

# NOW

By David Behrens

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**K**ansas City—Kelly Gaines had three days of fun. Sporting a well-worn feminist T-shirt, she scanned the text of each new bylaw as it was proposed and amended and re-amended. She listened intently to the heated and fiery debate. She watched in unruffled silence as two warring factions duelled for control of the National Organization for Women, the country's largest feminist group.

But Kelly did not become depressed or angry or worried about the future of feminism in America. Only occasionally did she crawl under a table and hide. Although she is a fully accredited voting member, Kelly is, after all, only 9 years old. The daughter of a NOW regional leader from Atlanta, she was born the same year that NOW was.

But for Kelly's elder "sisters"—the more than 300 who had come from all over the country—there appeared to be many worries. For three days, they worked on a new constitution for NOW's second decade. At the end, beset by regional and ideological conflicts, they left their national constitutional conference with some old wounds reopened and some new doubts about the future of the women's movement.

Women such as Fran Kolb of New Jersey and Anne Pride of Pennsylvania and Nola Claire of New York were worried over what they saw as a new spirit of conservatism and caution in the women's movement. They were representative of many women from the large eastern states and California who were outnumbered by a slim margin at this midwestern conclave.

In the majority here were women such as Lona Crandall of South Dakota and Pat Malcolm of Wisconsin, fighting for new rules to give women in the less populous midwestern and western states a near-equal share in the national organization. Many of them were worried that the eastern wing of NOW, which had controlled the organization for the past year, was "too anti-establishment," too radical to suit the needs of women in more conservative parts of the country.

In part, it was a regional struggle of geography vs. population. But it was also an ideological fight, coming down to two questions:

- Who will define problems?
- Who will propose the solutions?

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At the end of the third day, a new constitu-

tion had been drafted—to be submitted to all NOW members nationally by mail ballot within 30 days. The proposed new bylaws contain three major, controversial changes:

- The president and four other national officers would be elected by a delegate system, based on the membership of chapters throughout the country. In the past, all NOW members attending national conventions could vote on a one-person, one-vote basis.

- NOW's board of directors would be elected at regional meetings, thus giving NOW members in smaller states a near-equal share of seats on the national board.

- NOW's five top officers would be salaried and would serve on a full-time basis, a demand made by delegates from the eastern states.

After an 11th-hour compromise, representatives from eastern states begrudgingly agreed to support the new constitutional proposals—or at least not to work against them back home.

"My God, I don't want to have to do this all over again in Detroit," a New York delegate said, referring to NOW's next national conference in April.

The remark came on the final day. The mood was tense. Easterners such as Theresa Bergen of Brooklyn were promising to "go home and stump the state" to defeat the new constitution. Pennsylvania state coordinator Gloria Sackman-Reed said she did not see "how members at home can wallow this."

But a last-minute compromise was in the works. The conference divided into two separate caucuses in adjoining meeting halls. In one, Elsie Smeal of Pennsylvania, NOW's national chairwoman, urged the eastern members to accept compromise. In the other half, Mary Lynn Myers of South Dakota, unsuccessful last year in her bid to defeat NOW President Karen DeCrow, successfully urged women from the South, Midwest and West to offer a compromise—giving some additional national board delegates to the eastern states. Both Myers and Smeal had been up past 3 PM, working on a conciliatory plan to save the conference.

But from the outside, the players on each side certainly looked alike.

On both sides there were T-shirts that proclaimed "Woman Power" and "My Body Belongs to Me" and "Uppity Women Unite" and "A Woman Without A Man Is Like A Fish Without A Bicycle." ~~On both sides there were women who were married, who were divorced, who were~~

back in college or graduate school, who were working and/or raising children. On both sides, a few lesbians were represented, although their profile was low at the conference. Feminist jewelry was popular on both sides.

And yet, there were bitter words coming out of both caucuses. "Blackmail!" "Dirty tactics!" "Guilt trip!" "I don't trust 'em!"

What was it all about? "It's hard to say sometimes," a New Jersey woman said, shrugging. "And I wouldn't want to tell the press," another said. But some would talk about it.

"We want to work within the establishment," Lona Crandall of Sioux Falls, S. D., said. Karen DeCrow and the easterners had promised to take the women's movement "out of the mainstream and into the revolution a year ago," she said.

But instead, midwesterners claimed that NOW's image had been tarnished. Its membership is down, finances are shaky and structure has been torn with dissension. "We've been unable to persuade Congress, for example, that poor women need federal funds for abortion, and we've made no progress on the Equal Rights Amendment," Crandall said. That is where the revolutionaries from the East have taken NOW.

Another midwesterner was Pat Malcolm of Madison, Wisc. She, too, voted with the moderate contingent, but her own story is far from cautious or conservative. She married at 17 because she did not realize that she had other options, she said. She had three children, divorced her husband at 23, and now, at 27, is back in college, working for divorce reform laws in Madison and serving as NOW's legislative coordinator for the state of Wisconsin. In the eyes of many not caught up in the varying shades of the feminist debate, Malcolm would be considered innovative, a reformer, perhaps even a bit daring or courageous. Within the context of the NOW struggle, she was placed "a little on the establishment side."

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"We are anti-establishment," Fran Kolb was saying. A national board member from New Jersey, she was holding a post-mortem yesterday with a few other national board members from the East. "We believe in more than legislative or legal approaches," Kolb said. "We also believe in street action, in demonstrations. We don't want to limit our options."

"But it's more than that," Nola Claire of Syracuse said. "We have a wider view of what feminism is." For instance, she said, changes in

the criminal justice system are part of the feminist movement. For people on "the other side," she said, "they may be involved with reforms, but they don't relate it to feminism."

Anne Pride of Pittsburgh, a writer professionally and editor of NOW's national publication *Do It NOW*, agreed. "We also don't want to join the mainstream if it's going to be the world men live in. If you're fighting just to make women presidents of companies, then you are also going to put women on the unemployment lines." It was a question of changing society for the better, for both women and men, she said, not simply accepting all the hardships that men have accepted.

They agreed that there were "just as many women living alternative life-styles" on both sides of the ideological fence. It was probably harder in the smaller communities, Kolb agreed.

But smaller communities were not restricted to the Midwest or the West. Nola Claire, for instance, grew up in upstate New York and also married young. Now 42, she has children that are 20 and 18. She recently divorced, returned to graduate school in television production and is moving to Los Angeles this month.

"People call me courageous, but I did what I had to do," she said. But her story, in many ways, was parallel to Pat Malcolm's. No one is saying that the midwesterners were reactionary, Kolb said. It was a matter of degree. "It is easier for us to be more open," she said.

But the new NOW bylaws, if passed, will discourage dissent and make it even harder for poor, minority and blue-collar women to get involved in NOW and the women's movement, according to many of the easterners. The delegate system, they claim, will merely perpetuate and overrepresent middle-of-the-roaders who "always get elected everywhere."

The easterners felt that full-time officers will help, however. As Ellie Smeal had said, "How can we change the world with part-time people?"

A nationwide split in NOW is no longer predicted here. In fact, women on both sides generally agreed that the organization will be neater and more efficient, more stable financially and possibly politically stronger. "But it won't attract people," Alice Chapman, Connecticut state coordinator, said.

"No split," Anne Pride said, "but I think we will see some radical spin-offs, some new smaller organizations very soon." The ballots will probably go out at the end of the month, just in time for NOW's 10th birthday. /III