

THE RIGHT TO VOTE – 1920 – Appreciating the pioneers

by Ruth Nemzoff | March 1, 2021

Celebrating those whose names aren't in the history books

When I left New Hampshire in the mid-1980s, both the New Hampshire Historical Society and the Schlesinger Library at Harvard wanted my papers. I had been the assistant minority leader in the New Hampshire House of Representatives, deputy commissioner of Health and Welfare, and I had been one of the first organizers of the women's movement in southern New Hampshire. The anniversary of suffrage – and, frankly, my hurt and anger at the denigration of my generation's work by young feminists – propelled me to rediscover the story contained in the old boxes.

In 1970, I moved to New Hampshire and, looking for community, I responded to a two-line ad posted by women looking to form a consciousness-raising group. The ad had been posted by two women who worked in a factory and did not have high school degrees. Our first meeting consisted of them, me, and another doctor's wife – though if I wanted to check all the boxes, I could describe her as an immigrant of color with a GED. Before long, we each had reached out to many women in our various circles, which led to the formation of consciousness-raising groups across the region.

As I revisited my papers, I realized the historical narrative simplifies the movement I was part of. Women of all classes and creeds came together in New Hampshire; pretending poor women were not part of the movement devalues their contributions. Just as we are reevaluating the suffrage movement and finding the widespread participation, I have realized that every movement chooses its heroes. At this centennial, I am finding it powerful to think about the forgotten members of the second-wave feminist movement. Our heroes should be lauded, but so should those whose names aren't in the history books.

In these groups, we learned about low pay for women, because even the middle-class women who did work outside the home had much lower salaries than their husbands. We learned how society had socialized us to put our family's needs way before our own, often at the demise of our own dreams. Working together was not always painless, of course. Some women were afraid to be identified with lesbians, fearing it would weaken their cause, while others felt liberation had to be total. As in so many revolutionary movements, there was the tension between working from within the system and overthrowing the status quo.

Gender became a tool for critical thinking. We understood that we needed to change ourselves, because oppression is an interaction between the self and society's mores. At the same time, we tried to change society and the world of work. We built support networks to enhance our individual work, and a counseling center and nursery school for mutual support. Independence was not our goal. Interdependence was! We examined economic power and political power, and that examination helped us see that many of our concerns were not based on personal inadequacy but societal structures.

In a sense, the image of the second-wave feminists is correct. Over time, many of the working-class women stopped attending meetings because they were overwhelmed by work and the emotional and mental energy poverty requires. However, many of the working-class women set the agenda for our organizing, and they deserve credit. They left many of us changed. They taught me – us – about rape in marriage, violence against women, and the many indignities associated with being a working parent. Over time, we realized that middle-class women too endured abuse and worked jobs with low wages and no benefits. Similar to the #MeToo movement, it took some brave women speaking out first for many more to come forward. In this case, it fell across class lines, with the working-class

women seeing domestic violence as a fact of womanhood, not something to be ashamed of. In a sense, those women also opened the eyes of the middle- and upper-class women to the implications of economic inequality, and helped form the agenda for action. From the beginning, they showed us that the focus must not be only on self-improvement, but also on collective and individual action. In 1974, I was asked to run for the Legislature. When I look at the legislation my peers and I worked on at the time, it is clear to me that our legislation was informed by the women we met in consciousness-raising groups. We passed the first laws declaring that rape in marriage was rape. Before that, it was considered the women's duty. I sponsored legislation for equal pay for equal work, prorated benefits for part-time workers, and to grant scholarships for women who've been married less than 20 years but had no rights to their husbands' pensions. I also sponsored legislation to open adoption records. Why? A group called the Concerned United Birth Mothers called and pleaded with me that they had been told that they would never think of their babies again but in fact, they thought about them every day of their lives. Elected women gave access and credence to those who formerly had no access.

Reading my papers from those days, I was horrified to learn that feminists in the '60s and '70s were no more grateful to our forebears than the current feminists are to us. We took the suffragists' work for granted. We used Susan B. Anthony Day not to celebrate Susan or the vote, but to highlight our own concerns. It was not until I had the hindsight of time, and the knowledge of just how hard, how iterative and how long it takes to change hearts, minds and the law, that I realized what a debt we all owe to those who labored with glory and those who labored quietly to help women, men and all humanity. I see that the activism of the labor movement women in the early part of the 20th century was an outgrowth of the suffrage movement. The Women's Christian Temperance Union pioneered fighting the abuse of women. I now see there is not a clear line of recognition linking various movements, and that the historical narrative has simplified the movement I was a part of. I want to take a moment here to repair my past obliviousness and thank the suffragists and the labor organizers and those who protect voting for all they did for me, giving me the franchise. I was so busy and full of my own power and sacrifices that I did not notice the platform on which I built my own work. I hope I have repaid them by using the vote well.

Looking at the primary sources, I could see clearly how the complex story of the second-wave feminist movement has been simplified. The participant list has been narrowed, and the amount of cultural change we produced has been so successful that it is now taken for granted, just as we take for granted the vote.

Historians can analyze and re-analyze a given moment in time, but I believe there is nothing more informative than living through it firsthand. Looking through papers, I'd see that I wrote on the back of envelopes. I wondered how that might be interpreted by future historians: Would they think I was poor and could not waste paper, or perhaps that I was environmentally conscious. For me, the envelopes brought a visceral memory to the fore. Looking at them, I was again in my mid-30s and frantically juggling two young kids while taking an important phone call. My muscles remembered grabbing the nearest writing surface – often an envelope left on the table – to jot notes one-handed. My mind remembers the stress I was under literally balancing three roles. How could someone who didn't live through it understand?

Looking at my papers also brings me back to the adrenaline I felt in those days. When we were young and organizing, it felt sexy, energizing. Similarly, the energy I see among young people in politics today is built on righteous anger at injustice. Sometimes anger is necessary. It gets attention! But if we get stuck in anger, nothing gets done. While anger can tear down the walls, compromise and hard, detailed work rebuild society. To young activists, I will say this: Voting and protesting go hand in hand. Using your voice and your feet for justice is time-honored and admirable. It is the American way: Vote and organize! *(Ruth Nemzoff is a former assistant minority leader of the New Hampshire House of Representatives and served from 1975-1981. She lives in Massachusetts.)*