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'The other half of my soul': Widows of Covid-19 bond over sudden loss

Men have died of the coronavirus in larger numbers than women, leaving untold thousands of spouses suddenly alone. Some have turned to bereavement groups on Facebook.

By Julie Bosman

The NY Times (31.12.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/39ancVX> - One Friday evening, Sandra McGowan-Watts, a 46-year-old doctor from suburban Chicago, opened her laptop, stifled her nerves and told strangers on a Zoom call what had happened to her husband, Steven.

"He died by himself," said Dr. McGowan-Watts, who joined the call after an invitation on a Facebook support group for widowed Black women. "Not being able to see him, being able to touch him, all of those things. The grief is kind of complicated."

The women listening understood instantly. They were all widows of Covid-19.

For nearly two hours that summer night, their stories tumbled out, tales of sickness and death, single parenting and unwanted solitude, harrowing phone calls and truncated goodbyes.

More than 340,000 people have died of the coronavirus in the United States. Men have died of the disease in larger numbers than women, a gender disparity that some researchers have suggested could be partly attributed to men's generally poorer health. That has left untold thousands of spouses suddenly widowed by the virus.

Women have witnessed the pandemic from a miserably close angle. They have been left behind with family responsibilities, financial burdens, worries about their children's trauma and their own crushing loss and guilt. Many nursed their partners at home until they were so ill they had to be hospitalized; there, they often died with little warning.

Coronavirus widows, as well as many widowers, are spread out across the country, young and old, in big cities in California and small towns in Utah.

In more than a dozen interviews, women told of feeling stunned by the swiftness of the experience, even months after their husbands' deaths.

"It's very traumatic because of the unexpectedness of it," said Jennifer Law, whose husband, Matthew, died of the coronavirus in Texas in November, years after serving in the Army in Iraq. "He made it back from two deployments, two separate, dangerous deployments. He came home and this is what killed him."

Some feel unacknowledged, struggling to manage the aftermath of their partners' deaths amid an unending health crisis.

"It was really difficult for me because I felt like, man, I'm all alone," said Pamela Addison, 37, a teacher in Waldwick, N.J. Her husband, Martin, a speech pathologist who worked in a hospital, died of the virus in April. "If Covid wasn't here, all of our husbands would still be here."

Ms. Addison eventually sought out other Covid-19 widows to talk to, and other women have managed to find each other by joining Facebook bereavement groups, which are also open to men. They have forged ties similar to those found among other clusters of women whose husbands died unexpectedly and prematurely, including military spouses or widows of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The women on the Zoom call in July who live in the Chicago area have since become friends who meet for dinner and check in daily with quick texts.

Widows of the coronavirus recounted a painful set of commonalities: the experience of frantically taking care of their husbands when they fell ill, worrying about when to take them to a hospital and feeling haunted by the images of their partners dying without loved ones beside them.

"The generation that I'm from, we took care of our husbands — that's how we were raised," said Mary Smith, of Pekin, Ill., who lost her 64-year-old husband, Mike, to the virus. "That was our job, to be their cheerleader. They're used to having that, and all of a sudden you're not there."

After her husband died, she scrolled through his phone and found the lonely pictures he had snapped from his hospital bed. His food, in a cardboard container. The oxygen machines. A selfie as he wore breathing equipment.

"It was so stark," Ms. Smith said. "He was in there by himself so much of the time."

Jennifer Kay Jensen, who lives in Delray Beach, Fla., has been tormented by the notion that her presence in the hospital — barred to prevent further transmission — could have helped her husband recover. Her husband, Peter, a 56-year-old real estate broker, died of the virus in August.

"The guilt, it eats me up every day," she said. "I think it could have made a difference, if I was there seeing him, to soothe him or scratch his arm or kiss his head."

In St. George, Utah, Donna Heintz has been marooned, physically and emotionally, since her 78-year-old husband, Fred, died in October. Her neighbor across the street calls her to check in, or waves if they are outside at the same moment. But the isolation of widowhood is raw and unending.

"I wake up in the morning and the first thing I do is try to get out of bed quietly so I don't wake him," she said, choking back sobs. "Then I look to see if he's there, and he's gone."

Her husband, an Army veteran and longtime police officer, was the cook in their house, preparing meals that they would share on TV trays in the living room, watching their favorite shows and making each other laugh. Now Ms. Heintz barely wants to eat a thing, and cannot shake the feeling that her husband is still there.

"Sometimes at night I look in the kitchen and wonder what he's fixing for supper," she said.

A report published in May by the Global Fund for Widows, a nonprofit organization based in New York, called the coronavirus a “widow-making machine,” an outbreak that could create “unprecedented numbers of widows across the developing world.”

By late December, at least 163,000 men had died from the virus in the United States, compared with at least 138,000 women, according to federal data.

Sarah S. Richardson, a historian at Harvard who directs its GenderSci Lab, said men have died of the coronavirus in greater numbers in part because of its disproportionate effect on Black men, and by a surge in deaths of men early in the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, she added, women were more likely to be widowed than men.

The Facebook group for Black women who have been widowed has seen a tragic influx of new members this year.

Sabra Robinson, its creator, became a widow in 2012 after her husband died of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Spurred by that experience, and her dissatisfaction in traditional grief support groups, she started her own, with a heavy focus on empowerment and encouragement for Black women.

“When Covid hit, oh my goodness, the group was receiving so many requests from widows who lost their husbands due to Covid,” said Ms. Robinson, a project manager from Charlotte, N.C. “They are experiencing more complicated grief than I would say the average widow that posts in the group. How in the world can they heal as long as Covid is out there?”

For younger widows of Covid-19, the task of raising small children alone has been one of the most daunting tests of the pandemic.

After her husband died in April, Diana Ordonez sold her house in New Jersey to downsize and move closer to friends, family and their church. Ms. Ordonez described her husband, Juan, as a warm, funny and cheerful man who was “the other half of my soul.”

Ms. Ordonez said she had been propelled forward by a desire to be a good example for their 5-year-old daughter, Mia, to show her that she should live fully, as Juan did.

“This whole experience is so depleting and so draining,” Ms. Ordonez said. “You have to lead your kid by example. You want them to be happy, and you’re showing them how to behave.”

Some women’s grief has been laced with anger.

Mara Vaughan, of Prosper, Texas, lost her husband, Bryan, to the coronavirus in April, after he quite likely contracted it on a business trip. Ms. Vaughan, who has three children, has connected with other widows online and read about their struggles, financial and emotional.

She pointed to President Trump and his downplaying of the coronavirus crisis, especially early on, when her husband became sick. It is difficult to see people in her community still shunning masks and ignoring advice on safety and social distancing.

“Imagine the pandemic and losing someone to it and then doing it alone,” Ms. Vaughan said. “I will never have peace and closure on the death of my husband. It should never have happened.”

'I won't be the last': Kamala Harris, first woman elected US vice-president, accepts place in history

With victory speech, California senator brings tears to eyes of crowd in Delaware.

By Lauren Gambino

The Guardian (08.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Ie65cw> - Kamala Harris accepted her place in history on Saturday night with a speech honoring the women who she said "paved the way for this moment tonight", when the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants would stand before the nation as the vice-president-elect of the United States.

With her ascension to the nation's second highest office, Harris, 56, will become the first woman and the first woman of color to be elected vice-president, a reality that shaped her speech and brought tears to the eyes of many women and girls watching from the hoods of their cars that had gathered in the parking lot of a convention center in Wilmington, Delaware.

Wearing an all-white pantsuit, in an apparent tribute to the suffragists who fought for a woman's right to vote, Harris smiled, exultant, as she waved from the podium waiting for the blare of car horns and cheers to subside. Joe Biden, the president-elect, would speak next. But this was a moment all her own.

She began her remarks with a tribute to the legacy of the late congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis.

"Protecting our democracy takes struggle," Harris said, speaking from a stage outside the Chase Center on the Riverfront in Wilmington. "It takes sacrifice. But there is joy in it. And there is progress. Because we, the people, have the power to build a better future."

With Harris poised to become the highest-ranking woman in the history of American government, this milestone marks the extraordinary arc of a political career that has broken racial and gender barriers at nearly every turn. As a prosecutor, she rose to become the first Black female attorney general of California. When she was elected to the Senate in 2016, she became only the second Black woman in history to serve in the chamber.

In her remarks, Harris paid tribute to the women across the country – and throughout history – who made this moment possible.

"I reflect on their struggle, their determination and the strength of their vision, to see what can be, unburdened by what has been," she said. "I stand on their shoulders."

She specifically honored the contributions of Black women to the struggle for suffrage, equality and civil rights – leaders who are "too often overlooked, but so often prove that they are the backbone of our democracy".

As a candidate for president, Harris spoke often of her childhood spent attending civil rights marches with her parents, who were students at the University of California, Berkeley. When protests erupted in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd this summer, Harris joined activists in the streets to demand an end to police brutality and racial injustice.

As Biden searched for a running mate, pressure built to choose a Black woman in recognition not only of the role they played in salvaging his presidential campaign – which

Biden acknowledged in his remarks on Saturday night – but of their significance to the party as a whole. Yet a narrative began to form that Harris was a somewhat conventional choice, a senator and one-time Democratic rival who brought generational, ideological and racial balance to the Democratic ticket.

But Harris disagreed emphatically, saying that her presence on the stage was a testament to “Joe’s character – that he had the audacity to break one of the most substantial barriers that exists in our country and select a woman as his vice-president”.

Yet Harris’s presence on the ticket was not only a reflection of the nation’s demographic future but a repudiation of a president who relentlessly scapegoated immigrants and repeatedly attacked women and people of color.

In a moment of reflection, Harris invoked her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, who left her home in India for California in 1958, at the age of 19.

“Maybe she didn’t quite imagine this moment,” Harris said. “But she believed so deeply in an America where a moment like this is possible.”

In interviews and on the campaign trail, Harris often quoted her mother, sharing the advice and admonitions of a woman she describes as diminutive in stature but powerful in her presence.

On Saturday, Harris made a promise to the country.

“While I may be the first woman in this office,” Harris vowed, “I will not be the last, because every little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities.”

Mexico says two women may have had non-consensual surgery in U.S. detention center

Reuters (13.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/374HT64> - Mexico’s Foreign Ministry said it has identified two Mexican migrant women who may have had surgery performed on them without their consent while detained at a U.S. immigration center in the state of Georgia.

While being held at the Irwin center in Georgia, one Mexican woman was reportedly subject to gynecological surgery without her approval and without receiving post-operative care, the ministry said in a weekend statement.

The ministry said its findings were based on actions taken by consular staff and interviews Mexican officials conducted at the center.

Officials were also verifying the case of a second woman who may have been subject to surgical intervention “without her full consent,” without receiving an explanation in Spanish of the procedure, or her medical diagnosis, it added.

It did not name the women. The ministry last month said it had identified a woman possibly subjected to surgery in the center, but did not specify whether she had given her consent.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency did not respond to a request for comment.

The ministry also said it is in touch with a lawyer about a possible class action lawsuit by Mexican women who have been detained at the facility.

In September, a complaint by a whistleblower nurse alleged medical abuse within the Georgia detention center, including unauthorized hysterectomies, a surgery to remove the uterus.

Reuters could not independently confirm those claims. In its statement, the Mexican foreign ministry said the first woman it referred to was not subject to a hysterectomy. It gave no further details on the second.

ICE Health Service Corps said in September that since 2018 only two people at the center were referred for hysterectomies, based on approved recommendations by specialists.

The contractor that runs the facility has said it strongly refutes the allegations and any implications of misconduct.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court justice and legal pioneer for gender equality, dies at 87

By Robert Barnes & Michael A. Fletcher

The Washington Post (19.09.2020) - <https://wapo.st/32SSAGz> - Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman to serve on the high court and a legal pioneer for gender equality whose fierce opinions as a justice made her a hero to the left, died Sept. 18 at her home in Washington. She was 87.

The death was announced in a statement by the U.S. Supreme Court. She had recently been treated for pancreatic cancer.

Born in Depression-era Brooklyn, Justice Ginsburg excelled academically and went to the top of her law school class at a time when women were still called upon to justify taking a man's place. She earned a reputation as the legal embodiment of the women's liberation movement and as a widely admired role model for generations of female lawyers.

Working in the 1970s with the American Civil Liberties Union, Justice Ginsburg successfully argued a series of cases before the high court that strategically chipped away at the legal wall of gender discrimination, eventually causing it to topple. Later, as a member of the court's liberal bloc, she was a reliable vote to enhance the rights of women, protect affirmative action and minority voting rights and defend a woman's right to choose an abortion.

On the court, she became an iconic figure to a new wave of young feminists, and her regal image as the "Notorious RBG" graced T-shirts and coffee mugs. She was delighted by the attention, although she said her law clerks had to explain that the moniker referred to a deceased rapper, the Notorious B.I.G. She also was the subject of a popular film documentary, "RBG" (2018).

When she was named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in 2015, her colleague and improbable close friend, conservative Justice Antonin Scalia, wrote about her dual roles as crusader and judge. "Ruth Bader Ginsburg has had two distinguished legal careers, either one of which would alone entitle her to be one of Time's 100," wrote Scalia, who died in 2016.

After Scalia's death, the Senate took no action to confirm President Barack Obama's nominee to the court, U.S. Appeals Court Judge Merrick Garland. President Trump, who

took office in 2017, has nominated two new justices to the court, Neil M. Gorsuch and Brett M. Kavanaugh, the latter succeeding Justice Anthony M. Kennedy.

NPR reported that Justice Ginsburg, in a statement dictated to her granddaughter in recent days, said, "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed."

A landmark moment for Justice Ginsburg came in 2011, when the court for the first time opened its term with three female justices. Justice Ginsburg said in an interview with *The Washington Post* that it would "change the public perception of where women are in the justice system. When the schoolchildren file in and out of the court and they look up and they see three women, then that will seem natural and proper — just how it is."

Her outspoken feminism played a role in Justice Ginsburg's success. President Bill Clinton acknowledged that in 1993 when he nominated her to replace retiring Justice Byron White. At the time, she was a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

"Many admirers of her work say that she is to the women's movement what former Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall was to the movement for the rights of African Americans," Clinton said in Rose Garden ceremony. "I can think of no greater compliment to bestow on an American lawyer."

(Justice Ginsburg herself usually demurred when the comparison was made, saying that Marshall literally risked his life defending Black clients in the segregated South and that her legal work required no such sacrifice.)

On the court, Justice Ginsburg's most notable rulings and dissents advanced feminist causes.

In 1996, she authored a groundbreaking decision ordering the Virginia Military Institute to admit women, ending a 157-year tradition of all-male education at the state-funded school.

While Virginia "serves the state's sons, it makes no provision whatever for her daughters. That is not equal protection," Justice Ginsburg wrote in *United States v. Virginia*. The 7-to-1 decision — her friend, Scalia, was the dissenter — was the capstone of the legal battle for gender equality, she said later.

"I regard the VMI case as the culmination of the 1970s endeavor to open doors so that women could aspire and achieve without artificial constraints," Justice Ginsburg said after the decision.

Later in her career, discrimination against women was the theme of several forceful dissents Justice Ginsburg read from the bench, a sparingly used bit of theater that justices employ to emphasize deeply held disagreements with a majority opinion.

Among them was a protest of the court's decision to uphold a federal ban on so-called partial-birth abortions. "The court deprives women of the right to make an autonomous choice, even at the expense of their safety," Justice Ginsburg wrote. "This way of thinking reflects ancient notions about women's place in the family and under the Constitution — ideas that have long since been discredited."

In another, she objected to a ruling that said workers may not sue their employers over unequal pay caused by discrimination alleged to have begun years earlier. That case had been filed by Lilly Ledbetter, the lone female supervisor at a tire plant in Gadsden, Ala., who sued after determining she was paid less than male co-workers.

In an interview with The Post in 2010, Justice Ginsburg said the Ledbetter case struck a personal chord.

“Every woman of my age had a Lilly Ledbetter story,” she said. “And so we knew that the notion that a woman who is in a nontraditional job is going to complain the first time she thinks she is being discriminated against — the one thing she doesn’t want to do is rock the boat, to become known as a complainer.”

She called upon Congress to take action, and once Democrats were in control, it did. Obama signed the law relaxing the deadlines for filing suits.

If the law is often complex, her view of equality was simple, she once said.

“It has always been that girls should have the same opportunity to dream, to aspire and achieve — to do whatever their God-given talents enable them to do — as boys,” Justice Ginsburg said in a 2015 conversation at the American Constitution Society. “There should be no place where there isn’t a welcome mat for women. . . . That’s what it’s all about: Women and men, working together, should help make the society a better place than it is now.”

Baton twirler and bookworm

Joan Ruth Bader — her mother suggested using her middle name in kindergarten to avoid confusion with other Joans in the class — was born on March 15, 1933. She was the second daughter of Nathan Bader, a Jewish immigrant from Russia who became a furrier and haberdasher, and the former Celia Amster.

As a schoolgirl, Justice Ginsburg — known to friends as “Kiki” — was smart, popular and competitive, both a bookworm and a baton twirler. But her early life was also shadowed by tragedy. Her older sister, Marilyn, died of meningitis at age 8, leaving Justice Ginsburg to be raised as an only child. She later said she grew up “with the smell of death.”

Raised in Flatbush, then a striving working-class neighborhood of Jewish, Italian and Irish immigrants in Brooklyn, Justice Ginsburg was molded largely by her mother, who had graduated from high school at 15. Her mother never went to college, instead taking a job to help her oldest brother through Cornell University.

Celia Bader was determined that her daughter would have a different path. She stored away money given by her husband for personal expenses to establish a college tuition fund.

But tragedy struck again. By the time Justice Ginsburg was a teenager, her mother was battling cervical cancer. She died in 1950, on the day before Justice Ginsburg graduated near the top of her class from Brooklyn’s James Madison High School.

By the time Celia Bader died, the college fund was \$8,000. But her daughter did not need it; she had won enough scholarships to cover her expenses. She ended up giving most of the money to her dad.

Justice Ginsburg, like her uncle, attended Cornell, where on a blind date she met her future husband, Martin Ginsburg, a confident, fun-loving fraternity member and a standout on the university’s golf team. She later said he was the first boy she ever dated who cared about what was in her head.

After graduation, Martin Ginsburg enrolled at Harvard Law School while Ruth completed her senior year, graduating first in her class in 1954.

Shortly after, they married. He was drafted into the Army, and the couple moved to Lawton, Okla., where Martin was stationed at Fort Sill. While Martin served his two-year hitch, Ruth took a civil service exam and came close to landing a good job at Lawton's Social Security office.

A problem emerged when she mentioned that she was pregnant. She was told that she would not be allowed to go Baltimore for training, forcing her to settle for a lower-paying job as a typist.

After Martin's Army discharge in 1956, the couple went to Cambridge, where Ruth also enrolled in Harvard Law, one of nine women in a class of more than 500.

Those were the days of relentless grillings by professors using the Socratic method, a high-pressure situation made even more intense for female students by the prevailing view that they were operating in a realm where they did not belong.

At one point, Dean Erwin Griswold asked the women of the class what it felt like to occupy seats that could have gone to deserving men. (In 1993, on the eve of her Supreme Court confirmation, Griswold told the Harvard Crimson he long favored admitting women but that he had been overruled by the university's governing board. He added that in asking women such a provocative question, he was playing devil's advocate. "I think she completely misunderstood it and should have known better," he said.)

Further complicating matters for Justice Ginsburg as a Harvard student was the responsibility of being a new mother after the birth of her daughter, Jane. (Jane eventually attended Harvard Law as well, one year behind future Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr.)

Through it all, Justice Ginsburg was an academic star at Harvard. She earned top grades and a spot on the law review. But crisis soon invaded her life once again when her husband was diagnosed with testicular cancer. The prognosis was dire. "At the time, there were no known survivors," Justice Ginsburg said.

Doctors treated the ailment with both radiation and surgery. Justice Ginsburg collected carbon copies of class notes from Martin's classmates, and she typed his papers as he dictated before turning to her own studies. Martin eventually recovered and after graduation snagged a job at a New York firm.

In 1958, Ruth transferred from Harvard to Columbia Law School to complete her legal training. There, she continued to thrive, again making the law review and tying for first in her class at graduation in 1959.

Once she started looking for work, she could not find a job at New York's top firms.

"I struck out on three grounds — I was Jewish, a woman and a mother," Justice Ginsburg reflected later. "The first raised one eyebrow; the second, two; the third made me indubitably inadmissible."

Nor could she land an interview for a clerkship with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, despite a recommendation from a dean of Harvard Law School. Frankfurter made it clear that he simply wasn't ready to hire a woman.

Eventually, she landed a position as a clerk for a federal district court judge, after a Columbia law professor lined up a man as a replacement in the event Justice Ginsburg faltered.

After her clerkship, Justice Ginsburg signed on for a summer fellowship to study the legal system in Sweden. The six weeks in Stockholm proved to be an awakening, as she was thrust into the midst of that country's burgeoning debate about gender roles in raising families.

The question was easily settled in Justice Ginsburg's personal life, even as it roiled around her. She and Martin shared child rearing and household duties. She liked to tell the story of her response to receiving repeated calls from school administrators about discipline problems with her son, James.

On one "particularly weary" day, she told the school, "This child has two parents. I suggest you alternate calls, and it's his father's turn."

During her tenure on the court, Martin, a tax expert and later a Georgetown University Law School instructor who died in 2010, often baked cakes for justices' birthday celebrations. He also was a reliable contributor to the spouse lunches and dinners held by the justices at the court.

Martin Ginsburg once proposed this response to public requests for Justice Ginsburg's "favorite recipe": "The Justice was expelled from the kitchen nearly three decades ago by her food-loving children. She no longer cooks and the one recipe from her youth, tuna fish casserole, is nobody's favorite."

A 'sparrow,' not a robin

In 1963, Justice Ginsburg became the second woman to join the faculty at New Jersey's Rutgers Law School. There, her feminist awakening continued, even if she probably would not have described it that way.

When Justice Ginsburg learned that her salary was lower than that of male colleagues, she joined an equal pay campaign with other female teachers, which resulted in raises for the women.

While teaching at Rutgers, she also began taking on cases on behalf of the New Jersey branch of the ACLU. She battled successfully for maternity leave rights for teachers in New Jersey, who previously faced the threat of dismissal when they became pregnant.

In 1972, Justice Ginsburg became the first woman hired with tenure at Columbia Law School. Around that time, she also became the first director of the ACLU's Women's Rights Project.

At the ACLU, Justice Ginsburg led a team of lawyers that brought six cases before the Supreme Court between 1973 and 1979. They won five, victories that eventually altered the nation's legal terrain by establishing that the constitutional guarantee of equal protection applied not only to racial minorities but to women as well.

In many ways, she was an unlikely revolutionary. Friends called her shy, and detractors and even her family said she could be humorless. But at times, she could be whimsical and was known to have a wry wit. Opera was her passion, and she said she would have been a diva instead of a justice if she'd had the voice of a robin instead "of a sparrow."

In 1994, she and Scalia appeared in 18th-century costumes as extras in the Washington National Opera's production of Richard Strauss's "Ariadne auf Naxos." Later, composer-librettist Derrick Wang took words from their opinions and put them to music in an opera called "Scalia/Ginsburg." She often was asked why that order, instead of alphabetical?

Seniority reigns at the Supreme Court, Ginsburg answered, and Scalia got there first.

Roe and Clinton

Her early victories at the Supreme Court prompted President Jimmy Carter to appoint her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit in 1980.

On an appeals court that often divided along ideological lines, Justice Ginsburg frequently straddled the middle. She dissented from the majority's refusal to hear the case of an Air Force officer who wanted to wear a yarmulke while on duty, saying the prohibition reflected "callous indifference" to his religious faith.

On the other hand, Justice Ginsburg voted to dismiss a case brought by a gay sailor discharged from the Navy, and she voted against a minority set-aside program in *O'Donnell Construction Co. v. District of Columbia*. She developed enduring friendships with conservative jurists Scalia and Robert H. Bork while all three served on the appeals court.

A strong supporter of abortion rights, Justice Ginsburg nonetheless alienated some of her erstwhile allies with a 1984 speech at the University of North Carolina, where she criticized the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that guaranteed abortion rights.

The court's 1973 ruling was too sweeping, she said, contributing to the divisive rancor that has accompanied the abortion issue ever since. She suggested that the court and the cause of abortion rights would have been better served had the court simply overturned the Texas law outlawing almost all abortions, which was at issue in the case.

She clarified her position in a 1993 lecture in which she argued that the justices should have grounded the right to abortion not in the concepts of "personal liberty" and "privacy" that spring from the 14th Amendment, but in the amendment's equal protection clause.

Her novel views on *Roe* created a significant hurdle for her ascension to the high court. After White announced his resignation in 1993, Justice Ginsburg, then 60, was among a large group of potential nominees placed before Clinton.

Justice Ginsburg faced opposition from a new generation of women's activists who, citing her abortion rights speeches and record as a moderate on the appeals court, argued that her views were too narrow and that time had passed her by.

Justice Ginsburg also had her supporters, including her husband, who helped organize an effort that resulted in a torrent of letters and telephone calls to the White House that prompted Clinton to give her a second look. Clinton was also spurred on by Senate conservatives who pointed to Justice Ginsburg as a moderate that they could support, which appealed to Clinton's New Democrat leanings. Clinton announced her nomination on June 14, 1993. She was confirmed just over two months later by a 96-to-3 vote.

After the president announced her nomination, the normally reserved Ginsburg took time to thank a list of people and causes, including the civil rights and women's movements, her husband and two children, her mother-in-law and first lady Hillary Clinton. Then, she offered one final tribute.

"It is to my mother, Celia Amster Bader, the bravest and strongest person I have known, who was taken from me much too soon," Justice Ginsburg said. "I pray that I may be all that she would have been had she lived in an age when women could aspire and achieve, and daughters are cherished as much as sons."

A prolific dissent writer

Justice Ginsburg's lot was to serve on a court with a majority more conservative than she was. As a result, she became much more known for her dissents than her majority opinions. More-moderate justices such as Sandra Day O'Connor, whom Justice Ginsburg greatly admired, and Kennedy often were the ones who wrote when the court was ideologically divided.

Justice Ginsburg wrote a powerful dissent in one of the pivotal cases in her time on the court — *Bush v. Gore* — which resulted in George W. Bush's win in the 2000 election. The majority criticized and then shut down a recount by Florida officials, which she would have allowed to continue.

"Ideally, perfection would be the appropriate standard for judging the recount," she wrote. "But we live in an imperfect world, one in which thousands of votes have not been counted. I cannot agree that the recount adopted by the Florida court, flawed as it may be, would yield a result any less fair or precise than the certification that preceded that recount."

When Justice John Paul Stevens retired in 2010, Justice Ginsburg became the senior justice among the court's liberals: her fellow Clinton nominee Stephen G. Breyer and Obama's choices for the court, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan.

Under Justice Ginsburg's direction, the liberals often answered major decisions with which they disagreed with one unified dissent. And they swallowed any differences they had with Kennedy to join him in a string of liberal victories at the court on same-sex marriage, affirmative action and abortion. (Justice Ginsburg later became the first justice to perform a same-sex marriage ceremony.)

When the court in 2016 struck down Texas restrictions on doctors and abortion clinics, Kennedy assigned the majority opinion to Breyer. But Justice Ginsburg issued a rare concurrence to make the point that abortion rights remained — for now — firmly established.

As long as *Roe* remains good law, Justice Ginsburg wrote, laws that "do little or nothing for health, but rather strew impediments to abortion, cannot survive judicial inspection."

Justice Ginsburg did most of her work in dissents. She said she most lamented the court's decisions in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), which opened the way for greater corporate and union spending in elections, and *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), in which the court threw out a key provision of the civil rights-era Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In a famous passage, she faulted Roberts's logic that restrictions on states with past desegregation needed to be justified anew.

"Throwing out pre-clearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet," she wrote.

Justice Ginsburg sometimes drew attention for more than her legal opinions. Tiny and frail-looking, despite the fact that she worked out with a trainer and boasted of doing push-ups, photos of Justice Ginsburg falling asleep at the State of the Union address became the subject of news reports. She explained that it wasn't fatigue; in fact, she was known as something of a night owl, working late. Instead, she said, Kennedy had brought a good bottle of wine to the dinner that the justices traditionally hold before crossing the street to the Capitol.

Justice Ginsburg was also criticized for speaking too frankly in interviews and speeches, especially about abortion rights and same-sex marriage.

She drew criticism for surprisingly critical remarks about businessman Donald Trump, saying she feared for the court and the country if he were elected president. After several days of controversy, she issued a statement saying it was wrong of her to have commented about politics, but not apologizing for her views.

During her court tenure, Justice Ginsburg had several bouts with cancer, although she never missed a day of the court's public schedule.

