



EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH INNOVATIVE APPROACHES REQUIRE PARADIGM SHIFTS IN ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

Press Statement for International Women’s Day, 8 March 2019

It’s International Women’s Day *again*! While 8 March 2019 marks the 44th commemoration since the United Nations adopted the International Women’s Day (IWD) in 1975, it was first convened in 1909 in the USA, followed by Russia in 1917 and China in 1949, in each place marking significant struggle for and achievements in advancing women’s rights.

Commemoration also needs to capture women’s oft-hidden contributions to the world we live in. How many people know that Marie Curie (the first person in history to win two Noble Prizes) was the first to define the theory of radioactivity in 1903?¹ That Dorothy Hodgkins discovered the structure of penicillin and insulin?² That Ada Lovelance was the first computer programmer in history, that Grace Hopper (the mother of COBOL) invented the COBOL programming language³, that Stephanie Kwolek (1965) invented the Kevlar used in bulletproof vests,⁴ that Mary Anderson (1903) invented the car windshield wiper blade in 1903,⁵ and that Josephine Cochrane invented and patented the dishwasher in 1886?⁶

Against such a backdrop, the proclamation by former US President Barack Obama of March 2011 as “Women’s History Month” makes a lot of sense. So does Ethiopian Airlines decision to commemorate the day in 2019 by operating the Addis-Stockholm

¹ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1903/marie-curie/facts/>

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/chemistry/1964/perspectives/>

³ <https://www.i-programmer.info/history/people/294-the-mother-of-cobol.html>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-27951043>

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/25/536835744/alabama-woman-stuck-in-nyc-traffic-in-1902-invented-the-windshield-wiper?t=1551772151427>

⁶ <https://forgottennewsmakers.com/2010/04/20/josephine-cochrane-1839-1913-invented-the-dishwasher/>

flight with women-only flight crew, similar to last year when it placed an all-female crew on the Addis Ababa – Buenos Aires flight.

For 2019 there are two global themes; The IWD campaign **#BalanceforBetter** announces that ‘The race is on for the gender-balanced boardroom, a gender-balanced government, gender-balanced media coverage, a gender-balance of employees, more gender-balance in wealth, gender-balanced sports coverage’. We could add many more, not least ‘gender-balance in decision-making in humanitarian settings’, and ‘gender-balance in identification and response to the harms of war’.

The UN’s 2019 IWD international theme *“Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change”* focuses on innovative ways for advancing women’s empowerment in relation to social protection, public services, and sustainable infrastructures, and also calls to action individuals, communities, states, and international community to strengthen efforts in the protection of women and girls.

Uganda has not been left behind, with the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development adopting *“Empowering Women Through Innovative Approaches to Social Protection a Prerequisite for Inclusive and Sustainable Development”* as the national theme, and national celebrations scheduled to be held at Rwimi Primary School in Bunyangabu district.

As a country we should be celebrating numerous innovations by women, including; Natalie Bitature of Musana Carts who has demonstrated that we can fight pollution from charcoal and kerosene stoves through innovating environmentally friendly solar powered vending carts.⁷ Elizabeth Nyeko of Mandulis Energy who has demonstrated that Uganda can gain more from Agri-Waste to provide clean, affordable and reliable energy to light communities.⁸ Evelyn Namara of Innovate who has transformed farmers’ lives through mobile vouchers to redeem seed from agro-dealers.⁹ Brenda Katwesigye continues to shoot two birds with one stone in providing quality and affordable eyewear from recycled plastics.¹⁰ They, along with many other women, have demonstrated that big change can come from a combination of *small actions*. With such great innovations, we can be guaranteed that Uganda’s Human Capital Index (HCI), which in 2018 stood at 0.38 (below the 0.40 index average for Africa), can be boosted. That way, Uganda can realize improved rates of child survival, completion of seven years of school by 18th birthday, reduction in stunted growth, and increased life-expectancy.¹¹

⁷ <http://musanacarts.com/the-team>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUGLzxIWJO8>

⁹ <http://vouchdigital.africa>

¹⁰ <https://wazivision.com>

¹¹ https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/hci/HCI_2pager_UGA.pdf

The 2019 themes remind us that unless transformative and innovative approaches are embraced, Vision 2040 for Uganda, Vision 2063 for Africa, and Planet 50-50 by 2030 will remain improbable dreams. Removing structural barriers that deter women and girls from reaching their greatness requires innovative approaches in shifting practices and attitudes towards women and girls. Specifically, IWD 2019 reminds us that amidst socio-economic and technological advancements, women and girls continue to be under-represented in science and technology, as well as suffering the consequences of technological advancement, including development-induced displacement.

