

1979: Covering the Women's Movement

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The head of the Venezuelan delegation to the 1975 International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City receives a message from a colleague. Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.

When the modern women's movement emerged in the early 1960's the bulk of the mass media met it with disbelief and ridicule. Headlines talked about "libbers" and "bra burners." Nearly every woman in the public eye was asked if she believed in "women's lib"—most denied vehemently any association with the movement.

Despite this opposition, the movement prospered and spread beyond the most extravagant predictions of the Betty Friedans and Gloria Steinems. The story involved what was happening to the family, to schools, to churches and to the entire world of work and government policy, not just what President Carter was doing to Bella Abzug. In other words, despite the scornful views of many editors and reporters, the story became too big to ignore or belittle.

From the first stirrings of feminism, conflicts arose within the journalism profession about how this story of great social change should be handled. The civil rights movement for blacks had caused disputes in newsrooms where the story was ignored; the civil rights movement for women created similar problems. The friction often involved individual women reporters and the virtually all-male management about the assigning, editing and display of stories concerning the women's movement. Newspapers frequently dismissed crusaders for civil rights as outside agitators or communists. Similarly, the leaders of the women's movement were often branded as loonies, lesbians or sex-crazed libbers, and made the butt of crude cartoons and office jokes. Yet in a relatively short span of time, vast changes occurred in attitudes about women and their day-to-day treatment.

How did these changes happen at a time when most editors and news managers thought the movement was a joking matter? How did the message of the demonstrators—and of the conservatively clad but increasingly militant members of professional women's groups—reach the country as a whole? How did the public learn about the first breakthroughs?

At first, most serious news about the conditions underlying the demonstrations appeared on the women's pages, and gradually crowded out the more traditional coverage of society balls and debutantes. Stories appeared about quotas that had excluded qualified women from graduate schools, medical and law programs; about law firms that refused to hire women attorneys, about on-the-job discrimination, about the poverty of families headed by women, and about rape and violence toward women.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, however, many newspapers revolutionized their women's pages by replacing spot news with a stylized feature format. Some papers gave more in-depth coverage to

issues than to developments concerning women and families. One unforeseen consequence of this change was the disappearance from many papers of much day-to-day coverage of the women's movement. This news was squeezed out of women's pages and was not accepted in the rest of the paper's space allotted to general news. Many veterans of the women's movement credit Elizabeth Shelton of The Washington Post with having written the most comprehensive and thoroughly researched articles on the mid- 1960's emergence of the Status of Women commissions and the creation of federal women's commissions in every state in the country. But when the Post dropped its conventional women's pages and led the national move toward a new "Style" section the paper literally abandoned any systematic coverage of the women's movement.

Gradually a small group of national news reporters centered in Washington began to build up expertise in feminist issues. Eileen Shanahan, then an economics reporter with The New York Times (now Assistant Managing Editor of the Washington Star), recalls getting a telephone call from an unknown woman attorney in New York who told her that a major constitutional amendment was scheduled to be voted on before the House of Representatives within a week and that The New York Times had run only one five-paragraph story on it.

Disbelieving at first, Ms. Shanahan checked out the story, and subsequently covered the ERA debate herself. Later that year, 1971, she compiled the first national statistics of women in the law (only 9,103 women lawyers out of 324,818 law school graduates; only four women had been clerks for Supreme Court justices; many barriers prevented women from entering law school), and did another groundbreaking survey of the many suits women were winning by citing the little-known federal laws that prohibited sex discrimination in employment.

From his perspective as a labor reporter, James Hyatt of The Wall Street Journal, at that time in the newspaper's Cleveland bureau, wrote some of the first comprehensive stories about women and work. Charlotte Saikowski, then a reporter and now Chief of the Editorial Page of The Christian Science Monitor, was another pioneer who covered the women's movement.

Vera Glaser, now a correspondent with Knight Ridder Newspapers, was one of the first reporters to question a President about the scarcity of women named to high federal positions. In early 1969 Ms. Glaser, then Washington Bureau Chief of the North American Newspaper Alliance, asked President Nixon at his second news conference "whether we can expect a more equitable recognition of women's abilities or are we going to remain a lost sex?" She noted that he had filled about 200 top-level federal jobs and that only three appointees had been women. The reporters tittered, Nixon looked startled, and then said he would name more. Ms. Glaser said that the mail and telephone calls generated by the exchange prompted her New York editor to ask her to write a comprehensive five-part series about the women's movement. The stories, which were used in about 50 newspapers, dealt with women's lack of economic and political power; Supreme Court rulings that held women were not equal under the Constitution, and the emergence of national groups lobbying for changes. Indirectly, the question also prompted the creation of a White House task force on women monitored by Arthur Burns, Nixon's senior counselor.