She had colon cancer surgery in 1999, which was accompanied by precautionary chemotherapy and radiation treatment, but she never missed a day of oral arguments. And in February 2009, she underwent surgery for early-stage pancreatic cancer but managed to return to the bench when the court returned from recess less than three weeks later.

Instead, cancer took her husband first. Again, she was on the bench the next day.

It was the final day of the court's term, and she had an opinion to deliver. She thought of having another justice read the summary for her, but her children insisted she go herself, saying it was what their father would have wanted.

Justice Ginsburg's survivors include two children, Jane C. Ginsburg and James S. Ginsburg; four grandchildren; two step-grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter.

More migrant women say they did not consent to surgeries at Ice center

AP review finds no evidence of mass hysterectomies but files show growing allegations of operations women did not fully understand.

By Nomaan Merchant

The Guardian (18.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3clezJ8> - Sitting across from her lawyer at an immigration detention center in rural Georgia, Mileidy Cardentey Fernandez unbuttoned her jail jumpsuit to show the scars on her abdomen. There were three small, circular marks.

The 39-year-old woman from Cuba was told only that she would undergo an operation to treat her ovarian cysts, but a month later, she's still not sure what procedure she got. After Cardentey repeatedly requested her medical records to find out, Irwin county detention center gave her more than 100 pages showing a diagnosis of cysts but nothing from the day of the surgery.

"The only thing they told me was: 'You're going to go to sleep and when you wake up, we will have finished,'" Cardentey said this week in a phone interview.

Cardentey kept her hospital bracelet. It has the date, 14 August, and part of the doctor's name, Dr Mahendra Amin, a gynecologist linked this week to allegations of unwanted hysterectomies and other procedures done on detained immigrant women that jeopardize their ability to have children.

An Associated Press review of medical records for four women and interviews with lawyers revealed growing allegations that Amin performed surgeries and other procedures on detained immigrants that they never sought or didn't fully understand.

Although some procedures could be justified based on problems documented in the records, the women's lack of consent or knowledge raises severe legal and ethical issues, lawyers and medical experts said.

Amin has performed surgery or other gynecological treatment on at least eight women detained at Irwin county detention center since 2017, including one hysterectomy, said Andrew Free, an immigration and civil rights lawyer working with attorneys to investigate medical treatment at the detention center. Doctors on behalf of the attorneys are examining new records and more women are coming forward to report their treatment by Amin, Free said.

"The indication is there's a systemic lack of truly informed and legally valid consent to perform procedures that could ultimately result – intentionally or unintentionally – in sterilization," he said.

The AP's review did not find evidence of mass hysterectomies as alleged in a widely shared complaint filed by a nurse at the detention center. Dawn Wooten alleged that many detained women were taken to an unnamed gynecologist whom she labeled the "uterus collector" because of how many hysterectomies he performed.

The complaint sparked a furious reaction from congressional Democrats and an investigation by the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general. It also evoked comparisons to previous government-sanctioned efforts in the US to sterilize people to supposedly improve society – victims who were disproportionately poor, mentally disabled, American Indian, Black or other people of color. Thirty-three states had forced sterilization programs in the 20th century.

But a lawyer who helped file the complaint said she never spoke to any women who had hysterectomies. Priyanka Bhatt, staff attorney at the advocacy group Project South, told the Washington Post that she included the hysterectomy allegations because she wanted to trigger an investigation to determine if they were true. Wooten did not answer questions at a press conference Tuesday, and Project South did not respond to interview requests Thursday on behalf of Bhatt or Wooten.

Amin told the Intercept, which first reported Wooten's complaint, that he has only performed one or two hysterectomies in the past three years. His attorney, Scott Grubman, said in a statement: "We look forward to all of the facts coming out, and are confident that once they do, Dr Amin will be cleared of any wrongdoing."

Grubman did not respond to new questions Thursday.

Since 2018, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement says it found records of two referrals for hysterectomies at the jail, which is in Ocilla, Georgia, about 150 miles (240km) from Atlanta.

"Detainees are afforded informed consent, and a medical procedure like a hysterectomy would never be performed against a detainee's will," Dr Ada Rivera, medical director of the ICE Health Service Corps that oversees healthcare in detention, said in a statement.

LaSalle Corrections, which operates the jail, said it "strongly refutes these allegations and any implications of misconduct".

Women housed at Irwin County detention center who needed a gynecologist were typically taken to Amin, according to medical records provided to the AP by Free and lawyer Alexis

Ruiz, who represents Cardentey. Interviews with detainees and their lawyers suggest some women came to fear the doctor.

Records reviewed by the AP show one woman was given a psychiatric evaluation the same day she refused to undergo a surgical procedure known as dilation and curettage. Commonly known as a D&C, it removes tissue from the uterus and can be used as a treatment for excessive bleeding. A note written on letterhead from Amin's office said the woman was concerned.

According to a written summary of her psychiatric evaluation, the woman said: "I am nervous about my upcoming procedure."

The summary says she denied needing mental health care and added: "I am worried because I saw someone else after they had surgery and what I saw scared me."

The AP also reviewed records for a woman who was given a hysterectomy. She reported irregular bleeding and was taken to see Amin for a D&C. A lab study of the tissue found signs of early cancer, called carcinoma. Amin's notes indicate the woman agreed 11 days later to the hysterectomy.

Free, who spoke to the woman, said she felt pressured by Amin and "didn't have the opportunity to say no" or speak to her family before the procedure.

Doctors told the AP that a hysterectomy could have been appropriate due to the carcinoma, though there may have been less intrusive options available.

Lawyers for both women asked that their names be withheld for fear of retaliation by immigration authorities.

In another case, Pauline Binam, a 30-year-old woman who was brought to the US from Cameroon when she was two, saw Amin after experiencing an irregular menstrual cycle and was told to have a D&C, said her attorney, Van Huynh.

When she woke up from the surgery, Huynh said, she was told Amin had removed one of her two fallopian tubes, which connect the uterus to the ovaries and are necessary to conceive a child. Binam's medical records indicate that the doctor discovered the tube was swollen.

"She was shocked and sort of confronted him on that – that she hadn't given her consent for him to proceed with that," Huynh said. "The reply that he gave was they were in there anyway and found there was this problem."

While women can potentially still conceive with one intact tube and ovary, doctors who spoke to the AP said removal of the tube was likely unnecessary and should never have happened without Binam's consent.

The doctors also questioned how Amin discovered the swollen tube because performing a D&C would not normally involve exploring a woman's fallopian tubes.

Dr Julie Graves, a family medicine and public health physician in Florida, called the process "absolutely abhorrent".

"It's established US law that you don't operate on everything that you find," she said. "If you're in a teaching hospital and an attending physician does something like that, it's a scandal and they are fired."

Binam was on the verge of deportation Wednesday, but Ice delayed it after calls from members of Congress and a request for an emergency stay by her lawyer.

Grubman, Amin's lawyer, said in a statement that the doctor "has dedicated his adult life to treating a high-risk, underserved population in rural Georgia".

Amin completed medical school in India in 1978 and his residency in gynecology in New Jersey. He has practiced in rural Georgia for at least three decades, according to court filings. State corporate records also show Amin is the executive of a company that manages Irwin County Hospital.

In 2013, state and federal investigators sued Amin, the hospital authority of Irwin county and a group of other doctors over allegations they falsely billed Medicare and Medicaid.

U.S. Supreme Court permits broad religious exemption to birth control coverage

By Lawrence Hurley

Reuters (08.07.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2CIaJfq> - The U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday endorsed a plan by President Donald Trump's administration to give employers broad religious and moral exemptions from a federal mandate that health insurance they provide to their workers includes coverage for women's birth control.

The court ruled 7-2 against the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, which challenged the legality of Trump's 2018 rule weakening the so-called contraceptive mandate of the 2010 Affordable Care Act, commonly called Obamacare. Christian conservatives, a key constituency for Trump as he seeks re-election on Nov. 3, had strongly opposed the Obamacare mandate.

The federal government has estimated that up to 126,000 women could lose contraception coverage through their employer-provided health insurance under Trump's regulation.

The Obamacare mandate requires employer-provided health insurance to give coverage for birth control with no co-pays. Previously, many employer-provided insurance policies did not offer this coverage. Republicans have sought to repeal Obamacare, signed by Trump's Democratic predecessor Barack Obama in 2010, and Trump's administration has chipped away at it through various actions.

White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany called the ruling "a big win for religious freedom and freedom of conscience."

"Ensuring that women receive the healthcare they need does not require banishing religious groups that refuse to surrender their beliefs from the public square," McEnany added.

Trump's rule allows any nonprofit or for-profit employer, including publicly traded companies, to seek an exemption on religious grounds. A moral objection can be made by nonprofits and companies that are not publicly traded. The Trump exemption also would be available for religiously affiliated universities that provide health insurance to students.

Writing for the court, conservative Justice Clarence Thomas said Trump's administration "had the statutory authority to craft that exemption, as well as the contemporaneously issued moral exemption."

Liberal Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor dissented. "Today, for the first time, the court casts totally aside countervailing rights and interests in its zeal to secure religious rights to the nth degree," Ginsburg wrote.

The court's other two liberal justices, Elena Kagan and Stephen Breyer, agreed with the outcome but did not sign on to Thomas' opinion. Kagan wrote that the regulations could yet be challenged on other grounds, including that the moral exemption is overly broad, which she said is a "close call."

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, pledged to continue the fight against Trump's regulation.

"Our case is about an overly broad rule that allows the personal beliefs of CEOs to dictate women's guaranteed access to contraceptive medicine," Shapiro said.

'Overjoyed'

Rules implemented under Obama exempted religious entities from the mandate. A further accommodation was created for religiously affiliated nonprofit employers, which some groups including the Little Sisters of the Poor, a Roman Catholic order of nuns that was one of the groups seeking an exemption, objected to as not going far enough.

"We are overjoyed that, once again, the Supreme Court has protected our right to serve the elderly without violating our faith," said Mother Loraine Marie Maguire of the Little Sisters.

Groups supporting the contraception mandate criticized the decision.

"Today's ruling has given bosses the power to dictate how their employees can and cannot use their health insurance - allowing them to intrude into their employees' private decisions based on whatever personal beliefs their employers happen to hold," said Lourdes Rivera of the Center for Reproductive Rights.

The legal question was whether Trump's administration had the legal authority to expand the exemption under both the Obamacare law itself and another federal law, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which lets people press religious claims against the federal government.

The administration was joined in the litigation by a Pittsburgh affiliate of the Little Sisters. Under a separate court ruling, the group already had an exemption to the mandate.

Thomas wrote that the Little Sisters "have had to fight for the ability to continue in their noble work without violating their sincerely held religious beliefs" and that Trump's rule resolves their concerns.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday sided with Catholic schools in a separate legal dispute with teachers who said they were unlawfully dismissed, ruling that religious institutions like churches and schools are shielded from employment discrimination lawsuits.

A century after women gained the right to vote, majority of Americans see work to do on gender equality

About three-in-ten men say women's gains have come at the expense of men.

By Juliana Menasce Horowitz & Ruth Igielnik

Pew Research Center (07.07.2020) - <https://pewrsr.ch/2ZNAumx> - A hundred years after the 19th Amendment was ratified, about half of Americans say granting women the right to vote has been the most important milestone in advancing the position of women in the country. Still, a majority of U.S. adults say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, even as a large share thinks there has been progress in the last decade, according to a new Pew Research Center survey.

Among those who think the country still has work to do in achieving gender equality, 77% point to sexual harassment as a major obstacle to women having equal rights with men. Fewer, but still majorities, point to women not having the same legal rights as men (67%), different societal expectations for men and women (66%) and not enough women in positions of power (64%) as major obstacles to gender equality. Women are more likely than men to see each of these as a major obstacle.

Many of those who say it is important for men and women to have equal rights point to aspects of the workplace when asked about what gender equality would look like. Fully 45% volunteer that a society where women have equal rights with men would include equal pay. An additional 19% say there would be no discrimination in hiring, promotion or educational opportunities. About one-in-ten say women would be more equally represented in business or political leadership.

In terms of the groups and institutions that have done the most to advance the rights of women in the U.S., 70% say the feminist movement has done at least a fair amount in this regard. The Democratic Party is viewed as having contributed more to the cause of women's rights than the Republican Party: 59% say the Democratic Party has done at least a fair amount to advance women's rights, while 37% say the same about the GOP. About three-in-ten (29%) say President Donald Trump has done at least a fair amount to advance women's rights, while 69% say Trump has not done much or has done nothing at all. These views vary considerably by party, with Republicans and Republican leaners at least five times as likely as Democrats and those who lean Democratic to say the GOP and Trump have done at least a fair amount and Democrats far more likely than Republicans to say the same about the Democratic Party.

Views of the role the feminist movement has played in advancing gender equality are positive overall, though fewer than half of women say the movement has been beneficial to them personally. About four-in-ten (41%) say feminism has helped them at least a little, while half say it has neither helped nor hurt them. Relatively few (7%) say feminism has hurt them personally. Democratic women, those with a bachelor's degree or more education and women younger than 50 are among the most likely to say they've benefitted personally from feminism.

Views about how much progress the country has made on gender equality differ widely along partisan lines. About three-quarters of Democrats (76%) say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, while 19% say it's been about right and 4% say the country has gone too far. Among Republicans, a third say the country hasn't made enough progress, while 48% say it's been about right and 17% say the country has gone too far in giving women equal rights with men.

There is also a gender gap in these views, with 64% of women – compared with 49% of men – saying the country hasn't gone far enough in giving women equal rights with men. Democratic and Republican women are about ten percentage points more likely than their male counterparts to say this (82% of Democratic women vs. 70% of Democratic men and 38% of Republican women vs. 28% of Republican men).

The nationally representative survey of 3,143 U.S. adults was conducted online from March 18-April 1, 2020.¹

Click [here](#) for other key findings and the full report.

Coronavirus recession will hit women harder, experts warn

Women of colour in particular could suffer disproportionately from virus-fuelled economic downturn.

By Kaelyn Forde

Al Jazeera (16.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3br5vkV> - Crystal Crawford, 34, loves her job as a social worker at a nonprofit private school for children who have experienced homelessness. But the pay has never been enough to live on in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, so Crawford has always nannied for up to 10 families at a time, taking care of kids after school, on parents' date nights, during school vacations and more.

"A lot of hourly workers look like me, and unfortunately, when they get rid of those jobs, people are having to seek resources from the government or from food pantries," Crawford told Al Jazeera. "People who thought they had it all together - right now, we're struggling to maintain our households."

Crawford also runs a small business that pairs families with nannies. The money she earned caring for children herself used to bring in an extra \$900 to \$1,200 per month, she said, in addition to the \$45,000 she makes per year as a social worker.

But the coronavirus pandemic has caused her childcare work to dry up completely, and her social worker's salary is not enough to cover almost \$1,400 in rent, plus utilities and food, per month. She is also faced with the uncertainty of when her school will reopen, and whether a full-time social worker will be part of its distance learning plan if kids cannot go back to their classrooms.

"The cost of living is super high in Atlanta, and to just have one-third of your salary gone on the drop of a dime, that's a hard hit for someone," she explained. "Every day, we're just hoping to keep our doors open, hoping that the kids get to go back to school in August. Everything is just kind of up in the air right now."

Crawford is far from alone. Women are a huge part of the workforce responding to the coronavirus pandemic, but on average, they are paid less than men and poised to lose more from the continuing economic fallout, according to an analysis by the World Economic Forum.

Part of it has to do with the jobs women fill, but the gender pay gap and the large burden of unpaid childcare and housework also play a role, said Caitlyn Collins, an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St Louis.

"Women's disproportionate burden for caregiving hinders their ability to participate fully in the paid labour force. This is true in the best of times, and especially true, and dire, in times of economic crisis," Collins told Al Jazeera.

"Women also hold a disproportionate share of jobs in the care and service sectors - especially women of colour - so they're at the front lines and in the trenches of the coronavirus pandemic," she added.

Women comprise 70 percent of health and social sector workers in 104 countries, according to a 2019 report from the World Health Organization, and contribute \$3 trillion per year to global health, half of which is in the form of unpaid care work.

But on average, women healthcare workers earn 28 percent less than men and are less likely to be employed full-time, according to the WHO. Both of those factors make women more likely to feel the effects of the coronavirus recession more acutely.

'Well-worn path of inequality'

Of course, it is not just healthcare workers who are on the front lines of the crisis - grocery store workers, domestic workers, delivery people and transit workers are all still working outside their homes, and many are women and people of colour, said Elise Gould, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive-leaning US think tank.

"Some of the front line workers are going to be disproportionately Black and brown people - people working in grocery stores, transportation, public transit, lots of different sectors - and they're continuing to work," Gould told Al Jazeera. "At the same time, we know that Hispanic workers and Black workers are much less likely to be able to telework, so that tells you about the kind of jobs that they have and their ability to weather this storm from a health security standpoint or a financial security standpoint."

And while unemployment has soared across the United States in every demographic, "initial data suggests that women are more likely to lose their job at this time, and that's somewhat due to the types of jobs that are being lost," which include jobs in the service and care sectors, Gould said.

In some of the states hardest hit by the coronavirus - including New York, New Jersey, Oregon, Virginia and Minnesota - unemployment rates for women surged between 13 and 35 points above average figures during the last two weeks of March, according to data obtained by journalists at the nonprofit Fuller Project.

That is a contrast to the 2008 financial crisis, which first impacted industries that mostly employed men, said Gould.

"The Great Recession, to a large extent, was driven by initial losses in manufacturing and construction, which are dominated by men," she said. "These sectors that are being hit first and hardest now are not the typical sectors. So it's not just that you might have women being hit, it's that you're having more low-wage workers being hit, and that's an important distinction."

Among those low-wage workers are the US's 2.2 million domestic workers, who care for children and the elderly, cook, clean and perform a variety of other household tasks. Some 91 percent of them are women, according to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, and many are women of colour and immigrants.

Since domestic workers have never had a social safety net - including paid time off, living wages and health insurance - that makes them even more vulnerable in a crisis, said Haeyoung Yoon, the senior director for immigration policy at the nonprofit, National Domestic Workers Alliance.

"The coronavirus pandemic is travelling the well-worn path of inequality, and we are already seeing that low-wage workers, and women low-wage workers in particular, are hit the hardest," Yoon told Al Jazeera. "Poverty and gender inequality will be a decisive factor in how this virus will spread and its long-term effects."

The coronavirus has already taken a major short-term toll. A recent survey by the National Domestic Workers Alliance found 72 percent of domestic workers had no work for the week beginning April 6, a 9 percent increase from the previous week.

And while the median wage for domestic workers is just \$10.21 per hour, the same survey found that 77 percent of domestic workers are their family's primary breadwinners. The coronavirus crisis has the potential to thrust entire households into poverty.

"Many domestic workers earn poverty wages, work with no job security, and no safety net," Yoon said. "Domestic workers cannot telework from home. They must still go to work. But, for nannies and house cleaners, they are experiencing sudden and devastating unemployment or underemployment."

Working more - for free

Women also do the lion's share of unpaid care work at home, including taking care of children and the elderly, cooking meals and cleaning.

Globally, women perform 76.2 percent of unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men, a 2018 report by the International Labour Organization found, and "unpaid care work is the main barrier preventing women from getting into, remaining and progressing in the labour force".

Even in families that are used to dividing up tasks more equitably, if a father earns more at his job, a mother might be expected to spend more time caring for or homeschooling kids during the pandemic.

Women working full-time in the US earn roughly 82 cents to every dollar a man earns, according to the US Census Bureau. That gender pay gap becomes even more pronounced for women of colour, with Black women earning only 62 cents on average compared to every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns, and Hispanic women earning only 54 cents.

"Because the gender wage gap exists, it could be the case that if somebody has to cut their hours to take care of these things, then it's more likely going to be the woman," Gould said.

Uncertain future

All of it makes for an uncertain economic future for many women.

Crawford said she has no childcare work lined up, and only two of her 10 regular clients have reached out to ask her how she is faring in the crisis. None of them have continued to pay her, even though she had standing appointments with many of them.

But the crisis might mean going back to being a full-time nanny, even though Crawford has a master's degree.

"We don't know when the kids are going to go back to school, so we can't really plan for August right now. It's unpredictable because we might be doing distance learning until God knows when," Crawford said. "I'm thankful that if this all tumbles down and I'm no longer

able to work at the school, that I'm able to get a full-time nanny gig once the pandemic is over."

U.S. soccer says women don't deserve equal pay because they have less skill

By Kim Elsesser

Forbes (11.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xo3oyX> - The United States Soccer Federation argued in a court filing that the gender discrimination lawsuit lodged by the U.S. women's national team (USWNT) does not have legal standing because, among other reasons, men have more ability, strength and speed.

Thirty-eight members of the women's national team sued the U.S. Soccer Federation last March, accusing the federation of failing to promote gender equality. The women have asked for \$67 million, while U.S. Soccer is asking for the suit to be dismissed.

The federation filed its latest motion on Monday, and one of their arguments is the different abilities and skills held by male and female soccer players. The court filing argues, "it's not a sexist stereotype to recognize the different levels of speed and strength required for the two jobs," referring to the athletes on the men's and women's teams. They cite a study indicating a 10-12% performance gap between elite male and female athletes. The federation also refer to the testimony from two time Olympic gold-medal winner, Carli Lloyd, stating, "As Plaintiff Carli Lloyd's testimony admits, the WNT could not compete successfully against the senior men's national teams because competing against 16- or 17-year old boys 'is about as old as [the WNT] can go.'"

"The point is that the job of MNT player (competing against senior men's national teams) requires a higher level of skill, based on speed and strength, than does the job of WNT player (competing against senior women's national teams)," the filing states. Men's teams, they argue, face tougher competition as well.

There is no argument that men are stronger than women. It's a well-documented biological difference. It's why we have separate teams for men and women.

Here's what U.S. Soccer doesn't understand. The selection of speed and strength as the criteria for pay is biased, and here's why.

Imagine a world where women's sports dominated for hundreds of years. Only female athletes are sports heroes, and only women's sports are televised. Then men begin playing sports at a professional level. Would we still use strength and speed to define ability in a sport? No, we'd likely say the men's game is too physical and lacks the finesse, intelligent playmaking and teamwork of the women's game. If we had to rationalize paying men less, we might further cite studies indicating men lack the flexibility of women.

We value strength and speed, because we are accustomed to strength and speed from watching years of men's sports. However, these are clearly not the most important skills for succeeding at the national level. Recall, the USWNT won the World Cup last summer, while the country's men failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

The USWNT believes that U.S. Soccer's arguments actually illustrate the gender discrimination that caused the women to file the lawsuit in the first place. "This ridiculous 'argument' belongs in the Paleolithic Era. It sounds as if it has been made by a caveman," Molly Levinson, spokeswoman for the U.S. women, said in response to the filing.

The outcome of this lawsuit will send a message to aspiring female athletes as to whether women's skills will be recognized and appreciated or whether the biological differences between men and women will result in women taking a back seat to the men—even when representing our country. On March 30, the judge will rule on whether the case will proceed.

Harvey Weinstein verdict is #MeToo milestone but changes little for world's sexual assault survivors

Many women still face retaliation for reporting abuse.

By Leah Rodriguez and Pia Gralki

Global Citizen (24.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ccQILy> - Harvey Weinstein was found guilty of criminal sexual assault on two counts in a New York City court on Monday.

During a trial that lasted more than a month, six women testified that Weinstein, the founder of The Weinstein Company — a film studio behind popular films from Halloween to Inglourious Basterds — had sexually assaulted them.

The jury of seven men and five women deliberated Weinstein's case over the course of five days. Weinstein, pleaded not guilty and denies all allegations of non-consensual sex. He was convicted for a criminal sexual act in the first degree for forcing a sex act on former production assistant Mimi Haley at his apartment in July 2006, as well as rape in the third degree for raping aspiring actress Jessica Mann at a hotel in 2013. He was acquitted of two counts of predatory sexual assault, which would have resulted in a life sentence.

Weinstein's sentencing is scheduled for March 11, when he will face five to 25 years in prison. He also faces separate sex crimes charges in Los Angeles.

The verdict is a major win for the #MeToo movement, founded by activist Tarana Burke and relaunched by actress Alyssa Milan when high-profile women started going public about Weinstein's abuse in 2017. Nearly 100 women have come forward against Weinstein, and the movement has inspired hundreds of thousands of other sexual survivors to speak out. Several US states have expanded workplace harassment protections since.

As the movement picked up steam, the United Nations emphasized the need to ensure no one is left behind in the fight to achieve gender equality. The social media campaign also sparked an international rallying cry for justice in developing and wealthy countries alike. Namibia launched one of Africa's first #MeToo movements. Nigeria, Egypt, and other countries followed suit, while women in Japan introduced the #KuToo campaign to protest sexist dress codes. South Africans shared personal stories of sexual assault and gender-based violence on Twitter. And Indian women started speaking out against rampant sexual harassment in the workplace.

But experts say Weinstein's case will likely not impact the treatment of sexual assault survivors globally.

"This case reminds us that sexual violence thrives on unchecked power and privilege," Burke said in a statement released to Global Citizen. "The implications reverberate far beyond Hollywood and into the daily lives of all of us in the rest of the world."

Yasmeen Hassan, global executive director of women's rights organization Equality Now, considers the verdict a victory but said it's a "drop in the ocean" in the effort to protect sexual assault survivors worldwide.

"I can't say that this has a huge impact on international legal systems that actually prevent women from coming forward," Hassan told Global Citizen.

It is estimated that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner. While the #MeToo movement has encouraged women worldwide to report sexual abuse, Hassan said many are met with defamation lawsuits or other forms of retaliation. Sexual assault and rape laws are still far behind in countries around the world, she said.

There is no international treaty on gender-based violence in the workplace. While 154 countries have sexual harassment laws, the laws aren't always enforced or they don't meet international standards. The majority of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported because survivors fear retaliation from their abuser or society, don't think the authorities would help, and don't want to be retraumatized if the justice system doesn't believe them.

On March 11, the United Nations will hold the annual Commission on the Status of Women, where world leaders will gather to discuss the state of gender equality. Hassan hopes to use Weinstein's case and the #MeToo movement to put pressure on governments to reevaluate how the justice system treats sexual violence survivors at the commission.

"It takes a key change, country by country, to get women the courage to come forward," Hassan said.

A well of grief: the relatives of murdered Native women speak out

Native American women and girls are targeted at rates that far outweigh other American women, and are 10 times more likely to be murdered.

By Sara Hylton

The Guardian (13.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/30qH4iU> - On a warm summer day in 2018, Lissa Yellow-bird Chase packed her vehicle with sunscreen, iPads, spiritual items and water. She drove to the bank of Lake Sakakawea on the edge of Fort Berthold Reservation, in western North Dakota.

She parked her vehicle, bearing the license plate "SEARCH", and prepared for a long day ahead. As she'd done several days that summer, she began to scour her territory for clues. With fishing sonar equipment and a dilapidated old boat, she had nothing to go by but her instincts.

It was here, in the deep blue lake, that she and volunteers from her group the Sahnish Scouts of North Dakota, found the body of Olivia Lonebear. The 32-year-old and mother of five had last been seen in New Town, a small oil-boom city on the edge of Fort Berthold Reservation, nine months prior.

A hidden epidemic

Countless women have been victims of similar, less high-profile cases, but Lonebear's death exposed the reality in which Native American women and girls live – what the former North Dakota senator Heidi Heitkamp called a "hidden epidemic". The facts are dire. Native American women and girls are sexually assaulted and targeted at rates far greater than other American women, and they are 10 times more likely to be murdered.

In 2015, the Canadian government announced a national inquiry into the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). In June, the commissioners found the state responsible for "a race-based genocide". The treatment of Indigenous women is no less alarming across the border: while Canada collects some data, the US federal government does not track how many people like Lonebear go missing or turn up murdered.

Twenty-three-year-old Heather Belgrade, Lonebear's cousin who lives across the border in north-eastern Montana, has also been grieving the death of her best friend Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, who was brutally murdered in 2017. The case helped to bring about Savanna's Act, which enacted a set of reforms in how law enforcement agencies deal with cases of missing and murdered Native Americans.

The dangers of the oil industry

While the realities facing Native American women and girls are gaining more attention, what is less understood are the effects of extractive industries, mainly oil, on Native American women and communities.

Residents across Fort Peck Reservation are sensitized to the impacts of the oil industry. The reservation is situated not far from large oil boom towns like Williston and Watford City in North Dakota and is in the direct vicinity of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline expansion. Many of the community members I spoke to discussed the influx of crime, sexual violence and drugs when the Bakken oil boom began in 2006. They're bracing for what's to come.

Prairiedawn Thunderchild and her older sister Tahnee Thunderchild learned of those dangers early one evening when they were walking home to their apartment in Wolf Point, a small town of a few thousand people, on Fort Peck Reservation in Montana.

