

Building on the Promise: Where We've Come From, How Far We Have to Go

By Anne K. Ard, 9/17/2017

Thank you! What an amazing celebration of the Constitution's 230th Birthday this is! It has been an opportunity to reflect on our founding documents, the principles that have made America a land of freedom and of opportunity. There is much to celebrate – and we have come so far since that 1787 Convention in our pursuit of establishing justice, ensuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and securing the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. We also recognize, I think, that today is a celebration not only of those principles, but also of the reality that they hold us accountable to one another, accountable to the dream of what America can be. It is those principles that hold before us the promise of America and will not let us forget that we have not yet lived up to that promise. This celebration reminds us, to paraphrase the American poet Robert Frost, “We have promises to keep, And miles to go before we sleep.”

Nowhere do we see progress and the promise of America more clearly than when we look at the history of women in this country. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 produced the Constitution, but it wasn't until 133 years later that women were included with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. It seems so simple, so reasonable, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex” that it is almost unbelievable that it took 133 years and 19 Amendments to get there. In 1920, women got the

right to vote – and 4 years later, my grandmother left her parent’s home to go to college. When I think of that, it really doesn’t seem that long ago.

It hasn’t been quite 100 years since women got the right to vote – 97 to be exact. But we’ve made a lot of progress in the last 100 years, right? Well, let’s see.

- There are now 21 women (21%) serving in the US Senate and 84 women (19.3%) serving in the US House of Representatives.
 - But, if we maintain the rate of progress since 1960, women will not hold 50 percent of the seats in Congress until the year 2117. There are four woman of color in the US Senate and only 34 women of color in the US House. And, sadly, Pennsylvania ranks 48th out of all the states in the number of women in elected office.
- The percentage of all employed women working in managerial or professional occupations increased from 33.1% in 2001 to 39.9% in 2013.
 - But, the gender wage gap has barely budged in the past decade – women earn approximately 78 cents for every dollar earned by similarly employed men. The gap for women of color, however, is even larger, with Hispanic women earning only 46.2% of what their white male counterparts earn. Pennsylvania ranks 39th out of 50 states in pay equity, with the differential at 76%.
 - And a personal side note, women with a college education who were born between 1955 and 1959 and worked full-time, year-round each year since they were 25, lose on average, nearly \$800,000 by age 59 due to the gender wage gap.

- In education, between 2000 and 2013, the percentage of women age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 22.8 to 29.7%. And in Pennsylvania, the percentage of men and women holding bachelor's degrees or higher is the same, 28%
 - But men are still twice as likely to be in the STEM professions as women.
 - And Black, Hispanic and Native American women are the least likely to hold bachelor's degrees, with Black women at 21.6% and Native and Hispanic women at a little over 15%.

So politically and economically, women have a ways to go to reach full equality – or to put it another way, until we fully establish justice and promote the general welfare.

At the Centre Co. Women's Resource Center, where we work to prevent domestic and sexual violence and to provide safety and support to victims and survivors, we also know both the progress we've made and how far we still have to go. While studies indicate that nearly one in three women will experience violence at the hands of an intimate partner in her lifetime, and that one in four women and one in 6 men will be victims of sexual assault before the age of 18, much work has been done to address these horrific realities. All across the country, laws have been enacted to protect everyone, women, men and children, impacted by sexual and domestic violence. Civil protection orders are available to victims in every state, and within the past two years, Pennsylvania – a leader in civil protection for victims of domestic violence has implemented civil protection orders for victims of sexual violence as well. Also in Pennsylvania, with broad bi-partisan support, the crime of strangulation, often used by perpetrators of domestic violence

against their victims and too often minimized as “just choking” has been upgraded to a felony.

But again, we there is still much more to be done. Too many states, including Pennsylvania, have resisted implementing reasonable gun laws to protect victims. The protections afforded students under the federal Title IX law in educational institutions to provide for equal education for all are under attack. And only a few states, and Pennsylvania is not among them, have provided unemployment insurance to victims of domestic violence who lose their jobs because they have been victimized.

Someone said to me recently, “That’s all true, but what does it have to do with the Constitution?” My response was – everything.

The right to vote, accorded to women in the 19th Amendment 97 years ago, meant that for the first time, women had the power to influence the legislation that impacted their lives. It means that women have the right to demand with their votes, that the state and federal government take their protection seriously and will enact laws to keep victims safe and hold perpetrators accountable. When women are considered full citizens of the Commonwealth and the Country, they have the right to own property and to manage their own affairs. In short, they have access to the resources they may need to protect themselves and their children.

In its Preamble, the Constitution says that “We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

The 19th Amendment means that women are now included in “We the people”. It means that we have the right to Justice, domestic tranquility (in our homes, neighborhoods and communities), defense against those who would cause us harm, and a government that promotes our general welfare. We are included in the promise of the Constitution – explicitly included – and not just us, but our daughters and our granddaughters and their granddaughters to come, just as our husbands and brothers and sons have been.

We have been included in the promise of “we the people”, included in the promise of the Constitution. And in the next 230 years, we intend to hold the Constitution, our governments, and all of us to that promise.

Thank you.