

Women's Liberation Movement: The Second Wave

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This paper examines some of the achievements and setbacks that the "second wave" of the Women's Movement faced based on their organizational capacity. Women across the United States have the equality and opportunities that they have today because of the sacrifice of feminists during this period in time. However, due to a lack of cohesiveness during a majority of the "second wave," feminists ended up being both a friend and a foe to feminism and their objectives.

¹For a brief moment in history, supporters of President John F. Kennedy thought that his election to the White House in 1960 signified the beginning of women's liberation. That belief was short-lived. In fact, many soon realized that President Kennedy was "neither a friend nor a foe of feminism" (Berkeley 1999:19). It would be the indifference of the political climate—that of his unresponsiveness and the lack of real support from his successor and the newly formed Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in accordance to the Title VII Amendment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibited sex discrimination in employment—as well as the economic and

cultural social structural shift that would ignite the "second wave" of the Women's Liberation Movement through the establishment of its first social movement organization of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In the decades that followed, many collective groups of the Women's Movement industry found triumphs and failures, unity and dissent. This paper will examine some of the achievements and setbacks that they faced based on their organizational capacity and choices of collective action tactics and demonstrate that the results of some of their ups and downs came directly from themselves—from feminists who were both a friend *and* a foe to feminism.

¹ Lin Wang is an undergraduate student at the Department of Sociology. Her paper was originally submitted to SOC 418 Crowd Behavior and Social Movements, taught by Professor Hyojoung Kim in Summer 2009.

According to Berkeley (1999), the organizational structure of NOW was closely modeled after that of the Inter-Department Committee on the Status of

Women. Shortly before his death, President Kennedy had issued an executive order that created this committee, which was later matched at the state level by August of 1963. NOW's first 28 members adopted the committee's tactic of utilizing annual meetings to compare notes on the status of women of various states, share strategies for promoting change, renew friendships, and decide key issues that they would address as a group. The expectation was for policies to be hammered out during these annual meetings with the bulk of the actual work being carried out by officers, board of directors, and task force leaders. Local chapters would then be formed across the country to work on specific task force issues, lobbying for their changes and funds in federal legislations. This strategy of organization brought early success to NOW. In 1968, they were able to pressure the EEOC to review violations of sex discrimination in employment on a case-by-case basis rather than through uniform policies and convince the EEOC to rule in favor of integrating sex-segregated want advertisements in newspapers. Because of these early successes, NOW's membership grew to 1,200 members in its first year.

Despite these early successes, NOW's strategy of organization was flawed. The leaders of NOW focused too intently on controlling the issues that they felt were important to all women. They never stopped to realize that they did not possess the leadership skills or dedicate the time and effort needed to actually convince all of the women that their views were right. Rather, they resorted to implementing a "to-do" list

of issues and policies and placing them to a vote. Consequently, their actions angered a significant number of women, whose "minority" opinions were simply dismissed and never given the chance to be heard. Dissension would come from members who disagreed with NOW's policies. Those who were more radical or more conservative in their views became fed up with the way that NOW was organized. After NOW's 2nd annual meeting, they disbanded from the organization and established their own social movement groups.

One of the more conservative organizations that sprang up was the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL). Led by Elizabeth Boyer, a lawyer from Ohio, WEAL had chapters in 40 states in only three short years that represented the interests of elite, professional women (Berkeley 1999: 34). These women were all members that NOW could have potentially reached out to had they been more willing and capable of adjusting or expanding their views. Various radical women's organizations also sprouted across the United States. Unlike the large national organizations of NOW and WEAL, which represented liberal ideologies and called for "equal rights before the law" through legal and legislative changes, radical organizations were small and localized anti-hierarchical groups that emphasized revolutionary socioeconomic and cultural changes that liberated them from their oppressors. Radical organizations encouraged wide-ranging levels of participation and expression and did make small, individual contributions to the Women's Movement. However, their organizational capacity was severely limited.

