**Anne Ladky**

**Equal Rights Amendment Reunion Collection – Oral History**

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**Interviewee:** Anne Ladky

**Interviewer:** Marie Scatena

**Location:** University of Illinois at Chicago, Richard J. Daley Library

**City/state/country:** Chicago, Illinois, United States

**Date of Interview:** June 15th, 2019

**Duration of Interview:** 52 minutes, 52 seconds

**Interview number (file name):** ERAR19\_01\_Ladky\_Anne\_20190615\_transcript.docx

**Interview Summary:** “So this tells you the organizing is never done.”

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Anne Ladky was the first of three ERA reunion participants who were interviewed in the Special Collections Department of the Richard J. Daley Library during reunion events. She was on the Steering Committee, was Treasurer of the National Rally for Equal Rights, and was the Executive Director of Women Employed from 1985 to 2016. Anne agreed to be interviewed right after lunch and asked we keep within the time allotted. Like a number of ERA reunion attendees, Anne wore a suffragette white shirt. She spoke about her time at Northwestern University as not being particularly political aware or active due in part to campus culture and her interests, but that her job at Scott Foresman was formative and a catalyst to her activism. Anne spoke about coalition building in her work at Women Employed. After the interview Anne offered to be interviewed again as we talked about labor unions, one of the most important aspects of her work at Women Employed, in the last minutes of the interview. Her papers are held at UIC’s archives.

**Key Themes:**

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Women Employed, labor unions, Scott Foresman and Company, National Organization for Women (NOW), African American women leaders, political advocacy, economic opportunity and economic parity

**Interview Transcript:**

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Marie Scatena: So, thank you, Anne Ladky, for being here. It’s June 15th, 2019, and we're going to be talking about your involvement with NOW, and particularly with the ERA, ratifying and not ratifying. [laugh] We're at the University of Illinois at Chicago. And I’d like to start—Anne, if you could just tell us your full name, and a little bit about your early history and background.

Anne Ladky: My name is Anne Ladky. I was born in 1948 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to middle-class parents. And I am the second eldest of six, and grew up in a suburb just on the edge of the city. Went to Catholic schools through high school, and then went on to Northwestern University. I graduated from there in 1970.

0:01:00 So I was in college in a time of big unrest and organizing over the war, and very difficult political events like the assassinations of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy, and the difficulties of the anti-war movement. So it was a very trying time, I think, and a kind of—and my parents were Republicans, kind of in that Wisconsin way.

Marie Scatena: [laugh]

Anne Ladky: That’s the background I came from. My father became a Goldwater Republican. But through my college experience and then my experiences coming out of college, I reexamined all that, and decided that I was really more of a progressive than what I considered to be a look-back Republican.

Marie Scatena: I have to ask you about a look-back Republican. Could you just define that a little bit?

0:02:02

Anne Ladky: Sure. I mean, I think that what I actually respected about conservatism back then was there was a focus on fundamental values and family and community connections that I thought was admirable against, you know, some forces of change that weren’t really positive. However, as Republicanism moved so much more to the right to be backward-looking, and trying to preserve structures that weren’t positive for people, that were structures that fostered racial segregation or sex discrimination, and sort of a backward look at the country—trying to preserve, I felt, the ‘50s or something—that really was something that I then wanted to move away from. I still respected fundamental conservative values, but since that time, conservatism I think has been really corrupted by right-wing ideas.

0:03:07 I don’t think there are that many true conservatives left in the political environment anymore.

Marie Scatena: So that leap from Milwaukee to Northwestern sounds like a big one.

Anne Ladky: It was.

Anne Ladky: It was very big. I went to a small, Catholic girls’ school. I was very unprepared for the atmosphere of Northwestern, which by my standards was a big school. Just I was very much—didn't feel at home there. Very much a fish out of water. It was a big leap.

Marie Scatena: Do you have a story that you can tell us that maybe, I don’t know—a defining moment at Northwestern? Sounds like there were many.

0:04:00

Anne Ladky: Yeah, I don’t know if there was a defining moment. I think it was just more of a sense that there were students of considerable means there—and you know, I grew up in a very comfortable middle-class setting, so it wasn’t that this was foreign to me, but these were people who just kind of lived in a different world. I was also used to being reasonably academically successful, and there were people at Northwestern who were vastly more academically talented than I. I was used to a smaller atmosphere of connection between teachers and students. And in those days at Northwestern, that didn't exist. So there were lots of ways in which I just didn't—it was difficult to connect. Difficult to connect in the Greek atmosphere there. Sometimes you don’t necessarily make the best choice. And in addition, I think I probably was, in a way, too young for college.

