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# THE SHAPE OF EQUALITY

An Overview of the U.S. Women's Movement

By Heidi Hartmann and Martha Burk

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## From Suffrage to Equal Pay

More than thirty years after the street rallies, consciousness raising, and legislative victories of its “Second Wave,” there is a widespread public perception that the women’s movement is past its prime. Despite effective mobilizations in defense of Planned Parenthood and access to contraception, it remains unclear if the movement in its present state can act as an effective political force. Since the late 1970s, a resurgent conservatism has consistently fought against reproductive rights, forcing much of the women’s movement into a persistently defensive posture and creating a public perception that feminism is about little more than defending abortion. Other issues of daily concern to most women—including equal pay, workplace conditions, family leave policies, health care, and violence against women—seem to have fallen to the bottom of the agenda.

The beginning of the U.S. women’s movement is usually dated to 1848, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The decades of what is now remembered as the “first wave” saw major activism, but it would be many years before women won the right to vote in 1919. Moreover, this achievement did not make the enormous difference that many expected. The movement’s Second Wave was shaped by women’s experiences in the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and other “new left” struggles. It both transformed most women’s understanding of their social position and achieved a series of important legislative victories. The failure to win ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and the hostile climate of the Reagan-Bush years led to a period of retrenchment and fragmentation that has yielded few victories, even during somewhat more sympathetic Democratic administrations.

In this report, Heidi Hartman from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research and Martha Burk from the Center for the Advancement of Public Policy provide a brief history of the U.S. women’s movement, outline its current state, and suggest a way forward. Without conceding the importance of continuing the struggle for reproductive rights, the authors insist on the need for the movement to focus on other issues that are priorities for most women: economic issues, health care, and violence. This new focus could go a long way toward building alliances across boundaries of race and class. In order to effectively advocate on these issues, a new structure is needed, one that can act as a stable alliance and is unafraid to engage in political work.

The women’s movement remains a powerful force in the United States. By focusing on the issues that matter most to the majority of women and becoming a meaningful political actor, it can once again play a central role in building a more just, inclusive, and egalitarian society.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, October 2012*

# The Shape of Equality

## An Overview of the U.S. Women's Movement

By Heidi Hartmann and Martha Burk

It is probably safe to say that women have acted with others to better their condition and the condition of their families and communities in virtually every society and in every period of human history. But what makes women's *actions* a women's *movement*? For surely women's movements have not been active in every society in every period. And just as surely, women have participated in just about every social movement: against slavery, against child labor, for public health, for peace, for workers' rights, against environmental degradation, and even for white supremacy and male supremacy. Throughout U.S. history, women sometimes organized separately as women (Women Strike for Peace, for example) and sometimes not, as Heidi Hartmann and Claire Moses point out in their introduction to *U.S. Women in Struggle*. Women's collective action is a very broad field indeed. Historically much of this organizing has been to advance various "social housekeeping" causes, and not collective action for the specific purpose of advancing women's rights as compared to men.

In this essay, we narrow our focus to what is generally called the women's movement and often the women's rights movement and sometimes the feminist movement. Nancy Cott, in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, argues that feminism adheres to three ideas, neatly summarized by Joan Tronto as:

- 1) a belief in women's equality, that is, there should be no sex hierarchy;
- 2) that women's social condition is socially constructed; and

- 3) that women have a common identity as women.

While we agree that these ideas are central to the development of women's movement activity, they do not always lead to activity that is a major force for political, economic, and social equality for women. Such times of women's movement influence are relatively rare in human history.

Sometimes the demands of the women's rights movement, for example the demand for women's suffrage, spark massive movements that succeed in winning their demands by mobilizing large segments of society. Many historians have characterized the U.S. women's movement as one consisting of "waves." The suffrage movement is often referred to as the first wave because it was characterized by so much mass activity. Yet this activity was concentrated in the ten years after the first women's rights conference was held in 1848, and in the ten years before a constitutional amendment gave women the vote in 1920. More often than not, demands are pursued and won by the dedicated work of a small minority, as occurred between the first and second waves of the women's movement, roughly from 1920, when women won the vote, until the beginning of the Second Wave in the 1960s, when women began to gain more legal rights and the National Organization for Women was founded (1966).

The Second Wave was also characterized by mass demonstrations in the streets, and this activist phase is also usually considered to have lasted about ten years before street action sub-

sided and the movement was carried forward in more prosaic ways with fewer street demonstrations. The movement made many gains in its second activist wave, none more visible than the right to abortion, established by the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Some date the beginning of the end of the Second Wave to the failure to win ratification of an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, passed by Congress in 1972 with a seven year deadline for states' ratification. But perhaps more important than any specific gain or loss was the transformation of the consciousness of so many American women who came to believe that they had a right to be equal with men.

Since the passing of the crest of the Second Wave, many observers have tried, and failed in our view, to identify a third wave of women's activism characterized by a new set of actors and a new set of demands. Today, young women are demanding more action to stop street harassment and sexual assaults, the

vast majority of which are experienced by women under age 25. But their actions, which include the media-attracting and provocatively named "slut walks," do not yet constitute a mass movement that could be characterized as a third wave. Similarly, earlier announcements of a third wave, often marked as beginning in the 1990s and encompassing diverse views of feminism and women's rights from women of color or from the gay and lesbian rights movement have also not reached "movement" status in our view, though they certainly have raised important and provocative issues about how to achieve full equality for all women, a goal that still eludes human society.

In the sections that follow, we discuss the history of the U.S. women's movement in three major phases, from 1848-1920, 1920-1950s, and the 1960s forward. We then describe the present state of the women's movement and its highly developed infrastructure, concluding with some suggestions for ways to carry the work forward.

## History of the U.S. Women's Movement

### The First Wave: 1848-1920

The organized U.S. women's movement is generally dated from July 1848, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott spearheaded the first women's rights convention in American history in Seneca Falls, New York.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1848, there had been some organizing on the part of women, most notably those working in sweatshops and woolen mills, and in the temperance and anti-slavery movements. These efforts were, however, concerned with overcoming social ills or working conditions, not equal treatment with men.

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to acknowledge *Century of Struggle* by Eleanor Flexner for much of this section's information.

Female workers mounted various strikes and work stoppages beginning in the 1820s, as the mills demanded more and more labor with long hours and low pay. The first successful organizing attempt was in Lowell, Massachusetts. The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association had 600 members by 1846. Though they made only 25 percent of men's wages, the agenda of the early female labor groups was concerned primarily with work hours, child labor, and "speed-ups" in the mills. Some of the gains in these areas came at the price of pay cuts, which were accepted.

The American Temperance Society (ATS), founded in 1826, was one of the first organizations

in the temperance movement and served as a foundation for women's later suffrage activism. By 1835, the ATS had reached 1.5 million members, with women constituting between 35 and 60 percent of individual chapters. Many women were demonstrating in the streets and speaking out in churches for the first time.

Through getting involved in public anti-alcohol, labor, and human rights crusades, women had seen that they could and should be involved in social change movements, which later translated to suffrage work. Women learned to organize, hold public meetings, mount petitions, take direct action in groups, and speak in public.

Thousands of women joined with men in the anti-slavery movement, among them feminists who would later use the experience to organize for equality for women. The involvement of Stanton and Mott in the anti-slavery movement had a direct effect on their organizing the first women's rights convention. The seed of the 1848 meeting was planted in 1840, at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Though the American delegation included a number of women, only male delegates were seated. The women objected and debated the issue hotly, to no avail. They were consigned to a passive role in the galleries during the next ten days. Among the delegates were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, who bonded over the anomaly of devoted anti-slavery advocates being denied full participation merely because they were women. They talked about the need for action—and about a women's rights convention. They had no opportunity to realize a plan, however, until Mott visited Stanton eight years later in Seneca Falls. They met with a number of local activists and published a notice of the convention, "to discuss the social, civil, and religious rights of woman." They then had to come up with an agenda and a plan.

