



MARY LYNN MYERS  
Narrowly defeated



KAREN DeCROW  
President of NOW

# Has the Feminist Movement Reached a Turning Point?

by Pam Proctor

**A**fter nearly 10 years of dramatic success on many fronts—in the courts, in athletics, in education—the feminist movement has become fragmented and faces difficult times.

The fragmentation came into focus last October at the annual convention of the movement's largest activist group, the National Organization for Women (NOW), when the incumbent president was nearly defeated in a bitter election battle. A month later came the unexpected and crushing defeat of the state equal rights amendments (ERA) in New York and New Jersey.

The ERA defeat was "mostly the fault of the movement" and only a temporary setback, says *Ms.* magazine editor Gloria Steinem. Proponents of the amendment, says Steinem, "felt it couldn't fail to pass" and did not work hard enough to get out the vote.

## Ignoring the voters

"We are apparently not reaching the people we need to reach—those homemakers in New York and New Jersey who voted en masse against the ERA," says Mary Lynn Myers, 30, a NOW board member who lost the presidency of the 60,000-member group to lawyer Karen DeCrow by only 98 votes. "We have completely ignored what will be meaningful to them and cause them to feel an interest in their own welfare and in the women's movement."

This reassessment comes at a time when the goals of feminism are supported by a majority of the American people. A December poll by Louis Harris revealed that "a decisive 63-25 percent of the American people favor most of the efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society." In 1970, the ratio was 42-41. Popular support for women's rights groups, however, remains low. According to the Harris survey, only 16 percent of Americans feel that "most" feminist groups are "helping the cause of women."



Rep. Bella Abzug (l) says the women's movement "is becoming deeper and wider," as stars like Gloria Steinem (r) fade.

## FEMINISTS CONTINUED

"I joined NOW on an issue of equal pay," says DeCrow, who is a graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. Working at a series of editorial jobs, she found that women were paid less than men for the same work. In 1967 she founded the Syracuse, N.Y., chapter of NOW and two years later entered Syracuse University Law School.

Since her graduation from law school in 1972, the twice-divorced DeCrow has devoted herself to writing and working within the feminist movement.

"Now I don't get paid anything," she says, tossing back her long brown hair spilling over an Indian-print caftan. Although the NOW presidency is a volunteer post, DeCrow is a sought-after speaker and commands \$1500 per lecture.

In contrast to DeCrow's sometimes abrasive style, her arch-rival Mary Lynn Myers, a slender blonde from Pierre, S. Dak., talks and acts like a model of Middle-American sensibility. Although Myers favors civil rights for homosexuals and takes a moderate pro-abortion stand, she prefers to emphasize bread and butter issues to which most women can relate. In her home state, for example, the major priority of the local NOW chapter is to reform inheritance tax laws, which Myers says put farm women at a serious disadvantage when they are widowed.

"These are the kinds of issues which will benefit the vast majority of Ameri-

can women," says Myers.

Like DeCrow, Myers became an active feminist over a salary discrimination issue. During a summer stint as a 20-year-old lifeguard for the city of Sioux Falls, Myers found that female lifeguards were being paid 25 cents an hour less than the men. She threatened the city attorney with a lawsuit and the city quickly equalized salaries and gave back pay to Myers and her female co-workers.

Her continuing practical approach to feminism stems from her own work experience. Holding a master's degree in management, she was appointed South Dakota's first Director of Human Rights in 1972. As head of a seven-member complaint processing agency, she investigates allegations of discrimination in areas ranging from housing to athletics. During the past three years, cases under her jurisdiction have improved employment and educational opportunities for women in the state.

### Husband a 'feminist'

Myers, who says her lawyer husband Steve is also "a feminist," has worked within NOW for seven years at the state and local levels. But she's not satisfied with the recent direction in which the organization has been moving.

To combat what she sees as a drift away from economic concerns, Myers recently met with NOW founder Betty Friedan and 11 other dissident leaders. The group made plans for a new movement within NOW, tentatively called "Womansurge," which they hope will appeal to a broad spectrum of women.

The polarization in NOW around the

personalities of Myers and DeCrow is symptomatic of the growing diversity of the feminist movement and the fragmentation of its leadership. These days the movement "wears many faces and speaks with many voices, from Betty Ford to the most avant-garde groups," says Rep. Bella Abzug.

### Stars lose shine

One major reason for the fragmentation is that, as the movement has broadened, many of its old stars have lost some of their glitter.

Betty Friedan, for example, though still a powerful role model for many feminists, is gradually receding into the background. To Karen DeCrow, Friedan has become a mere memory: "There is a place in my heart for Betty," she



Betty Friedan, mother of the feminist movement, says her role is "to think."

says. Friedan regards herself as "an aging member of NOW" whose primary role is "to think."

Another luminary, Gloria Steinem—who was never a member of NOW but made her mark as a founder of *Ms* magazine—says she's ready to step down as a movement spokesperson.

"After eight years of doing precisely what I feel least comfortable doing—speaking in public, organizing—I'd like to retreat into my solitary profession," says journalist Steinem. "I haven't written anything of any length for four or five years and I miss it."

### The movement grows up

With such leaders as Friedan and Steinem fading into the background, the power base of the movement has shifted. Instead of being buoyed by a handful of charismatic leaders, the movement is now anchored in the efforts of thousands of rank and file women who are personally taking feminist action in their own lives.

A good example of this shift to grass roots feminism, which is reflected in statistics like the Harris poll, is Tennala Gross, a 59-year-old college math teacher from Greenville, N.C. Mrs. Gross, the wife of a Southern Baptist minister, got involved in the feminist movement over an issue of equal pay at her college, where female professors were paid less than men. She has been pressuring the school to equalize salaries. "I think that my work as a feminist is the most meaningful thing I've done as a Christian," says Mrs. Gross.

Another barometer of the growing grass roots appeal of the women's movement is the fact that many politicians are jumping on the feminist bandwagon. According to Karen DeCrow, three unnamed Presidential hopefuls have approached her for NOW's endorsement.

At NOW's annual convention in Philadelphia, Sen. Birch Bayh (D., Ind.) and Pennsylvania's Democratic Gov. Milton J. Shapp showed up for an ERA rally. Internal dissension on the convention floor kept Bayh from speaking and forced Shapp to wait two hours before talking to the group.

### They back Bella

So far, Rep. Bella Abzug, who may run for the Senate against New York Sen. James Buckley, is the only politician who has received NOW's official backing.

Because of the rift in its leadership, the feminist movement may have some rough weather ahead when it comes to delivering votes to individual candidates or winning issues like ERA. But if the polls are any indication, popular support for its basic aims is growing.

"Every place in the country women are recognizing that they have not fully explored the opportunities open to them," says Bella Abzug. "The women's movement has put women in movement."