

The fight for equality is far from over

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THIS week, women in Darfur will be attacked, raped and beaten simply because they leave their homes to collect firewood. This week, women in Ukraine, Moldova and Thailand will be bought and sold like pieces of meat and trafficked into the misery of sexual slavery.

This week, women in Australia, Russia and Wales will be beaten by their partners. Many will be seriously injured, some will die. This week, women in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco will continue to live as unequal citizens before the eyes of the law.

This week, our daughters, mothers and sisters will take home less pay than our sons, fathers and brothers - just because they are women.

This week is International Women's Week. A week when women across the globe celebrate more than a century of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development. It is also a time to take stock of the progress made, to call for further change and to recognise the many women who are continuing the battle for equal rights.

Despite much progress, widespread discrimination against women persists. Last year in Wales we celebrated 30 years of the Sex Discrimination Act, the Equal Pay Act and the Equal Opportunities Commission. Yet, despite three decades of such legislation, the struggle for real progress continues.

Only last week, the UK's Women and Work Commission concluded that the gender pay gap is worse in Britain than anywhere in Europe, with women in full-time employment earning 17% less than men. In Wales this figure rises to 19%. The average salary for men in Wales is now £25,558. For a woman it is just £20,716.

Women's skills are vital to our economy, yet the current rigid employment culture makes it almost impossible for women to fulfil their economic potential. In Wales there is currently just one childcare place for every seven children under eight, while recent statistics from the Equal Opportunities Commission reveal that 30,000 women a year are sacked just because they are pregnant.

Of course, there are success stories - those who have broken through the glass ceiling to take top jobs in the judiciary, civil service, government and with FTSE 100 companies. But they remain the exception. Indeed, though we are reminded regularly that women and girls are outstripping men and boys in education, those advantages are not carried into the world of work.

That's not to say that the past year has not seen progress. Last week the Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that 20% of world parliamentarians elected in 2005 were women - a record number. Here in Wales, the Welsh Assembly can be proud of its perfect gender balance.

Elsewhere, we now have a woman Chancellor in Germany, a woman President of Chile and in Liberia Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has become Africa's first female head of state. In May, women in Kuwait were given the right to vote for the very first time.

At home, women's concerns have taken their place at the centre of the mainstream political agenda and there are other signs of a "quiet revolution". I was particularly buoyed by a recent Western Mail interview with South Wales Police Chief, Barbara Wilding, in which she expressed her joy at over-hearing two male colleagues discussing childcare arrangements. Progress indeed!

Nevertheless, the challenges remain great. Right across the globe, violence continues to blight female lives. The UN estimates that one in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape during her lifetime and domestic violence continues to be the biggest cause of female injury and death worldwide.

Human trafficking is now overtaking drug smuggling as one of the world's fastest growing illegal trades. Between 800,000 and two million people, the majority of them women, are trafficked each year, often for commercial sexual exploitation.

More than 10 years since the World Conference on Women in Beijing recognised the worldwide "feminisation of poverty", the face of the world's poor remains distinctly female. Of the more than one billion people who live in extreme poverty worldwide, 70% are women and girls. Women work 67% of the world's working hours and produce 50% of the world's food yet they earn just 10% of the world's income and own a mere 1% of the world's property.

This week, during International Women's Week, we do our bit to challenge this status-quo. And as the Equal Opportunities Commission in Wales recently pointed out, we would do well to remember that "well behaved women don't make history". When equality and fairness is the objective, then this is surely sound advice.

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