This International Women's Day, Stand with Women Living with HIV for Reproductive Freedom

March 7, 2019 By PWN-USA

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by Kelly Flannery and Naina Khanna

March 7, 2019: International Women's Day has historically called attention to social, economic, and political power imbalances based on gender around the globe. March 8, Positive Women's Network - USA (PWN-USA), a national advocacy organization of women and transgender people living with HIV, calls for advancing gender equity by upholding reproductive freedom. This includes marshaling HIV resources to fight an unprecedented range of attacks on abortion, state by state and nationally.

International Women's Day is characterized by a rich history of struggle for the right to vote, equal pay, better working conditions that recognize family formations, and more. We have made progress. Yet over a century after the first International Women's Day, women continue to battle systemic gender inequality. In fact, conditions for women and transgender people appear to be worsening, with a renewed right-wing focus on quashing reproductive freedom. Attacks are coming fast and furious.

Recently finalized by the Trump administration, the Title X domestic gag rule literally seeks to stop many health care providers from providing any counseling or referrals related to abortion - *even if they themselves are not offering abortion services*. Under this rule, pregnant patients could be denied the accurate abortion-related information they want and need. It also includes the onerous and potentially cost-prohibitive requirement that health centers establish an entirely separate physical space for any abortion-related services or information. Because low income women of color and LGBTQ people disproportionately rely on Title X funded clinics, the effects of this rule would be devastating for the reproductive freedom of women of color and LGBT people, encouraging Title X providers to give coercive, misleading, or incomplete pregnancy-related counseling.

What's more, the right to safe, legal abortion in the U.S. hangs in the balance. The sword of Damocles hangs over *Roe v. Wade,* with at least one case, *June Medical Services v. Gee*, that could lead to the Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of abortion regulations as early as spring or summer 2020. With Gorsuch and Kavanaugh -- two deeply conservative Justices who drastically

shifted the ideological balance of the Court -- now on the bench, reproductive rights advocates are watching anxiously.

At the root lies the desire to punish women, trans and gender nonconforming people, and people of color for transgressiveness: violations of patriarchal norms or challenging the interests of white supremacy. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently said in a New Yorker article, “the idea that a woman can be as powerful as a man is something that our society can’t deal with.”

These attacks are an expression of society’s deep resistance to us reclaiming power from white, cisgender men. Access to safe, legal, affordable abortion and contraception is directly tied to improved economic security and educational and employment opportunity. By curtailing access to reproductive health-related information and services, women, LGBT and gender nonconforming people become less of a threat to the Western colonial distribution of social, political, and economic power.

We at PWN-USA are familiar with this tactic. Laws that criminalize otherwise legal behavior because of the person’s HIV status (a.k.a. HIV criminalization laws) have been used to discriminate against, stigmatize, and push us further to the margins. Informational gatekeeping meant that decades of evidence showing that people living with HIV with undetectable viral loads cannot transmit the virus only reached certain groups. Health care providers have too often left women and trans people of color in the dark about science that could shift our relationship to bodily autonomy, intimacy, and pleasurable sex. Policies that leverage the immigration and criminal legal systems against us while taking away crucial supports and services, health care, voting rights, and anti-discrimination protections have exacerbated the compounding oppressions people living with HIV experience daily.

PWN-USA has created a bold, visionary, proactive policy agenda to guide our advocacy and reclaim our rights. We work to build the power and strategic influence of women living with HIV. We call out racism, classism, misogyny, transphobia, and xenophobia as we call in our sisters and allies.

On International Women’s Day, we ask you to stand with us to fight the right-wing agenda that seeks to steal our reproductive freedom.

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