That evening, the girls saw a car with North Dakota license plates approaching. The car began to follow them, and the men, whom they didn't recognize from their community, told the sisters to get into the vehicle.

The girls knew that a car full of non-native men with North Dakota plates probably meant they were oil employees. They had heard stories of trafficking, kidnapping and sexual assault. They ran and called the tribal police. "[They] probably wanted gross things from us," Tahnee told me.

Some activists have linked the environmental impacts of extractive practices with an increase of rape among women in the region.

"Man camps," as they have come to be known, house thousands of temporary oil workers with disposable income, who are dealing with the stressors of dangerous working conditions. The proposed Keystone XL pipeline would bring in more "man camps" affecting Native American women and communities.

"Oil industry camps may be impacting domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking in the direct and surrounding communities in which they reside," the Department Of Justice found.

Eight-year-old Macylilly Whitehawk was sexually assaulted and abducted when she was just four years old, and meth was found in her system from the assailant's semen. Though the assailant was from the reservation, Macylilly's grandmother and caregiver, Valerie Whitehawk, believes what happened to her granddaughter is linked to the increase in drugs and violence stemming from the region's oil industry.

The complications of dealing with crimes in Indian country often means that cases fall between the cracks or go unreported. In cases of sexual assault, non-native men who assault women on reservations cannot be arrested or prosecuted by tribal authorities. A minority of reservations, including Fort Peck Reservation, fall under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which allows tribal authorities jurisdiction to prosecute non-native men who commit crimes within their territory.

According to Stacie Smith, Fort Peck's elected tribal chief judge, this jurisdiction was established in 2013 in order to respond to threats facing the community in large part by the oil industry. Smith is working with community activist Angeline Cheek to develop a set of tools to educate the community on the dangers of "man camps" and to prepare for the worst. They are also working to establish "Amber Alert", an early warning system to help find missing and abducted people.

On one of my last days in Wolf Point, I attended the Fort Peck powwow. I noticed a tipi in the distance that the light seemed to particularly favor. I walked over and was greeted by the tribal chief of the Assiniboine tribe, a tall, gentle man, who goes by Joe Miller. He invited me to sit with him and shared the story of how he named his life partner Eagle Woman Flies Above.

I shared with Joe that a few weeks before, I had seen an eagle flying around in Brooklyn that perched above the tree where I was sitting. A rare occurrence in a concrete jungle. Joe told me that the eagle is a sacred symbol, representing courage and wisdom. "It brought you here," he said.

I sat with his response, feeling its significance. The sun was settling into a magenta hue and a crescent moon began to take shape. I asked Joe what he thought about the issues facing the women in his community, and he responded: "They are the life givers of our people ... if they weren't here, we wouldn't be here."

It occurred to me that perhaps if we paid more attention, we would notice many eagles flying above, calling us to listen with more wisdom and courage. Calling us to awaken to this assault against our common humanity.

How a divided left is losing the battle on abortion

Miscalculations, and an unexpected victory by President Trump, have put abortion access at its most vulnerable point in decades, and the left on the defensive. Now it is trying to recover.

By Elizabeth Dias and Lisa Lerer

The NY Times (01.12.2019) - <https://nyti.ms/34UGStI> - The pin was small, and rusted on the back. Sharon Wood had packed it away in 1973 as a relic of a battle fought and won: the image of a black coat hanger, slashed out by a red line.

Then this spring, her home state, Georgia, joined a cascade of states outlawing abortion at the earliest stages of pregnancy. Ms. Wood did what she never imagined she would need to do again. She dug it out, and pinned it on.

“Don’t ask me how it all happened,” Ms. Wood, 70, a retired social worker northeast of Atlanta, said one Sunday afternoon, the pin on her dress. “I know so many people who said they woke up when Trump was elected. Well, they shouldn’t have been asleep.”

For years, abortion rights supporters like Ms. Wood believed the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling had delivered their ultimate goal, the right to reproductive choice. Now, they are grappling with a new reality: Nationwide access to abortion is more vulnerable than it has been in decades.

A spotlight on the people reshaping our politics. A conversation with voters across the country. And a guiding hand through the endless news cycle, telling you what you really need to know.

In a six-month period this year, states across the South and Midwest passed 58 abortion restrictions. Alabama banned the procedure almost entirely. Lawmakers in Ohio introduced a similar bill shortly before Thanksgiving. And in March, the Supreme Court will hear its first major abortion case since President Trump added two conservative justices and shifted the court to the right; how it rules could reshape the constitutional principles governing abortion rights.

For abortion opponents, this moment of ascendancy was years in the making. Set back on their heels when President Barack Obama took office, they started methodically working from the ground up. They focused on delivering state legislatures and gerrymandered districts into Republican control. They passed abortion restrictions in red states and pushed for conservative judges to protect them.

And then unexpectedly, and serendipitously, Mr. Trump won the White House. Ending legal abortion appeared within their reach.

As Planned Parenthood and its progressive allies have rallied the resistance, the shift in fortunes in the abortion wars has been mostly attributed to the right’s well-executed game plan. Less attention has been paid to the left’s role in its own loss of power.

But interviews with more than 50 reproductive rights leaders, clinic directors, political strategists and activists over the past three months reveal a fragmented movement facing longstanding divisions — cultural, financial and political. Many said that abortion rights advocates and leading reproductive rights groups had made several crucial miscalculations that have put them on the defensive.

“It’s really, really complicated and somewhat controversial where the pro-choice movement lost,” said Johanna Schoen, a professor at Rutgers University who has studied the history of abortion.

National leaders became overly reliant on the protections granted by a Democratic presidency under Mr. Obama and a relatively balanced Supreme Court, critics say, leading to overconfidence that their goals were not seriously threatened. Their expectation that Mr. Trump would lose led them to forgo battles they now wish they had fought harder, like Judge Merrick B. Garland’s failed nomination to the bench.

Local activists in states like Alabama, Georgia, North Dakota and Missouri where abortion was under siege say national leaders lost touch with the ways that access to abortion was eroding in Republican strongholds.

"Looking at the prior presidential administration, there was a perception that everything is fine," said Kwajelyn Jackson, the executive director of the Feminist Women's Health Center, an independent clinic in Atlanta that has provided abortions since 1976. "We were screaming at the top of our lungs, everything is not fine, please pay attention."

Discord at Planned Parenthood, the nation's largest and most influential abortion provider, exacerbated the problem. In July the group's new president, Dr. Leana Wen, was forced out in a messy departure highlighting deep internal division over her management style and how much emphasis to place on the political fight for abortion rights.

Planned Parenthood's acting head, Alexis McGill Johnson, said that Mr. Trump's election, new abortion restrictions and Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court provided a wake-up call to many national leaders, including herself, that forced them to confront the entrenched challenges of class dividing their movement.

"A lot of us are awakening to the fact that if you are wealthy, if you live in the New York ZIP code or California ZIP code or Illinois ZIP code, your ability to access reproductive health care is not in jeopardy in the same way that it is in other states," Ms. McGill Johnson said in an interview.

The right is pouncing on this moment of tumult, threatening to wield abortion politics to its favor in the 2020 presidential race. A leading anti-abortion political group, the Susan B. Anthony List, has more than doubled its campaign budget, from \$18 million in 2016 to \$41 million this cycle. Its goal is to reach four million voters, up from 1.2 million in 2016. The group says surveys it has conducted in swing states like Arizona and North Carolina show that portraying Democrats as supporters of infanticide — an allegation the left says is patently false — can win neutral voters to their side.

"They have fallen from that pinnacle of power to this," Penny Nance, president of the Concerned Women for America, a conservative group that opposes abortion, said of the abortion rights movement.

"I hope they continue doing what they are doing," she said of the left's political strategy. "We'll run the table in 2020."

On the campaign trail, national Democrats have responded by making unqualified support for abortion a litmus test to shore up a progressive base, boxing in moderate candidates in red states and leaving little room for the complex views on the issue that most Americans hold.

In June, when Joseph R. Biden Jr. reaffirmed his decades-long support for the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits federal funding for abortions, he was harshly criticized by supporters of abortion rights, including from within his own campaign; within a day he had changed his stance. In November, the Democratic Attorneys General Association announced it would support only candidates who support abortion rights and access.

Amid the high political maneuvering, there are fundamental internal divisions that the abortion rights movement has not resolved, especially between Planned Parenthood and the independent clinics that perform most abortion procedures.

This past summer, for instance, after Alabama passed its near-total abortion ban, celebrities and liberal donors opened their checkbooks en masse to support Planned Parenthood. The founder of Tumblr gave \$1 million. The pop star Ariana Grande held a benefit concert.

At the same time, Gloria Gray, who heads the West Alabama Women's Center in Tuscaloosa, said she couldn't afford to give her staff raises or pay for a \$20,000 fence to keep the daily protesters off the property. Her crowdfunding effort produced about \$4,000.

Ms. Gray's clinic performed about 3,300 abortions last year, more than half of all the procedures in Alabama. Planned Parenthood's two clinics performed none.

"With the national organizations," she said, "we seem to be left out."

Harsh challenges in the states

The cultural and financial disconnect between regional clinics and national leaders in the abortion rights movement has been brewing for years. Tammi Kromenaker, who runs the only remaining abortion clinic in North Dakota, said she saw the national crisis coming in 2013, when North Dakota became the first state to enact a ban on abortion after six weeks of pregnancy.

At an annual working group meeting with abortion rights leaders — "folks from the coasts," she recalled — the conversation centered not on the challenges to abortion rights in her state but on whether artwork conveying female power in a New York clinic's waiting area was too provocative and would alienate its changing patient base.

A short time later at a different annual meeting, an activist from California suggested North Dakota advocates should have had a better messaging strategy to prevent the ban. "You don't think we have the right message?" Ms. Kromenaker remembered in exasperation. "We have given every message."

"They are never threatened, so they never have to think the way we do," she said, referring to national leaders.

Independent clinics like Ms. Kromenaker's and Ms. Gray's in Alabama — unaffiliated with Planned Parenthood — perform about 60 percent of the country's abortion procedures, according to groups that track the data. Those clinics have essentially no lobbying or political power.

Few state activists want to question Planned Parenthood or its strategy publicly, especially when they are allies in court and some receive financial support from the national organization. Planned Parenthood affiliates, with counsel like the American Civil Liberties Union, have sued to block the restrictions this year in eight states, offering legal muscle many independent clinics cannot provide for themselves. Some laws have been temporarily blocked from going into effect in the lower courts, though they could end up being decided by the Supreme Court.

Many people interviewed acknowledged the unique pressures Planned Parenthood faced, especially as conservative activists made defunding the group a top policy objective in recent years.

Ilyse Hogue, president of the abortion rights organization NARAL Pro-Choice America, said that independent clinics "absolutely" needed to be better funded, but that ultimately protecting the clinics depended on bigger changes.

"I don't think they will be able to continue to operate at all if you don't shift the culture and politics," she said. "The trajectory we are on will outlaw service."

Still, some worry that Planned Parenthood and other national groups have overly prioritized politics and power instead of patients and providers. Though Planned Parenthood is

perhaps best known as the nation's largest abortion provider, it provides a range of health services across more than 600 centers across the country, including contraception; testing for sexually transmitted infections; and hormone therapy for transgender patients.

The tension between Planned Parenthood's political goals and its mission as a health provider was one of the main reasons Dr. Wen, with a background as a physician, had such a stormy tenure as president.

Pamela Merritt, who co-founded a reproductive rights group called Reproaction in 2015, compared Planned Parenthood's legal priorities to a lobbyist for a commercial enterprise like McDonald's, focused on protecting its own business needs. Activists refer to the organization and its outsize influence, she said, as "the big pink elephant in the room."

"The movement needs independent providers that provide most abortions to be loud and out front," said Ms. Merritt, who described herself as an "unapologetic lefty."

For many of those independent providers, the problem extends well beyond politics.

In Alabama, Ms. Gray's biggest challenges are practical. Drug prices for medical abortions are high, she can't find a physician to replace her aging medical director, and an electrician recently refused services because he opposed abortion, she said.

Amid these pressures her client base has grown, especially because Planned Parenthood has not provided abortions in Alabama since March 2017, according to state department of health data, though it advertised the service. Critics say that Planned Parenthood has been more focused on using the political climate in Alabama to raise money than on providing health care services.

After multiple inquiries over several weeks from The New York Times about when and why Planned Parenthood clinics stopped providing abortions in Alabama, the regional affiliate president, Staci Fox, said the group planned to resume providing abortions later this year. The group also removed web pages advertising the procedure in Birmingham and Mobile.

Planned Parenthood health centers are all 501(c)(3) nonprofits, but 85 percent of independent clinics are not, according to the Abortion Care Network, the national association for community-based abortion providers, which has 13 staff members and no political advocacy arm. Clinics like Ms. Gray's are for-profit businesses that rely on payments for services to stay open.

The financial challenges are daunting. In Arizona, independent clinic leaders are expanding the Abortion Fund of Arizona, a NARAL project that provides direct assistance to abortion patients; it has received about \$50,000 in donations this year, said Donna Matthews, the fund's treasurer. In Arkansas, the Little Rock Family Planning Services, a small for-profit that offers the only surgical abortion services in the state, received a \$30,000 grant from the National Women's Law Center.

Ms. McGill Johnson of Planned Parenthood pushed back against criticism that her group was inattentive to the needs of small abortion providers. The broader reproductive rights ecosystem, she said, was crucial. "We recognize that Planned Parenthood is one small piece of the work to defend access," she said.

"Pitting us against each other makes it impossible to provide health care," Ms. McGill Johnson added. "The only way we survive is by building the strongest network possible." Still, the fragmentation in the movement has persisted. In Alabama, that was evident in the growing popularity of the Yellowhammer Fund, a nonprofit started in 2017 that covers medical, travel and other costs for low-income abortion patients. After Alabama's ban was

enacted, prominent national groups like Planned Parenthood and NARAL, as well Democratic presidential candidates like Senator Bernie Sanders, rushed to support the group.

The Yellowhammer Fund raised \$4 million in 10 weeks, and its director, Amanda Reyes, said about \$500,000 was budgeted to cover abortion procedures. Ms. Gray and the two other independent clinic directors in the state had hoped more resources would be directed to meet their needs. But Ms. Reyes has put forth a different vision to address broader challenges that women of color and low-income families might face, like access to financial and health care resources to care for additional children.

Yellowhammer is planning to support other aspects of reproductive rights, like doula care, she said, and hopes to build new “reproductive justice centers” designed to compete with anti-abortion pregnancy centers by providing things like diapers and pregnancy tests.

Their efforts are a sign that the left knows it needs new strategies, but also of the wide disagreement over what they should be. In describing her vision, Ms. Reyes used language some say is similar to the rhetoric frequently deployed by abortion rights’ fiercest opponents.

“If all we do as an organization is pay for abortions for low-income people, we are eugenicists,” Ms. Reyes said. “That is not transformational work. That is slapping a Band-Aid on a huge problem.”

Alignment with the Democratic Party

At a NARAL town hall event with Bernie Sanders this summer, Karina Chávez rallied a crowd in a Des Moines ballroom by describing how she had an abortion at age 14. The father, her boyfriend, would become a drug addict, and her Catholic parents fiercely opposed abortion. The procedure itself, she said, was the easier part.

“Making a decision about your reproductive health doesn’t need to be a traumatic life experience,” Ms. Chavez, a Sanders supporter, told several hundred voters.

Her position reflects a wing of the reproductive rights movement that encourages women to “Shout your abortion,” and that believes building cultural support for the procedure depends on destigmatizing it.

“Going moderate, it is not a winning strategy,” said Jessica González-Rojas, who leads the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health.

Politically, that means mirroring the right’s successful tactic of doubling down on a firm position — and using energy from the liberal base instead of building bipartisan, cultural support.

This has led to close alignment with the Democratic Party. In recent years, Planned Parenthood has become one of the biggest sources of volunteer power for Democratic campaigns. In 2018, the group’s political arm gave more than \$1.1 million to Democrats and just \$5,735 to Republicans, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics.

The Democratic Party has rejected the message that drove its politics since President Bill Clinton’s administration — that abortion should be “safe, legal and rare” — and embraced abortion rights with few stipulations. Every leading Democratic presidential candidate has fallen in line.

But unlike support for same-sex marriage, which rose drastically before it was legalized nationwide, Americans’ views on abortion have remained relatively consistent since 1975.

A majority of Americans believe the procedure should be legal — but only in certain cases, according to Gallup’s long-running tracking poll.

Some abortion rights supporters worry that establishing abortion rights as a Democratic litmus test is too inflexible for Americans conflicted over abortion. They fear that it could hurt the party in rural areas and the more moderate, suburban districts that may hold the key to regaining the White House, and where many of the remaining vulnerable abortion clinics are.

Only five Democrats who oppose abortion rights remain in Congress, according to congressional votes tracked by NARAL, and at least two are facing primary challenges from women who have made support for abortion rights a key part of their campaign. In Louisiana, Gov. John Bel Edwards, a rare Democratic officeholder in the South, won re-election last month after campaigning on his support for a state law banning abortion after about six weeks of pregnancy.

J.D. Scholten, a Democrat running to replace Representative Steve King, an Iowa Republican, said that about 60 percent of voters in his culturally conservative district considered themselves “pro-life.”

“Where I’m from, we have a pretty big tent,” he said. “We can’t be writing off people. I need all the votes I can get.”

But many activists dispute the notion that compromise with abortion opponents constitutes a success. Appealing to the middle prioritizes the views of white moderates at the expense of the health care needs of women of color, critics like Ms. Merritt of Reproaction say.

“You have to change the structures,” she said. “We have ceded ground we didn’t need to about the power of our ideas.”

Cecile Richards, the former president of Planned Parenthood and the woman most associated with the reproductive rights movement under President Obama, has shifted her efforts and formed a new organization, Supermajority, that casts abortion as part of a wide range of issues affecting women.

Over a breakfast of eggs and biscuits in Birmingham, Ms. Richards and two of her co-founders said they saw an opening to talk about female empowerment instead of narrower debates like when pregnancy termination should be allowed. That means building an interracial alliance with activists working on issues like immigration, economic justice and gender equality.

“Look, movements ebb and flow, it does not mean that movement was a failure,” Ms. Richards said. “We can learn things from the past, and we can also do things differently.”

All of these efforts will be tested in the coming months, as both parties move into the pressure cooker of a general election and a series of court battles, where abortion politics will be front and center. For Ms. Wood, the woman with the rusted pin, the conflict feels familiar.

As she waited for the kickoff event of the Supermajority tour, she compared the moment to the pre-Roe years. Abortion rights advocates must rebuild their grass-roots power, she said, or risk suffering the consequences.

“I’ve stayed politically active,” Ms. Wood said as she stood in the half-empty hall. “But without a movement around you, it’s hard to feel empowered.”

Women are stopped from climbing the corporate ladder because of this worrying trend

By Ellen Wulfhorst

World Economic Forum (21.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/35SwEe8> - Enthusiasm for bringing more women into corporate boardrooms is dimming, but the biggest obstacle to women moving up in the corporate world is the very first step to manager, according to newly released research.

The so-called "broken rung" - wherein women are less likely to make a successful step up into management - has meant that just 72 women attain their first management job for every 100 men making the same move, a study released on Tuesday found.

The study on women in corporate America conducted by Lean In, a non-profit group that promotes gender equality, and McKinsey & Co. management consultants, blamed that broken rung for men holding almost two-thirds of manager-level positions.

Conventional wisdom has focused on the glass ceiling, where women can rise only so far in the corporate world, said Rachel Thomas, chief executive of Lean In, who contends that the broken rung is much more significant.

"Where women are most disadvantaged is at that critical step up to manager," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a telephone interview.

"Some senior women are putting cracks in that glass ceiling, but we don't have enough women coming up behind them."

Other research shows fewer company directors are concerned with gender diversity.

The importance of diversity fell to its lowest point in five years after a steady climb since 2015, said a survey released last week by business consultants PwC of more than 700 directors on U.S. company boards, 80 percent of whom were men.

Nearly two-thirds said investors actually focus too much on board gender diversity, up from about one-third a year ago.

"Board diversity, and especially gender diversity, have been a hot topic for investors for years and many boards have made strides," said Paula Loop, leader of PwC's governance insights center.

"But they are ready to change the subject," she noted.

The number of women on publicly traded companies' boards has increased in five years to about one in four from one in five, PwC said.

But fixing the broken rung so that equal numbers of men and women take the first step into management would add one million women in five years to U.S. corporate jobs, said Alexis Krivkovich, a senior managing partner at McKinsey.

"If companies swing their attention to fixing the broken rung, the impact is massive," Krivkovich said.

The research collected information from 329 organizations employing 13 million people.

It suggested companies set targets for moving women into first-level management, do more active recruiting and employ unconscious bias training for staff making hiring and promotion decisions.

1 in 16 U.S. women say their first sexual intercourse was rape

By Laura Santhanam

PBS NewsHour (16.09.2019) - <https://to.pbs.org/2kLHaRS> - A staggering one in 16 women said they were raped by force or coercion the first time they had sexual intercourse, according to a new study of government survey data.

Survivors reported higher rates of unwanted first pregnancy, abortion and an array of other physical and mental health problems, study authors wrote in an analysis published Monday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

What does the study say?

Between 2011 and 2017, researchers for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention questioned a nationally representative sample of 13,310 women, ages 18 to 44 about marriage, divorce, family life, reproductive health and more. Men were not asked about the first time they had sexual intercourse, and women with no history of vaginal intercourse and girls 17 or younger were not included in this study.

Among women who responded, 6.5 percent said their first time having sex was forced upon them. That equates to an estimated 3.3 million women nationwide. If the survey had included girls younger than 17 or women older than 45, "certainly that absolute number would be higher," said Laura Hawks, a primary care doctor at Cambridge Healthcare for the Homeless and the study's lead author.

"Quite honestly, that's the tip of the iceberg."

"Quite honestly, that's the tip of the iceberg," said Hawks, who is also a research fellow at Harvard Medical School.

The trauma of this first sexual experience left a legacy of negative health outcomes for survivors, the study suggested. Among these survey respondents, 30 percent of women reported an unwanted first-time pregnancy, compared to 18 percent of women who said they chose to have sex the first time.

Women who were forced to have sex the first time were also more likely to report having had an abortion and have had problems ovulating or menstruating, significantly higher than women who described their first sexual experience as consensual.

Often, the sexual violence happened when the women were girls. Among respondents, 7 percent said they were younger than 10 at the time of the assault, while another 29 percent said they were between the ages of 11 and 14. The largest segment, at 39 percent, said the assaults happened between the ages of 15 and 17.

While women of all racial and socioeconomic groups reported these assaults, women of color and women in poverty reported higher rates of first-time forced sex.

Why is this important?

One out of five women and one out of 71 men will be raped in their lifetime, according to the CDC's 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey. Among those who had been raped, 81 percent of women and 35 percent men reported post-traumatic stress disorder of varying duration, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

These first-time experiences are important for physicians to understand and monitor with trauma-informed care, Hawks said. This includes requesting permission to ask difficult questions and being sensitive when performing any genital exams.

"Any physical exam can be traumatizing for someone who has encountered physical or sexual violence in the past," Hawks said.

A patient's exposure to sexual violence "needs to be top of mind for medical professionals, particularly those serving teenagers and young adults, said Scott Berkowitz, president of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

"Any physical exam can be traumatizing for someone who has encountered physical or sexual violence in the past."

Nearly half of all victims of sexual violence who call RAINN's national hotline are under age 18, Berkowitz said. Younger people are at greater risk and while there is no guaranteed prevention he said there are steps children and young adults can take to lower risk.

Caregivers can empower their children to speak out by discussing personal boundaries so children know what kinds of behavior are appropriate. It is also important for parents to reassure their child that if someone ever mistreats them, the parent or caregiver remains a safe person for the child to talk to.

If an act of sexual violence has already occurred, Berkowitz said family and friends should be supportive, let the victim lead the conversation, and remember that the "reaction of the first person they tell is going to have a big effect on everything that happens next, on their healing process, how long it takes, or whether or not they report to police."

Top female GOP senators just introduced a bill to fight the abhorrent practice of female genital mutilation

By Andrea G. Bottner

Washington Examiner (28.06.2019) - <https://washex.am/2LalqKT> - Most Americans are shocked to hear that more than 200 million young women and girls around the world have been subjected to the barbaric practice of female genital mutilation. FGM is the cutting or removal of female genitalia for non-medical purposes: a practice that has no real health benefits yet brings lifelong physical and psychological consequences.

In 1996, the United States outlawed the practice, but — disturbingly — it still happens secretly here sometimes.

Last year, a U.S. district judge dismissed charges against two doctors who were charged with cutting or mutilating at least nine girls' genitalia. The judge's ruling wasn't because there was any doubt as to whether these girls, as young as age seven, were brought by their mothers to the Detroit area for a procedure which left them permanently injured and

in excruciating pain. Rather, the judge concluded that Congress did not have the authority to pass the 1996 law against FGM, because it had no impact on interstate commerce.

Now Congress is working to right this wrong.

Sens. Marsha Blackburn, Martha McSally, Joni Ernst, Cindy Hyde-Smith, Shelley Moore Capito, and Deb Fisher introduced the [Federal Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2019](#) to amend federal law to make this practice a federal crime under several circumstances. This bill includes the requisite commerce clause language to address the district judge's concerns and pretext for dismissing the Michigan case.

Blackburn and her colleagues are making it clear that Americans will not tolerate this abuse against our young women and girls. For that, they deserve commendation. But this isn't the end of the fight against FGM.

Another way to further protect our young women and girls is by making certain all 50 states have laws on their books outlawing FGM. Currently, only 33 states have anti-FGM laws. There are still 17 states that need to recognize this violence and act to protect their young women and girls. Over the next several months, all 50 states should put anti-FGM laws in place or strengthen existing ones.

In addition to putting laws on the books, our state and federal leaders should identify education and outreach opportunities within at-risk communities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 513,000 women and girls in the United States have experienced or are at risk of FGM. Our legislators should make resources available to train medical and law enforcement representatives to recognize and prevent the practice.

Currently, the Violence Against Women Act is being considered in the Senate. Senators should make sure anti-FGM efforts are included in this important legislation and that VAWA's funding is available to those who seek to end this practice, which is unquestionably a form of violence against women.

There is much to do, but today, Blackburn began that work and stood up for vulnerable young women and girls. Her colleagues from both sides of the aisle should join her and take this important step to protect young women and girls from a practice that should have no place in this country.

Trump's anti-abortion global gag rule threatening women's lives, report says

'People are dying' in Africa and south Asia as a result of policy that bans aid to foreign groups who support abortions, says author of report

By Adrian Horton

The Guardian (05.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2HXiA95> - The Trump administration's anti-abortion restrictions on US global health aid funding have significantly damaged healthcare for women in Africa and south Asia, according to a new report.

Restrictions on funding also include limiting access to funds for sex education, and shifting funds to anti-LGBTQ and pro-abstinence groups such as Focus on the Family, researchers say.

The “Crisis in Care” report from the International Women’s Health Coalition outlines the two-year impact of the Trump administration’s “global gag rule” which prohibits funding to international NGOs that do not sign a pledge saying they will not provide or promote abortions as a method of family planning. The rule applies to an organization’s non-US funded activities too, regardless of the local laws regarding abortion.

“I think the most impactful and glaring thing is that people are dying as a result of the policy,” said Vanessa Rios, pointing to a case in Kenya in which two women died from unsafe abortions – one used knitting needles – after a sex-worker organization stopped providing abortion information or referrals.

The new report, built on 118 interviews with community health organizations in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Nepal, portrays an international health community grappling with confusion over the gag rule’s implementation, increased stigmatization of reproductive health services, and a ripple effect that is closing or fragmenting critical health services. It also illustrates the international implications of intensifying efforts in the US, primarily in Republican-dominated state legislatures, to roll back abortion access.

Though every Republican president since Ronald Reagan has implemented the gag rule, which is imposed by a presidential memo, the Trump iteration expands the amount of money susceptible to the order, and has implications for funds for a wide array of global health concerns such as malaria, HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and nutrition.

According to the new report, adherence to the gag rule now applies to \$9bn in US foreign aid and extends to many organizations that previously did not have to comply with the policy.

The escalation of the gag rule, the report says, has led to confusion among international providers as to what services and advice they can offer, and increased fear that a wrong step will jeopardize vital funds.

Interviewees who received US funding from all four countries said they believed the gag rule allowed “absolutely no opportunity” for providing any information, service or referral relating to abortion, according to the report. “Even when prompted, many organizations did not or could not explain that the policy does not apply to abortion in cases of rape, incest, and when the woman’s life is in danger, and that it allows for post-abortion care.”

The report also warned that the US’s aggressive stance against abortion counseling and services was emboldening “regressive actors” – rightwing or anti-reproductive health groups – in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.