0:05:01 It maybe would have been good to have a gap year. But people didn't do that then.

Anne Ladky: And I don’t know why I chose Northwestern, particularly.

Marie Scatena: Hmm.

Anne Ladky: It wasn’t the right place for me, but I got through school, and I got my degree, and that was it.

Marie Scatena: Did you find any likeminded feminists there, or any likeminded—?

Anne Ladky: I don’t think I was a feminist then, really.

Marie Scatena: OK.

Anne Ladky: I'm not sure that—I mean, I know that there was feminist organizing activity going on at the U of C at that time, but there wasn’t any at Northwestern that I was ever aware of. Northwestern was kind of late to the game on some of the social issues, and late to the game for free speech for students, to feminism, and so on. And those all came along. But it wasn’t really part of the atmosphere. I was an English major, and I never had a female professor the entire time I was there, over four years. I had a female lab instructor in biology, and that was it.

0:06:04 So there really wasn’t anything that would have connected, I don’t think, to the women’s movement. We did have a very impressive woman who became the head of student government. Her name is Eva Jefferson Paterson[[1]](#footnote-2), and she’s still a very serious activist. She’s a lawyer on the West Coast, in California. And she was a very, very impressive African American woman. So that was quite unusual, I think, for Northwestern. She was very important to the conduct of the antiwar movement on the Northwestern campus. She was very inspiring, but I don’t recall any of that having to do with feminism in any way. And I certainly never read a feminist text while I was there. But I didn't take any political science or anything like that. Maybe it would have come up in that context, but I was much more of a traditional English major. History, philosophy, that sort of thing.

0:07:05

Marie Scatena: When did you start becoming politically active, then?

Anne Ladky: I was active in the antiwar movement, and went to demonstrations and did clerical work like women did, in the antiwar movement. The year I graduated was the year of Kent State, so the National Guard had moved into the Evanston Armory at the time of our last month in school. And I found it really grim and depressing, and I just wanted to get away from all that. So I was fortunate that I got a plane ticket for my graduation, and I went to Europe and stayed there for, I don’t know, four months or something like that, and traveled around the way kids still do, but now they go to much more exotic places than I did. I went to Europe.

0:08:00 When I came back, I decided to move to Chicago. I wanted to get into the publishing business, and I thought—I just didn't have enough money in the bank to go to New York without a job. There’s much more publishing there than there was in Chicago, but there was a fairly sizeable publishing industry in Chicago. So I decided to move to Chicago, and I did that in January of ’71. It took me a while to find a job, and I found one that I knew I didn't want to keep, so I kept job-hunting. And then when I found a job at Scott Foresman and Company in Glenview.[[2]](#footnote-3) I met women there who were feminists, and got in a carpool with them to go from Lincoln Park out to Glenview, where the company was. And so there was lots of reading, lots of talk, lots of arguing about women’s issues. And then fairly soon after I got to Scott Foresman, a group of us started a women’s caucus inside the company, to work on the representation of women and girls in the textbooks that Scott Foresman was publishing, in the teacher’s manuals, in all the educational materials, and also to focus on the company’s practices—employment practices.

0:09:26 Issues around maternity leave and those sorts of issues. So it was one of the very first company caucuses in the country. It was covered in *Ms.* Magazine I think in maybe ’73 by Susan Davis who was publishing *The Spokeswoman[[3]](#footnote-4)* here in Chicago at the time. So that’s how we knew we were one of the first. And we created a booklet called “Guidelines for Eliminating Sexism in Textbooks” that began to be distributed all over the country.

0:10:00 And the company paid—you know, we wrote it, and the company paid for it. And then William Buckley [[4]](#footnote-5) wrote about it in a really derogatory way in his syndicated column, and that of course increased our distribution just enormously. So that was really my introduction to the women’s movement, was starting in my job at Scott Foresman.

Marie Scatena: Do you have a story about a meeting there that was maybe like—just was really maybe typical of all the issues you were dealing with then?

Anne Ladky: Well, I don’t know if I could say it was typical, but we had our first sort of bigger public meeting—the group that was working in Scott Foresman, we spent a lot of time analyzing the textbooks and looking at pictures, text, and so on, instructions in the teachers’ manuals, and trying to create a picture of what was wrong with the textbooks and the way that women were being depicted.