Although the Seneca Falls Convention was hastily organized and hardly publicized, over 300

women and men came to protest the mistreatment of women in social, economic, political, and religious life. The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions issued by the convention was modeled after the Declaration of Independence of 1776, when the thirteen original American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. Like the original declaration, it detailed "injuries and usurpations"—this time those that men had inflicted upon women. The declaration was a harsh document, stating that men had imposed "absolute tyranny" on women and enumerating the grievances:

- ⇒ He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.
- ⇒ He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
- ⇒ He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.
- ⇒ Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.
- ⇒ He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.
- ⇒ He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.
- ⇒ He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master the law giving him power to

- deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.
- ⇒ He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a base supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.
  - ⇒ After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.
  - ⇒ He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.
  - ⇒ He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.
  - ⇒ He allows her in church, as well as state, but a subordinate position, claiming apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church.
  - ⇒ He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

- ⇒ He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.
- ⇒ He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.<sup>2</sup>

Resolutions were also included, demanding that women be granted all of the rights and privileges that men possessed, including participation in public affairs and religious matters, equal treatment under the law, and the right to vote. Though it has been reported that the suffrage resolution was the only one not passed unanimously, the official record of the meeting does not support this: “Some [resolutions], from their self-evident truth, elicited but little remark; others, after some criticism, much debate, and some slight alterations, were finally passed by a large majority.” The resolutions were signed by both women and men in attendance.

Seneca Falls proved to be the impetus for many other women’s rights conventions throughout the 1850s, both at local and regional levels. National conventions were held every year except one from 1850 to 1860. The frequency of conventions led to the accusation that women knew how to do nothing but talk, and indeed a common agenda was yet to be articulated. No permanent organization emerged (some participants actively opposed building an organization, believing it would stifle individual effort). Though it was apparent that without the vote the women had little leverage to win their demands, the vote was not paramount to most. Concerns centered much more on the control of property and earnings, divorce, custody of children, edu-

<sup>2</sup> U.S. National Park Service, “Report of the Woman’s Rights Convention.”

cation, and legal status, and many reforms were won in these areas, even without the vote. Most likely, most of the women involved were what we would call middle or upper-middle class today; some were married to prominent men and were well educated, having attended some of the colleges for women, but many were self supporting. Sojourner Truth, a freed slave from New York, worked intermittently as a servant to support her speaking and traveling on behalf of abolition and women's rights.

While it would be an overstatement to say that women's rights work ground to a halt during the American Civil War over slavery (1861–1865), women's rights definitely took a backseat to the demands of the war and the anti-slavery crusade. Many women entered war work as nurses or took on clerical jobs in government offices, and many more threw their efforts into passing the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ending slavery. The National Women's Loyal League was formed to gather one million signatures for the amendment, which passed in 1865. It had the effect of convincing women of the value of organization in achieving their goals.

The first significant showdown with men (many of whom had supported the *idea* of women's suffrage) came over the fight for the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to the constitution (1868–1870) granting equal protection of the law to all citizens and the right to vote to those formerly enslaved. Together the amendments gave black men the vote; black women were not included, even though their plight as freed slaves was often more desperate than that of men. White women were not part of the discussion either. The suffragists, led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were furious, and mounted a formidable opposition to any amendment that excluded the franchise for women. Many of their former male allies in the Equal Rights Association (which had been formed to further the interests of both blacks and women), were now against them, put-

ting the Negro cause for males only ahead of women's rights. The women lost, and the word "male" was enshrined in the U.S. Constitution for the first time. It would be another 52 years before females were granted the vote.

When it became clear that no women would be included in any federal amendment providing the vote to black men, the strategy changed to advocating for a separate amendment granting female suffrage. Some of the men in Congress introduced such an amendment in 1868. A final split with the Equal Rights Association came in 1869, when Stanton and Anthony formed a separate suffrage group, the National Woman Suffrage Association, open only to women. More conservative women—who wanted the vote but considered Stanton and Anthony too radical—almost immediately formed the American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA). The AWSA advocated a state-by-state strategy and stayed away from criticism of churches and other male-dominated institutions. The two organizations would remain at odds while working for the same cause for the next 20 years. After working separately—with some spotty victories in achieving the vote for women in several western state—the groups finally merged in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Stanton became the new organization's first president.

By 1910 the woman's suffrage campaign was in the doldrums, despite a few more victories in western states. Women now had the vote in six states, and suffrage became a plank in the Progressive Party platform behind the candidacy of Theodore Roosevelt, who lost to Woodrow Wilson in 1912. But suffrage was far from a hot-button national political issue. Routine hearings were held on the suffrage amendment in congress, but no one expected anything to come from them. Women's suffrage had not been debated in the Senate since 1887, and it had never reached the floor of the House.

It took the injection of new energy from the militant wing of the British suffrage movement to energize the American one. Alice Paul, a young woman who apprenticed with British suffragists, returned home to the United States in 1910. She began speaking to various groups on the British tactics, and organized a parade of 5,000 women in Washington by 1913. Paul was far more militant than the organized American groups. She was the first person to picket the White House; she organized speak-outs and more parades; and she and her colleagues were jailed for their suffrage activities, where they underwent force-feeding and extremely harsh conditions. Their target was passage of the federal amendment; the state strategy was too slow and piecemeal. Paul and her allies formed a new organization, the Congressional Union—it later became the National Woman's Party—to further their goal.

Once again there was dissension in the ranks, as the NAWSA, now led by Carrie Chapman Catt, distrusted the radical tactics and feared for their ability to control the new group. The militants were undaunted and began a strategy of "hold the party in power responsible, and take to the streets." They encouraged voting against any sitting politician, including the president, so long as suffrage was not passed. In 1916, in the middle of World War I, they opposed President Wilson on the grounds that he was willing to fight abroad for freedom in general while denying women all the rights of citizenship at home. The NAWSA women objected to these tactics, as they wanted friends in both parties and still believed state-by-state was the better strategy for achieving the vote.

Throughout this internal fight, the woman's suffrage amendment, now called the Anthony Amendment, was gaining strength in Congress as Paul's crusade gained momentum with more and more women participating. Votes were taken, many negative, both in Congress and in state legislatures—with a few more states moving

into the ratification column, most notably New York in 1917—and all served to bring attention to the issue. Though Catt disagreed with Paul on militancy, she was instrumental in getting President Wilson to endorse a federal amendment, and her long years of groundwork in Congress contributed heavily to a favorable vote. The Anthony Amendment passed in January 1918. Historians credit both factions of the suffrage movement for bringing about a favorable result.

The struggle was not over. The amendment now had to go to the states for ratification (three quarters—36 at that time—of the states must ratify a constitutional amendment after it has been approved by two thirds majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate), a process that would take many more campaigns and two more years. When it was finally ratified by the last state needed (Tennessee), Carrie Chapman Catt had these words about the campaign:

*To get the word "male" in effect out of the Constitution cost the women of the country fifty-two years of pauseless campaign. [...] During that time they were forced to conduct fifty-six campaigns of referenda to male voters; 480 campaigns to get Legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters; 47 campaigns to get State constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions, 277 campaigns to get State party conventions to include woman suffrage planks; 30 campaigns to get presidential party conventions to adopt woman suffrage planks in party platforms, and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses.<sup>3</sup>*

It is worth noting that suffrage was finally won at the end of the Progressive Era, a period roughly from 1890-1920 in which a number of democratic reforms were implemented, such as anti-monopoly legislation and public health measures. In 1913 a constitutional amendment passed to

<sup>3</sup> Catt, Carrie Chapman, and Nettie Rogers Shuler. *Woman Suffrage and Politics; the Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*. Seattle: University of Washington, 1969. Faudi, Susan. *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*. New York: Picador, 2008. Print.

provide for the direct election of U.S. Senators (they were formerly elected by state legislators). The prohibition amendment outlawing the sale of alcohol was passed in 1919, and the women's suffrage amendment followed in 1920. At the same time, labor unions were growing and legislation against child labor and other employment abuses was enacted. Women labor organizers, many of them affiliated with the Socialist Party, were prominent in organizing women in the garment industry and similar fields. In 1909, for example, a young woman worker, Clara Lemlich, spearheaded what is thought to be the first general strike in the United States. Initially centered in the garment trades in New York City, it spread to thousands of workers—75 percent were female—and then to other cities, resulting in an increased number of organized women workers. While prominent middle and upper class feminist members of the Women's Trade Union League supported the strikers, most of the working women were not active in the fight for women's suffrage, though many supported the right to vote. They were focused on improving working conditions. Women's suffrage was won in a climate of rapid social change in which multiple reform efforts flourished.