“The amount of money from the US to other countries isn’t decreasing, it’s just going more and more to regressive groups,” said Jedidah Maina, executive director, in Kenya, of Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health, at a panel previewing the report.

These groups include the anti-LGBTQ Christian group Focus on the Family, which now receives US funding to fight HIV/Aids in South Africa through a “purity pledge” program, which promotes sexual abstinence among young people.

Focus on the Family is one prominent example of how, two years into the more stringent gag rule, “we’re seeing the real shift: if organizations are declining to sign this policy, then where is that funding going? We’re seeing newer relationships with these [rightwing] groups,” said Rios.

One organization in Kenya which focused on maternal, newborn and child health, HIV/Aids, and support to orphans was forced to terminate programs after refusing to sign the gag

rule; according to the report, the resulting \$990,000 loss between 2018 and 2019 closed its office in Mombasa, cut 15 staffers and ended services and education for 13,000 children living with HIV.

As a solution, Rios and the International Women's Health Coalition's report advocated for the Global HER Act, which would legally end the gag rule and prohibit another president from implementing it. "We have the power to make it so presidents can't, just with a stroke of their pen, implement a policy that is so harmful to the health of people worldwide," Rios said.

UN waters down rape resolution to appease US's hardline abortion stance

Measure on sexual violence in conflict passes after Trump administration threatened to veto document over references to reproductive health

By Liz Ford

The Guardian (23.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2VY7HbW> - The UN has backed a resolution on combatting rape in conflict but excluded references in the text to sexual and reproductive health, after vehement opposition from the US.

The resolution passed by the security council on Tuesday after a three-hour debate and a weekend of fierce negotiations on the language among member states that threatened to derail the process.

The vote was carried 13 votes in favour. China and Russia abstained. On Monday, the US had threatened to veto the resolution but it is understood that last minute concessions on Tuesday morning got the US on side.

Other omissions included calls for a working group to review progress on ending sexual violence.

The UK backed the resolution, but expressed regret about the omission on reproductive healthcare. Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK prime minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict, said: "We emphasise the need for a survivor-centred approach. Survivor services should cater to all survivors – with no exception."

But he added: "We deeply regret the language on services for survivors of sexual violence, recognising the acute need for those services to include comprehensive reproductive and separate sexual healthcare."

The UK, he said, would continue to "support access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for survivors of sexual violence around the world. This is a priority. If we are to have a survivor-centred approach, we cannot ignore this important priority."

France and Belgium also expressed disappointment at the watered down text. French permanent representative to the UN Francois Delattre said: "We are dismayed by the fact that one state has demanded the removal of the reference to sexual and reproductive health ... going against 25 years of gains for women's rights in situations of armed conflict."

In recent months, the Trump administration has taken a hard line, refusing to agree to any UN documents that refer to sexual or reproductive health, on grounds that such language

implies support for abortions. It has also opposed the use of the word "gender", seeing it as a cover for liberal promotion of transgender rights.

Jessica Neuwirth, the director of The Sisterhood Is Global Institute thinktank and former UN special advisor on sexual violence, said: "It's shocking that the United States turned its back on these girls and jeopardised this urgently needed security council resolution."

During the debate, the secretary-general Antonia Guterres called on the council to "work together to reconcile differences" before the vote was cast.

Following the vote, Russia's UN envoy, Vasily Nebenzia, said the resolution overstepped the remit of UN bodies and required excessive reports to be delivered. He added: "Don't try to paint us as opponents of ending sexual violence in conflict. It is a scourge and has to be eliminated."

Nadia Murad, the Yazidi Nobel peace prize laureate who spoke at the debate, said: "I think this resolution is a step in the right direction. But adopting this resolution must be followed by practical steps to achieve reality."

The human rights lawyer Amal Clooney had called on members of the UN security council to stand on the right side of history in supporting the Yazidi survivors of sexual violence. "This is your Nuremberg moment," she said during the debate.

The agreed-upon resolution was a sliver of what the Germans had put forward earlier this month. The zero draft included progressive text on strengthening laws to protect and support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who could be targeted during conflict.

It also made specific mention of the need for women to have access to safe terminations.

But the resolution – number 2467 – did for the first time make specific calls for greater support for children born as a result of rape in conflict, as well as their mothers, who can face a lifetime of stigma. It also gave prominence to the experiences of men and boys.

The resolution is the ninth introduced by the security council that has sought to address women's specific experiences of conflict, and advocate for their involvement in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. The first – resolution 1325 – was passed in 2000 after years of lobbying by women's rights campaigners.

Germany has made women, peace and security a priority of its presidency.

However, before the government introduced the resolution, there were concerns that it risked weakening the women, peace and security agenda.

In a statement published last month, 10 organisations, including the Gunder Werner Institut, UN Women and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy and the NGO Care, said: "Given the further hardening of antidemocratic and decidedly misogynistic stances in the UN security council, we believe there is a danger of a weak resolution text ultimately being negotiated and adopted.

"Some powerful members of the security council, such as Russia, China and the USA, are undermining women's rights and once again questioning, for example, women's and girls' right to self-determination. Through such actions, the achievements that have already been made could be shattered and the 'women, peace and security' agenda overall decisively weakened."

In November, ministers, government officials and civil society groups will attend a second global conference on ending sexual violence in conflict in London. The three-day event is part of the UK government's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). The first conference was held in June 2014.

The UK is expected to launch the "Murad Code" on sexual violence, named after the Yazidi Nobel peace prize laureate. The code will set out standards of behaviour and care when gathering evidence of sexual violence.

Leaders will also be lobbied to support calls by the actor Angelina Jolie and the former foreign secretary William Hague for the UN to establish a permanent, independent body that will gather and assess evidence in cases of alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

U.S. woman says strict Christian parents subjected her to FGM

By Emma Batha

Reuters (01.04.2019) - <https://reut.rs/2UUmJ62> - An American woman from a strict white Christian community has told how her parents forced her to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) as a child - a highly unusual case which activists said could lead to similar stories coming to light.

Jennifer said she had decided to tell her story after launching a campaign to press her home state of Kentucky to outlaw FGM.

The internationally condemned ritual, which typically involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia, is most often associated with a swathe of African countries.

More than half a million girls and women from diaspora communities in the United States have undergone or are at risk of FGM, according to U.S. government data.

But anti-FGM campaigners say Jennifer's story suggests the secretive practice may also happen in some conservative white communities.

Jennifer, who asked that her full name not be used, grew up in a conservative evangelical church where her father was a minister.

"We were taught men were the leaders and God made women to be submissive," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

"Many things were considered a sin. For a woman to be sexual was seen as a sin, for her to have pleasure was a sin."

Now in her early 40s, Jennifer described how she was cut with her older sister when she was five.

"We were sent on a long trip. Mum and dad told us we were going somewhere special. It felt like an adventure," she said.

But the excitement quickly turned to terror.

"I remember my arms and legs being held down and somebody covered my eyes. It was awful. I think I blacked out and when I came to they had tied my legs together," she said.

"On the trip home I knew we had both gone through something terrible. When we got home my mum told us we weren't ever to talk about what had happened."

For much of her life, Jennifer believed most women had gone through the same ordeal. She only realized this was not the case when she studied reproductive health at nursing school, but she did not confide in anyone for many years.

"I thought it was a sin to talk about it. Religion can be a powerful tool for keeping someone silent," she said.

Flashbacks

An estimated 200 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM, according to U.N. data.

It is practiced in at least 29 African countries and parts of the Middle East and Asia, but has also been reported in pockets of Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Jennifer is the second white American woman from a strict religious background to talk publicly about undergoing FGM.

Two years ago, Renee Bergstrom, now in her 70s, revealed she had been cut at a church clinic when she was three because her mother thought she was touching herself.

In the nineteenth century some doctors in the United States performed clitoral cutting to treat masturbation and other perceived sexual problems. Medical historians say the practice died out in the early to mid-twentieth century.

"Jennifer's story is a new face to FGM, but we expect she's not the only one - it's possible it could still be happening in communities like hers," said Shelby Quast, Americas director at Equality Now, a global group working to end FGM.

"What we do know is that wherever it happens, FGM is always used to control women and girls and their sexuality - and there is often strong pressure on them to remain silent."

Jennifer said she had endured chronic pain, repeated urinary tract infections and excruciating periods as a result of FGM. Sex was always painful and her injuries were so severe she could not give birth naturally.

"It was a life of pain," she said, adding that she had also suffered depression, flashbacks and nightmares.

"FGM takes away any chance of having a 'normal' life. It takes away the ability to have intimacy or relationships. It just changes every part of you. It was hard for me to trust anyone."

Jennifer thinks there are other women like her hidden in conservative church communities scattered throughout the United States.

"I can't be sure, but it would be hard to believe I'm the only one," she said.

She hopes her story will encourage others like her to break their silence and get support.

FGM trial

Jennifer has launched an online petition calling for a law against FGM in Kentucky, one of 21 states that does not criminalize the practice.

Her campaign follows the collapse of a high-profile FGM trial in Michigan involving two doctors accused of performing FGM on nine girls.

The prosecution was the first to be brought under a 1996 federal law banning FGM, but the judge dismissed the case in November, ruling that the power to criminalize the practice belonged to individual states.

"This decision has empowered communities that practice FGM and put girls in jeopardy," Jennifer said.

"It's also alarming because so many states don't have laws. I don't want Kentucky to be somewhere girls can be brought for FGM just because we don't have a law."

US official Scott Lloyd admits to tracking teens' menstruation

Now This News (25.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Z1zt9j> - Trump official Scott Lloyd tracked the menstrual cycles of teen migrants to stop them from obtaining access to legal abortions.

American Bridge obtained a 28-page spreadsheet from the government, which lists pregnant teen and pre-teen migrant girls, how far along their pregnancies were, if the pregnancy was a result of consensual sex, if an abortion was asked for, and notes including last menstrual cycles.

Lloyd was the head of Trump's Office of Refugee Resettlement. He is an anti-abortion activist with virtually no prior relevant experience. Under him, the agency denied migrant girls their right to an abortion, despite being ruled illegal in a recent lawsuit.

Instead of providing pregnant minors with options, Lloyd and his staff pushed them to get anti-abortion counseling. A judge ordered the government to stop blocking this access to abortion on March 30, 2018. But there are entries on the spreadsheet that date back as late as June 2018, meaning that Lloyd might have blocked abortions after this ruling.

US accused of trying to dilute global agreements on women's rights

Draft documents suggest US will refuse to reaffirm commitment to international declaration on women's rights at New York forum

By Liz Ford

The Guardian (18.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Y5rkQI> - US officials in New York are attempting to water down language and remove the word "gender" from documents being negotiated at the UN, in what is being seen as a threat to international agreements on women's rights.

In negotiations at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which resume at UN headquarters this week, the US wants to replace "gender" in the forum's outcome document with references only to women and girls.

The move follows similar attempts by the US last year to change language in documents before the UN human rights council.

In draft documents, seen by the Guardian, the US is taking a step further at CSW by refusing to reaffirm the country's commitment to the landmark Beijing declaration and platform for action, agreed at the fourth world conference of women held in 1995.

The Beijing agreement is regarded as the blueprint for global women's rights. Although it is not legally binding, the document is used widely by activists to hold their governments to account on policy related to women.

The Beijing platform for action covers 12 key areas that need to be addressed to achieve gender equality. It covers issues ranging from ending violence against women and eliminating female genital mutilation to women's representation in the media and their involvement in decision-making. It was adopted by 189 countries.

Muadi Mukenge, chief of development and external relations at the reproductive health NGO Ipas, said the US taking a step back from Beijing was "a cause for concern".

"The US played a leadership role in the passage of Beijing, so to take a step back is regrettable. We know so many areas of Beijing have not been realised yet. There are still gaps and inequalities and it would be irresponsible for the US to take this position," said Mukenge.

"When the US speaks it has an impact on the global conversation. It could potentially set a precedent. We already have governments that are hostile to the consensus they agreed to previously."

The Guardian understands the US also wants references to migration and climate change completely removed from the CSW document.

Under the Trump administration, US negotiators have found themselves more aligned with countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia than European nations. These countries consistently seek to undermine agreements on women's rights at the UN, specifically around reproductive health and rights. This year's US delegation includes Valerie Huber, a proponent of abstinence-only sex education and now a senior policy advisor in the Department of Health and Human Services, and Bethany Kozma, an anti-choice activist and senior advisor for women's empowerment at the US Agency for International Development.

Shannon Kowalski, director of advocacy and policy at the International Women's Health Coalition, said: "They [the US] are coming into the negotiations in a way that is very aggressive and that advances an anti-gender, anti-woman position from the very start.

"One of the first things they have tried to do is block reaffirmation of Beijing and subsequent documents ... trying to downplay the political importance of this document as setting out the vision for women's human rights. They are trying to weaken commitments to that overall."

Kowalski said the US position was emboldening other countries to take a regressive position.

In a speech to CSW on Friday, Cherith Norman Chalet, US ambassador for UN management and reform, said "we are not about gender jargon. Today, here at the Commission on the Status of Women, we are about women. Women and girls. The life of all women and girls".

She pointed to the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, which aims to improve the economic opportunities of 50 million women, and the WomenConnect Challenge to close the digital divide for women, as evidence of the US's commitment to supporting women.

Chalet added: "The United States is also committed to protecting the precious gift of life, including the protection of baby girls who would have been aborted, merely because they are female."

The two-week long CSW, which began on 11 March, assesses progress on advancing gender equality and women's rights, and reviews implementation of the Beijing agreement.

Each year, more rightwing, conservative governments, along with the Holy See, which has official observer status, push for specific wording to be removed for the concluding document, which this year focuses on making social protection systems and public services work for women. This pushback is usually centred on references to women's sexual and reproductive rights, gender and family.

Kowalski is confident member states will agree a document says: "The question is, how strong will it be? It [the US position] puts people on the defensive and limits what's on the table for discussion."

More than 9,000 representatives from more than 1,000 civil society organisations registered to attend CSW, and hundreds of side events are being held to advance women's rights.

Last week, the US state department came under fire for excluding women's rights from its annual country reports.

Stephanie L Schmid, US foreign policy counsel for the Center for Reproductive Rights, said the decision "sends a clear message that the United States does not care about the plight of women and girls and is part of a comprehensive effort to erase sexual and reproductive health and rights from global discourse. This erasure is a blatant and unapologetic rejection of the basic principle that reproductive rights are human rights."

Utah lawmakers debate ban on child marriages

Public News Service (27.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2U6y3qZ> - A bill aimed at halting child marriages in Utah has been approved by a legislative committee and will advance to the full state House of Representatives.

House Bill 234 would ban all marriages in which one or both partners are younger than age 18. Currently, the minimum age to marry in Utah is 15. The bill's Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, told members of the House Judiciary Committee that the bill mainly is aimed at keeping young girls from getting married before they're ready.

"A girl who marries young - usually if you marry as a child," she said, "you're 80 percent more likely to have a divorce, you're 50 percent more likely to drop out of high school, and you're four times less likely to complete college."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Utah has the youngest average age of marriage in the country. In Romero's view, a child should "get to be a child," and she is particularly concerned about young girls being forced into marriages, often with much older men.

The bipartisan bill was amended to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to marry with the permission of a juvenile court judge.

There was emotional testimony in support of the bill. Heidi Clark said she was wed at 15 because of an unplanned pregnancy, but wasn't mature enough to handle the marriage, which she said became abusive.

"We don't allow adults to smoke until 19 in Utah, to protect our children. We don't allow adults to drink until 21 in Utah, to protect our children," she said. "Society can best be judged by how it treats and protects its most vulnerable members. Our children are vulnerable."

Another person who testified, LuAnn Cooper, said she's a former member of a polygamist group and was forced by her family to marry when she was still a child.

"I was married at 15 to my 23-year-old cousin/nephew because it was a culture that I was raised in and I believed that it was what God wants me to do, because that's what I was told," she said, "but I was also told that it was OK because it's legal to get married at 15 in Utah."

A proposed amendment to ban marriages when there is a large age gap between the participants was tabled in committee, but is likely to be added when the bill is considered by the full House.

The text of HB 234 is online at le.utah.gov.

How the global gag rule undermines Ivanka Trump's plan to empower women

A new White House initiative aims to economically uplift women in developing countries – but gender equality advocates see a big flaw.

By Nicole Fallert

Vox (25.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2E9dwLS> - Ivanka Trump has her next project.

The president's daughter and senior adviser is heading the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, which seeks to economically empower women in foreign countries. The project is launching with funding from the US Agency for International Development and will eventually give up to \$300 million to 10 US government agencies to help a projected 50 million women around the world become economically independent by 2025.

"American women demonstrate every day that when women are free to thrive and prosper, they create jobs, strengthen our communities, and bring greater peace and prosperity to our nation and all over the world," President Donald Trump said in the Oval Office two weeks ago when he signed a memorandum establishing the project and dedicating an initial \$50 million.

But the biggest barrier to the initiative's success might be another Trump administration policy: the global gag rule, a federal directive that prevents organizations abroad from receiving money from the US government if they discuss, let alone perform, abortions. Trump, as has every other Republican president since Reagan, reimposed the gag rule when he took office. He also broadened it to cover nearly all health care funding, rather than just family planning funding.

Gender equality advocates are skeptical Trump's initiative can be as effective as the White House says it will be if health is left out of the conversation, according to an analysis of the initiative by the Coalition for Women's Economic Empowerment and Equality.

"We noticed immediately and it's stayed consistent, that piece of the conversation is absent and glaringly so," said Teresa Casale, a policy advocate at the International Center for Research on Women, a member of the coalition.

A recent report from Casale's organization found that, across 97 countries, each additional child reduces a woman's labor force participation by 5 to 10 percentage points. Unmet needs for contraception increase the rate of informal work, which actually endangers women's working rights and makes them more vulnerable to unemployment if they become pregnant.

The initiative wants to eliminate "barriers" to women's participation in the economy

Trump's initiative consists of three pillars, according to an op-ed Ivanka Trump wrote for the Wall Street Journal. The first pillar focuses on workforce development and the second on promoting female entrepreneurs. The third pillar is dedicated to "eliminating the legal, regulatory and cultural barriers that prevent women from participating in their local economies."

Ten US government agencies, including the State Department and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, will receive money to develop programs meant to accomplish these goals.

Ivanka Trump claims the initiative will increase global economic output by \$12 trillion by 2025.

The Coalition for Women's Empowerment and Equality, founded after Ivanka Trump said at the beginning of her father's term that she wanted to support women globally, analyzed the plan and praised the idea of the third pillar. It is meant to address environmental factors that often limit women's economic decision-making, such as obtaining credit, property ownership, inheritance law, and unpaid care work. On the plan's website, the analysis also praised the inclusion of gender-based violence as a factor limiting women, although Trump's Oval Office memorandum failed to mention this barrier.

The inclusion of compounding environmental factors was "unprecedented" and demonstrated that the plan's drafters listened to expert advice, said Lyric Thompson, director of policy and advocacy at the International Center for Research on Women. She added that the third pillar of Trump's plan "does a lot of work to recognize the economic rights issues the US government has not been a leader on in any administration."

But the third pillar is also where some advocates for gender equality get stuck. If Ivanka Trump wants to "eliminate legal, regulatory, and cultural barriers" to economic participation, she'll also have to address commonly unmet needs for contraception, said Casale, the ICRW policy advocate.

And under the global gag rule — which the Trump administration not only reimposed but expanded — organizations addressing that issue have their hands tied.

“Women’s health is integral to her economic participation,” Thompson said. “If that ability is greatly constrained by the imposition of the global gag rule, then necessarily there are less women who are positioned to economically thrive.”

Casale agreed: “Any organization that receives money on the ground can’t talk about abortion and still receive funding,” she said. “Those two policies are in contrast and in conflict with one another.”

The global gag rule bars groups getting US funding from talking about abortion

The global gag rule, also known as the Mexico City policy, originated with Ronald Reagan, who established it in 1984. Traditionally, it has barred any organization that performs abortions or discusses abortion as a family planning option from getting US foreign aid meant to fund family planning and contraception.

Since Reagan, Democratic presidents have repealed the policy, while Republican presidents have reimposed it. President Trump went further: His administration expanded the gag rule to cover all health care funding, not just family planning.

Some members of Congress are trying to fight the global gag rule. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Rep. Nita Lowey (D-NY) introduced the Global HER Act the same week Ivanka’s plan was announced. The act would allow groups receiving US aid to provide abortions, as long as they don’t pay for them with US aid money. Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) eventually co-sponsored Shaheen’s Senate bill, but support largely fell along partisan lines and it never came up for a vote.

“Fundamentally it’s a speech restriction,” said Beirne Roose-Snyder, director of public policy at the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE). “It takes an entire set of highly effective organizations away from the ability to receive foreign assistance. ... We’re looking at a lot of new impacts, but what we know is that it increases abortion.”

According to a new book looking at the gag rule in the George W. Bush administration, Roose-Snyder said, the odds ratio of a woman in sub-Saharan Africa getting an abortion doubled after the gag rule was reimposed. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the odds tripled. This is often because, under the gag rule, women are not given access to contraception or prenatal care.

As government agencies working on Ivanka Trump’s plan partner with local organizations on the ground, they will basically be forcing agencies to comply with the gag rule or risk millions of women not receiving economic support.

For example, Mozambique’s government recently decriminalized abortion, but organizations in that country are forced to choose whether they will work with their own government or risk losing American aid.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment from Vox.

In her op-ed, Ivanka writes the White House plan should not be considered a “women’s issue,” because it benefits whole communities — but this emphasis hints at missing language around health. And for gender equality advocates, the suggestion that Ivanka Trump’s initiative might be called “feminist” is impetus for more work going forward.

"It's not feminist foreign policy because that term refers to an approach to a broader body of work that is comprehensive of all rights and encompasses all auspices of US foreign policy: aid, trade, diplomacy, and defense," Thompson said. "This is a development program that is geared towards women."

Congress allows Violence Against Women Act to lapse

By Juliegrace Brufke

The Hill (16.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2TZD8I1> - The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which provides funding and grants for a variety of programs that tackle domestic abuse, lapsed at the end of Friday after Congress failed to pass an extension before leaving for its one-week recess.

Lawmakers squabbled over whether a clean extension of the landmark legislation, which was first signed into law in 1994, should be wrapped into a massive must-pass government funding deal that was signed by President Trump on Friday.

But the language was ultimately left off, with Republicans accusing Democrats of playing politics in order to tack on additional partisan provisions.

Rep. Debbie Lesko (R-Ariz.) attempted to force a vote on a clean extension during a procedural vote Thursday, which ultimately failed on the floor.

"For whatever misguided reason, Speaker Pelosi has decided to take a noncontroversial clean extension of the Violence Against Women Act as a bargaining chip," a spokeswoman for Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), said in an email Thursday.

"Speaker Pelosi will cause VAWA to expire tomorrow at midnight. And apparently, she is okay with that. During every funding agreement previously, Republicans have made sure VAWA did not expire."

Democrats say current resources for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence will not be impacted by the expiration of the act, noting most programs are funded through the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services.

But should Congress fail to pass an extension in coming months, future grants and funding for resources including shelters, crisis centers and social service agencies could be impacted.

The omission of the act in the spending package that averted a government shutdown could provide Democrats with the opportunity to make reforms that weren't possible under the Republican-controlled Congress last year.

Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), alongside Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), pushed for a version last year that would have extended the Violence Against Women Act for five years, but included what some Republicans felt were "controversial provisions."

GOP leadership instead opted to bring a clean, short-term extension to the floor to allow lawmakers to continue negotiations.

But the Jackson Lee bill could have a far better chance of being signed into law after Democrats took back control of the lower chamber this year.

Democrat-backed changes to the act could potentially include an expansion of youth education and prevention programs as well as protections for Native American women — which was left out of the 2013 reauthorization.

It could also include protections for transgender people and stricter gun laws for those convicted of crimes related to domestic violence, a provision that proved to be a sticking point between the two parties during the last Congress.

A Democratic aide told The Hill that “a full reauthorization is expected to be introduced in March.”

Lesko said she hopes Democrats will be willing to work across the aisle in passing a bill both parties can support.

“As a survivor of domestic violence, I am deeply saddened that this critical legislation will expire,” she said in a statement.

“Rather than supporting my clean extension of the existing law, Democrats voted last night to allow these programs and services to lapse. Although this saddens me, I hope my colleagues will work with me in a bipartisan fashion to reauthorize such an important law for so many women and children in America very soon.”

Bill aims to put an end to ‘child marriages’ in Minnesota

By Briana Bierschbach

MPR News (12.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GrCxft> - Kaohly Her was a teenager when an older man caught a glimpse of her at a community event. The next day, his family called her father to ask for her hand in marriage.

“I remember hearing my father say to the caller that he would only entertain the thought of us marrying after I graduated from college,” Her said.

She did go to college, hours from her home, where she met a different man who became her husband. She got a degree in finance and last fall she ran for and won a seat in the Minnesota House. None of that would have happened if her father agreed to the man’s marriage proposal, she said.

Now, Her, a St. Paul Democrat, is sponsoring a bill that would bar marriage by any minor in the state of Minnesota and require a proof of age. Under state law now 16- and 17-year-olds can get married with parental consent and approval from a judge in the county where they live. Her’s proposal to change that was approved unanimously by the House Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

“We cannot let a practice that reduces a girl’s chance of success, happiness, security, and safety continue,” she said. “We are the adults who know better, so we should protect our children.”

There’s no data collected on these marriages in Minnesota, so there’s no information on how widespread the problem is, but it’s a fairly common practice in the United States. Between 2000 and 2015, more 200,000 minors were legally married in the United States, according to a Frontline investigation. Nine in 10 of those minors were girls, and in many

cases, they were married to men so much older that the age difference would usually constitute statutory rape, Her said.

In Minnesota, a child's parents or legal guardian must petition the courts in order for a minor to be married. Ashlynn Kendzior, an attorney with the group Gender Justice, said judges are given wide discretion and usually grant the marriage licences.

Kendzior supports Her's bill, in part, because the status of marriage changes how prosecutors can carry out sexual misconduct laws in the state. Minnesota has what are called "marital rape exceptions" in law, which prevent someone from being convicted of raping their spouses.

"Under Minnesota law, it is illegal to have sex with a 16-or 17-year-old child if you are more than four years older than that child and in a position of authority, however, that very same conduct is legal if the victim and the perpetrator are married," she said. "Even if the rape or other misconduct occurred prior to the marriage, most prosecutors will decline to prosecute because the marriage is seen as taking precedent."

Last year, two states passed laws that bar minors from getting married. Before changing its law, Florida allowed minor girls of any age to marry if they were pregnant.

"I know many people when they hear child marriage, they think it's a third world country problem, but I know many immigrant communities, and many mainstream communities, this is a problem," Rep. Hodan Hassan, DFL-Minneapolis, said.

The bill now heads for a vote in the House. Sen. Sandy Pappas, DFL-St. Paul, is carrying a companion bill.

Idaho lawmakers introduce bill to outlaw genital mutilation of children

By Ruth Brown

East Idaho News (10.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/GLyXsd> - Two Republican lawmakers on Thursday introduced a bill in the Idaho Legislature that would outlaw all genital mutilation of children.

A federal law passed in 1996 outlawing female genital mutilation nationwide, but it did not provide any enforcement mechanism, said Rep. Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird, during the House Judiciary, Rules and Administration Committee.

A federal judge in Michigan last year found that the federal law was unconstitutional, ruling that Congress did not have the authority to pass the law. The court determined that it must be up to the states to regulate the practice, according to a report from The New York Times.

The judge's decision voided the convictions of two Michigan doctors accused of mutilating several girls whose families were from a small sect of Shiite Muslims who enabled the ritual.

The bill introduced Thursday would make it a felony to commit the act in Idaho. Rep. Caroline Nilsson Troy, R-Genesee, co-sponsored the bill with Giddings, who said that there are now 28 states with anti-female genital mutilation laws.

Giddings said the bill mimics the federal law but extends the statute of limitations to three years after the victim speaks to law enforcement, rather than three years after the act occurred.

Troy noted that this was important because sometimes parents are involved in the genital mutilation and the victim may not be an adult within three years of the time the mutilation occurred.

The bill was unanimously moved forward to the House floor for a reading.

Connecticut renews push to ban female genital mutilation

By Susan Haigh

Local 12 (05.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Bj137R> - Connecticut lawmakers are considering legislation that would ban female genital mutilation, partly because of a U.S. District Court judge's ruling last fall that determined a federal prohibition was unconstitutional.

The General Assembly's Public Health Committee heard testimony Monday on one of several bills proposed this session barring the procedure known as female circumcision or cutting. Advocates said 28 states have enacted laws to combat it, and Connecticut needs to join them.

