

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Interview with Susan Aryeetey on Women in Ghana

Advocates for Ethics in Business (GPI Interview Series)

Susan Aryeetey, Julia Taylor Kennedy

Transcript

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Welcome to Global Ethics Forum. I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, here with Susan Aryeetey, to talk about her work empowering women in Ghana.

Aryeetey came to New York City as a participant in Columbia University's **Human Rights Advocates Program**. She has a background in journalism and communications, and has spent the last eight years at **Ghana's International Federation of Women Lawyers, or FIDA**.

Susan Aryeetey, welcome to Global Ethics forum.

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: Thank you very much, Julia.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: First, tell me, what is FIDA?

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: FIDA is a Spanish acronym. It's *Federacion Internacional de Abogadas*. The English is the International Federation of Women Lawyers, which was formed in Mexico. We have chapters all over, in Africa, in Europe, in the United States.

FIDA in Ghana really works to use the law to improve the lives of women and children. That's a very simple way of putting it. What we do is actually provide legal assistance or legal aid. That means that we have women coming to our offices and we provide them with legal assistance, either through mediation or arbitration. Of course, if it fails, we then have to go to the courts.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Are all the lawyers on your staff women?

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: We have lawyers who are women. We also have men who come in to help us. The men do a lot of the courtroom presentation, and take the cases up to the court. Initially we used to have a lot more women doing that, but it looks as if the trend has changed.

You are getting more men taking the cases to the courts, which we find quite brilliant, because it makes them more sensitive to the issues and then they are able to pass on what they do to younger colleagues, who sometimes think they are in competition with us because we make them lose out on the fees that should come to them. But if we have men as our voices out there, it actually helps to draw in more men to help with the courts.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What is it like for women in the workplace in Ghana, in general? Is

there parity? Do they have glass ceilings? Tell me a little about the culture.

SUSAN ARYEETAY: I'm going to put them in three categories. We have women who work in the corporate sector, women who work middle level, and women who are in the informal sector. You find a lot more women in the informal sector. You find them in the markets. You find them doing menial jobs on the farms. Then you have the middle level ones who are teachers and nurses. Then you have, of course, those who are working with the banks, industry, and stuff like that.

The challenge is how to balance family and career, which you find almost everywhere. Of course, there is parity at a certain point, but you can still find some subtle difference. A man would probably earn more than a woman, even though they are occupying the same position, because the woman will have taken some time off to take care of family, and so the man has probably gotten a little bit ahead. When it comes to performance appraisals, these things would probably count. So we find that men earn a little bit more.

Some of the challenges also have to do with sexual harassment. These days we have been dealing with issues of women who are coming out to speak about the fact that they are required to provide some kind of sexual favors to get good jobs in the corporate sector—which is not even a guarantee that if you do that, you're going to get a job.

At the middle level, it's convenient for women to be nurses and teachers. Especially for teachers, the holidays actually favor them. It gives them more time for their families. You tend to find more women getting stuck at the middle level because it's much more convenient for family life.

The women in the lower level work throughout the year. They have no social security benefits. They have to be there 365 days of the year. If they are sick, a relative will probably come in to help them out. But basically they are the ones who face, to me, the most challenges.

You have some balance now coming in to provide some kind of saving scheme for them. But there's no guarantee of any social security for these women. After working for so long, when they decide to retire, what are they going to live on? The children have to take care of them. They are the ones that probably also face pressing challenges.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I want to talk about women in the informal sector, but I also want to talk about the issue you mentioned earlier with sexual harassment.

I found an [article](#) about the ambassador from Ghana in Brazil, which I think sparked a lot of headlines in late October of 2010. This secretary has accused her boss, the ambassador—correct me if I'm wrong—of forcing her to have sex with him four times.

Is that something that you're seeing crop up more and more, or is this an outlier that was in the news, an extreme case?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: It is there, but most women don't report it, because the systems to support them are quite weak. You only had one major case where a lady who worked at a domestic airline actually was able to prosecute her case against her boss. That is what we have as a precedent.

But many times, you find it very difficult for women to actually come forward to report sexual harassment. If you report it, what are the systems available to provide you with that kind of support?

