since then, the new International Criminal Court or ICC has followed suit by placing new emphasis on crimes specifically committed against women.

My second story of female agency in unlikely places occurred in Bosnia. I had first visited that country in 1997, just two years after the Dayton Accords brought an end to the fighting. It was my first view of a war zone. In the once-beautiful, ancient multicultural city of Sarajevo, half-destroyed buildings lined both sides of the road. My taxi driver's face was hideously burned. Downtown, someone had written THIS IS SERBIA on a public building, to which a local wit had added, IT'S THE POST OFFICE, YOU IDIOT! A psychiatrist I interviewed told me it would take generations for the trauma to heal. Just like the trauma in survivors of the Holocaust.

In 2003 I returned for a second time in order to research whether the international criminal tribunal in the Hague that was trying perpetrators from this conflict was having any effect on the ground in terms of possible reconciliation. Following my nose, as I tend to do, I happened to meet a group calling themselves

the Mothers of Srebrenica. They were the immediate relatives of the 8000 men who had been carted away from the town of Srebrenica in 1995, an event that also was later designated a genocide. Only 15 of these men had survived. The Mothers of Srebrenica were agitating for justice—and remarkably they have since achieved a high level of success.

My point is that The Mothers of Srebrenica were *not* without agency, even under these dire conditions. Rage impelled them to act. They published a book about the genocide. They sold pasta dinners to raise money to educate war orphans. They acquired land for a proper cemetery. They raised money to build a memorial centre.

Their most improbable achievement was to sue the Dutch United Nations Peacekeepers who had been stationed in Sarajevo and had failed to stop the deportation of thousands of men. Why, you may well ask? Because they believed protection was not part of their mandate—and that's another story. Just last September, an appeals court in Holland upheld an earlier verdict convicting these soldiers of abandoning the men of Srebrenica. For the Mothers of Srebrenica it was a bitter-sweet taste of accountability after 28 years of activism.

The underlying question I have sometimes asked myself was how they were able to accomplish all this in a heavily masculinized society like the former Yugoslavia where men strut about and drink home-brewed Slivovitz? Perhaps it helped that they were grown women, not girls—because in places where discrimination against females is most rampant, it is usually the young who are most vulnerable. It is also possible, although unprovable, that the tragic fact that there were no longer men in their immediate entourage—that they were on their own, outside the culture of male oversight—may have liberated them, as ironic as that might sound. Whatever the reason, The Mothers of Srebrenica were certainly not *granted* the power to make change happen. They seized it. Ran with it.

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In some places, as we know, local culture is the excuse for the abuse of powerless girls and women. As in, it is our *culture* to ensure that female children marry at puberty or even earlier. There is a bride price and we are poor. Furthermore, we are protecting the virtue of our daughters and the honour of our families.

Or ... it is our *culture* to deny education to girls. We are poor, and since our daughters are destined to a domestic life, it doesn't make economic sense to educate them. Furthermore, education may give our daughters uppity ideas about an independent future—and that will create problems for everyone.

Such traditions represent continuities that are as obvious and valid to those who practice them as were the ancient patriarchal laws of Hammurabi's Code. They effectively pursue the idea of women as chattel. But in an age of globalized communications, these practices will increasingly clash with emerging ideas of modernity that include gender equality and universal human rights.

Do we have a right to intervene in such cases? Or, as some say, even a duty? This is one of the most passionate debates in the world today. For example, when we learn that in Yemen one out of 9 girls will be married before the age of 15, and that complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause

of death in females under the age of 19, what is the moral thing to do? The United Nations doctrine, The Responsibility to Protect, does allow intervention when a government cannot, or will not, protect its own people. And there are options to a military intervention. Not long ago the Responsibility to Protect doctrine was specifically expanded to include the plight of women and girls caught in war zones, or forced to submit to cultural practices that endanger their well-being. No question, this is *theoretical* progress – although it hasn't been acted upon. But what do we think about intervention of this kind?

Should international peace work impose western cultural standards? Perhaps this is a question you might want to discuss in your workshops and talk about when we come back together later this morning.

Regardless of how we answer this question, it is progress to see international doctrine expand to include the unique issues of women. There was another important theoretical advance back in the year 2000, when the Security Council passed its famous Resolution 1325. The resolution concerned women, peace and security. It purported to, and I quote, “reaffirm the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and in post-conflict reconstruction.” It stressed the importance of the equal participation of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. And it called on all parties to take special measures to protect girls and women from gender-based violence.

Fine words. Words in theory. But how much of this has come to pass? When I read Resolution 1325 I was hopeful. Then I was reminded of the high (and false) rhetoric of the chair of the Nobel Committee when he told Countess Bertha von Suttner that “History constantly demonstrates the great influence of women.”

I'll tell you in a moment how the well-meaning language of Resolution 1325 has translated into practice, but regardless of action, or, more to the point, inaction on the part of states, the condition of the world's women is today under investigation. On the all-important economic front, the World Economic Forum's annual *Global Gender Gap Report* details the scope of gender-based disparities around the world, and tracks progress. The Forum bases its findings on economic, political, education, and health-related criteria.

In 2013 they covered 136 major and emerging economies ... and the best place to be a woman was Iceland ... followed by the other Scandinavian countries. At the bottom of the list was Yemen, with the largest gender gap. Canada, you may be interested to know, ranked 20th. A big disappointment. Everywhere, a major factor was growing income disparity, which women are the first to feel. This is a growing international problem.

