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It Seems to Me: What young women may not know

By Sharon Weeks
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It came to my attention recently, after the March on Washington, that many young women are completely satisfied with their lives right now. I will refer to this as their "status quo." But first a crash course in women's history and a mention of many past marches and the influence they have had. I beg them, and you, to read on.

One thing I want to point out, as I am going to discuss women's rights from more than a hundred years ago to 2017, is what I think these young women are missing. Women's history has been basically excluded from the classroom text books in public schools. Many people are not aware that a select group of white men, a board of education in Texas, has been charged with the job of editing all of the history textbooks for decades. Their editing is final. (See Bill Moyers, "Messing with Textbooks," June 2012)

That is the reason you probably didn't know that in the 1870s women could not own property, could not sign contracts, could not vote, file law suits, nor have their own money. Under their father's roof, he had control and that control was passed to her husband upon marriage. A woman running away from violent domestic abuse was hunted down by the law and returned to her husband as she was his property.

From the 1840s to 1920 women fought for the vote. The struggle to gain the right to vote began nearly 200 years ago. Attempts to vote in 1870 were turned away. The Supreme Court ruled against them in 1875. In 1916 Alice Paul formed the National Women's Party. They marched. Over 200 supporters were arrested while picketing the White House. They were beaten with clubs and thrown in prison. Some went on hunger strikes and endured forced feedings. Forty prison guards wielding clubs went on a rampage against 33 women known as the "Night of Terror" on Nov. 15, 1917. (See HBO movie, "Iron Jawed Angels").

In the 1960s women fought for birth control. It was illegal in many parts of the country then, you see. Margaret Sanger, a pioneer in the struggle for a woman's right to birth control in an era "when it was illegal to discuss the topic," was arrested many times for her publications and her New York City clinic.

Civil rights marches (1960s)

Again people were beaten, drowned and hanged. Because of the media, there was more attention and the marches for these rights were better known. After the Civil War, the 14th and 15th amendments adopted in 1868 and 1878 granted citizenship and suffrage to blacks, but not to women. A suffrage amendment to the federal Constitution was presented to Congress and repeatedly failed to pass.

1972: Title IX is a landmark federal civil right that prohibits sex discrimination in education. Title IX is not just about sports and it protects all students; the federal government threatened to stop aid to all public schools that did not correct this.

1973: Roe vs. Wade made abortion legal and safe. Women stopped dying from abortions. The government is planning to stop funding for Planned Parenthood and tens of thousands of women will not only lose coverage for basic health care, but they will also no longer have access to birth control. That pretty much means there will be more unwanted pregnancies and if Roe vs. Wade is overturned, which seems likely with the appointment of a new Supreme Court judge by this administration, there will be more women dying from abortions again.

Gay rights marches

Again people were beaten and killed, even when not participating in marches, but while just trying to live their lives like people of color before them. Eventually gains were made and gays were given the right to marry and the same rights and benefits as heterosexual couples. LGBT people and their rights are now being subject to reversal.

Now it is 2017 and people are marching. Women, their husbands, children and fathers descended upon Washington, D.C., to march for women's rights. There were people marching in 57 other countries around the world. They marched for women who still make less money than men for the same work; for Muslim women and their families who fear deportation and being sent back to the terribly dangerous places they were trying so hard to flee; for Mexican families who live in fear of being deported and being torn from their children; and to raise awareness for women in other countries who have few, if any, rights.

Every march, every right that was fought for, that women died for, was for your "status quo," for the life you have now, that you take for granted. Please know that every one of these rights that let you live the life you have can be erased with the swipe of a pen. Don't let all those who died, the fighting and suffering be for naught.

Guess what? The Equal Rights Amendment did not pass. It won the two-thirds vote from the House of Representatives in October 1971. In March of 1972 it was approved by the Senate and sent to the states for ratification. It failed to achieve ratification by 38, or three-quarters, of the states. It was not brought to a vote again.

Because of that rejection, sexual equality, with the exception of when it pertains to the right to vote, is not protected by the Constitution. However, in the late 20th century the federal government and all states have passed legislation protecting women's rights. These protections are not amendments to the Constitution. They, too, can be wiped away with the swipe of a pen.

Please don't be complacent and too comfortable with your life. Be aware of what has happened over the years, decades and literally centuries to get you here. Women fought and died. People march to make other people aware; pay attention, please, lest you lose it all. Lest we all lose it all.

Weeks, who retired from the Chippewa Falls school district, runs a small photography business and is part of the Valley Art Gallery co-op in downtown Chippewa Falls.