We don't have it. It's always the woman's word against the man's word, unless you are able to provide some form of evidence that can really stand up in court. You find that many women will either succumb or walk away from it and then lose what was probably a good opportunity.

Sexual harassment is there. People just don't report it, just like domestic violence. We have to work on people to actually report the cases, because we don't have the support systems in place to actually help a woman to leave an abusive relationship.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: It was a good sign that she was out in the press, that she feels empowered to talk about it.

SUSAN ARYEETAY: It's great that she feels empowered to speak about this, because then she sends a strong signal to other women that they can also report the issue.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How common is it for women to come into your office with issues like this and for them to leave and decide it's not worth trying?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: I don't remember in my eight years of working at FIDA having to deal with a case of sexual harassment. It's a very dicey situation, where women just will not come out. But at least there was a radio program early in March where I heard four young women talk about their experiences with unwanted sexual advances, which, for me, is a good sign. It's something that maybe women's rights organizations in Ghana should also really work on. We find ourselves doing all sorts of things, but not actually focusing on issues of sexual harassment.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What are the common types of cases that you're seeing at FIDA?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: We're seeing issues with child support. We're seeing issues with inheritance, estates, custody of children, and access. We also have been seeing cases to do with women who have HIV and AIDS, as against their property rights.

We decided in 2007 to conduct research to find out what was really happening with women who have HIV and AIDS—those who have either been affected or infected by it. We came up with some interesting findings.

Based on that, we designed a project to do a one-year pilot in the area that we did the research. We were successful in getting funding for the first year. We produced a policy document out of that, based on the dissemination of the findings and then the recommendations that came out of the policy dialogues that we conducted.

Luckily for us, our executive director is a member of the board of the Ghana AIDS Commission, so she had a chance to present the findings to the commission, and they saw what was really happening. They invited us to join the review of the strategic country program from 2006 to 2010. She was on about three committees and was quite active on that.

Now they are going to come up with a new one which will span 2011 to 2015. We are hoping that some of the issues that we and other participants and dialogues recommended would be inputted into the new country program.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What were some of the findings of your research on HIV?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: There was one that stood out. We found out that there were medical personnel who were disclosing the status of women who have HIV and AIDS in the communities they live in. That prevented them from going to the hospitals in their communities for medical assistance. They had to travel further away from their communities in order to get—

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Because of the shame associated with having HIV/AIDS?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: Because of the stigma, yes. There was also an issue to do with their livelihood if people found out that they had HIV and AIDS, in particular for those who were in the food industry. It became a huge thing because they were going to lose their businesses.

There was another thing we found out, which reinforced some of the cases that came in, to do with their properties. We found that family members would actually go in, in the name of taking care of the children and providing some kind of support, and then take over your properties that you acquired with your husband.

Those three issues actually stood out. Also we found that many people did not know so much about the legal aspects that women who have HIV and AIDS were facing. There has been a lot of work to do with the social impact. There was a lot of information that we had to give out and they also had to give us.

One thing we also found out was that young adolescents who are in boarding schools who have HIV and AIDS were having issues with nutrition. Because of disclosure issues, they couldn't come out to declare that they were HIV-positive. We found out that they had to take a lot of time off from school to go home to seek medical attention.

We have a group of community leaders that we train. We call them paralegals, but they don't really go to court. What they do is provide basic legal assistance. In this case, there was a paralegal who was available, who knew the lady and who worked with her and was able to intervene on her behalf to her house mistress. Her nutrition was changed to help her to be a little bit healthier.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How does the stigma differ for men and women in Ghana who are HIV-positive?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: I don't think there's any major difference. It's the same. But you tend to find that women are usually blamed for actually passing on the disease. People think it's a woman's disease, but it's not.

There's a lot of education that has to be done, and there are women who actually now have to take their own contraceptive needs into consideration. They now have to negotiate for contraceptives to be used in relationships, which has been difficult over the years.

