International Women's Day 2017: Moving forward in a time of uncertainty and upheaval

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Since the first celebration of International Women's Day, the fight for women's rights has seen many milestones – the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the establishment of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, an international commitment to achieve gender equality by 2030. However, recent setbacks in the United States and United Kingdom have sparked widespread concern that this progress is under attack. Professor Christine Chinkin and Dr Louise Arimatsu reflect on a time of uncertainty and remind us to keep focused, moving forward together in solidarity.



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International Women's Day (IWD) was first celebrated in 1911 when over a million women and men around the world participated in public rallies and marches calling for a range of reforms including the right of women to work, to vote, to hold public office, to end discrimination. Over the last century there has been significant progress on all these fronts and more. Yet, in January 2017 – the day after President Trump's inauguration – an estimated 5 million protestors worldwide felt compelled to take part in the Women's March united by the common concern that recent setbacks to the progressive realisation of women's rights in some parts of the world had become more immediate and widespread.

These concerns were well-founded. On his first full day in office, the new President reinstated the Mexico City Policy, colloquially known as the 'global gag rule', which strips USAID funding to any organisation that 'performs or actively promotes abortion as a method of family planning in other nations'. The decision (which is feared to extend beyond previous restrictions) was widely condemned and described by the European Parliament as 'a direct attack on and a setback for gains made for women's and girl's rights' prompting it to call for Member States to significantly increase sexual and reproductive health and rights funding to protect women's access to birth control and safe and legal abortion. Trump's decision to reinstate the policy was not unexpected. After all, ever since the measure was first introduced under Reagan in 1984, nearly every new President has reversed their predecessor's actions. But

today, we are far better informed and we know the shocking costs extracted by this particular policy on women in some of the most deprived regions of the world. Moreover, the fact that a woman's fundamental right to her bodily autonomy continues to be used as a political football is a shameful indictment of our culture in the 21st century and reveals the embeddedness of patriarchy in what is ostensibly one of the most progressive societies in the world where women's rights are concerned.

The Trump Administration's first month in office has been a turbulent one. Many of the pre-existing divisions at national, regional and international levels have been exacerbated and new schisms have emerged. In a political environment characterised by uncertainty and instability, to what extent the Administration's isolationist rhetoric founded on a populist anti-global/anti-plural sentiment will translate into deeds is difficult to predict. The US Administration is not alone in its aversion towards the global. The UK too has embarked on a trajectory rejecting the multilateral European project, born of the horrors of the Second World War, in favour of a unilateralism founded on the myth of sovereignty. In both countries, the retreat to the domestic is fuelled by and fuels ever greater calls for the closing of borders and for increased security for some at the expense of others thereby normalising the exclusion and marginalisation of the most vulnerable. This new predilection to look inwards bodes badly for the future of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda which has, since its inception in 2000, been actively supported by these two permanent members of the Council, united by a shared internationalist and inclusive vision.



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The possibility that both the UK and US will choose to relinquish their role as the standard bearers of women's rights globally – including as strong advocates of the WPS agenda – makes it even more vital that public pressure is applied on each to remain actively engaged and committed. In the UK there are many demands that can be made and ways to express them. For instance, while welcoming Teresa May's announcement of a wide consultation pending new laws to enhance the prosecution of domestic violence, we must continue to remind the Government of its abject failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, despite a promise to do so made on International Women's Day, 2012. We must continue to demand that the Government actively promotes women's rights globally and that, notwithstanding the change in Administration, DFID will continue to pursue a regular dialogue with 'USAID, State Department and US-based international NGOs with regard to improving access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, which includes reducing recourse to unsafe abortion and improving access to safe abortion services [following sexual violence in armed conflict]' as it

claimed to do in June 2016 in response to the House of Lords Select Committee Report on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict. We should demand that the UK lead by example and take a leading role in establishing and contributing to an international fund to finance access to birth control and safe and legal abortion to fill the financing gap created by Trump's gag order.

On 8 March, International Women's Day, the organisers of the Women's March are once again calling on women everywhere to show our solidarity and this time through the act of striking. Not everyone will feel comfortable doing so and many will be unable to do so. To deprive society of women's labour – paid and unpaid – is to draw attention not just to the traditional power imbalance between the employer (public or private) and the worker but rather to the patriarchal power structures that permeate all societies. It is a radical act but no more radical than that taken by those who participated in the peaceful public protests in 1911.

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