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Women prepare food at a soup kitchen April 3, 2019, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. (CNS/Reuters/Agustin Marcarian)



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March 8, 2022

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When Kabul fell and thousands of Afghan refugees were housed at military bases across the United States, one of the first people who raised her hand to help was my colleague, Sr. Maryanne Loughry. She packed her things up and moved to Fort McCoy to help set up support for those temporarily housed on the base. She organized child-friendly spaces, rallied volunteers, helped provide mental health and psychosocial support and built lasting relationships with the Afghans who had been through unimaginable circumstances.

When the pandemic hit, followed closely by an enormous explosion and political and economic strife in Beirut, it was my colleague Heba who raised her hand to say that the work of our team would continue no matter what. She organized staff to deliver food and provide help when the city went into lockdown and was one of the first people to call survivors of the explosion. She kept the doors open against all odds.

Despite having suffered abuse, being forced into marriage as a teenager and having to flee from violence and persecution in her home country of Sudan, my colleague Aicha raised her hand and fought hard to get an education. She now runs our early childhood education program in Chad, called Little Ripples. It is a refugee-led program that provides comprehensive pre-primary education that supports the social-emotional, cognitive and physical development of young children.

March 8 is International Women's Day, an important and necessary recognition of the needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls. Having served for many years in leadership roles for Catholic organizations, I am especially aware of how the Catholic Church is called to engage women in all that we do. We need to serve women, but we also need women to serve. Women like Sister Maryanne, Heba, Aicha and hundreds of others bring unique and important qualities to the work that the church does around the world. They are determined and resourceful, they put their communities first and they lead and serve with care and concern.



St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, patron of immigrants, is depicted in a stained-glass window at the saint's shrine chapel in New York City. Mother Cabrini and her sisters worked with immigrants, schoolchildren and the poor. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

When I first began working in international development, one of the things I quickly learned was that investing in women and women's leadership ripples far beyond the direct beneficiary. Research by the U.S. Agency for International Development has found that when 10% or more of adolescent girls go to school, a country's gross domestic product increases by an average of 3%. This is because women and girls

invest in their families and communities and often take what they are given to serve others.

The role of women throughout the history of the church also deserves attention on this day devoted to the contributions of women. I think about some of the notable women, like St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, whose leadership and service have been so important to the church's mission. Devoted, powerful and sometimes brazen in her determination, she led important work for the church in the United States and directed missions to offer care and welcome for those seeking a better life in a new land. The inspiration I find in Mother Cabrini isn't just in her patronage of immigrants — a cause that is dear to my heart and the essence of the mission of my organization. She inspires me because of the unique leadership she brought to her work. Her leadership was steeped in prayer and directed and informed by those most in need, not those in power.

As we recognize International Women's Day around the world this year, it is more important than ever that we recognize the important qualities women bring, and the essential contributions we make, in society as a whole, and especially for the church's mission around the world.

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