0:11:07 So we put together a slide presentation that we then asked permission to give to the company. And I believe that we weren’t given time during the workday, but my recollection is that we did give this presentation at the end of the day. We had put up flyers and advertised it, and we had a very good turnout. And a lot of the people in the meeting were men who were running the company or running divisions of the company. And my recollection of that meeting is that the woman who was supposed to give the presentation, I can’t remember if she was sick or what happened, but she wasn’t available. We had a good group of people in this conference room, and the other woman who was sort of the leader on the committee, who was a senior editor, was really a good editor, she just said, “I don’t care if the meeting gets cancelled. I'm not giving this presentation. I can’t do it.”

0:12:03 She just would never, ever, ever get up in front of a room. She was a behind-the-scenes person. Now, I really did not want to get up in public. I never did. It was never my thing. I never spoke up in class in college or any of that. And it was either cancel the meeting and tell these, I don’t know, 60 people or something that were in this room, that we were going to not do it, or give the presentation. So I still can picture the conference room because I was terrified. But we did it, and I think it had a pretty overwhelming impact when you put all of it together, that showed how passively girls were depicted. There were instructions that we highlighted—like for the early childhood instruction, how to develop kids’ motor skills—that with boys, you helped them build things with blocks, and then with girls, you give them a scissors to cut out doll clothes.

0:13:00 It was very, very sex stereotyped. The illustrations, the same thing. I mean, at that time, it wasn’t a Scott Foresman product, but there was a children’s book at that time that I still have called *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl*, and in it, there’s a juxtaposed picture of a boy and a picture of a girl—you know, cartoony illustrations—and one of them was “Boys create things” and the opposite page said, “Girls use what boys create.” So that kind of tells you everything about how these textbooks looked. You know, there was the usual “Boys are doctors, girls are nurses,” so on and so forth, but that one I thought was really, really fundamental. “Boys create things. Girls use what boys create.” So as I say, it wasn’t a Scott Foresman product, but that was sort of the theme, if you will, for the way that textbooks were created in those days.

0:14:09 So we did a lot to interrupt that. We weren’t as successful, I don’t think, on the employment side of it, but you know, we raised some issues that were important. And we inspired women in the publishing industry all over Chicago to try to organize in their own companies. Many companies, however, wouldn't permit it. They wouldn't give the women meeting space. They were opposed to it. They said, “You can’t do it.” Scott Foresman’s management, thankfully for us, was more respectful of what we were trying to do, and they did, partly because there was a very smart woman who was the HR director, and she said, “Let’s just—this could be positive. Let’s let them do this.” But because so many other companies were not as open to their women employees wanting to organize, they really were sort of stymied.

0:15:07 So they were coming to us and saying, “Let’s figure out—let’s do something citywide.” So that led to the formation of a group called Chicago Women in Publishing.[[5]](#footnote-6) And we had brilliant outreach materials that were done by a very talented graphic designer at Scott Foresman that we posted around in publishing companies, and had, I think, over a hundred women at the first meeting.

Marie Scatena: Wow.

Anne Ladky: Those were the days when if you put up flyers, people would come. But the theme there really was pay. Pay disparities between women and men in the publishing industry. The publishing industry in Chicago at that time was a lot of trade. I mean, a lot of—not trade publishing, but commercial publishing.

0:16:00 So it was quite male-dominated, and so there were lots of pay disparities. So that was an early focus. It later kind of became more of a professional network. And it lasted a long time. I can’t really remember what the dates are for Chicago Women in Publishing, but it started in ’71, I believe, or ’72.

Marie Scatena: That sounds like that was formative for you.

Anne Ladky: Oh, it was. It was really powerful to see what could happen when women came together. I had seen some of that because one of the women I worked with at Scott Foresman persuaded me to come to a Chicago NOW meeting, so that’s how I got connected with NOW. But yeah, that early experience of Chicago—of women at Scott Foresman was really powerful for me. And I was very engaged, very intrigued by what these women were reading and talking about.

0:17:01 And then I saw more of that at Chicago NOW, where women were really coming together there to figure out what it meant if—what if women were equally powerful in the world of business, or the law, or religion? Figuring all of that out I thought was really engaging, interesting. And then the organizing was fun, as well, even when we didn't—I didn't feel I had very much experience or knew what I was doing, but I was learning from other people. And then when Day Piercy, who founded Women Employed[[6]](#footnote-7), was looking for people to help her do that, she came to Chicago NOW, and she also came to people who were involved in these groups. There was a group of women organizing at the library.

0:18:01 There were those of us who were in publishing. And there were a few others that she came to and said, “Why don’t you help me start this citywide organization for working women?” And I thought—I knew I could learn a lot from Day about organizing. And then I also was getting more and more involved in Chicago NOW. And I went to—I was in the first class at the Midwest Academy.[[7]](#footnote-8) So that was a two-week course on organizing and strategy. So that really kind of helped me launch into what later became my career.