Even from the beginning, these groups could not agree on either the root cause of their oppression—capitalism or male supremacy—or on a single strategy for achieving liberation. Not known for their staying power, most radical organizations disappeared or transformed by the 1980's.

Both liberal and radical feminists found some levels of success in their early years. However, at the same time, they were enemies to themselves in terms of organizational capacity. Feminists from both sides stood in their own ways of gaining activists and awakening their target audience by being stubborn and egotistical in what they perceived as right or wrong and important or trivial for feminism. Fortunately, the 1970's witnessed a renewed effort toward "united sisterhood". WEAL began favoring NOW's abortion stance and started leaning towards the radical side by accepting "responsible rebellions." Radical feminists began acknowledging that their extreme protests led to few long-lasting results. Eventually, pragmatism won out and all groups began seeking reforms of laws and established institutions through participation in politics. Ideological differences between the two branches also diminished as they both sought common ground on defining "feminist" issues, which included securing the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), abortion, child care, rape, and domestic violence. As proof of their changed ways, tens of thousands of members from different organizations gathered to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Woman's Suffrage by taking it to the streets for Women's Strike for Equality Day on August 26,

1970. "Women demonstrated that day in practically every major city in the country, and in some smaller ones as well . . . [that] Strike Day was a high for virtually everyone involved" (Davis 1991: 116). This strategy of demonstrating the new organizational capacity of the women's movement garnered tremendous success. Millions of Americans that were previously unaware of the Women's Movement awoke to its political potential as a "unified sisterhood" on that day. Their public support increased dramatically—as did their memberships. For instance, NOW who had started the decade with 4,000 members reached 20,000 by the year 1973 and 125,000 by the year 1980. NOW would go on to be the largest feminist organization in the United States in 2009 with a total of 500,000 contributing members and 550 chapters in all 50 states (The National Organization of Women 2009).

The effort towards "united sisterhood" merged not only ideologies but choices of collective action tactics. During the beginning stages, liberal feminists highly favored legal and lobbying tactics. Unfortunately, results from such tactics were painstakingly slow. It took a long time for any changes to be enacted and an even longer time for such changes to be enforced. For example, it took the federal agency EEOC years after it was created to even bother doing what they were funded to do, which was to enforce the law's sex discrimination provisions. In fact, between "1964 and 1966, women workers filed some four thousand claims of sexual discrimination and in nearly every case, the commission ruled against them" (Shomp 2007:101). At times, it

simply appeared that the efforts of liberal feminists were a joke to the entire political system, and radical feminists would tolerate none of it. They devised tactics that shocked and awed their target audience. According to Berkeley, the more outrageous and radical their stance or action was, the easier it became to popularize their political message of liberation (1999).

Radical feminists chose their tactics based on the source of their blame for oppression. Those that blamed capitalism frequently chose the tactic of direct action, which were public demonstrations staged for the media. "Though the mass media were, for the most part, hostile to feminism . . . they lavished attention on the women's liberation movement until there was hardly an American who hadn't heard of the movement" (Davis 1991:106). Some of the more well-known and highly publicized demonstrations included the 1968 Miss America Beauty Pageant demonstration by the New York Radical Women (NYRW) and the hexing on Wall Street delivered by the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) on October 31, 1968. On the other hand, the radical feminist groups that blamed male supremacy frequently utilized conscious-raising tactics. These tactics involved gathering women into small groups to share personal experiences of oppression with the goal of making them aware of how their lives were being shaped by patriarchy and its male chauvinists value system. Overall, with the exception of a few radical feminist groups, most radical feminist organizations preferred discussion over action. Their goal centered on informing women of their treatment

as an exploited class under a patriarchal society.

