

OPINION

The challenge: achieve gender equality

By JAMES W. PRESCOTT

Violence against women and children represents one of the greatest moral indictments of human civilization and the religions of the world, which have helped shape that culture. Why have the major religions of the world failed in their most important task — to bring an end to violence against children and women throughout the world? Indeed, is *this* their most important task?

We were reminded of this violence during the O.J. Simpson trial. We are reminded daily by our newspapers and television news shows, which chronicle that violence from America to Zaire.

We have been reminded again by the gang rape of a 12-year-old Okinawa girl. One American serviceman has confessed to this crime, and two others have admitted to being accomplices. This atrocity was compounded by the comments of Adm. Richard C. Macke, commander of U.S. Pacific Forces, who said the rape could have been prevented if the servicemen had hired a prostitute.

Clearly, Macke does not understand the nature and dynamics of rape, which has its roots in patriarchal gender inequality, where women and children have been considered the property of the male with all that this implies.

Unfortunately, the resignation of Macke and the imprisonment of the servicemen if they are convicted will not prevent future acts of man's sexual violence against women. More radical actions are needed, based on an understanding of the root causes of gender violence.

We are aware that no nation is immune from such violence, but some nations are clearly less violent than others. For example, a culture of violence exists in Bosnia, while a culture of peace exists in the Netherlands and Iceland.

Cross-cultural comparisons of this kind have yielded important insights into the origins and nature of violent and peaceful cultures, yet we have ignored these findings in preventing future violence.

Recently, America celebrated the 75th anniversary of women receiving the equal right to vote. The 1995 U.N. International Conference on Women in Beijing reminded us that in no human society are women treated as equals with men. The epidemics of female feticide and infanticide and the genital mutilation of female children in many countries attest to the low value placed upon being "female." Why?

An understanding of this worldwide gender inequality requires an understanding of how it has its moral-social roots in the philosophical and religious foundations of both Western and Eastern

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civilizations:

■ In "Politics," Aristotle proclaimed: "Also, as regards male and female, the former is superior, the latter is inferior; the male is ruler, the female is subject."

■ St. Paul proclaimed in Corinthians 11:8-9: "For man did not originally spring from woman, but woman was made out of man; and man was not created for woman's sake, but woman for the sake of man."

■ Ecclesiasticus 25:24 states: "Woman is the origin of sin, and it is through her that we all die."

When women are equated with evil — and knowing that evil must be vanquished and destroyed — how is it possible to end violence against women? We clearly have a formidable history of error and moral hostility toward women and children to overcome if we are to have gender equality and bring about an end to violence.

No major religion on earth has affirmed the full equality and dignity of women with men and treated women accordingly. It is perhaps for this and other reasons that mere political rights of equality in voting have not been sufficient to achieve gender equality in American or any other society; nor to bringing an end to violence. Without full sexual equality — in all of its dimensions: moral, social and political — violence against women will not end.

The question becomes, how can women most effectively achieve full gender equality in the light of history?

There are many paths that could be pursued. A change in philosophical and religious traditions is one such path, but this is hardly realistic for the near future. A political path to change is more so.

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution became the law of the land in 1920 — some 144 years having passed since Abigail Smith Adams pleaded with her husband John Adams:

"If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

The rebellion promised by Abigail Smith Adams and fomented by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton has clearly not gone far enough. Stronger social-political measures are needed to realize the dream of equality in America while neutralizing man's tendency to dominate women.

Abigail Smith Adams identified two elements that are necessary for women's equality: "voice or representation." The 19th Amendment provided for the equality of voice (voting), but it did not provide for the equality of representation. It is only with the equality of representation that the second half of the "rebellion" can be achieved and where gender equality has any hope of realization. Thus, the following proposal.

In the furtherance of the uncompleted rebellion fomented by Anthony and Stanton, I propose that a nonpartisan commitment be made to the equal representation of women in Congress and in all legislative bodies of this nation.

I can think of no other single act that could achieve so much in so little time that could redress the inequality of women or reprioritize the social, moral and political concerns of this nation.

Without equality of representation in the legislative bodies, I do not believe women will ever become equal with men; that power will always remain with the privileged male class; and violence rather than peace will continually characterize the male-dominated society.

At this year's 50th-anniversary celebrations of the United Nations, the world's heads of state affirmed to "work with renewed vigor and effectiveness in promoting peace, development, equality and justice and understanding among the people of the world."

The political parties of this nation are challenged to help implement this U.N. objective to achieve human equality and world peace by placing legislative gender equality in their political platforms.

Legislative gender equality in America would set a world standard for other nations to emulate; would guide the next U.N. World Conference on Women to seek worldwide sexual equality; provoke the Christian Coalition and the World Council of Churches to reshape the role of religion in achieving gender equality; and provide a foundation for a truly humane, compassionate and peaceful 21st century.

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