

January 26, 2023

Dear colleagues:

As our country continues to grapple with and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic instability it caused, women, people of all marginalized genders, and their families continue to bear the burden of that recovery. Making matters worse, we continue to see historic attacks – physical and legislative – against women, the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people of color. While one of the most egregious of these attacks was the stripping of the constitutional right to abortion – a Supreme Court decision that has already impacted millions and will continue to have far-reaching implications for our country – the attacks and risks we’re facing extend far beyond the *Dobbs* decision.

The outcome of the 2022 midterms was history-defying for a reason: It was driven by a broad demand to protect the rights of women and childbearing people. Given the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that women and all people of marginalized genders face, in particular Black women and other women and gender-expansive people of color, the 118th Congress has a responsibility and a duty to make gender equity and justice a top priority in its upcoming session.

The undersigned gender equity organizations urge Members of Congress of both parties to prioritize the following policy issues:

I. Protect Health, Reproductive Freedom, and Bodily Autonomy

With ongoing and relentless attacks against access to health care, Congress must act to protect the right to access essential health care services, including abortion, contraception, and gender-affirming care. Congress must also act to address health disparities and ensure access to care for survivors of sexual violence.

Defend Abortion Care. The *Dobbs* decision, a legally unjustifiable opinion issued by a Court that ignored nearly 50 years of precedent, further devastated access to abortion care. It immediately wrenched the constitutionally protected right to abortion and threatened the right to full bodily autonomy from millions of people, jeopardizing their health, safety, and financial security in the process. Access to abortion is especially essential to people with disabilities because for some, their pre-existing conditions mean carrying a pregnancy to term could put their own life in danger.

With multiple states implementing or proposing full abortion bans – in some cases with criminal penalties for individuals who provide or facilitate abortion access – those states that do allow abortion health care services are seeing their networks further strained by new and desperate patients seeking care from neighboring states. Many fear criminalization for their abortion or pregnancy loss due to a lack of health data privacy on their phones and devices. Additionally, transportation challenges for patients needing to reach out-of-state or distant providers, inconsistencies around available equipment and services (such as those necessary to treat people with disabilities), and fear around potential criminal penalties is putting individuals, families, and communities at risk.

Protect Gender-Affirming Care. In a similar vein, health care providers seeking to provide the standard of care to their transgender patients are being targeted both through legislation and

through threats of violence. Despite the clear consensus among medical professionals that gender-affirming care is not only safe but necessary for transgender people, political opponents are pushing legislative bans and others are harassing and threatening individual and institutional providers of this care. Congress should resist any efforts to replicate the harmful policies being pushed in a number of states, and affirm that everyone deserves access to the health care they need, free from violence and discrimination.

Combat Maternal Health Disparities. Additionally, Congress must do more to address maternal health disparities that have persisted for too long and that disproportionately impact the BIPOC communities due to systemic inequality and racism. These disparities have only been exacerbated by the attacks on abortion access and against transgender patients. We need our lawmakers to take action by making critical investments that would reduce health inequities, such as funding for housing, transportation, and nutrition. Our communities also need a greater investment in targeted funding for community-based models of care that will help improve access to health care services and close existing health disparities.

Strengthen Access to Care for Survivors. In the United States, sexual violence is a public health crisis. 1 in 10 children have already, are currently, or will experience sexual violence before they turn 18. While no race, ethnicity, tribe, gender, class, sexual orientation, religious and spiritual community, or caste identity is exempt from sexual violence, women – especially those living at the intersections of other marginalized identities – are vulnerable to physical and sexual attacks at a higher rate, with far less access to healing resources and support. The impact of sexual violence exists beyond the moment, or moments, an abuser attacks a survivor. The experience of any form of violence shifts the physiological body, including the systemic trauma of sexual harm. Survivors experience a higher risk of mental health diagnoses, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart attacks, suicide attempts, eating disorders, and other stress-related illnesses.