The mutilation of girls' external genitals for non- medical reasons is practiced in some two dozen African countries and parts of the Middle East and Asia. It also affects many immigrant and refugee communities in Europe and the U.S.

"This barbaric practice, which operates mainly in secrecy, must be stopped," said Dorothy Cutter, a resident of Somers who testified at the public hearing. She urged committee members to pass a bill with stiff penalties that prohibits transporting girls across the state border to perform what she called "child abuse at its worst."

Advocates warned after the judge's ruling in Michigan that states like Connecticut, without laws on the books, could now become "destination states" for the practice. Legislation was proposed last year in Connecticut to make the practice a class D felony, punishable by up to five years in prison. That bill, however, didn't move beyond a committee vote.

Last November, U.S. District Judge Bernard Friedman threw out genital mutilation charges against a Michigan doctor, arguing the federal law that bans female genital mutilation was unconstitutional because Congress didn't have the power to regulate it. Eight people were charged in that case. The government accused Dr. Jumana Nagarwala of performing genital mutilation on nine girls from Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota at a suburban Detroit clinic.

She denies she committed any crime and says she performed a religious custom on girls from her Muslim sect. Federal prosecutors are seeking to reinstate the charges.

A wide range of interest groups submitted testimony supporting Connecticut's legislation this year. But in testimony submitted by Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, Susan Yolen, vice president of public policy and advocacy, warned it's "hard to know" if female genital mutilation is being practiced at all in Connecticut. She said creating a criminal penalty for those responsible could be a "difficult if not impossible burden for a young girl to bear."

While Planned Parenthood opposes the practice, Yolen said the organization also recognizes the "unique challenges faced by immigrant women" and believes criminalizing the ritual "may only further isolate those who, now that they are in the U.S., can and should become more fully integrated into our way of live."

She urged Connecticut lawmakers to consider "a different approach to the issue" and instead enlist public health students or professionals to study the practice in Connecticut and identify "public health interventions" that could be used to mitigate or eliminate the procedure.

Every U.S. state needs a law against FGM!

Tell Governors to Support Anti-FGM Legislation in Each State

Equality Now (2019) - <https://bit.ly/2RLtK2D> - Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a human rights violation, constituting torture and an extreme form of discrimination against women and girls. The reasons underlying its practice are numerous and varied, and ultimately serve to control women and girls' sexuality. FGM has no health benefits, it only causes harm.

You've probably heard about many cases of FGM in other countries, but you might be surprised to know that this harmful practice happens in the U.S. as well, across religious, cultural, and socioeconomic groups. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, it is estimated that over half a million girls and women in the United States have experienced or are at risk of FGM. Yet little more than half of U.S. states have laws against FGM.

When some states have strong laws and others don't, the result is that girls can be taken across state lines to have FGM performed in a state without an anti-FGM law. To ensure this can't happen, we need to urge ALL states to have strong, well-enforced laws against FGM.

Take action: If you're from a state that has a law, please tell your Governor you support the law, and urge its effective implementation, including a budget for education, training and prevention. . If you're from a state without a law, please tell your Governor to support anti-FGM legislation in your state, and pledge to sign it into law when passed. The action form to the right will automatically detect which category your state is in when you enter your information. If you are from Massachusetts, there is a bill pending right now - take action here!

Learn more: Check out our information page about FGM in the US, and read about the laws state-by-state in more detail.

Do More: Equality Now serves on the inaugural steering committee member of the brand new U.S. End FGM/C Network, and the Network is accepting applications for membership. If you or your organization would like to learn more, you can find an application here.

Ohio legislature passes ban on female genital mutilation

By Jim Siegel

The Columbus Dispatch (19.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2FdjqyE> - Ohio is on its way to joining 27 other states in prohibiting female genital mutilation of a minor one month after a federal judge in Michigan struck down the federal law banning the procedure, which critics call gender-based violence and a violation of fundamental human rights.

"Ohio is one of the few states in the Midwest that does not prohibit this," said Sen. Lou Terhar, R-Cincinnati, a prime sponsor of Senate Bill 214, which the Senate passed unanimously Wednesday and sent to Gov. John Kasich for his signature.

The AHA Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that advocates for the end of female genital mutilation, forced marriages and honor killings, told Ohio legislators that of the estimated 513,000 women or girls who are at risk of or have undergone mutilation, more than 24,000 live in Ohio.

With the nation's second-largest Somali population, the Columbus metro area ranks seventh among the nation's metro areas in the number of girls at risk, according to AHA. The Ohio Department of Public Safety publishes a Guide to Somali Culture that dedicates four pages to female genital mutilation.

"This legislation will provide protections for girls in the state and will send a strong message that Ohio stands against FGM as a form of gender-based violence," AHA wrote to legislators.

In November, U.S. District Judge Bernard Friedman struck down the 1996 federal law outlawing female genital mutilation, ruling that although the procedure is "essentially a criminal assault," Congress does not have the power to regulate it under the Constitution's Commerce Clause.

Under the Ohio bill, a person who performs female genital mutilation on a minor would face a second-degree felony punishable by eight years in prison and a \$15,000 fine. It would not allow cultural necessity or the consent of the minor or a parent as a defense. It also would prohibit an Ohioan from taking a girl out of state to have the procedure performed.

A separate provision added to the bill would exempt videos, photos or digital images of victims of sex crimes from Ohio's public-records law.

In other business, the Senate:

- Voted 24-8 for Senate Bill 255, which would set up a state process for allowing an individual convicted of a criminal offense to request a professional license. It also requires annual legislative reviews of state professional licensing boards to determine whether they should continue to operate or be revised. The bill goes to Kasich for his signature.
- Voted unanimously for House Bill 66, which would require schools to attempt to contact a parent or guardian within two hours if a student is absent without a legitimate excuse.

Sen. Sandra Williams, D-Cleveland, said the proposal was developed after 14-year-old Alianna DeFreeze went missing in January 2017 after boarding a public bus to go to school in Cleveland. Her mother was not notified by the school of Alianna's absence until 4 p.m. that day, Williams said.

Judge voids U.S. female genital mutilation law

By Jonathan Stempel

Reuters (21.11.2018) - <https://reut.rs/2BpI0cj> - A federal judge in Detroit on Tuesday declared unconstitutional a U.S. law banning female genital mutilation, and also dismissed several charges against two doctors and others in the first U.S. criminal case of its kind.

U.S. District Judge Bernard Friedman said Congress lacked authority under the Commerce Clause to adopt the 1996 law, and that the power to outlaw female genital mutilation, or FGM, belonged to individual states.

"As despicable as this practice may be, it is essentially a criminal assault," Friedman wrote. "FGM is not part of a larger market and it has no demonstrated effect on interstate commerce. The Commerce Clause does not permit Congress to regulate a crime of this nature."

Gina Balaya, a spokeswoman for U.S. Attorney Matthew Schneider in Detroit, said that office would review the decision before deciding whether to appeal.

The decision removed the main charges against Jumana Nagarwala, a doctor who performed the procedure on nine girls from Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota at another doctor's clinic in the Detroit suburb of Livonia.

FGM is a religious custom performed on girls from her Muslim sect, the Dawoodi Bohra.

Four of the eight defendants were dismissed from the case, including three of the four mothers accused of subjecting their daughters to FGM.

The government said one girl, age 7, had told investigators that she and another girl had been taken to Detroit for what they thought was a "special girls' trip," and was told not to discuss the FGM procedure after it was completed.

Molly Blythe, a lawyer for Nagarwala, said in an email: "We are very excited about today's ruling, although the victory is bittersweet given we fully anticipated our client to be vindicated at trial on those charges."

FGM typically involves the partial or total removal of the clitoris.

It is a common practice in many northern and central African countries including Egypt, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, but several international treaties forbid it.

Twenty-seven U.S. states also ban the procedure, according to civil rights groups. Michigan joined the list last year.

The World Health Organization estimates that more than 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM.

Nagarwala pleaded not guilty last month to the two remaining charges she faces. Those charges are obstructing an official proceeding, and conspiracy to travel with intent to engage in illicit sexual conduct.

The case is U.S. v. Nagarwala, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, No. 17-20274.

HRWF Note: See text of the law 'H.R.941 - Federal Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act of 1995' [here](#).

Reporting on women's and LGBTI rights deteriorating under Trump administration

New Oxfam analysis finds significant omissions in State Department human rights reports

Oxfam (01.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2AQObWJ> - A new joint analysis released today from Oxfam America and The Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver found that reporting on women's rights and issues in the State Department annual Country Reports is down 32% under President Trump's Administration, while reporting on LGBTI rights and issues abroad is down 21%. Alarming, countries of origin for asylum seekers and countries with greater gender inequalities saw their reporting decline at even higher rates of around 50%.

These reports are important inputs into US policy and help support human rights defenders at home and abroad. They are also a critically important trove of systematic data on human rights practices available to advocates, scholars, asylum seekers, and multinational firms.

"Our findings signal one thing: under the Trump Administration women's and LGBTI rights reporting worldwide is deteriorating, particularly in the places with the worst gender inequality and where asylum seekers originate," said Abby Maxman, President of Oxfam America. "The numbers only tell a part of the story. Changes in tone, language, and content suggest the Trump Administration is shaping these reports to diminish the profile and importance of women's rights and LGBTI people, which could have disastrous impacts on the United States' capacity to defend human rights."

Under the Trump administration, the State Department has cut back on discussing women's rights and issues for countries that send the most asylum seekers. Additionally, the worse a country scored on the Gender Inequality Index the bigger the decrease in reporting from 2016 to 2017. For example, Afghanistan saw a decrease of 56% in the number of mentions of women from 2016 - 2017. El Salvador saw a decrease in references to women of 50%, and Yemen saw a decrease of 52%.

Despite reasoning provided by the State Department, these decreases are not just about shorter, more concise reports. Our research found that the 2017 reports are not statistically significantly shorter than 2016 reports. Nor do the reports reflect conditions improving much on the ground. Reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch suggest that while women's and LGBTI rights are improving for some in particular contexts, they are deteriorating in others.

"Our research confirms a broad, distressing trend: the Trump administration is writing women and LGBTI rights and issues out of US policy documents, undermining decades of US leadership on these issues and threatening to imperil women and LGBTI communities across the world," said Dr. Marie Berry, Assistant Professor at the Joseph Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver.

For transgender Americans, the political gets even more personal

The Trump administration delivered a one-two punch to transgender people just weeks before a midterm election in which a record number of L.G.B.T.Q. candidates are seeking office.

By Maya Salam

NY Times (26.10.2018) - <https://nyti.ms/2Ptaw4M> - On a panel of L.G.B.T.Q. journalists a couple of weeks ago, I was asked what news organizations were missing in our coverage of issues affecting this segment of the population.

For me, the answer was easy: Americans deserve a wider and more thorough examination of local and state legislation that relates to gender identity and sexual orientation. The Human Rights Campaign, which advocates protections of L.G.B.T.Q. people, tracked 129 bills introduced across 30 states last year that it described as anti-L.G.B.T.Q.

And that was before new reports this week that the Trump administration is moving to roll back protections for transgender Americans, possibly legally invalidating their existence by narrowly defining gender as based on sex assignment at birth. About 1.4 million Americans consider themselves transgender, according to a 2016 analysis of federal and state data.

Transgender advocates said that the timing, just weeks before the midterm elections, made them feel like the latest “pawns” in wedge-issue politics.

On Wednesday, the Justice Department told the United States Supreme Court that businesses can discriminate against workers based on their gender identity without violating federal law, Bloomberg Law reported.

“Transgender people are frightened,” said Sarah Warbelow, the legal director of the Human Rights Campaign. “At every step where the administration has had the choice, they’ve opted to turn their back on transgender people.”

Under President Trump, several federal agencies have withdrawn Obama-era policies that recognized gender identity in schools, prisons and homeless shelters. The administration has also tried to remove questions about gender identity from an upcoming 2020 census survey.

This is happening amid a midterm campaign that has seen a record number of L.G.B.T.Q. candidates.

Christine Hallquist, a transgender woman from Vermont, could become the nation’s first transgender governor. In Texas, Gina Ortiz Jones, a Filipina Air Force veteran, could become the state’s first openly gay woman elected to any office. Brianna Titone could become the first openly transgender member of the Colorado Legislature. These women are all Democrats, as is Danica Roem, whose election last year to the Virginia House of Delegates made her the first openly transgender person to serve in any state legislature.

A Pew Research Center analysis last November showed that 54 percent of Americans believe gender is determined by sex at birth, and 32 percent say society has “gone too far” in accepting transgender people. Views were sharply divided along partisan and religious

lines, with more Republicans and more Christians believing gender was determined by sex at birth.

Here are some examples of what is going on at the state level:

- In November, Massachusetts residents will vote on a whether to [undo Senate Bill 2407](#), which protects transgender people from discrimination in public places. When Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican, signed the bill in 2016, it was heralded as a watershed moment for equal rights.

A group of conservative and religious activists — who feel 2407 infringes upon the privacy of women and children — collected enough signatures to qualify its repeal for the ballot. It will be the [first time](#) a law explicitly banning discrimination against transgender people is put to a statewide vote.

- [Montana](#), [South Dakota](#) and [Tennessee](#) also saw bills advance this year that aimed to limit protections for transgender people in public places, though all eventually foundered.

In Montana, the initiative was approved by the attorney general but supporters did not collect enough valid signatures to qualify the measure for the ballot. In South Dakota and Tennessee, the bills were defeated in committee.

- In May, after a last-minute push by conservative and religious groups, Governors [Mary Fallin of Oklahoma](#) and [Jeff Colyer of Kansas](#), both Republicans, signed bills into law that allowed taxpayer-funded adoption agencies to refuse to work with same-sex couples. Similar bills in Georgia and Colorado were introduced and defeated this year.

UK and US border officials join forces in bid to tackle female genital mutilation

Information from airport interviews to be shared as part of Anglo-US drive to protect potential victims

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (07.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2It99Nq> - British police and border security will share intelligence on female genital mutilation with US counterparts as part of a drive to increase prosecutions and prevent abuse.

Information on flight paths and investigations will be shared between the UK authorities and US agencies, including the FBI and Department of Homeland Security.

“We do a lot of work with the US anyway in terms of serious and organised crime – it’s one of the best relationships we have. If they [US agencies] have an investigation, intelligence, or tactics that they’ve used, we’ll be able to share that,” Ivan Balhatchet, National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) lead for FGM.

There are elements of organised crime involved in FGM, Balhatchet said, but under-reporting and a lack of intelligence are major barriers for security services.

"There are cutters, who are being paid," he said. "People are being paid to commit child abuse. In any other walk of life you would call that organised crime. It's not all like that – there's [also] inter-familial [abuse]."

In May, campaigners welcomed news of two forced marriage convictions in one week. But while FGM has been illegal in the UK for more than three decades, there has not yet been a successful prosecution.

Between January and March this year, there were 1,030 newly recorded cases of FGM in England, according to NHS figures. Figures from the NPCC show that FGM protection orders, which safeguard actual or potential victims under civil law, were granted 220 times between 2015, when they were introduced, to the end of March 2018.

A pilot project investigating how to improve the effectiveness of these orders, which until recently were not collated centrally, has been launched by the Ministry of Justice and the NPCC.

FGM is believed to be taking place both abroad and in the UK, with Border Force staff also tracking suspicious packages. "Sometimes you'll see beads used for ceremonies, razor blades, or different liquids, sometimes you might see sanitary towels," said Amanda Read, national operational lead for safeguarding at the Border Force, who said staff routinely look for indicators of FGM.

To mark the agreement with US agencies, officers held intelligence-gathering operations at airports across the UK, as well as JFK Airport in New York.

Teams from Operation Limelight, which aims to raise awareness at airports and is carried out by border officials, police and charities, targeted inbound flights from countries where FGM and forced marriage are prevalent.

Staff look for anything unusual – a person's demeanour, if they are uncomfortable walking, or if someone else is holding their passport.

During an operation at Heathrow on Thursday, specialist teams identified three people who might be at risk. Their names, addresses and school details will be forwarded to local agencies such as social services. A six-year-old girl's details were taken for referral after staff found that she couldn't or wouldn't speak to them.

Polly Harrar, founder of the Sharan Project, which supports survivors of forced marriages and "honour crimes", said that while teams will focus on particular flights, they approach all travellers so that no community feels they are being singled out.

Speaking from Heathrow, where she was assisting Operation Limelight, she said there should be a far greater focus on prevention. "Part of that is education, part of it is sustainable working within community, so that it's community-led, not dictated," she added.

One mother, Afuwa, who arrived in the UK with her family following a holiday in Uganda, said she welcomed efforts by agencies to raise awareness. She said she was aware of communities practising FGM in northern Uganda. "That's their culture," she said, although she added that it is not something her family believes in.

Dr Leyla Hussein, a trained psychotherapist and founder of the Dahlia project, a counselling service for FGM survivors, said survivors needed existing support was sporadic and needed to be greatly improved.

"We still don't have safe houses that girls can go to. They usually end up in hospital by themselves, extremely isolated, and they end up going back to their families anyway," said Hussein.

"The moment you go against parents you have gone against all your wider family. The battle will just get bigger. We need to ensure they have care."

Why Women's Equality Day was different this year

Activists and politicians used August 26th to combat Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court

By Tessa Stuart

Rolling Stone (27.08.2018) - <https://rol.st/2otQZIH> - It took 42 years for the United States to ratify the 19th Amendment, enshrining a woman's right to vote. Between the time it was first introduced to Congress in 1878 and when it actually became law in 1920, the Panama Canal was built, nine states joined the union and World War I occurred.

But if that seems like a long time, consider this: It's been 46 years since the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment, which, to this day, remains one state short of the required three-quarters majority needed for ratification.

If passed, the ERA would finally guarantee women equal rights with men.

In the 1970s, when the fight over the ERA was still fresh, New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug wrote a bill declaring August 26th Women's Equality Day. This year on August 26th, women and their allies around the country used the occasion to protest President Trump's nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

Kavanaugh has indicated in rulings and past remarks that he believes *Roe v. Wade* was wrongly decided. Kavanaugh has assured pro-choice Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) that *Roe* is "settled law." But that's little comfort for women whose reproductive freedom is at stake, particularly when considering the fact that President Trump has loudly declared he would appoint judges who would overturn the ruling protecting abortion.

At protests in New York, Los Angeles and dozens of other cities and towns across the country, women spoke out forcefully in defense of reproductive rights. They were cheered on by lawmakers like Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), who tweeted, "With a SCOTUS nominee threatening to undo decades of progress and do away with some of our most fundamental rights, the need to continue the movement that won us the right to vote 80 years ago could not be clearer or more pressing." She was joined by Rep. Brenda Lawrence (D-MI), who tweeted, ".@realDonaldTrump has said women should face 'punishment' for exercising their constitutional right to abortion. Now, with Kavanaugh's nomination, this nightmare could become a reality. On #WomensEqualityDay & every day we must #StopKavanaugh & protect women's right to choose!

A number of rumored 2020 presidential hopefuls chimed in as well.

Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) chided the GOP for scheduling nomination hearings nearly two months months ahead of the date the National Archives said Kavanaugh's documents would be ready for release. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) tweeted Saturday, "I won't let Kavanaugh overturn Roe v. Wade and undermine every step we've taken toward equality in this country. I've been fighting his confirmation from day one, and I'm not going to let up. But neither can you. I need you to stay strong, stay determined and keep fighting."

Trump antagonist and Stormy Daniels lawyer Michael Avenatti also chimed in, tweeting, "The Equal Rights Amendment has been in limbo far too long. It is frankly shocking that it has yet to be ratified after all of these years. The time has come to change this. Women deserve equal rights across the board, especially equal pay! #Basta"

The president did not acknowledge the day on his own Twitter feed.

Thermostats, locks and lights: Digital tools of domestic abuse

By Nellie Bowles

NY Times (23.06.2018) - <https://nyti.ms/2KrQ52q> - The people who called into the help hotlines and domestic violence shelters said they felt as if they were going crazy.

One woman had turned on her air-conditioner, but said it then switched off without her touching it. Another said the code numbers of the digital lock at her front door changed every day and she could not figure out why. Still another told an abuse help line that she kept hearing the doorbell ring, but no one was there.

Their stories are part of a new pattern of behavior in domestic abuse cases tied to the rise of smart home technology. Internet-connected locks, speakers, thermostats, lights and cameras that have been marketed as the newest conveniences are now also being used as a means for harassment, monitoring, revenge and control.

In more than 30 interviews with The New York Times, domestic abuse victims, their lawyers, shelter workers and emergency responders described how the technology was becoming an alarming new tool. Abusers — using apps on their smartphones, which are connected to the internet-enabled devices — would remotely control everyday objects in the home, sometimes to watch and listen, other times to scare or show power. Even after a partner had left the home, the devices often stayed and continued to be used to intimidate and confuse.

For victims and emergency responders, the experiences were often aggravated by a lack of knowledge about how smart technology works, how much power the other person had over the devices, how to legally deal with the behavior and how to make it stop.

"People have started to raise their hands in trainings and ask what to do about this," Erica Olsen, director of the Safety Net Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence, said of sessions she holds about technology and abuse. She said she was wary of discussing the misuse of emerging technologies because "we don't want to introduce the idea to the world, but now that it's become so prevalent, the cat's out of the bag."

Some of tech's biggest companies make smart home products, such as Amazon with its Echo speaker and Alphabet's Nest smart thermostat. The devices are typically positioned as helpful life companions, including when people are at work or on vacation and want to remotely supervise their homes.

Some connected device makers said they had not received reports of their products being used in abuse situations. The gadgets can be disabled through reset buttons and changing a home's Wi-Fi password, but their makers said there was no catchall fix. Making it easy for people to switch who controls the account of a smart home product can inadvertently also make access to the systems easier for criminal hackers.

No groups or individuals appear to be tracking the use of internet-connected devices in domestic abuse, because the technology is relatively new, though it is rapidly catching on. In 2017, 29 million homes in the United States had some smart technology, according to a report by McKinsey, which estimated that the number was growing by 31 percent a year.

Connected home devices have increasingly cropped up in domestic abuse cases over the past year, according to those working with victims of domestic violence. Those at help lines said more people were calling in the last 12 months about losing control of Wi-Fi-enabled doors, speakers, thermostats, lights and cameras. Lawyers also said they were wrangling with how to add language to restraining orders to cover smart home technology.

Muneerah Budhwani, who takes calls at the National Domestic Violence Hotline, said she started hearing stories about smart homes in abuse situations last winter. "Callers have said the abusers were monitoring and controlling them remotely through the smart home appliances and the smart home system," she said.

Graciela Rodriguez, who runs a 30-bed emergency shelter at the Center for Domestic Peace in San Rafael, Calif., said some people had recently come in with tales of "the crazy-making things" like thermostats suddenly kicking up to 100 degrees or smart speakers turning on blasting music.

"They feel like they're losing control of their home," she said. "After they spend a few days here, they realize they were being abused."

Smart home technology can be easily harnessed for misuse for several reasons. Tools like connected in-home security cameras are relatively inexpensive — some retail for \$40 — and are straightforward to install. Usually, one person in a relationship takes charge of putting in the technology, knows how it works and has all the passwords. This gives that person the power to turn the technology against the other person.

Emergency responders said many victims of smart home-enabled abuse were women.

Connected home gadgets are largely installed by men, said Melissa Gregg, a research director at Intel working on the implications of smart home technology. Many women also do not have all the apps on their phones, said Jenny Kennedy, a postdoctoral research fellow at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, who is researching families that install smart home technology.

(One in three women and one in four men have been victims of physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner, according to a 2010 Centers for Disease Control report.)

The people who spoke to The Times about being harassed through smart home gadgetry were all women, many from wealthy enclaves where this type of technology has taken off. They declined to publicly use their names, citing safety and because some were in the process of leaving their abusers. Their stories were corroborated by domestic violence workers and lawyers who handled their cases.

Each said the use of internet-connected devices by their abusers was invasive — one called it a form of "jungle warfare" because it was hard to know where the attacks were coming

from. They also described it as an asymmetry of power because their partners had control over the technology — and by extension, over them.

One of the women, a doctor in Silicon Valley, said her husband, an engineer, “controls the thermostat. He controls the lights. He controls the music.” She said, “Abusive relationships are about power and control, and he uses technology.”

She said she did not know how all of the technology worked or exactly how to remove her husband from the accounts. But she said she dreamed about retaking the technology soon.

“I have a specific exit plan that I’m in the process of implementing, and one of my fantasies is to be able to say, ‘O.K. Google, play whatever music I want,’” she said. Her plan with the smart thermostat, she said, was to “pull it out of the wall.”

When a victim uninstalls the devices, this can escalate a conflict, experts said. “The abuser can see it’s disabled, and that may trigger enhanced violence,” said Jennifer Becker, a lawyer at Legal Momentum, a women’s rights legal advocacy group.

Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, said disabling the devices could also further cut off a victim. “They’re not sure how their abuser is getting in and they’re not necessarily able to figure it out because they don’t know how the systems work,” Ms. Galperin said. “What they do is they just turn everything off, and that just further isolates them.”

Legal recourse may be limited. Abusers have learned to use smart home technology to further their power and control in ways that often fall outside existing criminal laws, Ms. Becker said. In some cases, she said, if an abuser circulates video taken by a connected indoor security camera, it could violate some states’ revenge porn laws, which aim to stop a former partner from sharing intimate photographs and videos online.

Advocates are beginning to educate emergency responders that when people get restraining orders, they need to ask the judge to include all smart home device accounts known and unknown to victims. Many people do not know to ask about this yet, Ms. Becker said. But even if people get restraining orders, remotely changing the temperature in a house or suddenly turning on the TV or lights may not contravene a no-contact order, she said.

Several law enforcement officials said the technology was too new to have shown up in their cases, though they suspected the activity was occurring.

“I’m sure that it’s happening,” said Zach Perron, a captain in the police department in Palo Alto, Calif. “It makes complete sense knowing what I know about the psychology of domestic violence suspects. Domestic violence is largely about control — people think of physical violence but there’s emotional violence, too.”

Some people do not believe the use of smart home devices is a problem, said Ruth Patrick, who runs WomenSV, a domestic violence program in Silicon Valley. She said she had some clients who were put on psychiatric holds — a stay at a medical facility so mental health can be evaluated — after abuse involving home devices.

“If you tell the wrong person your husband knows your every move, and he knows what you’ve said in your bedroom, you can start to look crazy,” she said. “It’s so much easier to believe someone’s crazy than to believe all these things are happening.”

Asking everyone in a home to understand smart home technology is essential, researchers said.

"When we see new technology come out, people often think, 'Wow, my life is going to be a lot safer,'" said Katie Ray-Jones, chief executive of the National Domestic Violence Hotline. But "we often see the opposite with survivors of domestic violence."

Maine Democrats quash bill to criminalize FGM

By Meira Svirsky

Clarion Project (24.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2qXIu32> - A bill to criminalize female genital mutilation (FGM) in Maine was squashed by House Democrats due to political correctness and misplaced concerns about Islamophobia.

The vote ironically came during the "Week of the Young Child."

The bill would have held the mutilator, consenting parents and/or guardians and the transporters accountable for their part in perpetrating the FGM and exacted penalties from each of these parties.

Instead of passing the bill, all the House Democrats save for one, voted against the bill amid ad hominem cries against one of the bill's sponsors, Republican legislator Rep. Heather Sirocki. Specifically, the Southern Poverty Law Center published emails between Sirocki and a Maine member of ACT for America, which the law center bogusly claims is "the largest anti-Muslim hate group in the United States."

During testimony regarding the bill, Leftist activists questioned why a white woman was fighting so hard to defend immigrant girls and accused the sponsors of the bill of being racists, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant. Listen to the accusations by clicking [here](#)

Legislators also heard heart breaking testimony from an FGM survivor, yet they were not moved.

But the story doesn't end here. Last week, House Democrats passed a toothless bill that appears to ban FGM but in fact does not. That bill removed all penalties for those involved with the crime. In addition, the word "mutilation" was removed from the definition of the barbaric practice. (House Republicans rightly rejected that bill.)

The bill was then sent back to the Senate, which re-inserted the penalties for all those connected to the crime. The bill passed the Senate 30-5, with the dissenters hailing from Far-Left parties.

Why this legislation is needed

One may wonder why state legislation criminalizing FGM is needed since FGM has been illegal in the U.S. on a federal level since 1996. This reason is that, until a recent case in Michigan, federal legislation has been insufficient to stopping FGM since prosecutors usually defer to state law when charging a crime.

In practical terms, what this has meant is that in states that do not have their own laws criminalizing the practice, perpetrators are usually charged with child abuse, assault or the like, which results in lesser sentences.

In fact, the on-going case in Michigan is the very first instance of a federal FGM prosecution since the federal legislation was passed 22 years ago.

"That's one reason that state legislation is important," said Ayaan Hirsi Ali Foundation Senior Director Amanda Parker in an interview with Mic. "It gives prosecutors the tools that they need to really fight this."

