

PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN '17

Over four decades, certain issues remain constant

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The U.S. government once asked women what they wanted. It was 1977, and about 20,000 people — Gloria Steinem and Coretta Scott King, Democrats and Republicans, lesbians and straight women — flocked to Houston for the only federally funded women's rights conference of its kind in U.S. history.

The National Women's Conference called for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would explicitly ban discrimination based on sex. The women asked for affordable child care and equal pay. They called for national health care. They wanted to end discriminatory rape laws and deportations of immigrant mothers of American born children.

In 2017, women gathered en masse again, flooding the nation's capital for the Women's March on Washington, spurred largely by the election of President Trump, whose treatment of women was denounced on both sides of the aisle. March organizers found themselves reiterating many of the demands of those women 40 years ago.



JIM WEBER, USA TODAY NETWORK

More than 9,000 people rally during a human rights march in Memphis in January. Although women have found themselves making gains in society, some say they are still reiterating many of the demands they made the past four decades.

Divisions persist at start of Women's History Month

"The power of men to decide what the world is going to look like, what counts and what doesn't, hasn't really been terribly disrupted in a generation," legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw said.

Though feminism seems pervasive — democratized by the Internet and popularized by the likes of Beyoncé and Ivanka Trump — women's rights remain in flux, depending on who's in power.

As Women's History Month kicks off, here's a look at where a number of women's issues stand:

Health: The Affordable Care Act forbade the denial of coverage based on gender and guaranteed access to birth control, maternity care and breastfeeding supplies. The National Partnership for Women & Families (NPWF) called the ACA "the greatest advance for women's health in a generation." Trump and Republicans in Congress vow to repeal and replace it.

Domestic violence: One in three women have been a victim of physical violence by an intimate partner, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions did not support the most recent authorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which he is responsible for enforcing. **Sexual violence:** One in six American women will be the victim of an attempted or completed rape, according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. Rates are even higher for transgender people, according to the Department of Justice. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos didn't say whether she would uphold Title IX's guidance instructing colleges to combat campus sexual assault.

Politics: Women are 51% of the population but make up 19% of Congress and a quarter of state legislatures. Women will reach parity with men in office by 2117, according to the nonprofit Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR).

Paid family leave: The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but fewer than 40% of workers qualify for it, according to the NPWF. During the campaign, Trump proposed that the federal government provide six weeks of paid maternity leave to some birth mothers.

Abortion: After elections in 2010, more anti-abortion politicians seized power in state legislatures, leading to a proliferation of abortion restrictions nationwide. The president and vice president are against abortion, and abortion rights advocates view Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Neil Gorsuch, as a threat.

Equal pay: Women earn 80 cents for every dollar earned by men, according to the NPWF, and women of color earn even less. Critics argue these figures don't account for factors such as occupation or experience, but economists say that even accounting for those, a wage gap persists.

In the decades since the conference in 1977, women's issues have grown politicized. Marjorie Spruill, author of *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics*, said a major factor was the rise of a conservative women's movement that denounced the feminist agenda. It "made people really line up on extreme sides," Spruill said.

In 2017, a conservative view of feminism acknowledges gender inequality but does not share liberals' ideas to combat it. Sabrina Schaeffer, executive director of the conservative Independent Women's Forum (Kellyanne Conway has a seat on the board), said addressing disparities is important, but top-down mandates may not be necessary or economical. "Gender is not the whole story," Schaeffer said.

American women share common struggles but differ greatly in their experiences, which is why "women's rights" remain divisive and its tent so broad.

Karla Holloway, a professor of English and Law at Duke University, said conversations that fixate on the achievements of Hillary Clinton come at the expense of mothers working minimum wage jobs. "Women who are elevated are still vulnerable," she said. "Women who have been erased are drowning."



1977 PHOTO FROM AP

Gloria Steinem's magazine *Ms.* rated President Carter's first year in office from a feminist perspective.