The fight for reproductive justice and survivor justice are intricately connected, as stolen consent and the violation of bodily autonomy are central to both. Being forced to carry a pregnancy to term after an assault can be increasingly harmful both physically and psychologically, as well as financially, and further diminish survivor agency. Exemptions in the cases of rape and incest are not acceptable pathways to strengthening access to care for survivors, as these policies render survivors vulnerable to the repeated trauma of being forced to disclose and bear the burden of proving their assault in order to gain access to safe, quality abortion care. Policies regarding victim verification mechanisms can lead to elongated waiting periods, increasing the likelihood of gestational limitations.

We urge the 118th Congress to prioritize passing bills that would truly create, protect, and expand access to abortion that our coalitions are advocating for. Moreover, we urge the 118th to affirm that everyone has a right to access the health care they need, including transgender patients and survivors of abuse and assault. Exemptions for cases of rape and incest communicate that birthing people only have a right to bodily autonomy after they have been violated and as such these exemptions should not be seen as acceptable pathways to strengthening access to care for survivors. We further urge Congress to invest in closing maternal and other health disparities.

II. Ensure Economic Security for Women and Families

Although the pandemic and recovery bills that were passed in the 117th Congress offered desperately needed short-term assistance to families facing economic insecurity, many of those

supports have now ended. Pandemic programs demonstrated the importance of public investments in strengthening families' economic security, boosting labor force participation, and supporting families' health and well-being. Congress must protect and strengthen:

The Child Tax Credit. The expanded Child Tax Credit passed under the American Rescue Plan (ARP) [brought down the child poverty rate](#) from 9.7% in 2020 to 5.2% in 2021. By allowing this life-saving support system to lapse in 2021, the 117th Congress failed to ensure that these children and these gains would be protected.

Universal Child Care. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated categorically how critical access to universal and affordable child care is for American families and communities. Child care stabilization funding will soon run out, causing a dangerous cliff for child care providers and families. As our country continues to recover from the pandemic, the need to support families with child care remains essential.

Paid Family and Medical Leave. Early pandemic policies created the first-ever paid sick and family leave protections for some U.S. workers, supporting individual and community health and saving lives and jobs. Creating a robust federal paid family and medical leave program that covers all working people – no matter where they live or work, or the nature of their job – with meaningful wage replacement is an essential component for families, businesses and economies' strength and security going forward.

Paid Sick Time and Paid Safe Leave. Ensuring all workers have access to paid sick days is also critical. In addition, the financial pressures associated with domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking can affect survivors' ability to leave any abusive relationship and seek safety. Paid safe leave would allow survivors to access critical services without risking their jobs and financial security.

Support for Unions and Worker Organizing. Unions and worker organizing are essential for achieving and sustaining gender justice, especially for people of color. The PRO Act would significantly strengthen the ability of private-sector employees to form unions and collectively bargain for better pay and better working conditions. The further concentration of wealth and power by corporations during the pandemic and the disparate economic impact that the pandemic has had on women and people of color (particularly in women-concentrated sectors child care, education, and home care) underscore the need for legislative support for stronger unions, which is why we urge Congress to enact this long overdue piece of legislation.

Good and Safe Jobs. Through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, we will see millions of new jobs created over the next several years. For those jobs to be filled in an equitable way, more effort must be put into making these worksites free of harassment and abuse, responsive to trauma experienced by workers, and inclusive of child care and other supportive services. These investments should also maximize the creation of union jobs. Congress is slated to address the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act reauthorization and should use this as an opportunity to modernize the workforce development systems to better protect and meet the needs of women and workers with families.

Fair Pay. Women are more likely to work in jobs that pay low wages than are men, and women – especially Latina, Black and Native women, and women of certain Asian American and Pacific Islander ethnicities – are paid less than men on average for doing similar work. Congress must raise the minimum wage, eliminate the tipped minimum wage, eliminate sub-minimum wages for people with disabilities, implement wage transparency, and make it more difficult and costly for

employers to justify gender- and race-based pay differentials in an effort to end discriminatory pay practices. Congress must ensure all women have the tools they need to challenge discrimination and all employers have the incentives they need to comply with the law. Passage of the Paycheck Fairness Act would take meaningful steps to update and strengthen the Equal Pay Act of 1963 to help close the gender pay gap.