### **The "Doldrums": 1920–1960**

After the gargantuan struggle for women's suffrage, it almost seems as if indifference and amnesia then descended upon the American public.<sup>4</sup> It is often noted that women winning the vote did not make the enormous difference its advocates thought it would; a new era of social reform and peace was not ushered in. Women tended to vote similarly to the men in their families. With the election of Republican Calvin Coolidge to the presidency in 1922, the 1920s was a more politically conservative era than the Progressive Era that preceded it (though it was socially liberating in many ways), and it was fol-

lowed by the longest and most severe depression in U.S. history. In the 1930s government programs openly preferred men in offering jobs for the unemployed, and passage of legislation excluding women from certain occupations was not uncommon at the state level. Many unemployed and working-class women and men organized in the 1930's for jobs, union labor rights, and public assistance. While important gains were won, women's concerns were often left out. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which instituted the 40 hour work week and set a federal minimum wage, excluded domestic workers, the majority of whom were women. Social programs such as the national retirement system (Social Security) and the federal-state unemployment insurance system, both established in the 1935 Social Security Act, were designed to benefit most those traditional families with a male breadwinner and stay-at-home wife, with lesser benefits for never-married women.

The story of one of the longest and most challenging political campaigns in U.S. history was not recounted in school textbooks. The large women's suffrage movement, which gained its numbers and mass support only in the last decade before passage of the suffrage amendment, faded away—leaving the women's rights field largely to a much smaller group of women (estimated at 8,000 at its peak) organized by Alice Paul as the National Woman's Party. The bulk of women joined the existing political parties. Both the Republican and Democratic Parties actively recruited women, forming active women's caucuses under the leadership of prominent suffragists and ensuring that women received a fair share of delegates to state and national political party conventions. According to Anna Harvey's analysis, the leaders of the political parties, having ignored women for so long, woke up and worked overtime to catch up and organize these new voters into their parties. Parties had previously been based on ethnic allegiances or regional or class interests; gender had not been seen as a basis on which voters would affiliate

<sup>4</sup> With appreciation to Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor for the title of this section.

with a party. But seeing the way women affiliated with one another in the suffrage movement, leaders realized they had better recruit them.<sup>5</sup>

The women's groups, who had fought so long for the vote, were unprepared to organize women *as* voters, whereas the existing parties had all the necessary infrastructure in place. The women's organizations, even the League of Women Voters (which was formed by Catt out of the NAWSA about six months before the suffrage amendment passed) stayed away from selecting or supporting candidates and, working in a strictly nonpartisan manner, concentrated their efforts on educating women on issues and teaching them how to advance specific issues through educating and lobbying elected officials. According to historian William Chafe, the vast majority of issues for which the League advocated had nothing to do with women and addressed other policy issues such as peace and war, public health, children's issues, and so on. Often major women's organizations formed at about the same time—such as the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, founded in 1919—focused on the war effort and worked to improve employment and business opportunities for women. Older groups such as the Young Women's Christian Association, founded in England in 1855 and in New York City in 1858, and the American Association of University Women, founded in 1881, continued after suffrage working much as they had before. As noted, many working women were organizing in labor unions during this period, often surfacing issues of special importance to women. As for advancing women's political rights, except for the efforts of women in the political parties and dedicated feminist groups,

a period of virtual dormancy set in that would last four decades.

By the time the Second Wave emerged some forty years later, the historic fight for the right to vote had come to be viewed as a timid reformist goal that was not a meaningful step toward women's liberation. For the most part, women had not used the vote to get policies that would help women. Contemporary historians such as Ellen DuBois, however, point out that the vote was an incredibly radical demand, establishing the principle that women have their own, direct relationship with the government and cannot be represented by their husbands or fathers. This direct relationship would define them as citizens in their own right and not only as subordinate members of families headed by men. If the right to vote did not transform the consciousness of the mass of women as Elizabeth Cady Stanton believed it would, it did, along with women's continuing experience organizing in a variety of contexts, certainly convince some women that they had rights worth pursuing.

Two groups willing to pursue those rights were the National Woman's Party, which put forward the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923, and women in the developing labor movement. As often as not, these two groups were pitted against one another. The Women's Trade Union League had united many upper class "social housekeeping feminists," who supported equal rights for women because they saw women as the main champions of a more humane society that would provide more safeguards for the poor and downtrodden, with women of the working classes who were struggling to secure protections for working women. While the WTUL was in favor of unions and collective bargaining, this branch of feminism was also willing to see protective labor laws enacted, because unions were not always interested in winning (or able to win) protections for women. These laws, now long gone, limited how long women could work, how much weight they could lift, which shifts they

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Harvey's analysis shows that while the political parties were still jockeying over which party could recruit which women in the 1920s, the U.S. Congress passed measures that were of great interest to women, such as the establishment of federally funded public health clinics across the nation. Once the loyalty of "their" women was won, few measures specifically to help women were passed until the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

could work (not night shifts), and so on. Social housekeeping or reform feminists were already ensconced in such federal government agencies as the Children's Bureau (originally in the Department of Commerce and Labor) and the Women's Bureau (which had been established in anticipation of the passage of the suffrage amendment, predating it by several months).

In contrast, the National Woman's Party, the smaller group, saw protective legislation as codifying and reinforcing women's status as second-class workers. They systematically argued for equal status of women and men in law, which would invalidate all the protective labor legislation laboriously gained. The NWP lobbied Congress intensively and it achieved the introduction of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1923 and in virtually every congress thereafter, all the way up to the present day, although the NWP was not a factor in recent years. The NWP argued that radical change was needed to affect all areas of society. It expected that an ERA would, in one sweeping action, eradicate all laws that discriminated against women. While compromises between the LWV and the NWP were attempted in the early 1920s (several prominent reformers were also members of the NWP), the effort was abandoned by 1926, according to Chafe. The LWV preferred gradual change at both the state and federal level, while the NWP (though it worked at the state level as well) argued that women should concentrate on the federal effort, since the fruits of this labor would affect the entire nation.

This division among women, all of whom considered themselves advocates for women, would last until sometime after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The Act's Title VII, which outlawed employment discrimination based on sex, finally invalidated all protective labor laws that were not gender neutral.

During the 1920s and 1930s, women workers organized themselves in their workplaces and

succeeded in unionizing important areas of the economy that employed many women, such as the needle trades, the textile mills, and food service (waitresses organized their own single sex, occupational based locals). The newer labor umbrella, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which formed to organize the mass of workers in unskilled factory jobs, was more open to women's organizing than was the American Federation of Labor, which was established earlier based on organizing in the skilled trades.<sup>6</sup>

National-level organizing for effectiveness also extended to African American women who united several dozen organizations—many of which fought against lynching and to uplift the black race—under one umbrella. In 1935 educator and political leader Mary McLeod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women as an assembly of organizational leaders to speak with a unified voice for African American women. Dorothy Height, who had her early leadership experience in the YWCA, became president of NCNW in 1957 and served for forty years, bringing a strong voice to the national dialogue for both feminism and the black civil rights movement. Near the end of Height's long life, a bust of Sojourner Truth was installed in the Capitol Visitor Center, making Truth the first African American woman to be honored in the U.S. Capitol building.

As the United States entered World War II in 1941, women workers, many denied jobs in the depression of the 1930s, flooded into the labor market and fought more or less continuously for equal pay with the men in the jobs they took as the men marched off to war. They also took advantage of all that employers offered to attract them, such as child care centers available at job sites. Within a year of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that drew the United States into the war, employers came to real-

<sup>6</sup> For more on labor movement in this period, see Brigid O'Farrell's *She Was One of Us*.

ize that women could do most of the jobs men had done—whether welding, operating heavy equipment, reading and using highly technical instruments, or taking down huge trees. Women also flocked to the growing number of government office jobs. Women, too, were recruited into the military, often as nurses or clerical workers, playing important but supportive roles which provided them with leadership opportunities and the opportunity to serve their country. Only in recent years with the building of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, opened in 1997 at Arlington National Cemetery, has wide recognition been given to the crucial role played by military women, including African American women. In World War II, for example, few Americans have heard of the “Six Triple Eight” Central Postal Battalion, the first all African American, all female unit to serve overseas, while almost everyone knows about the contribution of the Tuskegee Airmen, a black male military unit.

