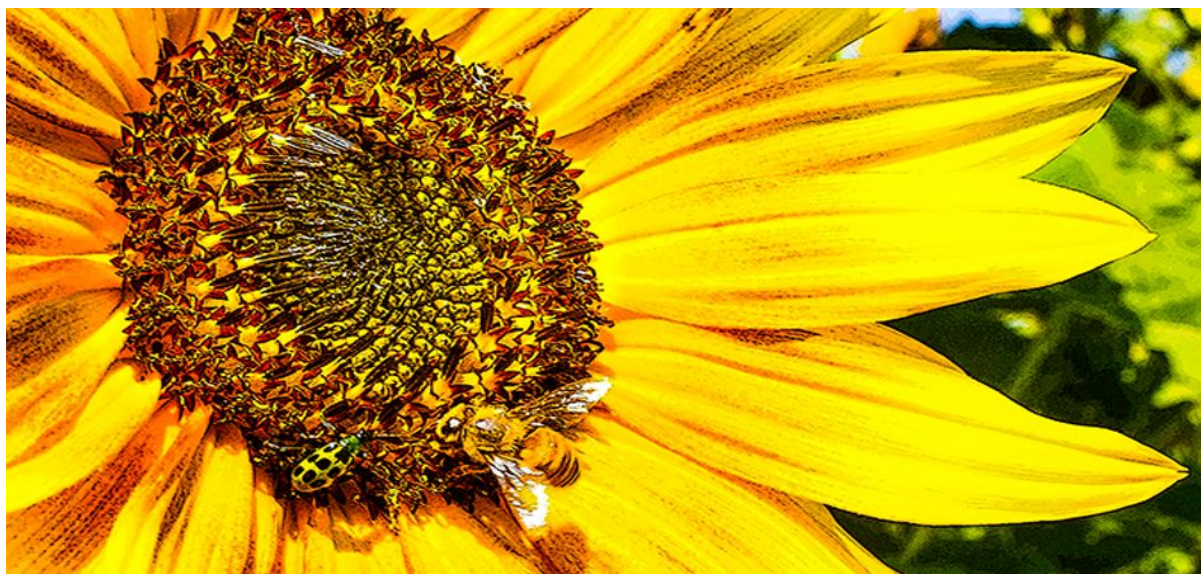


# Women and Girls, Key Constituents of a Life-Affirming, Planetary Transformation - A MAHB Dialogue with Equality Now Global Executive Director Yasmeen Hassan

Geoffrey Holland



Sharing our world | Image courtesy of the author

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## **Geoffrey Holland - What is the Maputo Protocol, and how is it indicative of Equality Now’s approach to championing the rights and wellbeing of women and girls?**

*Yasmeen Hassan* - The Maputo Protocol - the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa – is the most far-reaching (and Africa specific) legal treaty on women’s rights that was adopted by the Member States of the African Union in Maputo, Mozambique in 2003. It builds on and goes beyond existing international human rights instruments (CEDAW, ICCPR, ICESCR) and addresses the unique human rights challenges faced by women and girls in the African context, including rights to be free of child marriage, female genital mutilation, widowhood practices, etc. It has been ratified by 40 African States.

The Protocol came about as a result of the efforts of the Solidarity of African Women’s Rights Coalition (SOAWR) that has 50 member organizations from 25 African countries. Equality Now acts as the Secretariat of SOAWR. SOAWR members work in

collaboration to get the Protocol ratified and, more importantly, domesticated and implemented.

**GH - Can you summarize the current state of sex trafficking around the world, and talk about what Equality Now is doing to end the sexual exploitation of women and children?**

YH - Sex trafficking is the most prevalent form of human trafficking. It is highly gendered -- as most people trafficked for sex are women and girls and their buyers are men -- and rooted in gender inequality. Globally, 72% of all trafficking victims are female and of these, it is estimated that 83% are trafficked for sexual exploitation. Sex trafficking is “big business” and brings in an estimated \$99 billion a year. In the words of one trafficker: “Why traffic in drugs or guns that you can sell only one time when in women and girls you have a commodity that can be sold again and again!”

