

A year after the first Women’s March, what’s changed?



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

From left: Tami Gouveia founded and led the Massachusetts chapter of the women’s march; Lucy Lyman, a 17-year-old, marched last year with her mother; Linda Sopheap Sou works for the Lowell Community Health Center; Lianna Kushi marched while pregnant with her daughter, Ella Kushi-Pouv; Nicole LaGuerre (standing, center) was a lead Massachusetts organizer of the March on Washington; Yvonne Spicer was elected mayor of Framingham; Stephanie Martins ran for City Council in Everett; and Sumbul Siddiqui became the first Muslim woman elected to the Cambridge City Council.

By [Stephanie Ebbert](#) GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 20, 2018

ON JANUARY 21, 2017 — 12 months ago today — millions of women took to the streets to protest the inauguration of a president who had boasted of sexual assault. What came next was a head-spinning period of upheaval in women’s lives, a roller coaster ride of ups and downs, joy and rage, humiliation and vindication.

Maxine Waters reclaimed her time. Elizabeth Warren persisted. The Trump administration let employers stop providing birth control coverage, and the Republican House proposed college savings plans for fetuses. Men were tossed from their jobs over allegations of sexual assault, even as the government made it harder to make such allegations stick on college campuses. Anita Hill was appointed to lead a commission aimed at ending sexual harassment 26 years after she was shamed by an all-male Senate panel for having the nerve to testify she was a victim of it.

Day by day, it was often unclear whether all those pink pussy hats of protest would amount to anything, whether the marches staged in Washington, D.C., Boston, and around the world, were just a noisy demonstration in futility.

A year later, women know this for certain: America can hear them now.

“It’s extraordinary to think about how much the public discourse around women’s dignity has changed in a year,” said Leigh Gilmore, a visiting professor in women’s and gender studies at Wellesley College.

The women's march "kicked off something very important in the public conversation," said Gilmore. A second wave of anger erupted in October as women from all walks of life, inspired by exposés about longstanding sexual harassment in Hollywood, began sharing their own stories online with the hashtag MeToo, illustrating the commonality of women's experience.

"It is, in some ways, a response to Trump," said Jean Klingler, an English teacher from Cambridge whose trip to the 2017 Women's March on Washington marked the first act of protest in her 54 years. "Here's something good that he's done."

On Saturday, she and other marchers gathered on Cambridge Common for an anniversary rally that drew 8,000 to 10,000 participants, police estimate. In cities and towns across Massachusetts, groups scheduled a "Weekend of Women" featuring lunches, feminist film screenings, and campaign training to mark the day. And in Las Vegas, the national Women's March coordinators planned to kick off a voter registration tour aimed at getting more progressive candidates and women elected, riding the tidal wave of civic engagement spurred by the march.

"I've seen so many people get involved locally, paying attention to government, transparency, and process, all up and down the levels of government," said Tami Gouveia, one of two lead organizers for the Massachusetts chapter of the Women's March on Washington. She's among those now running for office, pursuing an open seat for state representative in her hometown of Acton.

"There's a reaction," Gouveia added. "Our democracy really matters, and me being involved really matters. . . . I can contribute, even if I've never done this before."

It's the bright spot in a year that looked, to many women, like one long solar eclipse.



BEBETO MATTHEWS/ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE

The "Fearless Girl" statue, created by Kristen Visbal, stares down the "Charging Bull" statue.

Hillary Clinton’s loss in November 2016 was devastating to many women, not only because America rejected its first major-party female nominee. America rejected her for a man they’d heard, on an “Access Hollywood” video, talking exuberantly about sexually demeaning women.

The pushback has been staggering.

Since the 2016 election, more than 26,000 women have contacted Emily’s List, a national organization that supports pro-choice Democratic women, to say they were considering running for office. (The previous election cycle brought only 920.) Women are hoping to make major inroads in the 2018 midterm elections, though biology is not destiny, of course. In 2016, more than half of white female voters voted for Donald Trump.

In liberal Massachusetts, Cambridge saw a [record number of women run for City Council](#); the second highest vote-getter was 29-year-old Sumbul Siddiqui, whose family emigrated from Pakistan when she was 2, and who became the first Muslim woman elected in the city. Turnout leapt 26 percent, and many more younger voters than usual showed up at the polls. And it wasn’t just Cambridge.



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Siddiqui, 29, was the second-highest vote-getter in November’s Cambridge City Council election.

“These elections in so many towns brought out people who normally don’t vote,” Siddiqui said. “This is what’s happening in the nation, this desire to just be involved and learn about what’s happening locally. It really changed our local elections.”

In Framingham, which changed its form of government from a town to a city, voters rejected as their first mayor a white man who had long operated the levers of Beacon Hill politics. Instead, they chose Yvonne Spicer, a black woman executive for the Boston Museum of Science who had previously run only for town meeting.

“I was always a pretty much strong-willed person, but I think this election process made me fearless,” said Spicer, who is 55. “I had absolutely nothing to lose in this process — only to gain and only to give.”

Many female challengers did not prevail; politics is hard on newcomers. In Everett, Brazilian-born Stephanie Martins failed to break into a City Council that is exclusively white and almost entirely male. After the election, the councilor she challenged, Stephen Simonelli, voted alone against a city resolution supporting immigrants who came here as children, saying, “We have to take care of our own first.”

Martins, 29, who became a US citizen in 2009, plans a political second act. In the meantime, she’s helping people register to vote, trying to boost civic engagement.

“I just feel like the work continues,” said Martins. “Whatever I can do and offer differently, then I’ll be there.”