Just as the Civil War and World War I had opened new employment opportunities for women, so did World War II. While women leaders were able to translate their support for President Wilson and the war effort in World War I into his support for suffrage, however, women leaders had no such luck after World War II. Instead, “Rosie the Riveter” was ushered back home as the soldiers returned to civilian life and reclaimed their former jobs. The GI Bill enabled veterans, the vast majority of whom were men, to go to college, with the result that men retained an advantage in college graduation that lasted for four decades. Easy borrowing terms, plenty of jobs, and the development of low cost housing in the suburbs ushered in the conformist era of the 1950s, with mom, dad, and the kids in the house with the white picket fence, dad as the breadwinner and mom as the homemaker. The birthrate, low during the depression and WWII, skyrocketed. Of course, the ideal of a nuclear family living in a suburban home did not apply to many working-class, immigrant, and African

American families, but the image dominated the cultural representation of the era.

It was not an era when women’s rights leaders made large, public gains. Indeed there was hardly any visible women’s movement, but progress proceeded on many fronts. A brain trust of women worked in the federal government, some in significant leadership positions. Women were challenging laws that prohibited married women from having access to birth control, for example, and soon the daughters of the baby boom would be pushing for equal access to higher education. Cold War educational loans helped women as well as men attend college. Oral contraceptives, commonly known as the birth control pill or just “the pill,” became available with a medical doctor’s prescription in 1961. Coupled with a widespread rise in the standard of living as American industry generated enormous productivity gains for all, a new era of opportunity and possibility for women was about to emerge.

### **The Second Wave Begins: 1961–1979**

Just as the first wave of the women’s movement had emerged from the anti-slavery movement and other currents of reform such as temperance, so too did the second wave emerge in part from the civil rights movement aimed at overcoming racial discrimination as well as other progressive movements collectively dubbed “the new left.”<sup>7</sup> Women who had worked hard to liberate others came to realize that they needed liberating too, in no small part because men in the civil rights movement expected the women to serve as subordinate “helpers,” and not leaders. Only one woman, Dorothy Height, was allowed on the stage at the massive “I Have a Dream” civil rights march, and she was not allowed to speak. Women formed their own national liberation movement, borrowing language

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7 See Sara Evans’ account in *Personal Politics*.

and tactics, such as consciousness raising, from liberation movements around the world. Often called “women’s lib,” the Second Wave, like the first wave, encompassed many different strands of feminism. The main strands are usually identified as:

1) The socialist feminists, who grew out of the new left and the civil rights movement, often focused on working-class women and often participated in alliances with other progressive movements. They often argued that class and gender are both primary divisions in society that need to be addressed—or even argued that class is primary and gender secondary.

2) The radical feminists, in contrast to the socialist feminists, believed that gender is *the* primary division in human society upon which all other hierarchies are modeled. In other words, patriarchy predates class hierarchies and even race hierarchies since relations among groups are modeled on the first social relations, those found in the family.

3) The liberal feminists, encompassing the established women’s groups from the first wave as well as the Second Wave’s National Organization for Women (NOW), typically used traditional means such as lobbying the Congress, filing suits in the courts, and filing complaints directly to executive branch agencies. NOW, for all its street demonstrations and media-grabbing tactics, chose relatively traditional targets and established methods, such as petitioning government, whereas the other strands tended to target men, “the family,” corporate institutions, or cultural icons like the Miss America beauty pageant.

Betty Friedan, writing *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, became an instant celebrity for identifying the malaise of the middle-class housewife, who like herself was often well-educated but felt she was not able to use her education fully in the job of homemaker. The book and the broad and intense response to it are often used

to mark the start of the Second Wave. Coached by the feminists lodged in the federal government, Friedan led the effort to form the National Organization for Women in 1966. As described by Gail Collins, the idea of NOW was birthed at a national convening of the commissions on the status of women from around the country organized by the Women’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor. Included in this first convening—and among the founding members of NOW—were both women labor union leaders and prominent African American women. As historian Cynthia Harrison notes, the state and local commissions at the convening were modeled after the first national commission on women, appointed by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and chaired by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Kennedy’s commission was urged upon him by his labor supporters who wanted to address women’s equality, but his backing was also informed by the need to ensure women a place in the labor force and to compete with the Soviet Union.

While appearing quiet from the outside, on the inside women in government, including the 14 or so women in Congress, worked closely with labor movement women and many of the lasting first wave women’s organizations—including the YWCA, the AAUW, BPW, and the NCNW—to keep the fire smoldering under women’s issues. Among their not inconsiderable gains was passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, the lack of which had been the key issue for working women since at least WWII. Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of sex along with race, also occurred before the heady days of the Second Wave. Although “sex” was added to the prohibitions by a famously anti-civil-rights southern congressman, Howard Smith a conservative Democrat from Virginia, and is widely thought to have been added either as a joke or in an effort to derail the bill, Smith was in fact a long time supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment and he was re-

sponding to ERA advocates in Virginia. While he wouldn't have minded had the addition killed the bill entirely, he knew that the bill would pass and he wanted to ensure that white women had a cause of action against discrimination if black women had one. Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, a feminist, lawyer, and Democrat from Michigan, made tactical use of his support, the near-unanimous support of the women members, and other votes she had collected to pass Smith's amendment.<sup>8</sup> After passage in the House, the White House made it clear to Senate Democrats that they should pass the House bill without changes that could disrupt the process. Republican Everett Dirksen, then the Senate Minority Leader, attempted to excise the provision, but had to drop his attempt "in order to avoid the wrath of the women," as quoted in Jo Freeman's account.

The inclusion of protection from discrimination on the basis of sex in the employment section of the Civil Rights Act (labeled Title VII) was ignored by almost all, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agen-

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8 Griffiths had been on alert since the Meet the Press television show at which a female reporter, a member of the NWP, had asked Smith if he would consider adding women to the Civil Rights Act. He had said he might, and, although he joked about women when he rose on the floor of the House to offer his amendment, he was known to be a good friend of Alice Paul. Edith Green, a Democratic member from Oregon, was the only woman in the House not to support the amendment to include sex discrimination in employment in the Civil Rights Act. She had just finished a bruising fight to get the Equal Pay Act passed in 1963, with numerous exemptions, and was convinced by the Johnson White House that adding sex might jeopardize the Civil Rights Act's passage. Many organized women's groups, also opposed adding sex to Title VII, siding with the Women's Bureau and other pro-labor women's groups. President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, which had reported out shortly before he was assassinated, held that sex should be treated differently than race in laws. Once the bill passed in the House with sex added, the White House dropped its opposition. Moreover, the BPW, also ERA supporters and therefore in favor of the seeing sex included in Title VII, mounted a lobbying effort to persuade the Senate to let it stand. A Republican woman senator from Maine, Margaret Chase Smith, rallied Republicans against Senator Dirksen's attempt to exclude women. See Jo Freeman and Cynthia Harrison for additional details.

cy charged with implementing the law. One of NOW's early, successful actions was to organize protests in a few key cities demanding that the U.S. government enforce its own laws. It also filed a writ of mandamus in federal court requiring the EEOC to enforce the sex provision, noting that one-third of the complaints had come from women. Just as with the upstart National Woman's Party in the 1920s, the established women's organizations thought the new kids on the block, including both NOW and the women's liberation and radical feminist groups, were far too militant, far too brash, and received far too much credit for the gains women were making. After all, the older established groups had been foot soldiers in the trenches all along, before the guerrilla girls moved in! And just as the NWP was not very large in comparison to the older groups, NOW too was small, at least at the outset. But for whatever reasons—perhaps more widespread higher education among women, the advent of the birth control pill, millions of women moving into the workforce, and the absence of a major economic depression among many—the Second Wave of the women's movement succeeded in altering the consciousness of the vast, vast majority of American women. Survey after survey, even in the 1980s when many pundits thought the women's movement long dead, showed huge proportions agreeing that the women's movement was good for women. While upwards of 85–90 percent of all women taken together saw the value of the women's movement, support was even higher among women of color, at 90–95 percent and more.

The succession of legislative triumphs is impressive: the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by two-thirds of both chambers of Congress and its movement to the states for ratification (1972); Title IX of the Education Amendments (1972) guaranteeing equal opportunity for women students in all programs of all colleges and universities receiving federal funds;<sup>9</sup> the Equal Credit Opportunity

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9 Often thought to be limited to sports and athletics,

Act (1974) granting women the right to credit in their own names; the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978) barring employment discrimination on the basis of pregnancy; federal support of the convening of the National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, in November 1977, attended by 20,000 women from across the country; and the extension of the time deadline for ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment by almost three more years shortly after this convening (it did not help—the ERA still failed).