As the Feminist Movement matured in the 1970's, tactical distinctions between the two branches of feminism became less pronounced. Eventually, both sides turned to tactics that sought reforms in legal and social institutions through the use of "petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and lawsuits to force legal reform" (Schomp 2007:106). Consequently, significant moments of success for the Women's Liberation Movement followed. Recognizing that equal opportunity for women in the job market meant equal opportunity in education, NOW and WEAL placed their legal and lobbying talents to work in the 1970's. Along with other women's groups, members targeted over 300 colleges and universities and all medical and law schools, charging them with sex discrimination towards women in education. Their efforts proved to be fruitful. On June 23, 1973, Title IX cleared Congress, banning sex discrimination in all schools that received federal funds. Private under-graduate schools were the only ones exempt from this legislation. In 1975, the Women's Movement also directed public attention to areas of household violence and battered women. They helped change the way that the public viewed domestic violence—from that of a private issue to a public outrage. The numbers of shelters for battered women grew as a result. By 1978, 300 shelters spanned over the United States. In addition, 40 states passed laws that eased restrictions on restraining orders and increased criminal penalties for batterers. Some states even began imposing surcharges on marriage licenses to raise funds for

sustaining these shelters. The Women's Movement then went on to contribute vital reforms for rape victims. The many changes that they helped make included revisions in the Federal Rules of Evidence that prohibited defense attorneys from introducing a victim's sexual history and style of dress as "evidence" and legislation amendments that dropped the marital exemption clause from rape statutes. Tackling all of the various "feminist" issues as a "unified sisterhood" allowed feminists to be friends of feminism. However, tackling all of these issues at once also backfired on them. Feminists would go on to witness the evaporation of support for one of the most critical policy reforms for the Women's Liberation Movement—that of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

ERA had sailed through Congress in early 1972 and was seemingly on a fast-track process to ratification. According to Berkeley, in order for the amendment to become law, it "needed to be ratified by thirty-eight states and by December 1972, twenty-two states had affirmed their support for the amendment" (1999:83). Although support from additional states slowed somewhat in the following three years, feminists remained optimistic. "After all, a public opinion poll conducted in 1974 had indicated that 74% of the Americans queried supported the ERA" (Berkeley 1999:83). And, by 1975, feminists only needed three more "yes" votes before their deadline on March 22, 1979. However, what the feminists failed to anticipate was that ratification would stall in that same year and nosedive only two short years later. Prior to this time, feminists' energies

and resources had been focused on a myriad of issues, mostly dealing with localized needs and concerns. As a result, feminists never really noticed or cared about the conservative Republican activist Phyllis Schlafly or her seemingly small publication called *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* that centered on what was wrong with the ERA. In fact, feminists figured that Schlafly's opposition was not a big deal, since they had the support from both Republicans and Democrats at the time. They never thought that Schlafly and her organization of STOP ERA would turn the tide from support to complete and utter resistance. In a final ditch effort, feminists tried to salvage the weakening support for ERA by gathering at the 1977 National Women's Conference. However, by the time that the feminist organizations shifted their focus to ratification of the ERA, it was too late. They discovered a well-entrenched opposition and nothing that they tried to do, from televised debates to fasting vigils to economic boycotts, seemed to resonate with the "white, middle-aged males from business or professional backgrounds" who comprised the majority of legislators in unratified states (Berkeley 1999:85). Schlafly had won and defeated the ERA.

In conclusion, in terms of organizational capacity and choices of collective action tactics, feminists were both a friend and foe of feminism. Throughout the decades following their rise in the 1960's, feminists have succeeded countless times in pressuring lawmakers to make the necessary legal and legislative changes that gave women equal rights and protection before the law. Women across the United States

would not have the equality and opportunities that they have today had it not been for the “second wave” of the Women’s Liberation Movement. However, organizational capacity of feminists was severely limited in the beginning by their years of disputes and their sheer inability to compromise. The nation watched as feminists scattered to form various organizations that seemed to all want different things. Also, for the most part, the tactics Feminists chose seemed to work both for them and against them. They finally managed to come together in the 1970’s for the sake of tackling multiple women’s issues. However, multi-tasking only turned out to hurt them in the end as one of their most important areas of reform failed with the defeat of the ERA.

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