FGM is a barbaric practice commonly found in (but not limited to) Muslim countries across the world that involves either cutting off part of or the entire clitoris, removing the labia, narrowing the vaginal opening and/or executing other painful alterations to a woman's genitals for no medical purpose, according to the World Health Organization.

It involves intense pain, shock, sometimes even death. Survivors are plagued with a lifetime of emotional trauma as well as severe physical effects ranging from decreased or lack of sexual response to painful intercourse and childbirth, at best.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that approximately 513,000 girls are at risk of FGM in the United States.

There are literally no words to describe the audacity of these Maine lawmakers who have, by their actions, condemned innumerable women and girls to a lifetime of avoidable pain and suffering. Their suggestion that it is "racist" for a white woman to advocate for the basic human rights of a non-white woman is not only an outrageous proposition but falls squarely in the very definition of racism.

What is the future for a country that has devolved into making the sexual mutilation of women and girls into a partisan issue?

FGM in Michigan — Get the facts

By Meira Svirsky

Clarion Project (25.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2DVKcak> -

TIMELINE: FGM COURT CASE IN MICHIGAN

Dr. Jumana Nagarwala was charged with performing FGM (female genital mutilation) on two seven-year-old girls from Minnesota who were brought to Nagarwala's clinic in Livonia, Michigan for the procedure in February. She was arrested trying to board a flight to Kenya. She was denied bail by the FBI.



April 4, 2017



Nagarwala's lawyers planned to invoke freedom of religion. The defense wanted to claim the girls were not cut, but scraped for religious reasons (despite evidence to the contrary). Also charged in the case are Dr. Fakhruddin Attar, 53, who is accused of letting Nagarwala use his clinic to carry out the cuttings and Farida Attar, 50, Fakhruddin's wife, who is accused of holding the hands of at least two victims during the cutting procedures to comfort them.

May 4, 2017

Attorney Cynthia Nunez alleged that the doctor's mosque paid for the procedures. The doctor's husband is the treasurer of the mosque. The state discovered six more girls in addition to the original two. At the time, the state was moving to take parental rights away from the doctor as well the girls' parents.

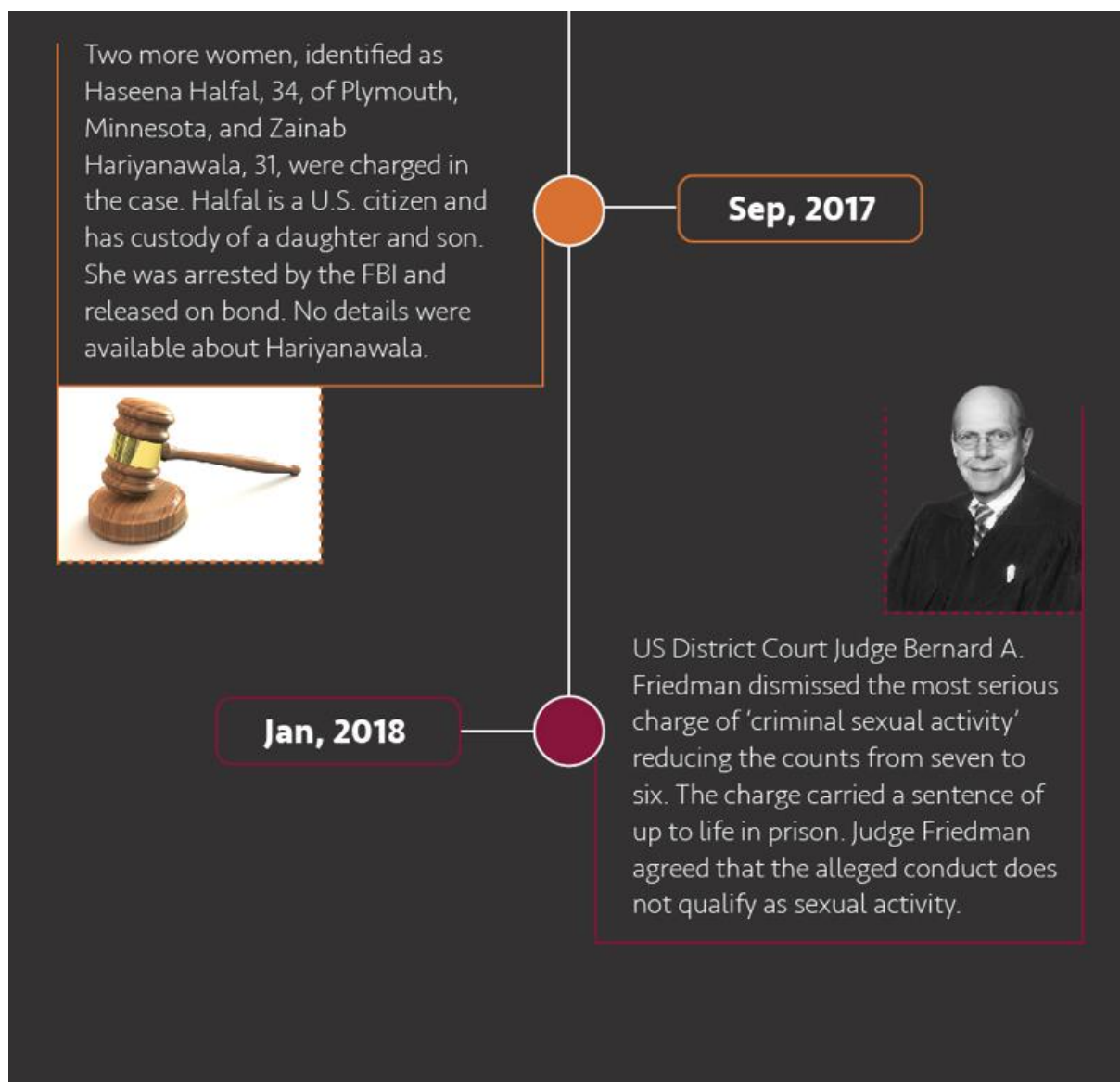


July, 2017

June 6, 2017



Two mothers were arrested in the case. They are not American citizens, but rather hold Indian passports and are part of the Dawoodi Bahra Muslim Indian community which is under investigation in the ongoing case. The two women, Farida Arif and Fatema Dahodwala, both from Oakland County, Michigan, were released on \$10,000 unsecured bonds and must wear GPS bracelets.



New HHS civil rights division to shield health workers with moral or religious objections

By Juliet Eilperin and Ariana Eunjung Cha

The Washington Post (17.01.2018) - <http://wapo.st/2Dzq8kL> - The Trump administration will create a new conscience and religious freedom division within the Health and Human Services Department to ease the way for doctors, nurses and other medical professionals to opt out of providing services that violate their moral or religious beliefs.

Specific details are scheduled to be announced Thursday. But the new policy appears to be broad and aimed at protecting health-care workers who cite those reasons for refusing to take part in abortions, treat transgender patients or participate in other types of care.

Conservative groups praised the move Wednesday as upholding providers' right to religious liberty.

"We think the Trump administration should set an example in enforcing the multiple conscience laws that have been passed since the 1970s to prevent the government from punishing people who have objections to participating in abortions," said David Christensen, vice president of government affairs at the Family Research Council.

But a number of women's and LGBT rights and physician groups expressed worry that such a policy would further discriminate against vulnerable populations and worsen inequities within health care. Even before the official announcement, several groups vowed to challenge it.

"This will impose a broad religious refusal policy that will allow individuals and institutions to deny basic care for women and transgender people. We know from experience that denial of care compromises care," said Dana Singiser, vice president of government affairs for Planned Parenthood.

By empowering an enforcement authority, the action will reverse policies put in place under President Barack Obama, and resurrect and expand "conscience protections" introduced under President George W. Bush. The new division, which will be part of the HHS Office for Civil Rights, will not only accept complaints from health-care professionals but will be responsible for ensuring that hospitals, clinics and other institutions across the country are accommodating their beliefs.

The previous administration, Christensen said, had "significantly narrowed enforcement of the laws" in place to safeguard those who oppose abortion or hold other religious convictions.

The president signed an executive order last year instructing agencies to expand religious liberty under federal law, and HHS has been at the leading edge of implementing that directive. The department issued rules in October that provided broad religious and moral exemptions to the Affordable Care Act's mandate that employers, including for-profit companies, provide no-cost contraception coverage.

"President Trump promised the American people that his administration would vigorously uphold the rights of conscience and religious freedom," HHS Acting Secretary Eric Hargan said in a release Wednesday night. "That promise is being kept today. The Founding Fathers knew that a nation that respects conscience rights is more diverse and more free, and OCR's new division will help make that vision a reality."

Critics, however, said that the move represented a major civil rights rollback.

"The administration appears set to go far, far beyond the reasonable accommodations that have long existed in our laws. This is the use of religion to hurt people because you disapprove of who they are," Harper Jean Tobin, the National Center for Transgender Equality's director of policy, said in a statement. "The vast majority of the medical community is against any form of license to discriminate. That the administration is rushing out such a momentous rule in secret, hiding behind a vague description and potentially circumventing normal procedures, just underscores how far they have been straying from established law in this area."

Sarah Warbelow, legal director for the Human Rights Campaign, said the policy seeks to "devalue the humanity of LGBTQ people."

"Every American deserves access to medically necessary health care, and that health care should not be determined by the personal opinions of individual health care providers or administrative staff," she said.

“Conscience” protections have been around for decades, whether in state statutes or as part of hospital policies, but some health-care providers have said those have not been enough to protect them.

In 2009, Cathy Cenzone-DeCarlo, a nurse at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, was forced to assist in a second-term abortion or face disciplinary action. She sued, but a court rejected her claim that Mount Sinai had violated federal protections because it received nearly \$375 million in research funding from the National Institutes of Health. DeCarlo’s complaint with the HHS Office of Civil Rights was not addressed until 2013, when the hospital changed its policies and procedures so employees were no longer forced to participate in abortions over their objections.

“We look forward to seeing protections for pro-life nurses like Cathy DeCarlo . . . and other health care professionals from being forced to participate in the destruction of innocent lives,” Mallory Quigley, communications director for the antiabortion Susan B. Anthony List, said in an email.

Yet Ben Brown, a gynecologist-obstetrician in Chicago and a fellow with Physicians for Reproductive Health, said the administration’s new rule appears to go against the oaths that health-care providers take when they enter their professions, ethics policies at many hospitals and state statutes in many parts of the country that require basic care be delivered to those who need it.

“Imposing their values on a patient is not in consort with our professional job as doctors,” he said.

Louise Melling, deputy legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union, said Wednesday that federal employment law allows workplaces to accommodate individuals’ beliefs as long as they do not impose an undue hardship.

“Religious liberty gives you a right to your beliefs, but it doesn’t give you the right to impose your beliefs on others or harm others, including to discriminate against others,” Melling said.

[Website: HHS.gov, Department of Conscience and Religious Freedom](http://www.hhs.gov/department-of-conscience-and-religious-freedom)

Violence against transgender people is on the rise, advocates say

By Maggie Astor

The New York Times (06.11.2017) - <http://nyti.ms/2zqmX9j> - On Oct. 21, a body was found off a county road west of Corpus Christi, Tex., with bullet wounds to the chest, abdomen and shoulders.

The victim was Stephanie Montez, a transgender woman. But because the police misidentified her as a man, it was not until last week that Ms. Montez, 47, was known to be among the more than two dozen transgender Americans killed this year.

Even as transgender people have scored political victories and turned public opinion in favor of more protections, violence has risen, especially against black and Hispanic transgender women. And Ms. Montez’s case shows the difficulties advocates face in tracking killings and other hate crimes.

The full death toll is impossible to determine, but by rights groups' estimates, each of the past three years has become the deadliest on record.

The Human Rights Campaign has documented the killings of 25 transgender people in the United States so far in 2017, compared with 23 last year and 21 in 2015. Other organizations, like GLAAD and the Transgender Law Center, have slightly different tallies, but the trend holds.

Transgender people have been killed this year in Chicago and in Waxahachie, Tex.; in the Ozarks of Missouri and on the sidewalks of Manhattan. They have been shot, stabbed, burned and, in at least one case, pushed into a river. On average, one to two have been killed somewhere in the United States every week.

And experts say these numbers almost certainly understate the problem. Local officials are not required to report such killings to any central database, and because the police sometimes release incorrect names or genders, it can be difficult to know that a homicide victim was transgender. So advocacy groups are left to comb news reports and talk to victims' friends or family.

Even so, Sarah McBride, a spokeswoman for the Human Rights Campaign, said the rough numbers strongly indicate that violence against transgender people is increasing.

Beverly Tillery, the executive director of the New York City Anti-Violence Project, said that since the 2016 presidential election, her organization had recorded "a spike in incidents of hate violence" — both homicides and other crimes — against transgender people as well as members of the broader gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

"There is an increased climate of hate that is, in some cases, being allowed to grow," Ms. Tillery said.

Advocates say the violence is inseparable from the social climate: that anti-transgender violence and anti-transgender laws — like so-called bathroom bills, which aim to police who may use gender-specific public facilities — are outgrowths of the same prejudice.

Sixteen states have considered bathroom bills this year (though none have passed), and six have considered legislation to invalidate local anti-discrimination protections, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Advocates also point to actions by the Trump administration, including the rescinding of federal protections for transgender students, an effort to bar transgender troops and a Justice Department decision to stop applying workplace discrimination protections to transgender people. Yet the administration did help with the successful prosecution of a man accused of killing Kedarie Johnson, a gender-fluid Iowa teenager.

"The same stigma and the same sort of fear that is trying to be embedded in our society are the driving factors of the extreme forms of violence that are taking place," said Isa Noyola, deputy director of the Transgender Law Center. "A lot of these cases are happening in regions where there are a lack of protections and there's a lack of understanding and infrastructure for trans folks to live their daily lives."

In some sense, experts said, the increased awareness that leads to more acceptance also draws the attention of would-be perpetrators.

"There's no question that transgender people and the trans community have seen an increase in our profile and in our visibility," Ms. McBride said. "In many cases, that is a

good thing. It results in more hearts and minds opening. It allows for progress legally, socially." But it may also stir up violent opposition, she said.

Almost all the murder victims in the past several years have been nonwhite women. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the annual murder rate for Americans ages 15 to 34 is about one in 12,000. But an investigation by the news organization Mic found that for black transgender women in the same age group, the rate was one in 2,600.

"We know that when transphobia mixes with misogyny and racism, it can often have fatal consequences," Ms. McBride said.

Yet Ms. Noyola also said the brutality had brought the community together in a powerful way.

"That resilience and that power and that wisdom," she said, "is also a part of the story."

Child marriage persists in US

HRWF (25.10.2017) - Child, early, and forced marriage are forms of gender-based violence that pose serious threats to the rights of girls and women. People often think of child marriage as occurring only in developing or Muslim-majority countries, but it is also found in North America and Europe. As BBC reports, child marriage is a problem in the United States, where [Girls Not Brides reports](#) that between 2000-2010, 248,000 girls were married to adult men.

Video: <http://hrwf.eu/usa-child-marriage-persists-throughout-europe-and-north-america/>

Also see HRWF's recent report on [Child Marriage and Religion](#)

Michigan mosque paid for FGM, lawyer alleges

By Meira Svirsky

Clarion Project (15.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2nCLwb5> - A lawyer involved in the ongoing case against the Michigan doctor charged with performing female genital mutilation (FGM) on young girls alleged in court that the doctor's mosque had paid for the barbaric and illegal procedures.

Dr. Juama Nargarwala, 44, an emergency room doctor, is accused of performing FGM on two young girls from Minnesota, although prosecutors said in court that she may have cut up to 100 girls over the past 12 years.

Nargarwala is part of a sect of Muslims from India called the Dawoodi Bohra. She was arrested in April trying to board a flight to Kenya after the FBI received a tip in the case and was denied bail. Also charged in the case are two other members of the Dawoodi Bohra sect: Dr. Fakhruddin Attar, 53, accused of letting Nargarwala use his clinic in Livonia to carry out the procedures and his wife, Farida Attar, 50, who is charged with holding the girls' hands during the painful cutting.

Cynthia Nunez, the attorney who made the allegation and who was assigned by the court to look out for the best interests of Nargarwala's children, also stated that Nargarwala's

husband is the treasurer of the mosque and could face criminal charges over the allegations that the mosque was paying for cutting.

Other members of the sect and their daughters have been told to keep quiet about the FGM procedures according to the charges against the doctor and her alleged accomplices. So far, the state has discovered that in addition to the two girls from Minnesota, six more girls are known to have been mutilated.

Medical examinations have shown that the girls' genitals were altered and not just symbolically "scraped" as Naragarwala claimed. Writing in Mother Jones, a victim of FGM from the same sect, describes her horrific memories of the procedure that was carried out on her as a child and how wide-spread the practice is among the Dawoodi Bohra.

The state has been moving to take parental rights away from Naragawala as well as parents who have taken their daughters to be cut. In the case of Nargarwala, the children's father agreed to move out of the house to avoid having the children put into foster care. The children are currently being taken care of by their grandparents.

Although the state requested the father's visits to the children be made only with supervision, the judge ruled that for the time being, he is allowed to visit his children freely and without supervision.

Michigan doctor accused of performing FGM to claim freedom of religion defense

By Meira Svirsky

Clarion Project (29.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2nASAVE> - Lawyers for Jumana Nagarwala, the Michigan emergency-room doctor accused of performing genital mutilation on young girls, plan to invoke a defense based on freedom of religion, the Detroit Free Press reported.

While the law, enacted in 1996, is clear that cutting a girl's genitals is illegal, the defense will claim the girls in question were not actually cut, but rather scraped for religious reasons. Thus, they will propose that not only was no harm done, but the defendants themselves are victims of religious persecution by the U.S. government.

The case involves two seven-year-old girls from Minnesota who were brought to Nagarwala's clinic in Livonia, Michigan for the procedure. Also charged in the case are Dr. Fakhruddin Attar, 53, who is accused of letting Nagarwala use his clinic to carry out the cuttings and Farida Attar, 50, Fakhruddin's wife, who is accused of holding the hands of at least two victims during the cutting procedures to comfort them.

According to court documents, a medical examination showed the girls had scarring and other abnormalities on their clitorises and labia minora that would indicate actual cutting took place. In addition, the government says there are many other young victims of FGM performed by Nagarwala who were told to remain silent or lie about the procedure to authorities, itself a crime.

Even if the procedure involved "just" scraping, "There are experts who contend that even the most mild procedure is still harmful," said Brad Dacus, an attorney and expert on First Amendment rights and president of the Pacific Justice Institute, as quoted in the Detroit Free Press.

FGM includes all procedures involving partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Short-term complications can include hemorrhaging, pain, shock, and even death, while long-term complications include formation of cysts, problems with sexual intercourse and giving birth, chronic pelvic infection and sterility.

The trauma of FGM often lasts a lifetime and can cause depression and anxiety, among other psychological problems. FGM reduces or eliminates sexual pleasure for the victim. It has been illegal in the United States since 1996.

"It is hard for me to imagine any court accepting the religious freedom defense given the harm that's being dealt in this case," said Dean of University of California Irvine Law School Erwin Chemerinsky, one of the nation's leading constitutional law scholars and an First Amendment expert, as quoted in the Free Press.

All the defendants are Muslims from India and members of the Dawoodi Bohra sect.

Chemerinsky noted other instances where parents consistently lost cases trying to defend their choice to deny their children medical care based on their religious beliefs, thus showing there is "no absolute right" to freedom of religion in the U.S.

Both Chemerinsky and Dacus say the case will come down to medical facts — namely, whether or not the procedure inflicted upon the girls creates lifelong harm.

In addition to a medical examination of the girls, a court filing submitted by a Homeland Security investigations special agent states, "According to some members of the community who have spoken out against the practice, the purpose of this cutting is to suppress female sexuality in an attempt to reduce sexual pleasure and promiscuity."

This statement also supports the argument that permanent harm was done, since a symbolic scrape would presumably not permanently alter the girl's future sexual function.

Defense lawyers also plan to base their defense on the fact that since the law allows male circumcision, not allowing this type of FGM on the girls – which they term a "very minor religious procedure" – violates the constitution's clause that mandates men and women be protected equally.

However, constitutional lawyer Robert Sedler from Wayne State University said the equal protection clause was not valid in this case since male circumcision has positive health benefits, is not considered harmful by the medical community and does not affect a man's sexual function.

Assaults on Muslim women force some to rethink hijab

By Yonat Shimron

RNS (12.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gF5MXs> - Melissa Grajek was subjected to all kinds of taunts for wearing the hijab, but an incident at San Marcos' (Calif.) Discovery Lake sealed the deal.

Her 1-year-old son was playing with another boy when an irate father saw her and whisked his son away, telling Grajek: "I can't wait until Trump is president because he'll send you back to where you came from."

The man then scooped up a handful of wood chips and threw them at Grajek's son.

At that moment, Grajek thought, enough was enough. She decided to take off her head covering.

"I had been on the fence regarding hijab, but that incident made it clear my religious choices could be putting my son at risk," she said.

Grajek's decision to doff the hijab follows weekly, if not daily, news reports of assaults against Muslim women.

Last week (Dec. 6), Ilhan Omar, the newly elected Minneapolis state representative was leaving the White House, which she visited to talk about policy initiatives, when a cabbie threatened to yank her hijab while shouting expletives and calling her "ISIS."

A day earlier, a man pushed a New York City transit worker down a staircase at Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan, yelling, "You're a terrorist, go back to your own country!"

And two weeks ago in Brooklyn, another man threatened an off-duty police officer with his pit bull, telling her and her son to "go back to your country."

All three women were wearing hijabs.

Assaults or intimidation of Muslims had been steadily rising well before the election but they became more common during the divisive campaign of President-elect Donald Trump, who called for a ban on Muslim immigrants and proposed a registry for U.S. Muslims.

A Pew Research Center analysis of hate crimes statistics from the FBI shows that the number of physical assaults against Muslims reached 9/11-era levels last year. The number of anti-Muslim intimidation crimes — defined as threatening bodily harm — also rose.

Now some imams across the country are saying it's OK to take the hijab off, at least temporarily.

Imam Abdullah Antepli recently asked a group of women at the Islamic Association of Raleigh (N.C.) how many of them felt unsafe in public.

Dozens of hands shot up.

He then told them the extraordinary circumstances under which Muslim Americans now live may require extraordinary measures — including doffing the hijab, at least for a while.

"I'm not trying to be alarmist," said Antepli, the chief representative of Muslim affairs at Duke University. "But the nation is being sucked into a combustible mix. We have to think unconventionally."

Antepli's call to remove the hijab, which he repeated at a mosque in Cary and in home gatherings of Muslims in Raleigh and Chapel Hill, is rare but not unheard of.

In Texas, Imam Omar Suleiman, president of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research and resident scholar at the Valley Ranch Islamic Center in Irving, said women's fears should be taken seriously.

"It's important to give our women support and validate the fear they're feeling," said Suleiman, who is also a professor of Islamic Studies at Southern Methodist University. "Fear isn't quantifiable; it's to the person's own experience."

While Suleiman doesn't foresee a blanket call to abandon the headscarf, he advises women to consider practical measures, such as wearing a hoodie instead of a hijab if they feel like they may be in danger.

For many Muslim women, the head covering is a quintessential mark of their identity — much as the kippah or yarmulke is a customary requirement for Orthodox and some Conservative Jewish men.

While often understood as a symbol of modesty and privacy, the hijab is much more for those Muslim women who choose to wear it. They view it alternately as a sign of religious devotion, discipline, freedom from Western expectations, or simply a way to be in a continuous state of prayer.

Many Muslim women would never think of giving it up, even if it means being targeted.

"This is a difficult time," acknowledged Khalilah Sabra, a Raleigh Muslim activist who works for the Muslim American Society's Immigrant Justice Center. Just last month, a man spit in her face as she descended the stairs of the Garfield, N.J., Municipal Court, where she was testifying in a domestic violence dispute.

He came up to me and said, "Get the f— home," she said. "I had to pause and decide do I fight or let it go?"

Sabra decided to buck up and carry on.

"We have to stand up for our religious rights and encourage women to stand their ground," she said.

Others, however, are taking security measures.

On Nov. 9, when New York's Muslim Community Network posted a notice on Facebook about a self-defense workshop, leaders expected 50 or 60 women would respond. Within hours, 2,700 women had signed up.

The third such workshop at Judson Memorial Church in the Greenwich Village neighborhood took place Saturday (Dec. 10).

On Wednesday, the Council on American-Islamic Relations will sponsor a free self-defense workshop at Aqabah Karate studio in College Park, Md.

"A lot of people have been traumatized," said Debbie Almontaser, the Muslim Community Network's board president. "We want them to come in and feel empowered once they've finished the training."

The workshop's instructor is a woman, and the instruction is preceded by a group talk where women can share their fears and get advice on how to respond.

Other Muslim women are buying pepper spray, taking firearms training or applying for concealed carry permits.

And quietly, some Muslim women are uncovering their hair.

"One of the reasons women are encouraged to dress modestly is for their protection," said Engy Abdelkader, senior fellow and adjunct professor at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. "Once that purpose is no longer served there's an argument that

it becomes a matter of necessity to remove it or make it less conspicuous with a hat, for instance, in order to preserve her safety."

While Abdelkader still wears her hijab, Rose Ashraf has taken it off.

For Ashraf, there was no traumatizing incident. An operations director for a food service management company, Ashraf, who lives in Houston, said her bosses were very supportive of her hijab.

But her work requires frequent travel and being a single veiled woman at airports, hotels and restaurants forced her to constantly look over her shoulder.

"By wearing the hijab, I felt like I was a target," said Ashraf, who converted to Islam shortly before she married a Muslim in 1973. "I was always on guard for what might happen: Is someone going to react negatively? Can I trust this person?"

Three months ago, she took off the headscarf. She feels safer, now, she said, but wishes she could also practice her faith more freely.

House joins Senate in approving heartbeat abortion bill

By Catherine Candisky, Randy Ludlow & Jim Siegel

The Columbus Dispatch (06.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2h3N7pc> - The election of Donald Trump emboldened majority Republicans in the Ohio General Assembly to pass the strictest abortion law in the nation Tuesday.

In a surprise move in the final days of the lame-duck session, the Senate and House adopted the Heartbeat Bill — long sought by some abortion opponents — to outlaw abortions once a fetal heartbeat can be detected, generally about six weeks into pregnancy.

Previous attempts to pass the bill failed over concerns that it would be ruled unconstitutional in the federal courts, as have similar laws in two other states.

"A new president, new Supreme Court appointees change the dynamic, and there was consensus in our caucus to move forward," said Senate President Keith Faber, R-Celina, when asked why the measure suddenly surfaced to the shock of objecting Democrats.

"I think it has a better chance than it did before," Faber said of the bill's chances of surviving a constitutional review by the courts.

Ohio Democratic Women's Caucus Chair Kathy DiCristofaro said "this bill — which was tacked on as a last-minute amendment to a child abuse prevention bill — makes no exceptions for rape or incest victims. It is cruel and plainly unconstitutional — but it seems like Ohio Republicans don't care about the Constitution. Trump's vision for America is already alive and well in the Buckeye State."

Janet Porter, president of Faith2Action who has pushed for passage of the bill for years, sometimes with harsh tactics including protests at members' homes, said, "it's a brand-new day with a Trump-appointed Supreme Court and we are very hopeful ... we will see babies with beating hearts protected again."

In the Senate, Faber engineered passage of the Heartbeat Bill by a 21-10 vote after it was added to an unrelated House-passed bill. House Bill 493 then returned to the House

Tuesday night where representatives held an emotional debate and voted 56-39 accept Senate amendments. In past years, the House has twice approved the ban, but it failed to clear the Senate.

With both sides using personal stories and observations, Republicans argued for saving lives, while Democrats argued to protect the sovereignty of a woman's body.

Sen. Kris Jordan, R-Ostrander, introduced the amendment in the Senate, saying, "This is just flat out the right thing to do. It affords the most important liberty of all – the opportunity to live."

The vote came over the protests of minority Senate Democrats, whose objections were repeatedly turned aside by Faber.

Sen. Minority Leader Joe Schiavoni, D-Boardman, said the amendment violated Senate rules by not being filed in a timely manner prior to session. Schiavoni predicted any such law banning abortions after a fetal heartbeat is detected will be found unconstitutional.

The bill would make it a fifth-degree felony, punishable by up to one year in prison, for a physician to perform an abortion without checking for a fetal heartbeat or performing the procedure after it can be detected. The doctor also could face a civil lawsuit from the mother and disciplinary action.

While several states have considered fetal heartbeat abortion bans, only two passed it, Arkansas and North Dakota. The laws in both states were later found to be unconstitutional by the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and declared illegal. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear appeals.