Women also began to get more involved in electoral politics. Feminist leaders founded the National Women's Political Caucus, to work for the election of women who support women's rights (no matter their political party). Bella Abzug, a great champion of women, was elected to the U.S. Congress from New York in 1970; Patricia Schroeder who became another champion was elected from Colorado in 1972. Also in 1972, Shirley Chisholm, an outspoken African American congresswoman from New York and an ardent feminist, ran for president in the Democratic Party primaries. Ella Grasso became the first woman governor whose husband did not precede her when she was elected governor of Connecticut in 1974. But perhaps even more important than the impressive legislative and electoral victories of women, was the change in American culture and life across the nation. Seemingly no corner of society, no cultural practice, was left untouched by feminist awareness. From churches, to schools and universities, television, movies, and rock music to coal mines, construction sites, prisons, town halls, and the military, in family after family and workplace after workplace, nothing would be the same. In particular, women's participation in the labor market rose dramatically, especially of mothers, and women flooded into colleges and universities and professional schools, in

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which has certainly led to a huge increase in women participating in intercollegiate sports, it applies to academic programs as well. Title IX opened up law schools and medical schools to women, for example.

law, medicine, and business, most of which had been previously closed to them. Women's organizations continued to raise new and challenging issues, such as sexual harassment, which defined an entirely new type of behavior that came to be prohibited by Title VII, and domestic violence, forcing it to be recognized as a crime rather than as a private matter.

### **Retrenchment and Diffusion: 1980s–2010**

When President Jimmy Carter was in the White House in the late 1970s, he met weekly with women's movement leaders to plot strategy to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, but beginning in 1981 the presidency belonged to Ronald Reagan, whose goals included shrinking government and changing domestic priorities. A pervasive attack on the women's movement and the changing role of women was also characteristic of this period. The 1980s are now seen as solidifying the conservative takeover of the Republican Party and leading to the 1994 election victory that brought the House of Representatives under Republican leadership for the first time in 40 years. Clearly, as in the 1920s, a conservative era contributed to blocking forward momentum for women in many areas. Perhaps we should not be surprised that periods of change in long standing institutions are often met with counter reactions in the following period. The campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment in the states that began in 1972 drew strong opposition from Phyllis Schlafly, whose Eagle Forum opposed the ERA in state after state. Her efforts strengthened the "counter women's movement," the women opposed to women's rights and abortion rights, as it gave them a cause against which to mobilize. Time ran out on the ERA in 1982, when only 35 of the required 38 states had ratified it. As with the women's suffrage campaign, the state legislatures were still dominated by men, and still today women state legislators are in

the minority in all 50 states. In the three key states where ratification failed, 75 percent of the women legislators voted for the ERA but only 46 percent of the men did, and there were not enough women to win overall.

During the Reagan (1981-1989) and George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) years, opposition to reproductive rights grew and victories for women were few and far between. Fortunately, Reagan pulled back on his election promise of abolishing Affirmative Action (a federal program established by President Lyndon Johnson barring discrimination in hiring by federal contractors and requiring affirmative measures to assure equal opportunity in employment). In a rare pro-woman move, in 1984 his attorney general established a task force on domestic violence and convened a public meeting. Reagan also appointed the first woman to the Supreme Court, Sandra Day O'Connor, in 1981. She generally supported women's right to abortion in Supreme Court cases but sometimes agreed to considerable restrictions on those rights. And in 1990, the first woman took command of a U.S. Navy ship.

During the Reagan and G.H.W. Bush years, women's rights advocates learned that on issues related to law and order and defense—and sometimes on family issues—common ground could occasionally be found with Republicans. During these years, for example, legislation providing access to husbands' pensions for wives (and ex-wives) was passed. Anticipating that their pro-family stances might lead some Republicans to support the proposed Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which would require employers to provide up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave for family care or medical need, including child birth, advocates managed to get majorities in both houses of Congress to pass it. However, President Bush vetoed the FMLA not once but twice. Bush's lasting legacy was the 1991 nomination of a conservative anti-abortion African American,

Clarence Thomas, to the Supreme Court. The backlash from the televised Thomas confirmation hearings, which featured testimony by Anita Hill that Thomas engaged in sexual harassment (and significant browbeating of Hill by senators), led to a significant increase in the number of women in the Senate as well as in the House; 1992 became known as the "year of the woman." The number of women in the Senate tripled, from two to six (of 100 possible seats!) and the number of women in the House also increased substantially. The gains were aided by Emily's List for the Democrats (formed in 1985), a new political action committee working to elect pro-choice women members of Congress. The Wish List formed in 1992 to elect Republican pro-choice women and the Susan B. Anthony List formed in 1993 to elect anti-choice women (and men).

The year 1992 also ushered in a Democratic president, William J. Clinton. During the Clinton presidency (1993-2001), the Family and Medical Leave Act was signed into law (1993) and the first Violence Against Women Act passed (1994) after an equally long gestation period. The act provides federal funding for prevention services, stricter enforcement of laws against assault and battering, and substantial funding for services to victims of domestic violence.

Little has happened since the 1990s to suggest that, in the absence of a generally progressive era, gains for women will go much beyond such safe areas as law and order, the military, domestic violence, a few family related issues, and funding for women's health more generally. In fact, President Clinton campaigned in the 1992 election on the promise that he would "reform welfare as we know it," welfare then being the primary federal program in the United States that supported poor women and children. (Conservatives had managed to make the case that the availability of a pittance to poor women and children led to there be-

ing more of them!) After Republicans won the majority in the House in 1994, Clinton signed a draconian welfare law that limited benefits to poor women and children to a maximum of five years over a lifetime and allowed states to limit benefits further to only two years. The result has been that in the severe 2007–2009 recession and slow recovery, the poverty of women and children has increased since welfare is no longer there for them. Clinton was pro-choice and did veto anti-abortion legislation, but he was not a strong advocate for other women's causes such as expanding equal pay laws. When Alexis Herman served as Director of the Women's Bureau in the 1970s under Carter, she was able to do far more to advance the concept of comparable worth—or equal pay for jobs of equal value—than she was as Secretary of Labor under President Clinton. He also complained that women's groups were “bean counters” when they lobbied for more women to be appointed to his cabinet. But Clinton did appoint a strong women's rights advocate, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to the Supreme Court, joining Sandra Day O'Connor, and bringing the total to two out of nine. (President Obama, elected in 2008, has appointed two more women, and O'Connor has retired, leaving three female justices at the end of 2011.)

The Clinton years were followed by a return of eight more years of a Republican presidency, that of George W. Bush, the son of George H.W. Bush. The signature of the G.W. Bush years was the fight against terrorism, which unleashed massive federal spending to fight foreign wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and to build a national security apparatus in the United States. The attacks on September 11, 2001 (known as 9/11), killed more than 3,000 Americans and constituted the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history. As Susan Faludi argued in *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*, the U.S. response to terrorism was characterized by the cultural return of the macho man with a vengeance—under threat, the nation reverted

to its earlier ethos. While women soldiers went to war and women even gained some additional military roles, on the home front the most salient image of women was the mothers widowed by 9/11, a trope used to justify a strong militaristic response. Bush railed against Islamic terrorism and strengthened the influence of Judeo-Christian religions in government, funding abstinence-only birth control education in the public schools; advancing “fatherhood initiatives,” designed to reestablish the man at the head of families and to push poor women into marriage; and appointing two Roman Catholic men to the Supreme Court, which brought the Roman Catholics to five of nine (the other three having been appointed by his father and Reagan). Bush appointed about as many women to his cabinet as Clinton had, especially when considering both terms. The Bush White House supported the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act as well as new legislation to curb international trafficking in women, a cause well supported by religious fundamentalists.

