

The Legendary Women's Rights Activist Who Mailed Obama a Coat Hanger

Laura X led the campaign to outlaw marital rape across the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. We talk to the 75-year-old about the state of women's rights, how young women today can be political activists, and "Miss Congeniality 2."

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Two weeks into Barack Obama's administration, Laura X sent him a coat hanger by FedEx.

"I was so annoyed. He was inaugurated in January 2009, which was the 36th anniversary of Roe versus Wade, and he had the opportunity to extend abortion access to the poorest of women, and he just didn't. So I sent him a coat hanger." She pauses. "I got a form letter back a couple of weeks later."

A veteran of the anti-nuclear and civil rights movements, [Laura X](#) is best known for her successful state-by-state campaign to outlaw marital and date rape in all 50 U.S. states. Born Laura Rand Orthwein Jr., [she adopted the name Laura X](#) in 1969 to protest how women are treated as the property of their husbands and fathers, and highlight the anonymity of women's history.

A teacher, educator, and cultural anthropologist by training, Laura X founded the Women's History Library (WHL) in Berkeley, California in 1968, before establishing the National Clearinghouse on Marital and Date Rape (NCDMR) in 1978. After becoming incensed by the media's treatment of Greta Rideout, whose husband John was the first man to be tried for the crime of marital rape that same year, Laura began a lifetime's work to outlaw marital and date rape across the US; and later, in 18 countries including Puerto Rico, England, and Mexico. Despite this, Laura remains relatively unknown outside of the activist community (where she is widely respected), without the international name-recognition of a Steinem, Fonda or Baez.

I'd reached out to Laura X several weeks earlier for an interview, keen to learn how the legendary activist viewed the current state of women's rights. The vetting process was extensive. Over email (sometimes written in ALL CAPS), I'm asked for my views on campus rape, food poverty at public schools; had I seen the film *Suffragette* and did I know about [Emily Wilding Davison and the King's horse](#)? I even get an email about the danger of aspartame-sweetened fizzy drinks. Eventually, we arrange a date for a transatlantic phone call.

Getting time in Laura's diary isn't easy: the 75-year-old activist never seems to stop working; she still campaigns on women's issues, helps to publicize the [online](#) archive of

legendary anarchist and historical feminist Emma Goldman, and maintains the NCDMR and WHL archive in her hometown of St Louis, Missouri (580 boxes, and counting).

She tells me they're in the process of cataloguing and sorting the archive with the ambition of finding it an ultimate home, and a way to make it available to the public. "I'd hope these documents could inform the activism and tactics of young feminists today. Maybe young women could use them as they fight the battles of the future, for things like free childcare."

I ask Laura whether she ever intended to be an activist. "Yes and no." Growing up in an affluent family, the memory of her father coming home having fired 500 workers from his defence factory stands out. "I remember bursting into tears and saying, 'What about the women and children? What will they eat?' I'll never forget my father saying he had to do it to put them in their place. It turned me into an instant socialist."

A talk show regular in the late 70s and 80s, watching footage of Laura from this period is like disappearing down a digital rabbit hole—people make no attempt at hiding their misogyny, with one phone-in viewer querying: "Listening to your guest here... What is her qualifications?" I ask Laura how she stayed calm while explaining to men across the country why it wasn't okay to rape their partners. "It's funny you say that, because I never think of myself as polite in real life. They ambushed me once before I was due to go on *60 Minutes*. About a minute and a half before I went on, they told me they'd found someone I was supposed to argue against. I can't tell you how frightening that was for me, because I'd never had debate classes."

Outrage at how the media treat female survivors of sexual violence has been a powerful motivator throughout Laura's career. After observing how media coverage of the 1978 John Rideout trial perpetuated rape myths, Laura began the work of the NCDMR by assisting a local rape crisis centre with trial work. Later, after Rideout was acquitted and subsequently became violent to Greta and their four-year-old daughter Jenny again, Laura helped them flee on what was, fittingly, International Women's Day 1979. Is the media any better in its treatment of women today?

"I hate to be so negative, but I think we're in a terrible period of backlash, and the situation for women is worse in many ways. The rape culture we talked about decades ago is definitely worse now, and the influence of porn is everywhere. It's frightening [for women] to be on the receiving end of so much hate."

Alongside her work on marital rape, Laura campaigned on abortion rights and equal pay. "I was an early abortion rights activist, so I'm still mad, as it were. It was in the early 1960s, before a lot of people on the left were pro-choice... We were in shopping centres, holding up signs saying 'every child a wanted child.'" Her experience as a pilot scheme Head Start teacher taught the importance of family planning. "I saw a lot of suffering, definitely.

Female victims of domestic violence bringing in their children. You could see their swollen eyes. The children would be acting out what they'd witnessed with other children. I literally remember a three-year-old-child called Joey jumping on top of one child called Nancy and simulating a rape act."

Perhaps Laura's most tangible legacy is a physical one, as her role as unofficial archivist of the Women's Liberation Movement. As founder of SPAZM, the only national women's liberation newsletter around from April to December 1969, Laura published interviews with rape and domestic violence survivors. In January 1970 the Women's History Library went on to co-publish *It Ain't Me, Babe*, the first national women's liberation newspaper. Why is it important for women to self-publish? "We need to have as many outlets as humanly possible, because the media is so unbelievably powerful. So often, the answers to what you want to find out are behind a veil, and it's hard to get to the truth without non-corporate media organizations."

I ask what makes her angry still. "I have a very short fuse to any kind of injustice." She mentions rape in US army bases, under-representation of women in politics and a lack of access to paid maternity leave and childcare provision, before an unexpected pop culture curveball. "Have you seen the movie, *Miss Congeniality 2* with Sandra Bullock?" Um, yeah. "There's a scene where all the other contestants say they want world peace, and Bullock mentions all kinds of really important things and gets no response, until she adds world peace and gets some clapping. But it makes me sad reflecting on it. Who even talks about world peace anymore?" After a lifetime of activism, will she ever retire? She laughs. "I don't think there's a chance! It's unimaginable." "You know, I used to have these friends of mine in senior centres over the years from the 60s until the last decade who were socialist women. They would have been in their 90s. They would organize pickets within their senior centres about tenants' rights and protests for health insurance for Safeway workers.

"So I suspect I will be doing something like that one day, if I'm not too old by then. They're my role models, for sure."