There has been this perception that if you are a woman, a married woman particularly, and demand that your husband use some form of protection, then you are seen as being promiscuous and having extramarital relations. But we have seen women now taking that power and the initiative, because there have been so many married women who have been infected. Surprisingly, if you are single, you are able to negotiate with your partner, but if you're married, that's a whole different kind of ballgame.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What were your main recommendations out of this?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: One of the recommendations that we made was that gender considerations should be taken when these policies are being enacted. Patriarchy is so strong. That is often overlooked and ignored.

There is also the issue of the medical personnel either being sanctioned or really working to make sure that they are able to be quite circumspect when they are talking about women who have HIV and AIDS.

There was also another recommendation that talked about the need for a system to monitor human rights and violations that have to do with HIV and AIDS.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How did you become passionate about these issues of gender and advocacy for women and children in Ghana?

SUSAN ARYEETAY: I tend to say it was by default. When I was working with a radio station, there came a time when we had murders of about 30 women. The government at the time was not actually making a lot of effort to find out the murderers behind this. I had at that time FIDA Ghana and some other human-rights activists on a program I used to host. They spoke about the issues. I was really touched by what had happened.

From then on, I began to focus more on women's issues. I was working in a very competitive environment, where women's issues were seen as soft issues. If you really wanted to be a good reporter, a great journalist, then you had to do the hard stuff and compete with the men for the space.

I said, "Forget about the competition. Let's really bring out these issues."

That was where the interest started.

Then I got an offer to work with FIDA in the area of communications. I realized, as we traveled around the country, that we had really major issues to do with women. We have cultural issues that discriminate against women. We have fewer women in decision-making positions. When it comes to domestic violence, that was a big issue, and the fact that women really had to suffer in silence for so long before they came out to talk about their issues. It was affecting development in many areas in our country. That was when I really felt that there were so many inequalities that it's a good cause to work in.

Then there was a lady who had a child, with a father who was quite a high-ranking policeman. Anytime she had to go for child support from him, he always demanded some form of intimacy before providing the money. She came to us. I dealt with her at the time. We had to write a letter to his superiors to release him to come to us, so we could mediate the case. We were successful in getting him there.

It had taken the organization a long time to get him to come over. So I said, "Why don't we write to his superiors? We'll probably get a better response if we go around him there."

We did that, and he came in and he agreed to provide child support. It was getting to Christmas, and he bought a lot of stuff. The woman came with tears in her eyes, to come and say thank you.

I said, "Wow, this is a good cause. I think this is something worth working in."

So that's why I'm stuck.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Did you grow up thinking about gender questions? Did you think, "I want to be a journalist when I grow up" or did you just kind of fall into that path?

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: I had parents who really encouraged me to read a lot. They also never forced me to decide on what I wanted to do. I was allowed to make my own choices. I realized that journalism was a clear area that I wanted to pursue. My dad said it was fine.

I had seen my father interact with many people from all walks of life. That was one thing I liked about his approach. It didn't matter the kind of position that you were in, he never addressed you as "Hey" or that kind of stuff. He was always somebody who would ask you your name and then would talk to you and then, afterwards, say thank you and remember your name. That made them feel more human. I was always seeing him speaking to even people who worked in the domestic arena, where we were living. He sat with them in the evenings, and spoke to them.

I actually didn't see so much of these disparities and inequalities because I had a good example. When I was growing up I realized, even in boarding schools, all of the issues that some of the young people had at home. I realized there were so many issues here that I wasn't exposed to earlier. Working as a journalist also helps you to bring out a lot of injustices so the government can really start working on them. It was a good way to really get the government's attention.

We have over 200 stations all over Ghana. They raise the issue of accountability, transparency, and civil society. It does a really good job in that. It's a very good way to actually get government to begin to be serious about its obligations. That is why I found myself working as a journalist.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Tell me about the Columbia University Human Rights Advocates Program, which is what brought you to New York.

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: I was overjoyed to have been selected, because there's a lot of stress that we have to work under. I thought this was a good break, and a different kind of stress to work under.

We have ten advocates from ten different countries. We have Ugandans, Ghanaian, Sudanese, Haitian, Honduran, Belarusian, Bosnian and Mauritanian.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Wow.

