

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN THE  
AMERICAN SOUTH, 1965-1980

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In the late 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminism transformed American society, creating new legal rights for women, remaking gender roles, and altering women's position in the economy. Although largely omitted from popular and scholarly accounts, Southern women played critical roles in the second wave. At the grassroots, they engaged in a wide array of feminist activism, from establishing credit unions to opening health clinics, from suing discriminatory employers to opening rape crisis centers, from challenging sterilization abuse to building lesbian community, and from setting up feminist businesses to organizing domestic workers. Their initiatives included efforts to place women in non-traditional jobs, campaigns for political office, and court cases that established reproductive freedom and mandated equal pay. In restoring Southern women to the history of second-wave feminism, the dissertation suggests that the movement was far more widespread than has previously been acknowledged.

While drawing on evidence from throughout the South, the dissertation devotes particularly close attention to Atlanta, Georgia, Chapel Hill-Durham, North Carolina, and Austin and Dallas, Texas, all places where feminists were especially active and the sources are especially rich. It demonstrates that Southern women of widely varying backgrounds engaged in feminist activism, but only rarely in organizations that crossed lines of race and class. More commonly, they mobilized in coalitions that preserved separate identities and agendas while addressing common grievances. The women's movement in the South may thus be characterized as multiple movements that overlapped at times, if only in limited ways, and moved along parallel tracks at others.

Southern feminists confronted daunting obstacles, including their region's long history of racial injustice, social and economic conditions that lagged behind those of the rest of the nation, a weak welfare state, and entrenched political conservatism. The need to circumvent hostile state and local authorities led some Southern feminists to turn to the federal courts as a more promising arena. In so doing, they launched a number of landmark legal cases that transformed the lives of all American women. Ironically, feminists in the most conservative region of the nation became the vanguard of the women's movement.

SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH, 1965-1980

By

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## Introduction

“Southern women,” wrote one native daughter in 1979, “view women’s lib with all the enthusiasm usually reserved for hookworm or rabid bats. For one thing, militant feminism is, well, *impolite*.”<sup>1</sup> Such judgments, adopted by both scholars and the population at large, have not only shaped the imagery typically ascribed to Southern womanhood, but also obscured the multiple ways in which Southern women understood and embraced feminist activism during the late 1960s and 1970s. They also assume a narrow definition of feminism – one derided as “women’s lib” by critics of women’s activism – rather than the fluid and expansive meaning many Southern women attributed to their organizing efforts.

Southern women, perhaps more than those in any other region of the United States, have been characterized by stereotypical personifications: Southern lady, belle, good ol’ girl, redneck mama, honky-tonk woman, Appalachian backwoods hick, Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire. One appellation rarely employed is “feminist.” Southern women – particularly Southern white women – are often portrayed as “magnolias” who have deployed a “velvet hammer” or “stealth,” rather than direct activism, to achieve their goals, while the activism of women of color is simply ignored altogether.<sup>2</sup> Historians and contemporary observers have

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon McKern, *Redneck Mothers, Good Ol’ Girls, and Other Southern Belles: A Celebration of the Women of Dixie* (New York: Viking, 1979), 166-167. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> For “velvet hammer,” see McKern, *Redneck Mothers*, 19. For “stealth,” see Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, “Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women: A Retrospective for the Millennium,” in *Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective*, ed. Melissa Walker, Jeanette R. Dunn, and Joe P. Dunn (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 42-82. For the construction of Southern women’s identity, see Anne Firor Scott, “Historians

paid little attention to feminist organizing in the South, deeming the region either too barren to support progressive activism or too conservative to embrace gendered reform. Some have suggested that what little feminist activism existed was imposed by Northerners; the historian Numan Bartley, for example, argues that the women's movement "came from outside the region."<sup>3</sup> Still others have contended that few Southern women found feminist organizing either useful or necessary. Ascribing to this popular misconception, Southern writer Sharon McKern claims that Southern women disdained feminism because their society was already a combination of "the best of both traditional and contemporary worlds." Southern women could "stay on the pedestal, enjoying all the perks and privileges that come with Southern womanhood, while reaping as well the freedom attainable through that informal loophole of provincial eccentricity."<sup>4</sup>

Such mythology has obscured the multiple ways in which Southern women were, in fact, active in feminist organizations and causes. Despite the many boundaries dividing their society, Southern women – young and old, working class and middle class, rural and urban, black and white – engaged in feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, they employed a definition of feminism that recognized a wide spectrum of activism, all resting on a

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Construct the Southern Woman," in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. Joanne V. Hawkes and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1983), 95-110.

<sup>3</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 424. In comparison, Bartley writes, the African American civil rights movement had "southern roots."

<sup>4</sup> McKern, *Redneck Mothers*, 166-167.

shared premise that women's lives could be improved if their economic autonomy, physical well-being, and legal rights were secured. In restoring Southern women to the story of second-wave feminism, this dissertation suggests that the women's movement of the 1960 and 1970s was both more dynamic and more widespread than has previously been acknowledged.

Instead of taking for granted that Northern feminists represented the movement as a whole, a Southern point of view provides an opportunity not only to uncover tactics and philosophies shared by women across the nation, but also to identify issues and strategies that were specific to the South. A Southern perspective challenges many of the dichotomies that have come to dominate narratives of the women's movement: liberal versus radical, equity versus equality, reform versus separatism. These dichotomies have contributed to a literature marked by narrow definitions, rigid labels, and fixed chronologies. In constructing a framework that conceptualizes the Northern movement as normative, historians have assumed that women elsewhere followed the model established in such cities as New York and Boston. Rather than setting the South aside as "atypical," a comprehensive history of the second wave accounts for feminist organizing across the nation and paints a picture of multiple movements that cumulatively constituted a momentous challenge to women's subordinate economic, political, and social status.

Second-wave feminism in the South has gone largely unexplored.<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, this

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<sup>5</sup> In 1997, Jane Sherron DeHart called for greater inquiry into Southern feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, but only recently have a few scholars begun to turn their attention to the topic. Jane Sherron DeHart, "Second Wave Feminism(s) and the South: The Difference That Difference Made," in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 273-302.

omission is curious, because many of the movement's most significant actors and events emerged from the South. National women's organizations – Business and Professional Women's Clubs, the League of Women Voters, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), the National Organization for Women (NOW), Planned Parenthood, and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), among others – all had active chapters and affiliates across the South. A number of activists in the national movement either came from the South or devoted much of their activism to the region. Important legal cases emerging from Southern states in the 1960s and 1970s challenged sexism in jurisprudence (*White v. Crook*), in employment (*Weeks v. Southern Bell*), and in reproductive rights (*Roe v. Wade*, *Doe v. Bolton*). In addition, a number of early landmark events occurred in the South. In 1968, Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, activists in New Left circles in Gainesville, Florida, penned “Toward a Female Liberation Movement,” an influential and widely-read early critique of male dominance and traditional gender roles.<sup>6</sup> That same year, a group of women from cities across the country met in Sandy Springs, Maryland, to discuss political and radical feminism.<sup>7</sup> Most

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<sup>6</sup> Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, “Toward a Female Liberation Movement,” folder: Women's Liberation Pamphlets and Newspapers 1970-1972, 1981, 1 of 2, box 1, Tampa Women's Liberation Papers (W031), Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. On the influence of this position paper, see David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 122-124; Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) 79; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 58-59. In feminist circles, “Toward a Female Liberation Movement” was sometimes known as “The Florida Paper.”

<sup>7</sup> Wini Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95-96; Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 79.

well known, perhaps, was the “kind of memo” drafted in 1965 by Mary King and Casey Hayden, members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), as a critique of sexism in the civil rights and New Left communities.<sup>8</sup> The King-Hayden memo has often been cited as a catalyst for women’s organizing.<sup>9</sup>

Omission of the South from narratives of second-wave feminism has become all the more inexplicable as studies of feminist activism have become more voluminous and more nuanced. In recent years, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and authors of memoirs have tried to understand the nature and roots of resurgent feminism in the 1960s. Yet the historiography is marked by an overwhelming emphasis on the activists, participants, organizations, and publications of urban centers in the North and on the West Coast.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For the memo, see Casey Hayden and Mary King, “A Kind of Memo,” reprinted in *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 21-22. On the creation of and reaction to the memo, see Casey Hayden, “Fields of Blue,” in *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*, by Constance Curry, Joan C. Browning, Dorothy Dawson Burlage, Penny Patch, Theresa Del Pozzo, Sue Thrasher, Elaine Delott Baker, Emmie Schrader Adams, and Casey Hayden (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 333-375; Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morris, 1987), 442-461.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 289-291; Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 353-355; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* (New York: Random House, 2008), 196-199.

<sup>10</sup> The most important books in the historiography of second-wave feminism all ignore the activism of Southern women. None of the following consider in any detail the engagement of Southern women in feminist activism: Davis, *Moving the Mountain*; Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989); Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Cynthia Harrison,

Because the vast majority of this literature focuses on urban areas in the North (primarily New York City and Boston), the Midwest (Chicago), and the West (Los Angeles), depictions of second-wave feminism are limited. Recognizing the nationwide appeal of feminism yields a better understanding of both the successes of the second wave and the backlash that followed.

Even those historians who have begun to explore second-wave feminism outside the urban Northeast seldom focus on the South. Anne Enke's innovative examination of the spatial organization of feminism discusses the movement in Chicago, Detroit, and Minneapolis, while Judith Ezekiel has painstakingly recreated the network of activists in Dayton, Ohio. Stephanie Gilmore's dissertation compares NOW chapters in Memphis, Tennessee, Columbus, Ohio, and San Francisco, California. Anne Valk has studied the overlapping and separate activist networks of black and white women in Washington, D.C. This scholarship has begun to challenge the normative character of Northern feminism.<sup>11</sup>

When it has been considered, the South has generally been depicted as a place where grievances were articulated, tactics and strategies were learned, or friendships were formed, rather than as a site of feminist activism. In an influential early work, Sara Evans argued that

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*On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007); Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2002); Stephanie Gilmore, "Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide: The National Organization for Women in Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2005); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

female activists in the civil rights movement were galvanized by their experience in the Southern black struggle; while participating in a movement dedicated to achieving full citizenship for African Americans, both black and white women became aware of the limitations in their own lives. Borrowing inspiration, strategies, and tactics from the Southern civil rights movement, Evans intimates, these women left the South and moved North and West to launch a movement on their own behalf.<sup>12</sup> This picture fails to account not only for Southern feminism but for the diverse origins of the second wave itself.

Historians of the second wave have identified multiple origins for Northern women's feminism. Ruth Rosen, drawing on feminist leader Betty Friedan, has pointed to the disjuncture between women's aspirations and the limitations of domesticity, while Dorothy Sue Cobble has highlighted labor union activism in the postwar period. Cynthia Harrison has emphasized continuities between professional women's organizations in the postwar period and the new women's groups of the 1960s. Kimberly Springer has identified numerous civil rights organizations as both the origins and the sites of black feminism.<sup>13</sup>

The origins of second-wave feminism in the South were similarly diverse. Building on

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<sup>12</sup> Evans, *Personal Politics*. Evans's inattention to developments *within* the South is particularly surprising given that she herself was active in feminist organizations and publications in North Carolina while completing her graduate studies. See the introduction to her recent work, *Tidal Wave*.

<sup>13</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and the Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Harrison, *On Account of Sex*; Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).



longstanding networks and organizations such as the YWCA, the League of Women Voters, and their churches, Southern women found both the organizational structures and the language they needed to contest discrimination in their own lives. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, Southern feminists borrowed and learned from the women who had come before them. Organizations such as the League of Women Voters, the National Council of Negro Women, and the YWCA provided leadership opportunities, resources, and meeting places for a new generation of activist women.<sup>14</sup> For many Southern women, the Christian Left, particularly within organizations such as the YWCA, opened spaces for and gave moral weight to progressive movements, including feminism.<sup>15</sup> For other women in the South, the New Left, which was especially vibrant in cities and in university settings, offered the instruments (particularly journals and newspapers) and vocabulary to launch reform movements organized to address gendered discrimination. Women's liberation groups emerged from SDS chapters in Durham, North Carolina, Tallahassee, Florida, and New Orleans, Louisiana, and from New

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<sup>14</sup> Brenda Davillier, "Changing Images at the YWCA," *Distaff* (New Orleans Feminist Forum) 1, no. 5 (June 1973): 1, 3; Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003); King, *Freedom Song*, 59; Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Sara Mitchell Parsons, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights: The Memoir of a White Civil Rights Activist* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000); Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), especially chap. 3. Casey Hayden, among others, credited her experience in the YWCA with introducing her to civil rights and feminist organizing. See Hayden, "Fields of Blue," in *Deep in Our Hearts*, by Curry et al., 351.

<sup>15</sup> See especially the narratives of Charlotte Bunch and Nancy D. Richardson in *Journeys That Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1975*, ed. Sara M. Evans (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 122-140, 226-236.

Left publishing collectives in Austin, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>16</sup> Several scholars have demonstrated that activism by women of color aimed at shaping public policy – particularly with respect to welfare rights, public housing, and anti-poverty programs – was an important feature of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In the North, they have shown, African American women advanced feminism both through women’s organizations and within mixed-gender civil rights and labor organizations. Although less recognized, this pattern was also evident in the South.

While the roads to feminism, to borrow Benita Roth’s phrase, may not have been unique to the South, regional distinctions made some paths more traveled than others. A relatively weak welfare state in the South, for example, limited women’s ability to organize around issues of social welfare, and laws limiting collective bargaining constricted the growth of labor feminist organizations such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Above all, however, race and class played a decisive part in how Southern women understood feminism and became active in feminist causes.

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<sup>16</sup> Feminist women eventually dominated the editorial content of *The Rag* in Austin and *The Great Speckled Bird* in Atlanta. Many women never left New Left organizations or politics, seeking instead to inject a feminist perspective into New Left causes. See Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 305-307, 311, 313.

<sup>17</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall, “Re-visioning the Women’s Liberation Movement’s Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminist,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 225-245; Marisa Chappell, “Rethinking Women’s Politics in the 1970s: The League of Women Voters and the National Organization for Women Confront Poverty,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 155-179; Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

Historical literature about Southern women in the twentieth century has expanded in recent years, yet that historiography too is conspicuously silent on second-wave feminism. A rich body of scholarship on Southern women in the first half of the century has concentrated on New South cities and on periods of progressive reform.<sup>18</sup> More recently, historians have turned their attention to Southern women's activism in the suffrage and labor movements.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth York Enstam, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "O. Delight Smith's Progressive Era: Labor, Feminism, and Reform in the Urban South," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsack (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 166-198; Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Nancy Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Georgina Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City: Working-class Women and Urban Development in Atlanta, 1890-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Margaret Wolfe Ripley, "Eleanor Copenhaver Anderson and the Industrial Development of the National YWCA: Toward a New Social Order in Dixie," in *The Human Tradition in the New South*, ed. James C. Klotter (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 111-127; Jacqueline Anne Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: Norton, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> On the Southern wing of the suffrage movement, see Elna Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Suzanne Lebsack, "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsack (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 62-100; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Marjorie Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For union organizing and Southern women, see Sally Ward Maggard, "'We're Fighting Millionaires!': The Clash of Gender and Class in Appalachian Women's Union Organizing," in *No*

Other scholars have concentrated on women in conservative movements in the South, including the Lost Cause and white supremacist campaigns of the early twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, nearly all of the scholarship on Southern women in the post-World War II period has focused on the civil rights movement.<sup>21</sup> In general, scholars have been slow to investigate Southern feminists in the last third of the century.<sup>22</sup> A recent spate of memoirs has helped to fill some of

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*Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*, ed. Kathleen M. Blee (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 289-306; John A. Salmond, “‘Miss Lucy of the CIO’: A Southern Life,” in *The South is Another Land: Essays on the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Bruce L. Clayton and John A. Salmond (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), 107-121.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies’ Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> For the activities of women in the civil rights movement, see, among others, Cynthia Griggs Fleming, “‘More Than a Lady’: Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Black Women’s Leadership in the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee,” in *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Theda Perdue, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994): 204-223; Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*; Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> The omission is also true of studies in disciplines outside history. Sociologists and anthropologists have examined Southern women’s activism in union organizing, education, and the civil rights movement, but they, too, have failed to investigate the Southern second wave in detail. See Caroline Matheny Dillman, ed., *Southern Women* (New York: Hemisphere, 1988); Holly F. Mathews, ed., *Women in the South: An Anthropological Perspective*, Southern Anthropological Society Proceedings, No. 22 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Barbara Ellen Smith, ed., *Neither Separate Nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the South* (Philadelphia: Temple

the gaps, but these works generally lack scholarly analysis.<sup>23</sup>

The historiography of the post-World War II South similarly excludes the second wave. While generally incorporating women into analyses of the civil rights and New Left movements, such studies have not seen feminism as a product of these movements. Most general histories of the region treat the civil rights movement in detail, then move directly to the rise of the New Right. Surveys of the South in the postwar period rarely consider women at all.<sup>24</sup> Although scholars have incorporated women's history and gender history into understandings of most aspects of the nineteenth-century South, such analysis has not been fully expanded to the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

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University Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> For examples, see Curry et al., *Deep in Our Hearts*; King, *Freedom Song*; Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Parsons, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights*.

<sup>24</sup> None of the following books address the women's movement (or, for that matter, women's history in any detail): James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990*, 2nd edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); William J. Cooper, Jr., and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History*, 4th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009); David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Jeanette Keith, *The South: A Concise History* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002). A recent collection of essays on the twentieth-century South includes one essay on women, but it does not mention second-wave feminism. See Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Women and Leadership: A Century of Change in the South," in *The American South in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Craig S. Pascoe, Karen Trahan Leathem, and Andy Ambrose (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 39-55.

<sup>25</sup> Examples of studies of women and gender in the nineteenth-century South that have helped to transform the dominant narrative include Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transformation from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 107-146; Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill:

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Recent scholarship has done important work identifying and analyzing varieties of feminism – liberal feminism, radical feminism, lesbian feminism, black feminism, Chicana feminism, cultural feminism, and so on. As a result, the meaning of feminism has become ever more fragmented and disjointed.<sup>26</sup> Political scientist Barbara Arneil has suggested that no definition of feminism is entirely satisfactory “because the term is amorphous and ever changing and because there are so many schools of thought with widely varying views.”<sup>27</sup> More problematically, as Chela Sandoval has pointed out, a “hegemonic” definition of feminism has come to define the second wave as white-led and focused on sexism as the primary axis of oppression.<sup>28</sup>

For many activists in the South, the language of feminism was itself difficult. Yet, as the critical theorist Denise Riley has emphasized, the fact that some women did not employ terms or

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University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of this fragmentation, see Elsa Barkley Brown, “What Has Happened Here: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 295-312.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Arneil, *Politics and Feminism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 41-42.

language marking themselves as feminist did not make them uncommitted to women's rights.<sup>29</sup> Many Southern activists did not identify themselves as feminists at all. For any number of working-class women and women of color, second-wave feminism (or, at least, women's liberation) had been too strongly identified by the media as a movement of middle-class, white women to be considered a useful rubric. Many middle-class, white women in the South likewise rejected the vocabulary of second-wave feminism because they feared being tarred with the brush of radicalism.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, women from all of these backgrounds acted in ways that marked them as feminists, working to secure the rights of women, expand their opportunities, improve their well-being, or protect women from harm.

At the most basic level, feminist activists of all geographical origins identified inequality between women and men in social, economic, and/or political realms, and sought to remedy

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<sup>29</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of Woman in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Karen E. Fisher, president of the Central Savannah River Area chapter of NOW, found that women in her hometown supported feminist politics but tried to distance themselves from the term. "How many times have you heard women deny any involvement in the women's movement?" she asked. "I've heard it far too many times but whenever I've had the opportunity to pursue the conversation, I've discovered that in most instances there is no real difference in opinion, just a fear of being labeled a 'women's libber' because of the stereotype many people have of the movement woman." *The Applecart* (Augusta, Ga.) 4, no. 6 (June 1976), folder: Georgia Chapters Publications—Central Savannah River Area, box 19, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter Emory). In addition to serving as president of a NOW chapter, Karen Fisher was an attorney with Georgia Legal Services, Inc., co-president of Augusta Rape Crisis Line, and an attorney for the Augusta Welfare Rights Organization. *The Applecart* (Augusta, Ga.) 4, no. 5 (May 1976), folder: Georgia Chapters Publications—Central Savannah River Area, box 19, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

it.<sup>31</sup> Employing such a broad definition of feminism creates the possibility of understanding how women who shared few demographic, philosophical, or historical characteristics nevertheless came to articulate similar critiques and embrace similar strategies. This dissertation contributes to an understanding of second-wave feminism that emphasizes not only divisions but also commonalities. It demonstrates that many activists – from a range of class, racial, and regional backgrounds – worked toward expanding the rights of women in the late 1960s and 1970s. It provides a framework for understanding how multiple movements of women – many of whom never knew of each other’s work or considered their efforts part of the same cause – cumulatively changed the lives of American women. In so doing, it joins other new scholarship that is attempting to find sources of common inspiration, grievance, and activism.<sup>32</sup> Only by conceptualizing second-wave feminism as a movement that engaged a multitude of women under the auspices of different organizations, motivations, and nomenclature is it possible to understand how it was able to accomplish what it did.

Rather than positing an understanding of second-wave feminism as divided along lines of tactics and philosophies, origins, or region, this dissertation accepts divisions as inherent to its

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Arneil suggests that “a preliminary definition of feminism might be: The recognition that, virtually across time and place, men and women are unequal in the power they have, either in society or over their own lives, and the corollary belief that men and women should be equal; the belief that knowledge has been written about, by, and for men and the corollary belief that all schools of knowledge must be re-examined and understood to reveal the extent to which they ignore or distort gender.” Barbara Arneil, *Politics and Feminism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> For notable examples, see the essays in Stephanie Gilmore and Sara Evans, eds., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). None of the essays focus on the South. See also Valk, *Radical Sisters*.



nature.<sup>33</sup> Second-wave feminism was successful not despite divisions, but because of them. The rubric of “the women’s movement” was large enough to accommodate different constituencies and different goals. It provided a framework that made coalitions across lines of race and class possible, though never easy and only sometimes successfully. This dissertation embraces the concept of “coalition” as central to second-wave feminism in the South. Although many activists in the late 1960s and 1970s used the language of “sisterhood,”<sup>34</sup> they generally failed to create the truly empathic and reciprocal relationship that sisterhood implied. As sociologist Felly Nkweto Simmonds has argued, sisterhood was premised on a “commonality between women” that failed to account for “the different priorities that women had, even within the broader framework of the women’s movement.”<sup>35</sup> The language and symbolism of “sisterhood” inadequately describes the ways in which Southern women worked together.

Coalition-building, on the other hand, explains how diverse groups of women were able to construct a larger movement. While generally retaining their individual identities and goals,

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<sup>33</sup> On philosophy, see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). On origins, see Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*; Breines, *The Trouble between Us*. On region, see Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland*.

<sup>34</sup> The Dallas Area Women’s Liberation group, for example, argued that “the only hope for the Movement is in sisterhood, and if we do not accept all women as sisters we cannot be together enough to liberate ourselves from our mental and physical slavery.” *The Turn of the Screwed* (Dallas, Tex.) 1, no. 4 (October 20, 1970): 1, folder: Liberation Movement, box 1, Elizabeth C. Alden papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

<sup>35</sup> Felly Nkweto Simmonds, “Who Are Sisters? Difference, Feminism, and Friendship,” in *Desperately Seeking Sisterhood: Still Challenging and Building*, ed. Magdalene Ang-Lygate, Chris Corrin, and Millsom S. Henry (Bristol, Pa.: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 20.

coalition members joined together for varying lengths of time and with varying degrees of solidarity.<sup>36</sup> Coalition work was never easy. As Bernice Reagon put it, “You don’t go into coalition because you just *like* it.”<sup>37</sup> Many feminist coalitions were fractious or temporary (or both). But coalitions could make individual groups stronger and help protect minority interests. According to sociologists Jill Bystydzienski and Stephen Schacht, coalitions are “fluid sites of collective behavior where the blending of multiple personalities with political activism interacts with structural conditions to influence the development of commitments, strategies, and specific actions.”<sup>38</sup> The notion of coalition thus suggests that constituent members understood and recognized their differences but were willing to work together toward a shared goal.

