



Viewpoint: Press on in fight for women's equality

Curtis Hertel Jr. Guest writer 11:31 a.m. EDT August 26, 2015



On this date 95 years ago, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was officially certified. It gave women the right to vote and marked a huge step forward in the path toward women's equality.

But equality didn't result from the stroke of a pen, and so the fight continued.

Fifty years later, in 1970, the National Organization for Women organized a nationwide Women's Strike for Equality. The protest drew more than 100,000 people — who demanded equal opportunities for employment, education and 24-hour childcare

centers — and was the largest rally of its kind to take place in the U.S.

One year later, in 1971, Americans celebrated August 26th as Women's Equality Day, and we've been celebrating it ever since.

This year, as we reflect on the great strides made by women in the past 95 years, it also is important that we remember the work that lies ahead because we are still fighting for many of the same things — and they are not just isolated women's issues. These are issues that negatively affect entire families.

For example, here in Michigan, women continue to take home smaller paychecks than men with similar jobs, education and experience. According to the American Association of University Women, Michigan is ranked 41st in the nation for wage parity and women are paid 75 cents for every dollar that men earn in comparable jobs.

This is missed money that families could be using to pay their mortgage, put food on the table or pay educational costs. Gender creates this earning divide, which costs a full-time, working woman nearly \$500,000 over the course of an average 40-year career.

The equality issue isn't just a monetary one. It extends into access to health care, where obstacles — such as giving women the ability to plan when and if they will become mothers — continue to mount and are at an all-time high. These attacks on health care do the greatest damage to disadvantaged women seeking options and who often have the greatest economic barriers, and hurt those who are least equipped to handle a health crisis or unplanned pregnancy.

No woman should have to overcome such obstacles and be prevented from obtaining what should be guaranteed, basic, equal access to health care. In addition, they should also have the right to paid maternity leave, benefits for part-time work, and stronger laws against harassment, abuse and stalking.

So what can we do?

First, our government needs to become more representative of its population. Globally, the U.S. ranks 71st for the percentage of women who earn seats in a national legislature. This shouldn't be happening; it's not an accurate reflection of the values that we stand for as a free, democratic country.

Cuba, China, Afghanistan and Iraq all have higher percentages of elected women in national offices. This should disturb us. Our current ranking is unacceptable and we need to not only hold ourselves to a higher standard, but also do something about it.

More women need to run for office and have the support necessary to do so — the same access to pay, opportunities and benefits as their male counterparts so that they, too, can have successful careers and families, and lead happy lives.

We're closer to equality than we were 95 years ago, but we're still not close enough.

So on this Women's Equality Day, think about how you can affect change in our country. Challenge yourself and those around you to be better allies in the fight for gender equality. We need everyone's efforts — both men AND women — in order to make a difference so that 95 years from now, the fight for gender equality is a thing of the past and one for the history books.

Let's roll up our sleeves and make history happen together.

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