Access to Home & Community Based Services. People with disabilities and seniors prefer to live and work in their homes and communities, rather than nursing homes or other institutional settings. To make that possible, they rely on the assistance of direct care workers, including home care workers and other direct support professionals (DSPs) – a workforce consisting mainly of women, especially women of color. However, the high turnover rate of this workforce due to low wages, lack of sick and vacation days, and often, no health insurance, is making it increasingly difficult for seniors and people with disabilities to maintain this level of autonomy. Given the increasing number of people with disabilities and the growing senior population, the multitude of tasks that these workers take on, and the impact they have, Congress must invest in higher pay for home care workers and DSPs, and must also create structures to ensure that all home care workers, including independent providers, are able to join a union and advocate for themselves and the people they serve. A living wage and benefits would ensure that people with disabilities can find and retain qualified providers and would be a first step towards economic equity for this workforce. Congress must also make it easier for disabled people and older adults to access home and community based services by making HCBS mandatory services in Medicaid, provide funding to increase the capacity of HCBS infrastructure, and end decade-long state waiting lists. Finally, Congress must permanently fund programs like Money Follows the Person, protections against spousal impoverishment, and respite services for families of people with disabilities and older adults.

We urge the 118th Congress to prioritize providing sustained economic support for all American families, including by renewing the ARP's Child Tax Credit provisions, advancing workplace justice, and by continuing to work toward universal child care, paid leave, a higher minimum wage, and fair pay policies.

III. Advance Policies to Reduce Gender-Based Violence

Women, especially women of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ people experience disproportionately high rates of physical and sexual violence and harassment. New research documents the degree to which pregnancy is a major risk factor for domestic violence homicides, particularly for Black women and young women and girls, a problem that will undoubtedly be exacerbated by increased rates of forced pregnancy associated with widespread abortion restrictions.

We need Congress to strengthen protections against harassment at work and at school and unite behind a bipartisan effort to prevent and intervene in sexual violence, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking with the inclusion of community leaders and survivors doing the work every day. Ending gender-based violence will require a verbal, moral, understanding and financial investment in approaches to intervention and prevention, such as increasing funding for high-quality and factual consent education and resources for community-led direct services. Since survivors are multi-dimensional, preventing and intervening in gender-based violence will also require an overhaul of the oppressive systems that survivors face and are failed by every day, including the underfunded health care system, the prison and police system, the education system, and economic barriers.

Reauthorize and Fully Fund the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA).

FVPSA is the nation's only federal funding stream dedicated to the support of emergency shelter and related assistance for victims of domestic violence and their children. FVPSA provides base funding to support more than 1,500 local public, private, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations and programs and over 240 Tribes and Tribal organizations in their response to over 1.3 million domestic violence victims and their children each year and must be reauthorized with critical enhancements.

Expand Sexual Assault Funding. The financial cost of sexual violence is **\$122,461** over a survivor's lifetime. The cost of housing, food, safety and protection, child care, and legal fees are only a few examples of the burdens associated with attempting to recover from the trauma of sexual violence. Congress must increase funding for the Office on Violence Against Women Sexual Assault Services Program and the CDC Rape Prevention and Education Program at HHS, and invest in new community-led approaches to meet the needs of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Address Structural Barriers to Safety for Native Women and Girls. Violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women occurs at crisis levels on tribal lands and in Alaska Native villages. There must be sufficient resources for tribal justice systems and ongoing support and coordination with federal agencies and tribal governments.

Support LGBTQ+ Survivors. LGBTQ+ individuals face increased risks of violence and more than half of transgender and non-binary individuals experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime. There must be policies that expand resources and services for these survivors.