Uganda's commitment to gender justice and gender equity is evident in several legislative and policy frameworks. These include the Social Assistance Grant Empowerment (SAGE) and Vision 2040. Launched in 2013, the latter says; *"... it will be paramount in the next 30 years to reduce gender inequalities as a prerequisite for accelerating and sustaining socio-economic transformation. Women and men of Uganda will thus be treated as equal partners in development right from the household to the Country level"*. But six years later, what progress has Uganda made in the protection of women and girls? Equally, Vision 2063 (alias "The Africa We Want") sets bold targets in women's empowerment, participation, and bridging gender disparities to be realized by 2063.

Legislative and policy frameworks at national level include the 1995 Constitution, The National Gender Policy, National Plan and the National Development Plan II. Affirmative actions aimed at addressing gender inequalities have been and continue to be implemented and led by the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD).

Despite those frameworks, a number of occurrences continue to frustrate modest but hard-won progress. In 2018 IWD was commemorated amidst public outcry following several cases of kidnaps and murders of women and girls. In 2019 women's rights activists are grappling with what looks like 'state-sponsored' commodification of women following the Ministry of Tourism's attempt to add 'curvy and sexy' Ugandan women to its list of tourism products. Statements that women in Uganda are 'naturally endowed' and 'nice looking'¹², are both dehumanizing and discredit Uganda's commendable struggle to promote women's rights.

In another jaw-dropping incident, a female Traffic Officer on lawful duty was allegedly assaulted in broad daylight by military whom she was calling to task for flouting traffic rules – a blatant abuse of power over a junior women in uniformed service. Some of these violations against women and girls are not perpetrated by unknown opportunists, *uneducated*, 'savage' or unexposed people; rather, they are perpetrated by individuals (including some diplomats who enjoy diplomatic immunity) entrusted

¹² <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Minister-Kiwanda-summoned-to-Parliament-over-Miss-Curvy-contest/688334-4979406-7jrwge/index.html>

with the State's financial and human resources and with duties to protect all people in Uganda.

Mal-practice meted on women and girls continues to range from household discrimination, marginalization, and socio-economic deprivation, through to widening disparities in laws and practices at national level. As a result, women in Uganda continue to face challenges in accessing essential services and in taking up socio-economic opportunities, and to suffer non-progressive socio-cultural practices including Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). These all continue to affect women and girls physically and psychosocially, with long-term impacts on Uganda as a whole.

Incidents such as the above, and many more that do not gain public visibility, demonstrate that women to this day are not safe, whether at home or in public spaces. As a nation that has garnered commendable successes in the past in achieving affirmative action, gender mainstreaming and gender equity, we should be ashamed and concerned.

Realizing sustainable positive transformation in women's lives requires proactive paradigm shifts. As an institution we are ourselves the product of a paradigm shift driven largely by the late Prof Barbara Harrell-Bond, a woman who broke new ground in humanitarian and rights work. We therefore join Uganda and the international community in commemorating this important day and in the pursuit of further sea-changes in the lives of all women and girls forcefully displaced in Uganda and elsewhere. In particular, we re-affirm our commitment to supporting all women who are hard-hit by protracted conflicts and violent extremism.

To strengthen protection of rights of refugee women in Uganda, we ask relevant stakeholders to;

- **Strengthen implementation of rule of law and accountability for violation of women's rights:** Women will not enjoy the fruits of greater equity in recruitment, retention, and promotion if they are not safe while at work, or when their jobs heightens their insecurity and risk to physical and sexual abuse. Several individuals, such as Peace Mutuuzo, the Minister of State for Gender and Culture Affairs, have called-out harassment of women: We implore Members of Parliament to take their cue from such leadership.
- **Invest in quality education and training for women and girls:** We cannot realize success in promoting women's innovation if women struggle to access education. Ensuring that girls enroll and remain in school is one aspect – ensuring that they are provided with opportunities to enable them concentrate and compete fairly is another. Besides formal education, skills-based trainings and mentorship, especially for women who missed out on education, need to be supported and expanded across the country. Also, functional adult literacy and catch-up education programmes for adult

refugee and host women need to be supported. The recently published Education Response Plan for Refugees, for example, needs to be modified to include provision and actions for adult refugees and hosts community members.

