

Marching With and For Women

Naomi Homel, Midwifery Student

On the 21st January 2017, women's marches were held all around Australia and the world to protest for social justice for women. Here are the accounts of three of our members who marched in Brisbane and Sydney, about why they marched and what they hoped to achieve.



Naomi Homel

On Saturday 21st January I joined a few hundred women and men at the Women's March in Brisbane. I haven't marched since 2009 when I travelled to Canberra with a three-month old baby for the 'mother of all rallies' to add my voice to the chorus calling for the rights of women and families to choose where, and with whom, they wanted to give birth. In the intervening years I have worked in birth advocacy and supported several social justice issues. But I think I have also been lulled into a false sense of righteousness, believing that simply sharing news about these issues in the echo chamber of social media amounted to effecting change.

2016 changed this for me. I completed my first year as a student midwife at Griffith University. Midwifery at Griffith supports and encourages their students to see midwifery as a profession with political and social impact. The degree's strong focus on reflection led me to create my formative philosophy as a midwife. In order to do this, I have had to define what midwifery means to me as a practitioner, separately to what midwifery means to me as a birthing woman or as a consumer advocate. The core values of my midwifery philosophy are dignity and respect. In 2016, the rhetoric surrounding the US election cycle gave legitimacy to discourse about women and diverse communities that was not dignified or respectful.

The Women's March called for people to speak up for the rights of women and also for the rights of diverse

communities. I believe that midwives speak up for these rights in their everyday work. Midwives recognise a woman's right to information, choice, consent and autonomy. Midwives support women to feel empowered as they birth. Midwives honour the role of the woman and the mother in building and sustaining families and communities. Midwives work respectfully with women and families from diverse communities. I truly believe that midwives working with women, families and communities can bring about social change.

And so on 21st January I marched as a midwifery student.

I am also the mother of two small boys. I dearly want them to grow and learn in a world where women are spoken about with respect and where they recognise the equality and power of women.

And so on 21st January I marched as a mother.

A large concern of mine was the threats of the Trump presidency to women's reproductive rights. In fact, in the first few days of his presidency, Trump signed an executive order banning international health services who receive US funding from providing abortion services or providing information or referrals about abortion services. This is not a uniquely American concern – in my home state of Queensland, abortion remains criminalised for practitioners and women.

And so on January 21st I marched as a woman.

I took to the streets as a woman, a mother and a student midwife. For me this was not an 'anti-Trump' march. The passion that made me stand up on my feet doesn't come from an election in another country. Reproductive rights, birthing rights, respect, equality and dignity are fundamental human rights. For me, the march represented how I live, mother and hope to work as a midwife.

Caroline Homer and Vanessa Scarf, Midwives

On the 21st of January we walked alongside 10,000 other women, men and children in the annual Sydney Women's March.

Why did we march? It was not necessarily an anti-Donald Trump march – although at least one speaker in Sydney admitted she did not like him – it was a march in solidarity for women's rights across the globe. This includes the right to be free of violence, to make our own reproductive decisions, to be treated with respect and dignity and to have equity in our workplaces, our homes and all parts of our lives.

We marched so that young women wherever they are born can grow up with the basic human rights and equality that we and our mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers have fought for.

It is easy to think that the battle for equal rights for women is won in Australia but there is much evidence to the contrary.



Sydney March



Vanessa Scarf and Caroline Homer (right)

One Australian woman is killed almost every week by her current or former partner and young women are routinely sexually harassed and assaulted at home, workplaces, clubs and pubs.

If you think this is a bleak or exaggerated view, just talk to young adult women about what it's like to deal with young men who have grown up in an age of extreme internet pornography and the distorted view of sexuality and human relations that flows from it.

As midwives we see that access to free and respectful maternity care is not universal across our country – maternity care where women have real choices instead of being pushed through systems that often encourage unnecessary interventions that sometimes place mothers and babies at greater risk.

In other parts of the world, the situation is far worse with the circumstances in which women give birth sometimes too horrific to contemplate. It is easy to ignore the fact that millions of women have virtually no maternity care or where it does exist; their labour is an ordeal of being yelled at, abused and blamed if something goes wrong. We marched for these voiceless women, hidden by cultures where basic equal rights seem as remote to us as life in a medieval village.

We are mistaken to believe that the injustices of women in other countries or cultures have nothing to do with us. We should be careful not to take for granted our reproductive rights, affordable access to contraception and safe abortions when the newly elected President of the United States of America seeks to deny those same rights both domestically and internationally.

Whatever your beliefs are about abortion, the reality is that wherever it is banned, it continues to occur both illegally and unsafely. It is estimated that around 68,000 women die of unsafe abortions annually, making it one of the leading causes of maternal death. The rate of unsafe abortions is higher for poor women in countries where access to contraception is limited or unavailable.

You need only read the stories of Australian women from the first half of the 20th century to understand the fatal consequences of the criminalisation of reproductive rights. Interestingly, Australian stories from that time paint a picture where poorer women were the victims of botched 'backyard abortions,' while at least some wealthy women had the money to access much safer medically supervised, yet illegal procedures.

The CEO of Women Deliver, the global advocacy organisation, Katja Iversen reminds us that 'Access to modern contraception and reproductive health constitutes the bedrock of gender equality, women's empowerment, economic development, and progress for all. Without this care, women can't reach their full potential'. The global gag rule implemented as soon as President Trump came to office is an example of the rolling back of women's rights that has already begun. This means that any overseas organisation receiving United States of America aid cannot have anything to do with abortion, they can't even talk about it. The last time the global gag rule was applied it affected family planning, HIV services, maternal and child health, and even malaria services. What it failed to do was to reduce abortions. In fact, it has been estimated that the policy led to more unwanted pregnancies and potentially more maternal deaths, usually in the poorest countries of the world.

Issues like the global gag rule are why the Women's March happened and why one day of marching is not enough. The movement is calling for this to be an ongoing campaign and we encourage each of you to get involved. One thing you can do is to be an active member of the Australian College of Midwives and join the volunteer movement of midwives.

We can help you lobby your local members of Parliament (state and federal) to pass legislation and implement policy that supports gender equity, removes violence against women and ensures every woman has access to midwifery continuity of care, reproductive rights and control over all parts of their lives.

The rights of women and girls are the unfinished business of the 21st Century – join us today and help make it happen. ■