



In Focus Where Women Stand: The First 100 Days of the New Administration

By Michele Thomas

The first question elicited a scoff, a nervous titter from the packed auditorium at New York University as panelists Jessica González-Rojas, executive director of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, L. Joy Williams, national political strategist, and journalists Rebecca Traister and Kiran Nazish, founding director of the Coalition for Women in Journalism reflected on the first hundred days of the new presidential administration. The question had come from Nazish, who was moderating the panel. “In the first hundred

days, how do you see social justice impacted?” she asked.

There was a lot to consider. Of the 13 Congressional Review Act resolutions and 30 executive orders signed by Donald Trump, several contained provisions or initiatives for equal pay, child care, paid family leave, health, and immigration that severely impact women, particularly low-income women and women of color. According to Traister, journalists are struggling to keep up with the deluge of news coming out of

about the development, roll out, and actions of the Trump administration. “There’s so much,” she said. “It’s like being hit with a fire hose...As a journalist, I’ll start writing about something at 9a.m. and by 4, it’s not just my editors that are saying this is old news, even I [am saying it].”

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For instance, in addition to the controversial appointment of U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions—who has been repeatedly faced political backlash for past actions that can be considered racist—the

hearing about people such as Maribel Trujillo Diaz, the Ohio mother of four U.S.-born children who was detained and deported to Mexico, despite having no criminal record. The result of this unprecedented barrage of challenges and the accompanying media attention, according to L. Joy Williams, is that social justice advocates are forced to play defense of a handful of issues, obfuscating the bigger picture and depleting resources that would otherwise be used to focus on other issues facing women in the U.S. today.

“The political atmosphere that we’re in right now is that we’re forced into this sandbox created by our opponent that we have to fight in,” she said. “So, this is not where we are determining the rules of engagement or what the issues are that we’re trying to advance and get past, and then negotiate from that standpoint. We are facing an administration and facing individuals that are defining *for us* what the terms are, what we have to fight against, and what tools we can use to engage

in that fight, which further puts us at a disadvantage.”

For example, Williams noted, in centering abortion in the fight to protect funding for Planned Parenthood, which provides important women’s health resources in all communities, that don’t have universal access to doctors and medical facilities, the ability to campaign for other critical needs for women, such as prenatal and post-childbirth medical care, cervical cancer screenings, and mammograms. That the overwhelming number of areas served by Planned Parenthood and similar agencies are traditionally economically disadvantaged communities of color means that the Trump administration’s attack on the organization is not just about abortion, but also preventative and prescriptive healthcare for the people who need it the most.

Indeed, these same constraints can be found in the areas of criminal justice, equal protection under the law, and education reform, Williams said. “Our fights, our political fights, our fights for justice, our fights for funding, our fights for equal justice under the law [are] being constrained and dictated by an opponent.” In a memorandum issued by the U.S. Attorney General’s office last March, the Justice Department issued a directive to roll back the number of federal



Trump administration, with support from many in the House of Representatives, has also launched extensive, widely publicized efforts to do away with wage transparency, overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and a deportation agenda that has left women in some immigrant communities afraid to send their children to school after

investigations into misconduct and abuse, including the use of excessive force by local police departments, in favor promoting officer safety and morale. “We now have a justice department, an attorney general who has not only signaled in language and hearings, but has actively withdrawn itself from court fights...the very department and institution that led a crusade—a successful crusade—against the Ku Klux Klan, many of which were in law enforcement is now saying they’re not responsible for that oversight.” Opponents of the new directive are forced into a defense position, severely limiting the resources available to push for much needed criminal justice reform.

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’ recent call for a funding increase for charter schools, despite an overall 13.5 percent cut in the Department of Education’s budget, move centers “school choice” in the debate about education reform, effectively preventing more in-depth discussions about standardized testing, arts programs and equal access to resources, for example.

Despite the challenges, Trump’s first hundred days seem to have ignited a return to progressive activism and civic engagement by women, as evidenced by grassroots efforts such as calling campaigns and most notably, the Women’s March last January. “One of the things about the first hundred days, that’s a good

thing, is that you’re seeing women in particular participate in so many varying ways in the resistance to Trump,” Traister said. There’s also been new attention on women leaders, such as California congresswoman Barbara Lee, who helped introduce legislation that would ensure reproductive healthcare for all women regardless of insurance or coverage, and federal judge Anne M. Donnelly, who issued the first stay of Trump’s Muslim travel ban.

“We’re trying to create the next big movement, the next big protest,” Williams said, in a critique of how many approach movement work, including social and criminal justice. “We’re trying to garner the media attention and write our page in history before we’ve even done the work.”

The specific strategies for some of that work are still in the process of being discovered through trial, error, listening and challenging beliefs and behaviors within and beyond the movement, especially those which unwittingly reinforce existing structures of paternalism and privilege. This is the grunt work of progressive activism. The panelists agreed that this grunt work of sustained civic engagement, self and community education, that will be critical for women through the duration of the Trump administration and beyond, even as they acknowledged the problematic history of women,

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especially women of color, bearing the bulk of this work. Effecting real change involves fighting for justice over the long haul, a concept fundamentally at odds with the breakneck pace of the world we live in.

“Get a table. Bring the table, and the chair, and create the space where you are,” Williams said. “All of the movements you think about...they began, most often with women, with a small table, just a few of us.”