Marie Scatena: I just want to—I didn't know that about Midwest Academy. That’s fascinating. So what was that like?

Anne Ladky: It was fabulous. I took my two weeks of vacation. We had some fundraisers in Chicago NOW to send chapter leadership to the Academy for training.

0:19:08 There was two other people at the meeting today—the ERA reunion—who were also members of the first class. Kathy Rand and Mary Jean Collins and I were in the first class.

Marie Scatena: Wow.

Anne Ladky: Yeah. And Heather Booth, who ran the Academy, is obviously part of today as well—she founded the Academy. So it was really exciting. The woman who founded Women Employed, Day Piercy, taught the organizing skills. Heather taught strategy along with Steve Max. We learned about labor history. We visited labor history sites in Chicago. It was just a terrific education with terrific people. People were organizing in different arenas, but Heather had—part of her reason for starting the Academy is that she wanted to have an organizing training school that really embraced women and wasn’t just kind of a guy thing that women also went to.

0:20:14 And so she had recruited a lot of women to the first class, and it was—yeah, it was a great experience. There were quite a few NOW people there. Anne Scott was there—she was the first vice president of NOW. I think Judy Lightfoot, who was the chair of the board of NOW at that time. So yeah, it was really a terrific experience. I learned a lot.

Marie Scatena: So you took your vacation to do this.

Anne Ladky: Yes. [laugh]

Marie Scatena: Did you go in with like, “OK I want to learn this, this, and this” or did you just—was it an explosion of information and—?

Anne Ladky: Well, I mean, I knew why I was going to the Academy—because I was really interested in the organizational work I was doing as a volunteer.

0:21:00 But I knew that I didn't really know what I was doing. I was just—you know, I was just participating. And I was going to—I was becoming the president of Chicago NOW, at that time, in 1973. And it wasn’t because I had long experience; it was because there had been some divisions in the chapter, and they wanted to sort of have an uninvolved—a person who hadn’t been involved in any of that decision to be the president. So I was relatively young and—I mean, I was young, and I was relatively inexperienced. But the people who recruited me said they would help me, and that we would have a group that would help me learn to lead the organization. And so I said yes. So I just knew I needed training. I mean, I needed the mentorship of people like Kathy and Mary Jean. But I also needed some skills.

0:22:00 And my experience with Chicago Women in Publishing was great. It was interesting. But after the initial sort of explosion of interest, then how do you really shape the direction of an organization? I didn't really know how to do that. So I was just—really it was both skills and knowledge that I wanted. That was why I went to the Academy.

Marie Scatena: What year was that?

Anne Ladky: I think it was ’73.

Marie Scatena: And I have to ask you a Chicago question. So Chicago in 1973—do you feel like in general the city, the culture of the city, was, “Yes, women!”?

Anne Ladky: No. Oh, absolutely not. I mean, for women, for many women it was. It was like lots of things were sort of blooming then.

0:23:00 *Ms.* Magazine was coming out. National NOW was more visible. Definitely there was a lot of energy around women’s issues. But in terms of was the city there, was there a sense that it was time to do something about the barriers that women faced? No. I think it was much more we were still in a period very much of just trying to push out ideas about—I mean, in 1972, sex-segregated want ads were declared illegal. So, you know, we still had “help wanted male” and “help wanted female” until 1972.

Marie Scatena: Yeah, wow.

Anne Ladky: So when I became active in Chicago NOW, you couldn't—a woman couldn't get a credit card in her own name. You had to get your husband or your father to—you know. It was a big thing—we all knew how to get a credit card in your own name, which stores you could go to, and how you built up a credit record.

0:24:07 You couldn't get a gas card or anything. I mean, it—didn't feel like change in the power structure was in the air, at all. But certainly the feeling that there was change in the air among women, I would say yes, there was definitely energy building around women being frustrated with the barriers they would face. So maybe the closest parallel today is the sort of unleashing of energy around #MeToo. There was I think that kind of energy-building around issues of pay and promotion, and probably it was driven by the really large number of women who were now coming out of undergraduate programs and felt that they had the same education and training as their male counterparts, but they weren’t getting the same opportunities.

0:25:14 So I think this was happening all over. The Coalition of Labor Union Women[[8]](#footnote-9) I think started in ’74. I might not have these dates right, but the historians will fix that. But there again, where there was probably greater acceptance of the need for women to be equal, it wasn’t so equal in the power structure, and so women even in the labor movement needed to band together. And I think that was the growing sense. Chicago NOW in 1973 was a fairly substantial chapter. Women Employed got started in ’73. If you went to the YWCA, which is where Women Employed started, you could take self-defense classes.