Increase Pathways to Healing and Safety for Women and Girls. Women and girls of color are even more vulnerable to incidents of violence and sexual assault, and the complexity of their experiences are not sufficiently addressed in current services and trainings. There should be increased resources and research to address these disparities.

Advance Policies and Practices That Secure Sustainable, Safe, Affordable, and Accessible Housing for Survivors. As a social determinant of health, creating safe and affordable avenues to housing can be a cost-effective solution and key factor in domestic and sexual violence intervention, prevention, enhanced safety, and overall well-being for survivors, their families, and our communities.

Reduce Homicides. An abuser's access to a firearm increases the risk of intimate partner homicide five-fold. The 118th Congress should fully close the dating partner loophole by prohibiting respondents to dating violence protective orders from possessing firearms or ammunition, and close the stalking loophole by prohibiting individuals convicted of a misdemeanor crime of stalking from possessing firearms.

End the Criminalization of Women and Mothers. Women are also experiencing violence through police brutality and mass incarceration. With more than 1 million women behind bars or under the control of the criminal justice system, women are the fastest-growing prison population in the nation. Eighty percent of [women in jail are mothers](#), and most are the primary caretakers of their children. The United States has the [highest incarceration rate](#) for women in the world, with the majority of women in prison being survivors of gender-based and/or intimate partner violence. Prisons and jails put them at greater risk for experiencing additional violence and sexual assault. We must decrease our overreliance on prisons and policing, and reduce the harm caused to families.

Sustain the Crime Victims Fund. The Crime Victims Fund is a critical funding source that helps millions of domestic violence and sexual assault survivors, and their children, access safety and healing after a crisis and needs sustained funding to support critical services.

We urge the 118th Congress to address the increasing rates of domestic violence and intimate partner homicides by reauthorizing the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, stabilizing the Crime Victims Fund, and investing in domestic violence services and prevention. There must also be increased funding for the Office on Violence Against Women Sexual Assault Services Program and the CDC Rape Prevention and Education Program at HHS, and investment in new community-led approaches to meet the needs of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Further, we urge Congress to decrease our nation's overall overreliance on prisons and police and push for non-carceral solutions to violence that don't further criminalize and incarcerate victims and survivors.

IV. Advance Democracy, Voting Rights, and Gender Equality

Our vote is our voice and our democracy is at its strongest when every voice is heard. A democracy relies on the meaningful opportunity to be heard — through our vote, our justice system and with the recognition of equality for all. This means everyone eligible to vote must have access to do so in a way that is easy and transparent and have their vote count. It also means our federal courts must be populated with fair, independent, and qualified judges committed to equal access to justice who represent the communities they serve. Additionally, the Constitution needs to be amended to explicitly protect against sex discrimination.

With the Supreme Court's *Shelby County v. Holder* decision gutting the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* and subsequent efforts to restrict access to the ballot box in states across the country, our ability to elect leaders who reflect our values and are committed to equity and justice is severely impacted. According to the Brennan Center, since January 2021 states enacted 45 laws that will make it more difficult to vote and that will have the effect of suppressing the vote in vulnerable communities. Moreover, hundreds of restrictive voting bills have been introduced across nearly every state in the Union.

Promote and Protect the Freedom to Vote. Deliberate barriers to voting — steeped in white supremacy — have made it increasingly difficult for people to register to vote and cast a ballot. Intentionally steep obstacles to the ballot box most hurt Black voters and other communities of color, young people, and people with disabilities. The *Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act* will ensure that voters, regardless of where they live, can safely and freely cast their ballots. This legislation would fight back against these attacks and ensure the ability of every American to participate in safe, accessible, and transparent elections.

Ensure Every Voice Can Be Heard at the Ballot Box. Rather than silencing the voices of Black voters, young people, and older adults, we must improve access to voter registration to make our democracy more responsive and representative. Solutions to modernize voter registration include registering people to vote automatically when they interact with a government agency, like the Department of Motor Vehicles, and enabling people to register any time, including on Election Day and online. Lawmakers should advance protections against improper purges of voter registration rolls, and end the practice of stripping the right to vote from people who have prior criminal convictions or who are, or have been, incarcerated. For those already impacted by these harmful practices, elected officials must ensure that Americans have their voting rights restored as soon as possible. The right to vote can be further protected by making Election Day a federal holiday, reducing barriers to vote early and by mail, making

polling stations accessible, and expanding language access programs to serve Americans for whom English is not their primary language.