Across the South, feminist activists of different races and classes rarely mobilized within

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<sup>36</sup> As Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer have argued, “Coalitions have traditionally referred to groups or individuals that have come together around a particular issue to achieve a particular goal. These groups operate autonomously and are usually not connected to each other; most organizations have different agendas as well. Upon completion of the shared goal, coalitions often dissolve and organizations go back to their own work.” Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer, “Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances for Social Change,” in *Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances*, ed. Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 2-22, quotation on p. 3. Psychologist Gail Pheterson employs the term “alliance” in a similar way. She describes alliances as “knowledge of, respect for, and commitment between people who are in essential ways different but whose interests are in essential ways akin.” Gail Pheterson, “Alliances between Women: Overcoming Internalized Oppression and Internalized Domination,” in *Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances*, ed. Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 34-48, quotation on p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Bernice Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 356. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>38</sup> Jill Bystydzienski and Stephen Schacht, *Forging Radical Alliances across Difference: Coalition Politics for a New Millennium* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 2. See also Albrecht and Brewer, eds., *Bridges of Power*.

the same organizations, but they often built coalitions that sought to bridge – if only temporarily – social, political, or economic divisions. Even if women only occasionally organized in the same groups across lines of race and class, they often articulated similar grievances and sometimes advocated similar solutions. In the South, feminist coalitions acknowledged women’s multiple identities without flattening them to a “universal sisterhood.” Many activists, as historian Dorothy Sue Cobble and others have noted, may not have articulated gender or sex as their most salient identity (privileging, instead, race, class, or sexuality), but all of the women discussed in this dissertation employed and understood women’s organizing as a critical tool.<sup>39</sup>

Coalition politics were imperfect means of mobilization. The creation of coalitions did not signify that the women within them were equal partners or that they conceptualized problems in the same way. Moreover, coalitions were often short-lived and directed toward limited, specific ends. In some instances, it was possible to build coalitions that crossed lines of class and race if the issue at hand could be defined in expansive terms. In others, class and race proved to be insurmountable barriers, a result of deeply divided historical experiences that left women in vastly different positions and with widely divergent needs and aspirations. Coalitions were constructed more successfully around certain issues than others. The strength of individual organizations sometimes played a part in determining whether coalitions could succeed. In other instances, location and context were critical.

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<sup>39</sup> Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement*, 8; Stephanie Gilmore, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Coalitions*, ed. Gilmore and Evans, 5.

Whatever the limitations of activism through coalition, in the South it enabled cumulative, grassroots-oriented, small-scale initiatives to create larger changes in many different aspects of women's lives. The women's movement in the South may best be characterized as multiple movements, overlapping at times, if only in limited ways, and moving along parallel tracks at others. Many small streams combined to create a larger river. This multiplicity had numerous advantages, not the least of which was that feminist coalitions drew in a wide range of different women.

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Organized thematically, this dissertation seeks to locate the sites and sources of feminist coalitions in the South and to identify the issues that motivated diverse groups of women. Although the South of the post-World War II era remained in many respects more homogeneous than other regions of the United States, it was home to people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, with wide differences in wealth and resources, living in vastly different environments. By the 1960s and 1970s, moreover, the South was becoming increasingly difficult to define as a region. Certain parts, particularly its larger urban centers, had begun to mirror national economic and demographic trends even as many of its rural areas maintained their historical isolation.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the South remained – in both experience and imagination – largely

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie, The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), esp. chaps. 11-13.

separate from the rest of the nation.<sup>41</sup> A common history of formal racial segregation and legal disfranchisement contributed to a distinctive regional identity. The religiosity and rurality of a large number of the region's residents also set the South apart.<sup>42</sup> Demography played a part in the region's distinctiveness; the South's population included a greater proportion of African Americans than was the case elsewhere in the nation, while the median age of its residents was lower than that of the nation as a whole.<sup>43</sup> The Southern economy, while growing more industrialized and diversified in the years after World War II, remained heavily dependent on low-wage, low-skill industry and agribusiness.<sup>44</sup> Weak labor unions and legislation designed to undermine organized labor characterized most of the region.<sup>45</sup> Measures of economic well-

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<sup>41</sup> Charles P. Roland, *The Improbable Era: The South since World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), chap. 11.

<sup>42</sup> On religion in the region, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). In 1970, the South remained the most rural region of the United States, despite sharp decreases in the number of farmers. See Grantham, *The South in Modern America*, 261-262; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population, Supplementary Report: Population by Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Residence, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 7-8; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population, Supplementary Report: Population of Voting Age for States, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 2-11.

<sup>43</sup> In 1970, every county whose population was at least 20 percent African American was in a Southern state. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Distribution of the Negro Population by County, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 3. The total number of people aged 18-44 was higher in the South than any other region in the nation. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population, Supplementary Report: Age and Race of the Population of the United States, by State, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 297-308.

<sup>44</sup> Cobb, *The Selling of the South*, chap. 6.

<sup>45</sup> By 1954, every Southern state except Louisiana had enacted so-called "right-to-work" laws that prohibited agreements between labor unions and employers making membership in the union a condition of employment. James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society*,

being also set Southerners apart from the rest of the country. In any number of categories – median household income, educational attainment, social welfare spending – Southern states remained below the national average, often far below.<sup>46</sup>

As was also the case elsewhere in the nation, second-wave feminism in the South was more prevalent in larger cities and in towns with colleges or universities. While drawing on evidence from throughout the South, this dissertation therefore devotes particularly close attention to three locales where feminists were especially active and the sources are especially rich: Atlanta, Georgia; the Durham/Chapel Hill area of North Carolina; and Dallas and Austin in Texas. In some respects, these three areas were among the most urbanized and economically prosperous of the region.<sup>47</sup> They drew residents from across the South and from

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1877-1984 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), chap. 4; Grantham, *The South in Modern America*, 264-266.

<sup>46</sup> In 1970, no Southern state matched or exceeded the median income for the nation as a whole, and every Southern state fell below the national average of education levels. The median income across the nation was \$10,999, while median incomes in the South ranged from \$9,955 in Texas to \$6,021 in Mississippi. Nationally, 52 percent of all Americans graduated from high school, but only 41 percent did so in Georgia, 38 percent in North Carolina, and 47 percent in Texas. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population, Supplementary Report: Educational Characteristics of the Population of the United States, Supplementary Report, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 1-6; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population, Supplementary Report: Labor Force Characteristics of the Population, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 1-6. Social welfare spending lagged behind the rest of the nation. See Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society*, 155-157; Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 7; Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> On Atlanta, see Numan V. Bartley, *The Creation of Modern Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); David L. Sjoquist, ed., *The Atlanta*

the North as well.<sup>48</sup> Atlanta and Dallas were the two largest metropolises in the South, and each was home to significant populations of ethnic and racial minorities. Into the 1970s, they remained highly segregated in both housing and employment.<sup>49</sup> In seeking to protect economic growth and to avoid disruptive civil rights protests, white civic leaders in both Atlanta and Dallas acceded to racial integration of public accommodations and city politics but did little to alter traditional power structures.<sup>50</sup> Even as economic and political power remained concentrated in white hands, cities like Atlanta, Dallas, and Durham nurtured black enterprises

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*Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000). On Austin, see David C. Humphrey, *Austin: A History of the Capital City* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997). On Dallas, see Robert B. Fairbanks, *For the City as a Whole: Planning, Politics, and the Public Interest in Dallas, Texas, 1900-1965* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). On Durham, see Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). The South became increasingly urban in the postwar years. By 1980, three-quarters of Southerners lived in urban areas, with Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas-Fort Worth each having more than two million residents, and eleven of the nation's fifty most populous cities were in the South. Grantham, *The South in Modern America*, 261-262.

<sup>48</sup> Unlike cities such as Philadelphia and Detroit which were losing populations, Sunbelt cities such as Atlanta and Dallas recorded large increases in the 1970s. See Truman A. Harshorn and Keith R. Ihlanfeldt, "Growth and Change in Metropolitan Atlanta," in *The Atlanta Paradox*, ed. David L. Sjoquist (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 23.

<sup>49</sup> On Atlanta, see Cynthia Lucas Hewitt, "Job Segregation, Ethnic Hegemony, and Earnings Inequality," in *The Atlanta Paradox*, ed. David L. Sjoquist (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 185-216; Mark A. Thompson, "Black-White Residential Segregation in Atlanta," in *The Atlanta Paradox*, ed. David L. Sjoquist (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 88-115. On Dallas, see Phillips, *White Metropolis*, Introduction and chap. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, "Models of Ethnic and Racial Politics in the Urban Sunbelt South," in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 107-111; Richard M. Bernard, "Metropolitan Politics in the American Sunbelt," in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 69; Phillips, *White Metropolis*, chap. 6.

and the careers of influential black professionals, clergy, and entertainers.<sup>51</sup>

If the three areas were not typical of the region as a whole, they nevertheless served as economic and political centers of the Sunbelt South.<sup>52</sup> Industrialization remained uneven in the post-World War II South, but Atlanta, Dallas, and Durham-Chapel Hill each represented variants of Sunbelt economic development. In the years after the Second World War, the Durham-Chapel Hill area became a center of research and development, medical care, and academia.<sup>53</sup> Dallas, meanwhile, became home to major aeronautic firms, the oil industry, and banking.<sup>54</sup> Atlanta's economy was the most diverse, attracting such industries as automobile production (General Motors and Ford opened assembly plants after the war) and major retail and communications firms.<sup>55</sup> Each of the areas under consideration also included several colleges and universities with large student populations.

Other places receive less attention in the dissertation, although virtually every Southern state makes an appearance at some point. Evidence from other cities in the South suggests that

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<sup>51</sup> In the 1960s, the three largest black-owned businesses were insurance companies headquartered in, respectively, Durham, Atlanta, and Memphis. Dallas and Houston were also home to profitable black enterprises. Bartley, *The New South*, 139.

<sup>52</sup> In 1960, each metropolitan area under consideration was home to approximately 10 percent of its state's residents. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population, 1960* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/county.php>.

<sup>53</sup> Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society*, 174-176.

<sup>54</sup> Bartley, *The New South*, 137; Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society*, 103-104; Phillips, *White Metropolis*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society*, 52, 108.



the patterns uncovered in Atlanta, Chapel Hill-Durham, and Dallas prevailed elsewhere as well. Across the South, urban centers and universities provided not only the spaces needed to organize, but also the intellectual and cultural underpinnings of second-wave feminism. The small towns and rural areas of the South were also home to feminist activism, and scattered evidence from such places can be found throughout the dissertation. Nevertheless, the dissertation's focus on cities and towns means that questions of origins and activism in rural areas remain only partially addressed.<sup>56</sup>

While far from comprehensive, the material at hand suggests the scope and diversity of feminist activism in the South and allows for an exploration of demographic, political, and social differences while also making generalizations about the region as a whole. Because this dissertation seeks to fill lacunae in studies of Southern feminism, it necessarily employs a wide lens. Another choice may have been a close study of a single area, but given the overwhelming lack of scholarship on second-wave activism in the South, it seemed critical to provide a larger framework. In addition, while examining one locale in detail could provide valuable insights, no single place offered evidence of the variety of coalitions and activism that could be gleaned by adopting a region-wide view. Even so, while this dissertation has uncovered wide-ranging feminist activism, it does not encompass all aspects of second-wave feminism in the South.

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<sup>56</sup> In addition to limits in geographic focus, the recentness of many events covered in this dissertation has restricted the availability of certain sources. Important records (particularly those related to the women's health movement) will remain closed to researchers for decades, while other resources have yet to be donated to archives. In addition, many women's organizations kept few or incomplete records, especially the many grassroots groups that characterized so much of second-wave feminism in the South.

Because so little was previously known, the dissertation's primary goal is to recover the history of second-wave feminism in the South. A study systematically comparing the South with other regions of the country remains to be written. Nevertheless, one of the most striking findings of this dissertation is the similarity of second-wave activism in the South to the movement elsewhere. Its chronology and origins generally follow the standard narrative, and the issues that motivated Southern women were shared by feminists across the nation. To be sure, there were differences. The rurality of the South may have hindered the creation of feminist organizations, but because few studies have examined feminism in the rural North or West, any such supposition remains uncertain. The South's long experience with racial segregation gave different meaning to interracial organizing and contributed to the difficulty of creating and maintaining biracial coalitions, if only because the historical experiences of Southern women left them in distinct and vastly unequal circumstances. In addition, the region's history of racial and gender hierarchies shaped the imperatives, limitations, and representations of Southern women's sexuality.<sup>57</sup> Comparing the experience of feminists in the South with those in other regions would therefore be a valuable enterprise, but it seemed necessary first to recover the history of second-wave activism in the South itself. Comparison informs the dissertation's discussions at many points, but it does not drive the analysis.

Each chapter provides an overview of a broad target of activism before turning to closer examination of specific organizations and actors that illustrate the larger themes. The first

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<sup>57</sup> See Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

two chapters examine campaigns for economic justice. As they struggled for economic equity, many Southern women came to understand equality as inextricably linked to their status in the labor force. Chapter 1 considers the battles waged by feminists in the realm of workplace justice, with an emphasis on gaining equal standing with men in jobs and pay. Whatever their race or class, Southern women received unequal pay and discriminatory work assignments, experienced sexual harassment, and faced barriers to promotion and to more remunerative jobs. While middle-class and working-class women alike therefore put workplace struggles at the center of feminist activism, they rarely organized together. Emphasizing the parallel organizations and comparable goals of women in different economic positions, Chapter 1 highlights the similarities in both problems and solutions with regard to workplace justice. At the same time, it suggests that divisions of class and race proved to be too formidable to allow the creation of lasting coalitions of working-class and middle-class women around issues of workplace justice. When women of different economic positions did work together, they tended to do so as unequal partners and failed to conceive of their aspiration for economic equality as intertwined.

Other Southern feminists, smaller in number, offered conceptions of economic justice that extended beyond the workplace. Chapter 2 explores how activists of different classes and races sought to increase women's economic equality and to reconceptualize women's place in the Southern economy. The groups examined in this chapter – welfare rights organizers, feminist business owners, and consumer rights advocates – had virtually no overlapping membership and few shared spaces, but each sought to alter women's status in the economy

and to define economic justice more expansively than workplace equity alone. Their efforts – largely small-scale and at the grassroots – rarely led to broad coalitions across lines of race and class. Moreover, in those rare instances when middle-class and working-class women did organize together, differences in power – economic, social, and political – did much to create and maintain divisions among them.

Coalition-building was more successful in matters of health and reproductive justice, although race and class continued to shape the ways in which women defined both problems and solutions. The South was a critical site of activism geared toward expanding women’s reproductive rights, with consequences that reverberated throughout the nation. Chapter 3 investigates how race and class shaped women’s experiences of reproductive justice and their relationship to the state. By the early 1980s, Southern women had not only helped to win a number of important victories in expanding reproductive rights, but also contributed to a widened understanding of what reproductive justice meant. “Reproductive freedom is more than abortion rights and birth control, more than family planning programs as they exist in rural America today,” argued a group led by Byllye Avery, an African American woman from Florida. “An expanded definition includes good, safe birth control, the right to conduct one’s sex life as one chooses, an end to nuclear, chemical, and occupational hazards to our reproductive systems, and safe, woman-controlled choices in childbirth.”<sup>58</sup> For many activists,

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<sup>58</sup> Byllye Avery, Dorothy Battenfeld, Maureen Flannery, Robin Garubarth, Jean Hoppenfield, and Judy Lipshutz, “Health Issues for Rural Americans,” in *Pattens for Change: Rural Women Organizing for Health*, ed. Dorothy E. Battenfeld, Elayne G. Clift, and Robin P. Graubarth (Washington, D.C.: National Women’s Health Network, 1981), 13.

reproductive justice entailed the right to bear children as well as the right not to do so. By framing the issue expansively, Southern feminists in the reproductive justice movement attracted diverse groups of women.

The women's health and anti-rape movements in the South were deeply connected to the politics of reproductive rights, but were even more successful in building coalitions. Employing feminist critiques of the medical and legal systems, activists in the women's health and anti-rape movements set out to create alternative, women-centered institutions. Both of these initiatives recognized that women needed special services, not replicas of those provided to men. They argued that women's needs were distinctive and that the available resources were inadequate. Whereas current scholarly literature suggests that feminists rejected interaction with the state for fear of cooptation of their practices and politics, Chapter 4 demonstrates that in the South, activists in the women's health and anti-rape movements sought not only to create separate resources, but also to reform existing legal and medical practices – a goal that necessitated close interaction with mainstream institutions. Chapter 4 also highlights the loosely connected networks of activists in the women's health movement that created coalitions across lines of race and class to meet shared needs.

Political organizing likewise appealed to a broad range of women. Like women's health issues, political equality, particularly issues such as jury participation and the Equal Rights Amendment, drew support from a wide variety of women. In many cases, feminists across the South succeeded in framing political activism as change that would benefit all women, allowing advocates to argue that they were working to improve the lives of women without regard to

class or race. Chapter 5 demonstrates that political organizing often served as the nexus for coalition building and joint initiatives. As the region became increasingly conservative in the 1970s, mobilizing around women's issues necessitated broad coalitions. While political change has sometimes been decried by feminist scholars as limited in its potential for change, the historical context of the South suggests that such activism should not be dismissed so readily. In the South, the insistence that all people should be equal before the law repudiated generations of racial and gender discrimination. Legal equality, generally considered a moderate challenge, had radical implications in the South.

Finally, rather than focusing on overlapping or parallel networks of activists, Chapter 6 examines how the women's movement bequeathed leadership, strategy, and resources to lesbian organizing. Until recently, gay and lesbian life in the South has received scant attention from scholars. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the nation, gay Southerners began to build social networks and political organizations in the postwar period. The lesbian rights movement of the 1970s drew inspiration from such postwar foundations, but ultimately found greater common ground with the women's movement. Lesbian women were critical participants in many feminist organizations, but they found, more often than not, that their specific demands met with hesitation or hostility from straight women. The building of alliances between straight and gay women demonstrates that coalition-building sometimes occurred *within* organizations, as well as between them. In advocating civil rights and constructing social networks, lesbian women worked within feminist organizations when possible, but also found it necessary to separate upon occasion.

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Second-wave feminism in the South never cohered into a unified movement. Instead, it was typified by multiple movements that were sometimes overlapping, sometimes at odds. When change occurred, it resulted from a cumulative but diffuse activism. What marked these efforts as a movement, this dissertation argues, was neither a coherent philosophy nor a unified struggle, but a shared understanding that organizing around issues of women's rights was an effective avenue for change. In recovering the history of second-wave feminism in the South, the dissertation emphasizes both the possibilities for coalition building and the limitations of a movement that never fully addressed racial and class divisions.

Understanding the appeal of second-wave feminism to women across the country does not diminish the fact that, with some exceptions, the battle itself was largely waged at the local level. Even seemingly national initiatives such as the Equal Rights Amendment or abortion rights legal cases were deeply connected to networks of local activists, as this dissertation demonstrates. For both philosophical and practical reasons, many activists believed change had to emerge from local concerns. Examining the grassroots thus paints a picture of how coalitions were created, how priorities were negotiated, how national battles were translated into local concerns, and how local organizing advanced the cause of feminism throughout the nation.

## Chapter 1

### The Fight for Economic Equity: Southern Women in the Wage Economy

In 1973, Crystal Lee Jordan joined the unionization struggle at the J. P. Stevens textile plant in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. She did so after attending an organizational meeting in a local African American Baptist Church at which she and another woman were the only white workers in attendance.<sup>1</sup> Jordan, who had been folding terry-cloth towels at the plant for more than a year, threw herself into the union movement and was soon fired for insubordination. Her story caught the attention of the national media and the national women's movement, including one of its most prominent leaders, Gloria Steinem.<sup>2</sup> After reading a profile of Jordan in the *New York Times Magazine*, Steinem, the editor of *Ms.* magazine, helped put together a sixteen-minute documentary for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) about the North Carolinian activist.<sup>3</sup> The documentary, produced by a public television station in Dallas, was meant to suggest the common ground between middle-class and working-class women but

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<sup>1</sup> James Hodge, "The Real Norma Rae," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. Robert H. Ziegler (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 255-256. Attempts to unionize the J. P. Stevens plants in the Carolinas and Georgia became a twenty-year battle that was fought in the courts, in the press, and on picket lines. Both workers and the corporation considered the Stevens campaign crucial, not only because Stevens was one of the largest textile employers in the South, but also because the company was, in the words of the National Labor Relations Board, the nation's "number one labor law violator." Quoted in Timothy J. Minchin, *Fighting against the Odds: A History of Southern Labor since World War II* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 129. For vivid, first-person accounts of life in the Carolina mill towns and working in the Stevens plants, see Mimi Conway, ed., *Rise Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Jordan was the inspiration for the celebrated film *Norma Rae* (Paramount, 1979) starring Sally Fields.

<sup>3</sup> *Crystal Lee Jordan* (KERA Dallas, 1975).



unintentionally revealed the gulf between them. Steinem's involvement with the project signaled a desire by middle-class feminists to support their working-class counterparts as best they could and to celebrate their achievements. But her understanding of the textile workers' struggle and their politics was extremely limited. In the documentary, Steinem praised the Stevens strike as "a move by blue collar women to involvement in the women's movement" – a characterization suggesting that working-class women could (and should) be incorporated into an ongoing women's movement.<sup>4</sup> In reality, however, working-class women like Jordan had developed a feminism of their own and had long been committed to women's rights. They were not, as Steinem implied, latecomers merging into "the women's movement." Rather, they had been activists at the forefront of feminist battles and had developed their own critiques of women's economic roles. "I don't feel that a woman's place is in the home," Jordan herself asserted in the documentary. Moreover, she conceptualized her union work as inextricably linked to her feminist commitments. "I really got involved with the union," she explained, "because I feel like it really gave me the opportunity to be the woman I have always wanted to be and I can stand up and fight."<sup>5</sup>

Even if they did not participate in the same feminist networks as women like Steinem or in avowedly feminist organizations, many working-class women understood their activism as advancing women's rights. The Crystal Lee Jordan documentary revealed not only Steinem's

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Gammon, "Show Features Steinem, Tar Heel," *Durham Morning Herald*, June 19, 1974, p. 7A; Hodge, "The Real Norma Rae," 259.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Hodge, "The Real Norma Rae," 259.

own limited definition of second-wave feminism, but also a significant divide between middle-class and working-class feminists. It also highlighted the difficulty of building coalitions across class lines even when activists shared a desire to improve the economic position of women.

Although they rarely recognized each other's struggles as either shared or symbiotic, middle-class and working-class women alike put workplace struggles at the center of feminist activism. In the years following World War II, increasing numbers of Southern women moved into the waged economy, making workplace justice integral to the women's rights movement. Southern women were not new to the labor market; white working-class women had long staffed the region's textile mills while their African American counterparts worked in tobacco factories and domestic service. Rural women of both races had been integral to the South's agricultural economy for generations.<sup>6</sup> Changes wrought by the infusion of federal funds into the region during and after the Second World War, however, opened new positions and brought greater numbers of women – black and white – into waged labor. These new positions offered both opportunities and dangers. Many women increased their own and their families'

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<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, LuAnn Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Georgina Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City: Working-Class Women and Urban Development in Atlanta, 1890-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

economic well-being through paid employment even as they received less compensation than men and discriminatory work assignments, experienced sexual harassment, and faced barriers to promotion and to more remunerative jobs. These experiences inspired a variety of Southern women to launch campaigns for greater justice in offices, factories, and homes across the region. As they struggled for economic equity, many activists in the South came to understand their civil equality as inextricably linked to their status in the labor force.