- **Support women innovators:** Women innovators in Uganda and around the world have not resigned to discrimination and denial of opportunities. Indeed they show the transformational power of women, inspire other female innovators and re-affirm that women rise up in free and fair societies, and contribute to solving critical problems. To address remaining hurdles facing women entrepreneurs and innovators, such as access to credit, property, quality education, and lives free from violence and discrimination, requires deliberate efforts to support a critical mass of women amidst fierce competition on unlevelled ground.
- **Support women grappling with war-related injuries get quality medical and psychological rehabilitation:** Violence, war and extremism leave women and girls with untreated war-related injuries and enduring physical, psychological, psychological, psychosexual, and political consequences. Stigma and discrimination make it difficult for victims to disclose experiences in pursuit of quality medical and psychological support – with devastating consequences on themselves and their household members. Whereas the guns have fallen silent in Uganda, the Pearl of Africa still grapples with unresolved and biting effects of wars, with thousands if not millions of people affected. Without timely and professional support, the women among them may lag behind further and not participate in economic activities.
- **Supporting grassroots women-led organisations and institutions supporting women and girls:** Many life-changing activists are in hard-to-reach villages far from both the camera lenses of media houses, and from financial and technical support or event recognition. The media and other actors must refocus their lenses to support grassroots women activists, role model women, and community-based structures promoting protection of women and girls. Attitudinal shifts need to go hand-in-hand with implementation of legislative and policy frameworks to realize gender transformation.
- **Nurture gender-sensitive younger citizens:** It's often said that children are like young banana suckers that continue to grow when the old banana tree dies. As such, inculcating paradigm shifts needs to start early; children need to be socialized to critically challenge gender injustices at all levels.
- **Tackle trauma in children:** Children are often the hidden victims of gendered crimes. In our experience a great number of children have been forced to witness acts of physical and sexual violence committed on their loved ones.

If not attended to early, the resultant trauma will be passed from one generation to another. Innovative approaches could include engaging primary, secondary, and university students on gender discourse, and promoting clubs and public debates on the same.

- **Bridge the research-practice divide:** Realizing transformation in women’s lives requires disrupting ‘business as usual’. In Uganda, women’s participation in governance and decision making and steadily moved to 33% in national legislature, and 28% in the Executive as highlighted by the Second National Development Plan.¹³ However, such progress may not mean much if the barriers to breaking ‘glass ceilings’ that affect women in private and public spaces are not identified, challenged and confronted. For significant changes to happen, and for voices of women to be heard, requires seeing that women who qualify are supported to climb past structural and technical obstacles. This requires widespread discussion, mapping, and collective action to remove barriers to women’s progress.
- **Support establishments of innovation centers across the country:** Innovation requires close mentorship and support from local to national level. Currently, Uganda has very few known innovation centres through which women can access quality infrastructures and personnel to nurture their innovative ideas. As RLP, we have taken a lead in establishing the first ever refugee-host Innovation Centre in Gulu, a hub that provides free computerized facilities, digital trainings and support to women and girls as well as men and boys refugees and hosts. Such centres, which have already begun to yield tangible transformation in the lives of women and girls, can be replicated in other parts of the country to provide free access, inculcate and promote access to facilities which can transform the lives of women, their immediate household members, Uganda and the world at large.

Conclusion

The struggle for women’s rights has come a long way. The remaining hurdles require bold commitments, concerted efforts as well as fierce actions, time, finances and leadership to address them. It begins by taking one extra step in recognizing, respecting, and acting to strengthen justice for women everywhere! Today it’s somebody else’s mother, sister, daughter, friend, and or colleague; tomorrow it might be yours. We have achieved a lot over the years but we are not done, yet!

As we commemorate this day, may we recognize the strength and courage of women as they tear through gendered barricades; may this day be a reminder that amidst the pain and despair, women and girls affected by conflict have dreams, desires and

¹³ <https://consultations.worldbank.org/Data/hub/files/consultation-template/materials/ndpii-final11.pdf>

aspirations – all of which gives them strength to hope for better days ahead. The desired outcomes require corresponding amount of input. From grassroots activism to national action, RLP like many other human rights institutions has organized several events in its offices in Kampala, Kiryandongo, Adjumani, Hoima, Mbarara, Isingiro, Lamwo, Arua, Yumbe, Moyo, Kitgum, and Gulu. Join our colleagues as we boldly hold a giant trumpet for IWD 2019 in celebrating women’s achievements as well as looking head-on approaches in transforming lives of all women in Uganda and elsewhere.

However, refugee women just like Ugandan women are not homogenous. The challenges women and other marginalized minority groups face might be similar but women and girls have unique challenges that require corresponding unique responses. We cannot afford to treat women and girls; who are also our mothers, sisters, spouses, daughters, friends, and colleagues with brutality. Let’s denounce violence against women and girls in all its forms and using the strongest possible means. Celebrating women’s achievements and acting on measures to improve women’s life shouldn’t be contained to just one day of 8th March. Rather, it’s a daily commitment for all which we take stock of progress on this special day.

For people heading to and or already at Rwimi Primary School in Bunyangabu district, we wish you the very best in these noble deliberations. #JoinTheStruggle #TheRacelsOn #ItBeginsWithYou! #ActNow #BalanceforBetter @refugeelawproj