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NEXT STORY



What we can learn from Middle Eastern women about fighting for reproductive care

7 hours ago



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Image: krie/Getty Images

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Access to abortion & birth control may soon be limited, but we can take some tips from women in the Middle East

On Nov. 9, I woke up and called my gynecologist's office to ask about IUDs. My friends who went to the same left-leaning women's college in New England as I did flooded my newsfeed with articles about the end of *Roe v. Wade* wedged between donation links for Planned Parenthood.



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While the reality of our situation was painful to come to terms with, it reminded me of how women in the Middle East, including Turkey, where my family is originally from, have been dealing with these kinds of restrictions for decades. When visiting Istanbul, I was shocked to find even the most basic of birth control methods, like condoms, locked behind cash registers at pharmacies. Getting access required proof of age and an unavoidably awkward conversation with a pharmacist.

More: [No, Republicans: Defunding Planned Parenthood definitely won't save money](#)

While the shared experience doesn't make the taste any less bitter, there are some lessons to be learned here while we head into what is sure to be a harrowing time for women's rights.

On abortion...

In Egypt and Iran, abortion is illegal except in cases where the mother's life is at risk. A committee of doctors must agree that the abortion is legal, which in many cases is another example of a bunch of men huddling together to decide what a woman should do with her body. On this issue, Turkey and Tunisia are among the [most progressive](#) countries in the Middle East, as abortions are permitted within the first 10 to 12 weeks of pregnancy, respectively.

In the United States, 22 states impose abortion limitations after a number of weeks of gestation. [Fifteen of those states](#) draw the line at 22 weeks of pregnancy (a pregnancy is considered full-term at 39 weeks). A pregnant woman's fate depends almost entirely on her state's laws. Ohio's most recent [motion](#) to limit a woman's right to choose at just six weeks into pregnancy (a point at which many are not even aware of a pregnancy) foreshadows a dark future for abortion rights across the country.

More: [Kentucky lawmaker tells women that unplanned pregnancies are "opportunities"](#)

What lessons can we learn?

The value of organizing: Over the years, Turkish women have [rallied together in protests](#) to show the government that their rights shouldn't become political bargaining fodder. Abortion remains legal in Turkey today, and while it's a stretch to say these protests have secured abortion access, it's certainly a lot harder for the government to legislate against women when they won't just go quietly into the night.

The [scores of women's marches](#) that are planned for Trump's inauguration day across the country bear strong resemblance to this kind of pressure through civic engagement, and with any luck, will remind the incoming administration that women are a force to be reckoned with.

The value of giving: Women in countries like Turkey, Iran and Tunisia have continued to receive access to contraception and reproductive health services thanks to volunteer-based organizations like [Women on Waves](#) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation. Now more than ever, it's worth supporting organizations like Planned Parenthood, Emily's List, NOW and NARAL in the United States (both by donating and by showing up as a volunteer). For now, American women enjoy freedom of speech and expression – rights many of their Middle Eastern counterparts don't have. Organizations like these may be common in the US, but women around the world aren't so lucky to have established bodies that lobby and advocate for their interests.

On access to birth control...

In many countries in the Middle East, hormonal birth control is less popular than natural methods. This means guesswork and timing sex to a woman's ovulation cycle are preferred to condoms, IUDs and hormonal birth control pills. However, hormonal and physical birth control methods can be very expensive, which is another limiting factor for many women in the region.

More: [69 percent of Americans oppose overturning Roe v. Wade](#)

In the United States, education and access to birth control methods vary widely from state to state. In many states, [abstinence-only sexual education](#) leaves students with a woefully limited understanding of the prevention methods that are out there and the pros and cons of each. Luckily, [under the Affordable Care Act](#), many American women currently have access to free birth control.

What lessons can we learn?

The value of an economy that caters to the needs of women: Now that the Trump administration has promised to repeal the ACA and this critical provision, it's crucial that American women take advantage of startups like [Nurx](#), which is currently providing free birth control to women in California, New York and Washington D.C. It's also worth noting that expanding coverage for birth control to the Midwest and South should be a priority as a precaution against conservative state legislators in these parts of the country.

The value of education: Organizations like [Karaz](#) have aimed to create resources for men and women looking to become more informed about contraception, sexual health and access to services. Supporting nonprofits with similar educational goals (not to beat a dead horse here, but Planned Parenthood... again) is absolutely critical. An educated electorate is so much less likely to make decisions that endanger the rights of half of its population.

It doesn't make the situation any better to know that women on the other side of the world have gone through the challenges that likely await American women with this new administration. But paying attention to how women in

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