

# Learning to Fly with Two Strong Wings

By Sabine Machl and Lodovico Folin Calabi



Evidence shows that equality in a society, including gender equality, promotes productivity, innovation, and prosperity. In terms of women's human rights and gender equality, people often forget that upholding the human rights of women is not about diminishing and limiting the human rights of men. It is not about claiming that women are better or will do better than men. We would therefore like to challenge the headline "Our Better Half" and instead support the metaphor of Gloria Steinem comparing humanity to "a bird with two wings, and if one wing is broken, no one can fly."

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*@UN Women. Photo by Shareef Sarhan.*

Gender equality is about promoting human rights, participation, and opportunities for all individuals in a community. Working towards gender equality is about transforming power dynamics in a society to make it work equally for the development of women and men, boys and girls.

Unfortunately this understanding is not always shared, and women and girls often do not perceive themselves as powerful actors of change. Palestine is no exception in this regard. Palestinian women are recognized for their

resilience, their strength, and their invaluable contribution to the building of the Palestinian state. Despite all this, in every aspect of our lives, whether in the media sector or in education, health, finance, or politics, there are still very few Palestinian women represented in decision-making positions. Multiple obstacles continue to prevent them from reaching their full potential and accessing the same opportunities as men and boys.

In the current context of Palestine, society's patriarchal norms and male

dominance over power and decision-making positions relegates women's and girls' rights and empowerment issues to matters of secondary importance. Through perceptions and stereotypes, shared and reshaped over time, influenced by family and community pressure, girls and women often accept circumstances and decisions imposed against their will.

We must collectively place gender equality at the heart of all development efforts: supporting girls' and women's education; fighting discrimination and violence against women; and supporting women's political participation and leadership roles, including in the media.

In this endeavor the engagement of youth is key. Internalization of gender equality as a value starts at a young age, and we must initiate changes in the way attitudes and behaviors are shaped, so that violations of girls' and women's rights become unacceptable.

It is not enough to ensure that girls and young women enroll in schools, they must also be guaranteed a quality education. An education that teaches young boys and girls the importance of equality and respect.

Among the set of Sustainable Development Goals approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls by 2030 transpire all its goals, targets, and indicators. It is critical to apply these goals and targets to the Palestinian context and design and implement measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making in social, economic, and political fields.

In Palestine, gender equality and women's empowerment can only be achieved through a renewed and collective endeavor, in an alliance between academic institutions, national and local public institutions, the private sector, civil society organizations,

and international organizations. Civil society in Palestine is indeed one of the most active in the region in promoting women's and girl's leadership to be agents of change in their communities.

In 2014, UN Women launched the HeforShe initiative ([www.heforshe.org](http://www.heforshe.org)), galvanizing citizens around the globe to sign up to take action for gender equality, and asking men and boys to step up their responsibility in achieving gender equality. This year, UN Women is initiating a new partnership with youth organizations in Palestine to drive this change and support further engagement of Palestinian young men and women.

Gender equality is also a global priority for UNESCO, mainstreamed throughout all its activities in the fields of education, sciences, culture, and communications; supporting the active involvement of women in the preservation and promotion of Palestinian cultural heritage; in ensuring access to quality education for Palestinian girls and women; and in increasing women's access and participation to expression and decision in and through the media. UNESCO's Networks for Mediterranean Youth (NET-MED Youth) project, funded by the European Union, implemented in Palestine and in nine other Mediterranean countries, provides equal opportunities for young girls and men to jointly work, debate, and influence youth policies and strategies, giving them adequate skills to have a positive impact on their societies.

"We need to reach a tipping point, where there is momentum to prepare our world, our whole world, to equality, to parity, to justice – and gender equality will help us to get there faster" (Christiane Amanpour, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Freedom of Expression and Journalist Safety, at the International Development Cooperation Meeting on Gender and Media, held in Geneva, Switzerland, December 2015).

Gender equality concerns all of us, and working towards this goal is our shared responsibility. We shall only be able to fly if we get the best out of every woman and every man in our society.

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*"Women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights. We want to provide our partners with the effective support they need in order to fight violence against women and girls and at the same time to empower them socially and economically, so that women can participate actively in the political, social and cultural life of their countries," said Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission.*

The EU and its Member States are at the forefront of the protection and fulfilment of girls' and women's rights. The strong EU positioning in the post-2015 development agenda clearly contributed to gender equality being accepted as a central element within the new Sustainable Development Goals.

In line with this, the EU-funded projects in Palestine address gender in different contexts and contribute to the fight against gender inequality. We support equal engagement of women in economic development and promote stronger involvement in governance at local and national levels. This is in addition to a number of human rights and youth EU-funded actions where gender is a core component.