Officials of NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio were stunned. The group issued a statement saying, "The unconstitutional six-week abortion ban, known as the 'Heartbeat Bill,' would block access to safe and legal abortion before most women even know they're pregnant. The amendment has no exceptions in the bill for rape, incest, or to protect the health of the woman and would criminalize doctors who perform abortion procedures, regardless of the reason."

Executive Director Kellie Copeland added, "Clearly this bill's supporters are hoping that President-elect Trump will have the chance to pack the U.S. Supreme Court with justices poised to overturn Roe vs. Wade. We must prevent that from happening to protect women's lives."

Prior to the House vote, Emmalee Kalmbach, spokeswoman for Gov. John Kasich, declined to comment on the bill. However, Kasich said on several occasions in the past two years he opposed the Heartbeat Bill, primarily because of constitutional concerns. The governor could line-item veto the abortion language since it contains a \$100,000 appropriation to create the Joint Legislative Committee on Adoption Promotion.

Ohio Right to Life President Michael Gonidakis said his organization is neutral on the bill and has been pushing for separate legislation to ban abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy, which was added last-minute to a House committee Tuesday and also could get a vote this week.

"Our ultimate goal is to overturn Roe v. Wade and we feel the 20-week ban is the best (legal) strategy," he said. "There is a reason no other state has a Heartbeat Bill."

Supporting the bill marks a change in stance for Faber. In February 2015, Faber questioned why, if the Heartbeat Bill is unlikely to be upheld by the courts, lawmakers would pass a bill waiting six weeks to prohibit abortion instead of just banning it outright.

"If life begins at conception, then why are you picking a date where it's OK to kill babies?" Faber said in 2015.

In the Senate, Republicans Bill Coley of West Chester, Gayle Manning of North Ridgeville and Bill Seitz of Cincinnati joined all Democrats in voting against the amendment. Coley said it will waste millions in taxpayer dollars on legal fees for a bill with no chance of becoming law.

Seven House Republicans voted against the measure, including Reps. Mike Duffey of Worthington, Cheryl Grossman of Grove City and Stephanie Kunze of Hilliard.

About 30 peaceful protestors demonstrated outside the Governor's Residence in Bexley Tuesday night in opposition to the bill.

The contraceptive conundrum: The costly component of the Affordable Care Act for BYU students

By Lauren Vidler

HRWF (17.05.2016) - Some students at Brigham Young University (BYU), a private religious university in Utah, are faced with fines up to hundreds of dollars come tax season, as their school health plan is no longer adequate according to the federal standard.

As of August 31, 2015, BYU health insurances provided by Deseret Mutual, no longer qualifies as "minimum essential coverage" under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The student plan does not comply with the provision of federal law requiring contraceptive coverage.

The US Federal government added a female contraception mandate to the ACA, believing that companies which covered prescription drugs to their employees but didn't provide birth control were discriminating on the basis of sex. Contraceptive provision is not only a right of the woman but lack of affordable birth-control options can have far reaching consequences for society.

BYU's students, agree to abide by an Honor Code that prohibits premarital sex due to religious beliefs. However, according to the most recent available statistics from 2014, around one in four BYU students are married.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), which owns and operates the school of roughly 30,000, leaves it up to married couples in the Mormon faith to make their own choices on contraception. The LDS church does not prohibit the use of birth-control but rather states "The decision of how many children to have and when to have them is a private matter for the husband and wife." Yet, the church's own insurer, which covers all LDS Church employees — including BYU faculty — does not cover family-planning devices or medication.

Exclusions under the policy include family planning, including contraception, birth control devices, and/or sterilisation procedures, unless the patient meets "Deseret Mutual's current medical criteria". According to a source, in order to qualify for sterilisation or birth control, he and his wife had to have had five children, "the golden number" so to speak. No religious

doctrine has been found to support such a threshold, with official church statements stating, "Decisions about birth control and the consequences of those decisions rest solely with each married couple."

In 2012, the UN boldly declared access to contraception a human right, pressing that everyone should be able to determine when and if to have children. Providing a woman freedom to exercise her reproductive rights, can provide access and availability to other rights, such as the right to education. The report states, "Today, family planning is almost universally recognised as an intrinsic right".

The LDS church does not object to birth control on religious or moral grounds as some faiths do. But for several religious employers, providing access to contraception is contrary to religious beliefs or in some instances, immoral. Employers so minded have argued, they are being forced to choose between obeying their moral conscience and obeying the law of the land, and as such are suffering a violation of freedom of religion or belief.

Of the estimated 10,000 students covered under the school health insurance policy, not all will have to pay fines. But many, including international students— who have limited choice when it comes to health insurance— and students above the poverty line or those in three person families, face governmental penalties and depend upon non-profits for their contraceptive needs.

BYU is not the only religious school to fall short in failing to provide family-planning and contraceptive options. The University of Notre Dame and Catholic University, in Washington D.C., are amongst a number of religious schools challenging the federal regulations on religious grounds. This issue brings to light the tension between freedom of religion and belief and women's rights, which are often thought to have competing values.

Supreme Court dodges major decision on Obamacare birth control

By Lawrence Hurley

Reuters (17.05.2016) - <http://reut.rs/1OvRFLy> - The ideologically deadlocked Supreme Court on Monday failed to resolve a major case involving the Obamacare law's mandatory birth control coverage, telling lower courts to reconsider the matter after tossing out their rulings favoring President Barack Obama.

With four conservative justices and four liberals, the court did not rule on the merits of the legal challenge by nonprofit Christian employers who objected to the 2010 healthcare law's requirement that they provide female workers with medical insurance paying for contraceptives.

The court's action avoided a possible 4-4 split that would have affirmed the lower-court rulings. The justices, shorthanded following February's death of conservative Justice Antonin Scalia, threw out seven rulings by federal appeals courts around the country that had backed the Obama administration.

The justices handed at least a short-term victory to the religious employers, primarily Roman Catholic organizations.

The decision suggested a possible compromise for the lower courts that would allow women to get contraception coverage without violating the religious rights of employers, by having

the government arrange coverage directly with health insurers rather than requiring employers to sign off on it.

"The court expresses no view on the merits of the cases. In particular, the court does not decide whether petitioners' religious exercise has been substantially burdened," the unsigned ruling stated.

In a separate order, the court sent six other pending cases on the same issue back to lower courts, including two in which the religious employers prevailed.

Among the employers challenging the contraception mandate were the Roman Catholic archdioceses of Washington and Pittsburgh, the Little Sisters of the Poor order of nuns, and Christian colleges.

"We are pleased that the court confirms that there is a path forward that recognizes our religious liberty, yet we also recognize that this struggle will continue," said Cardinal Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington.

The justices in previous decisions since 2012 had fended off other major conservative challenges to Obamacare, considered Obama's signature domestic policy achievement.

Obama, following the court's action, reiterated his demand that the U.S. Senate confirm Merrick Garland, his nominee to replace Scalia.

"I won't speculate as to why they punted, but my suspicion is if we had nine Supreme Court justices instead of eight there might have been a different outcome," Obama told the online media outlet BuzzFeed.

'Seamless access'

"We are disappointed that the court did not resolve once and for all whether the religious beliefs of religiously affiliated nonprofit employers can block women's seamless access to birth control," Gretchen Borchelt of the National Women's Law Center added.

The dispute before the justices focused on whether nonprofit entities that oppose the contraception mandate on religious grounds can object under a 1993 U.S. law called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to a compromise measure offered by the Obama administration.

The Christian employers challenged the 2013 compromise that let organizations opposed to providing insurance covering contraception to comply with the law without actually paying for the coverage.

Under the compromise, employers can certify they are opting out of the requirement by signing a form and submitting it to the government. The government then asks insurers to pay the cost of contraceptives.

The court's decision, with no justices issuing a dissent, declined to decide whether the accommodation violated the employers' religious rights by forcing them to authorize the contraception coverage even if they are not paying for it.

Sonia Sotomayor, joined by fellow liberal justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, wrote a concurring opinion stressing the narrow nature of the decision. Lower courts should not view the ruling "as signals of where this court stands," Sotomayor wrote.

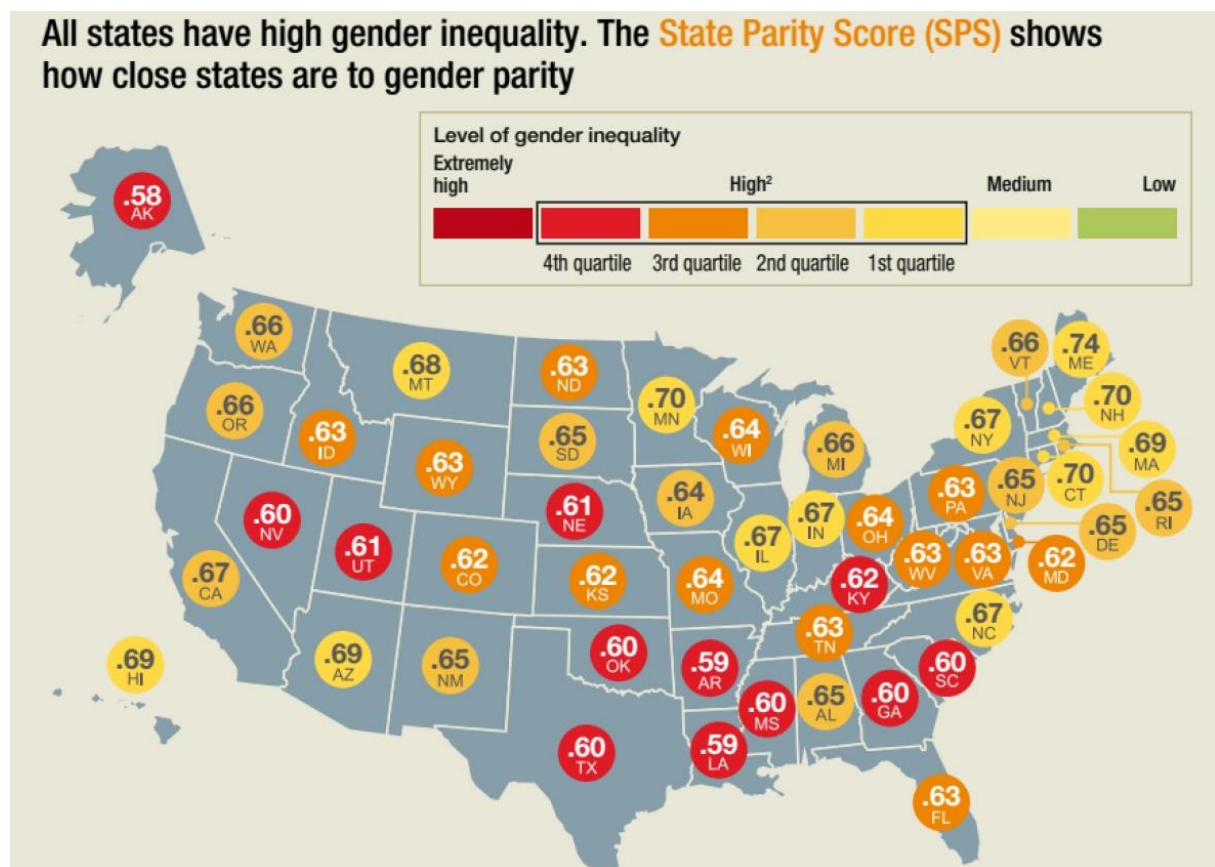
The court told the lower courts to consider modified positions that the government and the employers have taken following a request by the justices after oral arguments in March for the two sides to outline possible compromises.

The administration had conceded there may be an alternative way of providing birth control coverage without requiring employers to sign off on it.

For their part, the employers said their religious rights would not be infringed upon if the government required coverage to be supplied by their private insurer as long as they do not have to take any action seen as endorsing it.

The Christian employers call birth control immoral and assert that the federal government should not force religious believers to pick between following their faith and following the law.

U.S.A.: The US is failing miserably on six of 10 markers of gender equality



A score of 1 would indicate full gender equality.

Business Insider (09.04.2016) - <http://read.bi/1SpUAZT> - The US could increase its GDP by trillions if it fixed gender inequality, according to a new report from the McKinsey Global Institute.

In a paper released on Thursday, MGI reported that poor performance in six of 10 major indicators of gender equity, including violence against women and business leadership representation, are keeping the country from reaching its economic potential.

By taking the steps necessary to increase women's participation in the workforce, reduce the gender gap in work hours (women hold more part-time jobs and fewer full-time jobs than men), and hire women in the economy's most productive sectors, the US could add up to \$4.3 trillion to its economy by 2025, MGI says.

That's an admittedly high estimate that assumes full gender equity in all areas, which we probably can't expect by 2025 no matter how many mediocre men we stomp under our biz-casual pumps on our way up the corporate ladder. But even if, for the next decade, every state just matched the best respective state's performance over the last decade in meeting each of those three goals, the country's GDP would rise by \$2.1 trillion by 2025.

That's 10 percent better than our usual rate of growth, MGI says, an expansion equivalent to adding another entire state of Texas to our economy. Each individual state and city would see a GDP jump of at least 5 percent—and up to 13 percent—by ramping up gender equity to that level. MGI estimates that getting there will take \$475 billion in additional capital investment to create 6.4 million jobs. That seems unlikely to materialize, but the growth opportunity is there.

Thursday's report also ranks every US state on gender parity, as measured by 10 indicators: women's participation in the work force, the types of jobs women hold, the number of women in higher education, the maternal mortality rate, the number of women who hold leadership positions in their work, how many hours women spend on unpaid work, the number of single mothers, the teen pregnancy rate, women's representation in politics, and rates of violence against women.

MGI found that the US rated decently on the first four indicators, but registered high or extremely high levels of inequality on the latter six. There are 66 women in US business leadership positions for every 100 men, for instance, and women do nearly twice the amount of unpaid care-related work that men do.

New England fared well: Maine, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, in addition to Minnesota, had the country's highest levels of gender equity. They were followed by Hawaii, Arizona, Montana, North Carolina, Illinois, Indiana, and New York. States in the South fared worst: Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alaska, Nevada, Texas, South Carolina, Georgia, and Oklahoma came in as the least equitable places for women.

The country is already showing some improvement in at least one of these areas. The teen pregnancy rate is falling fast, largely thanks to improvements in sex education and contraception. But one of the most appalling sections of the MGI report deals with violence against women, which harms women's economic advancement through lost wages and productivity in addition to causing physical and emotional damage.

MGI's analysts found that one out of every three US women is a survivor of intimate partner violence, and half of US women have survived sexual violence of some kind. These rates align with many other countries in the world, but virtually none of our developmental peers, Fortune reports.

The most important takeaway from the report is that social and economic equality are interdependent goals. MGI studied the state of women in 95 countries and found almost no cases in which women enjoyed equality in society but not in the workplace. Women who take on a disproportionate share of unpaid labor at home are less likely to take a job outside the home or advance in their fields.

Women who get pregnant as teenagers or suffer domestic abuse do not achieve on par with their peers in the workforce. When women are highly represented in political offices, bills that advance women and children come to the fore, and when a woman holds the

highest political office in the land, her country's GDP improves. Any advancement in any of the six most critical areas of inequity would boost the others as well—and any stagnation will stunt the betterment of the rest.

Leading imam quits as debate over women's 'hypersexuality' boils over at major U.S. mosque

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey and Abigail Hauslohner

The Washington Post (09.06.2017) - <http://wapo.st/2szSYbu> - Johari Abdul-Malik has worked to pull his embattled mosque "out of the fire" too many times, and on Friday he decided he had enough.

Abdul-Malik, an imam and the public face of Dar al-Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, Va., one of the nation's largest and oft-embattled mosques, resigned after he said the mosque's board failed to adequately address a brewing controversy over the banned practice of female genital mutilation.

The mosque's lead imam, Shaker Elsayed, drew a wave of condemnation from Abdul-Malik and young Muslim activists earlier in the week after he appeared to endorse a certain form of female genital mutilation as sometimes necessary to prevent "hypersexuality."

The practice — considered a human rights violation by the World Health Organization — is banned in the United States and throughout much of the world, and it has no basis in Islam's holy text, the Koran. The mosque's board condemned Elsayed's comments as out of line with both U.S. and Islamic law and placed him on administrative leave.

But Abdul-Malik, who has worked on helping the mosque to scrub its image in the 15 years since 9/11, said Elsayed needed to be fired.

In a letter tendering his resignation Friday, Abdul-Malik cited "the lack of decisive leadership" from the mosque's board and Elsayed's "many reprehensible statements." Abdul-Malik had called for Elsayed's dismissal, and resigned Friday after the board decided not to do so: "I have worked to pull us out of the fire many times. And this is indefensible," Abdul-Malik said.

Elsayed said last month during a lecture that limited "circumcision" of girls is sometimes necessary to curb women's sex drive, advising congregants to consult with a Muslim gynecologist before proceeding.

FGM is a common practice among some Muslim and Christian populations in parts of Africa and Asia. Experts say it has no health benefits and can lead to infections, hemorrhaging, childbirth complications and death.

Communities that engage in the practice do so for a variety of reasons, including societal pressure and myths that it serves health or religious purposes.

The U.S. government estimates that there are roughly 500,000 women and girls living in the United States who hail from countries where FGM is prevalent; it is unclear how often the practice occurs in the United States. Federal prosecutors recently charged three Michigan doctors in the female genital mutilation of two girls, the first such federal case.

Right-wing critics of Islam have long sought to highlight female genital mutilation as a distinctly barbaric practice condoned by the Muslim religion, and one that is likely to spread

if more Muslims are allowed into the country. ACT for America, the country's largest anti-Muslim organization, is staging nationwide demonstrations on Saturday partly to protest FGM.

Dar al-Hijrah hired Abdul-Malik 15 years ago, after the mosque came under intense scrutiny for being the onetime house of worship for two of the 9/11 hijackers. Several years later, the mosque's former imam, Anwar al-Aulaqi, invited further investigation of the mosque after he began espousing terrorist ideology from a hideout in Yemen. And then there was Nidal Hassan, the Fort Hood shooter, who had also visited the mosque at some point in the years prior to his rampage.

Abdul-Malik, a charismatic 60-year-old American-born convert with a penchant for youthful slang, has acted as the mosque's public liaison; hosting roundtables with FBI officials, giving media interviews, leading Dar al-Hijrah's efforts to build friendships with rabbis, priests, pastors and local officials, and above all, providing answers.

"Aulaqi was not radical while he was with us," he'd repeat time and again in response to right-wing critics who accused the mosque of being a haven for terrorists. "Nidal Hassan was not part of our congregation. The 9/11 commission found us harmless regarding the two hijackers," he'd say, noting also that the mosque believes in peace, tolerance and education.

A little over a month ago, Abdul-Malik went through all these talking points at a meeting in Manassas with the Republican Party of Virginia. The party was promoting a petition that demanded an apology from the state's attorney general for visiting the mosque, arguing that the mosque was a hotbed for extremism. Abdul-Malik responded to the allegations, and he defended previous statements by Elsayed: "out of context," he told the meeting. He considered the conversation a victory.

Then came Elsayed's comments on female genital mutilation.

"For 15 years I've been able to defend Dar al-Hijrah," he said. "And I can make progress if we have a kind of partnership to move controversial issues forward. But if there isn't enough capacity in the institution to face challenges like this, I ruin my own reputation to be able to make change by staying."

The scrutiny over Dar al-Hijrah's track record, which has also made the mosque a prime target for hate mail, threats and inciteful blog posts over the years, was traumatic for its congregation of some 3,000 Muslims, most of them immigrants. And in the face of crisis, "hunkering down" often felt like the best option, members of the mosque said.

"A lot of Muslims [at Dar al-Hijrah] feel like they've been under attack and feel like they've made a lot of concessions since 9/11 and now they want to plant this flag on this hill," said Tariq Nelson, who has visited the mosque in the past. "It's been boiling under the surface but came to a head over this."

Dar al-Hijrah's board said Friday that it stood by its "unequivocal" condemnation of FGM as un-Islamic, but also that it is seeking to forgive Elsayed and move forward.

11 Years Old, a Mom, and Pushed to Marry Her Rapist in Florida

By Nicholas Kristof

The New York Times (26.05.2017) - <http://nyti.ms/2r1Z8fL> - When she was a scrawny 11-year-old, Sherry Johnson found out one day that she was about to be married to a 20-year-old member of her church who had raped her.

"It was forced on me," she recalls. She had become pregnant, she says, and child welfare authorities were investigating — so her family and church officials decided the simplest way to avoid a messy criminal case was to organize a wedding.

"My mom asked me if I wanted to get married, and I said, 'I don't know, what is marriage, how do I act like a wife?'" Johnson remembers today, many years later. "She said, 'Well, I guess you're just going to get married.'"

So she was. A government clerk in Tampa, Fla., refused to marry an 11-year-old, even though this was legal in the state, so the wedding party went to nearby Pinellas County, where the clerk issued a marriage license. The license (which I've examined) lists her birth date, so officials were aware of her age.

Not surprisingly, the marriage didn't work out — two-thirds of marriages of underage girls don't last, one study found — but it did interrupt Johnson's attendance at elementary school. Today she is campaigning for a state law to curb underage marriages, part of a nationwide movement to end child marriage in America. Meanwhile, children 16 and under are still being married in Florida at a rate of one every few days.

You're thinking: "Child marriage? That's what happens in Bangladesh or Tanzania, not America!"

In fact, more than 167,000 young people age 17 and under married in 38 states between 2000 and 2010, according to a search of available marriage license data by a group called Unchained at Last, which aims to ban child marriage. The search turned up cases of 12-year-old girls married in Alaska, Louisiana and South Carolina, while other states simply had categories of "14 and younger."

Unchained at Last was not able to get data for the other states. But it extrapolated that in the entire country, there were almost 250,000 child marriages between 2000 and 2010. Some backing for that estimate comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, which says that at least 57,800 Americans age 15 to 17 reported being in marriages in 2014.

Among the states with the highest rates of child marriages were Arkansas, Idaho and Kentucky. The number of child marriages has been falling, but every state in America still allows underage girls to marry, typically with the consent of parents, a judge or both. Twenty-seven states do not even set a minimum age by statute, according to the Tahirih Justice Center's Forced Marriage Initiative.

A great majority of the child marriages involve girls and adult men. Such a sexual relationship would often violate statutory rape laws, but marriage sometimes makes it legal.

In New Hampshire, a girl scout named Cassandra Levesque learned that girls in her state could marry at 13. So she set out to change the law.

A legislator sponsored Cassandra's bill to raise the age to 18, and researchers found that two 15-year-olds had recently married in New Hampshire, along with one 13-year-old. But politicians resisted the initiative.

"We're asking the Legislature to repeal a law that's been on the books for over a century, that's been working without difficulty, on the basis of a request from a minor doing a Girl

Scout project,” scoffed one state representative, David Bates. In March the Republican-led House voted to kill the bill, leaving the minimum age at 13. (Legislators seem willing to marry off girls like Cassandra, but not to listen to them!)

New Jersey lawmakers passed a bill that would make their state the first in the country to ban marriages of people under 18, but Gov. Chris Christie this month blocked the legislation. New York legislators are considering a bill backed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to raise the age to 17, from the current minimum, 14.

Opponents worry that raising the age will lead to out-of-wedlock births, and they note that many underage marriages are consensual.

Globally, a girl marries before the age of 15 every seven seconds, according to estimates by Save the Children. As in Africa and Asia, the reasons for such marriages in the U.S. are often cultural or religious; the American families follow conservative Christian, Muslim or Jewish traditions, and judges sometimes feel that they shouldn't intrude on other cultures.

Johnson, the former 11-year-old unwitting bride who is now fighting for Florida to set a minimum marriage age (there is none now), says that her family attended a conservative Pentecostal church and that other girls of a similar age periodically also married. Often, she says, this was to hide rapes by church elders.

She says she was raped by both a minister and a parishioner and gave birth to a daughter when she was just 10 (the birth certificate confirms that). A judge approved the marriage to end the rape investigation, she says, telling her, “What we want is for you to get married.”

“It was a terrible life,” Johnson recalls, recounting her years as a child raising children. She missed school and remembers spending her days changing diapers, arguing with her husband and struggling to pay expenses. She ended up with pregnancy after pregnancy — nine children in all — while her husband periodically abandoned her.

“They took the handcuffs from handcuffing him,” she says, referring to the risk he faced of arrest for rape, “to handcuffing me, by marrying me without me knowing what I was doing.”

“You can't get a job, you can't get a car, you can't get a license, you can't sign a lease,” she adds, “so why allow someone to marry when they're still so young?”

Those are precisely the reasons marriages for even 17-year-olds are problematic, according to Fraydya Reiss, who founded Unchained at Last to fight forced marriage and child marriage. Bullied by their parents into marriage, she says, girls may feel powerless to object — and fearful of telling a judge that they don't want to wed. If they try to flee an abusive marriage, they are turned away from shelters and may be treated as simple runaways.

Some judges and clerks intervene on behalf of young girls; others do not. Reiss says one clerk told a 16-year-old bride: “Don't cry. This is supposed to be the happiest day of your life.”

“For almost all of them,” says Reiss, “marriage means rape on their wedding night and thereafter.” Reiss, now 42, says she was forced into a marriage at age 19 by her ultra-Orthodox Jewish family.

Lyndsy Duet, now a school counselor in Texas, told me that she was forced into a marriage at 17 after enduring a series of rapes beginning when she was 14, by a young man her

conservative Christian family had taken into the house. Confused, shamed and helpless, she didn't speak up — but her rapist did.

"He asked my parents if he could marry me," Duet remembers. "My mom was crying, she was so happy."

Duet felt powerless to resist her parents' pressure — and it was eight years before she could flee what she says was a violent marriage. Once, she says, her husband threatened her with a chain saw, and it was only when she went to college on her own and proved a brilliant student (she graduated first in her class) that she was able to escape.

"Most girls who reach out to us love their families," Reiss says, "and their primary concern is that they don't want their families to get into trouble."

The United States has denounced child marriage in other countries as a "human rights abuse that contributes to economic hardship," in the words of a State Department document published last year.

Let's listen to ourselves. State legislators must understand that child marriage is devastating in Niger and Afghanistan — and also in New York and Florida. It's past time to end child marriage right here at home.

Ivanka Trump 'inspires' a \$100 million donation from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to a women's empowerment fund

- The funding will not be used to promote priority women's rights issues in Saudi Arabia nor the UAE
- The World Economic Forum ranked Saudi Arabia 141st out of 144 countries in its 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, showing a worsening situation as it was ranked 134th in 2015.

HRWF (24.05.2017) – As U.S. President Donald Trump is on an official visit to Belgium today, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* criticizes the President and his daughter for paying lip service to the authorities of the Arabic Peninsula regarding women's empowerment issues.

During their visit, Ivanka Trump, President Trump's eldest daughter and senior White House advisor, discussed women's rights and apparently 'inspired' a large donation to be made to women's empowerment; however, within these talks Ivanka Trump failed to address the serious violations of women's fundamental rights in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The \$100 million donation

On the occasion of President Trump's visit to Ryad, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates donated \$100 million to the World Bank Women Entrepreneurs Fund, a fund supposedly "proposed" by Ivanka Trump.

The donation is aimed at efforts for women in the Middle East. The Wall Street Journal reports that the fund will specifically support women who start businesses [1]. Ivanka Trump will not have any influence over the allocation of these funds.

This news is shocking and paradoxical, as women's fundamental rights are severely violated in the region. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are banned from driving and are required to receive permission from a male guardian to travel or wed.

At a meeting with elite professional women in Saudi Arabia, Ivanka Trump remarked that the country's progress on women's rights has been "very encouraging" but that "there's still a lot of work to be done".

How oppressed are women in Saudi Arabia?

The shocking nature of these meetings and the donation can only be understood upon the recognition of the severity of human rights violations for women in the country.

"The World Economic Forum [3] ranked Saudi Arabia near the bottom in its 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, with the country earning 141st out of 144 countries in 2016. Ranked at 134th in 2015, the situation in the country is clearly getting worse. It was only in December 2015 that Saudi women finally got the right to vote and to run for office – and even then only in municipal elections" Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers remarked in his reaction to the shocking lip service operation.

Furthermore, Human Rights Watch highlights that women "may be required to provide guardian consent in order to work or access healthcare" they continue on saying "Women regularly face difficulty conducting a range of transactions without a male relative, from renting an apartment to filing legal claims."

Activist Loujain al-Hathoul, who was jailed in 2014 for driving in Saudi Arabia, told The Washington Post that her concern with events, such as the meetings with Ivanka Trump, "is that they show these women as powerful and making an impact, making a change. But in real life, they've been giving these opportunities by the men. They did not fight for them." [4]

The criticism for this illegitimate effort has been heard from on both sides of the talks. In the U.S. Ivanka Trump has been criticized for paying lip service to issues women face while failing to influence her father to take real action on policies such as affordable child care. Some Saudi activists have also criticized Ivanka Trump and the women she met with for not doing enough to address some of the serious issues that women face in Saudi Arabia.

