
Our Moment Is Now

AMBASSADOR MELANNE VERVEER AND KIM AZZARELLI

In 1848, Charlotte Woodward was earning a pittance stitching gloves in her home in Waterloo, New York.¹ Like other women of her era, the former schoolteacher, not yet twenty years old, had been denied property ownership rights, citizenship, and political representation. In some states, if a woman married, everything she owned or earned belonged to her husband. That July, Woodward was intrigued by an announcement she read in the newspaper about a meeting of women to be held in a chapel forty miles away, in the town of Seneca Falls. Looking for an opportunity to better her life and that of her family, she did what women have done throughout history and to this day: she joined a network. Woodward's experience and those of others contextualize the movement for women's rights and equal participation from a historical perspective, both in the

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United States and internationally. These experiences demonstrate the mounting evidence that women's equal participation is not only beneficial for half the world's population, but for humanity overall.

SENECA FALLS AND THE 19TH AMENDMENT

Over tea one Sunday in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and three other women came up with the idea for the Seneca Falls Convention.² Stanton and Mott recalled their journey to London, where,

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as women, they had been relegated to the sidelines at an international abolitionist gathering. They agreed then and there to organize a women's rights convention when they returned to the United States. Back home, they discussed their frustration with their second-class status, and together they

drew up an announcement for an assembly "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman." Their resulting campaign to reform child custody, divorce, property laws, equal pay, and suffrage gained momentum from the moral outrage and organizational channels of the abolitionist movement.

Stanton and Mott also drew inspiration from the writings of Sarah Moore Grimké. The erudite daughter of a plantation owner, Grimké was one of the first women to espouse women's rights and perhaps the earliest proponent of equal pay for women in the United States. Her revulsion at slavery moved her to join the abolitionist cause, but her energies shifted to women's rights when, working as a schoolteacher, she learned that her male colleagues earned three times as much for the same work.

Charlotte Woodward longed for connection to such a purposeful sorority. She tentatively approached her neighbors to see if anyone might like to join her on the trip to Seneca Falls, which would take more than two days. She was met with mixed reactions when she knocked on doors. Undeterred, she set out early on July 19 by horse and carriage, accompanied by the handful of other travelers she had mustered. If they formed a dishearteningly thin procession at first, they were joined at each crossroad by other women, gaining heart and strength.³

Also traveling to Seneca Falls were abolitionists, including the former slave Frederick Douglass, who found common cause with women's suffrage and would prove to be an important male ally. Years later, at a speech before

the International Council of Women in Washington, D.C., he would state:

There are few facts in my humble history to which I look back with more satisfaction than to the fact, recorded in the history of the woman suffrage movement, that I was sufficiently enlightened at that early day, and when only a few years from slavery, to support your resolution for woman suffrage. I have done very little in this world in which to glory except this one act—and I certainly glory in that. When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of women, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act.⁴

Others on the road to Seneca Falls included pacifist Quakers from Philadelphia, wives and mothers who had never had the opportunity to work outside their homes, and teenage girls, including one who had started going door to door at age twelve with antislavery petitions. When Woodward reached the hot, packed Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, she found a diverse crowd, bound together by a shared purpose, moved to further action by the inspiring speeches.⁵

To be sure, not everyone was moved. The convention was widely derided in the press. A Philadelphia newspaper editorial huffed, “A woman is nobody. A wife is everything.”⁶ An Albany newspaper warned that equal rights would “demoralize and degrade” women. The convention was condemned as “the most shocking and unnatural event ever recorded in the history of womanity.”⁷

By the end of the momentous two-day gathering, one hundred signatures—those of sixty-eight women and thirty-two men—were dry on the Declaration of Sentiments,⁸ which demanded basic civil, economic, and political rights, including the right to vote, for women. The negative press fueled publicity, as word of mouth traveled and spurred women’s rights activists to form regional groups. By 1850, a national event held in Worcester, Massachusetts, drew about 1000 attendees. In 1851, Susan B. Anthony would join Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her efforts, spending the next fifty years of her life advocating for women’s suffrage. Each year, Anthony traveled around the country, giving up to one hundred speeches, in an effort to educate her fellow citizens.

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The early women's movement was a slow-burning movement. While this can be partially attributed to the pace of transportation and communication in the mid-nineteenth century, most important was the momentous shift in thinking that was needed to secure the right to vote. It would take more than seventy years from the date of the Seneca Falls Convention before women would legally have the right to vote. The Nineteenth Amendment, also known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, was passed on June 4, 1919. However, neither Susan B. Anthony nor Elizabeth Cady Stanton would live to see women cast their votes. Indeed, Charlotte Woodward, the young glovemaking, was the only participant of the Seneca Falls Convention who lived to see their dream achieved.⁹

JEYHOUNABAD, IRAN

One year after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, in 1920, halfway around the world in Jeyhounabad, Iran, a fourteen-year-old girl was beginning to notice the first painful signs of losing her sight.¹⁰ Malak Jân Nemati, born in 1906 into a landowning family with an ancient lineage, would prove instrumental in transforming the mindset of a male-dominated community toward a more egalitarian view of the role and value of women and girls.