In some respects, the workplace battles waged by working-class women and middle-class women had much in common. At the most basic level, they represented a desire to secure opportunities for more remunerative work. But getting a foot in the door was only the beginning. Southern women fought not only to gain access to higher-paying positions but also for dignity and respect on the job and wages equal to those of men. Despite such shared goals, however, the multiple (but class- and race-divided) movements for workplace justice never cohered into a unified struggle. Instead, they developed along separate but more or less parallel tracks and sometimes at cross-purposes. While both working-class and middle-class feminists sought economic justice, racial and class divisions in society at large meant that, for the most part, women organized separately. Moreover, even when they moved in the same spaces, they often did not do so as equals.

This chapter explores the battles waged separately – and, less often, in concert – by Southern women as they pursued workplace equality. Campaigns for equal pay and access to jobs long held exclusively by men were launched by both middle-class and working-class women, often with similar tactics and rhetoric. Across class divisions, women tried to use the

courts to enforce new equity laws and to fight discrimination on the job. Southern women – black and white, middle class and working class – created grassroots organizations that functioned as support groups, lobbying efforts, or quasi-unions. In some instances, they attempted to connect their organizations to national efforts, but, for the most part, organizing for workplace justice took place at the local level. Feminist newsletters and regional umbrella organizations were especially important in helping women learn about similar activities in other parts of the South, but they did not lead to the creation of a unified women’s movement organized around issues of workplace justice. Indeed, workplace activism was so often divided by class and race that it can best be characterized as overlapping but separate women’s movements. Coalition-building proved to be rare and tenuous.

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In many respects, the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s would have been impossible without the dramatic economic changes that followed the Second World War. As federal funds and private capital poured into the region, the South’s economy was transformed, becoming wealthier, more industrialized and mechanized, more technologically advanced, and less agricultural. These changes pulled increasing numbers of women into wage labor and reconfigured the region’s residential patterns, creating new opportunities for organization and activism while at the same time reinscribing longstanding divisions along lines of race and class and even introducing new ones.

Personal income more than doubled in the South in the postwar period, in part because the number of industrial workers grew by more than 50 percent. Southerners began to narrow

the gap between their per capita income and that of other Americans, reversing the historical trend that had kept their incomes far lower than those in other regions of the United States.<sup>7</sup> As Southern states promoted their “good business environments” with low taxes, lax regulation, and weak labor unions, national corporations increasingly saw the South as a promising location for their enterprises.<sup>8</sup> The region’s comparatively low wages, and the nonunionized, semiskilled character of its workforce made it especially attractive to highly competitive, low-skill industries. At the same time, changes in technology helped ameliorate some of the region’s previous disadvantages. The invention of air conditioning, for example, made the southern climate bearable for manufacturing, while the interstate highway system effectively integrated the South both internally and nationally.<sup>9</sup> Influential congressmen funneled federal funds into their states in the form of military bases, research laboratories, and the new aerospace industry.<sup>10</sup> Southern cities boomed as their populations swelled with migrants from agricultural areas that

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<sup>7</sup> John B. Boles, *The South through Time: A History of An American Region* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995), 455.

<sup>8</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 403; Tami J. Friedman, “Exploiting the North-South Differential: Corporate Power, Southern Politics, and the Decline of Organized Labor after World War II,” *Journal of American History* 95 (September 2008): 340-341. Southern states often enacted “right-to-work” laws, which weakened unions by enforcing open-shop policies.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Arsenault, “The End of the Long, Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture,” *Journal of Southern History* 50 (November 1984): 597-628; Boles, *The South through Time*, 457; Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 116.

<sup>10</sup> Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*.

were becoming increasingly mechanized and dominated by large-scale agribusiness.<sup>11</sup> By the 1970s, commentators were describing the South as the modern and prosperous “Sunbelt” rather than an embarrassing example of economic backwardness.<sup>12</sup>

These changes did not necessarily translate into benefits for Southern workers – particularly women. The new sectors of the economy offered opportunities beyond agriculture and domestic service, but rarely held out the promise of parity with men.<sup>13</sup> In the mid-1960s, managerial, technical, and professional jobs employed fewer than one in ten white women and even fewer black women.<sup>14</sup> Women most often found jobs in the clerical or service sectors of the economy or in light manufacturing. Jobs in the service sector provided few opportunities for advancement and usually paid low wages. Those low-skilled jobs with the highest wages – in the oil and mining industries, for example – often excluded women. With few exceptions,

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<sup>11</sup> Boles, *The South through Time*, 459-460.

<sup>12</sup> In 1969, political strategist Kevin Phillips coined the term “Sunbelt” to designate the southern rim of the United States. Phillips argued that the Republican Party should concentrate its energies on the region and appeal to its conservative political tendencies. Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969). For historical debates on the usefulness of the concept of a “Sunbelt,” see Raymond Mohl, ed., *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Historian Jacqueline Jones has argued that “for much of the twentieth century, the South has remained unique in terms of, first, its persistent rurality and, second, the peculiar force with which racial ideologies have shaped class and gender relations. These forces have tended to estrange groups of women from each other, and to limit the potential of women to contribute fully to the southern economy as family members, as workers, and as citizens.” Jacqueline Jones, “Spheres of Economic Activity among Southern Women in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to the Future,” in *Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective*, ed. Melissa Walker, Jeanette R. Dunn, and Joe P. Dunn (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Bartley, *The New South*, 263.

women remained concentrated in low-skill, low-wage jobs. This was especially true for black women. In 1960, half of all employed Southern black women worked in domestic service. In the following two decades, even as the number of domestic workers in private homes declined, black women continued to perform similar labor in hotels, restaurants, schools, hospitals, and nursing homes.<sup>15</sup>

As changes in the Southern economy transformed women's lives, Southern feminists sought to make the labor market more just, to expand opportunities for women, and to secure positions in more remunerative fields. These goals were shared by a variety of Southern women, yet their activism never cohered into a single movement. This outcome is perhaps not surprising. Differences in power – economic, social, and political – did much to create and maintain divisions among women. But in identifying and challenging on-the-job discrimination through the courts and in grassroots organizations, Southern women were taking part in a larger fight for economic justice.

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Facing negative gender stereotypes and sexual harassment, both middle-class and working-class activists sought to improve women's treatment in the workplace. In the late 1960s and 1970s, they increasingly challenged restrictions on the kinds of work available to

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Ellen Smith, "Women in the Rural South: Scraping a Living from Two-Bit Jobs," *Southern Changes* 8, no. 2 (1986): 6. Smith served as research and education director of the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC), which will be discussed later in this chapter. See also Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland, 1994), 13; Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *Caring by the Hour: Women, Work, and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 13-14.

women and prevailing ideas about women's capabilities. Professional, clerical, and working-class women all refused to accept their subordinate position in the Southern economy, but they did so separately. Women in a wide variety of occupations also sought to expand women's access to positions traditionally held by men and lobbied for funding of high-quality daycare. In the few cases in which men and women performed the same work, feminists of all classes tried to use new federal legislation mandating equal pay to obtain equality in the workplace.

For professional women, universities and colleges were an important early target, in part because these women were among the best equipped to use new federal legislation protecting equity and promoting affirmative action. Like women throughout the nation, female faculty members in the South earned less than their male counterparts and were less likely to be promoted to tenured positions. At the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, for example, the median salary for women was less than that for men at each academic rank, although women had often worked at the university for longer periods.<sup>16</sup> Women faced similar discrimination in terms of benefits. After joining the staff of the Emory University library in the early 1970s, Janet Paulk began to notice discrimination in the university's benefits system. "Not

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, only one woman served as a department head (in the school of nursing and public health), and women could be found in disproportionately high numbers in the ranks of one-year appointments. Few were full professors. See clipping, Steve Adams, "Statistics Show Bias Against Women on Faculty," *The Chapel Hill Newspaper*, March 20, 1973, folder: Printed Materials, Clippings, 1972-1984, box 2, Margaret O'Connor papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. (hereafter, UNC Manuscripts); clipping, no author, "UNC Women Unite to Battle Sex Bias," *Tar Heel*, February 23, 1973, folder: Printed Materials, Clippings, 1972-1984, box 2, Margaret O'Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts; list, "UNC-CH Women Faculty Members, 1973-1974," n.d., folder: Org. Materials, Committee on the Role and Status of Women, 1973-1974, box 1, Margaret O'Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts.



only was it salary,” she later recalled, “but, for example, retirement benefits for women who had contributed an equal amount to men were less because women as a group were considered to live longer than men, so they did not receive as much money.”<sup>17</sup> Paulk also objected to the university’s policies in allocating courtesy scholarships (which allowed employees’ offspring to attend the university without paying tuition), because Emory made these available only to male heads of households and to divorced or widowed women with children. Married women who worked at the university were not eligible. With the help of a law student, Paulk composed a “white paper” on women’s employment at Emory that detailed the university’s discriminatory policies. As female employees continued to press the matter, the university acknowledged the disparity and modified its benefits program.<sup>18</sup>

The grievances of female faculty members included more than inequitable benefits. Some lost tenure appeals because of their feminist scholarship or activism. Jo McManis, an associate professor of English at Loyola University in New Orleans, for example, lost her bid for tenure because the university’s president, the Reverend Michael Kennely, disapproved of her feminist scholarship and course offerings. Despite the support of her department, McManis was discharged from the university in 1973. McManis had previously filed a suit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) after discovering that her salary was lower than

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<sup>17</sup> Transcript, Janet Paulk, in an interview conducted by Joyce Durand, February 19, 2003, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 3-4, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter, GSU).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

that of most of the male faculty members in her department, even those who had published less than she had and had worked at Loyola for fewer years.<sup>19</sup> Judith Rooks, a women's health care advocate and nursing professor, lost her position at Georgia State University after the administration learned of her efforts to change the state's abortion laws. The university's vice president informed Rooks that "radical women were the cause of campus unrest" and refused to allow her to teach.<sup>20</sup>

Discrimination against professional women because of their activism was not limited to the academy. Sue Millen, a reporter for the *Wilmington Star News* in North Carolina, found that her support of women's rights was limiting her career. Millen had struggled for years with discrimination in story assignments and in pay. When she learned that a male colleague with less experience was earning more money than she was, she reported the paper to the U.S. Department of Labor. Upon discovering that another woman was earning even less than she after working more years, Millen brought the matter to the editor's attention. The editor, she recalled, responded that "we have to pay them [male reporters] more because they have a family." Millen pointed out, to no avail, that the woman in question, a single parent, had a family. Ultimately, however, it was the paper's decision to edit stories with a feminist slant that outraged Millen. When the Wilmington school board, for example, ignored a Supreme Court

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<sup>19</sup> "Loyola Fires Feminist," *Distaff* (New Orleans) 1, no. 7 (August 1973): 1.

<sup>20</sup> Transcript, Judith Rooks, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, April 26, 2004, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 28-30, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU. For Rooks's involvement in Georgia's abortion rights movement, see Chapter 3, below.

ruling forbidding school districts from suspending pregnant students, Millen's reporting exposed the board's wrongdoing. The managing editor intervened and changed details in her story. Millen appealed to a female editor, who reinstated much of the story, which forced the school board into compliance. After these incidents, Millen recalled, the editors "made it pretty miserable" for her to work at the paper until finally she accepted another job out of state.<sup>21</sup>

During the late 1960s and 1970s, working-class women also challenged their treatment in the workplace, demanding dignity, pay, and better working conditions. Workers at Winn-Dixie, a large grocery chain based in the South, charged the company with practicing gender discrimination in employment and pay.<sup>22</sup> In Laurel, Mississippi, Sanderson Farms, a large agribusiness, faced legal challenges from its nonunionized workers – primarily female and African American – for sexual harassment, dangerous working conditions, and such restrictions as limiting restroom visits to three per week.<sup>23</sup> In the textile and apparel industry, a significant

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<sup>21</sup> Transcript, Sue Ann Millen, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, July 7 and 9, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 5-6, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>22</sup> Virtually all of Winn-Dixie's 1,600 stores were located in states with "right-to-work" laws. Both national and local feminist organizations recognized that these laws restricting unionization of workers would create major hurdles for organizing women workers. National Organization for Women, "The Taft-Hartley Act, Section 14 (b): A Threat to Women's Right to Organize," pamphlet, 1980, p. 7, folder: Writings, miscellaneous, no. 2 1978-1986, box 32, Southeast Women's Employment Coalition records, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter, Duke). This pamphlet details the unionization campaign of Winn-Dixie workers.

<sup>23</sup> William Serrin, "200 Mississippi Women Carry On a Lonely, Bitter Strike," *New York Times*, February 27, 1980, A12; interview with Mary Robinson, May 23, 1980, Montgomery, Alabama, pp. 142-143, box 1, Southwest Institute for Research on Minority Women Oral Histories of Local Income and Minority Women, Southern Historical Collection, UNC Manuscripts.

employer of white women in the Carolinas and in Texas, workers earned the lowest manufacturing wages in the nation – almost \$1.00 an hour less than factory workers in other parts of the country.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1970s, Mexican-American women workers at the Farah pants company in El Paso, Texas, went on strike, to protest low wages and poor working conditions. Women at the plant were particularly distressed by the restriction of bathroom breaks, a policy they felt was especially unfair to women. “At the break is the only time you can go to the bathroom,” one worker complained. “If you have to go when it is not break, the supervisor sees you and he waits for you outside and when you come out he asks you why you went in. Perhaps it is your period, you have to mess with the machine and you are tired and you must change clothes. But it is embarrassing to say this to the supervisor, so you just say you don’t know why it took so long and look dumb.”<sup>25</sup> Mary Lynn Walker, a clerk at the Atlanta Army Depot in the mid-1960s, remembered that her employer “wouldn’t promote women into [higher paid, managerial] jobs because they saved those jobs for men who, as they said, were heads of household. And they needed it worse than women did. What they didn’t ask you was, were you head of your own household?”<sup>26</sup> After Walker joined the American

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<sup>24</sup> National Organization for Women, “The Taft-Hartley Act,” 7.

<sup>25</sup> Researchers found that many Farah workers developed kidney and bladder infections because they feared taking breaks to use the restrooms. Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig, *Women at Farah: An Unfinished Story* (copyright by the authors, El Paso, 1979), 8; Gayle Gagliano, “Women Won’t Wear the Pants,” *Distaff* (New Orleans) 1, no. 9 (October 1973): 4. For more on the Farah strike and its supporters, see chap. 2, below.

<sup>26</sup> Transcript, Mary Lynn Walker, in an interview conducted by Lauren Kata, January 27, 2005, Atlanta, Ga., L1995-12, p. 13, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, GSU.

Federation of Government Employees, and later the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), she decided to challenge the treatment of women in her office. She took an active role in the union, she recalled, “because of a problem that started there with the way men talked to women. I didn’t like and I didn’t have to put up with that [from] my father, or my brothers, or anybody else, so it was something new to me when they’d start yelling at you and tell you that you were stupid and all of this. . . . I just didn’t appreciate the way that men talked to – the bosses, they were all men – and I didn’t appreciate the way they talked to us, so I stood up in the middle of the floor [on a regular work day] and told them not to talk to me that way.”<sup>27</sup>

From a distance, the complaints and struggles appeared to be similar for middle-class women and working-class women. Yet Southern women rarely organized across line of class on matters of workplace justice. These experiences of discrimination – all individual, yet familiar – spurred many women to join or create unions, to sue their employers, or to file complaints with the EEOC, but only rarely did they recognize that they were engaged in similar struggles. Their struggles were comparable but not shared. That the tactics embraced by middle-class and working-class women were so similar – particularly legal action and the creation of grassroots networks – suggests that economic injustice in the workplace could be fought with similar weapons, but only rarely in common. When women did work together, they often did not do so as equals. Deep economic divisions in the Southern economy, coupled with

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<sup>27</sup> Walker interview, pp. 11-12, GSU. On the whole, CLUW had relatively little impact in the South, where it had few resources and where state laws limited union organizing. CLUW operated chapters in Atlanta, Little Rock, Louisville, Houston, and Nashville. List of CLUW Chapters, May 23, 1975, folder: Misc. Chapters, Maria Getzinger Jones papers (W021), box 2, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, GSU.

racial and class hierarchies, created parallel but separate movements for economic justice.

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Initiating litigation against employers became a critical tool for both middle-class and working-class Southern women as they challenged on-the-job discrimination. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, along with a number of executive orders, had created a legal basis on which to challenge sex discrimination in employment. The cases usually targeted specific corporations, but, as in NOW's lawsuit against *Atlanta Magazine*, were sometimes intended to make a political statement. In 1973, the Atlanta chapter of NOW launched a sex discrimination suit and a series of protests against the city's chamber of commerce, whose members sat on the boards of and controlled the city's most influential corporations. Protesting discrimination in pay, promotion, and hiring, NOW challenged Atlanta's touted image of "progressive" race and gender relations in a series of protests and legal suits, particularly against *Atlanta Magazine*, a publication produced by the chamber.<sup>28</sup> "Much more than just a bunch of boosters," NOW explained, the chamber of commerce "seriously represents the business establishment and is a major part of the power structure of our town." NOW activists believed that a challenge to the chamber's employment practices "could set an example which would make a very clear statement to the rest of the

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<sup>28</sup> Transcript, Cynthia Hlass, in an interview conducted by Joyce Durand, April 30, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., p. 20, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU. On Atlanta's image, see David Andrew Harmon, *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946-1981* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1998); Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); David L. Sjoquist, ed., *The Atlanta Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

city's employers" and to the "old boys" network across the city.<sup>29</sup> Local NOW members asked the city to recognize the "vital part" women played in the city's economic life as employees and as owners of businesses. They also asked the chamber to eliminate discriminatory hiring and promotion practices and to create an affirmative action council that would increase women's access to jobs.<sup>30</sup>

Another tactic embraced by Southern women was the class-action suit, most successfully by women employed in higher education. In 1970, Bernice Sandler, an instructor at the University of Maryland, launched a nationwide campaign to end discrimination against women faculty members at colleges and universities. Denied the opportunity to obtain a tenure-track position on account of her sex, Sandler used the provisions of Executive Order 11246 – which prohibited programs receiving federal funds from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin – to challenge the hiring and promotion practices of more than 250 universities and colleges.<sup>31</sup> With the help of the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), an organization of middle-class women, Sandler filed suits on her own behalf and on

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<sup>29</sup> *Atlanta NOW Notes* 6, no. 11 (November 1974): 3-7. See also "Chamber of Commerce Sued for Sexism," *The Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta) 7, no. 11 (March 18, 1974): 1.

<sup>30</sup> Peg Nugent (Atlanta NOW President) to board of directors, Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, September 7, 1973, folder: Atlanta Chapter Correspondence, box 19, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter Emory).

<sup>31</sup> NOW and the Women's Equity Action League filed suit on behalf of female faculty members against 100 universities. For Executive Order 11246, see [www.archives.gov/federal-register/executive-orders/1965.html#11246](http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/executive-orders/1965.html#11246).

the behalf of women faculty members across the country.<sup>32</sup> These lawsuits put pressure on Congress to pass Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which mandated equal funding for women on college campuses across the nation.

Working-class women in the South also turned to the courts to redress inequities in their employment. *Weeks v. Southern Bell*, the first significant case filed under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, was brought by a Georgia woman who worked for Southern Bell, an AT&T subsidiary. After winding through the courts for half a decade, the case finally reached the Supreme Court, which upheld the clause that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in matters of employment. The decision established that bona fide occupational qualifications (often referred to as bfoq's) could not discriminate against women simply because of their sex.<sup>33</sup> *Weeks* would have a profound impact on women across the country.

Initiated by a white working-class woman, *Weeks v. Southern Bell* was ultimately successful because of the contributions of both working-class women and professional women.

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<sup>32</sup> For a fuller description of Sandler's suit, see Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 209-211. The suit relied on the executive order because other legal avenues failed to address the problems of women in academia; Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act exempted schools and colleges, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963 did not cover professionals. See [www.bernicessandler.com/id44.htm](http://www.bernicessandler.com/id44.htm). See also Bernice Sandler, "A Little Help From Our Government: WEAL and Contract Compliance," in *Academic Women on the Move*, ed. Alice S. Rossi and Ann Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973), 439-455.

<sup>33</sup> *Weeks v. Southern Bell* was the first of many lawsuits leveled against AT&T in the 1960s and 1970s. See Venus Green, *Race on the Line: Gender, Labor, and Technology in the Bell System, 1880-1980* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Lois Kathryn Herr, *Women, Power, and AT&T: Winning Rights in the Workplace* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003); Marjorie A. Stockford, *The Bellwomen: The Story of the Landmark AT&T Sex Discrimination Case* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004).



Litigation not only proved to be an attractive and useful tool for a wide range of women, but also offered the possibility of cross-class organizing. The activists in the case did not, however, conceptualize themselves in the same manner. The middle-class attorneys who argued *Weeks* never characterized themselves as *workers* with grievances similar to those of working-class women. Thus, although women of different classes collaborated in the lawsuit, they did not necessarily view each other as members of a cross-class movement based on economic justice.

In 1966, Lorena Weeks, a white mother of three young children, was facing dire economic circumstances. Weeks had worked for Southern Bell in one capacity or another since 1947, but her current position as a clerk in Swainsboro, Georgia, required an exhausting and costly forty-mile daily commute. When she learned that a switchman position was opening in her hometown of Wadley, Georgia, Weeks decided to apply for the job; the position would not only eliminate her long commute but also pay an additional \$51.50 a week, nearly doubling her salary.<sup>34</sup> Only one other applicant submitted an application – a man with less seniority than Weeks. Weeks expected to be awarded the position, especially because her union’s contract contained no stipulations about sex, only seniority, and she had received a number of commendations for her work.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Weeks had on-the-job experience, having

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<sup>34</sup> Stockford, *The Bellwomen*, 67. Stockford misidentifies Weeks as African American.

<sup>35</sup> Jobs at Southern Bell were highly segregated by gender. Women worked in the “traffic department,” which transferred and transmitted phone calls; men worked in the “plant department,” installing and repairing cables. Jobs in the plant department, even at its lowest levels, exceeded the pay scale of all traffic department jobs. Weeks was a member of the Communications Workers of America. Brief on behalf of Lorena Weeks (by Marguerite Rawalt and Sylvia Roberts), appeals from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Georgia, in the US Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, May 1968, folder 20, box 27, Marguerite Rawalt papers,

substituted when the current switchman was on vacation.<sup>36</sup>

A few days after applying for the position, Weeks learned that it would not be assigned to a woman. She therefore filed a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which launched an investigation. The EEOC supported Weeks's claim, finding that there was no reason she could not perform the job of switchman, and concluded that, in refusing to hire her, AT&T had violated Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Because the EEOC had no enforcement powers and Southern Bell maintained its refusal to award Weeks the position, she decided to file suit in federal court. Her court-appointed attorney warned that she "stood a good chance of being fired."<sup>37</sup> In November 1967, the U.S. District Court found against Weeks, ruling that the job of switchman could be legally denied to her because it involved "strenuous activity" (lifting a pack containing thirty-one pounds of equipment) that violated a Georgia regulation forbidding women and minors to lift weights in excess of thirty pounds. Thus, the Court found, the thirty-one pound pack served as a bona fide occupational

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Special Collections, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter, Schlesinger); "Weeks/NOW vs. Bell/AT&T: Womanpower Topples Goliath," *Now Acts* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 4, folder: NOW publications, box 16, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory; Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> In addition, while working at an AT&T plant in rural Georgia, she had spent two years as a night operator, which required her to make minor repairs to equipment and to become familiar with switching equipment. "Weeks/NOW vs. Bell/AT&T," 4.