0:26:00 And there was a weekly radio broadcast from the YWCA around women’s issues, and it was called—oh, I can’t remember now. All of a sudden, it has just gone out of my brain. But Maya Friedler, who’s at the ERA reunion today, was part of that radio broadcast. And that was—it was that kind of energy that was building, I think. Oh, *Talk-In*. It was called *Talk-In*. And it was weekly, and a lot of women came to this discussion that was broadcast. I don’t know what station or anything, but it was broadcast out of the YW every week.

Marie Scatena: Wow.

Anne Ladky: And the YW had the feminist as the head of the Metropolitan YW, and a feminist as the head of the Chicago—of the Loop Center YWCA.

0:27:01 So things were brewing, but certainly not to the point where they were touching the power structure at that time.

Marie Scatena: Were there any prominent or notable partnerships that you formed at that time that helped you as you moved along, once you went to—so you were directing NOW here in Chicago, and then as you’re honing your direction a little more to really look at women employment—was there somebody who galvanized you or focused you?

Anne Ladky: Well, I think I was always most interested in the economic issues. I just think that’s where my—I had good friends who were more interested in violence issues or equal education issues.

0:28:00 I always just had a focus on the economics. That’s what interested me the most. And I was fortunate—Mary Jean Collins introduced me to Catherine Conroy among others—women from the labor movement—who really helped me understand those issues better. And I met them when I was president of Chicago NOW in that ’73 to ’75 period. I had also helped to get Women Employed off the ground at that time, and women like Addie Wyatt[[9]](#footnote-10) were really helpful to Women Employed. And so I was meeting women who were really powerful economic advocates for women in the labor movement, and they were very inspiring. So yeah, that was probably kind of a straight line through around my interests, and it’s why I ultimately left the publishing world, even though toward the end of my time in the publishing world, I was in the feminist publishing world, because I was working for *The Spokeswoman*.

0:29:15 But then in ’77, I left that world and went to Women Employed.

Marie Scatena: And while you were in the world of feminist publishing and as the director of Chicago’s NOW chapter, how did you deal with or what were your encounters with the intersectionality issue that we talked about this morning? That the panel talked about.

Anne Ladky: Oh, and just to back up and say—I was the president of the chapter. I wasn’t the director.

Marie Scatena: Sorry.

Anne Ladky: So I wasn’t the salaried person.

Anne Ladky: I was still working in the publishing industry then, for *World Book Encyclopedia* at the time.

Marie Scatena: Sorry, thank you.

Anne Ladky: So the encounter with the intersectionality is a really good question.

0:30:02 I think we had a more coalition kind of perspective. In other words, we made common cause with other organizations, whether it was the Coalition of Labor Union Women or the Urban League or other organizations that we built partnerships with around certain issues. And some of those individuals out of those organizations were really helpful in different times in the organization, particularly in Women Employed is what I remember. I don’t think we had a sense of even what intersectionality meant. In the early days of Women Employed, African American women were really an important part of the organization. They weren’t as numerous as white women, in part because we were organizing out of workplaces.

0:31:07 We were trying to get women who were in downtown workplaces to come together to talk about their employment issues. And there was really a lot of discrimination against women of color. And there were no Latinas, for example, who had office jobs. I mean, almost no Latinas had office jobs in the early ‘70s in Chicago. They couldn't even get into those jobs. African American women had jobs in downtown industries, but they were mostly in the lowest-level clerical jobs. They weren’t legal secretaries or front office, because the discrimination was really severe. And so I don’t think we—because of where we were organizing geographically, I think what we did see was that African American women were disproportionately thoughtful about and inclined toward coming together with other women around these issues.

0:32:09 And they also really had good networks in their offices, and I think for survival reasons, because they were women of color in a white male-dominated environment. So their networks were really good, and they were I think very persuaded to come together. I think it was later that there was some pushback about the—were women of color, if they were choosing to work on women’s issues, were they disloyal to their racial or ethnic community? There was some of that tension that came later. And I think that intersectionality was just a concept that—I mean, we saw—our whole thing was about bringing women together across whatever the differences were, whether it was race or class or background.