Other Washington reporters who developed specialties in the women's movement at this pivotal time included Isabelle Shelton of the Washington Star, Frances Lewine of the Associated Press, Barbara Katz with the National Journal, Marlene Cimons of the Los Angeles Times's Washington bureau, Helen Thomas and later Sara Fritz of United Press International, and Kay Mills of Newhouse Newspapers.

Most of these reporters covered the women's movement on a volunteer basis, in addition to their regular beats at the Labor Department, the Treasury Department, the White House or Congress. The stories were based on information from sources they had developed within the emerging network of women's groups. Editors rarely assigned the issues mainly because they still didn't see the movement as significant and worthy of serious and continuous coverage. Whatever was printed was the result of the reporters' initiative and conviction.

Around the country, other women reporters—most of them young—were getting stories into their newspapers and having occasional luck in persuading their editors to send them to the first national conventions of the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus.

On television, Barbara Walters was not only a featured interviewer on the "Today" show but also she added a half-hour interview show of her own, "Not for Women Only," that NBC syndicated across the country. It treated seriously and in depth issues then surfacing as a result of the women's movement—issues that affected men and society as a whole, not just women.

Marlene Sanders of ABC was a pioneer in producing serious documentaries about health and legal issues involving women.

Sylvia Chase of CBS, at her own request, began to add coverage of women's national political meetings to her regular national reporting beats. Many local shows appeared, some modeled after Mary Catherine Kilday's "Woman Is" production begun in 1973, on WRC in Washington, D.C.

In my own case, I edited a weekly paper in Hondo, Texas, after college, joined the AP in Dallas in 1962, and rotated between that bureau and

the state legislative bureau in Austin. In 1968, I was transferred to the Washington AP to cover the Southwest regional beat from the Capitol. At that time I had not reported on any major elements of the early women's liberation marches and had never met anyone who called herself a feminist. I did know a lobbyist from the Texas chapter of Business and Professional Women who was unsuccessfully trying to get a state Equal Rights Amendment passed. She never approached me, during my two terms covering the Texas Legislature, and I never called her, so a persuasive state senator easily assured me that women would be in terrible straits if Texas's protective labor laws and community property laws were altered by the ERA.

Coming from a general news background—and having fought vigorously to avoid the debutante-society pages where most women reporters were isolated—I was irritated, on arriving in Washington, to find that only the women on the AP staff were assigned to stories relating to women. Although a few accounts about the successful breakthroughs of women in various fields were being written, most were about wives of famous men.

In the fall of 1971 I got a call from Deborah Leff, a staff aide at the newly organized National Women's Political Caucus. She urged me to cover a Capitol Hill meeting between some founders of the caucus and Lawrence O'Brien, then chairman of the Democratic National Committee. The caucus was launching its move to use the party's new reform rules to get more women delegates elected to the national convention. That first story led to many others as presidential candidates, one after another, agreed to put women on their delegate slates, thus altering the make-up of the Democratic convention and moving women onto front-page political stories.

I thought of myself not as a feminist but as a reporter covering a good news story that, for some reason, almost all my male colleagues had

ignored. The AP did not at first assign me to the Democratic convention, despite the fact that during the preceding six months dozens of my stories had dealt with the battle by women and minorities for more delegate seats. I was astounded. I was puzzled that a reporter who had become a specialist in an important area was not assigned to follow the story wherever it led—in this case, to the national political conventions. Clearly, my editors and other media executives did not consider the women's political movement to be a bona fide story meriting continuing and expert coverage.

Other reporters were getting the same signal. Nevertheless, despite the added workload and lack of appreciation from top management, some of us continued to write about the women's movement.

Why? Because the story became progressively better and led in directions unforeseen a decade before. But editors still did not recognize its significance and, as a result, many of the benchmarks of change in the 1960's and 1970's were ignored—even by the self-assigned specialists.

Some of these unreported milestones included the three Supreme Court rulings on cases from Georgia, Indiana and California striking down state laws that, since the early 1920's, had restricted work opportunities for women. These cases were filed by women on assembly lines who were blocked from better paying jobs because state laws limited the hours they could work or the weight they could lift. The nullification of these laws had sweeping consequences and opened up whole new worlds of work for women.