<sup>37</sup> Opinion of the court, District Court of the US for the Southern District of Georgia, Swainsboro Division, *Mrs. Lorena W. Weeks vs. Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Co.*, civil action no. 443, November 1967, folder 19, box 27, Marguerite Rawalt Papers, Schlesinger; "Weeks/NOW vs. Bell/AT&T," 4.

qualification. Weeks's attorney refused to file an appeal.<sup>38</sup>

At this point, the case came to the attention of the newly formed National Organization of Women (NOW), particularly the members of its Legal Defense Fund, which was under the direction of Louisiana attorney Sylvia Roberts and Texas-born attorney Marguerite Rawalt. Roberts, who also served as NOW's Southern Regional Director, approached Weeks about the possibility of using her case as a test of the recently enacted equal opportunity laws. Both NOW and the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor had been working to convince the EEOC and state departments of labor that weight-lifting capabilities were not a function of sex per se, but depended on technique, muscular strength, and build – in other words, characteristics of individuals, not an entire sex. In order to pursue the issue, Weeks agreed to remain in the employ of Southern Bell despite on-the-job harassment, her supervisor's disapproval, her children's embarrassment, and her husband's impatience with her determination to see the case through.<sup>39</sup>

NOW, working in conjunction with the Women's Bureau and the EEOC, tried to chip away at the state laws that imposed sex-specific weight-lifting requirements.<sup>40</sup> In a savvy bit of courtroom theatrics, Sylvia Roberts, a petite, ninety-pound woman, casually lifted the thirty-

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<sup>38</sup> When Weeks returned to work after losing her suit, she refused a supervisor's order to move her typewriter, on the grounds that it weighed thirty-four pounds. She was reprimanded by the company. Herr, *Women, Power, and AT&T*, 81-82.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Some leaders of the Women's Bureau, particularly Mary Dublin Keyserling, remained concerned that the EEOC would undermine protective labor laws aimed at women and did not support this strategy. See Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 185, 203.

one-pound switchman pack while making her opening statement and pointed out that women routinely lifted children and groceries. During the testimony stage of the trial, Roberts asked Lorena Weeks if she had any difficulty lifting her three small children; Weeks replied that she was able to do so with ease until they were at least six years of age (and presumably weighed more than thirty pounds).<sup>41</sup> In the midst of the trial, Weeks's advocates were able to sway the Georgia Commissioner of Labor into removing the weight-lifting regulation. With this restriction lifted, Southern Bell was left with only its "strenuous activity" characterization of the job as ground to deny the switchman position to Weeks.<sup>42</sup>

Southern Bell continued to maintain that the job of switchman was too strenuous and dangerous for women and refused to award the job to Weeks. NOW decided to proceed with the case. For Roberts and Rawalt, Lorena Weeks's case could do more than challenge narrow bona fide occupational qualifications (bfoqs); they hoped to capitalize on the opportunity to test

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<sup>41</sup> Although difficult to document, this courtroom anecdote is repeated frequently. For one account by Lorena Weeks, see the website of the Veteran Feminist of America: [www.vfa.us/TitleVII.htm](http://www.vfa.us/TitleVII.htm). See also Sara M. Evans, "Sources of the Second Wave: The Rebirth of Feminism," in *American Identities: An Introductory Textbook*, ed. Lois Palken Rudnick, Judith E. Smith, Rachel Rubin (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 182. Other accounts describe Roberts lifting a typewriter that weighed more than thirty pounds. See Toni Carabillo, Judith Meuli, and June Bundy Csida, eds., *Feminist Chronicles, 1953-1993* (Los Angeles: Women's Graphics, 1993), 54. For Weeks's testimony, see brief on behalf of Lorena Weeks (by Marguerite Rawalt and Sylvia Roberts), appeals from the US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia, in the US Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, May 1968, folder 20, box 27, Marguerite Rawalt papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>42</sup> Marguerite Rawalt and Sylvia Roberts, post-argument memorandum on behalf of Mrs. Lorena W. Weeks, appellant-appellee, in the US Court of Appeals, Fifth circuit, no. 25725, October 1968, folder 21, box 27, Marguerite Rawalt papers, Schlesinger. In 1968, Georgia, along with thirty-eight other states and the federal government, removed weight-lifting regulations pertaining exclusively to women.

Title VII and establish a precedent for women everywhere. In March 1969, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled that sex was not a bona fide occupational qualification for the job of switchman and that in refusing to consider Weeks for the position Southern Bell had violated Title VII. “Men have always had the right to determine whether the incremental increase in remuneration for strenuous, dangerous, obnoxious, or unromantic tasks is worth the gamble,” the court held. “The promise of Title VII is that women are now to be on equal footing.”<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, in a series of briefs supporting Weeks’s claim of gender discrimination, the EEOC argued that AT&T (Southern Bell’s parent company) had evinced a pattern of “blatant discrimination” against women, who occupied 96.9 percent of low-paying and clerical positions and less than 1 percent of skilled craftsmen positions. The EEOC also described a pattern of sexually discriminatory retirement plans offered by AT&T (both in age of retirement and level of benefits) and a sexually and racially discriminatory seniority system.<sup>44</sup> In terms of both creating legal precedent and publicizing company-wide discrimination, the *Weeks* case became one of NOW’s first and most important successes.

Beyond its important legal achievements, *Weeks v. Southern Bell* was significant in demonstrating both the possibilities and the limitations of middle-class and working-class coalitions. Activists involved in the case continued to fight in the years after the Supreme Court decision. After the Court’s ruling, NOW filed a number of motions to obtain restitution and the

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<sup>43</sup> *Weeks v. Southern Bell*, 408 F.2d 228 (5th Cir.), 1969.

<sup>44</sup> “Weeks/NOW vs. Bell/AT&T,” 6.

switchman's job for Lorena Weeks and legal fees for Sylvia Roberts and Marguerite Rawalt.<sup>45</sup> Southern Bell resisted all of these motions. In February 1971, national NOW organized a letter-writing campaign to the president of Southern Bell, criticizing the company's "continued intransigence" and "continual harassment" of Lorena Weeks.<sup>46</sup> In March of that year, Southern Bell finally relented, awarding Weeks the switchman position but providing her little support on the job. According to NOW, "a supervisor in her area told workers to treat her 'just like any nigger' and co-workers took to calling her 'switch bitch.'" Her union, the Communications Workers of America, condemned use of the epithet "nigger" but suggested that "switch bitch" was merely "humorous office camaraderie."<sup>47</sup> On May 29, 1971, feminists in fifteen cities across the nation picketed local AT&T offices; in New Orleans, protestors carried signs reading "Switch Bitch is Beautiful."<sup>48</sup> Three weeks later, Southern Bell capitulated on the issue of restitution, agreeing to pay Weeks \$30,761 in back pay, along with pension increases and access to training courses.<sup>49</sup> The NOW protests were important both symbolically and tangibly, but few of the protestors tied the workplace issues Weeks faced to a larger critique of

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<sup>45</sup> Typed notes, "Southern Bell meeting," March 9, 1971, folder: NOW Atlanta Chapter Discrimination in Employment: Southern Bell, box 20, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

<sup>46</sup> "Weeks/NOW vs. Bell/AT&T," 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> In New Orleans, thirty members of NOW picketed the local Bell offices on Poydras Street. See Mary Gelman, "N.O. Women's Movement: A Comprehensive Herstory," *Distaff* (New Orleans) 2, no. 1 (January 1974): 5. For other protests, see Herr, *Women, Power, and AT&T*, 185.

<sup>49</sup> "Weeks/NOW vs. Bell/AT&T," 1, 4.

sex discrimination in other workplaces. The dedication of NOW lawyers and activists did, however, make a significant impression on Lorena Weeks herself. Having survived years of legal wrangling, she turned her attention to women's rights and became a leader in a local NOW chapter.<sup>50</sup>

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NOW, both nationally and in its local chapters, was an important medium for women's fight for economic equity. But both working-class and middle-class women found that challenging employment discrimination required grassroots organizations and initiatives that moved beyond legal challenges. These local groups built networks of like-minded supporters, a goal that had both practical and emotional rewards. They rarely, however, crossed lines of class.

In addition to organizing in feminist organizations such as NOW, middle-class women also turned to their professional organizations as means of improving their status. Atlanta political consultant Beth Schapiro remembered that the Business and Professional Women's Clubs helped draw "lots of women in these small communities throughout the state . . . into a larger movement."<sup>51</sup> Women in the Georgia Nurses Association, the Business and Professional Women's Clubs, the American Association of University Women, and the National Conference

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<sup>50</sup> Lorena Weeks and her sister-in-law were appointed co-convenors of the South-Central Georgia NOW chapter. Newsletter, *NOW Notes* (Atlanta), June 1972, p. 2, folder: NOW Atlanta Chapter Publications: 1972, box 20, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

<sup>51</sup> Transcript, Beth Schapiro, in an interview conducted by Dana Van Tilborg, October 11, 1995, Atlanta, Ga., p.10, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, GSU.

of Black Lawyers lobbied for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which they believed would guarantee better pay and open doors to professions that had been limited to men.<sup>52</sup> Even within national organizations, it was the local chapters that provided resources and support to women. Laura Davidson, a clerical worker in North Carolina, helped establish her local Business and Professional Women (BPW) chapter. She remembered the BPW as her “chief source of pleasure,” second only to her family.<sup>53</sup>

More typical were organizations that existed exclusively at the local level. Sojourner South, an informal network of middle-class black women in Atlanta, combined activism for professional women with fighting racism and poverty. Sojourner South’s members included political figures, professors, and influential sorority members. One of the group’s first targets was a local television station that had discriminated against a black anchorwoman. After unsuccessfully attempting to negotiate directly with the station, Sojourner South activists

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the Equal Rights Amendment, see Chapter 5, below. Pamphlet, National Conference of Black Lawyers, “Conference For and About: Black Women and the Law,” 1981, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, box 7, American Civil Liberties/Southern Women’s Rights Project Papers (Record Group M178), Special Collections, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va. On the Georgia Nurses Association, see transcript, Mary Long, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, May 13, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., 12-13, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, GSU. On the AAUW and BPW, see transcript, Beth Schapiro, in an interview conducted by Dana Van Tilborg, October 11, 1995, Atlanta, Ga., p. 10, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, GSU.

<sup>53</sup> Survey, February 1975, folder: Equal Rights Amendment, box 1, Winifred Gail Soules Bradley papers, Duke.



complained to the Federal Communications Commission and picketed in front of the station.<sup>54</sup>

One of the longest lasting and most influential local organizations that engaged in campaigns for economic equity was the Feminist Action Alliance (FAA), a largely white and middle-class group based in Atlanta. In a fundraising letter to local activists, the Feminist Action Alliance articulated grievances that suggested the frustrations many of its members had experienced: “You’ve spent your first 20-odd years getting grades as good or better than your men friends, but employers still ask, ‘Can you type?’ You need to work to help your family but can’t find good day care that you can afford. . . . In spite of Affirmative Action plans and fancy titles, you are still doing more work for less pay.”<sup>55</sup> In its early years, the Feminist Action Alliance put middle-class employment issues at the top of its agenda.<sup>56</sup> Its two most important initiatives, career counseling events and mentoring services, sought to increase the number of

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<sup>54</sup> Historian Winston A. Grady-Willis found that women in Sojourner South also tried to expand welfare expenditures and to persuade white feminists to include Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in their agendas. Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 199-201. For more on Sojourner South, see “Clark Will Host U.N. Conference for Women,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 22, 1980, p. 3; “Human Service Awards Fete Sets Honors for Noted Social Workers,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 15, 1979, p. 1; “Sojourner South Hits Sen. Nunn on Smith Visit,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 2, 1978, p. 2. I am grateful for Mary-Elizabeth Murphy’s assistance in locating these sources.

<sup>55</sup> Brochure, Feminist Action Alliance, “Here’s An Opportunity to be able to Say ‘I’m doing something for women’s rights’,” n.d. [1978?], folder: Membership Committee Work: 1978, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. Members of the Feminist Action Alliance sometimes called their organization simply ACTION. For clarity, I have chosen to use FAA throughout.

<sup>56</sup> FAA remained in existence until the mid-1980s. In the late 1970s, the organization moved into two new areas: reforming rape laws and encouraging women to run for electoral office. These efforts are examined below, in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, respectively.

women in professional employment, both immediately and in the long term.<sup>57</sup> The middle-class orientation of the alliance was evident in both its language and its activities; FAA rarely included examples of working-class women in its literature. Illustrative photographs suggested that the organization's membership was predominantly middle-class and overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, white.<sup>58</sup>

From 1976 to 1982, the Feminist Action Alliance held a series of successful conferences on topics relating to women in the workplace that regularly drew between 300 and 800 women. The conferences were held at local hotels or on the campuses of local universities; FAA provided daycare services for participants, often with the help of local church groups. Each conference included sessions that addressed issues facing professional women in the workplace, such as "Living with Stress on the Job," "Action Tools for the Developing Manager," "Time Management," "Negotiating Skills," and "The Traveling Woman," as well as practical workshops on career planning, resume writing, and interview skills. In order to assist women who had left the workforce for family reasons, FAA sponsored sessions that provided information about office etiquette, appropriate dress, and behavior. The alliance also incorporated a job fair into the conferences, bringing in recruiters from large corporations such

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<sup>57</sup> Feminist Action Alliance, "Here's An Opportunity to be able to Say 'I'm doing something for women's rights'."

<sup>58</sup> The 300 members of FAA in 1980 were mostly professional, white, and highly educated. "1980 Membership Survey – Summary," folder: Survey –1980, Feminist Action Alliance Records, box 1, Emory. For photographs, see box 4.

as General Motors and Scientific Atlanta.<sup>59</sup>

To complement the yearly employment conference, FAA created the “Professional Women’s Directory,” which listed approximately 350 professional women who owned their own businesses or provided services in a range of professional fields. The alliance intended the directory, which was updated annually and made available to the public, to be a handy resource for Atlantans who wanted to employ professional women.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, it operated a job information and referral service, which FAA used to connect its members to businesses seeking to hire new employees. FAA offered this service to local businesses as a way to help them achieve their “affirmative action goals.”<sup>61</sup>

Because members of the Feminist Action Alliance also hoped to have an influence beyond their own generational cohort, they sponsored a series of sessions at high school career days that highlighted women holding non-traditional jobs in both the professions and skilled trades. FAA sponsored these “occupational awareness and life planning” workshops in an

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Lomax (Bureau of Parks, Libraries, and Cultural Affairs), Atlanta, Ga., from Deloris [sic] Pringle (Director, Employment Task Force, Feminist Action Alliance), n.d. [September/October 1978], folder: President – Miscellaneous, 1978, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory; “Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance],” n.d. [1980], p. 6, folder: Miscellaneous, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory; transcript, Anne Deeley, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, May 20, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 17-19, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, GSU.

<sup>60</sup> “Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance],” n.d. [1980], p. 8, folder: Miscellaneous, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. FAA’s monthly newsletter, *InterAction*, included an additional directory of professional women (attorneys, bookstore owners, counselors, financial planners, florists, insurance agents, psychologists, real estate agents) and – less frequently – women in skilled trades (carpenters, painters, plumbers).

<sup>61</sup> “Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance],” p. 7.

effort to encourage students to consider feminist career paths.<sup>62</sup> “Non-Traditional Career Days” introduced students to real-life men and women who had chosen atypical careers: a male nurse, a female FBI agent, a male flight attendant, a female automobile mechanic, a female physician, a male secretary. For the most part, these occupations (with the exception of the auto mechanic) reflected the middle-class aspirations of FAA members. In 1980, based on the success of these workshops, the alliance created the “Non-Traditional Career Day Planning Kit,” a model training package based on the Atlanta program, which was professionally written and marketed throughout the country. It was adopted by local school systems, state education offices, and community organizations in more than twenty states.<sup>63</sup>

FAA’s organizing was specifically targeted toward professional women and firmly committed to a conservative approach to change. Beth Schapiro, an Atlanta political consultant, became involved with both NOW and FAA, but found the latter to be more appealing because NOW “just felt too radical.” FAA, she remembered, was trying “to work more within the system and it just felt like a much more comfortable place to be.”<sup>64</sup> While the alliance’s efforts were incremental and limited, it did manage to win a number of supporters,

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<sup>62</sup> Feminist Action Alliance, “Here’s An Opportunity to be able to Say ‘I’m doing something for women’s rights’.” Because the records do not indicate exactly which schools hosted the workshops, it is impossible to discern the racial or class composition of the student audience.

<sup>63</sup> “Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance],” p. 8. The sources do not specify the states that adopted the kit.

<sup>64</sup> Transcript, Beth Schapiro, in an interview conducted by Dana Van Tilborg, October 11, 1995, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 6-7, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, GSU.

particularly young, professional women. In 1979, FAA created the Atlanta Women's Network, which provided female leaders in business, education, politics, the media, the arts, the volunteer community, religion, government, and health care with "an opportunity to come together to establish personal contact with peers; to build a strong network of professional contacts, and to have an opportunity to hear decision-makers discuss a wide range of important issues."<sup>65</sup> Members of FAA used their connections to businessmen and politicians in Atlanta and across the state to propose legislation, recommend women for appointed positions, and lobby for changes in employment practices.<sup>66</sup> While FAA activists certainly experienced discrimination and inequity, they were able to draw on their positions of relative privilege to agitate for change in ways that other women were unable to do.

Just as FAA was concerned with expanding opportunities for middle-class women and introducing them to "non-traditional" careers, a group of progressive Southerners created a similar organization for working-class women. Because of its working-class orientation, the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC) had, however, a very different understanding of "non-traditional" employment than the FAA; for SWEC, the goal was not the hiring of women as lawyers or accountants, but their employment as miners and construction

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<sup>65</sup> "Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance]."

<sup>66</sup> In 1977, for example, FAA recommended two women, Isabel Gates Webster and Dorothy Robinson, as candidates to fill a position on the Federal Circuit Court. It also recommended women for positions on the Atlanta Economic Development Corporation and the Cobb County health board. Linda Barr (Chair, Political Action Task Force, Feminist Action Alliance), Atlanta, Ga., to Senator Sam Nunn, Washington, D.C., January 31, 1977, folder: Political Action 1977, box 6, FAA records, Emory. None of the suggestions offered by FAA seem to have considered the needs of working-class women.

workers. SWEC also devoted its attention to lobbying for better and healthier working conditions for women. Founded in 1979 as a coalition of twelve women's and progressive organizations, SWEC initially concentrated its efforts on women in Appalachia. This geographical focus and the makeup of the member organizations made SWEC predominantly white.<sup>67</sup> SWEC embraced goals shared by many middle-class women's organizations, particularly as it lobbied for the Equal Rights Amendment and worked to expand women's economic opportunities and protect their rights in the workplace, but it had few tangible connections with them.

One of SWEC's earliest and longest-lived efforts was the publication of a quarterly newsletter, *Generations*, which investigated women's working conditions and considered possible solutions for discrimination in employment. For *Generations* and other publications, SWEC compiled copious data on women's employment, on barriers to their economic advancement, and on working conditions in both male- and female-dominated industries.

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<sup>67</sup> The population of African Americans in Appalachia declined in most areas of Appalachia in the 1960s and 1970s, falling 7 percent in Alabama, 29 percent in Kentucky, 10 percent in Virginia, and 25 percent in West Virginia. Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee each noted moderate increases of between 1 and 6 percent. The percentage of African Americans in Appalachian counties ranged from 2 percent in Kentucky to 21 percent in Alabama. See William H. Turner, "The Demography of Black Appalachia: Past and Present," in *Blacks in Appalachia*, ed. William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 240-241. For a discussion of Appalachian subregions, see Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 175-177. Representatives of twelve organizations sat on the SWEC Board of Directors, including Chris Weiss from the Women and Employment Project in West Virginia (which worked to gain jobs for women in the building trades) and Betty Jean Hall, a lawyer working with the Coal Employment Project (which sought to increase the number of women employed in the mining industry). Chris Weiss, "Appalachian Women Fight Back: Organizational Approaches to Nontraditional Job Advocacy," in *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, ed. Stephen L. Fisher (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 155.

SWEC hoped that *Generations* and its other research publications would help expose the economic marginalization of Southern women to political leaders and to the nation as a whole.<sup>68</sup>

Like some of its member organizations, such as the Women and Employment Project in West Virginia, which sought to open the building trades to women, SWEC endeavored to expand access to jobs traditionally held by men – that is, jobs with higher pay and better benefits.<sup>69</sup>

The Coal Employment Project, another member organization, worked to expand the number of women employed by mining companies; it had found that “coal mining jobs are generally the only good-paying jobs available in Appalachia.”<sup>70</sup> Pay statistics attested to this reality. In the late 1970s, first-year coal miners earned \$18,000-\$20,000 a year, while women working as waitresses or as seamstresses in the region earned only \$4,000-\$6,000.<sup>71</sup> SWEC’s board decided to concentrate the organization’s efforts on gaining jobs for women in road construction and maintenance because the federal funds used to build highways placed such work under federal equal employment laws. It filed complaints on behalf of women with the federal Departments of Labor and Transportation against discriminatory hiring and promotion

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<sup>68</sup> For copies of *Generations* and other research publications, see boxes 31 and 32, SWEC records, Duke. SWEC continued this research until the organization disbanded in 1991.

<sup>69</sup> For information on the Women and Employment Project, see Weiss, “Appalachian Women Fight Back,” 151, 157-159.

<sup>70</sup> Miners’ wages were generally established by contracts negotiated by the United Mine Workers union. Connie White and Betty Jean Hall, “Women Miners Can Dig It, Too!,” 1980, SWEC records, folder: Nontraditional Employment: Coal, box 6, SWEC records, Duke. Connie White (Community Educator, Coal Employment Project) and Betty Jean Hall (General Counsel, Coal Employment Project) completed this report for the National Women’s Health Network.

<sup>71</sup> “Women Miners Can Dig It, Too!”.

practices by road construction companies employed by the government.

For the board members of SWEC, the organization provided an opportunity to pool resources and to nurture leadership among local women. As Chris Weiss of the Women and Employment Project later recalled, she and other members of the board defined leadership as “support for risk-takers doing organizing work for change in their communities.”<sup>72</sup> Much of SWEC’s activism therefore focused on building grassroots networks of women activists. SWEC board members sought to reproduce their model of female leadership throughout Appalachia. Central to this mission were education and the exchange of information. During the 1980s, SWEC held numerous conferences for women workers and their advocates, often at universities or at the Highlander Folk School, a center of progressive organizing located in New Market, Tennessee. These conferences, largely funded by grants from the Ford Foundation, featured a mixture of traditional formats (paper presentations and roundtables) and nontraditional elements resembling consciousness-raising sessions. SWEC leaders envisioned these conferences as opportunities for working women to map strategies, discover shared problems and goals, and establish and maintain a network of activists.<sup>73</sup>

SWEC devoted much of its energy to its Leadership Development Program, which endeavored to give structure to that network of local activists. SWEC identified grassroots leaders and offered them fellowships that would provide time in which to learn collective

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<sup>72</sup> Weiss, “Appalachian Women Fight Back,” 156.