0:33:13 Wherever you came from, if you had a college degree and were a professional woman, if you were a high school graduate and you had a clerical job, if you were a woman of color processing paper in an insurance company basement, or you were a key operator in a bank—the idea of women’s organizing at that time—and this was certainly true in my experience at Women Employed—was to bridge all those differences, and to kind of put those differences lower, and raise up the common issues. And that was really the way we organized then. And so that’s so different from saying now, “Yes, we want to see where our commonalities are, and we also want to really embrace our differences and bring those to the fore, because they're not going to keep us from coming together.”

0:34:15 But I don’t think that was the way we thought about things then. We thought about the need for commonality, for common purpose, for connecting women across difference. And if that meant leaving some of those differences less examined, I think we thought, “That’s OK.” And I think the women who got involved thought that was OK. That’s not to say that we didn't look at the problem of sex discrimination and how it affected women of different groups, different racial and ethnic groups. It’s not as if we didn't understand that there were different barriers for women who had college degrees than women who didn't. All of that, we understood, and we brought to the fore.

0:35:04 But I think our organizing principle was much more around trying to find the common ground. And you know, I think it was successful in lots of ways, and in some ways it was less successful. But it’s sort of like we had some of that conversation this morning at the ERA reunion—that we were breaking new ground in lots of ways. We didn't know everything, and we had a lot to learn. And so the young women who are organizing today I think have levels of sophistication, understanding, and vision that are different from what we had. And that’s one of the most optimistic, encouraging things out there—hopeful things—is that these young women who are organizing now are savvy and smart and have learned a lot of things that we hadn’t learned by the time we were doing what they're doing.

0:36:12

Marie Scatena: So do you think when you were in these meetings and trying to find that common ground that one of your missions was to make it clear to everyone that the structure of these corporations were not going to help them? The women?

Anne Ladky: Yes.

Marie Scatena: Would that be a fair thing to say?

Anne Ladky: Well, I think that it really was—I think what we were doing was showing women in lots of different ways that the system was not for them. That the system was working against them. That it wasn’t their own personal problem that they couldn't get promoted or that they were being asked to do work that really was outside their job description, because it was putting them in their place as a female in the workplace.

0:37:15 Our whole goal was to—in order to change systems—was to help women understand the ways in which the system worked, and how it was those systemic barriers that were holding them back. So some of the early work both in NOW and in Women Employed was to organize women to come together and have meetings with people who were in power. So in Women Employed, the way this would work is we would get women together and we would understand the barriers. We did a lot of listening, a lot of laying out and describing those barriers.

0:38:03 Helping women learn to exercise their own voice and their own power, and then have meetings with these corporate executives to explain what it was we wanted, and what the problems were, and how we expected them to be solved. And the responses we got were so pathetic and so lame that it really made people understand that there was no rationale to any of this. It just was, “We're excluding women. We think of women as capable of these things, but not these things. And our whole operation here is structured for the benefit of men.” So—and particularly white men. “And we don’t want to change.” Even when we made a business argument that, “Hey, look at all this talent. Look at all these women who could contribute to your enterprise.”

0:39:01 And you know, the business argument didn't work. They didn't want women. So it was very radicalizing for women to listen to this sort of thing. We had a meeting of 200 women early on, very early on in Women Employed’s history. It was really kind of a test meeting for Women Employed. And Kathy Rand, who’s here at the ERA reunion, facilitated the meeting for Women Employed. And the guy who was the CEO of Carson Pirie Scott, which was a department store—a big department store—was the head of what was then the Chamber of Commerce for Chicago, and he came to speak at the meeting. Because they didn't really know who we were. They weren’t worried about us at that point. They were still thinking they could just pat us on the head. And we were young. But anyway, he came, and his opening thing when Kathy introduced him—he’s going to give his opening remarks, and he said, “Well, gee, I don’t know if my wife would have let me come if she had known I was spending the evening with all these beautiful women.”

0:40:10 Well, these women were not happy to be patronized like that, right out of the start of the meeting. Here, this guy stands up and patronizes all of them. And so everything like that was radicalizing. It just showed right off that here’s the guy who’s the powerful head of the Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry—what he thinks of you. He doesn't think of you as serious people having a meeting with him. He thinks of you as, you know, cute girls that his wife would be annoyed if she knew he were—so, you know, there were other much more serious things about some of these same executives explaining to us about how you got promoted in the company, that were just ridiculous, that were also radicalizing.

0:41:01 But just things like that in meetings— women had come there for a serious purpose, to put forth serious grievances about the way that they were being treated at work, and the opening remark from this guy is just patronizing. So those were the kinds of experiences that women were having at that time that were radicalizing and helped them see that it wasn’t that they were having trouble getting ahead because there was something wrong with them, but that the whole structure of where they worked was organized to keep them from being considered on the basis of their own talents.

