

Emancipation and Rural Women in Uganda

Arise: Miriam, you sound so optimistic about women's emancipation, why?

Miriam: I base my optimism on the experiences I have had. I have had the privilege to work with both the rural and urban women, right from 1974, both with government and NGOs up to now. I have worked with Ministry of Culture and Community Development, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Uganda Embassy in U.S.A., the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the Family Planning Association of Uganda and now the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT). I have been a keen player in women emancipation activities and that is how I come to be a founder member of ACFODE, TOKA Farmers Association and the Kigulu Development Group in Iganga District.

Arise: That is a really broad based experience. But let us first of all focus on the rural women. In your view, have they responded to women emancipation message or calls?

Miriam: The whole issue was at first viewed with some sort of apathy. The rural woman thought that the issue was for the benefit of the educated and urbanized women since they (the latter) were the ones talking about it. Secondly, women "emancipation" sounded too foreign and irrelevant.

I vividly recall the day we celebrated the end of the Women's Decade. I asked my mother not to prepare me a meal because I was rushing to the party. "Which party?" she asked.

"The national celebration to mark the end of the Women's Decade." I answered.

"And what on earth is the Women's Decade?" she asked again.

As I began to explain, I realized how embarrassed I was.

I knew my mother was not alone in her ignorance about the Women's Decade. I also knew that somehow, we who

knew about the decade had not taken enough trouble to spread the gospel to all the women. At the end of my long seemingly boring explanation, my mother bluntly said, "I don't think I understand half of what you are talking about. It is for you educated women in Kampala. I also insist there is no hurry, so sit down and at least take a cup of my banana juice ..."

Arise: Is that why you jumped on the Action for Development bandwagon?

Miriam: Precisely. Right from the word, "go" I saw that ACFODE was going to give me the way to reach out to the majority of the women in rural areas and to share with them my concerns and aspirations about women emancipation. You see, the main concern of the founders of ACFODE was to reach the majority of rural women.

Arise: Women's emancipation has been interrelated in various ways by various people. What is your personal view?

Miriam: For me, emancipation means facilitation of equal opportunities for both women and men to share in both the challenges and benefits pertaining to National Development. It means allowing freedom of choice to both women and men; to be true to themselves and pursue their life's visions without sexual discrimination. It means empowering both women and men to unleash their human potential for individual and national advancement.

Arise: What makes you think that the women emancipation idea is slowly but steadily taking root among the rural women?

Miriam: I have live examples of women breaking through traditional barriers and creating better lives for themselves



Miriam Tabingwa, a founder/member of the Action for Development (ACFODE) and the Chairperson of its Publicity Committee, shares her strong belief in a recent interview with **ARISE** that "the Ugandan rural woman is slowly but steadily awakening to the realization that she has the power, the wisdom and the opportunities to improve her status for effective participation in her country's developments." The interview is presented here in its entirety.

and their families. You need to come to Kagadi Sub-district where the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT) is working. There you will see for yourself how women in groups and individually have taken up the challenges to fight hunger, poverty and ignorance. For the first time in my life I have seen women building houses for and by themselves.

I have also seen women sit down and actually calculate the hours they put into various activities and value their working time in terms of money. I have seen both women and men take on alternative roles to ensure protection of their wells, etc. A great awareness is building up.

Arise: How about cultural and traditional role in women emancipation?

Miriam: Women have been the worst hit victims of negative culture and tradition. Often, when men want to win an argument or claim benefit, they apply negative culture and tradition. Of course, there are many things in our culture and traditions that are positive and can be tapped for development but ...

Arise: Like what aspects?

Miriam: An example that quickly comes to my mind is our inherited sense of community living, of having community concerns and obligations. Most of our Ugandan culture is community-binding and I think we should make maximum use of it. The women have the natural, God-given role of motherhood. We do acknowledge this role, and in fact we take pride in it. When we talk of emancipation, we are not saying that we should be emancipated from childbirth and motherhood. What we are saying is that we should be given the right to choose when to start motherhood and how many children we want to have. Marriage and motherhood should be by choice, not by force of cultural and traditional forces.

Arise: Maybe you can talk like that because you are educated and know your rights and exactly what you want. But what about rural women? Are they aware of their problems and do they know what they want?

Miriam: How can they not know their problems when they are living with them? I can also assure you that they know what they want. I have learned this through my work with the URDT programme and through networking by ACFODE. Women want to have healthy children, good houses, and earn independent incomes from modern farming. They know their problems, but they are overwhelmed by powerlessness so they resort to resignation. All we have to do is to bridge the dialogue with them.

Arise: What do you mean by "bridge the dialogue?"

Miriam: I mean we should listen and encourage women to articulate both their problems and their vision for better lives. We should build on their knowledge and their dreams but not act as the know-it-all saviours. A two-way communication is what we need to build a supportive and trustful relationship with one another.

Arise: Can you say that the Uganda situation has contributed to women's search for a better status?

Miriam: To a big extent, yes. Two decades of war and insurgency have left many women as bread-earners and heads of families. All of a sudden women have to take on men's roles and, therefore, look for ways to play these roles effectively. So we are now seeing them in economic entrepreneurship, in development groups and even in the army.

The NRM government policy on women has also created an encouraging atmosphere for women to come out and show their capabilities in leadership. I know a lot has to be done but we are operating on firm grounds of hope and clear vision. Then the emergence of a number of forward looking women organizations like ACFODE and the women lawyers (FIDA) has also been a great source of inspiration. I remember when we (ACFODE) were networking in Rukungiri about four years ago and we introduced a woman lawyer in our group, I saw several women wipe tears of surprise and joy. "So even women can also become lawyers!" one of them exclaimed.

Arise: What do you say about people who think that women are just fighting to be equal to men?

Miriam: To those I retort with the famous quotation from Archbishop Dam Helder Camara of Brazil: Neither is a man greater than a woman, nor a woman greater than a man. But it is also not true that the two are equal in everything. The

reality is greater and more beautiful; the woman has qualities specifically feminine which when added to the qualities which are specifically masculine, allows the achievement of results which are greater, more expressive and richer than any which could be reached if either of the two sexes were working separately.

SOURCE: ARISE, DECEMBER 1990

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