<sup>73</sup> For application forms and descriptions of SWEC leadership conferences, see folder: Programs/publications, box 12, SWEC records, Duke.



strategies and solutions and meet other activists. The fellowship recipients, SWEC hoped, would in turn mentor other women in their communities. The Leadership Development Program offered its participants opportunities to attend a series of retreats at Highlander Folk School where they could take classes in fair employment law and workers' rights, meet other women interested in workers' issues, and gain access materials on labor law.<sup>74</sup>

SWEC fellows were drawn from diverse occupations and from many areas of the South. Sallie Lawson, who was from Reidsville, North Carolina, worked as a sewing machine operator. After being elected president of her local United Garment Workers union, she attended classes at the Carolina Labor School with SWEC's help and met with labor leaders from throughout the state, learning about contract negotiation tactics and procedures. Delores Cave, of High Point, North Carolina, became a member of SWEC's Board of Directors after attending the coalition's seminars on the principles of organizing. Cave, a nursing aide, had been fired after attempting to organize a sitdown strike for improved staffing and working conditions. With SWEC's help, Cave established a group that supported the rights of health care workers in High Point. Another fellow, Sandie Fletcher, served as a model of SWEC's vision for the impact of its leadership training courses. Fletcher, a waitress in Lexington, Kentucky, organized the Restaurant Employees Association of Lexington (REAL) while she attended trainee classes in the SWEC Leadership Program. In those classes, she learned about

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<sup>74</sup> Application for Leadership Development Program, Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, n.d., folder: programs/publications, box 12, SWEC records, Duke. For more on Highlander, see John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1988).

fair employment law, met with representatives of the Service Employees International Union, and worked on an education campaign on the challenges and inequities of pink-collar work. When she returned to Lexington, she continued to work with REAL to protest federal tax changes that cut into restaurant workers' wages and to inform workers about employment laws that affected employees whose compensation included tips.<sup>75</sup>

From the beginning, SWEC's board members were concerned about the fact that the organization's leadership consisted solely of white women. In part, the board's racial makeup simply reflected that of the coalition's predominantly white member organizations, which were based in areas whose populations were largely white. Chris Weiss remembered that SWEC's early efforts to attract African American women were only moderately successful but that the addition of three black women in 1982 – Sophia Bracy-Harris, Sara Davis, and Gardenia White – permanently changed the composition of the board.<sup>76</sup> Each of these women, community activists in her own right, shared SWEC's interest in economic equality. From this point on, each quarterly SWEC board meeting set aside time to explore issues of racist attitudes or institutionalized racism.<sup>77</sup> Leslie Lilly, a white member of the board, believed that

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<sup>75</sup> SWEC Annual Report, 1982, p. 38, folder: programs/publicity, box 12, SWEC records, Duke.

<sup>76</sup> Weiss, "Appalachian Women Fight Back," 160. Bracy-Harris helped to create the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama (FOCAL). Because she hailed from Alabama and worked to expand women's rights, Gardenia White may be the woman who had served as the plaintiff in *White v. Crook* (1966), the landmark case that established gender equity in jury service. See Chapter 5, below. I have not been able to identify Sara Davis.

<sup>77</sup> Weiss, "Appalachian Women Fight Back," 160; Hazirjian, "Traveling the Unpaved Roads," 73.

these discussions could have repercussions beyond the boardroom, as each member “brought issues of diversity and equality back into our own organizations.”<sup>78</sup>

Although SWEC leaders recognized almost immediately that the racial disparity on the board was problematic, it took several more years – and many discussions – before they grasped that the coalition’s goals had different meanings for black women and white women. From the outset, SWEC had worked hard to place women in what it termed “non-traditional jobs,” emphasizing construction and coal mining.<sup>79</sup> The publicity garnered by publishing photographs of women in hard hats and miners’ gear was extremely valuable in drawing attention to women’s exclusion from these high-paying occupations, but SWEC’s leaders initially failed to grasp that the categories of “non-traditional jobs” were quite different for African American women. For black women, long trapped in the low-wage agricultural or domestic service sectors, the “pink-collar ghettos” of clerical and sales work were both “non-traditional” and, in many cases, an improvement. While white activists saw coal mines and construction sites as the battlegrounds on which to challenge sex discrimination and gender stereotypes, black women, especially in the South, continued to be denied access to jobs in the

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Weiss, “Appalachian Women Fight Back,” 156. SWEC did not seem interested in reaching out to middle-class women’s organizations in the same way.

<sup>79</sup> Leaders in local chapters of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) also worked to recruit women into non-traditional employment in highway construction. The YWCA’s Creative Employment Project recruited women interested in applying for construction jobs and monitored their applications. Southeast Women’s Employment Coalition, Annual Report, 1981, p. 15, folder: Reports – SWEC Annual Reports, box 11, SWEC records, Duke. In Florida, the League of Women Voters filed a lawsuit in an attempt to open federal road construction jobs to women. See Jamie L. Kahn, “League of Women Voters Sues Federal Contractors,” *WomaNews* (Gainesville, Fla.) 3, no. 6 (September 1977), Periodical File, Schlesinger.

clerical, service, and sales sectors that were the preserve of white women. For African American women who worked as domestics or agricultural workers, clerical work constituted a step up and was, in fact, nontraditional.<sup>80</sup> After Bracy-Harris, Davis, and White joined the board, they helped redefine SWEC's goals by expanding the organization's research to include black women's labor and by pushing state and local governments to employ greater numbers of black women.<sup>81</sup>

While SWEC struggled to develop a more inclusive understanding of women's work, black women employed as domestic workers established their own organizations. Like FAA and SWEC, these organizations sought to improve working conditions for women. Although they did not necessarily seek to place women in "non-traditional" occupations, they did want to change the nature and meaning of domestic work. They endeavored to expand domestic workers' access to Social Security and other benefits, to attach dignity to their work, and to protect them from sexual harassment. The particularities of domestic work, however, created entirely different relationships with middle-class women, who often played the role of employer

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<sup>80</sup> NCNW Women's Center for Education and Career Advancement, "Report to the NCNW Executive Committee," January 1976, folder 57, box 3, series 3, group 75, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, Bethune); Lisa Hazirjian, "Traveling the Unpaved Roads: Alliance Building and Working Women's Advocacy in the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, 1979-1982," unpublished paper (1995), p. 58, SWEC records, Duke.

<sup>81</sup> Also important in this regard were the contacts SWEC made with representatives of the black women's health movement and the black liberation movement at a 1981 conference in Epes, Alabama, that was organized by rural black women. At this conference, sponsored by the Southern Rural Women's Network, SWEC leaders attended sessions about voting rights, health, and employment, gaining a greater appreciation of the complexity of Southern women's poverty. Glenda Conway, "The Southern Rural Women's Network," Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, Annual Report, 1982, p. 47, folder: Programs/Publicity, box 12, SWEC records, Duke.

rather than partner.

Domestic service had changed considerably during the twentieth century – particularly as day work replaced live-in arrangements – but the occupation retained its low wages and patriarchal character.<sup>82</sup> Attempts to change the nature of domestic work had persisted throughout the century, but until the late 1960s, much of this activism constituted individual acts of resistance enacted on a personal, daily basis.<sup>83</sup> Domestic service was exempt from most government regulation, and most domestic workers remained non-unionized – circumstances that closed doors to legal action and access to other workers.<sup>84</sup> In addition, domestic workers often were caught in a bind whereby their employers did not view them as workers at all. “We

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<sup>82</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, “‘A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm’: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women’s Service Jobs in the 1970s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56 (Fall 1999), 33; Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class*.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class*, 90-96; Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*. Domestic workers had a sporadic history of unionization efforts. In 1920, for example, ten locals of domestic workers affiliated themselves with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (an AFL union), while CIO unions organizing domestic workers existed briefly in the 1930s in both Washington, D.C., and New York City. See Vanessa Tait, *Poor Workers’ Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2005), 41-42. See also Phyllis M. Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Donna L. Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Domestic Workers, 1870-1940* (New York: Praeger, 1988). For black working-class organization more generally, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 75-112.

<sup>84</sup> Household workers were not covered by federal minimum wage laws or by the provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act (overtime pay, workers’ compensation). Including domestic workers under these regulatory protections was a central concern of domestic workers’ organizations at both local and national levels.

want to be treated like an employee,” declared Ruth Benjamin at a 1971 domestic workers’ conference. “Everybody tells you you’re in the family and then they won’t even give you a holiday.”<sup>85</sup> Household employees often worked long, irregular hours while their employers demanded not only their labor but also loyalty and love.

In the middle and late 1960s, domestic workers in cities across the nation organized collectively to improve their working conditions and to reform the image of their work. These groups, both local and national, shared the tactics and language of the labor, civil rights, and feminist movements. Household workers’ unions organized not only to increase wages and benefits, but to demand dignity and respectful treatment. Although these goals were shared by many feminists, domestic workers’ organizations, as sociologist Vanessa Tait has argued, “also had to work at raising public consciousness, as did their clerical organizing counterparts, about the ways their work was particularly influenced by elitism, sexism, and racism.”<sup>86</sup> Although these organizations rarely self-identified as feminist, their aims – to increase women’s earnings, to demand respect for women’s work, to protest sexual harassment – resembled those of both working-class and middle-class women in more explicitly feminist groups.

Domestic workers’ organizations developed from many different sources, ranging from religious organizations to civil rights groups to the Department of Labor. Domestic United, Inc., of Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, emerged out of a series of meetings between middle-class churchwomen and working-class domestic workers. Throughout 1966, a group

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<sup>85</sup> “Farewell to Dinah,” *Newsweek*, August 2, 1971, p. 67.

<sup>86</sup> Tait, *Poor Workers’ Unions*, 43.

of black and white women from Church Women United, all middle class, had been discussing the needs of the indigent in their Charlotte community when they decided that action, rather than simply the donation of money, was needed.<sup>87</sup> They began to meet with community leaders and domestic workers in the all-black Greenville area of the city, both at a community center and at local black churches. After these meetings, the domestic workers decided to organize themselves into a group called Project House Maid (later Domesticity United). Together, the middle-class women and the domestic workers drafted a voluntary code of fair employment, which they circulated to the Mayor's Committee on Human Relations, local ministers, and community groups. The coalition also wrote letters to their political representatives requesting passage of a minimum wage law for domestic workers and improved public housing. At the same time, the household workers in Domesticity United began to meet separately each week to define the goals of their organization. They discussed ways to secure daycare centers, create training programs, and develop a cooperative credit union for domestic workers. They began to form their own committees to handle publicity, fundraising, and community outreach.<sup>88</sup> In 1967, Domesticity United drafted a petition to the city's mayor asking for a minimum wage of \$1.50 an hour, inclusion under Social Security, a daycare center for their children, sick pay,

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<sup>87</sup> Newspaper clipping, "Domesticity United: An Exercise in Free Enterprise," *Blueprint for Opportunity* 3, no. 3 (November 1967): 8-9, folder 30, box 16, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

<sup>88</sup> Newspaper clipping, "Here's How: The Story of Domesticity United in Charlotte, North Carolina," n.d. [1967?], folder 30, box 16, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

paid vacations, and a codification of responsibilities.<sup>89</sup>

Domestics United met with little support from Charlotte's white residents. Local newspaper coverage and editorials were dismissive or hostile. Dozens of people wrote letters to the editor ridiculing the idea of paying domestic workers more than \$1 an hour or constructing daycare facilities for domestic workers' children.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, by 1971, Domestics United claimed 600 members (out of approximately 7,000 domestic workers in the Charlotte area) and considered its lobbying efforts responsible for shorter hours and higher pay, along with increased respect and recognition in the community.<sup>91</sup>

The most successful grassroots organization of household employees was the Atlanta-based National Domestic Workers Union (NDWU), founded in 1967 by Dorothy Bolden.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Malcolm Scully, "Maids Unite to Seek Higher Wages," *Charlotte Observer*, June 30, 1966, folder 30, box 16, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

<sup>90</sup> For examples, see R. B. J., "Who Can Pay the New Maids?" *Charlotte News*, July 2, 1966; J. G. S., "Maids' New Demands Are Silly," *Charlotte News*, July 6, 1966; Fair Play, "Pie-in-the-Sky for Maids," *Charlotte News*, n.d.; D. S., "Won't Raise Maid's Pay Either," *Charlotte News*, n.d.; all clippings found in group 75, series 1, box 16, folder 30, Bethune.

<sup>91</sup> "Domestics Uniting for More Pay – and Respect," *New York Times*, July 18, 1971, p. A1.

<sup>92</sup> Although it was called the *National Domestic Workers Union*, the NDWU had members only in Atlanta. It was not a truly national organization along the lines of the National Committee of Household Employees (NCHE), which was an umbrella organization of domestic workers' groups across the nation. NCHE, formed in 1965 by labor feminists and officials from the Women's Bureau, was funded partly by the Department of Labor and later by donations and grants from the Ford Foundation and other entities. Feminists in the Women's Bureau (Esther Peterson, Frieda Miller, Mary Dublin Keyserling), the YWCA, and the National Council of Negro Women (Dorothy Height) served on the NCHE board. Hoping to "upgrade household employment standards," the NCHE initially focused on skills-training for domestic workers and on supporting minority-owned businesses in the household-services sector. In its early years, NCHE was an organization in which middle-class and working-class women organized together, but not necessarily toward the same goals. NCHE proposed to create "model contracts" that



Bolden's success was partly due to a foundation of shared experience with domestic workers; like many other African American women, she had spent several decades employed as a domestic worker in private homes before she seized on the idea of organizing household employees. A longtime civil rights activist, Bolden hoped both to improve working conditions for domestic workers and to build respect for them and their work.<sup>93</sup> In the mid-1960s, domestic workers in Atlanta were earning between \$3.50 and \$5.00 a day for twelve to

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would clearly spell out the duties expected from the domestic worker and the wages and treatment expected from the employer. On a local level, NCHE activists sought to establish placement services that could match qualified, trained workers with employers who agreed to follow the model contracts. Rudolph Wilson, "Aunt Jemima Ain't What She Use to Be," *The Welfare Fighter* 2, no. 10 (December 1971): 4, folder 10, box 1, series 4, group 75, Bethune; Rev. Norman Dewire (Executive Director, Joint Strategy Action Committee) to Edith B. Sloan (Executive Director, NCHE), January 25, 1972, folder 7, box 2, series 3, group 75, Bethune; "Summary of Minutes of Emergency Board of Directors Meeting," March 26, 1975, Silver Spring, Md., folder 5, box 1, series 3, group 75, Bethune; Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm," 34.

<sup>93</sup> Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, "'We Were the Invisible Workforce': Unionizing Home Care," in *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007), 183. This was not the first time that black domestic workers in Atlanta had organized collectively. For information on the 1880-1881 strike by Atlanta's washerwomen, see Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, chap. 3. Bolden worked in domestic service for more than forty years. The daughter of a cook and a chauffeur, she entered domestic service when she was nine years old and subsequently worked for a series of families, doing a variety of household work – babysitting, dishwashing, cleaning, cooking. After the success of the NDWU, she served as an adviser to Secretary Elliot T. Richardson in the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1972-1976) and as an appointee to the Georgia Commission on the Status of Women. For biographical information, see Dorothy Bolden, "Women Helping Women," in *Nobody Speaks for Me! Self-Portraits of American Working Class Women*, ed. Nancy Seifer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 138-177; and transcript, Dorothy Bolden, interview conducted by Chris Lutz, August 31, 1995, Atlanta, Ga., L1995-12, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Ga. On *Nobody Speaks for Me!*, the collection in which Bolden's autobiographical sketch appears, see Ann Banks, "Today the Neighborhood, Tomorrow the World!" *Ms.*, October 1976, pp. 40-42, folder 32, box 1624, National Domestic Workers Union records, Southern Labor Archives, GSU.

thirteen hours of work.<sup>94</sup> Bolden sought to raise these wages by more than \$10, depending on whether the domestic worker was employed by one family or several during the week. In a nod to the dependence of local domestic servants on public transportation, she also hoped to gain reimbursement for travel expenses.<sup>95</sup> For Bolden, however, economic gains were only one part of the NDWU's mission. She argued that a union would professionalize household work and, in the process, generate respect and dignity for women working as domestic servants. "I didn't organize just on money," she remarked. "I organized to upgrade the field, to make the field more professional."<sup>96</sup> To celebrate and recognize the achievements of domestic workers, Bolden created Maids Honor Day, which celebrated an outstanding woman in the field.<sup>97</sup> To increase workers' skills, she helped create the Career Learning Training Center, where women interested in domestic work received training in basic literacy and numeracy skills, first-aid, budgeting, and household chores.<sup>98</sup> Bolden believed strongly in the need to inspire self-pride in

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<sup>94</sup> Tait, *Poor Workers' Unions*, 41-42.

<sup>95</sup> Dorothy Bolden, "Organizing Domestic Workers in Atlanta, Georgia," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 237.

<sup>96</sup> Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 164.

<sup>97</sup> The records of the NDWU contain hundreds of letters from employers testifying to their domestic workers' skills and contributions. The awards were granted from 1970 to 1976. See folders 79-88, box 1627 and folders 89-90, box 1628, National Domestic Workers Union papers (L1979-24), Southern Labor Archives, GSU.

<sup>98</sup> Dorothy Cowser Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden, Organizer of Domestic Workers: She Was Born Poor but She Would Not Bow Down," *Sage* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 55; Dorothy Bolden, Atlanta, Ga., to Shirley Chisholm, June 16, 1970, folder 76, box 1627, National Domestic Workers papers, GSU; undated resolution, folder 76, box 1627, National Domestic Workers Union papers, GSU.

domestic workers, a desire that grew partly out of her own experience. In an interview in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, Bolden explained why she had devoted so much of her life to improving the lives of the city's domestic workers. "I was born poor, grew up poor, and I am still poor," she said, "but I am not going to bow down. I am still a woman."<sup>99</sup>

Before founding the NDWU, Bolden already had a history of taking a stand against injustices both personal and political. She was once jailed after an argument with an employer who had attempted to physically assault her.<sup>100</sup> In 1964, Bolden organized a protest against the Atlanta School Board when it proposed to move students from a local school to a condemned building downtown. Although she was unable to stop the initial transfer of the students, Bolden successfully lobbied the school board to build a new school in the neighborhood.<sup>101</sup> The school board fight not only equipped Bolden with crucial organizational skills, but also brought her to the attention of many members of her community. "It just came natural to me," she explained. "If anything was going on in Vine City [a predominantly African American neighborhood in Northwest Atlanta], they just sent for me."<sup>102</sup> She also joined Julian Bond and the Student

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<sup>99</sup> *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, November 12, 1976, quoted in Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 55.

<sup>100</sup> The woman, who insisted that Bolden take sides in an ongoing dispute with her husband, attacked Bolden when she refused to do so. Bolden ran out of the house, but was later arrested. "They said I was 'mental' because I talked back," Bolden declared. "No one had ever talked as nasty to me as she did. I was in jail five days." Quoted in Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 53. For other accounts of this story, see Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 142; Bolden interview, GSU, pp. 26-27.

<sup>101</sup> Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 152- 153; Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 53.

<sup>102</sup> Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 153.

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in a boycott of local shops that refused to employ African Americans and later supported Bond's campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>103</sup>

In 1968, Bolden convened an organizational meeting of eight women at Perry Homes, an Atlanta public housing community. As interest grew, meetings were held at sites that could accommodate more people, first at the Butler Street YWCA and then at the Wheat Street Baptist Church. Bolden recruited new members while riding city buses and by telephoning fellow domestic servants, posting leaflets at bus stops, and publicizing meetings on the local black radio station, WAOK.<sup>104</sup> The National Urban League provided Bolden with office space and access to a shared telephone line and secretarial services.<sup>105</sup> J. C. Daugherty, an African American lawyer and member of the Georgia legislature, helped the Union become incorporated.<sup>106</sup> After organizing locally, members of the Atlanta-based National Domestic Workers Union turned to the National Committee on Household Employment (NCHE) for advice on establishing ties to church and civic groups and on building their union.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Feeling insulted after being addressed as "boy" at a local Democratic meeting, Bond came to Bolden to discuss dropping out of the race. As she recalled, she responded by telling him that if he dropped out, "I'd take me a baseball bat and beat the hell out of him." Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 155.

<sup>104</sup> Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 54.

<sup>105</sup> Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 160-161.

<sup>106</sup> Georgia Council on Human Relations, press release, Atlanta, Ga., September 9, 1968, folder 4, box 16, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

<sup>107</sup> Mrs. Jack B. Schmitt, Atlanta, Ga., to National Committee on Household Employment, Washington, D.C., September 10, 1968, folder 4, box 16, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

Bolden's initial efforts earned a mixed response. Several of the city's black ministers tried to dissuade her from creating a separate organization of domestic workers by arguing that it was impossible to organize "those gossipy women."<sup>108</sup> She received some encouragement, however, from fellow Atlantan Martin Luther King, Jr.; according to Bolden, King offered words of support when he saw her waiting at a bus stop.<sup>109</sup> Bolden had initially expressed a desire to affiliate her fledgling group with the organized labor movement, but local labor leaders advised her that at least ten people must join her organization before they would take her seriously. By the early 1970s, when several hundred women were attending NDWU meetings, Bolden was no longer interested in affiliating with the AFL-CIO because she felt that her group was stronger if it stood on its own.<sup>110</sup>

Bolden did not employ the word "union" lightly, nor did she mean it in the traditional sense.<sup>111</sup> She chose the term, she remembered, because "the word union gave it clout, and working class members understood the word," but she recognized the difficulty of organizing women who usually worked alone and were often isolated from other workers.<sup>112</sup> Thus, in its early years, the NDWU functioned more like a mutual aid society than a union. "I don't think we realized how much 'union' frightens people," she later reflected. "They think you're coming

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<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 54.

<sup>109</sup> Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 54.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Elizabeth Beck, "The National Domestic Workers Union and the War on Poverty," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 28, no. 4 (December 2001): 203.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Yancy, "Dorothy Bolden," 54.

in to stampede and bargain and harass and talk about striking and this kind of thing.”<sup>113</sup> Bolden hoped that the NDWU would help each woman learn to negotiate with her employer individually. The organization also established a non-profit employment service to match prospective employers with members of the NDWU. Between 1972 and 1986, more than 13,000 domestic workers found employment in this way. The counseling and placement service proved to be one of the most successful of the NDWU’s activities.<sup>114</sup>

The demands of the NDWU in Atlanta and Domestics United in Charlotte were not dissimilar from those of other women workers across the region. Household workers asked for fair pay, professional treatment, paid sick leave, clear work assignments, an end to sexual harassment, and “an atmosphere conducive to self-respect and dignity.”<sup>115</sup> In addition, “domestic workers should be called Miss or Mrs. plus last name,” the NDWU’s code of ethics declared.<sup>116</sup> Women working in clerical positions in Southern cities lobbied for much the same professional treatment. Organizations such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), which included clerical workers in Atlanta, sought to improve working conditions, to reduce sexual harassment, and to demand professional treatment in the workplace.<sup>117</sup> As Bolden put

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>114</sup> Bolden, “Organizing Domestic Workers,” 238; Beck, “The National Domestic Workers Union and the War on Poverty,” 204-206.

<sup>115</sup> Atlanta Domestic Workers Union, “A Code of Ethics,” pamphlet, n.d. [1968?], folder 4, box 16, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> CLUW had relatively little impact in the South, where it had few resources and where states limited union organizing. CLUW operated chapters in Atlanta, Little Rock, Louisville,

it, “you can’t tell a maid from a secretary anymore.”<sup>118</sup>

But the relationship between domestic workers’ organizations and other feminists was not at all clear or uncomplicated. Dorothy Bolden firmly believed that NDWU was part of the women’s movement.<sup>119</sup> Although she did not sympathize with all proponents of second-wave feminism, Bolden insisted that the demands of working-class women and women of color must be included in the national women’s movement.<sup>120</sup> She was particularly frustrated by the absence of low-income women at meetings of the National Women’s Political Caucus, a bipartisan organization that sought to increase women’s political representation. “You can’t talk about women’s rights until we include all women,” she insisted. “When you deny one woman of her rights, you deny all.”<sup>121</sup> The domestic workers’ unions espoused a feminism that recognized the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism experienced by women of color.

Complicating the inclusion of domestic workers into second-wave feminist organizations were the interpersonal relationships between domestics and their employers, some of whom

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Houston, and Nashville. List of CLUW chapters, May 23, 1975, folder: Misc. Chapters, box 2, Maria Getzinger Jones papers (W021), Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, GSU. The members of Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), particularly Sara Butler and Ruth Stanley, were key leaders in Atlanta CLUW. Transcript, Sarah Butler, in an interview conducted by Susan Millen, October 23, 2004, Gainesville, Ga., Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>118</sup> Bolden, “Women Helping Women,” 167.

<sup>119</sup> Bolden interview, GSU, pp. 30-31.