Because states can't, or won't, act, numerous non-governmental organizations have popped up in recent years. The prestigious US Council on Foreign Relations now has a 'Women and Foreign Policy Program.' Their objective, as stated on their website, is to bring the status of women into the mainstream foreign policy debate *and* to include the contributions of women in peace negotiations. Just like Security Council resolution 1325.

In a fair and rational world, peace negotiations would prioritize the perspective of women, whose experience of war may be considerably more brutal than that of men. But in spite of theoretical progress and the fine work being carried out by the Council on Foreign Relations and other groups, we should not hold our

collective breath waiting for this to become routine. How disturbing it was to learn last month that Syrian women would not be allowed to participate in the peace talks being held in Geneva, although women and children have been the principal victims of that bloody war. Ordinary women in Syria have organized to distribute food and keep their communities together. Syrian Activists have created a Syrian Women's Charter for Peace. Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's Special Envoy to Syria, has said that Syrian women's civil society groups are a more organized force than the current opposition to the regime. And still they were rejected, largely because orthodox Muslim members of the Syrian opposition refused to have women in the room.

The story didn't end there. Defiantly, an international organization of activists calling themselves *Women Lead To Peace* flew to Geneva, where they met in a separate venue to talk about the exclusion of Syrian women from the formal process and the seemingly endless barriers that women encounter as peacemakers. The Nobel Peace Prize winner from Northern Ireland, Mairead Maguire, reminded them of the enormous, squandered potential of women—and that women need to cooperate more. “Our world needs the voices of women,” she urged. The founder of an NGO that supports the role of Syrian civil society stressed empowerment. “Not all women can be individual voices for peace, but women can be a *collective* power for peace,” she said. She appealed to women to form a united coalition, or coalitions, for peace across political and ethnic boundaries with specific, directed objectives.

Not long ago, that advice would have been pie in the sky. But not today. With instant communications, international coalitions of like-minded women are already happening, and more would be feasible. So would be a coalition in Canada to empower and support Aboriginal women be feasible, I might add. As an aside, I'll mention that I'm currently reading Alan Borovoy's memoir of his years as chief counsel for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. Good planning, coalitions, and smart strategizing characterized the way he made change happen in mid-20th century Canada. Anyone planning an activist campaign would be well advised to read *On The Barricades*.

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In our newly globalized world, women's rights are in transition everywhere. In Western democracies, we have made substantive progress over recent decades. But the developing world is another story, and it is probably inevitable that attempts to bring equality to women's lives will continue to meet with resistance from conservative patriarchal populations. Take India, for example, where anger at the growing integration of women—their increasing agency and autonomy, in other words—has led to an upsurge in sexual violence against them, in spite of, or perhaps because of, new legislation that criminalizes rape.

But here too there is good news to counter the bad. At the *same* time as this backlash is occurring, Indian civil society groups are initiating conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts for both sexes. One of these titled *The Women's Peacemakers Program* – runs a course named “Overcoming Violence: Exploring Masculinities, Violence, and Peace.” They have been so successful that their work has expanded to places such as Liberia and Brazil.

In researching today's talk I came across the personal testimony of some of the men who have participated in this program. It was really quite moving. They all agreed the experience was cathartic—life-changing. One

young Liberian spoke about the transformative practice of empathy. He said, “I learned to put myself in the position of these women and girls instead of seeing myself only as ‘Samuel the man.’”

My powerful virtual encounter with Samuel reminded me of a conversation I had some years ago with the late Robert McNamara, the United States Secretary of Defense in the administrations of President John F Kennedy and President Lyndon B Johnson. McNamara had presided over the Vietnam war in which more than 58,000 Americans died. At the time of our meeting, he was ruefully reviewing his life and thinking about his legacy. He was close to 90 years old.

What he now believed about war and peace went far beyond the urgencies of battle. What increasingly absorbed him was the *lack* of that human quality we call empathy: the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another, including an enemy.

He told me that in 1995 he had travelled to North Vietnam to meet to the man who had been his counterpart during the war. That individual said, “Mr. McNamara, if you had ever read a history book about our country, you would have understood that *no* amount of pressure from the United States would have stopped us from fighting for our national independence.”

I was astonished. Had learning this undercut the basic rationale for the Vietnam war in his mind, I asked him. Yes, he replied.

He had returned in great old age to the study of philosophy, especially to the great debates of Socrates over the meaning of justice. In his old age he had become an advocate of the International Criminal Court, an institution that would probably have indicted and convicted him.

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I once wrote that new ideas emerge over time like small ocean waves. At first they are unequal in size and importance; then, as the wind picks up, they may compete for prominence until one of them rises above the rest. Among the restless revolutions of the 1960s and 70s, during which young people rebelled against the conventions of their parents and their societies, the movement for the liberation of women was the most enduring. The time frame is already generations long, and continuing. But the generations of *our* lives are nothing compared to the longevity of Hammurabi’s Code of laws, whose inhibitions women still must battle against.

Empowering young women is key. Education is key. Supportive families are key. Economic opportunity and income parity are key. And learning empathy is key. *Especially* learning empathy.

When we commit ourselves to putting the pieces of this foundation in place, women’s equality and universal human rights will grow from our efforts. ■