During congressional action on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, opponents added a ban on sex discrimination in an unsuccessful attempt to kill the entire bill. The gesture was seen as a political joke—by editors, reporters and news executives as well as by members of Congress. Years passed before the real implications and possibilities of the sex

discrimination provision became clear and were analyzed seriously by the media.

Many law professors, like Martha Fields, who teaches a “Women and the Law” course at Harvard, contend that courts are using a double standard to measure race and sex discrimination. Many public officials and much of the media suffer from this dual vision. An illustration of this is the furor that ensued after Frances Lewine of the Associated Press asked President Ford a two-part question at a televised news conference. She wondered if he agreed with the guidelines laid down by his administration against federal officials patronizing segregated facilities. After Ford said that he did, she asked why he continued to play golf every week at the exclusive Burning Tree Country Club, which no longer barred blacks but still refused to admit women. Ford answered with a caustic quip about golfing and quickly took another question. According to desk editors at the AP, the New York executives were upset that the question was even asked. Ms. Lewine says her subsequent removal from the AP’s White House staff may have dated back to that query. Ford’s Press Secretary, Ronald Nessen, in a book about his White House years, called her question “the worst misuse of a question at a presidential news conference to advocate a personal point of view.”

Over the years, it also became clear that reporter specialization in the women’s movement or its many related issues was not as valued by the management as much as expertise in civil rights, labor or environmental issues. National and international political forums about the changing role of women were treated as feature stories, rather than serious news events.

When the United Nations held an international conference on women in Mexico City in 1975, almost none of the major newspapers sent their specialists in the women’s movement—among those absent were

Shanahan of the Times, Shelton of the Washington Star, Cimons of the Los Angeles Times, Glaser of Knight Ridder or Fritz of UPI. Instead, the Times and The Washington Post sent reporters who wrote eminently readable feature stories—but who failed to interpret or underscore the significance of the events. The television networks sent crews to cover most of the conference but focused on conflicts or featured events. National Public Radio sent a reporter-producer team, Linda Wertheimer and Kathy Primus, who broadcast special wide-ranging reports on women from around the world and their problems.

But I was practically the only reporter sent from Washington who was experienced in covering the U.S. women's movement and who had written on the international status of women. My experiences in Mexico City showed that, despite a commitment by top AP editors in New York to treat the conference as a serious story, everyday pitfalls and problems tended to trivialize the meeting.

When I got there, other AP staff members already had written stories about arriving dignitaries. The stories usually revolved around such questions as to whether or not they liked the title "Ms." My own opening day conference story, which was discarded, included background on the scope of women's problems throughout the world and reported Mexican President Luis Echeverria's unusually strong keynote address appealing for equality for women everywhere. In its place, under my byline, was a flowery feature story picked up from a Mexico City paper about the sex appeal of the Soviet woman cosmonaut who led her country's delegation to the conference.

Ordered to put aside a serious story about the frank admission by the chief Cuban delegate, Vilma Espin, that male chauvinism still was a problem in her revolutionary socialist state, I was assigned instead to interview U.S. sex symbol Burt Reynolds, who was in town promoting a film, about his views on "liberated women."

But the most frustrating incident involved a photograph of half a dozen Mexican and Argentine women struggling over a microphone. The incident had no relevance to the proceedings—but it made a dramatic photo and was circulated around the world with a caption about “women fighting at the International Women’s Conference.” I first knew of the photo 10 hours after its release when New York requested a story to explain the conflict. Since the dispute was extremely parochial—and involved only six women out of six thousand at the conference—there was no story. Unfortunately, that photo was the most widely distributed picture of the conference, and helped to reinforce a stereotype in the minds of many editors and people in general that women can’t get along and that they resolve conflict by shouting and pulling hair. Later, in 1976, at a conference on women at the University of Texas, Australian feminist and former cabinet member Elizabeth Reid described with sarcasm and emotion the expectations of many Australian politicians that she would further her career in government through the use of cosmetics and sex. A UPI story of that speech twisted her bitter recollections into recommendations to women that they use sex and beauty to get ahead. The National News Council ruled foul play—and UPI promised to do better.

