



Rise of Feminism & the Renewed Battle for Women's Rights

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In 1909, the Socialist Party of America, in support of female garment workers protesting working conditions, designated March 8 as a day to honor women. By 1917, women in Russia were protesting for 'bread and peace' against a backdrop of war. In recognition of that protest and women's suffrage in Soviet Russia, The International Socialist movement designated March 8 as International Women's Day.

Over the past 101 years, women, governments and the UN around the world have marked the day of solidarity and recognition of our rights. I appreciated its true significance in 2010 when, I spent the day among a group of Masai women in Kenya. I was leading a delegation of women peacebuilders from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Canada and the US. We drove miles through dusty plains speckled with the occasional tree and giraffe herds to meet the Masai. They had walked hours to join us at their community center, a cinder block building that they'd paid for by making and selling jewelry and crafts. They knew it was International Women's Day and they were excited to be included as women in the world. It was humbling to be with them and it felt like a universal sisterhood.

In 2017, in the wake of the massive women's protests, in the US on March 8th women wore red. For just that day on the sidewalks and in traffic, in government buildings and beyond, we the women signaled our mutual solidarity through our shared flash of red. It was symbolic, reassuring and empowering.

So 101 years on as March 8th 2018 dawns, how far have we come and how far do we still need to go? In America, it is easy to feel angry. We are witnessing the most deliberate and targeted rollbacks of basic rights for women to be enacted by a government.

Domestically in 2017 the Trump administration revoked the Fair Pay act that enabled women and minorities to determine if they were being subject to pay discrimination.

Health care provisions particularly reproductive rights are at perpetual risk. Vice President Mike Pence has openly stated that they aim to put an end to abortion – presumably the legal, safe variety – in his time.

Internationally too, the US is retrenching. In February 2018 the State Department announced that its annual global human rights report would no longer highlight the range of abuses and violations that women and girls typically experience. In the name of expediency and to 'sharpen the focus', the US has determined that violence against women is not a sufficiently egregious form of abuse – despite its prevalence among and relevance to at least 50% of the world's population. To give simple context: Globally women and girls make up 71 percent of the victims of human trafficking – a vast source of revenue for criminal and violent organizations. Three quarters of them are sexually abused. Of the women murdered globally in 2012, their partners or their own relatives killed half of them. But according to the US administration this evidence does not amount to egregious abuse.

Such denial makes for strange bedfellows internationally. The Trump administration puts the US in the same camp as Cuba, China, Iran, Syria, all of which refused to acknowledge violence against women as a gendered issues in recent years. On seeking to assert state control over women's bodies particularly in terms of reproductive health issues, it is aligned with among others, Sudan, Russia, and the Vatican/Holy See – a nation of some 570 citizens, of whom just 30 are women –

Globally too, there is room for concern. In recent years, we have seen a co-opting of the rights and equality agenda in insidious ways. Many conservative states have become champions of girls' education on the global stage. Yet scratch the surface and their agenda is not one of equal rights, opportunity or freedom to choose their own paths. They want to educate girls so they can be good wives and better mothers. In other words, girls' education is not for the purpose of fulfilling a human being's potential, rather it is to prepare her to be subservient to male dominance, and cede the public sphere where decisions are made and power is wielded. And most tellingly no state is making the effort to educate men to be good husbands and better fathers. That would certainly go a long way towards reducing levels of violence.

Another recent trend has been to claim support for the women, peace and security agenda, by opening militaries to female recruitment in combat roles. The latest to join the ranks is Saudi Arabia, which in February 2018 announced that women could join the army as security officers but not as combat soldiers (The irony that these women would still need to live with their male guardians seems lost on the state). So in the name of equality, women are being deployed to wield weapons and if needed, oppress, perpetrate violence, maim or kill. But an equal chance to fit into existing structures does not equate to an equal chance to transform the entrenched status quo. When it comes to the

women, peace and security issues for example, many of us advocates would argue that our cause is not to enable our daughters to be drafted into armies on equal footing as our sons. Rather ours to ensure that neither our daughters nor our sons have bear witness or engage in the horrors of war. That is the paradigm shift and equality we strive for – much like the Russian women in 1917. But neither Saudi Arabia nor many other countries are matching their purported awakening to gender equality with a commitment to ensuring women's effective participation in the realms where decisions – particularly about peace and security – are being made. It is evident by the paucity of women in the negotiations regarding the fate of Yemen and Syria.

