

## EDITORIAL

# Outcome of the US presidential elections: Reforming the agenda for reproductive health and women's rights

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At the time of finalizing this editorial on November 28, 2020, Joe Biden has been projected by the major television and media networks as the winner of the 2020 Presidential election in the United States. Barring unforeseen developments, it is now evident that he will be sworn-in as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (POTUS) on Wednesday, January 20, 2021. With this increased likelihood of the Biden presidency of the world's most powerful country, it is appropriate to explore what this means for reproductive health and women's health and social development, not only in the United States but also for Africa and the rest of the world. At the onset of the presidency of Donald Trump in 2017, this journal cautioned that the "reversal of the US progressive policies will have hindering effects on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, three of which were specifically designed to promote gender equality and social equality around the world"<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it was not surprising that the performance of Donald Trump in the domains of social justice, racial equity, and gender equality featured prominently in the campaigns for the 2020 elections and were significant points in anchoring victory for Joe Biden.

As a pragmatic democrat, President-elect Biden promises to re-enact some of the most endearing principles in promoting women's health and development and reproductive health and social justice in two main ways. First and foremost, his choice of a woman as Vice-President convinces the world that "he has put his money where his mouth is". The choice and emergence of Kamala Harris as Vice-President, the first woman to occupy the highest political position in the United States, testifies to Biden's positioning as a strong advocate and practitioner of women's rights and social justice. Apart from being a woman, Harris is of minority Asian and African descent. Her racial identity suggests that Biden identifies with a more diverse and multiracial

America. This strategic choice provides a beacon of hope for all social reformers and human rights advocates worldwide that the United States will again promote social justice and equality for all persons globally.

Secondly, it was noteworthy that Joe Biden grounded his campaign on reproductive choice and made specific commitments to promote reproductive health and rights if elected as POTUS. In this regard, some of the promises and commitments he made included:

- 1) "support for right to privacy, on which the entire notion of a woman's right to choice is based"<sup>2</sup>; 2) his promise to eliminate the global gag rule<sup>3</sup>; 3) his undertaking to "protect birth control for four million people and ensure that all people have access to all health care options"<sup>3</sup>; 4) his commitment to implement a program to tackle maternal mortality and health<sup>4</sup>; and 5) his support for "comprehensive and age-appropriate sex education that includes science-based prevention methods<sup>5</sup>."

If these commitments are implemented, it will represent a renewed re-awakening and preeminence for sexual and reproductive health and rights in the United States and throughout the world.

Despite these assurances, a relevant and critical question is whether the commitment to choice and the promotion of reproductive health and rights and women's equality in the United States will be sustained after Biden presidency. Now is the opportune time to think about this conundrum, as the world has repeatedly witnessed an oscillation between choice and anti-choice agenda in the USA - developments that have had severe implications for the rest of the world. Given the acrimony that was associated with the 2020 US presidential election, it is expected that the opposition party will be vociferous during Biden's administration to counter some of the arguments that led to his victory. In

this regard, President Biden and his administration will need to work hard to endear the principles of humanity, social consciousness, and equality in the minds of Americans, and they should not hesitate to draw upon international/multilateral support to further their agenda. By so doing, Biden's tenure will void the cycle of policy fluctuations concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights that have characterized the United States' political system over the past four decades.

The *African Journal of Reproductive Health* believes that President-elect Biden can entrench, consolidate, and sustain these principles in the American system and engender positive influence throughout the world in three primary ways. First, the success of Vice-President Kamala Harris would prove to the American people that women can be relied upon to provide credible and robust leadership. This would provide a new way of thinking about gender equality and help women leverage future opportunities. Biden would be blamed if Harris fails, and it would be a sore point upon which the opposition will mount their disparagements. Therefore, Biden must provide critical support to Vice-President Harris, including offering specific prerogatives and visibility to enable her to succeed in office. We believe very strongly that Harris's success as Vice-President should be one of the major strategic agenda items that would sustain the principles espoused during Biden's tenure in office.

Secondly, Biden's preference for reproductive choice and rights should not be a rhetorical expression but should be based on empirical policies and support programs. In the recent past, United States' Democratic Presidents made pro-choice declarations, but there has been little substantive support for the implementation of robust programs on reproductive choice and rights globally. Four years is short. Therefore, there should be no time wasted by Biden. He should jettison some of the unpleasant policies and bottlenecks placed by the outgoing administration that had hindered global efforts in line with the philosophy of the International Conference on Population and Development and the targets enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals. With dispatch, Biden should reverse Trump's policy regarding the World Health Organization's de-funding and promote the work of major international institutions such as the UNFPA, UNICEF, and the IPPF, which should be more bold in their policy formulation and resource allocation to implement evidence-based activities that would advance women's health. Over the years, these organizations have provided social support to the most deprived citizens of the world. Only through tangible, measurable results in improving social justice

and gender equality will be the premise upon which Biden was elected be unchallengeable.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it would be crucial for Biden's presidency to attract social justice and improve the economy of the United States sooner than later. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought untold deaths and disabilities not only to the United States but throughout the global community. However, the crisis has particularly been devastating in the United States, where as of November 28, 2020, more than 13 million have been infected, and over 266,000 deaths have occurred from the disease<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, one of the major criticisms of the Trump administration has been his denial and mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and this is arguably one of the primary reasons that he lost the election. Therefore, an immediate resolution of this nightmare in the United States and globally will send a strong signal to the rest of the world about America's rededication to the dictates of science and globalization.

In conclusion, the *African Journal of Reproductive Health* strongly welcomes the emergence of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as President and Vice-President of the United States of America. We believe that their tenure holds a strong promise in re-awakening some of the most endearing principles in gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights within the United States and globally. However, we believe that the new administration will have to work hard to entrench these principles in the public consciousness over time.

## Conflicts of Interest

None.

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