

THE WORLD

- HOME
- POLITICS & INFLUENCE
- THE WORLD

Women Still Need a Day to Amplify Our Voices

By Gloria Feldt
WeNews commentator
Friday, March 7, 2008

International Women's Day is heading toward 100, a woman is vying for the White House and Gloria Feldt says we're at a pivot point in women's history. But the venerable event remains relevant as long as women are muffled, mocked and ignored.

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS)--"People do not disregard my voice," actress Kathleen Turner said to me in her famously smoky tones when we were working on her memoir, "Send Yourself Roses."

"It calms babies. It turns men on. When I call a restaurant and say, 'This is Kathleen Turner,' they say, 'Yes . . . yes it is.' And I get a table."

A woman's voice is indeed important when it comes to getting a seat at the table.

And when it comes to International Women's Day--founded March 8, 1911, in Copenhagen as part of a socialist movement supporting women as voters, workers and people entitled to safe workplaces--a woman's voice has larger meaning. It's a metaphor for women's equality and responsibility in the world.

With the day's centennial just three years away, it's gratifying to consider the stunning advances women have made in many parts of the world. It's even tempting to think, "Haven't women found their voices yet?"

While the preponderance of political leaders is still male, women are heads of state in countries as disparate as Liberia and Chile. This year's elections might even prod the United States up from its dismal 68th ranking among nations in the percentage of women holding parliamentary-level positions.



Gloria Feldt

Glass ceilings are shattering all around and pro-female advocacy groups are multiplying, making a special day set aside for women seem almost quaint.

At what point does a social movement declare victory and move on?

The question is begged in part by the U.S. Democratic presidential primary, where female voters, even self-defined feminists, are split about whether gender should be a deciding factor in whether to vote for the first viable female candidate.

Vocal Problems

Yet even many supporting Barack Obama are aghast at the difficulty Hillary Clinton's female vocal chords have caused her. Reporters have characterized her voice as "grating," "shrill," "like a scolding mother." TV's Comedy Central host Jon Stewart compared Hillary's laugh--or "cackle"--to the Wicked Witch of the West from "The Wizard of Oz," joking that "she'll be our first president you can't spill water on."

Even though Obama has been taking more media heat in recent days, studies by Media Matters, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and media outlets themselves find Clinton gets substantially more scrutiny. She also sustains vitriolic gender-based attacks such as the Hillary Nutcracker and Roger Stone's (remember him for Nixon's dirty tricks?) Hillary-bashing Web site, Citizens United Not Timid, with an acronym that Jane Fonda discovered can't be spoken on national TV.

These are all classic ways to disregard a woman's voice, literally and symbolically, and by extension deny social and political equality.

Meanwhile, as women's stake in global leadership posts goes up, the other end of the seesaw is weighed by findings at the other end of the privilege spectrum.

The Web site Infoplease.com says that about 25,000 brides are burned to death each year in India because of insufficient dowries. Women who have been raped in some countries are still sometimes killed by their own families to preserve the family's "honor." Rape remains a common weapon of war everywhere, and 100 million to 140 million girls and women have undergone some form of female genital mutilation in Africa, despite it being widely outlawed.

Poverty's name is "woman" in most of the world, rooted in lower educational opportunities, worse nutrition, less health care and child marriage that puts women in lifelong financial dependence and near servitude.

Inequalities Persist

Inequalities restrain the rise of women's voices into equal social and political power, even as they cry out for women's leadership and partnership with male leaders.

In a Women's eNews article, "[Lost Girls' in U.S. Struggle to Find Their Way](#)," a Sudanese woman now living in the United States says, "It is hard to have a good life when you think you don't have a voice."

Yet, according to a new global poll by WorldPublicOpinion.org, the world is ready for change: There is widespread consensus that it's important for "women to have full equality of rights." The poll surveyed over 14,000 people in broadly representative countries and found similar results in non-Western and Western countries.

Clearly, even supposedly advanced nations still need a day to take stock and recommit to rectifying gender-based injustices that continue to silence or muffle women.

But in the trajectory of social movements there is often this pivot point where all that has been achieved has to come to terms with all that is yet to be done.

Having a Voice Means Using It

Women cannot succeed by merely blaming the patriarchy for our plight. Having a voice, even if it isn't yet full-throated, brings with it the responsibility to speak up effectively and courageously.

For this reason, all women should cheer Hillary Clinton's tenacity in staying in the fray, regardless of whom they support for president. And since she's entered her current comeback mode--telling reporters, with a little help from the skit writers on "Saturday Night Live," that she's not going to take it anymore--rival Barack Obama has been taking more of the media heat that befits a frontrunner.

But how long before gender-based distinctions become irrelevant to the public's assessment of a person's leadership ability? How many times must we repeat the words "laughter, breasts, woman president" before we are sufficiently desensitized that we can focus instead on the substantive issues?

And what must women do to put our voices into equal resonance with men in all of society's institutions? My answer is we must redouble our efforts to participate at our fullest capacities and with our utmost conviction.

A wider range of vocal sounds will become commonplace only as more women assume leadership roles globally, as more rounded female bodies and colorful clothing take the stage. Leadership can come with cleavage, after all.

International Women's Day will no longer be needed when it can honestly be said that women's voices are not disregarded anywhere in the world.

The quality of a woman's voice matters. But equality of a woman's voice matters even more.

Gloria Feldt is co-author of Kathleen Turner's best selling memoir, "Send Yourself Roses" and former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. She has just launched her new Web site, Speaking Up, at <http://www.GloriaFeldt.com>.