Once again, like during the Reagan years, women made some progress in the second Bush term on issues related to law and order and defense, but women's groups devoted the bulk of their efforts to holding on to gains made in the 1970s and to keeping the Family and Medical Leave Act, weak when it passed in 1993—it provides only unpaid leave to workers at firms with 50 or more employees—from being further weakened by the Bush administration through changes in regulations. The civil rights and employment discrimination enforcement apparatus in the Justice Department, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the U.S. Department of Labor were significantly weakened. The Bureau of Labor Statistics even went to so far as to attempt to stop collecting gendered data on the number of workers on payrolls, an attempt that was beat back on the Senate floor after an organizing and lobbying effort by women's groups.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The BLS did briefly stop collecting the data, since the

In sum, the twelve years of Republican rule between 1981-1993 can be characterized as the beginning of a period of retrenchment for many of the Second Wave women's groups, who were caught up in the necessity to defend reproductive rights and the legislative gains of the 1970s. This was little relieved during the Clinton years and further reinforced during the George W. Bush years, as in many ways the retrenchment became the status quo. To take just one example of remarkably long-lived backlash, the Hyde Amendment to prevent federal funds from being used to provide legal abortions to poor women, first introduced in 1976 in response to the 1973 Roe v Wade Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, has been reaffirmed by almost every Congress since, indicating women's failure to achieve a pro-choice majority in Congress.

Mass movement activity has subsided and many Second Wave groups have disappeared or severely cut back their activities. Most of the larger women's groups in Washington are once again the long established first wave groups who have survived by working within the system and by providing services to their members. Many of these groups are also declining as their members age and are not replaced by as many younger women. While some women's groups, such as Emily's List and Moms-Rising, have emerged to address particular needs and issues and have become prominent, there is a palpable sense among thought leaders that the women's movement is past its prime. On the one hand, the movement has diffused throughout the country as larger na-

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change was an administrative one approved by Bush's Office of Management and Budget, but after Senator Edward Kennedy successfully won an amendment to the appropriations bill requiring the BLS to reinstate the "women worker data series"; the BLS restored the missing data and said they would not try to eliminate it again. Now the BLS publishes the data more prominently, and, ironically, it is the existence of this data set that allowed the media to hype the 2007-2009 recession as the "mancession," because early in the recession men lost three times as many jobs as women did.

tional and many smaller advocacy groups have organized at the state and local level; indeed, new women's groups have continued to form. On the other hand, it is characterized by a lack of common purpose, the failure to create or push a broad women's agenda, and the absence of strategic and unified collective action to achieve major goals.

What accounts for the weakening of the women's movement in the thirty-plus years since the 1970s, the vibrant decade of the Second Wave? As we have seen, twenty of those years have been dominated by conservative Republican administrations in Washington, certainly a contributing factor to a lack of concrete gains. But women's gains were also weak under Clinton with cutbacks in welfare benefits a major loss, and now under Obama the small positive of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (the first bill the President Obama signed in January 2009)<sup>11</sup> is offset by the elimination of abortion coverage in employer provided health insurance, a major loss for women in his signature health care reform law, the Affordable Care Act, which in other ways is likely to provide many benefits for women.<sup>12</sup>

Here are some of the reasons we suggest:<sup>13</sup>

- 11 The Lilly Ledbetter Act was ready to sign by Obama in his first weeks, because like the FMLA early in the Clinton years, the advocates had it all teed up for him. It had passed the House before and only had to be quickly reintroduced. The law is, however, mostly a defensive action as it overrules a Supreme Court decision which held that women couldn't sue for discrimination that had been on-going for some time, but only for recent acts of discrimination. Previous interpretations of the equal pay and employment opportunity laws had held that each new paycheck is a new act of discrimination, but the Roberts Court ruled that if pay discrimination had occurred at first hire and that pay difference was simply perpetuated without additional new acts of discrimination, women (or members of other protected groups) had no standing to sue.
- 12 For example, the Obama administration has ruled that many tests and medications connected to basic wellness for women, such as mammograms and birth control, must be covered as basic health care at no additional charge beyond the premium paid for the insurance (no co-pays or deductibles).
- 13 Based upon Martha Burk and Heidi Hartmann, "Beyond

- ⇒ The failed push for the ERA took its toll on women's organizations. When the death knell rang on the ERA extension in 1982,<sup>14</sup> groups like NOW were not only defeated but worn out—they had poured a huge amount of energy in state after state, risking their all and losing. Many young women today have not even heard of the ERA, and a large majority of Americans believe women already have equal constitutional rights.
- ⇒ Several of the most prominent women's groups today are either single issue groups, such as NARAL Pro-Choice America or Planned Parenthood, or foundation-funded policy advocacy groups that use an "insider strategy" and lack an activist grass-roots membership base or political component to push from the outside. Most of the multi-issue membership groups from both the first and second waves have not attracted sufficient numbers of new members to wield effective political power.
- ⇒ Like many other social and political movements, the women's movement has found it difficult to respond to changing economic times. While many highly educated women entered high-paying professions in the 1970s and 1980s and rode the economic boom of the 1990s, gains for less educated women were more modest. Less educated men (their husbands, brothers, and boyfriends) lost out in the labor market as the bottom fell and the middle shrank (concomitant with globalization; the Reagan-Bush attack on labor unions; technological change; the spread of contingent work arrangements; and deteriorating work standards, such as a relatively low federal minimum wage that has not kept up with inflation). Some women and men blame the women's movement for reducing men's wages, even pushing men out of the labor force by taking their jobs.
- ⇒ The women's movement, which created more employment opportunity for women, had no response to the cultural consequences. As one tired blue collar woman worker put it, "Before the women's movement we did the housework and the men took out the trash. But since we were liberated they don't take out the trash anymore."
- ⇒ The right wing has thrived by pushing "right-to-life" and other hot button issues like opposition to gay marriage, keeping the women's groups in a defensive posture. The perennial top concerns of the vast majority of women, such as better jobs and wages and work-life balance, as measured by surveys, have fallen further down the agenda as women's groups struggle to maintain a fundamental principle of women's equality: control over fertility.
- ⇒ In the climate of retrenchment of the Reagan-Bush years, a dispirited movement became increasingly fragmented, as each group struggled to differentiate itself from the others to gain members and funding from foundations and other sources, producing what can be characterized as "flea-market feminism," with each bit of issue turf staked out and guarded by an organization seeking to attract customers to its booth. This tendency was not abated during the booming 1990s, as many new groups were organized around specific agendas, frequently dedicated to helping women abroad or to address newly identified issues, such as street harassment. Many

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the Gender Gap" in *The Nation*.

<sup>14</sup> See Jane Mansbridge's *Why We Lost the ERA* for a full account.

groups tailor activities to suit foundations, sometimes to the detriment of their core missions since foundations typically emphasize their own priorities in

making funding available. In the 2000s, characterized by recession and slow economic growth, retrenchment is once again evident.

## The Current Landscape

Where is the U.S. women's movement today? The question can be answered from several perspectives: public perception, political influence, infrastructure, and organizational capability.

### Public Perception

Even though abortion has been legal since 1973, the U.S. women's movement is still seen by both the public and politicians as primarily about abortion, largely due to the fact that abortion rights have been under continuous assault in the ensuing decades, and abortion is still a potent political issue. With abortion and contraception insurance coverage once again having taken center stage in the fight over the reform of the U.S. health care system in 2009-2010 and in the current effort by the Tea Party Congress elected in 2010 to defund Planned Parenthood, this perception has been reinforced, with Planned Parenthood gaining more than one million new members.

Among Democrats running for elected office in liberal areas, most candidates feel they have women's issues covered if they are pro-choice. This is a somewhat less nuanced view than among Republicans, who often put forward defense, national security, and the fight against terrorism as important to moms anxious to protect their families, in addition to bashing abortion and gay marriage. With economic issues taking center stage in the broader political debate since 2007, candidates of both parties

talk much about job creation, but few mention, let alone dwell on, women's need for equal pay and equal opportunity for promotion. President Obama's much touted Lily Ledbetter Act simply restores the state of federal law to what it was before a Supreme Court decision severely restricted women's time frame for filing a discrimination suit. Very few political leaders at the national level are preparing new legislation to make work more family friendly.

Even most of those already elected have gravitated to "safer" women's issues, such as domestic violence prevention and breast cancer. While President Obama seldom addresses women's concerns, Vice President Biden, to his credit, has placed a specialist on domestic violence in the White House and extended his long standing commitment to eliminating domestic violence to sexual assault on campuses, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made women's rights a priority internationally.