Traffickers prey on the vulnerability of women and girls and exploit all ways in which to create a market for their sale. There are a variety of ways in which women and girls can end up being trafficked for commercial sex, including being:

- sold into prostitution because of poverty;
- deceived into signing contracts for jobs and ending up in sex trade;
- tricked by “boyfriends” and trapped in prostitution;
- trafficked into temporary marriages for sex;
- sold into child marriages or trafficked as sex slaves during times of conflicts or natural disasters;
- advertised and sold on the internet;
- trafficked in organized virginity sales.

The constant in all these situations is the exploitation of women that results from their unequal status, both legally and socially. And the “normalization” of the sex trade into which they are trafficked!

Addressing sex trafficking requires a range of contextual solutions. Equality Now advocates for a three-pronged approach (1) ensuring that women and girls in prostitution are seen as victims and not criminals; (2) decreasing their vulnerability through a range of legal protections; and (3) shrinking the commercial sex trade into which they are trafficked. The last involves criminalizing traffickers, pimps and brothel owners and addressing the underlying misogyny and sexism of the “johns” who normalize the purchase of women’s bodies. Equality Now is working with a diverse range of advocacy groups focusing on poverty, addiction, homelessness, foster care and LGBTQI youth to take the agenda forward. In addition, we are working closely with law enforcement, media and technology companies. Misuse of technology, combined with the legal, policy and technical challenges associated with policing the global web, is resulting in an unprecedented increase in the

scope and scale sexual exploitation at a global scale. In the US, 2 out of every 3 children sold for sex are trafficked online.

**GH - Misogyny and gender violence impact hundreds of millions of women and girls around the world. What is Equality Now's approach to addressing gender-based discrimination and violence?**

*YH* - Equality Now envisions a world in which men and women are equal, we work to bring about legal and systemic change to ensure that laws treat men and women equally and address all forms of violence against women and girls. Legal equality is an essential first step in achieving gender equality. We use a unique combination of legal advocacy, strategic litigation, partnership building, community mobilization and media messaging, at the international, regional and national levels to encourage governments to adopt, improve and enforce laws that protect and promote the rights of women and girls around the world. More than 50% of the laws that we have highlighted as sex discriminatory have been successfully changed.

Fundamental to our approach is the understanding that change has to be driven by local groups and we must support them and elevate their voices. We are present at all major international and regional forums (United Nations, Inter-American Commission, European Union, African Union, League of Arab Nations) and ensure that the issues identified by grassroots women's rights groups inform international and regional laws and policies, which then influence laws and policies at the national level.

**GH - Globally, more than 120 million women and girls have been subjected to the medically harmful practice of FGM or Female Genital Mutilation. This is a deeply entrenched cultural tradition in many parts of Africa, the Middle East, and in some places in Asia. It seems making FGM against the law is not enough. How do we encourage the cultural change that seems to be the best way to end this practice?**

*YH* - In our experience, the law can be a powerful tool for cultural and social change but the government must treat it as such. A law that seeks to change cultural practice must have national support and must be accompanied with a plan for awareness raising, community mobilization and education. Some governments (like Burkina Faso) have used national action plans that incorporate legal, educational and social change efforts with great success. The determining factor for the impact of these plans is sustained political will.

**GH - How important is equal access to education for girls to achieving a future that is worthy of our species?**

*YH* - Access to education for girls is critical. It gives girls tools and opportunities and enables them to claim other key rights, including health, work, property, political participation,

access to justice, freedom from violence. Significantly, it reduces rates of child marriage, promotes healthier families, improves wages and jobs for women.

Girls' education has an impact on economic growth. According to The World Bank, a one percentage point increase in the proportion of women with secondary education raises the average gross domestic product (GDP) by 0.3 percent.

However, despite the clear benefits of girls' education, many families and communities prioritize boys' education. Sex discriminatory social norms and laws that promote inequality in the family are the root of this son preference. In addition, sometimes government policies can restrict girls' access to education. In Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Burkina Faso we have challenged policies banning pregnant schoolgirls from attending school (in addition to holding governments to account on the responsibilities to protect girls from sexual violence and child marriage).

**GH - Much progress has been made on gender equality in North America and other developed regions around the world. How is the law being used to advance the cause of equal rights for women and LGBTQ citizens in regions of the world that continue to lag behind?**

*YH* - Interestingly, the United States ranks 41 in the Gender Inequality Index – countries like China and Belarus are ahead of the United States in equality for women. The United States is among only seven countries in the world that have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the international treaty on the rights of women. Additionally, the U.S. Constitution does not guarantee gender equality. Equality Now is part of the Equal Rights Amendment Coalition, which advocates for such a provision.