<sup>120</sup> Bolden’s opposition to abortion rights also put her at odds with some segments of the women’s movement. See Bolden, “Women Helping Women,” 150-151, 171.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

considered themselves feminists. Josephine Hulett, an African American field organizer for the National Committee on Household Employment (NCHE), understood how class divisions kept women from organizing together.<sup>122</sup> While employed as a domestic worker, she recalled feeling resentful about the time she had spent with her employers' children and away from her own son, Richard. She was also well aware of the economic divide that separated her from her employers. "I resented having to deny Richard so much when my employers' children had all the material things they needed," Hulett said. "It's these kinds of problems that keep women divided against each other."<sup>123</sup> Dorothy Bolden shared this sentiment. She longed to tell feminists that "we're not on your agenda. We're not in your by-laws. We're just scrubwomen and you're not even considering motivating us."<sup>124</sup> In addition, Bolden directly

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<sup>122</sup> Initially, NCHE acted as a service agency, putting household workers and employers in contact with one another. This arrangement operated primarily to the benefit of the employers, who were guaranteed experienced, qualified employees and regular access to workers. In these early years (1965-1969), NCHE functioned largely as a referral service, organized locally and dominated by household employers. That began to change in 1969, when Edith Sloan joined the group as its executive director. Sloan transformed NCHE into an organization that promoted the welfare of domestic servants as its first priority. Under Sloan's leadership, NCHE served as an umbrella organization for local domestic workers' unions providing support services for local organizers, creating low-cost health care and retirement plans, offering advice on obtaining grants, providing technical assistance in filing papers, and proferring legal aid services. NCHE also sponsored national conferences that provided domestic workers with an opportunity to meet and to exchange information. Rudolph Wilson, "Aunt Jemima Ain't What She Use to Be," *The Welfare Fighter* 2, no. 10 (December 1971): 4, folder 10, box 1, series 4, group 75, Bethune; Rev. Norman Dewire (Executive Director, Joint Strategy Action Committee) to Edith B. Sloan (Executive Director, NCHE), January 25, 1972, folder 7, box 2, series 3, group 75, Bethune; "Summary of Minutes of Emergency Board of Directors Meeting," March 26, 1975, Silver Spring, Md., folder 5, box 1, series 3, group 75, Bethune; Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm'," 34.

<sup>123</sup> Janet DeWart, "Household Help Wanted: Interview with Josephine Hulett," *Ms.*, February 1973, p. 106, folder 17, box 11, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

<sup>124</sup> Bolden, "Women Helping Women," 170.



challenged the position espoused by some women's rights advocates that it violated their feminist principles to employ other women to do household chores. When middle-class feminists "got to talking that they better do their own housework," Bolden remembered, "I said, 'Well, how are you going to do it when you don't know it? You need me just as much as I need you. So there's no use to lying and saying that we don't. We need each other.'"<sup>125</sup> Bolden articulated a feminist discourse that not only allowed for the inclusion of diverse women but opened a space for conflict and criticism of each other.

As Bolden indicated, some middle-class feminists struggled with the implications of employing other women to do their housework. Emily Toth, a white feminist in New Orleans, pointed out that in movement circles, housework had long been derided as "shit work" and that employing another person to do it was "exploitative [and] degrading to the person hired." But Toth, who had once accepted these ideas, found her opinions challenged by NCHE members who defended the dignity and worth of their profession. "It occurred to me," she wrote, "that it's not the housework itself that's the oppressive situation. It's the way household workers are treated, by feminists and non-feminists alike." She applauded NCHE's platform of shorter hours, better pay, and the model contract. Rather than refusing to hire domestic workers on ill-considered political theories, Toth argued that feminists could better help household workers by treating them with respect and paying high wages. "I've come to the conclusion," Toth declared, "that where household workers' jobs are concerned, feminists shouldn't beat 'em, for

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 170.

the workers are our sisters; perhaps we could even join ‘em.”<sup>126</sup>

*Ms.* magazine also tackled the issue of employing domestic servants; in an in-depth interview, NCHE field organizer Josephine Hulett rejected the hesitation many feminists felt about employing another woman to clean their homes. Hulett urged these women to continue employing domestic workers, but under equitable conditions. “I explain to them,” Hulett said, “that we need the job; it’s a *good* job. We just want to be respected – and to be decently paid. In fact, I’d much rather have a household worker employed by someone in the Women’s Movement, because I think she’s more likely to get treated like a human being.” Hulett noted that some local feminist groups were organizing meetings of workers and employers that could serve as places of negotiation and support. She urged all women to work together in order to demand their rights as citizens and win respect. “Most of all,” Hulett argued, “we’ve got to organize. We’ve got to learn, as women, to put pressure where the power is, on the person above us, not the one below. That’s the way change happens.”<sup>127</sup>

Some middle-class feminists supported the domestic workers’ organizations by offering meeting space or publicity. Women in feminist circles in New Orleans, for example, publicized the meetings of NCHE and encouraged the adoption of NCHE policies by its members. In its newspaper, the New Orleans Feminist Forum circulated information about the organizing

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<sup>126</sup> Emily Toth, “Maids are Sisters Too,” *Distaff* (New Orleans) 2, no. 7 (November 1974): 17, folder: Distaff (New Orleans), box 3 (Acc. 91/128) YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>127</sup> Janet DeWart, “Household Help Wanted: Interview with Josephine Hulett,” *Ms.*, February 1973, pp. 106-107, folder 17, box 11, series 1, group 75, Bethune.

efforts of domestic workers and touted the local visit of NCHE organizer Josephine Hulett.<sup>128</sup>

Similarly, when a NCHE representative visited Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to organize a local chapter, a white feminist group hosted the event. At this meeting, two African American leaders of NCHE cited both race and gender to explain women's concentration in domestic service.<sup>129</sup>

That such examples of collaboration across lines of race and class were rare reflected the highly differentiated access to resources that divided women. In fact, the advancement of some women was possible precisely because other women remained concentrated in the service sector. The movement of middle-class women into the labor market depended heavily on the household labor and other service work performed by working-class women. Middle-class feminists waged important battles for greater economic opportunities for women, but their emphasis on the professions rarely spoke to the needs of working-class women, black or white. Often blinkered by their assumption that their efforts represented the interests of all women, middle-class activists failed to understand that their positions of privilege accorded them greater advantages. Domestic workers and their employers failed to create successful organizations that spanned their class differences.

The divisions between domestic workers and the middle-class women who employed them were echoed, in some ways, by the experience of women in SWEC. SWEC's founder,

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<sup>128</sup> Bernette Johnson, "Household Workers Organize," *Distaff* (New Orleans) 1, no. 5 (June 1973): 1, 10, Schlesinger.

<sup>129</sup> *Feminist Newsletter* (Chapel Hill, N.C.) 5, no. 11 (June 2, 1974): 4.

Leslie Lilly believed that rural, working-class women shared many goals with middle-class professional women but that language and stereotypes had created barriers between them. Working-class women, Lilly explained, “were always saying, ‘I’m not a feminist but . . .’ and then the ‘but’ would be about economic issues.”<sup>130</sup> It was these economic issues, Lilly believed, that could create a bridge between rural women and those engaged in the women’s movement in the South’s cities and suburbs.

Lilly’s own history presented a telling example of white, working-class feminism in the South. Before organizing SWEC, she had worked as a drug store soda fountain girl, a telephone operator, and a Levi Strauss production sewer. Widowed at nineteen, she was a single mother who came to believe that women’s economic and political rights were inseparable. While working for Levi Strauss in northern Georgia in the early 1970s, she found it impossible to make ends meet, and, because of the company’s sex-segregated division of labor, she was unable to obtain a position that paid higher wages.<sup>131</sup>

Lilly did not immediately become active in movements for workers’ or women’s rights. The women’s movement, she later explained, seemed to be “composed of all those women who had gone to college, gotten their degree, and, from their higher station of learning, could espouse all these liberating notions that didn’t have a damn thing to do with me.”<sup>132</sup> Lilly’s

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<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Hazirjian, “Traveling the Unpaved Roads,” 8.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>132</sup> Leslie Lilly, “Women at the Portal: The Long Passage to ERA,” address delivered to the Second National Coal Mining Women’s Conference, [no place], p. 6, May 31, 1980, folder: writings miscellaneous, no. 2, 1978-1986, box 32, SWEC records, Duke.

experience – hardship in her personal circumstances, a recognition of shared frustrations and obstacles, and a desire to work towards improving women’s status – is perhaps not extraordinary but is nonetheless significant. In 1972, after meeting a local labor organizer, she became involved in efforts to establish high-quality daycare in northern Georgia, particularly through a series of VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) programs. This work brought her to the attention of local social-welfare activists, who recommended her for a position in the Georgia Department of Human Resources. Her appointment, which lasted two years, led to a fellowship funded by the Ford Foundation that was intended to improve the lives of residents of Appalachia. In 1975, at the conclusion of her fellowship, Lilly joined the staff of the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training organization (SALT), which was also funded by the Ford Foundation.<sup>133</sup>

Between 1975 and 1979, Lilly worked to improve access to child care and to empower women through the SALT grant – work that brought her into contact with scores of black and white working-class women, many of whom shared similar stories. Lilly came to realize that the challenges women faced as low-wage workers were not individual problems but collective ones – the very essence of the feminist slogan “the personal is political.” She began to recognize similar themes running through the stories of the women with whom she spoke, particularly of on-the-job sexual harassment and of barriers to better-paying jobs. Women

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<sup>133</sup> Lilly was not native to Appalachia; she was born in Florida. For biographical information on Lilly, see Hazirjian, “Traveling the Unpaved Road,” 19-26; Weiss, “Appalachia Women Fight Back,” 151-164. Weiss was Lilly’s contemporary. Both women continue to work for economic justice in Appalachia and throughout the South, with a special focus on women’s issues.

who came from different parts of the South and from different races were divided in many ways, Lilly realized, but what united them was an intertwined discrimination based on race, class, and sex.

These stories, coupled with Lilly's personal history, helped her to develop a working-class feminism for the rural South that put equal access to jobs at the heart of a movement to create gender equality. For Lilly, economic concerns – specifically employment issues – were the best means to build a women's movement in the South. This thinking was, in part, influenced by her own experiences, which had illustrated that her particular problems were actually part of larger, systemic challenges. She wanted to consolidate women's individual grievances into a collective struggle but realized that the priorities of the middle-class women's movement – particularly the Equal Rights Amendment – needed to be translated into language that made clear just what those goals would mean for Southern working women. The national women's movement, Lilly felt, often failed to convey how it would benefit women in practical ways. In particular, it lacked an emphasis on tangible issues such as equal pay, on-the-job sex discrimination, and job equity in hiring and promotion. More pragmatically, rural women in the South, she maintained, also lacked a local connection to the national movement, a conduit through which feminists in other regions could explain its goals and programs. Because rural women were especially ill-served by the mostly urban and suburban chapters of national feminist organizations, Lilly believed that this void should be filled by organizations such as

SWEC, which could more directly address the issues facing rural Southern women.<sup>134</sup> Lilly hoped that SWEC's programs would provide a path toward uniting Southern women by offering a more expansive definition of a feminist: "any man or woman who is working to improve or who supports working to improve the economic and social status of women."<sup>135</sup> By focusing on economic issues, Lilly believed SWEC could offer common ground on which all Southern women could organize and agitate.

Lilly was well aware of the barriers to a unified women's movement in the South. She pointed to the region's longstanding enforcement of racial separation and to the ideologies of privilege that had retarded the women's movement in the region. Women's "alliances across race and privilege," she wrote, had historically been "divided by political tactics that required the oppressed to settle first on which oppression was of greater priority in the determination of specific reforms."<sup>136</sup> The women's movement in the South, Lilly argued, could not be fought solely on the basis of gender equality without first confronting any number of other inequalities – particularly in a region that had legally subordinated blacks to whites and had only recently begun to reduce cultural and geographical division between its urban and rural populations. Lilly understood the Southern past, but found more than despair in the region's history. She

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<sup>134</sup> Hazirjian, "Traveling the Unpaved Roads," 27.

<sup>135</sup> Annual report, SWEC, 1981, p. 4, folder: reports/SWEC annual reports, box 11, SWEC records, Duke.

<sup>136</sup> Leslie Lilly, "Women in the Rural South: Toward Economic Equality," clipping from *Southern Changes*, 8, no. 2 (1986): 5, 8, folder: Writings, newsletters, articles, 1980-1987, box 31, SWEC records, Duke. *Southern Changes* was a publication of the Southern Regional Council, an Atlanta-based progressive organization.

encouraged Southern women to learn from previous mistakes. “Racism, classism, and sexism mean that women always lose,” she argued. “This reality is nowhere more stark than in the South. Women’s historical inheritance is economic subjugation.”<sup>137</sup> Learning this lesson, she believed, would help spur Southern women toward an acceptance of feminist politics for themselves and for their children. She knew that Southern women had been active in any number of progressive causes, from anti-lynching campaigns to the civil rights movement. Applying this energy to their own needs would require recognizing both the achievements of Southern women in the past and acknowledging the barriers to their own advancement.

Lilly believed that “economic equity is at the heart of the effort to achieve civil equality.”<sup>138</sup> It was impossible to separate the two. Achieving civil equality would require the work of government, local leaders, and women themselves. She called on federal, state, and local governments to enact affirmative action requirements and to earmark more funds for economic improvement in the rural South. She exhorted local leaders to create locally owned, high-quality child care so that women in rural communities could enter the labor market. She urged businesses, local and state governments, churches, and schools to recruit women into policy-making positions. Most of all, she implored Southern women to fight on their own behalf. “Unite! Organize!” she challenged them. “Let your children be your inspiration, your sisterhood be your sustenance, and a movement for race and sex equity, your vision.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Lilly, “Toward Economic Equality,” 8.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



Lilly was convinced that rural and working-class women had to be included in the women's movement.<sup>140</sup> Creating a united movement of middle-class and working-class women, Lilly knew, was "the most elemental challenge to the would-be organizer working for job equity." But, she argued, this challenge had to be overcome so that all women – regardless of class or race – came to understand economic discrimination as an issue of sex discrimination. In order to do so, she believed, "women must first be organized as women before they can be organized as workers."<sup>141</sup>

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## **Conclusion**

This chapter suggests both the limitations and the possibilities of feminist organizing around workplace justice in the South. Women in the region were waging an uphill battle. Long-held traditions excluded women from certain occupations, laws restricted their access, and unions were weak. Even so, campaigns for workplace justice in the South existed, revolving around the issues of dignity, justice, and equality. Many activists came to believe that without gaining equality in the labor market, Southern women would not win equality in the political or domestic spheres. Gaining access to positions with higher pay and winning respect in the workplace were therefore the first steps toward achieving equality.

Although they shared some attributes, the activism of working-class women and that of

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<sup>140</sup> In her speeches and writings, Lilly often conflated "rural" and "working class."

<sup>141</sup> Leslie Lilly, "Farmer Green's Complaint, or The Sisterhood of Rural Women," unpublished paper [speech?], n.d. [after 1981], p. 9, folder: writings miscellaneous, no. 1, 1978-1986, box 32, SWEC records, Duke.

middle-class women were not the same. Both middle-class and working-class women battled discrimination in the office and on the shop floor. They agitated not only for equal pay and promotion, but against sexual harassment and barriers to promotions. Nevertheless, examples of feminist activism undertaken by working-class and middle-class women suggest overlapping but usually separate women's movements throughout the South. Labor market segregation and longstanding racial boundaries meant that Southern women's movements for economic justice were generally divided along lines of race and class. When women of different classes and races did organize together, they often did so as unequal partners.

Although they shared the experiences of exclusion from occupations defined as male, of receiving lower wages than their male counterparts, and of confronting barriers to promotion, Southern women did not always propose congruent solutions. The movement of middle-class white women into the labor market depended on the household labor and other service work performed by working-class (often African American) women. In 1974, Judith Lightfoot, a white NOW leader and a board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), argued, "we work because we need to – let's get that idea that white women work for pin money and black women don't work unless they have to out of the minds of America, once and for all. The freedom to work at meaningful work for income that is essential and for the dignity of productivity is and should be an undisputed human right and it is women, women of all races, who have the highest rate of unemployment."<sup>142</sup> Lightfoot's statement reflected a

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<sup>142</sup> Speech, n.d. [1974], no location [1974 SCLC conference?], folder 21, box 7, Judith Lightfoot papers, Schlesinger.

complex understanding of Southern women's labor that was not typical of middle-class women.<sup>143</sup> The meaning of workplace justice was not only open to interpretation, it was also difficult to employ in cross-class organizing.

Exploring the ways in which Southern women organized for workplace justice reveals many of the obstacles to building feminist coalitions. Because the labor market was so divided by class, race, and region, Southern women rarely created organizations that included both working-class and middle-class women, even if they shared similar motivations for reforming their experiences in wage labor. They often lacked the opportunity, let alone the resources, to recognize shared grievance or tactics.

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<sup>143</sup> In 1972, for example, when the Atlanta chapter of NOW tried to explain why women were entering the labor market in increasing numbers, it revealed a narrowed understanding of class divisions. As the Atlanta chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) understood, women were entering the labor market for many reasons, including a need to help provide for their families. But, as NOW understood, financial pressures were not the only reason women were joining the workforce. Many women, the group asserted, had come to the realization that "personal fulfillment is a right to be shared by men and women alike. . . . Staying home and taking care of children is not the only valid avenue through which women may gain fulfillment." "Economic pressure on the family unit," the chapter president wrote, "has been a primary factor in the movement of women into the labor force. Many families cannot manage without the mother's earnings." Such statements ignored the long history of working-class black and white women's involvement in waged labor. *NOW Notes* (Atlanta), August 1972, p. 6, folder: NOW Atlanta Chapter Publications, 1972, box 20, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

## Chapter 2

### Investing in Our Sisters: Feminist Constructions of Economic Justice

In 1976, Elizabeth Tornquist, a nurse and mother in North Carolina, urged Southern women to reexamine what they considered economic justice. A white veteran of the civil rights movement, Tornquist challenged the equal pay campaigns of many feminist organizations by asking why women should fight to gain access to an economic system marked by impersonal and dehumanizing work. A more productive course, she argued, would be to “demand the reordering of society” and reject “an increasingly bankrupt political economy.”<sup>1</sup> This stance was not unique to feminists in the South, but Tornquist believed that her region offered the best possibility for success because capitalism had developed so differently there. Generation after generation of Southern women, she contended, had combined waged and non-waged labor in an economy that marginalized their contributions. Women in the South had long “planted

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Tornquist, “A Woman’s Work,” *Southern Exposure* 4 (Spring/Summer 1976): 127. In the 1960s, Tornquist was best known for having authored an article – later published as an organizing pamphlet – advising the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) on how to recruit members who were over thirty years of age. Tornquist’s advice included such “Do’s and Don’t’s” as “Don’t ask a man to do busy work until he is fully committed. And, even then, try to make best use of his talents” and “When you ask a man to do something, try to let him do it his way, if that is not going to defeat your cause.” Elizabeth Tornquist, “Over 30 ...,” *New South Student* 3 (March 1966): 5-6. Sue Thrasher, also an activist in SSOC, remembered that Tornquist’s stance on male leadership was common at the time, as the organization had yet to confront its internal sexism. See Christina Greene, “‘We’ll Take Our Stand’: Race, Class, and Gender in the Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969,” in *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Theda Purdie, and Elizabeth H. Turner (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 193. On the emergence of women’s liberation within SSOC, see Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organization Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 168-179.

gardens . . . [and done] seasonal work for the farmer down the road or shift work in the factory around the schedule of caring for their children.” This historical experience had taught Southern women “the guiding principle of balancing work that produces money with work that directly satisfies basic needs” including self-fulfillment, personal enrichment, and preservation of family life.<sup>2</sup>

For Tornquist, the solution to the inequities women experienced lay not in legal challenges or unionization campaigns, but in expanding the meaning of economic justice to one that included quality of life.<sup>3</sup> While many wage-earning women were challenging their employers for pay equity, respect and dignity on the job, and access to male-dominated occupations, a number of Southern feminists like Tornquist began to assert that the battle for women’s economic well-being should be fought on terrains beyond the shop floor, the household, and the office suite. As they reconceptualized the myriad roles women played in economic life, these activists sought to expand women’s access to public assistance, to reform work environments, and to gain equal access to credit.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, women across the South acknowledged the limitations of campaigns focused on waged labor, and adopted more expansive goals and

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<sup>2</sup> Tornquist, “A Woman’s Work,” 127.

<sup>3</sup> Tornquist rejected the legal challenges that were the tools of the early civil rights and women’s movements. She was particularly critical of Southern feminists who believed that the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would create economic equality. Tornquist argued that even had support for the ERA in the South not been tenuous (particularly in “Southern small towns with their rural conservatism and provincialism”), passage of the amendment held little promise of reordering society or altering the economic system. *Ibid.*, 127.

strategies. They generally did so in ways that were shaped by their racial and class identities, rather than as part of an overarching campaign. Most of these activists sought not a transformation of society at large, but more modest gains. Working at the grassroots, any number of women who on the surface had little in common began to challenge their position in the Southern economy. College women in Chapel Hill, housewives in Dallas, and welfare rights organizers in Atlanta may not have recognized their efforts as part of a shared struggle, but they all endeavored to create a more equitable society, to increase women's economic autonomy, and to demand respect for women's contributions to society, paid or unpaid. Because many of these activists were not themselves participants in the traditional labor market (or, at the very least, did not consider their wage-earning central to their identities), their critiques of the equal-pay movement were understandable.

Women from many different backgrounds shared a sense that organizing around workplaces issues was insufficient to truly rectify economic inequality. Critiques of workplace organizing generally grew out of an understanding that women's economic inequality could not be solved without attending to larger, structural problems. For the most part, however, these activists were not socialist feminists who, like the Charlotte Perkins Gilmore chapter of the New American Movement in Durham, North Carolina, sought "the destruction of capitalism."<sup>4</sup> Rather, they hoped to reform the existing system by contending that businesses could operate on different, more equitable models or that the government had a responsibility to recognize the

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<sup>4</sup> "Report from C. P. Gilman Chapter," n.d., folder: Women's Center, box 7 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter, Duke).

unpaid labor performed by women and to guarantee a basic standard of living. Still others came to believe that the ability to participate in the nation's consumer economy on an equal footing would improve the lives of women in the South. This chapter – which focuses on women as recipients of government aid, as proprietors of feminist businesses, and as consumers – endeavors to suggest the range and variety of Southern feminist activity with respect to the economy. Whatever its particular form, this activity represented a redefinition of the economic demands of the women's movement and a different branch of second-wave feminism. While each group of activists tended to organize with women of similar backgrounds, coalitions across lines of race and class did exist, if only in limited ways. Examining women's mobilizing for economic equity beyond the workplace reveals not only how sharply the South's racial and class hierarchies divided feminists, but also how economic and social circumstances shaped the meaning of economic justice for different women.

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## **Welfare Rights**

In recent years, historians and sociologists have done much to integrate the work of welfare rights organizers and poor people's campaigns into the narrative of the women's movement.<sup>5</sup> At the most basic level, this inclusion makes sense; most poor Americans were,

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<sup>5</sup> A number of books have examined campaigns for welfare rights in the North and West. Among the most important are Lawrence Neil Bailis, *Bread or Justice: Grassroots Organizing in the Welfare Rights Movement* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1974); Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston:

after all, women and children. But these campaigns deserve to be included in the narrative for reasons beyond demography. The demands and desires of welfare rights organizers both echoed and influenced second-wave feminism, particularly as welfare activists pressed for economic and reproductive autonomy for women and sought recognition of their contributions as citizens and mothers. As Premilla Nadasen has suggested, including the welfare rights movement as part of the 1960s women's rights struggle requires a rethinking of the definition of "women's issues."<sup>6</sup> Activists in the welfare rights movement, like those in the women's movement, worked for women's liberation and autonomy. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), for instance, was not initially conceived as a women's organization, but by the early 1970s, the organization's predominantly female leadership and its political tactics had placed it in alliance with more explicitly feminist organizations.<sup>7</sup> As one Louisville welfare worker asserted, "if Women's Liberation is committed to the elevation of all women, the needs

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Beacon Press, 2005); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); Jacqueline Pope, *Biting the Hand that Feeds Them: Organizing Women on Welfare at the Grassroots Level* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 233.