Publish the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The country has yet to enshrine gender equality in the U.S. Constitution, leaving women, girls, LGBTQIA+, and gender-expansive people particularly vulnerable to further rollbacks of rights. For women of color, this extra layer of protection is particularly critical, as their experience with sex discrimination is magnified by the intersection of discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity. It is time to fulfill the promise to form a more perfect union and to strengthen our democracy by publishing the ERA as the 28th Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing all persons protection against discrimination on the basis of sex.

Expand Nondiscrimination Laws. In addition to enshrining gender equality in the Constitution, it is also important to enact additional federal legislative protections by expanding our nondiscrimination laws to clarify that they cover sexual orientation and gender identity.

Confirm a Representative Judiciary with Judges Committed to Equal Justice for All. As integral players in our democracy, judges should be impartial arbiters of the law. The Senate must confirm nominees who will uphold the rights of all Americans and embrace judicial independence. And, the federal judiciary should reflect the communities they serve. Diversity in our courts inspires confidence in the judicial system and can better ensure balanced decisions.

We urge the 118th Congress to advance democracy by promoting and protecting the right to vote, ensuring fair courts, expanding nondiscrimination laws, and prioritizing gender equality by passing legislation that expresses the sense that the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is valid having satisfied all requirements for ratification.

V. Advance Justice for Immigrants and Their Families

Undocumented immigrant women, families, and entire communities have been waiting for decades for immigration relief from Congress, including a pathway to citizenship, access to health care and other economic supports, and an opportunity to live their full lives and achieve their full potential in this country. Not only have these efforts repeatedly died in Congress, but under the previous administration, undocumented immigrants were subjected to some of the most horrific policies our nation has ever implemented. Some of these policies, including Title 42, remain in place even now. This is unacceptable.

While undocumented immigrants are members of our communities, pay billions in taxes, and send their children to our schools, they are left out of many of our key social welfare programs. They were also largely barred from accessing programs and services Congress passed to help American families through the COVID-19 pandemic, making it even more difficult for immigrant families to weather the pandemic and economic crises it created.

Pass the LIFT the BAR Act. Millions of individuals are denied access to health care and basic economic support because of their immigration status. The LIFT the BAR act would update eligibility standards of federal assistance programs.

Expand Access to Health Care Services for Immigrants by Passing the HEAL for Immigrant Families Act. This legislation ensures critical access to Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program by lifting the current five-year period that lawfully-present immigrants, including children, are required to wait before being able to enroll in these health care programs.

Strengthen Implementation of VAWA/TVPA Visa Protections. Congress should pass the Working for Immigrant Safety and Empowerment (WISE) Act, which reduces barriers to longstanding immigration protections available for survivors by lifting caps on visas for crime and abuse victims, expanding protections for abused spouses and children on temporary visas, preventing deportation while victim-related immigration cases are pending, providing timely access to work authorization and economic and health supports, and strengthening privacy protections for survivors. There should also be increased funding to USCIS to ensure timely employment authorizations to VAWA self-petitioners, U and T visa applicants, and to ensure the prevention of deportation and detention of such applicants.

POWER Act. Finally, Congress should strengthen and pass the Protect Our Workers from Exploitation and Retaliation (POWER) Act, which would protect workers who fight back against sexual assault, sexual harassment, discrimination, and other workplace violations from immigration-related retaliation.

We urge the 118th Congress to pass legislation that would allow undocumented immigrants to regularize their status and fully integrate into American society, including by ensuring language access, allowing them to access key economic supports and benefits, and strengthening protections for immigrant survivors. This should not be coupled with additional funding for immigration enforcement that further harms immigrant communities.