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: It has been very good sharing the various experiences. In the kind of work we do, there are commonalities in what we do; we work in different areas, but there are the same challenges. The skills-building aspect of it has also been great. Fundraising skills are something that human-rights advocates should acquire, because you need to diversify your funding sources. Things are changing economically, so the more you have, the better options you have as well.

Also meeting with human-rights activists, like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, is

very good practical experience. It shows how other people are working in various countries.

We need to audit some classes. I'm doing one in human rights in sub-Saharan Africa, which is great. It gives you a deep understanding of the issues. How you link human rights and development is not something in a vacuum. It's very practical.

It's a healthy partnership as well, because then you are also a good reference source for the students. Some of them have been in Africa before; some haven't. As you speak about the practical aspects of your work, it gives them a better insight of how you can link human rights and development.

In my class, fortunately, we have been able to link up with students from Ghana, in the university. They have had this interaction with students also, which has been great. We have asked them questions from here and they have answered, and they have also asked us questions as to how things work in a developed country like the United States.

I could never have done anything with new media, and I have a new media class that I'm auditing as well. It's fantastic. You learn how to use media in human-rights advocacy in various forms.

On the whole, the Human Rights Advocates Program has been a great experience. It has given me the opportunity to meet different people, network, and sometimes going on radio stations and talking about your work, which gives a little bit more visibility to what you do.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You mentioned in your answer the link between human rights and development, which a lot of human-rights organizations are trying to forge, now that "development" is the buzzword that a lot of people want to fund. Maybe a lot of people know about the link between gender rights and development, but I'm curious want your take on it is.

SUSAN ARYEETAY: We really need to get women empowered. When they are empowered, they have information as to how they can get help for issues.

Empowerment is in various forms and shapes. Economic empowerment is also another way to go. Basically, no country can develop without developing women. In many, many, many African countries, you have populations where woman outnumber the men, 51 percent, 52 percent, and if you continue to marginalize women, then women cannot bring their own perspectives to development.

We need their perspectives to be able to have equal outlook towards issues. In our parliament, we have more men, fewer women. When it comes to issues, you find that the men articulate more and they dominate on the issues, whereas women are usually in the background. When it comes to the aspects where women's issues should be talked about—location of resources, for instance, for women—we tend to find them silent on the issue.

If we had more women, we would probably have them raising the issue of, "Listen, let's put more resources towards education, towards this aspect, and towards that aspect." Then you find that the development is a holistic thing.

We tend to find women way behind in the composition-making process. Fortunately for us, even in

the local communities, in certain parts of the country you have women who are the ones who actually appoint the kings or the chiefs. They are kingmakers. Sometimes in local parlance they say "Let's go see the old woman," because they think she has a lot of wisdom.

If we can do that at the local level, why can't we translate this to the national level? My take on this is that there's no way that we can continue to marginalize women. We need to get women—even childcare, firstly. It was one thing I was discussing with my colleague from Haiti, about women in Scandinavian countries, how far they have gone and how this has reflected upon the development of their countries.

If we want to really develop, wherever we are coming from—Africa, Latin America, even the United States; we have come across issues where even women are marginalized in the United States—that is the way to go, to really make sure that women's perspectives come to bear on development, and to have policies and practices that encourage women to pursue education, to go as high as they want to go. If we have a policymaking environment that really allows women that chance to improve themselves, then we can't get it wrong.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You've had a semester to reflect and step back. Do you feel like you're going back to Ghana armed with some new solutions for FIDA and some new directions?

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: Yes. One of the things I wrote down about what I want to acquire from this program was to build my skills so I could really add to the critical mass of women that we need back home, who are intellectual and who can actually initiate policy changes. So far it has been great. To do all the research and reading actually stimulates your mind, so you are probably armed with a lot of information. I'm going back with a lot of ideas.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Susan Aryeetey, thank you so much for joining me on Global Ethics Forum.

SUSAN ARYEETEEY: You're welcome. I had a very good time here talking to you.

Audio

Susan Aryeetey discusses her work empowering women in Ghana. She has a background in journalism and communications, and has spent the last eight years at Ghana's International Federation of Women Lawyers, or FIDA.

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