Located near Mount Bisotoun, Jeyhounabad is an agricultural village whose climate is marked by harsh winters and blistering summers. With no electricity (that would come only in the 1980s), the rustic living conditions of Jeyhounabad during Malak Jân's time have been likened to those of pre-modern life in the West. The simple clay houses formed a small and intimate community that was isolated, dependent wholly on the surrounding agricultural land.

Jeyhounabad and the nearby villages, however, were not isolated from the regional and national patriarchal view of the role of women and girls. In accordance with age-old tradition, females were deemed subservient to males in every way. Women were not entitled to express a point of view, and under the law their statements were considered to have half the value of men's. The birth of a girl was not a celebrated occasion, but rather one for which people would frequently offer their condolences. Girls did not go to school, and often they were fed less than boys. From a young age, girls were assigned household chores with the goal of preparing them for marriage and the bearing of children.

Malak Jân's father, an influential mystic and poet, had a different vision for his young daughter.¹¹ Contrary to the customs of the time,

Malak Jân was offered an education akin to that of her elder brother; she studied classical philosophy, theology, Persian language and literature, and music. This would provide the basis for her lifelong pursuit of knowledge, which would include far-ranging subjects such as mathematics, biology, law, history, and geography. In her teenage years, however, she would begin a life of physical frailty and health challenges, as she began to feel the effects of a chronic and acutely painful ocular condition that would render her completely blind by the age of twenty. As a blind, frail young woman in an environment that rewarded physical strength, Malak Jân was up against significant social and material disadvantages.

Despite these obstacles, the strength of Malak Jân's character and convictions would lead her to become a revered sage and powerful leader in her region, an influential thinker who would later be recognized well beyond Jeyhounabad. Equipped with uncommon courage, wisdom, inner strength, and generosity, she would become a champion for the rights of women and girls, often at great risk to herself. Her power would stem not from her physical strength, material position, or status, but rather from the depth of her conviction — the power of her perspective.

For Malak Jân, acquiring the correct philosophy of life, shaped by one's intellectual and moral development, was fundamental to the pursuit of a meaningful life. She emphasized that service to others provided the fuel for self-knowledge and ethical progress.

She firmly believed that each person had a duty to use his or her positive traits for the benefit of others.¹²

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It was with that mindset that Malak Jân sought to improve the lives of her fellow villagers, from providing daily meals to those in need, to introducing much-needed innovations to her community. "Though hardly

leaving her native surroundings, her social initiatives were downright revolutionary," her biographer, Leili Anvar, wrote.¹³ "She was instrumental in bringing electricity to the village and encouraged villagers to grow fruits and vegetables by introducing new irrigation techniques."¹⁴ She also instituted a system of microcredit whereby villagers could borrow on the honor system to improve their own livelihoods. Her wisdom, generosity, and unwavering attentiveness to everyone—from the peasant villager to the educated urbanite, including many who had traveled from the West to seek her counsel—captured the hearts and minds of all.

But Malak Jân understood that progress for her community would require more than just modernizing infrastructure and farming techniques. Progress would also demand a change in mindset about the value and role of women and girls. Under her leadership, gender reform in her community meant feeding girls and boys an equal amount of food, allowing girls to go to school and women to attend classes, equal inheritance and property rights, and full economic participation and financial independence for women. Malak Jân's insistence on the equal participation of women was not, however, limited to civic and familial life. She also insisted on their full participation in the moral, intellectual, and spiritual life of their community, for which she was subject to severe criticism and even threats on her life.

Yet her patience, perseverance, and generosity of spirit ultimately won out. "The stunning contrast between these rugged tall men and this frail woman who spoke in a soft and composed voice has left a great impression on those who witnessed their willful submission to her authority," Anvar wrote.¹⁵ Ultimately, Malak Jân believed the education of both men and

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By facilitating the emancipation of women, she led an entire community steeped in traditions of oppressing women toward a more equitable conception of the rights and duties of human beings towards one another.¹⁶

She encouraged them to challenge their own cultural, social, and religious heritage and to become aware of the negative impact of prejudice. In short, the transformation of an entire culture may be one of her greatest enduring legacies.