In the past decade the coverage of women’s new roles in society has changed dramatically. More women are among the previously all-male ranks of economic, political and diplomatic reporters. A few have moved up to become editors and publishers. Most local television news programs have at least one anchorwoman and more women are producing and reporting on network news. Advertisements now are beginning to show women in careers and in charge of more than eradicating “ring around the collar.”

In new stylebooks, the AP, UPI, The New York Times and The Washington Post all have adopted far-ranging provisions to eliminate

stereotypical and condescending references to women. And that most respected of business newspapers, The Wall Street Journal, recently completed the most thorough series to date on the impact of the women's revolution.

But that is not to say there are not problems ahead. This is partly a problem of success: Many editors think the problems are solved, now that there have been a few women in the cabinet, more women named to judgeships, and nearly every level of job has had its "first woman." Many other editors say the women's movement isn't a story anymore because the conflict and drama have diminished....

A question remains: Can the movement continue to make its case with the news media, let alone the general public? Can it educate reporters and, via the newspapers, tell the nation about the inequities that still remain and, in some cases, are worsening? Are the enormous changes throughout society affecting men as strongly as women, or seen as significant enough for editors to assign reporters to monitor them? Are new writers developing the expertise to go beyond personality conflicts between the White House and activists to report on conditions facing women in factories and typing pools, about the resentments of men facing serious challenges for jobs from women, about the anger of millions of women isolated in low-paid, dead-end work ghettos? Are reporters aware of the new frontier facing many women in professional jobs, or concerned about the conflicts between careers and personal relationships?

Many of the journalists who became early experts on the women's movement have left the reporting field, although some now have wider influence as editors. For many who remain, there is increasing tension between the reporters and the feminists they cover, as conflicts develop within the movement over strategies for the future. There are fresh versions of the classic reporter's dilemma: how to be close

enough to know what's really happening in a situation without being too close to report it objectively.

My own experiences illustrate this point. Last year, I wrote two stories which earned me considerable enmity from some leaders of major women's groups. One concerned presidential assistant Midge Costanza, who was being eased out of her job as advisor to President Carter about women and other groups outside the power structure. I wrote that she was fired not because she opposed Carter's policies limiting federal funds for abortions for poor women, nor because she criticized Carter's friend Bert Lance, but because she was not competent in her job. A subsequent story told of opposition from Rosalynn Carter and her daughter-in-law Judy Carter to the nomination of Bella Abzug, but subsequent events bore out the basic animosity of this administration towards her. In both cases, I was told by leading feminists that I shouldn't have written these stories even if they were true.

Last summer, during the lobbying for an extension of time for the ERA, Marlene Cimons of the Los Angeles Times followed a delegation of West Coast women as they talked to members of Congress. She received criticism for her story, which reported on the clumsy and arrogant tactics of the group. She had not known the encounters would turn out that way—and in fact told office colleagues about her personal uneasiness and the contradicting pressures she felt—but she wrote the news as it happened.

Other stories are not being written about the women's movement because reporters are too close to the situation. But most of the important stories are not covered because they would take too much time to develop, and editors do not consider the issues to be front-page material.

When the ERA was clearing Congress, there was very little coverage of it, very little consideration of it as a constitutional amendment with potentially important consequences for all society. Now, with the amendment in trouble and the odds stacked against it for approval, the mass media are again reacting apathetically.

There are many stories about the conflicts between the pro-ERA and anti- ERA factions—the rhetoric about unisex toilets and women in combat. But where are the analytical, interpretive stories about what the loss of the ERA might mean for the country and for women, specifically? Where are the evaluations of judges' statements that their rulings on pending court cases will be influenced by the nation's decision on the ERA as to whether or not women should have equal constitutional status?

Some other unreported stories are:

- An analysis of the labor market isolation of women either going to work for the first time, or returning after long absences, to low-paid jobs where wages will be kept down indefinitely because of the surplus of women just like themselves.
- Examination of the job market prospects of millions of women who became pregnant in their early teens, dropped out of high school and, with even few educational credentials, will be competing very soon for work.
- An analysis of the far-right conservative strategy to campaign against the ERA and abortion rights as a fundraising and organizing maneuver to then use against the overall labor and civil rights movements.

- An exposé of attempts by socialists to take over leading women's groups as part of the continuing factional dispute over ideological goals.

Many similar stories wait to be written, more research must be pursued, many questions have yet to be asked. Someday we hope there will be no need for specialists in the women's movement and the social changes attributed to it. But for now, only experts are able to cover and interpret a story that is still unfolding.

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