Meantime, the economic issues most women face every day—poor working conditions; lack of access to highly-paid, male-dominated jobs; unfair pay; barriers to promotion; lack of accommodation for family needs at work—go largely unchampioned and unaddressed, except by a few liberal members of Congress. The Obama White House frequently touts its commitment to work and family issues, and an interagency task force on equal pay enforcement has been formed, but no new legislation on these issues has been proposed by the White House. Gains

tend to be small in these areas: for example, the inclusion of some training funds (\$20 million) for women and underrepresented minorities to help them gain infrastructure jobs funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, President Obama's nearly \$1 trillion stimulus bill. The ARRA did include, however, many provisions to increase financial assistance to the unemployed and those with low-income and provided services targeted at women, such as increased funding for domestic violence and childcare. Nevertheless, in the 19 years since the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act, not one improvement in coverage or benefits has been won at the federal level. There have been some gains at the state level, notably in California and New Jersey, which now provide *paid* parental leave for up to six weeks.

Despite the plethora of women's organizations, many women wonder where the women's movement is, since no one group or individual has emerged from the crowd to capture media attention or claim the mantle of leadership of the women's movement.

## **Political Influence**

Part of the reason for less attention to issues beyond abortion rights by politicians is that women are not seen as a cohesive political force. Even though women are now a permanent majority of voters and there is a gender gap in every presidential election—with more women tending to vote Democratic and more men tending to vote Republican—more voters of both genders are moving to the Independent column. Women do not constitute a reliable voting bloc, much less one that women's groups can marshal at will. African American women do vote reliably more Democratic, and the Democratic Party is seeking to win the allegiance of Latina/o voters, but these groups, too, have difficulty in asserting their political claims within the party.

The organized women's groups, while advocating on issues benefiting women, cannot mount a substantial threat to those who don't vote their way, nor provide substantial help to those who do. This is due to a number of reasons, such as declining membership and less emphasis on activism, but another factor is U.S. tax law, which has encouraged most women's groups to organize under a section of the tax code called 501(c)(3) that governs charitable and educational organizations. In order to accept tax-deductible contributions, such groups cannot have lobbying as their primary purpose and cannot engage in electoral activity, including mounting political ads and supporting—or opposing—candidates. A very few groups have organized affiliated branches under a different section of the tax code that allows lobbying and supporting candidates, but they are a tiny minority.

In the face of their inability to bring home the policy bacon on economic issues, women's groups have tended to define success downward. To take one example, the concept of comparable worth, that is equal pay for jobs of equal value (also called pay equity in the United States), viewed as *the* civil rights issue of the 1980s, is now rarely mentioned. Virtually abandoning a broader bill, the proposed Fair Pay Act, which would require comparable worth, most women's groups coalesced around the much lesser bill, the Paycheck Fairness Act, which focuses on improving enforcement of existing law, and ultimately had to settle for the Lilly Ledbetter Act.

Another reason for women's lack of political influence is the paucity of female elected officials, who, research shows, tend to pay more attention to the concerns of women voters than do male office holders. There have been almost no gains in women's representation in Congress since 2006 and in state legislatures since 1998; women's share of state-wide executive offices has fallen since 1998–2000. Women are only 17 percent of the U.S. Congress and 24 percent of state legislatures. A record number

of women ran in the primary elections for their party's nomination to the U.S. Congress in 2012 and became the official nominees of their party. The November general election results will show how many succeeded to hold office.

Access to elected officials at the highest levels has also declined since the 1970s, when President Jimmy Carter met with women's groups weekly to plot strategy for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. In recent history, Presidents Clinton and Obama established liaison offices or individuals to interface with groups, but these encounters typically did and do not include the highest level of staff, let alone the president, and rarely address significant legislation or executive orders targeted at women. President George W. Bush did not even mount a pretense; he replaced the White House Office on Women's Issues with an office for religious liaison.

An illustration of the present state of affairs comes from early 2012 when President Obama was considering weakening the requirement for birth control coverage in the national health plan, as proposed in regulations from the Department of Health and Human Services, due to pressure from the Roman Catholic bishops. Women's groups largely petitioned from afar, taking ads in *The New York Times* and mounting internet petitions and the like. To his credit, Obama eventually declined to weaken the requirement, but it is telling that his decision was much in doubt and caused considerable angst on the part of women's movement leaders. A signature achievement for all Americans, with many especially good provisions for women, nevertheless could disappoint millions of women if it results in their employers' policies no longer covering abortion.

### **The Substantial Infrastructure of the Women's Movement**

At the national level there are now a large number of women's rights groups, primarily based in

New York and Washington, whose focus is policy advocacy and—for a few—building and supporting grass roots activism. For example NOW is re-dedicating itself to strengthening its grassroots activism. Approximately 250 of these groups are members of the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO), a coalition formed in the early 1980s in the wake of the ERA defeat, and aimed at combating what were seen as threats to the gains of the 1970s by the election of Ronald Reagan. The coalition includes single-issue groups like Planned Parenthood and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, as well as many multi-issue and long-standing organizations from both the first wave—including the AAUW, BPW, and the NCNW—and the Second Wave—including NOW, Feminist Majority (founded in 1987); the National Black Women's Health Imperative (1983); MANA, A National Latina Organization (1974); the Coalition of Labor Union Women (1974); and 9 to 5, National Association of Working Women (1973). Membership requires that groups subscribe to a common progressive agenda, though not all work on all issues, and the member groups are perhaps the heart of what people think of when they think of the women's movement, though NCWO itself is not well-known among the general public. The coalition's work is diffuse, generally underfunded, and not taken seriously by most political leaders, although lip service ramps up during campaign years.

As an outgrowth of decades of work on advocacy and institution-building, national groups have succeeded in spawning a large infrastructure that meets women's needs in a variety of ways. But these groups and institutions have not coalesced around a common agenda. Literally thousands of rape crisis centers, battered women's shelters, hotlines, women's job training programs, women's community hubs (such as YWCA buildings), campus women's centers, and women's studies programs, for example, are located on campuses and in urban areas (of even medium size) across the

country. Planned Parenthood clinics, many of which provide abortion in addition to other women's health services, are also found in all states, though in several places that are especially hostile to women's reproductive rights only a few can be maintained.

With very few exceptions, however, the groups with the most infrastructure tend to be more service oriented and less advocacy oriented, and many local and state groups are often not connected to national networks. Some leaders of facilities like battered women's shelters and rape crisis centers would no doubt like to be better connected to feminist activism at the national level, but with the movement centered in Washington and primarily working via direct mail or email, it is hard for these local leaders to relate to national women's groups beyond their issue area. The domestic violence groups have a national network as do the reproductive rights groups. These groups are active on their particular issues, often lobbying for policy changes that can help their constituencies, but they tend not to move beyond their issue area to other issues such as equal pay, even though they recognize that women's economic independence is directly linked to their issue areas.

Some local and state groups are multi-issue, such as women's studies programs and YWCA chapters, and may be related through their own professional or organizational state, regional, and national networks. They may be more or less involved in advocating for women's rights, depending on local leadership and other factors, but most stay away from getting involved in electoral politics. The abortion groups are virtually the only women's groups who regularly seek to elect women (and men) who endorse their goal of securing reproductive rights for all in the United States.

In the past two decades, the U.S. women's movement has also branched out to include significant advocacy for women's rights inter-

nationally.<sup>15</sup> Especially during the Clinton years, these groups became more influential in terms of U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis women. One major initiative, Vital Voices, grew out of the Clinton Administration's Vital Voices Democracy Initiative and has since become a viable stand-alone non-government organization. Currently, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has appointed the first ever U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues at the State Department.

In the philanthropic arena, women's funds, most of which are organized at the state and local level and are represented by the Women's Funding Network, which advertises that it has member women's funds on six continents, have emerged as a relatively new and dynamic sector of the broader women's movement. Again most are service oriented, but they are making a difference in the United States by funding local and state initiatives, supporting local and state organizations, and often working to strengthen advocacy through technical assistance and leadership development.

Also to be found are women's caucuses in almost every conceivable social group, from labor unions and nearly all religions to professional groupings such as transportation, banking, and real estate. Some professions are so thoroughly integrated—or even female dominated now—that their former women's groups dissolved. For example, women in management and administration positions in higher education decided they no longer needed their organization.