Marie Scatena: I can’t help but ask you this question. How do you think it is now?

Anne Ladky: Well, it’s vastly better. It’s vastly better. It’s still really not good enough. I mean, at that time, when Women Employed started, I mean, there were dozens of jobs that were just simply not open to women, and companies were perfectly open about that.

0:42:04 You couldn't be an outside insurance adjuster. You couldn't be an actuary. You couldn't be a commercial banking officer. There were all kinds of things that they just said, “We don’t hire women for that.” So, you know, and women were just not—I mean, the number of women in positions of power in corporate Chicago were just—you could count them on the fingers of one hand. So, things have changed a lot, and there are many women now who do very well in decent professional jobs. They have many more opportunities. At the same time, we're just very far from there. One big set of issues—I mean, we know we still have big pay issues. We know that we still have big, big issues around work and family. They're more difficult for women, but they're also difficult for men, and this country is just very backward in that whole realm, and it really holds women back particularly. It isn’t good for men either.

0:43:09 We know from just the most recent—I mean, we had a big outbreak of this after the Anita Hill—Clarence Thomas hearings, and then we had it again after Harvey Weinstein—that there’s just a tremendous amount of sexual harassment and sexual abuse that goes on in the workforce, and we are very far from that being over. So there’s still a lot to be done. And we know, for example, just on the high-power end, that there are fewer women CEOs in the Fortune 500 today than there were five years ago. And we know too that because of changes in the world of work itself, the structure of employment, that there are women who are really just completely segregated into low-wage, unstable, insecure jobs.

0:44:10 When Women Employed started, you could work in a department store from nine to 5:30. You worked every other Thursday and every other Saturday. And those were your hours, and you worked hourly but you had a manageable work life. Today, retail is not like that at all. You don’t know when you're going to work. You may or may not get full-time work. You don’t get benefits. There are all kinds of ways in which certain kinds of work that is female-dominated is less stable and less family-supporting than it even was 30 years ago. So there are ways in which the structure of work has changed to the detriment of women and people of color, at the same time that women with education and some advantages have done I think remarkably well and have much, much better opportunities now than they would have 40 years ago. So a mixed picture, I guess, is the way to put it.

0:45:16

Marie Scatena: Yeah. I'm curious about one more thing, because we're starting to get a time—and if you (Frank Dina was filming the interview) have any questions, too, please chime in, Frank. Are there any places in Chicago—and it can be a place, a neighborhood, or a corporation, or a business entity—where you feel like women are really flourishing now that benefited from all the work that you did?

Anne Ladky: Well, you can look at the hundred best places to work list, and you'll see a lot of places where I think there’s a really strong, honest, forthright effort to make the workplace work for everybody and to be inclusive.

0:46:07 So I think there are a lot of places where women are thriving. Sometimes it’s not in a whole company, but just in a particular unit where there’s a leader that really cares about that. And there are lots of companies that are great, and once in a while they will have—they'll hire somebody who turns out to be a sexual harasser. There’s not, say, one—the workplace issue is never finished. There’s always things that can impinge on it. And in addition, even the best workplaces are surrounded by policy that is negative. So for example, if we don’t have a really robust affordable childcare system, there are always going to be issues for the women and some of the men in those companies, because even the best companies don’t do everything.

0:47:07 So the state of our childcare system is a negative. The state of our federal policy on work/family is a problem. So we have lots of gig work, we have lots of contract work, we have lots of part-time work, and we don’t have benefits that fit that kind of work. So we don’t have any portability of benefits. We don’t have national maternity leave programs that other developed economies all have. So the best companies are still in some respects held back by a lack of really full national commitment to women’s equality.

Marie Scatena: That’s a really good way to end. Is there anything else you would like to add, Anne?

Anne Ladky: I'm good if you're good.

Marie Scatena: OK! I think we are!

0:48:00

Frank Dina (camera): I have one quick question. I hope it’s quick.

Anne Ladky: OK, I'll be quick.

Frank Dina:(camera): You mentioned a little while ago about sort of a class-based discrimination still going on today. Do you think that has gotten worse than it was, say, in the ‘70s or ‘80s? Do you think because the economy has changed, do you think it has gotten worse now?

Anne Ladky: That’s an interesting question. Because in a way, when, say, before, around the early ‘70s, it felt to me—and really, you'd have to talk to a labor economist, but it felt to me as if women were kind of in the same boat. Whatever your education and so on, you still couldn't get a good professional job, and you still couldn't get ahead.

