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FEATURE

Women who triumphed

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Wed, 08 Aug 2007



Are Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Jackie Onassis and Princess Di the female icons of the 20th century? Perhaps, but only on a rather superficial, idolatry level. They are women who are celebrated, for the large part, for their beauty, sexuality and ability to sell tabloids.

As Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan vie pathetically to succeed them, young women around the world clamber to buy their perfume, read about their latest drunken exploits and dream, albeit secretly, about living a life as fabulous as theirs.

However, our era is not without its true female icons — women who have challenged the system, broken the mould, or seen a bigger picture. Women who have achieved great things *despite* their gender. We pay tribute to these remarkable women from all walks of life in the hopes that somewhere some young girl or woman will find a new role model.

Mother Teresa

One of the most easily recognisable icons of our time, Mother Teresa changed the world in a way that few would consider revolutionary. Operating within the structures of a patriarchal society, driven by her compassion, she touched the lives of thousands.

Born Agnes Gonxha Bgaxhiu in 1910, she took her vows as a nun at the age of 21 and adopted the name of Teresa after the patron saint of missionaries. In 1950, in Calcutta, she started the Missionaries of Charity and for 40 years ministered to the needs of those shunned by society.

The charity, which started with 13 members, now has more than 4000 nuns running orphanages, Aids hospices and charities around the world. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her humanitarian work and, following her death, was beatified by Pope John Paul II and given the title Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

Chien-Shiung Wu

Nicknamed the 'First Lady of Physics' and 'Madame Curie of China', Chien-Shiung Wu (1912 — 1997) excelled in the male-dominated field of science. Working on the Manhattan Project (to enrich uranium fuel), she developed a process to separate uranium isotopes by gaseous diffusion. She also created a test method for beta decay. Her 1956 book 'Beta Decay' is still used as a standard reference by nuclear physicists.

However, when the rest of the Manhattan Project team was awarded a Nobel Prize for their discoveries, Chien-Shiung Wu was overlooked. This has been widely attributed to the sexism of the selection committee. Nevertheless, she became the first female instructor in the Princeton physics department and the first female president of the American Physical Society.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

Born in 1938 and often referred to as the 'Iron Lady', Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first elected female president in Africa in 2005 when she

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became the president of Liberia. A member of former president William Tolbert's administration, Johnson-Sirleaf went into exile in Kenya when he was overthrown in 1980 by Samuel Doe.

She returned in 1985 to run for senate and was sentenced to ten years in prison when she spoke out against the regime. Initially a supporter of Charles Taylor's bloody coup on Samuel Doe, she soon opposed him and in 1997 ran against him in the presidential election. Charged once more with treason, Sirleaf-Johnson continued to campaign against Taylor, eventually playing an active role in the transitional government. In 2005 she beat popular football player George Weah to become the continent's first female president.

Germaine Greer

Anarchist, academic and advocate of female sexual liberation, Germaine Greer (born 1939) is regarded one of the significant voices of feminism in the twentieth century. Her ground-breaking and best-selling book 'The Female Eunuch' (1970) challenged notions of female sexuality and revolutionised the way in which many women of the time understood their own sexuality.

Although the book has received criticism in recent years for being a disorganised diatribe and Greer has been accused of extrapolating her own experiences into general statements about the condition of women, it was nevertheless a seminal work in shifting ideas about female sexuality.

Wangari Maathai

Environmental and political activist, Kenyan Wangari Maathai (born 1940) became the first African woman in 2004 to win the Nobel Peace Prize, which she won for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace".

She studied at the University of Nairobi, where she became the first Eastern African woman to be awarded a PhD. In 1977 she founded the Green Belt Movement — a non-governmental organisation, which has planted over 30 million trees across Kenya to prevent soil erosion, resulting in her affectionate nickname 'The Tree Mother of Africa'.

During the regime of former president Daniel Arap Moi she was imprisoned on numerous occasions and violently attacked for campaigning for multi-party elections. In 2005 she was elected the first female president of the AU's Economic, Social and Cultural Council.

Billie Jean King

Regarded by many as one of the greatest female tennis players and female athletes, Billie Jean King is also an outspoken activist against sexism in sports and society. Although she won over 39 Grand Slam titles, she is probably best known for one game of tennis — the 'Battle of the Sexes'.

In 1973 she defeated former Wimbledon men's champion, Bobby Riggs, who was 53 at the time and claimed that the women's game was so inferior that even he could beat one of the top female players.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Another winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (1991), Aung San Suu Kyi (born 1945) has been under house arrest in Burma (Myanmar) since 1989. Leader of the National League for Democracy, she is a non-violent, pro-democracy activist who has been imprisoned by the military dictatorship for 18 years. She has been prevented from seeing her family, who live in Britain, even at the death of her husband.

The United Nations has campaigned for her release. She has also been awarded the Rafto Prize and the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Oprah Winfrey

The famous talk show host cracks the list because of her prestigious ability as a businesswoman and her philanthropy. Since she started the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1986, Oprah has built a business empire which has made her the world's only black billionaire for three consecutive years.

With over 49 million viewers in the US alone, Oprah is regarded by many as the most influential woman in the world. She is also renowned for her philanthropy, donating more of her own money to charity than any other show-business celebrity in America.

To quote Oprah in what seems to be a fitting Women's Day message: "It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from. The ability to triumph begins with you — always."

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