Meanwhile conservative forces that rail against women's rights and feminism, have co-opted the empowerment agenda by deploying their own army of women. From ISIS to the White Supremacist, they understand that women have power and influence. They also understand that women have aspirations and capacity to contribute to a cause. In the US the fact that the National Rifle Association (NRA) has a female spokesperson and television series with female heroes is no accident. They recognize that the optics work in their favor. Their spokeswomen inevitably appear more disarming (pun intended), conveying an image of both modernity and traditionalism, femininity and empowerment, even if they are handmaidens to the male leadership.

But the anger is also giving rise to positive developments. Trumpism sparked the women's marches and a linking of arms among women across nations, of every generation. Feminism, long taken for granted and even denigrated, is fashionable again. It is fueled by indignation and action. The #MeToo campaign founded by Tarana Burke long before Trump arose, has surged and its impact is evident in every sector. In the political realm despite the negative stance of the administration, Congress has passed two critical pieces of legislation – the Women, Peace and Security Act and a new Anti-online Sex trafficking bill that is heading to the Senate.

Perhaps the greatest sign of hope is the younger generation. Our teenage girls, who grew up in the Obama years that brought kindness, respect and a 'can-do' attitude to the fore, and whose political consciousness evolved in tandem with the rise of social media and greater connectivity, are emerging as new leaders. This too is a global phenomenon. In the US, high school students Emma Gonzalez and Delaney Tarr who survived the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida have become leading activists in the tough, overwhelmingly male dominated debates on security and gun control. In Palestine, 17-year old high schooler, Ahed Tamimi has become the symbol of resistance against the Israeli occupation, after confronting armed Israeli soldiers about shooting her unarmed young cousin. Pakistani Malala Yousefzia, survivor of a terror attack and already a veteran activist at 21, won the Nobel Prize for daring to confront the Taliban about attacks on schools girls. In Iran, a younger generation of women are confronting the state's compulsory hijab laws by provocatively standing in public spaces, waving their

scarves like flags on a pole. It is notable that in every instance they are either working on equal footing with men, or they have men recognizing their courageous leadership and cheering them on.

In each instance, these young women activists, stand on the shoulders of the many who came before them. They may not be familiar with the terms of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council Resolution 1325 and its 7 sister resolutions, the Millennium or Sustainable Development Goals. They may even take much of it for granted, but that itself is an indication of empowerment, as this new generation is taking the struggle into a new phase. This younger generation's starting point is one of absolute equality. They not only feel entitled to speak, but feel entitled to be heard. And as my 17 year old daughter remarks, 'Years of dystopic novels with female heroes saving the day, combined with lessons in civil rights, means of course we want to speak out and act.' So if their grandmother's generation fought to get into the system and participate in the status quo set by men, and their mother's generation fought to transform systems from within by being collaborative, this younger generation is standing their own ground. They are setting their own terms, shaping their own narratives, and creating their own space – particularly through their adept handling of social media. As they stand up to might of the vested interests and security state offering common sense solutions – be it in the US, Israel, Iran or Pakistan – but being rebuked violently, they reveal how naked and absurd the emperor truly is.

So a century on from the first International Women's Day, these young women are lifting the veil off the systems that have perpetuated discrimination and violence and calling them out. In solidarity with women of the past they are saying 'Time's up'. I know they mean it. So it is with pride and confidence that I, for one, am happy to pass the baton.

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