

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 30, 2013 at 10:41am

The dance in support of 1 billion women is waiting for you

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

I've got a dance date for you Feb. 14, on Valentine's Day.

Eve Ensler, actress and author of "The Vagina Monologues," invites you to join crowds in 177 of the 196 countries of the world who have decided that enough is enough. It is time for those who really believe in the full humanity of their daughters and in the moral integrity of their sons to tell the world they will no longer tolerate violence against women.

Actually, whether you know it or not, your entire life, if you are a woman, has been directed at a moment like this. If you are a man living in a distorted and deformed gender-driven world, you have been looking for something like this to demonstrate your real manhood, your genuine convictions, for a long time now.

So what is it and where did it come from? Well, in a way, it actually came in response to now-former Congressman Todd Akin's remarks about "legitimate rape" in the last election. Akin, you recall, insisted that in a "legitimate rape," a woman's body itself makes pregnancy impossible. The inexcusably ill-informed thinking behind that kind of remark electrified the country.

In the first place, what in heaven's name is a "legitimate" rape? Is it the old kind where the woman fights to the death to avoid it? Or is it the kind where a woman is really being truthful about the fact that she was taken advantage of without her consent?

The debate the comments generated alerted women everywhere to how little has really changed because of feminism. Except, perhaps, our awareness of how much is still unfinished in our journey to justice and how fragile -- and often brutal -- is really the condition of women everywhere. Even here.

Which is not to say that a lot of good hasn't happened. On the contrary.

If nothing else, we have become more conscious of the shopping list of violent assaults against women. We do not take the sexual exploitation and definition of women for granted anymore, at least not here. It still happens, yes, but in our lifetimes, the legal system has finally called it what it is -- criminal -- and strong women risk their lives to expose it.

We know now that half the population of the planet -- women -- are routinely sneered at, demeaned, beaten, sexually abused, bought, sold, trafficked for sex, underpaid or enslaved. We know, too, that this is not simply a byproduct of poverty that we're talking about; this is simply what it means to be a woman. Still. Yet. Even in so-called developed countries of the world.

We know that the airwaves are a cloud of dirty stories about women raped and thrown out of buses; used as weapons of war; sexually mutilated. So many stories, in fact, so many numbers of women, so many hundreds of thousands of them that the shoulders sag and the soul begins to shrivel under the weight of it all.

And worst of all, we know, too, that all the while the men of the world go on talking about "rationality" and "equality" and "justice." And the churches talk about "the will of God" and say little or nothing from any public pulpits about what all of this has to do with crimes against women or the moral obligations of men.

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And yet, at the same time, there is also a new list developing that may well change the world.

This is the growing body of young men who are becoming "fathers" as well as "bread winners."

These are men who parent small children as well as either spoil or discipline them and so themselves become more feeling, more sensitive.

These are the men who are marching in India in great numbers, demanding reform in the rape laws.

These are the men who are hiring women so the agendas, approaches and quality of their services become gender-free.

And now, these are the young women -- and men -- who are calling us to be one of the One Billion Rising. You'll like it. It's a dance for the world to do together Feb. 14, on St. Valentine's Day, the day on which much of the world celebrates the kind of love between women and men that makes both more human, more whole.

One out of every three women in the world will be raped or beaten in her lifetime. That is 1 billion women treated as things, beaten and bruised, used and exploited sexually without their consent, humiliated and mutilated invisible victims of war. Some of them are as young as 3 years old. Many of them are targeted and attacked in their 70s. All of them are changed for life.

I hope you already know about the call for a billion women and men to stand up wherever they and dance together Feb. 14 to shake the foundations of the world. I hope you are already organizing your own groups. I hope you have found a public place to do the dance and will send your videos of it to One Billion Rising's website when it's over to become part of the archives of a world that has finally called violence against women what it is: immoral, illegal, unjust and inhuman.

From where I stand, I think it is time for all of us to stand up together to say "Enough," to make it known that we will dance and dance and dance until the rumble of the earth brings down the pillars of patriarchy that have distorted the humanity of men and the lives of women.

I'm not going to really end this column. It won't be over until you watch the short film that opens the website OneBillionRising.org.

Then check the even shorter films of dancing groups around the world on the homepage of the website. The dance instructions are there, too, so when you and your group begin to dance, you can be heard all over the world.

And then do nothing, say nothing, talk to no one. I dare you.

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