<sup>7</sup> As he became more aware of a larger women's movement, Tim Sampson, the NWRO's associate director, realized that he "was working for a women's organization." He contacted the national women's organizations with offices in Washington, D.C., and received positive support from NOW, which shared NWRO's demand for a guaranteed income but could not offer much in the way of financial support. Quoted in Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 171-172. George Wiley, president of the NWRO, also established institutional and personal connections with middle-class feminists such as Gloria Steinem. See Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*, 161-162.



of AFDC mothers must be met. . . . Like other women welfare women should be free to choose employment that she [sic] considers suitable – and free to work or not work.”<sup>8</sup> Like this activist, welfare rights organizers across the South challenged gender roles and sought to secure women’s control over their own lives, particularly the right to economic security and to control of their reproductive choices.<sup>9</sup>

Although the South was the poorest region in the nation in the 1970s, welfare expenditures not only remained low throughout the decade, but actually declined.<sup>10</sup> In 1975, the state of Georgia, for example, ranked thirty-third in the nation in per capita income but forty-seventh in welfare expenditures.<sup>11</sup> In every Southern state, monthly stipends to recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) fell below the national average.<sup>12</sup> In 1970, when AFDC benefit payments averaged \$187 per month in the nation as a whole,

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<sup>8</sup> “When Aid Stops . . .,” *Women’s Newspaper Collective* (Louisville, Ky.) 1, no. 3 (February 17, 1971): 4, Schlesinger Periodical File, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter, Schlesinger). The anonymous author described herself as “a welfare worker in Louisville.”

<sup>9</sup> Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 229.

<sup>10</sup> In 1969, one in five Southerners lived below the poverty line; the national average was 13.7 percent. In 1979, the poor accounted for 15.4 percent of the South’s population, while the national average was 12.4 percent. See “Census Historical Poverty Tables: CPH-L-162, Persons by Poverty Status in 1969, 1979, and 1989, by State,” [www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/census/cphl162.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/census/cphl162.html).

<sup>11</sup> Press release, Georgia Poverty Rights Organization, January 13, 1976, folder: Press Releases, 1976-1984, box 37, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter, Emory).

<sup>12</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 199.

payments in the South ranged from \$179 per month in Virginia to a meager \$46 per month in Mississippi. Southern state governments chose to receive minimal federal welfare support because doing so allowed them to keep their own welfare expenditures low.<sup>13</sup> High poverty rates left a larger proportion of Southern women in dire straits than was the case in other parts of the country. Barbara Ellen Smith, a sociologist and a former research director of the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC), has argued that the economic position of women in the South made the burdens of poverty especially onerous. As the lowest-paid workers in the lowest-wage region in the nation, Southern women represented the poorest of the poor, particularly those who experienced the "intersecting discrimination of class, race, and gender."<sup>14</sup>

Although scholars have recently documented the efforts of welfare rights activists in the urban North and, to a lesser extent, the West, few studies have investigated the South where welfare rights activism often assumed different forms, in part because concentrations of rural poverty made the large-scale demonstrations conducted in New York City or Washington, D.C., difficult to replicate. Despite such regional obstacles, both local and national organizations sought to expand the rights of poor women in the South. The many grassroots efforts of women across the region cumulatively amounted to a call for a new conception of

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<sup>13</sup> After the first few dollars, which were entirely underwritten by federal funds, federal welfare expenditures had to be matched by state funds. Southern states also discouraged their residents from seeking assistance by creating onerous eligibility requirements. See Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Ellen Smith, "Women in the Rural South: Scraping a Living from Two-Bit Jobs," *Southern Changes* 8, no. 2 (1986): 7.

rights. Moving beyond civil and political rights, poor women put forward expanded conceptions of freedom. Their liberation, they argued, rested not only on legal equality, but on guarantees of a minimum standard of living, protection of maternal rights, and reproductive freedom.<sup>15</sup> The Southern welfare rights movement was not exceptional, but it did win important victories both locally and nationally. In many ways, however, the region's conservative politics and backward economic conditions restrained much activism.

Although the NWRO operated relatively weak chapters in the Southern states, several local branches managed to win some concessions.<sup>16</sup> Welfare rights activists in Wake County, North Carolina, for example, organized an effort to increase their food stamp allowance and to protest their treatment by welfare officials. In nearby Orange County, welfare organizers also worked to increase food stamp allowances and hosted Soul Food dinners, bake sales, and dances to raise money for their treasury. They sponsored "Eat on a Welfare Budget" weeks during which people who were not welfare recipients sent the money they saved to the welfare rights organization and used the funds for such purposes as posting bond for arrested picketers and paying for travel to National Welfare Rights conventions.<sup>17</sup> In South Carolina, Marie James and fellow welfare recipients challenged a federal program that mandated work projects

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<sup>15</sup> Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, xviii. The NWRO did create chapters across the South, but its work has been difficult to uncover. The national NWRO papers, held at Howard University, remain unprocessed and offer little about Southern activity.

<sup>16</sup> Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 167-168.

<sup>17</sup> *New Carolina Woman* (Fayetteville, N.C.) 1, no. 2 (December 1970), folder: New Carolina Woman (Fayetteville, N.C.), box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA Records, Duke.

in counties with overwhelmingly African American populations.<sup>18</sup> In Little Rock, Arkansas, NWRO staff member Wade Rathke launched a “southern strategy” to win the support of grassroots leaders whom the organization had had difficulty reaching. Rathke eventually created a new organization that split from the NWRO in order to focus more exclusively on the working poor. Rathke’s group, ACORN, relied on the support of local women to pressure members of Congress and to rally grassroots support.<sup>19</sup>

In the South, women in welfare rights organizations sometimes found themselves marginalized, even as they represented a majority of the organizations’ membership. Although women were overrepresented in the ranks of low-income Southerners, that fact did not necessarily translate into leadership roles in ACORN, for example, nor did the organization concentrate its efforts on women-centered initiatives. Gary Delgado, a sociologist who has studied the organization closely, concluded that ACORN “has purposely avoided issues that reflect other than economic inequalities – questions of gender and race. One consequence of this choice is that the organization has been unable to develop a staff infrastructure supportive of women and people of color.” In the late 1960s and 1970s, ACORN did not invest its time or energy in issues such as daycare, equal pay for equal work, or reproductive rights, nor did it

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<sup>18</sup> Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 167-168. Kornbluh also identified strong welfare rights chapters in Huntsville and Birmingham, Alabama.

<sup>19</sup> The ACORN acronym originally derived from Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now. *Ibid.*, 168-169.

promote many women to decision-making positions.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Christina Greene has found that in Durham, North Carolina, local poor women found little opportunity to voice their opinions in the white male-dominated antipoverty organization, ACT. Indeed, the concerns of poor women, such as the need for child care services, were marginalized by ACT's leadership.<sup>21</sup>

Poor women sometimes found allies in middle-class women's organizations. In 1969, the Durham League of Women Voters sought to increase affordable housing in the city, going so far as to try to raise funds toward buying property that the League would then make available to poor families.<sup>22</sup> The League maintained that "welfare eligibility should be based on need," that social services should be expanded, that work should not be a requirement for receiving welfare, and that "benefit levels should be sufficient to provide decent, adequate standards for food, clothing, and shelter."<sup>23</sup> While the League rarely worked directly with poor

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Delgado, *Organizing the Movement: The Roots and Growth of ACORN* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 191-193.

<sup>21</sup> Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 142-153.

<sup>22</sup> The proposal met with support at League meetings, but the organization was never able to raise enough money to purchase property. The League did, however, lobby the city council to improve existing housing stock and increase the number of units available. See, for example, "Would Leaguers Make Good Landladies?" *Bulletin of the League of Women Voters* (Durham, N.C.), April 1969; "To Sponsor or Not to Sponsor," *Bulletin of the League of Women Voters* (Durham, N.C.), July 1969, Winifred Gail Soules Bradley papers, folder: League of Women Voters, box 4, Duke.

<sup>23</sup> "Welfare Reform," *Bulletin of the League of Women Voters* (Durham, N.C.), September 1971, Winifred Gail Soules Bradley papers, folder: League of Women Voters, box 4, Duke.

women, it did seek to protect and expand welfare rights.

In contrast, the Georgia Poverty Rights Organization (GPRO) included in its membership both welfare recipients and middle-class activists. Middle-class activists in the GPRO – most of whom were veterans of the civil rights movement – lobbied state legislators to secure funding for welfare programs, including AFDC, Medicaid, and emergency fuel assistance, while welfare recipients organized at the grassroots level. One of the GPRO's longest-lasting efforts was the *Poor People's Newspaper*, a monthly periodical mailed free of charge to more than seven thousand welfare recipients.<sup>24</sup> The newspaper, which was written and edited by welfare recipients, offered information about welfare case workers, directions on how to obtain aid, and interviews with local activists in tenants' rights and welfare rights' organizations.<sup>25</sup> Activists tried to improve the lives of women by increasing their access to economic and health resources. Articles in the *Poor People's Newspaper* provided guidance regarding how to procure assistance in obtaining abortion services, described resources available to battered women, and identified daycare facilities and health clinics available to low-

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<sup>24</sup> Funding for the newspaper, which was published from 1971 until at least 1987, came from GPRO and from Emmaus House, a combination settlement house and community center. Established in 1967 by the Episcopal Archdiocese of Atlanta, Emmaus House rented living space for several volunteers in an economically depressed neighborhood and provided office space for a number of local organizations, including Georgia Poverty Rights Organization and Tenants United for Fairness. See "Emmaus House," n.d. [1977], folder: Emmaus House Historical Background, box 69, Frances Freeborn Pauley papers, Emory. For information on the GPRO's principal lobbyist, see Kathryn Nasstrom, *Everybody's Grandmother and Nobody's Fool: Frances Freeborn Pauley and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 117-134.

<sup>25</sup> For copies of the newspaper see folders: Poor People's Newspaper, 1972-1975, and Poor People's Newspaper 1976-1977, box 70, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, Emory.

income women.<sup>26</sup> While middle-class and poor women had discrete positions in the organization, it represented one of the South's few examples of cross-class organizing around issues of welfare rights.

Across the nation, welfare rights activists sought not only to expand access to resources but also to challenge the restrictions that intrusive social workers imposed on welfare recipients. In particular, they demanded that economic security be divorced from sexuality.<sup>27</sup> In defending their right to engage in sexual relations and an entitlement to privacy within their homes, these women challenged gendered restrictions on economic equality. Because women receiving public assistance often faced discriminatory and degrading inspections of their homes, they faced a series of limitations on their sexual choices and their family organization. Elsie, a Fayetteville, North Carolina, woman with seven children, complained that "social workers come into your house and see where your house look good and they say – well, how did you get this? You got your house lookin' good. You don't need to be on welfare – on the other hand they come and find your house filthy and the kids are dirty. They want to know what are you doing with the money, you know?"<sup>28</sup> When Susan Hastings of Baltimore was pregnant, she

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<sup>26</sup> See *Poor People's Newspaper* 6, no.8 (November/December 1976): 3, *Poor People's Newspaper* 7, no.10 (November 1977): 2, folder: Poor People's Newspaper, 1976-1979, box 70; *Poor People's Newspaper* 8, no.5 (May 1978): 2; *Poor People's Newspaper* 8, no.4 (April 1978): 2, folder: Poor People's Newspaper, 1976-1979, box 70, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, Emory.

<sup>27</sup> For an examination of this practice at the turn-of-the-century, see Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> *New Carolina Woman* (Fayetteville, N.C.) 1, no. 2 (December 1970): 1, folder: New Carolina Woman (Fayetteville, N.C.), box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

was questioned aggressively by social workers about the father of her child. Describing the experience as “an intensive grilling,” she recalled that among the questions “were seemingly innocuous invasions of privacy such as where I met him, who introduced us, would I be able to have another person corroborate the fact that I was sexually involved with him (now really), where our sexual encounters took place, how many times, etc.” Hastings received the impression that she was being treated as though she “had committed a crime or at the very least had offended society as a whole with my protruding abdomen and naked ring finger.”<sup>29</sup> Such treatment, which was meant to reinforce the notion that women on welfare had lost the right to control their own lives, provoked sustained protest by welfare recipients across the nation in the 1970s, but the most important legal test of the privacy rights of women receiving public assistance emerged from the South.

In 1966, Mrs. Sylvester Smith, an African American woman living in Selma, Alabama, sued the state after she lost her welfare benefits for engaging in a sexual relationship with a man who did not live with her.<sup>30</sup> Because Alabama law regarded this man as the “substitute father” of Smith’s children, local welfare officials withdrew Smith’s payments and suggested that

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<sup>29</sup> *Cold Day in August* (Baltimore), September 1974, p. 2, folder: Cold Day in August, box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>30</sup> In all contemporary newspaper coverage and in court documents, Smith is always referred to as “Mrs. Sylvester Smith.” She had four children. The father of her first three children had died in 1955; the father of her fourth had left the family in 1963. For biographical information, see Walter Goodman, “The Case of Mrs. Sylvester Smith,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 25, 1968, pp. 28-29, 62-65; “Curb on Welfare in Alabama Upset; Federal Court Bars Denial of Aid to Needy Children,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1967, p. 21; William Chapman, “Court Bars Bias in All Housing,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 1968, p. A1. See also <http://law.jrank.org/pages/13154/King-v-Smith.html>.



her boyfriend should support her financially. Enraged, she approached the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC), which had been founded in 1964 by Carl Rachin, a civil rights lawyer and NWRO's general counsel.<sup>31</sup> Smith argued that she was entitled to public assistance on a basis equal to other women and forbade local welfare officials to investigate her sex life any further. When one caseworker suggested that she end the relationship in question in order to remain on the welfare rolls, Smith declared that "if God had intended for me to be a nun I'd be a nun."<sup>32</sup> Smith asserted that she should be able to engage in romantic relationships and to preserve her privacy regardless of her economic status. In 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court found in Smith's favor; the decision, *King v. Smith*, held that all people were equally entitled to assistance. The court also ruled that welfare programs could not use their powers to "punish dependent children, whose protection is AFDC's paramount goal," not the policing of "immorality."<sup>33</sup>

The *King* decision had far-reaching effects and important national repercussions. Before the ruling, the substitute father standard had disqualified some 16,000 children, most of them African American, from receiving AFDC benefits.<sup>34</sup> Building on the court's decision in

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<sup>31</sup> Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 67. In the early 1960s, Rachin had been the legal director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

<sup>32</sup> Smith quoted in Goodman, "The Case of Mrs. Sylvester Smith," 29.

<sup>33</sup> *King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 309 (1968); Rand E. Rosenblatt, "Legal Entitlement and Welfare Benefits," in *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique*, ed. David Kairys (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 269, 273; Mink, *Welfare's End*, 50; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Gwendolyn Mink estimates that 90 percent of the 16,000 disqualified children were African American. Mink, *Welfare's End*, 50.

*King*, lawyers acting on behalf of other poor Americans were able to overturn rules throughout the nation that limited the eligibility of women and children to enroll in AFDC.<sup>35</sup> Equally important, the *King* case, by protecting women's privacy, separated sexual expression from the right to economic support.

In many ways, the *King* decision was an unusual example of welfare organizing in the South, as most welfare activists remained locally oriented. Moreover, welfare organizers usually focused their attention on increasing social services and expenditures. As this emphasis suggests, most women receiving welfare found the economic programs of wage-earning feminists inadequate. Equal pay laws and attempts to move women into non-traditional employment offered few benefits to women who relied on government assistance. In arguing that wages alone could not create equality, welfare activists expanded the meaning of economic justice.

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### **Feminist Businesses**

While welfare rights advocates were arguing that the state should provide an adequate support network, other women's organizations began to challenge the economic model of mainstream businesses. Appealing mainly, although not exclusively, to middle-class women, feminist business proprietors sought to practice a particular politics in both their products and

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<sup>35</sup> According to Gwendolyn Mink, these cases included "California's man-in-the-house regulation, New Jersey's rule limiting AFDC benefits to families where parents were legally married, and New York's requirement that lodgers help with AFDC family rents, which reduced family benefits." Mink, *Welfare's End*, 53.

their operations. In the 1970s, women across the South created feminist businesses that valued politics as highly as profits and that sought to balance work and family obligations.<sup>36</sup> Ranging from bookstores to sewing collectives to health centers, these businesses were often organized along cooperative lines, eschewing hierarchical decision-making and mingling high ideals with the bottom line.<sup>37</sup> Feminist businesses experimented not only with organizational structure, but with the kinds of products they created and sold.

Unlike feminists in the labor movement or in organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), women who established feminist businesses were largely uninterested in campaigning for equal pay or in lobbying for access to jobs held primarily by men. Many of these businesses operated as feminist collectives and developed as enterprises that created women-centered products, such as feminist literature or crafts.<sup>38</sup> Like many

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<sup>36</sup> I employ the term “feminist business” to describe entities with characteristics beyond female ownership alone. Feminist businesses included newspapers, credit unions, art galleries, daycare centers, theater groups, women’s health centers, restaurants, and law firms, among others. Alison M. Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg Struhl, eds., *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 184-188; Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman’s Survival Sourcebook* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 25; Deena Peterson, ed., *A Practical Guide to the Women’s Movement* (New York: Women’s Action Alliance, 1975), 62; Ginette Castro, *American Feminism: A Contemporary History* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 250.

<sup>37</sup> Cooperative business models had a long history in the South, particularly in rural areas. During the 1960s, civil rights organizers in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) experimented with creating cooperatives of farmworkers and of quilters. See Ray Marshall and Lamond Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty in the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 37-38.

<sup>38</sup> Women’s health clinics, an important category of feminist business, will be discussed below, in Chapter 4.

feminist publications, *Distaff*, which was published by the New Orleans Feminist Forum, operated as a feminist collective and included news of interest to women. Each woman on the staff shared editorial responsibilities and participated in reporting, typesetting, layout, graphics, printing, advertising, distribution, and finances. The staff structure was flexible, and decisions were made by the group rather than by individuals. Staff meetings were open not only to members of the collective, but to all women. As an editorial in the first issue declared, *Distaff* was “published by and for women and for all people who wish to join us in creating a world of human liberation.”<sup>39</sup> For *Distaff* members, the product they created and the process by which they did so were inextricably connected.

For similar reasons, bookstores were a popular choice among feminist business owners. Atlanta’s Charis Books and More, established in 1974, was both a feminist business and an important center of the women’s movement in the city.<sup>40</sup> The bookstore initially offered a mix of children’s books, women’s books, and books on the Christian left, but by the end of the decade, the women who ran Charis imagined their store as a site for political organizing as much as a place of business.<sup>41</sup> Charis hosted feminist readings and consciousness-raising

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<sup>39</sup> Editorial, *Distaff* (New Orleans) 1, no. 1 (February, 1973): 12, Schlesinger.

<sup>40</sup> The records of Charis Books are held at Duke but are closed to researchers.

<sup>41</sup> Two scholars of Southern sexuality, Saralyn Chestnut and Amanda C. Gable, found the group’s Christianity “surprising,” but acknowledged that the Christian left played an important part in any number of progressive social movements in the South in the 1960s and 1970s, ranging from civil rights to the women’s movement to the student New Left. Saralyn Chesnut and Amanda C. Gable, “‘Women Ran It’: Charis Books and More and Atlanta’s Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1971-1981,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 279n. 44.

groups, co-sponsored a women's studies conference at Spelman University, and offered meeting space to diverse women's groups.<sup>42</sup>

Tallahassee, Florida's feminist bookstore, Herstore, was also more than a place to purchase feminist literature. In business between 1974 and 1977, Herstore operated as a collective, and, although most of the members held full-time jobs and many had children, they volunteered in the store and attended weekly meetings. The store hosted a weekly potluck dinner and entertainment by local musicians or readings by women, as well as women's music concerts, a community anti-rape program, poetry readings, and a women's art show. Members of the collective that operated Herstore led classes in political theory, organized consciousness-raising groups, and held workshops on do-it-yourself skills building.<sup>43</sup> "Many women," remembered Vicki Mariner, "were just discovering the women's movement and beginning to consider the ways in which their lives were going to be changed by it." The collective bookstore not only provided entertainment and information, but also suggested a different way of organizing. "Working and imagining a new future together was exciting," Mariner recalled. But the hours of planning and "the feeling that life was just a series of endless meetings" took a toll on members of the collective. When their building was condemned in

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<sup>42</sup> Transcript, Linda Bryant, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, September 29, 2005, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 1-5, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter, GSU). This is an unprocessed interview, so page numbers may change.

<sup>43</sup> Vicki Mariner, "Herstore," *Spectrum* [no vol.], no. 28 (Winter Solstice 1981): 12, folder: Women's Liberation Pamphlets and Newspapers 1970-1972, 1981, box 1, Tampa Women's Liberation records, GSU.

1977, they decided to abandon the project.<sup>44</sup>

Like bookstores, businesses that sold women's crafts served a double purpose by operating with feminist values while supporting women's creative production. Chapel Hill's Womancraft, for example, was a nonprofit arts and crafts cooperative run entirely by women. Local feminist publications *She* and *Feminist Newsletter* urged their readers to do their holiday shopping at Womancraft "because the prices are reasonable and most of the money returns to the women who did the work."<sup>45</sup> Items in the store – paintings, pottery, quilts, dolls, jewelry, and hand-sewn clothing – were created by women who were members of the cooperative. Like feminist bookstores, Womancraft also offered a physical place for feminists to meet; members often took advantage of this space to offer lessons in traditionally female handicrafts such as spinning, quilting, knitting, crocheting, weaving, macrame, and basket making. Linda Brogan, who worked at the cooperative, argued that the ability of women to earn a small income from their crafts made the store important to them not only in a financial sense but also in creating a sense of worth. "Skills associated with women have not received adequate recognition," she declared. "At Womancraft women can display and sell their crafts instead of giving them all away to neighbors." But Brogan was careful to distance Womancraft from radical associations. "We're not a women's lib organization," she insisted, "in that women who

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<sup>44</sup> Mariner, "Herstore,"12.

<sup>45</sup> *Feminist Newsletter* (Chapel Hill, N.C.) 4, no. 1 (February 12, 1973): 5, folder: Printed Materials, Miscellaneous Publications, 1973, box 2, Margaret Anne O'Connor papers, General Manuscripts, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C. (hereafter, UNC Manuscripts).

join ‘belong’ to women’s lib. Anyone can join.” Kate Bell, a volunteer in the store, described the membership of the Womancraft collective as ranging from “radical feminists to little old grandmothers.” Bell, like some other members of the cooperative, worked in the store because she thought it was “a good idea” but did not bring any crafts to sell. The appeal of working in a cooperative was sufficient. As Linda Brogan asserted, “women get turned on by the idea of working in a cooperative.” She believed that “for many women, selling things is a minor consideration . . . . Many just enjoy the idea of working with other women.”<sup>46</sup>

The Mountain Women’s Exchange, an Appalachian women’s collective based in Jellico, Tennessee, served many similar functions. Established in 1977, the Exchange was not only a sewing collective that provided income for its members, but also a support group that provided social services to women.<sup>47</sup> The group used its profits to help Appalachian women obtain education, food, or shelter from abuse. Darlene Leache, who attended meetings of the Mountain Women’s Exchange without her husband’s approval, took classes at the Exchange’s community center to earn a General Equivalency Degree and then studied bookkeeping.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lu Stanton, “Sweaters, Quilts . . .,” *She*, 1, no. 2 (September 24, 1973): 4, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O’Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts; Susan Buie, “Womancraft,” *She* 4, no. 3 (November/December 1975): 12, 15, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O’Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts. Womancraft also stocked women’s literature. Most members of the collective, which averaged about fifty women, were white.

<sup>47</sup> The Mountain Women’s Exchange was a collective that included Mountain Valley Mountain Crafts; the White Oak Community Center; Williamsburg, Mulberry, and Crazy Quilt Friendship Centers; the Tennessee Indian Council; and the Morley Recreation Group – all organized and operated by Appalachian women.