0:49:04 Certainly if you were a clerical worker, nobody was going to help you get ahead, and everybody was a clerical worker, just in a different level of clerical work. Unless you were like a lot of women of color were, and a lot of white women, but low-income people were in factories and so on. But in the white-collar world, a lot of women were really often, with very few exceptions, all in the same boat. As affirmative action and equal opportunity enforcement opened up more opportunities for women who had educational advantages, then that divide widened. And then further, a lot of the middle kind of range jobs were eliminated by automation, right? By computerization. And then, changes in segments like retail and hospitality that became kind of 24/7 jobs—you know, sort of the opposite of what I was talking about with retail workers before—those jobs changed in a way, for the worse, I think, in lots of cases.

0:50:16 And so women without education and advantages who are in those jobs, I think those jobs probably are worse. They probably are worse. Because there’s no way to earn benefits. They're very precarious in terms of their hours. Lots of people in food service, hospitality, and retail go in expecting—they say they want to work 40 hours. They sign up for a job with that many hours, and they never get that many hours. And they're working 15 hours some weeks, and then they'll work 21 hours the next week. They never know how much they're going to make. Their incomes fluctuate all the time. And at that same time, housing and healthcare have gotten more expensive.

0:51:01 So I think that the economic situation for people who work, even people who work full-time in some cases, is worse.

Frank Dina(camera): Thank you for that explanation. That’s good. I agree. Yeah.

Marie Scatena: Yeah. Well, it sounds like that old adage “A woman’s work is never done” is maybe what you're—

Anne Ladky: Well, the organizing work is never done. That’s for sure. And I didn't mention the decline of unions.

Marie Scatena: [laugh]

Anne Ladky: But, you know, we could spend ten minutes on that. But if you look, and there’s an interesting book that I'll remember the name of at some point, but it has just come out—a woman historian wrote it—and it’s about organizing in the ‘70s. And she says, “Don’t think that the reason that unionization began to decline was a lack of organizing.” Some of it was a very concerted decision on the part of major companies that they had had enough of industrial unionism and they were never going to have it in the white-collar environment, period.

0:52:04 And they put a tremendous amount of resources. I mean that was part of the reason that NOW was not successful in its efforts to get Sears to comply with equal opportunity laws. Because Sears had drawn the line, and they were worried about their white-collar workforce being unionized, and they were not going to put up with that. So the decline of unionization I think also figures into this period, when certain jobs are really now lower quality than maybe those comparable jobs would have been early on. So, this tells you the organizing is never done.

[End of recording]

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1. Eva Jefferson Patterson (b.1949) is a civil rights activist, attorney and professor who founded The Equal Justice Society <https://equaljusticesociety.org> and worked for The Lawyers Committee for Civil rights. She graduated from Northwestern University and University of California Berkeley. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Scott Foresman and Company founded in 1896 in Chicago publishes educational materials. The company is now owned by Pearson Education. <http://www.pearsonschool.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *The Spokeswoman* was a bi-weekly newsletter published during the 1970s. It reported feminist news and publicized job openings for women. The Spokeswoman newsletter collection is housed in the Special Collections and University Archives at UIC. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. William Buckley (1925-2008) was a conservative American author, commentator and public intellectual. Buckley founded the National Review in 1955. He was the host of a popular public affairs television program, Firing Line (1966-1999) that often featured debates between leading conservative and liberal political figures. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Chicago Women in Publishing (CWIP) <http://www.cwip.org> is an association which connects women to opportunities in publishing since 1972. CWIP hosts a weekly networking and support meeting. CWIP provides educational and career guidance. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Women Employed <https://womenemployed.org> was founded in Chicago in 1973 by a group of women to create change in the workplace for women. The stated goals of Women Employed is to improve the economic status of women and to remove barriers to economic equity. Their first major event in 1973 drew over 200 women and representatives from 26 Chicago corporations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The Midwest Academy <https://www.midwestacademy.com> was developed to help train social justice activists. It is a national organization and network promoting local grassroots efforts to build and support democratic processes. Steve Max and Heather Booth trained the first class in 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) was founded in March 1974. 3,000 labor union women from across the U.S. gathered in Chicago to discuss issues such as equal pay and workplace equity. Joyce D. Miller was elected president of CLUW in 1977. Today CLUW is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and housed in their headquarters in Washington D.C. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Addie L. Wyatt (1924-2012) was the first African American women to be named head of a major labor union, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union. Addie was the first African American woman to be named TIME magazine’s woman of the year in 1975. She was also a founding member of The National Organization for Women (NOW). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)