

Decisions only she should make

From a teenager seeking safe abortion in the USA, to the multiple actresses with sexual harassment allegations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein, recent media reports concerning the rights of women and girls share the familiar sense of objectification of female bodies by men in power and lost agency in sexual and reproductive rights. The latest draft of the 2018–22 strategic plan of the the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defined the HHS mission as “serving and protecting Americans at every stage of life, beginning at conception”. This enforces domestically the mission behind US President Donald Trump’s reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule—also known as the Mexico City Policy—preventing non-governmental organisations worldwide from receiving money from the US Government if they provide safe abortions or information about abortion.

While Trump and the actions of Weinstein might have dominated headlines, global statistics for women and girls are reason in themselves for outrage. One in three women will experience violence from a partner, one in four girls gets married as a child, 71% of human trafficking victims are female, 200 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation or cutting, 130 million girls are out of school, an estimated 60% of all young people living with HIV (15–24 years) are adolescent girls and young women, and 214 million women of reproductive age in developing countries who want to avoid pregnancy are not using a modern contraceptive method. A recent Article by Bela Ganatra and colleagues reported that 25.5 million abortions (nearly half of global abortions) are unsafe.

In this rather depressing context, is there need for a more positive way to talk about female bodily autonomy? *SheDecides* is one such overdue ambitious new movement created in January, 2017, by Dutch Foreign Minister Lilian Ploughman in immediate response to the Global Gag Rule—to promote, provide, protect, and enhance the fundamental rights of every girl and woman to do what she chooses with her body, and with whom. Standing up, changing the rules, and unlocking resources are the three objectives behind the global manifesto of *SheDecides*. The manifesto itself speaks to all women everywhere who have ever suffered sexual harassment, objectification, or abuse. “Because when others decide for her, she faces

violence, forced marriage, oppression. We—and you, and he, and they—are uniting. Standing together with her so she can make the decisions only she should make.” Since March, 2017, the movement has rallied funding from a number of sources to fill the gap left by the expected removal of US aid funds. Robin Gorna, *SheDecides* co-lead, told *The Lancet* “it is easy to despair in the context of the Trumps and Weinstains of this world but I have a deep belief that when things get this bad, it leads to a time of remarkable change”.

She is quite right. Already, the fulfillment of human rights and empowerment of women and girls is increasingly recognised as indivisible from the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals. Countries need empowered women for economic and social cohesion. Last week the Indian Supreme Court ruled that men who have sex with child brides (younger than 18 years) are guilty of rape, with the government describing the practice of child marriage as an obstacle to development. Chile recently reformed its ban on abortion. Formerly, abortion was illegal in all circumstances (still the case in five other countries: Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Malta, Nicaragua, and Vatican City); now it is available for women who are raped, when the fetus is not viable, or the woman’s life is in danger. Women are particularly at risk of rape or sexual exploitation during and after conflict and natural disasters. In response, on Oct 11, the International Day of the Girl Child, the UN launched the campaign EmpOWER Girls: Before, During and After Emergencies. The Global HIV Prevention Coalition chaired by UNAIDS and UNFPA, who aim to work to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030, also reaffirmed their focus on adolescent girls. And astonishingly, World Trade Organisation members are working on a declaration on gender. On Nov 20, Ploughman will give the annual *Lancet*—UCL lecture in London. A new *Lancet* Commission on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, due in 2018, aims to develop wide-ranging evidence-based priorities for the SDG era. Crucially, all actions require monitoring.

The health community can co-create sustained momentum to support each girl today to fulfil her full potential in life, free from objectification and fear. But only if we change the narrative to allow dreams of a future that are uniquely hers to decide. ■ *The Lancet*



Eye Ubiquitous/Contributor

For the HHS strategic plan see <https://www.hhs.gov/about/draft-strategic-plan/introduction/index.html>

For the *SheDecides* manifesto see <https://www.shedecides.com/the-manifesto/>

For more on violence against women see <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9789241564625/en/>

For Ganatra and colleagues see [Articles http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)31794-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)31794-4)

For the *Lancet* Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Commission see <https://www.guttmacher.org/guttmacher-lancet-commission>