Misrepresenting America’s Women: Trump’s Three-pronged Attack on Gender Equality

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Even before Donald Trump swore to “uphold and defend” the Constitution on January 20, 2017, concerned US citizens were bracing for a shock regarding the rights of women and minorities. World-wide women’s marches on January 21 offered some quick comfort, but demonstrations alone provide no real defense against a barrage of presidential executive orders challenging equality gains of the last four decades.

Prior to the inauguration, Trump’s transition team began identifying State Department personnel and initiatives installed by Secretary Hillary Clinton to foster gender equality abroad, e.g., campaigns against gender violence and activities promoting female economic, entrepreneurial, diplomatic and political participation (Landler 2016). Trump plans to cut US foreign assistance by 37%, assuming that US Americans pining for greatness “have to start winning wars again” (Daalder 2017). His war against women continues on multiple fronts, posing major challenges to America’s historical image as a vanguard of feminist mobilization through the 1960s and 1970s. Already lagging far behind their European counterparts in terms of descriptive and substantive representation, US women are encountering an Orwellian redefinition of what it means to be feminist even at the symbolic level, based on three concrete examples.

Descriptive Representation: “Women Should Be Seen But Not Heard.”

Despite the land-slide character ascribed to the 2016 elections, women’s share of national legislative mandates has remained constant; they still occupy 104 Congressional seats (78 Democrats, 26 Republicans), accounting for 21% of the Senate and 19.1% of the House seats. While the number of female governors dropped from six to five, three new Democratic Senators raised the total of women with minority backgrounds to four, the highest number to date. Based on current projections, US females will not reach parity representation until 2121, despite accounting for 51% of 321 million citizens (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2013). Their physical presence in Congress says little about their ability to control government appointments or public policy, however.

The new White House team harkens back to a time when politicians and corporate bosses were free to discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, religion and national origin, later banned by the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Among the Trump Cabinet appointees, 85% are white, 75% are male; seven boast of no previous government experience; two more are retired generals lacking civilian management credentials. Most are millionaires and billionaires: Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, for exam-