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We Cannot Afford to “Agree to Disagree”

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By Mica Annis, Vice President’s Office Intern

Since childhood I have been taught that it is often best to shy away from conflict for the sake of harmony. I would even argue that most women are socialized (even in feminist environments) to be as non-confrontational as possible. Growing up in a progressive, feminist family, I never felt like these teachings were never an attempt to silence me, but to encourage me to be the kind of person who could discuss opposing ideals and have relationships with people who held those opposing views. I learned the value of open-mindedness at an early age, which has served me well as I have developed my own liberal ideology. I have filled my life with a wide diversity of people. My friends practice different religions, come from various backgrounds, were raised in differing cultures and often vote for candidates that I do not support. When I turned 18 in November of 2015 and waited excitedly to vote in my first presidential election, never did I guess that a friend’s ballot or ideology would end a relationship.

Of course, we all know how the year between November 2015 and November 2016 went. The 24 hour new circuit seemed to constantly remind us of every racist, misogynistic, xenophobic and otherwise offensive thing Donald Trump did, said or tweeted. He attempted to normalize assault towards women, violence towards Muslims and injustice towards immigrants. Many of us rose above his fear-mongering, hatred, and cruelty. In Michelle Obama’s words, “when they go low, we go high.” Others responded to Trump by opening their arms to Syrian refugees, making donations to Planned Parenthood and sporting pantsuits as they became activists in their communities. But it is undeniable that Trump’s campaign and now his presidency has brought out the worst in some Americans.

A professor recently told me that if he lived through the Reagan years, I can live through this. But what this professor is forgetting is not everyone survived Reagan’s presidency. Many low-income African Americans did not survive Reagan. They were imprisoned by the millions, their neighborhoods were destroyed, and their crimes were unjustly prosecuted. Both Nancy and Ronald Reagan turned a blind eye to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which eventually killed over 650,000 Americans, in addition to further stigmatizing the LGBTQIA+ community. Homeless people did not survive the Reagan years. Mentally ill people, working mothers, and others did not survive (or at the very least, were significantly harmed) by the Reagan years. As a white middle-class man with a Ph.D., my professor survived. As someone with many privileges, including my race, sexuality, access to healthcare and access to a college education I will probably survive the Trump presidency. Will I suffer as I see him implement policies that directly contradict everything I believe in? Yes. Will some of his policies directly impact me? Yes. But, I will survive.

Neither my professor nor I am the demographic that Trump is directly attacking. We are people who have a fair amount of privilege. I understand that as a woman (and as a human, and as an American)

Trump's and Vice President Pence's policies (ahem, reproductive rights) will affect me. But I must recognize my privilege that will allow me to stay fairly safe and unharmed throughout this presidency. My professor and I both have enough privilege that we can survive terrible presidencies. We are the lucky ones. We are the ones that can say we "agree to disagree" at Thanksgiving dinners, when we do not see eye to eye with coworkers, or when our views differ from peers.

But Trump's presidency, even more so than Reagan's, is not about different ideologies or opinions on policy. Trump's presidency is about ideals that directly harm the livelihoods of other human beings. When someone's life, health, and safety are being threatened by a president's policies they cannot "agree to disagree." That phrase itself denotes privilege, elitism and as feminists, white feminism. In some ways, it is convenient to "agree to disagree" with our Trump-loving relatives, friends, and coworkers. By "agreeing to disagree" with the people in our lives, perhaps we save some relationships or at least preserve harmony. There are people who cannot afford to care about harmony. Already, Trump has made America the worst place for some many. He has closed our borders to people of some of the most war-torn countries in the world. I attend American University where I have seen the impacts of Trump's policies, as other 18 year olds, my peers, are unable to return home or possibly complete their education because of their nationality. As a whole, our country has seen the effects of Trump's "Muslim Ban" in images of Syrians suffering in the streets of Aleppo, families literally torn apart in U.S. airports and increased violence towards Islamic Americans.

There are so many more people who cannot "agree to disagree." There are people who fear Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids and arrests. There are people who fear losing their right to marry whomever they love or even the right to feel safe in public space. There are low-income people who are losing access to education, healthcare, and affordable housing. And perhaps these people will survive. I hope they survive. But the most vulnerable, marginalized groups were the ones who were stigmatized, suffered and even perished during Reagan's presidency. Too many people saw policies as matters of debate when in reality policies are matters of life or death for so many people. Too many people failed to protect human rights, the livelihoods the lives of others.

This is our chance to stop "agreeing to disagree." We have seen how one presidency can leave long lasting effects. How one president can easily ignore, disenfranchise, isolate and persecute entire communities. As women, as feminists, as Americans, and as people, it is our duty to protect our fellow people and stand up against injustice. It is time to put an end to "agreeing to disagree."