VI. Prioritize Gender Justice in the 118th Congress

We, the undersigned, recognize the challenges of realizing these priorities, given the political dynamics in Congress. However, the urgent need – and our demand – for gender equity does not depend on the distribution of power in Congress. While many of our priorities may not become law under divided government, the 118th Congress must make progress in advancing them to lay the groundwork for a future in which people of all marginalized genders and their families have the full opportunity to thrive in our country.

In unity and partnership,

1. #VOTEPROCHOICE
2. 9to5
3. Abortion Access Front
4. Access Reproductive Care-Southeast
5. Advocates for Youth
6. AFL-CIO
7. All In Together
8. All* Above All Action Fund
9. Alliance for Girls
10. American Association of People with Disabilities
11. American Association of University Women (AAUW)
12. Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence
13. Bans Off Miami
14. Better Life Lab at New America
15. Black Girls Vote
16. Black Women's Health Imperative
17. Care in Action
18. Cobalt
19. Community Justice

20. End Rape On Campus
21. ERA Coalition
22. Esperanza United (formerly Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network)
23. Family Values @ Work
24. Feminist Campus
25. Feminist Majority Foundation
26. Feminist Women's Health Center
27. FL National Organization for Women
28. Fund Texas Choice
29. Futures Without Violence
30. Girls for Gender Equity
31. Girls Inc.
32. Girls Who Code
33. Global Justice Center
34. Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights (GRR!)
35. Higher Heights Leadership Fund
36. Human Impact Partners
37. Ibis Reproductive Health
38. If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice
39. Illinois Accountability Initiative
40. Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health
41. In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda
42. Indivisible Miami
43. ineedana.com
44. Institute for Women's Policy Research
45. Ipas
46. It's On Us
47. Jane's Due Process
48. Jewish Women International
49. Just Solutions
50. Justice for Migrant Women
51. Legal Momentum, the Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund
52. Main Street Alliance
53. me too. International
54. Medical Students for Choice
55. Moms First
56. MomsRising Together
57. Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity
58. Ms. Foundation for Women
59. NARAL Pro-Choice America
60. National Alliance to End Sexual Violence
61. National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF)
62. National Center for Lesbian Rights
63. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
64. National Coalition on Black Civic Participation/Black Women's Roundtable
65. National Council of Jewish Women
66. National Crittenton
67. National Domestic Workers Alliance
68. National Institute for Reproductive Health
69. National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice
70. National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)

71. National Organization for Women
72. National Organization of API Ending Sexual Violence
73. National Partnership for Women & Families
74. National Urban League
75. National Women's Law Center Action Fund
76. National Women's Political Caucus
77. New Voices for Reproductive Justice
78. One Fair Wage
79. Paid Leave for All
80. Physicians for Reproductive Health
81. Plan C
82. Planned Parenthood Action Fund
83. Poderistas
84. Power to Decide
85. Pregnancy Options Wisconsin: Education, Resources, & Support, Inc (POWERS)
86. Pro-Choice Washington
87. Progress Florida
88. ProgressNow New Mexico
89. Reproaction
90. Reproductive Health Access Project
91. RHITES (Reproductive Health Initiative for Telehealth Equity & Solutions)
92. Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
93. SHERo Mississippi
94. SisterReach
95. SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, Inc.
96. State Innovation Exchange
97. Steph Black Strategies
98. Supermajority Education Fund
99. Survivors' Agenda
100. Tewa Women United
101. The Meteor
102. The National Domestic Violence Hotline
103. UltraViolet Action
104. USOW
105. Vote Run Lead
106. We Testify
107. Women's March
108. YWCA Kalamazoo
109. YWCA USA

The priorities we outline here enjoy broad support and are directly responsive to the issues that impact gender equality. While specific actions are led and supported by various coalitions and organizations and not all signatories have a position or expertise on all of the priorities here, all of the undersigned are united in our support for gender equality, human rights, and the empowerment of women, girls, and people of all marginalized genders.