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Protesters filled Pennsylvania Avenue during the 2017 Women’s March.

The relentless pace of activism that began with the women’s march didn’t end with it.

“All of us thought, ‘We’ll take a week and find out where we’re going,’ ” said Gouveia. “And there was no time for that.”

Immediately, the marchers got to work, calling members of Congress, writing letters, and trying to make themselves heard at additional protests, often on issues that were not exclusive to women.



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Tami Gouveia was one of two lead organizers for the Massachusetts chapter of the Women’s March on Washington.

First there was the travel ban on Muslim countries. Later, there were fights against efforts to undo Obamacare. After a white supremacist event devolved into violence in Charlottesville, Va. — and the president said the marchers included some “very fine people” — tens of thousands of activists staged a counterprotest on the Boston Common.

“It is such an onslaught of attacks on people and their identities and democracy and decency and what makes us human beings,” said Gouveia. “Nobody knows what to believe. It’s been a really painful year.”

A series of policy changes and proposals inflamed feminists’ sense that they were losing ground. An all-male congressional panel debated dropping the mandatory maternity coverage included in Obamacare. The administration revoked mandatory birth control coverage, letting employers who had moral misgivings opt out of providing it. And Education Secretary Betsy DeVos rescinded campus guidelines on sexual assault, saying the system had been tipped too heavily in favor of victims, denying due process to accused men.

Activists repeatedly found themselves having to abandon their longer-term mission for today’s priority.

“It’s such a state of chaos all the time,” said Linda Sopheap Sou, 34, of Lowell, who works for the Lowell Community Health Center. “How do you stay committed to a specific area of focus when you’re like, ‘Crap, this is happening right now and if we don’t do something about it right now, then that’s going to pass?’ ”



RENA LAVERTY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES/FILE

Actress Rose McGowan raised her fist while speaking in October in Detroit.

Heavy. Daunting. Exhausting. These are the words women use to describe the year that followed the Women’s March. Even in its inspiring moments, it was a difficult year to enjoy.

Lianna Kushi, 33, of Lowell, was newly pregnant when she and her husband attended the march last January. Later, when they went for an ultrasound and learned they were having a girl, she was momentarily flooded with dread.

“Her life,” she realized, “is just going to be harder.”

To Jean Klingler’s daughter, 17-year-old Lucy Lyman, the year was less cataclysmic than expected, but also far less empowering.

“I spend a lot of time kind of anxious about what’s going to happen, but nothing terrible has happened to me,” said Lyman. “As a middle-class white girl from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I’m going to be fine. But there are so many people out there who aren’t. . . . Every single week there’s a new thing that I can’t do anything about, and I still am upset by it.”

The word her mother reaches for is “hopeless.” Klingler has never gotten over the “Access Hollywood” footage — how voters heard Trump on a hot mike bragging about grabbing women’s genitals and getting away with it because of his fame. Thirty-two days later, they elected him president.

“The fact that he can say that, that he can do that, means that people knew who he is and it didn’t matter,” Klingler said last January. “That, I think is the most demoralizing thing, that it just doesn’t matter.”

Nothing makes up for that now — not Harvey Weinstein, not Matt Lauer, not Charlie Rose, or Mark Halperin, not the entire parade of men who have been pushed from perches of power as punishment for allegations of sexual misconduct, she said.

“Like Harvey Weinstein, there’s a whole system supporting [Trump] and keeping him in place,” Klingler said. “He can do whatever he wants.”

Last week brought reports that just before the 2016 election, Trump paid \$130,000 in hush money to a pornographic-film actress with whom he’d had an affair.

The nation barely had time to react before the next headline blared.

Some feminists are, however, expressing optimism that the #MeToo movement could mark a real turning point for women's rights. The #MeToo movement, which began in October, has continued for months, and the deluge of testimony from so many different women made it harder to discount their stories.

"MeToo created a form of solidarity that we had not seen before," said Leigh Gilmore, the Wellesley professor and the author of "Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives." "MeToo broke the back of he said/she said, because it's he said/she said/she said/she said/she said."

A new sense of female solidarity has been palpable to Nicole LaGuerre, a lead Massachusetts organizer of the March on Washington. Last year, the Jamaican-born LaGuerre lamented that American women are prone to infighting, likening them to "crabs in a bucket" that end up dragging each other down.

Now, she said: "I don't see that antagonistic behavior I've seen before. It could be that we're all so scared."

"We have a common goal and that common goal is driving a lot of the camaraderie I'm seeing. And I think it's nice," LaGuerre added.

Women involved in the post-march women's movement are also reaching across divides. At the start of the new year, when a group of celebrities announced a new initiative aimed at fighting sexual harassment, pay disparity, and discrimination, they didn't confine their work to Hollywood. They started a legal defense fund for individual women to wage legal claims and invited farm workers, housekeepers, and other women to tap into it. The fund has already raised more than \$16 million.

"If I was constructing a movement around sexual harassment, would I do it exactly that way: The most privileged also standing up for the least privileged? Yes I would," said Joan C. Williams, director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings.

All of which brings hope to feminist scholars who think America is finally catching onto the lesson it might have learned 26 years ago when Anita Hill told her story of sexual harassment; the man she accused is still a Supreme Court justice.

"Enough men in power have been held accountable that this moment will not be forgotten," said Gilmore. "When industries as vast as Hollywood, media, and Ford are held to account, that's transformational change."



PETER FOLEY/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK/FILE

A protester stood outside New York's Trump International Hotel last month.

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