

Commentary: Women's strike will succeed only if combined with action



Demonstrators protest during the Women's March along Pennsylvania Avenue on Jan. 21, 2017, in Washington, D.C. (Joshua Lott, AFP/Getty Images)

By **Joanne Cleaver**

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The Women's March is about to be about where women aren't.

Not in class. Not at work. Not at home. The organizers of the Women's March have announced an official women's strike on March 8, International Women's Day.

They are against a lot — the current administration and a list of purported attacks (their term, not mine) on public education, working families and constitutional rights.

But what are they for?

The challenge now facing the Women's March organizers is to channel the considerable energy and

motivation of millions of women into positive action.

Women have been striking periodically for decades, starting with the suffragettes a century ago. In 1975, the urge to strike seized my mom and her friends, inspired by the women of Iceland, whose one-day walkout brought their country to a standstill.

Nothing came to a standstill in our two-income household. We teenagers already did our own laundry and knew our way around a frying pan and a can opener. My mom took the day off, which she did occasionally anyway, albeit without a preceding political statement, and she seemed to have a good time with her friends, all of whom continued to welcome my friends and me after school with home-baked cookies when we invaded after track practice.

The collective absence for a day of our town's moms changed nothing.

The same will happen in March, and in any other strikes or events being planned, if the organizers of the Women's March don't realize that making noise is not the same as making progress.

Systemic change takes time and a lot of hard work.

Every woman can advance the cause by making a single change that directly affects her co-workers and that sparks conversations about how her workplace can remove barriers to women's success. Women can:

- Form lunch discussion groups of women at various points in their careers and share honestly about how each person overcame career sticking points.
- Encourage their organization's sales and marketing managers to shift default invitations to networking events from "first come, first served" to deliberate rotations that ensure that women are equitably included.
- Revise their online biographies to short narratives that tell their integrated life and career stories (as opposed to condensed resumes), weaving in important family and personal milestones.
- With other women in their departments, agree to back each other up in meetings to ensure that each woman is heard on her own terms and that her ideas are credited to her.

Small changes add up. Just ask the women of Iceland, where tremendous progress has been made since 1975 but challenges remain. Last October, they turned themselves into a living infographic by prorating their workdays according to the national pay gap. By shortening their work day by 14 percent, they accelerated the conversation about pay equity to a degree that they'll fully measure only when they're over the finish line.

Joanne Cleaver is a communication consultant based in Chicago.

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