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The Internationalization of Women's Issues

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NEW YORK — At the dawn of this new year, a note of cautious optimism is rising from female leaders, activists and advocates who are anticipating major new strides as “women issues” go global.

“Women issues are world issues,” Michelle Bachelet, the executive director of U.N. Women and former president of Chile, said recently. “Today there is greater awareness than ever before that women’s full participation is essential for peace, democracy and sustainable development.”

At the same time, Alyse Nelson, chief executive of Vital Voices Global Partnership, a nongovernmental organization that trains and empowers emerging female leaders and social entrepreneurs around the globe, noted that “the pace and nature of globalization have worn away the distinction between ‘women’s issues’ and global issues. In 2013, women who find real solutions and leverage their leadership to empower others will rise to the international stage in increasing numbers — and not because they’re women. I believe these women are the vanguard of a new era of global leadership.”

A universal vision seems at work here: Elect more women as heads of state and government (there are only 21 worldwide) and to parliaments, and promote more women to corporate boards and executive positions; advance and empower women in the developed and developing world; close the gender pay gap; and improve workplace conditions.

Meantime, violence against women, a central focus of U.N. Women’s agenda, has exploded as a world issue.

“In some countries, up to 7 in 10 women will be beaten, raped, abused, or mutilated during their lifetimes,” Ms. Bachelet said. “There can be no peace, no progress, when women live under the fear of violence.”

Indeed, Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani student shot by Taliban attackers after she spoke up on behalf of girls’ education, has become a global symbol, renewing efforts to protect schoolgirls in extreme patriarchal societies.

India, the world's largest democracy, was put on notice that women would not be silent anymore. Thousands of people have joined female demonstrators against government and police mishandling of rape cases and insensitivity to women in general. Large protests over a fatal gang rape became front-page news around the world, and protesters, led by women, demanded stronger laws against rape, sexual harassment and child abuse.

With the globalization of women's issues, world organizations are drumming up the support of activists the world over, of marquee names and celebrities. At the first [Trust Women conference](#), convened by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and the International Herald Tribune in London in December, participants and speakers — from Queen Noor of Jordan to Christy Turlington — debated complex issues like sexual slavery, child marriage, and the role of women in the Arab world.

Separately, the Women in the World Foundation, which will have its fourth annual conference in New York City in April, announced that a fund-raising appeal in the name of Ms. Yousafzai had collected more than \$100,000 in donations that the foundation said would go toward girls' education in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Some progress has been made on that score. "In countries around the world, we see women's educational achievement growing to the point that in many countries, more women than men are attending university," says Liza Mundy, a fellow at the New America Foundation and author of "The Richer Sex," about the rising number of female breadwinners. The near-fatal shooting of Ms. Yousafzai, she says, "demonstrated the real import of schooling for girls and women, and it also shows how deeply threatening this can be to extreme traditionalists."

Taking on another big issue, Catalyst, a nonpartisan organization for the advancement of women in business, is kicking off a plan to get more women onto corporate boards. "We expect 2013 to be the year when momentum builds for women in leadership," Ilene H. Lang, Catalyst's president and chief executive, said by e-mail. "Corporate boards are top priority." Women hold only 16.6 percent of Fortune 500 board seats. To help close that gender gap, Catalyst plans to enlist chief executives who would sponsor board-ready women into leadership positions. In Europe, Viviane Reding, the commissioner for justice, is leading another big push for women on boards. Allied activists have produced a register of thousands of board-ready women to counter arguments that there is a shortage of qualified candidates.

A big lift to American women came with the record number of women (20) who won seats in the U.S. Senate. The old tag “Year of the Woman” has been revived, and fresh momentum injected into the campaign to elect a woman president in 2016.

It’s no news that Hillary Rodham Clinton — recovering from a blood clot and other illnesses — is the undisputed Democratic front-runner. But the names of Democratic female senators also pop up, including Kirsten E. Gillibrand of New York and the newly elected Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

The female senators make up just 20 percent of the 100-member Senate but are drawing outside attention. Known challenges await them in and out of Congress, like efforts to restrict abortion rights and cut back or end federal funding for women’s health programs like Planned Parenthood.

Familiar issues like equal pay, workplace policies, family-work balance and political power haven’t gone away in the United States or anywhere else. Basic needs and basic rights remain elusive for many women in the developing world. And those issues, too, will not go away anytime soon.

But more women in more regions of the world are stepping up and living better lives, just about everyone in the field agrees. And as the old women’s issues become global, the expectations rise, and the challenges get larger.