

Between Ghent, Geneva And Kenya

Marleen Temmerman



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At the end of 2012, a Flemish gynaecologist was appointed Head of the Department of Reproductive Health and Research at the World Health Organization in Geneva: Marleen Temmerman (° 1953). Even before being appointed to this key post, Temmerman enjoyed international renown, and received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the prestigious *British Medical Journal* in 2010. This distinction is awarded to a doctor, politician, academic or researcher who has made a unique and essential contribution to improving healthcare. The competition for the award was stiff, with candidates from countries such as the United States, Canada and Great Britain, each with a long list of publications to their name.

Temmerman grew up in the kind of family which in the past was found everywhere in Flanders: Christian, hard-working and full of good intentions, but just a little unadventurous. At secondary school she was greatly interested in general social and political topics, and what were seen as her highly rebellious comments were not greatly appreciated. She was undeterred. Without batting an eyelid, she played truant one day to attend a lecture in Brus-

sels given by a Trotskyist economist, and she was also no stranger to lectures by socially critical professors of philosophy at Ghent University.

The fact that Temmerman chose to study medicine in Ghent rather than, say, sociology or economics, came as a surprise. Even more of a surprise was that she went to university at all. Studying was far from the norm in her family, and even less so for a girl, but her parents eventually gave up their resistance. It was written in the stars that she would be no ordinary student. She soon became a member of a socio-medical working group which discussed ways of improving medicine and the redistribution of property; she learned Turkish - there was already quite a large Turkish community in Ghent at that time - and worked as a volunteer in a health centre in a disadvantaged neighbourhood.

Whilst still studying, Temmerman embarked on a trip that was a harbinger of an important development in her life. She travelled to Rwanda, completely alone. She found the experience overwhelming. She had of course known that the gap between the rich West and Africa was wide, but

she was staggered by the circumstances in which Rwandans lived and by the lack of staff and technical resources at the hospital in Butare.

It was to be some time before Temmerman returned to Africa. She specialised in gynaecology and obtained a post on the staff of Jean-Jacques Amy, professor at the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, the Dutch-speaking university in the Belgian capital. It was an interesting but strange time for Temmerman. In her work she was concerned mainly with infertility problems. She also performed abortions - in a period when abortion was still completely illegal in Belgium. She sometimes went straight from helping a woman who was unable to become pregnant to a woman in another room who was demanding an abortion.

In 1995 Temmerman's latent love for Africa received a powerful impetus. The University of Nairobi, which was a partner of the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, was running a small study on the consequences of sexually transmitted diseases in pregnant prostitutes. Temmerman was awarded a grant to spend a month helping on the project. Two years later, there was a need for someone to develop the project further. The call of Africa had become very loud, and complete with husband and newborn child Temmerman left for Kenya to take up an appointment at the University of Nairobi. She was stationed in a public sector maternity clinic in a slum district or, more precisely, a valley in which 500,000 people lived together in the worst imaginable circumstances. Temmerman wrote a compelling description of her experiences in Kenya in her book *Mama Daktari: gynaecologie in Afrika* (Mama Daktari: Gynaecology in Africa), in which she talks at length about the appalling lack of infrastructure and resources, the almost unimaginable difference between rich and poor (including locally) and the striking cultural differences. The almost hopeless battle against AIDS is a constant background theme in the book. By way of illustration, when Temmerman began her assignment, roughly 2% of her patients were HIV-positive women; five years later, that figure had risen to 25%.

In 1992 the family decided to return to Belgium, but Africa would continue to play an important role in Temmerman's life. In 1994, she founded the International Centre for Reproductive Health (ICRH) together with several partners, including former colleagues in Kenya. The ICRH is a multidisciplinary centre operating within the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Ghent University. Besides research activities, ICRH implements projects in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia with a focus on developing training programmes and takes actions to defend sexual and reproductive rights. Its main objective is to improve sexual and reproductive health in its broadest sense. To this end, ICRH seeks to improve the acceptability, accessibility and quality of sexual and reproductive health services, and integrates a human rights based and gender sensitive approach in its analysis.

Until her appointment in Geneva, Temmerman was a professor of obstetrics/gynaecology at Ghent University and head of the Obstetrics Department at Ghent University Hospital. She combined these activities with a seat in the Belgian Senate, as a member of the social-democratic party sp.a. Despite her lack of real political experience, her work in the Senate attracted glowing praise from analysts. She also published books at regular intervals, on topics such as the violence sometimes perpetrated against women or about light-hearted (and less light-hearted) moments in her work as a gynaecologist.

Although Temmerman now lives in Switzerland, she will frequently be away from home. She will be found regularly in Kenya, the country to which she has returned repeatedly since her departure in 1992, thereby demonstrating that a cliché can also be true: once someone has been in Africa, they will always want to return.

HANS VANACKER

Translated by Julian Ross

www.marleentemmerman.be

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