Malak Jân's presence and wisdom has had an impact on people around the world, an achievement marked by the centennial celebration of her birth at the Asia Society in New York City in 2006. Her life serves as a powerful example for those who want to help shift perspectives on the value of women and girls. "She was well aware," her biographer wrote, "that during her own lifetime she would not see a world in which women were equal to men. Yet, she was hopeful that on the scale of human history, each individual struggle would count toward establishing this equality."¹⁷

In 1995, two years after Malak Jân passed away, over 40,000 people converged in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women, the largest conference in the United Nations' fifty-year history.¹⁸ Nearly 150 years after Elizabeth Cady Stanton and ninety-nine others inked the Declaration of Sentiments, 189 nations signed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a document that Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women, has called "the most comprehensive global policy framework and blueprint for action for equality and human rights of women and girls everywhere."¹⁹

In early 2015, with the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing conference quickly approaching, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for a renewed commitment to its goals. In a foreword to a re-publication of the Beijing Declaration, Ban wrote, "When we empower women and girls, we will realize a better future for all."²⁰ In March 2015, Hillary Clinton, Chelsea Clinton, and Melinda Gates presented the *Full Participation Report*, a result of their No Ceilings initiative.²¹ The report aggregates and analyzes 850,000 data points on the status of women and girls from more than 190 countries, to better understand the gaps in and progress toward equality.²²

"Data is a road map to impact," Melinda Gates told us. "Behind every data point is a real person's struggle for a better life. So the data captures the truth of what's going on in communities around the world. But when you add up all the data points, they reveal patterns you can't see by any other method."²³

What did these 850,000 data points reveal? As Hillary Clinton put it, "Despite all this progress, when it comes to the full participation of women and girls, we are just not there yet."²⁴

So how can we get there?

Today there is undeniable momentum building, and getting there is within our reach. The data is in, and it is conclusive: advancing women and girls can fast-forward us to a better world for both ourselves and for generations to come. Mounting evidence from the public and private sectors demonstrates that women are currently among the most potentially powerful demographic the world has ever seen, poised to rival those of India and China as an economic force. Most recently, McKinsey & Company's Global Parity Report found that closing the global gender gap could drive between \$12 and \$28 trillion in gross

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domestic product growth by 2025.²⁵ Women and girls represent a critically under-utilized economic opportunity of unprecedented proportion.

However, many obstacles still stand in the way of realizing this opportunity. The World Bank's report on Women, Business and the Law in 2016 found that 155 economies around the world still have some legal impediments to women's economic participation.²⁶

If we can address these injustices and overcome these obstacles, the potential is enormous. Increasing women's workforce participation so that it is equal to that of men's could potentially raise GDP by thirty-four percent in Egypt, nine percent in Japan, and five percent in the United States.²⁷ Women own or lead more than a quarter of private businesses worldwide. In the United States alone; if women entrepreneurs were a country, its GDP would rank fifth in the world, close to that of Germany.²⁸ Women control some \$20 trillion in annual consumer spending globally.²⁹

Moreover, it's not just about how much money women have to spend, but *how* they spend it. Women tend to reinvest their earnings into their communities and families, raising GDP and lowering illiteracy and mortality rates. As a result of this "multiplier effect," investing in women and girls creates a "double dividend."

Women are critical to driving growth for companies too. A 2011 analysis by Catalyst found that Fortune 500 companies that consistently had three or more female board directors in at least four years over a five-year period had nearly a fifty percent higher return on equity than companies with no women on their boards in at least four of the five years.³⁰ According to another analysis, Fortune 1000 companies with women CEOs

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performed more than two times better than the benchmark S&P 500 between 2002 and 2014.³¹ In the words of the former president of the World Bank, Robert Zoellick, "Gender equality is smart economics."³²

Despite the obstacles that remain, the good news is that both women and men – in leadership positions in communities, nonprofits, companies, and countries – are increasingly making the case for putting women at the center of their strategies. In some instances, this has meant giving families incentives to keep their daughters in school. In others, it has meant lobbying leading CEOs to take a hard look at the correlation between diversity and profitability.

These efforts are paying off. Women are not only populating the leadership ranks but, just as importantly, increasingly participate in every area of society. And as women are achieving power at every level, they are often using that power for the purpose of advancing other women and girls. They, and like-minded men, are working together across sectors, nations, and economic strata to build partnerships for the benefit of all. Education, media, and especially technology, are providing unprecedented opportunities for acceleration.

By connecting with like-minded people with shared values, individuals can accelerate not just their own lives but progress for women everywhere. And women are not on this journey alone: male champions from around the world are recognizing that investing in women and girls is not solely a women's issue.

Since Seneca Falls, we have been on a journey to women's full and equal participation, a journey that requires a change in the way we view and value half the world's population. This shift in perspective starts within each of us, both as women and as citizens of the world: knowing our own power, finding our purpose, and connecting with others to turn that purpose into action.

Progress for women is progress for all. Today there is a collective shift underway, evidenced by the mounting data, fueled by technology and connectivity, and propelled by emerging women leaders. There are few propitious moments in history when forces converge, creating the potential for a transformative leap—a moment when society can move fast and the world can move forward.

That moment is now. *f*

Adapted from *Fast Forward: How Women Can Achieve Power and Purpose*.
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