Whatever the level of development in a country, the law sets the tone for how that government values and treats its citizens. Before you can access rights, it is essential to have them and that is why, as a first step, we in all countries, we advocate for the repeal of sex discriminatory laws. We also advocate for strong laws against all forms of violence against women that are responsive to local contexts. In common law countries, we often pursue strategic litigation because judicial decisions set precedents that can change the interpretation of the law. The final frontier is the implementation of laws that lags in many countries, particularly those that are not well resourced or where rule of law is not strong. We are paying more attention to this issue and working with a local organization to find.

**GH - The human population, currently 7.7 billion, has doubled in just the past fifty years and is headed to 10-12 billion by the end of this century. Yet, in many parts of the world, women and girls are still subjugated by male-dominant cultures; deprived of education, still treated like property and denied reproductive choices. How is it possible to curb our**

**worst tendencies and make peace with the biosphere we all depend on when this kind of human injustice and inequality continues in so many places?**

*YH* - A first step is to create awareness that equality for women and girls is not just the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do. Studies have shown the gender equality is directly linked to the level of peacefulness in society. In addition, development and poverty reduction, and environmental and climate change efforts are all enhanced by the level of equality for women. This understanding is enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)-- the 17 global goals for a better world by 2030 - seeking to end poverty, fight inequality and stop climate change, as the SDGs all incorporate measures to achieve gender equality and end violence against women. It is now up to all of us, governments, businesses, civil society and the general public to work together to curb our worst tendencies and adopt laws, policies and behaviors that shift us to a more peaceful, equal, just and sustainable planet.

**GH - In the U.S., the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution was passed nearly fifty years ago and was subsequently ratified by 34 states. The amendment fell four states short of the 38 needed for ratification and subsequently died. Is the ERA a symbolic milestone that must become renewed and ratified for American women to feel truly emancipated?**

*YH* - The ERA fell three (not four) states short in 1982 when the extended deadline for ERA ratification lapsed. There is a renewed push for ratification that focuses on getting three additional states to ratify. Nevada ratified the ERA in 2017 and Illinois ratified in 2018. We're now just one state short and it is vitally important that women finally be put into the U.S. Constitution. The amendment goes beyond emancipation. It would mean protections would be enshrined in our most basic legal document, changing the law and cementing the incredible legacy of pioneers of sex discrimination litigation. It would give our nation's next generation a permanent, invaluable tool for gender equality. The ERA would also be important to stop the rollback of reproductive rights in this country.

**GH - How can humans better embody the responsibility we have for restoring and protecting wild, underdeveloped areas of land and oceans as part of any sustainable, life-affirming vision for the future?**

*YH* - By shifting the focus of the human endeavor from wealth creation to the creation of universal wellbeing of people and the planet - this means reducing economic inequality between people and between nations and addressing exploitation in all its forms- of each other, of our common resources, of our planet.

**GH - Is it important for the world's peoples to embrace their common humanity and see themselves as planetary citizens, as part of the process of shaping any kind of positive future? How do you think we can do this?**

YH - We need to shift the dominant discourse from division and wealth grabbing to a new narrative of cooperation, respect and equitable distribution and sharing. This is what the human rights framework, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights tried to do. Unchecked capitalism that is our economic model is not fully compatible with this framework, so we need a re-evaluation of our priorities. One simple thing to do: put more women in charge!

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Yasmeen Hassan is the Global Executive Director for [Equality Now](#) which focuses on ending practices harmful to women, sex trafficking, sexual violence, and achieving genuine equality for women and girls. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Ms. Hassan has served as an advisor to The Council on Foreign Relations, and as a consultant to the United Nations Trust to End Violence Against Women.

*Geoffrey Holland is a Portland, Oregon based writer/producer, and principal author of [The Hydrogen Age](#), Gibbs-Smith Publishing, 2007*

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*The MAHB Dialogues are a monthly Q&A blog series focused on the need to embrace our common planetary citizenship. Each of these Q&As will feature a distinguished author, scientist, or leader offering perspective on how to take care of the only planetary home we have.*

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