

International Women's Day: How To Bring Meaning And Effect Real Change In The Lives Of Women

I like the fact that we have an International Women's Day which is globally recognized as a day to focus on women's rights. On this day we have conferences, speeches, discussions etc. mostly at the international level and by women with a certain level of prominence or visibility. As I watch these events, I have often wondered how it impacts the lives of ordinary women. How do the women in developing countries celebrate this day? Take Mariam for example, she was married to a man with three other wives who recently left her and replaced her with a younger woman. She has five children and under the current family law neither Mariam nor her children are adequately provided for. Her children have dropped out of school because she cannot afford the basic school supplies and her oldest daughter who just turned thirteen has been betrothed to an older man by her father. To make ends meet Mariam gets up at the crack of dawn, goes to her farm, harvests a few vegetables and takes them to the market. She is lucky if she makes enough to buy food for the children on that day.

Mariam has heard of International Women's Day. For her it means putting on a uniform and marching joyously with other women. It means a day free from her daily routine. It means a day to eat, drink and be merry. It means the one day when she can take to the streets. But for Mariam this is not the day when she can hold the government, her husband, children, family and herself accountable for improving her wellbeing.

I don't object to merry making but I believe a day set aside to focus on women's rights should be used to showcase women's achievements and challenges. Many women in developing countries are still deprived of their fundamental human rights. Certainly, speeches and discussions are important. But where are Mariam and women like her in these discussions? Why are we speaking for her when we hardly know her story? Why can't we help Mariam understand what her rights are and stand shoulder to shoulder with her to advocate for those rights? If Mariam knew how to make her life better and had someone to help her advocate for them, I am sure she would rather be handing a petition for equal rights to the President of the Republic as opposed to dancing in the streets on March 8th.

Perhaps what we should do is support a grassroots movement for women's rights and empowerment, assessing their situation and identifying their needs from the local to the national levels with every women's group or association. These needs would be summarized and presented to the national authorities who are able to enact policies with respect to the needs identified. Suppose that on March 8th, these women organize a program at the different levels of government to outline their findings and advocate for their rights. Imagine the impact of such a coordinated, well planned approach with a follow-up action plan to ensure that any changes that are promised are enacted.

We cannot nor should we speak for Mariam and other women in developing countries. Empowerment or change is long lasting if it originates from the beneficiary herself. We can help women enjoy their human rights by creating a conducive environment where laws protect women as much as they do men, where women have access to quality education, timely and quality healthcare, and can obtain justice where there is injustice as well as speak for themselves. Yes, each woman speaking for herself. On this day we need to mobilize men and women, families and communities to advocate for those rights that

are still denied to women. We need the ordinary woman to take the podium and shine a light into her life for the world to see. Then the rest of us will realize how much still needs to be done. Hopefully, we will join her to make a better world for her and her family.

Kate Lifanda for international women's day