

Women's rights: never truly acquired?

"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." So wrote Simone de Beauvoir in her landmark 1949 book, *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir's statement still remains an important principle for women and health. March 8 marks International Women's Day—a day that celebrates the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women worldwide. But International Women's Day also signals a moment to reflect not only on what has been achieved, but also what remains to be done. And there is, indeed, much more to be done if the goal of gender equity, Sustainable Development Goal 5, is to be won.

The 2017 campaign for International Women's Day will be based around the theme of "Be Bold For Change", an invitation to all—men and women alike—to take strong pragmatic actions to accelerate progress towards gender equity and to deliver the greatest possible positive change for women. A new US president has certainly taken some bold actions. Presidential decrees taken within his first days in office have generated anxiety among women. The question facing many women today is therefore not simply what strategies should be adopted to advance women's health and to address the determinants of their health, but how to protect the fragile successes that have taken decades to accrue.

In this issue of *The Lancet Public Health*, Rachel Benson Gold and Ann Starrs question what Donald Trump's election means for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. The reinstatement of the global gag rule—which will limit funding of family planning programmes in developing countries—might only be "the opening salvo in what is expected to be a broad-based assault on sexual and reproductive health and rights", write Gold and Starrs. Looking beyond the global gag rule, they argue that reproductive health and rights in the USA will come under sustained attack. "President Trump has vowed to 'put America first'; however, his policies would put the health of women last", they warn.

There are certainly grounds for concern. While the Affordable Care Act (or Obamacare) boosted access to birth control via affordable contraceptive methods, the promised unravelling of President Obama's initiative will mean that these gains are under threat. Young and poor women are likely to be harmed first. Weakened health-care insurance, defunding of Planned Parenthood, and

abortion restriction would challenge affordability and accessibility to birth control methods, family planning safety nets, and women's control over their fertility—a sustained assault on women's health and wellbeing.

Another cause for concern among American women comes from possible cuts in funding to the Violence Against Women Act. Programmes to prevent violence against women, together with legal aid provision for women, will be jeopardised, putting the lives of those experiencing (or at risk of) domestic violence in serious danger. Eliminating all forms of violence against women, one target of Sustainable Development Goal 5, is essential if the hope of enhancing women's empowerment and equality is to be met.

In the USA and beyond, the new Donald Trump's presidency has been coldly welcomed by many concerned with women's rights. On Jan 21, a hugely successful Women's March on Washington took place. Its aim was "to send a bold message to [the] new government on their first day in office and to the world that women's rights are human rights". It rapidly evolved into a worldwide protest joined by millions of people in more than 80 countries. Their response followed the misogynist rhetoric of the American election campaign. Many women felt insulted and threatened in such a climate. Many felt they had to stand together.

The challenges for women go well beyond the USA. According to the World Economic Forum 2016 Global Gender Gap Report—which quantifies gender disparities and tracks progress on four key areas: health, education, the economy, and politics—progress is still too slow for realising the full potential of one half of humanity within our lifetimes. Progress is also uneven. Of the 142 countries studied, 68 have increased their overall gender gap score compared with the previous year, while 74 have seen it decrease.

At this time of uncertainty, de Beauvoir's book remains an inspiring call to action. Prophetically, de Beauvoir issued this warning, one that should be emblazoned on the hearts of all those who care for women and their health—"all it would take is a political, economic, or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question." ■ [The Lancet Public Health](#)

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