[1] <http://on.wsj.com/2rFQmVz>

[2] <http://bit.ly/2qVejsJ>

[3] <http://bit.ly/2el9jG7>

[4] <http://wapo.st/2qfFUDZ>

Child marriage is legal in New York – but this bill aims to stop it

By Meghan Werft

Global Citizen (15.02.2017) - <http://gblbctzn.me/2mkBfOC> - Just a few years ago in the state of New York, a 14-year-old girl legally married a 26-year-old man.

It was, without question, child marriage – an issue that the United Nations says is a flagrant human rights violation. But marriage at the age of 14 is legal in New York and many other states in the US, provided the parents and a court give their permission.

One lawmaker in New York is hoping to change that law and make it impossible for children to get married at an age that makes them vulnerable to sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Amy Paulin, Democratic Assemblywoman for New York's 88th District, introduced a bill to the New York State Assembly that would prohibit marriage under the age of 17 and require court permission for marriages of anyone under 18.

"I can't even begin to imagine the physical, psychological and emotional traumas these children have suffered," said Paulin. "We must safeguard the health, safety and welfare of our children, who are the future of our society."

Paulin introduced the bill following a campaign by child rights activists who released a stunt video of a child marriage in Times Square last year that, amassed 15 million views on YouTube and shocked New Yorkers. The sad reality is that child marriage does occur in New York and throughout the US, legally.

Nearly 4,000 teenagers were married, legally, in New York between 2000 and 2010 according to Human Rights Watch. Not far from the video above, an astonishing 84% of child marriages in New York were between girls under 18, and adult men.

Laws have been slow to change partly because of outdated belief that marriage can be a solution to teen pregnancy, or fear of infringing on religious freedoms. However, young marriages have higher rates of divorce, cases of poverty, and negatively impact girls' mental health and access to education — to name just a few counterarguments.

"Child pregnancy should trigger alarm bells, not wedding bells," said Marlena Hartz, spokesperson for the Tahirih Justice Center, a legal council group that advocates for eliminating parental permission clauses that allow child marriage in the US.

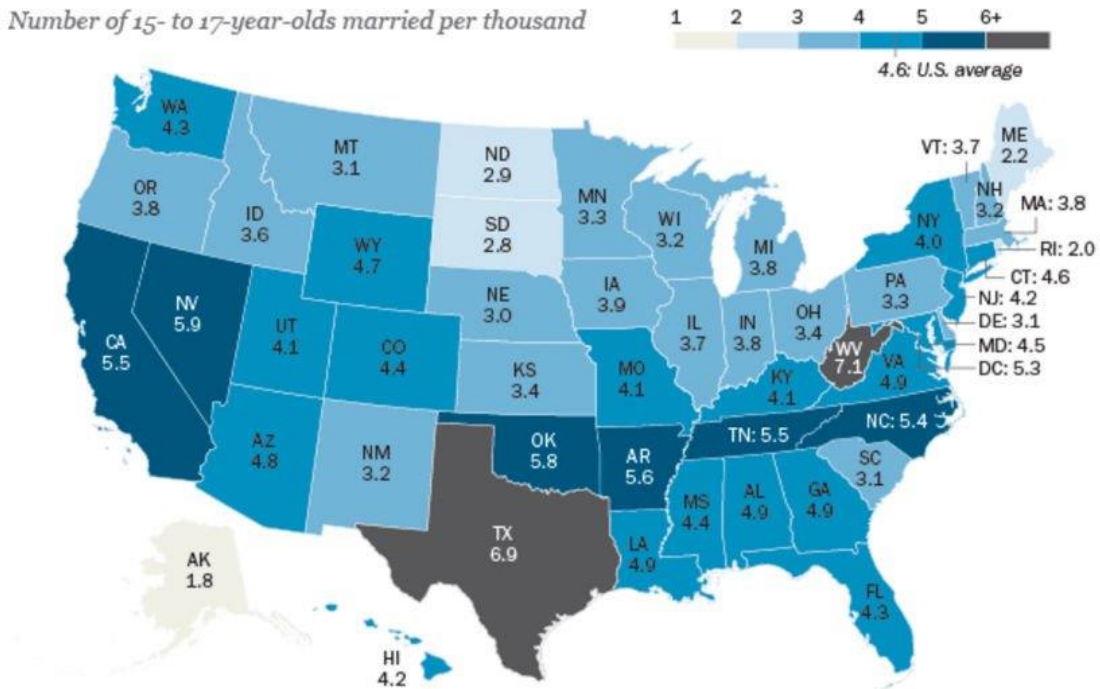
New York is one of five states, including Alaska, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, North Carolina, that allow child marriage via parental loopholes for children as young as 14.

Though rare, child marriage is much more common than you might think in the US, especially in Southern states. In West Virginia and Texas, 7 out of 1,000 youth age 15-17 are married.

In New York, four of every 1,000 teens between the ages of 15 and 17 are married, according to Pew Research Center. Girls are also more likely to be married at a young age than boys in the US.

Child marriage is more common in the southern United States

Number of 15- to 17-year-olds married per thousand



Note: Marriage rates for 2014 are five-year estimates that include data collected from 2010-2014. Respondents who are separated, divorced, or widowed are not counted as "married" but are included in the total population of 15- to 17-year-olds. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey data (2014 five-year estimates)

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In the vast majority of states - 44 of them - the legal marriage age with parental permission is 16 years old. But in the states that have exceptions, the age can be much, much lower.

In New Hampshire and Massachusetts, kids can get married as soon as they turn 13.

In Virginia girls can be married at 13 if they are pregnant. There were four cases of marriage of 13-year-olds and 24 cases of legal marriage of 14-year-olds in the state between 2004-2014 according to Maribeth Brewster, a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Health.

"I think that we can't know what all the stories are behind those statistics, but I can tell you that when you have someone, an adolescent that young, there is a greater likelihood that the parents are coercing them to get married and it is not of their own free will," said Jeanne Smoot, a senior council for TJS.

As Smoot points out, at 14, a child is very much still a minor incapable of making their own decisions, and it is the responsibility of the law to step in and stand up for the rights of all vulnerable children.

Tanzania, the Gambia, and Zimbabwe have all taken steps to close loopholes in child marriage in the law in recent years. It's time for the US to follow suit.

Fortunately, New York lawmakers are now one step closer to protecting young girls and boys that, with hope, will spark change across the US.

Sexual assault in the time of Trump

Eight years of progress and funding for programmes countering sexual violence against women are about to be undone.

By Gina Benevento

Al Jazeera (24.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jO6HF5> - "Affirmative consent, for those who don't know, is the idea that if you don't consent at every stage of a sexual encounter, it's rape. That means asking for every kiss and asking for every boob squeeze. It's almost as if feminists want everyone to remain celibate."

These words were spoken last autumn to a packed auditorium of students at Auburn University in Alabama during a speech called How Feminism Hurts Women by Milo Yiannopoulos.

Yiannopoulos is senior editor for the far-right media outlet Breitbart News. The man who hired him is Stephen Bannon, ex-CEO of Breitbart News and President Donald Trump's chief strategist. Students didn't have to guess at Yiannopoulos' political affiliation: he addressed the students sporting a "Team Trump" jersey.

On his tour of American universities, Yiannopoulos is often joined by Christina Hoff Sommers, who in 2014 wrote an article entitled Rape Culture is a Panic Where Paranoia, Censorship and False Accusations Flourish which appeared in Time magazine. Sommers has also written for A Voice for Men, considered a hate site by the Southern Law Poverty Center.

Their viewpoints directly contradict the United States government's Department of Justice website, which states that 21 percent of female undergraduate students - approximately one in five - experience sexual assault while at university.

Yiannopoulos and Sommers dismiss this number. They don't like similar statistics from the Center for Disease Control or the Association of American Universities either.

They also don't like that former President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden have been using this statistic to draw attention to - and to allocate resources for - campus rape. It angers them.

Yiannopoulos and Sommers aren't alone. Behind them is a burgeoning men's rights movement who believe there is a vast and powerful women's lobby, backed by the White House, the National Organization for Women and rich female celebrities, among others. Their agenda? "It's about man-hating," Yiannopoulos says .

And what is the most hateful thing that they do? They enacted legislation and support programmes to protect women.

Eight years of progress

In 1994, Biden (then a senator) authored the landmark Violence Against Women Act, still the primary legislation protecting American women. And when Biden joined Obama's team in 2008, he requested that his vice-presidential staff, in addition to the Justice Department, work on violence against women.

The issue of campus rape seized Biden, who became a crusader. Like Yiannopoulos, he launched a university tour, but Biden's tour came out squarely on the side of young women. Speaking at the University of Pittsburgh, Biden said that prosecutors are still allowed to

ask rape victims what they were wearing; "What difference does it make, what a woman was wearing? [...] No one, particularly a court of law, has the right to ask any of those questions," he said.

With Biden's prodding, the White House issued tough new guidance regarding a 1972 law called Title IX: Universities would combat sexual assault on campus - or risk losing government funding. As of March 2016, 167 universities were under investigation for violating Title IX.

A special White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault was created, and a public campaign, "It's On Us", was launched.

Reports of campus sexual assault increased, which legal experts and academics attributed to heightened awareness of the issue. United Educators, a company providing insurance services to 1,300 US colleges and universities, stated that sexual assault claims among its clients increased twofold from 2011 to 2013.

Referring to the past eight years, Lisa Maatz, vice president of the American Association of University Women, said: "We've had a perfect storm around campus sexual assault. Survivors coming forward at an unprecedented rate, an administration that took an interest, and the right staffing at the Education Department to start getting things done."

But a new far-right universe has come to power in the White House, and whether you listen to Jeff Sessions, nominee for Attorney General, or examine leaked Trump team proposed budgets, funding for the Violence Against Women Act will cease. That means 25 grants focused on "reducing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking by strengthening services for victims and holding offenders accountable" will disappear.

And in scrapping The Violence Against Women Act, the new president, one who prides himself on being pro-police, will also be cutting grant programmes which teach law enforcement staff how to respond to domestic violence and sexual assault.

Trump's convenient demonisation of immigrants, minorities and Muslims will mask a real epidemic of sexual violence against women - largely perpetrated by white, middle-class men.

Think of the Vanderbilt University football players who gang-raped an unconscious young woman. Or former Stanford University swimmer, Brock Turner, found guilty of multiple felony counts including penetration of an unconscious person.

"If you cannot consent because you are unconscious, it is rape. Period." said Biden.

An invisible crime

Brock Turner's father argued that his son shouldn't have been jailed "for 20 minutes of action".

I suspect Brock Turner's father would say he can't see the damage. With a dead body the crime is undeniable. Unless there is a black eye or broken bones, the crime of rape isn't visible. Rape survivors can still be very pretty.

I know that for a fact. A few months shy of 15, I was abducted, drugged, raped and left in darkness in a ditch in an Everglades swamp. When I returned to school a few days later, I looked like the same pretty teenager, green eyes and long curly hair, as before.

I was quiet, very quiet - that was the only external sign. But inside everything - everything - had changed. My life became panic attacks, de-personalisation and suicidal thoughts so relentless that twice, for my own safety, I had to put myself into hospital.

There weren't programmes like the ones implemented by the Violence Against Women Act available to me. There was nothing.

Years later, during rape counselling at St Vincent's Hospital in New York, I would repeat endlessly to the therapist: "Why me? I never even kissed a boy."

I'm a writer and still, after all these years, I can't find words for what was stolen from me. Almost no one in my life knows I was raped. Keeping it quiet somehow made me feel as if I could keep that young, trusting girl whose dream was to kiss a boy she liked ... alive. She didn't deserve to die.

And that's how almost all rape victims feel.

How the US global gag rule threatens health clinics across Kenya and Uganda

Campaigners warn Trump's reinstatement of a policy cutting aid to organisations who offer abortion services will devastate family planning provision

By Murithi Mutiga

The Guardian (24.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2j9uQUF> - Each day she sets out to speak to young girls about family planning, Elizabeth Akoth, 23, sees how myths about the use of contraceptives are entrenched in her western Kenyan community.

When she explains the various methods they can use to prevent unintended pregnancies, they ask searching questions such as, "Is it true drugs offered for family planning can lead to death?" and "Do they even work?"

Akoth and her fellow peer educators in Homa Bay, a town on the shores of Lake Victoria, have educated dozens of girls on the family planning options available to them, undoubtedly saving many from the unintended pregnancies that often force girls to drop out of school.

But their work may well grind to a halt following the re-imposition by the Trump administration of the global gag rule, a policy that cuts funding to foreign organisations if they provide abortion information, referrals or services, or if they engage in any advocacy on abortion rights with their own funds. Organisations are offered the choice to stop offering these services and still receive funding, or to continue and lose financial support.

Campaigners say the policy will have a devastating impact on millions in many developing countries.

"This blocks access to sexual and reproductive health services in the poorest and hardest to reach communities where we are currently changing lives," says Tewodros Melesse, director general of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). "We can't support something which tries to restrict people's choices or take them away. The global gag rule undermines those human rights, so IPPF cannot sign the policy."

Ending this US aid, which currently stands at \$600m (£474m), will result in cuts to funding for sexual and reproductive health services in at least 30 countries where IPPF partner organisations work.

Campaigners say this will have a negative effect on the most vulnerable groups that benefit from family planning advice: teenage girls.

About 16 million girls aged 15 to 19, and one million girls under the age of 15, give birth every year, according to the World Health Organization. The majority of these girls live in low- and middle-income countries. Globally, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for girls aged between 15 and 19.

Girls who become pregnant in their teens face considerable stigma and are often forced to drop out of school, spelling a life marked by early marriage and low-skilled jobs. This has a larger economic cost to countries as they lose out on the income an educated young woman would have earned if she had finished school.

Babies born to adolescent mothers also face a substantially higher risk of dying young than those born to women aged 20 to 24, the WHO finds.

Bernard Washiaka, programme manager for Family Health Options Kenya, one of the country's main providers of sexual and reproductive health services, says an end to its programmes would have a major effect on many women and young girls.

"We live in a patriarchal, male-dominated society and the advice and information we offer helps to empower girls," he says. "They can enjoy their sexuality while avoiding unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The services are entirely voluntary and based on the decisions of the girls, but we have seen the impact they] have ... Girls are able to stay in school for a longer which opens up a world of opportunity."

Washiaka, whose organisation's primary outreach tool is deploying trained peer educators such as Akoth, said there is a risk of returning to the situation of the 80s and 90s, when the implementation of the global gag rule by successive Republican administrations caused the closure of numerous clinics in many underserved communities in Kenya.

Other programmes that may face closure include a pilot initiative in Uganda that distributes Sayana Press, a three-month injectable contraceptive that combines the drug and needle in one unit. The contraceptive can be distributed easily across communities and be self-administered at home.

Uganda has one of the highest fertility rates and youngest populations in the world; almost half of Ugandans are under the age of 15 and 78% of the population is younger than 30. Millions of Ugandans living in rural communities do not have access to family planning facilities and Jackson Chekweko, executive director of Reproductive Health Uganda, told the Guardian that the organisation would have to end many of its activities if USAid terminates financial assistance.

"As well as reaching more people with family planning services, we need to give women more choices about the form of contraception they want. Sayana Press does that," he says.

Family Health Options Kenya is lobbying local government administrations to allocate funds for family planning from their health budgets. But, says Washiaka, they face a difficult battle because county administrators have to cater for numerous health challenges with a limited budget.

"We will also have to lobby non-traditional donors, such as the Japanese aid agency [Jica] and the Swedish aid agency [Sida]. The alternative is to leave our young children facing a bleak future."

Further reading:

[Gag me: Trump's anti-abortion executive order](#)

[Dutch Government Wants to Counter Trump With Abortion Funds](#)

[7 Ways to Make Your Voice Heard Following the Women's March](#)

US abortion rate is lowest since Roe v Wade – but contraception access may go

Study finds strong indication contraception access linked to abortion fall; Republican Affordable Care Act repeal would end easier access to birth control

By Molly Redden

The rate of abortion in the US reached a lower level in 2014 than in any other year since the procedure first became legal, a study has found, a decline that appears to be due to the widespread use of contraception producing a drop in unintended pregnancies.

Nineteen percent of pregnancies ended in abortion in 2014 – the lowest abortion rate since the supreme court handed down Roe v Wade in 1973, legalizing the procedure – and the number of abortions between 2011 and 2014 also fell, by 12%.

But the researchers found strong indications to link the decline in the abortion rate to the wider availability of highly effective contraception – which could be imperiled by efforts to repeal Obamacare by the incoming Republican administration.

The study appears in the latest issue of Guttmacher Institute's scholarly journal, Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, and was conducted by two of the institute's researchers, Rachel K Jones and Jenna Jerman.

The researchers made an estimate of the number of abortions by surveying local health department data and abortion clinics, which may be hampered by clinics that did not respond. Guttmacher is a thinktank that supports access to reproductive care, but its data is widely trusted by supporters and opponents of abortion rights alike.

The decline in the abortion rate was greatest in the midwest, south and north-east. Abortion is still a common procedure – in 2014, Jones and Jerman estimate, US women had 926,200 abortions – but there were nevertheless shifts in how abortions were performed. The number performed with medication, which is only effective early in a pregnancy, rose 7% to account for 31% of abortions outside a hospital setting.

There are competing theories to explain the decline in the abortion rate. The drop coincided with the enactment of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which made more effective and expensive methods of contraception, such as IUDs, available to millions more women for no "copay" or prescription charge. But the decline also aligned with a historic spike in new, state-level abortion restrictions.

Some data – such as trends in contraception usage – that could help determine the reasons for the decline are not yet available for 2014. Still, the researchers predicted that the drop in the abortion rate had less to do with new restrictions than with changes in contraception usage and a reduction in unintended pregnancies.

One clue is that more than 60% of the decline in the abortion rate took place in states that had not enacted new hurdles to getting the procedure.

If the drop is due to contraception, it would have alarming implications for Republicans' breakneck campaign to repeal the ACA. The law says that most health insurance plans must cover a broad range of contraceptive drugs and devices at no copay – the so-called contraception mandate. Public health advocates have credited this provision with an explosion in women's access to more affordable and more effective birth control.

Between the fall of 2012 and spring 2014, a separate Guttmacher study found, the share of privately insured women who had no copay for contraception quadrupled. By 2015, the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) found, 55.6 million US women had access to FDA-approved methods of contraception without a copay.

If Republicans were to repeal Obamacare, it is not clear that their replacement would contain a similar provision. Tom Price, Trump's nominee to lead the HHS, has put forth several proposals for an Obamacare replacement that do not contain a contraception mandate.

Separately, the vice-president-elect, Mike Pence, has proposed issuing a rule, through the HHS, that would allow business owners to refuse to cover contraception if doing so violates religious beliefs.

"Their agenda ... could stop or reverse progress in empowering women to meet their childbearing goals, including by avoiding unintended pregnancy," Joerg Dreweke, of Guttmacher, wrote in a policy brief accompanying the new study.

"There is strong evidence from recent abortion declines that supporting women's decision-making across the spectrum of reproductive healthcare is very much compatible with reducing abortion incidence."

The Guttmacher researchers found less evidence to link the decline in abortions or to new abortion restrictions. About 38% of the decline in the number of abortions was observed in 22 states that had enacted new restrictions significant enough to potentially impact women's access to abortion.

These included laws that imposed extra counseling for an abortion. But only eight of those 22 states had abortion declines that outranked the national average, and four states – Arkansas, Michigan, Mississippi and North Carolina – actually saw an increase in their abortion rates.

There was, however, one type of abortion restriction that seemed to cause a decline in the abortion rate. These were laws that placed medically unnecessary regulations on abortion clinics in order to shut them down.

The number of abortion clinics fell by 6% between 2011 and 2014, and the loss of access appeared to be linked with a decrease in abortions – although it could not account for the entire declines observed in those states. In June 2016, the supreme court ruled these kinds of laws to be unconstitutional.

On Tuesday, groups opposed to abortion linked the decline in the rate and number of abortions to laws that impose new restrictions. Clarke Forsythe, the acting president of the legal group Americans United for Life, said in a statement that those laws were a factor.

"Another factor in lowering the number of abortions is the power of beautiful pictures of life inside the womb, through ultrasound," he said. "Such pictures are worth more than a thousand words when it comes to helping people understand whose lives are on the line."

"Although Planned Parenthood and the abortion industry wants to say that this is a contraception story, the fact is, contraception has been around since the 1950s," added Kristi Hamrick, a spokeswoman for AUL.

The decline in the abortion rate from 2011 to 2014 continues a long downward trend. The US also saw its abortion rate drop between 2008 and 2011, driven, according to Guttmacher, by a steep decline in unintended pregnancies, probably explained by improvements in the use of contraception. As the abortion rate fell, the birth rate did not rise commensurately.

In particular, the rise of the use of highly effective, long-acting, reversible contraception, such as IUDs, might account for the drop in abortions.

Further reading:

[Abortion Could Be Outlawed in 33 States if Roe v Wade Overturned: Report](#)

NYPD captain suggests unsolved rape cases are 'not a trend that we're too worried about' because most weren't committed by strangers

By Michelle Mark

Business Insider UK (06.01.2017) - <http://read.bi/2iFNpAm> - A New York City Police Department captain drew backlash Friday for saying a spike in reported rapes was "not a trend that we're too worried about" because many of the perpetrators were acquainted with the victims, and not strangers.

The 94th Precinct, in the Greenpoint neighborhood in Brooklyn, has seen a 62.5% increase in reported rapes over the last year, with 10 out of 13 reported cases in 2016 remaining unsolved, DNAinfo reported Friday.

Police attributed the lack of arrests to the fact that most rapes were committed by victims' acquaintances, adding that women who reported the attacks often stopped cooperating with investigators, according to DNAinfo.

"Some of them were Tinder, some of them were hookup sites, some of them were actually coworkers. It's not a trend that we're too worried about because out of 13 (cases), only two were true stranger rapes," Captain Peter Rose told the website.

"Every rape should be investigated. I wish we could do more," Rose said.

Rose reportedly made further comments at a community council meeting Wednesday suggesting that rapes committed by strangers to the victim were more worrying to police than acquaintance rapes.

"They're not total abomination rapes where strangers are being dragged off the streets," he said.

"If there's a true stranger rape, a random guy picks up a stranger off the street, those are the troubling ones. That person has, like, no moral standards," he added.

Rose's comments received fierce backlash from the public and city officials alike, after being circulated on social media on Friday. Sexual-violence prevention advocates frequently decry the myths that most sexual assaults are committed by strangers and that such cases are more severe than assaults committed by acquaintances.

NYPD Deputy Commissioner Stephen Davis said Rose's comments "did not properly explain the complexity of issues involved with investigating rape complaints."

"Every report of rape is thoroughly investigated by specially trained detectives in the NYPD's Special Victims Unit. All complaints of rape and other types of sexual crimes are taken seriously whether they are committed by domestic partners, acquaintances, or strangers," Davis told Business Insider in a statement.

A spokesman for New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said "rape is rape," adding that the crime "merits no moral qualification and does not involve shades of criminality or degrees of danger."

And New York City's public advocate, Letitia James, said in a statement provided to Business Insider that she is "extremely disturbed and concerned" by Rose's comments, and called upon the police department to ensure its officers are properly trained to handle sex crimes and interact with victims.

"Too often, victims of rape and sexual crimes do not come forward because of fear that their claims won't be taken seriously, and these comments perpetuate those concerns," James said.

"I want victims to know that we believe them; we are here for them; and we will never tolerate rape or sexual assault in our society."

Statistics show that most sexual violence perpetrators are, in fact, known to the victim — just 28% of rapes are committed by strangers, according to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

On Friday afternoon, the women's rights group UltraViolet called upon the police department to immediately fire Rose "for his dangerous and unacceptable views."

"Captain Peter Rose and the NYPD are engaging in victim-blaming of the worst kind while judging which rapes they deem to be legitimate and which they do not," co-founder Nita Chaudhary said in a statement.

"With comments like these, it is not surprising that survivors of sexual assault don't feel comfortable reporting and cooperating with police authorities who dismiss the seriousness of violence against women."

Other reading:

[When men kill their partners, warning signs often missed](#)

Religious Freedom & Women's Rights share common ground

"Working together, advocates of religious freedom and women's rights could be a strong, bipartisan force that could make a difference in the lives of millions of women around the world."

By [Thomas Reese](#)

NCR (15.06.2016) - <https://bit.ly/2csMD6x> - Support for religious freedom often appears to be in conflict with women's rights both in the United States and abroad. In the debate over the contraceptive mandate, for example, the religious freedom rights of employers were set against the right of their women employees. This conflict is real and will eventually be worked out in society and the courts.

But the conflict between religious freedom and women's rights is bad for both sides. If those supporting religious freedom are perceived as opposing women's rights, they will suffer because they are fighting against an historical force that is only going to get stronger. If those supporting women's rights are seen as against religious freedom, they will suffer because religion is so fundamental to most of the world's outlook on life.

This is a lose, lose situation.

But is conflict between religious freedom and women's rights inevitable? I would argue that it is not and that there are areas where women's rights and religious freedom go hand in hand and can support each other. Rather than opposing each other all the time, supporters of religious freedom and women's rights could work together on some issues.

I think that this is especially true in the area of international religious freedom -- religious freedom outside the United States.

Follow the journeys of refugees around the world. [Read this special series from Global Sisters Report](#).

Although I am chair of the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#), what I write here does not necessarily represent the views of the commission.

It is true that there are legal and cultural practices supported by religious beliefs that treat women unequally in families, education, the workplace, and society. Examples would be female genital mutilation, forced marriages, honor killings, rigid dress codes, divorce laws favoring the husband, inheritance laws favoring male heirs, and restrictions on education, employment, and participation in political life.

Looked at one way, it appears that allowing freedom of religion is holding women down in these examples.

A way out of this apparent conflict is to emphasize that religious freedom is a human right that resides in the individual not in a religious tradition. "The human right to freedom of religion or belief does not protect religious traditions per se," [explained](#) Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, "but instead facilitates the free search and development of faith-related identities of human beings, as individuals and in community with others."

Religious freedom does not protect religious belief or religious institutions from challenge. Rather religious freedom protects the right of an individual to believe or not believe, to change one's religion if one desires, and to speak and act on those beliefs. It protects believers not beliefs. Religious freedom includes freedom of speech and press on religious topics, which allows individuals to challenge religious beliefs and traditions.

As a result, religious freedom in its true meaning empowers women to decide for themselves what they will believe and empowers them to challenge the teachings of their own religion if they don't like the way it treats women. Any restrictions on the right of women to challenge religious beliefs and practices are violations of their religious freedom. With this kind of religious freedom the religious establishment can be challenged. Ultimately, it allows religions to evolve and change over time.

"In virtually all traditions," notes Bielefeldt, "one can indeed find persons or groups who make use of their freedom of religion or belief as a positive resource for the promotion of equality between men and women." When religious freedom is promoted, the position of these people is strengthened.

The fight over religious dress is a case where religious freedom and the rights of women are portrayed to be in conflict but in reality they are in sync.

In some Middle Eastern countries, women are forced to dress in a certain way because of religious tradition even if they don't support this tradition. Meanwhile, in Europe, secularists are telling women they cannot wear religious dress even if they want to as an expression of their faith.

Putting aside the fact that any man who tells women what clothes to wear needs his head examined, both cases are violations of both the religious freedom of women and their fundamental rights as women to make decisions in their own lives. In both cases, the state is acting paternalistically and restricting the religious freedom of women. In both cases, religious or secular elites are saying they know what is best for women. A respect for religious freedom would allow women to wear what they want in both situations. In other words, religious freedom empowers the woman to make her own decisions.

I am not saying that all conflict between religious freedom and women's rights can be easily resolved, but it is important to look for potential synergies between the two. This would be helpful to the advocates of both causes. They need not be seen as two essentially contradictory human rights norms.

Certainly proponents of women's rights and religious freedom can agree that forced conversion and marriages of abducted girls is wrong on both counts. Likewise, telling a woman that she cannot change her religion, that she cannot fall in love and choose her own husband, that she can be mutilated, that she cannot be educated or have political rights -- all this is not only violating her rights as a woman, they are violating her rights to believe and act on her own beliefs.

Freedom of religion for women should be a strongly articulated goal of feminists who believe that women have the right to make their own decisions. The rights of women, who are most vulnerable to religious discrimination, should also be a strongly articulated goal of religious freedom advocates who believe that all people, especially vulnerable populations, should have the right of religious freedom.

Working together, advocates of religious freedom and women's rights could be a strong, bipartisan force that could make a difference in the lives of millions of women around the world. Disagreements over some issues should not lead to constant warfare. Rather, both

sides need to focus on how they can work together on those issues about which they agree.