Additionally there is a substantial infrastructure in women's culture, including music festivals and music production companies. Women's media abounds from Ms. Magazine (founded in 1971 and now published by Feminist Majority) and women's e-news to the Women's Media Center

<sup>15</sup> Estelle Freedman, in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, provides a global perspective on the women's rights movement.

and countless blogs. Some blogs, like *feministing* and *MomsRising*, reach large audiences; *MomsRising* has gained a membership of more than one million since its founding in 2006.

## **Organizational Capability**

While the women's movement is generally characterized as consisting of the types of groups described above, most of which work on well-trodden paths, there are of course exceptions—examples of substantial and spontaneous grass roots awakening that provide a glimpse of the potential for aroused women to make a compelling difference. When Planned Parenthood was threatened recently by the Susan G. Komen Fund for the Cure with de-funding of its breast cancer screenings and the current Congress followed up by trying to take away Planned Parenthood's federal funding, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media exploded with support for Planned Parenthood. Incidents such as these tend to ignite "flash activism" around a specific situation, and it remains to be seen whether that momentum will be sustained in this case. Typically, once the crisis is over, activity reverts back to policy advocacy led by paid professionals with technical expertise.

Illustrative of this point is the fact that the organized women's movement has had no presence in and little to say about the Occupy Wall Street Movement, which began in September 2011. This despite the rallying cry of defending the 99 percent against the banks and Wall Street, whose subprime mortgage loans disproportionately targeted single heads of household, most of them women. There were complaints about marginalization from women inside Occupy that were eerily reminiscent of the complaints of their grandmothers during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In the midst of this, no national women's group stepped forward to help to correct the imbalance in the Occupy movement, although NOW

president Terry O'Neill did offer support to the occupiers on several occasions. And barely a year after it burst on the public scene the Occupy movement, which resisted developing a clear leadership structure, seems to have evaporated.

The new proliferation of blogging, text messages, and social media activism is once again fragmented and diffuse. The successful internet organizing revolution by groups such as MoveOn.org has eluded the older organized women's groups. MomsRising, cofounded by MoveOn.org cofounder Joan Blades, has built a large membership and an even larger blogosphere, but so far it has taken its place as one of several large groups and not catapulted to the front. At least up to now, new groups and new organizations have not produced a significant boost in women's social, economic, and political progress.

Despite occasional heralding of a "third wave" of the U.S. women's movement, in our opinion such a wave has not materialized. While often characterized as a new type of multi-racial, multi-ethnic, androgynous movement focused on new issues and using new tactics, that movement has yet to capture either a sizable portion of the media or the imagination of American women. New groups and tendencies have emerged to be sure: a focus on body image issues, healthy eating, eco-feminism, international feminism, street harassment and stalking, sexual assault and rape (including date rape), street marches known as 'slut walks' challenging the assumption that provocative dress causes assault and rape, and disruptive anti-war actions at meetings (often by Code Pink, a group of primarily older women that wear pink and disrupt hearings and other government or corporate meetings).

The lack of an identifiable third wave is not, however, a particular impediment to forward progress. Indeed we have shown that the U.S. women's movement, with its rich history and

enviable track record, has developed an abundance of know-how and a very substantial in-

frastructure. Both are ready to be tapped for a resurgence of activism and political influence.

## The Way Forward

While we believe the women's movement remains a strong force in U.S. society and has great potential for achieving further political, social, and economic progress for women, we would be remiss if we did not point out that all social justice movements in the United States confront formidable obstacles. Changes in campaign finance laws have opened the floodgates of corporate cash, and there is little or no oversight of claims made in the media. The right wing is enjoying the fruits of thirty-plus years of work to change the dominant ideology from one of shared responsibility and sacrifice to a "winner take all" society, where social supports are minimal to nonexistent. Income inequality—disproportionately affecting women—is at an historic high, labor union membership has fallen to one-half of its former share of the workforce since the early 1980's, and even the weak corporate regulation we have is under attack. The Obama Administration's Consumer Financial Protection Bureau will continue to be challenged, and possibly weakened or overturned, by Republicans in Congress. None of these circumstances can be laid at the feet of the women's movement, nor can the women's movement alone solve the problems created by the decades-long rightward shift in U.S. thinking and political and economic outcomes.

Nevertheless, there is much that can and should be done. Several strategies are recommended:

First, we must admit that many strategies and activities that worked in the past are no longer effective. The very sociological shift that the women's movement helped to create is now working against the organizing and political tac-

tics women's groups pioneered in the 1970s. Most women are working for pay and out of the home; they no longer read newspapers, don't have time to go to meetings, and wouldn't consider attending a rally or march for a cause they feel only remotely connected to in their precious time. While young people can be induced to come out to the streets, activism in the old sense is increasingly difficult to sustain for the average woman. To become more effective as a movement we must invent and take advantage of new forms of activism.

Second, we must make ourselves relevant to women's lives and make the priorities of the majority of women the focus of the women's movement. Numerous polls show that women in the United States care most about economic issues (pay equity and pensions), health care (which also has an economic component), and violence. The women's movement is primarily identified with abortion rights. No one would argue that defending reproductive choice isn't important—and even, at its core, economic—but most women's everyday lives don't revolve around this issue. We must convince women that the movement is relevant to their lives, and that a feminist future, one in which women and men are equal participants in politics, economics, society, and family life is both desirable and feasible.

Third, we must make educating the public a priority. We have to make the connection in the public mind between what is happening to women and their families economically and what the women's movement can do about it. We need a new consciousness-raising about

how the personal is *still* political, about how what is happening to each individual can be acted upon collectively. We have not educated women as to how fair pay, for example, is something they can help to bring about through a movement. Nor have we shown women that contingent employment, loss of benefits, forced part-time work, mandatory overtime, or the falling value of the minimum wage are women's issues that the women's movement is addressing. The movement has been very loud in saying "get your hands off my body," but not as vocal in saying "stop shorting my paycheck."

Fourth, we must address the traditional complaint of women of color that the movement has not been for them.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the mass activation of working-class women called for by leaders like Barbara Ehrenreich and Karen Nussbaum has not yet happened. Emphasis on a new, primarily economic agenda—pay, promotion and advancement, employment environment, paid parental leave, child care, violence and sexual harassment—can cut across race and class lines.

Fifth, we must learn to work together. To do so we need new structure. A new economic agenda won't do any good unless the organized groups in Washington truly start working together, reaching out to both organized and unorganized women outside the capital. What passes for working together at the national level now is joining one or another coalition, each under the leadership of a particular group, so that leaders can seek funding, visibility, and members. Really working together means crafting a short list of goals for revitalizing organized feminism and making sure the message resonates with the majority of American women. Working together would mean that organizations would cooperate—and in not a few instances consider merging—in addressing priority issues and in crafting effective visible

media, social media, and education campaigns to achieve common goals. This argues for a more effective coalition such as those maintained by the labor unions and environmental groups, who can and do coalesce around common agendas most of the time. A new National Federation of Women should include not only existing and new groups, but also individual women.<sup>17</sup> The Federation would need a focused agenda, agreed upon tactics, meaningful funding, and a commitment to singular, serially achievable goals that could serve as the backbone of revitalization.

Even with all the women's movement's potential, a New Federation of Women, including changes in structure, goals, and tactics, will be less than successful without a substantial increase in political influence. Two things are needed:

1) Women's groups (and a new women's federation) must not shy away from political activity, and must put in place the legal and tax structures to allow political activity. This is not difficult; it is more a psychological barrier due to long tradition than a true legal obstacle.

2) Women's groups must commit to public education in the broadest sense, so that women identify as female voters who can make a difference if they vote together. This is necessarily a long term strategy, but it can begin with small victories that allow women to see the benefits of voting as a bloc. Again, the union movement serves as an example. Politicians know that union groups and their individual members typically vote for candidates who support their agenda, and unions have the ability to deliver those votes or sit out an election.

In the face of what has been characterized politically as a modern "war on women," the women's movement has an opportunity to seize

<sup>16</sup> See bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, and Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's edited volume, *This Bridge Called my Back*.

<sup>17</sup> The existing NCWO could take on such functions or another organization could take the lead in forming a new federation.

the moment and make a real difference for U.S. women. By dint of sheer numbers alone, the women's movement has the potential to

far outstrip the clout of any other social justice movement. And never in the modern history of the U.S. has it been so needed.

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## Related Study

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