<sup>48</sup> Darlene Leache, an Appalachian woman, believed that the Mountain Women’s Exchange helped women “come out from under just the traditions of men. I think this is mainly

Leache remembered that the women at the Mountain Women's Exchange came to the realization that if they pooled their resources and their knowledge, they could "build a bigger power base, and begin exerting some needed pressure on the systems that are keeping [us] out." Members met quarterly to develop programs and to distribute services. Women needed employment "not just as maids and waitresses," Leache contended, "but in non-traditional job areas, in areas where we can make decent salaries and where we have a voice in the management and direction of [our] work."<sup>49</sup> Feminist business models focused not just on putting money in women's pockets but on reshaping the ways that women worked.

Like members of the Mountain Women's Exchange, most feminist business proprietors hoped to do more than turn a profit or create job opportunities for women. The most innovative among them sought to reconsider the very nature of work and its meaning for women. This chapter examines two such feminist businesses in detail: Lollipop Power Press, a small publishing house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, that was staffed primarily by well-educated, middle-class women; and Brier Patch, a textile-production collective in Atlanta,

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the thing, that they could do other things besides sit at home and have babies, that they could help other people, that is the main thing about women's exchanges, helping other people. Helping other women with the needs that they had. That is like battered women for one thing. They always thought just like I that you had to sit and you had to take it, that there was nothing you could do about it. But with this, they show them that there is a place that they can go, they can take their children, and they can be cared for. That women can get out and they can work together to find peace of mind, to help bring other women together to help. I think that Mountain Women's Exchange is one of the greatest things that could have happened." Transcript, interview of Darlene Leache by Fran Leeper Buss, June 5, 1980, Newcomb, Tennessee, pp. 75, 85-86, box 1, Southwest Institute for Research on Women Oral Histories of Low Income and Minority Women (#4608), UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>49</sup> Leache interview, p. 90, UNC Manuscripts.



Georgia, created by women from the city's public housing communities in collaboration with members of the local YWCA. Although these businesses were operated by very different women, in very different industries, both were created to suggest how businesses could operate in ways that put women's lives at the center of production. Unlike the activism of wage-earning feminists or groups such as the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, who worked for pay equity or to open opportunities for women in employment traditionally held by men, these feminists sought to create business models that suggested, on a small scale, alternatives to the traditional capitalist ventures that had long relegated women to low-wage and low-skill work and had also failed to integrate women's domestic responsibilities into their production schedules.

Established in 1969, Lollipop Power Press grew out of a women's liberation group in Durham, North Carolina. The decision to create Lollipop Power emerged from practical concerns. Because many of the women in the group were the parents of small children, they had begun to discuss the means by which children were socialized into gender roles and how they learned to behave in gender-stereotyped ways.<sup>50</sup> Members of the women's liberation group decided to put some of their ideas into practice, initially because they shared an interest in "the process of sex-role socialization and saw as a common area of concern the sex- and

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<sup>50</sup> Press release, "Lollipop Power to Publish This Summer!" June 1971, folder: Lollipop Press, Early Descriptive Materials/Membership Lists, box 17, Carolina Wren Press Records, Duke; a copy can also be found in folder: LP 1970 Minutes, box 2, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, UNC Manuscripts. See also Pam Scullen, "Tentative, Informal Statement of Purpose for Lollipop Power," November 1970, folder: LP Minutes 1970, box 2, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, UNC Manuscripts; Sara Boyte, "Thoughts on the Purpose of Lollipop Power," 1970, folder: Lollipop Power 1970-1974, box 4, Boyte Family papers, Duke.

race-stereotyping so overwhelmingly present in commercially-produced books for young children.”<sup>51</sup> One of the founders, Sara Evans (who went on to become a leading historian of the women’s movement), later recalled that “in many other consciousness-raising groups, women talked about and thought through their own socializations. Instead, we were determined to find ways to *do* it differently and to make it possible to liberate children from the constraints of cultural prescription. Ultimately, the need to turn that concern into action led to the creation of Lollipop Power.”<sup>52</sup> As Paula Goldsmid, another founding member, put it, Lollipop Power was intended to be “a concrete way in which the members could work for the liberation of women (and men) from sex role stereotyping.”<sup>53</sup>

In its early years, the women involved in Lollipop Power envisioned the press as a service to parents supportive of women’s rights and to daycare centers sensitive to presenting alternative role models. Because the members of Lollipop Power were aware that socialization occurred in schools and in the media as much as in the home, they endeavored to put their books into local daycare centers and lobbied local school districts to adopt their publications.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Kathleen Gallagher, “Lollipop Power, Inc.: Feminist Children’s Books,” Fall 1976, folder: Lollipop Press--Correspondence with Feminist Press, box 17, Carolina Wren Press records, Duke.

<sup>52</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Memo, Paula Goldsmid, “Thoughts on Lollipop Power as a Group Within the Women’s Movement,” November 1970, folder: LP Minutes 1970, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, box 2, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>54</sup> “Lollipop Power to Publish This Summer!” Lollipop Power continued publishing until 1982; four years later it was bought by the Carolina Wren Press, which republished many of Lollipop Power’s most popular releases.

The press placed a priority on stories that featured girls rather than boys and that depicted non-white protagonists and non-nuclear families.<sup>55</sup> Although Lollipop's production schedule was often slowed by its editorial process – the press published only six books in its first three years – its books consistently reflected both the politics of the Lollipop collective and the spirit of Lollipop's process. Published in 1970, the press's first book, *Jenny's Secret Place*, dealt with a young boy's admiration for his sister's dreams and accomplishments. *Martin's Father*, published the following year, featured a father who cooked, did the laundry, and bathed his son. It presented these chores as part of the father's daily life activities. Also published in 1971, *Did You Ever* explored the world of possibilities open to boys and girls alike.<sup>56</sup>

Although the themes of these books remained critical to Lollipop's members, equally compelling was the possibility of developing alternative methods of running a business. For the members of Lollipop, the process by which they created children's literature became as important as the products themselves.<sup>57</sup> Lollipop Power was established as a collective, with its

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<sup>55</sup> After 1975, as mainstream publishing presses began to incorporate non-sexist and non-racist themes in children's books, Lollipop Power turned to manuscripts with more overtly feminist themes. Gallagher, "Lollipop Power, Inc.: Feminist Children's Books," pp. 3-4, Duke; Patti Paddock, "A Statement of Purpose for Lollipop Power," November 1970, folder: LP Minutes 1970, box 2, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>56</sup> Vinton Taylor, "Liberation Lollipop-style," *She* 1, no. 5 (January 29, 1974): 4, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O'Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts; Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 12-13. All of the books put out by Lollipop were printed on heavy paper with color illustrations and sold for \$1 to parents and daycare facilities. Copies of the books published by Lollipop Press are available at the Sallie Bingham Center, Duke University, in the Carolina Wren collection.

<sup>57</sup> Lollipop Power had ten founding members, all of whom had been members of Group 22, a women's liberation group. The membership shifted throughout the decade as women moved in and out of the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro area for professional and personal

members sharing responsibilities and making decisions by consensus.<sup>58</sup> The founding members were committed to equity, both in the collective's practices and in its products. Thus, the organization of labor reflected a determination to create non-hierarchical relationships. After each member of the collective had read submitted manuscripts, one or two projects were selected for consideration. At this point, the manuscript was "workshopped" or revised and edited by the collective members and the author. The final version had to receive the approval of all members of the group before further action was taken. After the text was complete, it was sent to various illustrators who had submitted their names to Lollipop. Sketches of all illustrations were reviewed by the collective, and the illustrations then went through the same workshopping process as the text.<sup>59</sup>

The collective met weekly not only to make editorial decisions, but also to discuss women's liberation. Founding member Paula Goldsmid maintained that Lollipop members should use their "weekly meetings and book workshops (indirectly, for the most part) to develop our own analyses of sexism as it exists today and our ideas about how to combat it through our books and by other means."<sup>60</sup> Sara Evans, another founder, believed that Lollipop Power constituted "one dimension of women's liberation." She saw it as "a means of attacking

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reasons. In 1972, the press filed papers as a non-profit corporation and received tax-exempt status. After the first six years of its existence, however, Lollipop lost much of its organizational activity.

<sup>58</sup> Gallagher, "Lollipop Power, Inc.: Feminist Children's Books," pp. 1-2, Duke.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, "Liberation Lollipop-style," p. 4, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>60</sup> Goldsmid, "Thoughts on Lollipop Power as a Group Within the Women's Movement."

the psychological aspects of the oppression of women (such as the ascribed characteristics of emotionality, passivity, and mental inferiority, identification not as individuals but in terms of relationships with men, etc.).” Lollipop Power’s books could be “*tools* in the service of women’s liberation and human freedom.”<sup>61</sup> The minutes of many Lollipop Power meetings read more like the discussions of a consciousness-raising group than those of a business operation. Minutes for a February 26, 1974, meeting, for example, describe a lengthy discussion of the advantages and meaning of lesbian feminism and mention no publishing business at all.<sup>62</sup>

The collective and feminist ideals of Lollipop Power sometimes led to frustration and inefficiency, yet at every turn the members reiterated a commitment to their original business model. The group frequently acknowledged that output was slowed by the collective editorial process, but members affirmed that they did not want to give up democratic decision-making.<sup>63</sup> It was the process, as much as the product, that mattered. “As far as I’m concerned,” Paula Goldsmid insisted, “the first and most important thing to remember is that we are not in existence primarily to become a whiz-bang publisher of children’s books – we are a part of the women’s movement which has decided to publish the books to fill a need felt by our sisters

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<sup>61</sup> Sara Boyte, “Thoughts on the Purposes of Lollipop Power,” n.d. [1970?], folder: LP Minutes 1970, box 2, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, UNC Manuscripts. Emphasis in the original. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Sara Evans was married to Harry C. Boyte and sometimes adopted his surname. For consistency, I have employed Sara Evans throughout the text.

<sup>62</sup> Minutes, Lollipop Power, February 26, 1974, folder: Lollipop Power 1970-1974, box 4, Boyte Family papers, Duke.

<sup>63</sup> Minutes, Lollipop Power, November 16, 1970, folder: LP Minutes 1970, box 2, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, UNC Manuscripts Collection.

(and brothers) and ourselves in raising children and disseminating the ideas of the movement.”

The first priority, she argued, was working democratically and remaining committed to feminist values. She recognized that members (herself included) sometimes became frustrated by their “frequent inability to stick to the subject and get our business done” but emphasized that those feelings were evidence that Lollipop Power was “losing sight of our first and primary reason for existing.”<sup>64</sup> Lollipop Power, which continued to publish until 1982, was created to be an example of feminist ideals in practice. Because the women of Lollipop were all educated, white, and middle class, they enjoyed the luxury of subordinating material concerns to those ideals. They shared not only a political philosophy, but also a racial and class experience that enabled them to experiment with a business model that elevated politics above profits.

Brier Patch, a feminist business in Atlanta, had similarly high hopes of creating a business that was women-centered, but the economic concerns of its members also required the operation to turn a profit and provide incomes. As numerous feminist businesses demonstrated, women’s work could provide more than financial security. It could be a means of *practicing* feminism. Working-class and poor women, who often lacked the ample free time and alternative means of financial support enjoyed by more privileged women, nevertheless imagined that work could mean more than a meager paycheck. A job could provide empowerment, dignity, and self-fulfillment; it could offer women some degree of creativity and control. With these goals in mind, the women of Brier Patch began to develop alternative

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<sup>64</sup> Paula Goldsmid, “Random Thoughts on Efficiency, etc., in Lollipop Power,” February 1972, folder: Minutes of Lollipop Power Meetings 1972, box 2, Lollipop Power Inc. Papers, UNC Manuscripts.

conceptions of work.

Established in 1972, Brier Patch was a business venture that sought to create dignified, productive work for low-income women in Atlanta.<sup>65</sup> Working out of their homes or other spaces in their own neighborhoods, Brier Patch workers fashioned hand-crafted clothing products that were sold in local stores and through catalogs. At its inception, the enterprise provided income to 10 women, but by the mid-1970s, it had ballooned to 200 crafters. Brier Patch not only provided income for its workers, but also enabled them to acquire new skills and to build connections among women within and across communities. From the outset, the enterprise had a dual purpose: to improve the lives of individual women and to support a grassroots network of women committed to a feminist business model.<sup>66</sup> The founders of Brier Patch hoped their business would “reverse the historical pattern of institutional exclusion of women from meaningful employment opportunities.”<sup>67</sup> The emphasis the Brier Patch women placed on “meaningful employment opportunities” suggested that they wished to do more than earn an income.

At first glance, Brier Patch appears to have rested on a neo-outwork form of

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<sup>65</sup> “Brier Patch” was the trade name of the organization; it incorporated as a nonprofit entity under the name Rabbit Enterprises, Inc. In its internal correspondence, Brier Patch was sometimes rendered as “Brierpatch” or “Briar Patch.” For consistency’s sake, I employ the spelling in the incorporation papers, which is also the one most frequently used in various records.

<sup>66</sup> “Brier Patch Proposal,” August 25, 1971, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprise, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory.

<sup>67</sup> Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., proposal for grant funding to Sears-Roebuck Foundation, Atlanta, Ga., 1973, YWCA Records, Emory. The proposal was unsuccessful.

production.<sup>68</sup> In some respects, this depiction is accurate. The work was attractive to women who had difficulty securing employment in traditional labor markets, either because they lacked the necessary skills or because family obligations restricted their time or mobility. The work process was broken down into specific steps (design, purchase of materials, layout, cutting, kit making, sewing, quality control, packaging, shipping), with each woman performing a discrete task. The crafters completed the work in their own homes on a comparatively flexible schedule. They used skills they already possessed or for which the local YWCA already had classes in place. At times, the comparison to outwork was even more apt. During slow sales periods, Brier Patch negotiated with several local industries to do piece work. After the holiday sales peak in 1973, for instance, The Old Atlanta Satchel Company hired Brier Patch crafters for piece-rate sewing. Other small companies contracted with the women to make denim skirts, lamp shade covers, and men's shirts.<sup>69</sup> Although these contract jobs were not the first choice of the Brier Patch women, they were integral in expanding the company's business and maintaining a steady flow of income for the crafters. In addition, a reliable source of work orders kept the business solvent as it moved toward the goal of a self-supporting, women-

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<sup>68</sup> For other forms of outwork in the late twentieth century, see Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Homework in the Industrial United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 11; Eileen Boris and Cynthia Daniel, eds., *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor in the Home* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1989); Elisabeth Prügel, *The Global Construction of Gender: Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>69</sup> William H. Harrison, Jr. (Old Atlanta Satchel Co.), Atlanta, Ga., to Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., Atlanta, Ga., January 22, 1974, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory. See also minutes, Board of Directors meeting, February 18, 1975, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory.



centered industry.

Although the Brier Patch model shared many characteristics with outwork, it also attempted to rectify problems in older forms of outwork. Unlike other outworkers, the Brier Patch crafters exercised considerable control over the design of products and over the production schedule. In addition, they endeavored to overcome the isolation inherent in outwork by creating communal spaces in which to work. This arrangement was in part a response to necessity; not every woman involved in the project owned a sewing machine. Brier Patch therefore acquired several machines and placed them in community centers within the housing projects.<sup>70</sup> But the communal work aspect was more than a practical choice. From the outset, each woman who participated in Brier Patch was encouraged to help train another woman and to expand her own skills.<sup>71</sup> Because the project aimed to do more than generate income for women, its participants hoped their work would create a community of women within the housing projects, across the city's various housing projects, and, through the YWCA's sponsorship, between women of different classes.

The role of the YWCA in Brier Patch was both critical to the project's success and indicative of the difficulty of creating organizations that bridged class divides. Brier Patch grew out of Model Homes, an older YWCA program in the housing projects of Atlanta. Comparing

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<sup>70</sup> The sewing machines were purchased by Brier Patch or, in some cases, supplied by other women's organizations, such as Church Women United. See minutes, Board of Directors, Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., January 23, 1973, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory.

<sup>71</sup> "Brier Patch Proposal," August 25, 1971, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory.

Brier Patch and Model Homes offers insights into the conflicts and misunderstandings that marked women's attempts to relate to one another across lines of race and class, even as they sought to work together. The two programs also demonstrate that working-class feminists were sometimes able to push traditional women's organizations like the YWCA into positions more respectful of the needs and aspirations of the public housing residents.

In the mid-1960s, the YWCA created the Model Homes program to demonstrate "proper" homemaking techniques and strategies to low-income women. The Midtown Branch of the YWCA rented an apartment from the city's housing authority in its low-income housing projects and set up house as a "model" resident. Here, the YWCA offered classes in cooking, sewing, budgeting, and homemaking; it also hoped to create a daycare program but was unable to find the resources to do so.<sup>72</sup> Elements of maternalism figured prominently in the project. The "model home" envisioned by middle-class YWCA women represented the values they held in high regard and often lacked an understanding of poor women's lives.<sup>73</sup> For example, the YWCA members sponsored a "consumer education program" to demonstrate shopping skills, but in the course of its operation, they discovered, much to their surprise, that the problem facing poor women was not *budgeting* money but *earning* it. "Home management," they concluded, "is more realistic and useful when dollars are coming in on a continuing

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<sup>72</sup> Minutes, Midtown YWCA Steering Committee, December 16, 1971, folder: Midtown Center Branch Administrative Files, 1972-1973, Master Files, box 155, YWCA Records, Emory.

<sup>73</sup> Although the YWCA included both middle- and working-class women, the demography of the Midtown Atlanta neighborhood suggests that the members of this branch were middle-class.

basis.”<sup>74</sup> For the YWCA women, interacting with the residents of public housing had generated a new understanding of the challenges facing low-income women.

They brought this new understanding to the Brier Patch project. Unlike Model Homes, Brier Patch was an attempt by the YWCA to foster a program that grew out of the concerns of public housing residents themselves and allowed the residents a voice in its operations.

Through its failed Model Homes program, representatives of the YWCA had learned that their own solutions were not always the most practical.

The impetus for Brier Patch came from the public housing residents themselves. During the Model Homes experiment, several women from Capitol Homes had approached the YWCA about a program that would allow them to put their skills to marketable use.<sup>75</sup>

Although the record is silent as to why the Capitol Homes women proposed to work with the YWCA women, some inferences can be made. The YWCA women had already demonstrated a commitment to improving the lives of women in the Capitol Homes, even if they had not employed methods that those women themselves preferred. In addition, they had allowed the local women to market their handmade crafts in the Model Homes space in the fall of 1969. The profits from this sale were held by the YWCA in a separate account and used for two purposes: an excursion to a local botanical garden for five of the women and as seed

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<sup>74</sup> “Proposal for Brier Patch: A Self-Help Project,” [1971?], folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory. This proposal included information about the lessons gleaned from the failed Model Homes program.

<sup>75</sup> Minutes, Midtown YWCA Steering Committee, April 20, 1972, folder: Midtown Center Branch Administrative Files, 1972-1973, Master Files, box 155, YWCA Records, Emory.

money for Brier Patch.<sup>76</sup> The YWCA was thus providing its resources, physical space, and an interest-earning bank account to low-income women at the very moment that the role and structure of Brier Patch were beginning to take shape. The YWCA also brought to the fledgling operation resources and contacts that the Capitol Homes women lacked – particularly access to and familiarity with a variety of community benefactors and volunteers. The YWCA was able to call on the local Community Chest and United Way organizations for seed money and to mobilize the services of its own volunteers in publicity, marketing, and accounting. With mixed success, the YWCA also applied for grants from national philanthropic organizations such as the Sears-Roebuck Foundation and to federal programs such as the Office of Economic Opportunity.<sup>77</sup>

For the women of the YWCA, the proposals of the Capitol Homes women must have been received with enormous relief. The YWCA had been trying for several years to connect with the public housing residents but had been unable to develop a program that fit their needs. Moreover, Brier Patch fit neatly with the national YWCA's Program for Action, adopted in 1970. This national edict called upon local chapters to create programs that would, among

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<sup>76</sup> No author, "Brier Patch Proposal," August 25, 1971, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, box 19, YWCA Records, Emory.

<sup>77</sup> Other professional and middle-class women also contributed to the success of Brier Patch. Church Women United donated or raised funds for the purchase of sewing machines, and members of the American Association of Women Accountants contributed their services. Members of the Junior League volunteered on specific assignments, such as kit making and publicity. Ann Stallard (President, Board of Directors, Rabbit Enterprises, Inc.), "Proposal for the Brier Patch," April 1972, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory; letter, Ann Stallard, Atlanta, Ga., to Earnest Moore (administrative assistant to Senator Sam Nunn), Washington, D.C., June 9, 1975, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA Records, Emory.

other goals, eliminate racism, eliminate poverty, demonstrate the relevance of volunteer work, and “revolutionize society’s expectations of women and their own self-esteem and perception.”<sup>78</sup>

For the low-income women involved in Brier Patch, the project offered several advantages. For the most part, they were able to work from their own homes or in the communal spaces of their apartment complexes, and they could create flexible work schedules. Most of the women were not in a position to work full time, but Brier Patch enabled them to earn at rates higher than the minimum wage. In addition, the Brier Patch crafters reached out to feminist cooperatives elsewhere in the South, developing ties with the National Council of Negro Women’s cooperatives in Mississippi, the Southern Federation of Cooperatives, and the Freedom Quilting Bee in Gees Bend, Alabama.<sup>79</sup>

Despite their best efforts, racial and class differences continued to divide the YWCA women and the Brier Patch crafters. In the mid-1970s, for example, the YWCA sought to incorporate Spanish-speaking women in the Atlanta housing projects into Brier Patch. These women, largely Cuban refugees, confronted a language barrier both in Brier Patch meetings and

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<sup>78</sup> Program for Action quoted in Ann Stallard (Chairman, Midtown YWCA Steering Committee), “Proposal for the Brier Patch,” April 1972, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA records, Emory; YWCA, “The YWCA’s One Imperative,” adopted by the 25th National Convention of the YWCA, Houston, April 1970.

<sup>79</sup> Email from Ann Stallard to author, April 21, 2008, in the author’s possession. For more on the Freedom Quilting Bee in Gees Bend, Alabama, see Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 1-5, 274-277; Nancy Callahan, *The Freedom Quilting Bee* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987); Marshall and Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty in the South*, 72-74.

in the printed directions for assembling the patterns. Although it would no doubt have been easier and more immediately effective for Brier Patch to translate the instructions into Spanish, the board decided instead to sponsor English-language classes for several of the Cuban women living in the Druid Hills Homes. Integration of Spanish-speaking women into the community, the YWCA believed, was paramount.<sup>80</sup> Class divisions were also evident in the organization's decision-making structure. Not until its second year of operation did Brier Patch slowly begin to incorporate the public housing residents into its Board of Directors. At first, the women employed as crafters sent community leaders to represent their concerns to the Board, but by the end of 1973, they had voting representation. Although they never constituted a majority of Board members, low-income women did manage to influence the organization's positions on pay and decision-making. An important example of the changes wrought by crafter participation on the Board was its policies regarding pay. Initially, Brier Patch paid its crafters after each piece had sold. But by 1973 the project had worked out a system that paid each crafter upon completion of her product. Through a series of negotiations between the crafters, their clients, and the YWCA, the crafters were paid 75 percent of the wholesale gross margin, regardless of the price at which the item was actually sold. So, for example, crafters earned \$7.88 per men's shirt they produced, which Brier Patch sold at a wholesale price of \$15 (the gross margin was \$10.50, the cost of raw materials \$4.50).<sup>81</sup> The establishment of set prices

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<sup>80</sup> Minutes, Board of Directors meeting, Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., May 15, 1973, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA records, Emory.

<sup>81</sup> Rabbit Enterprises, Restructuring Committee Report #1, January 23, 1973, folder: 1972-1974 Rabbit Enterprises, Inc., box 19, YWCA records, Emory.

allowed the crafters some stability in their incomes and guaranteed a measure of control over the time spent sewing in relation to the income they earned.

The shift in payment practices was the result of negotiation between differing groups of women who nonetheless shared some goals. All of the women involved in Brier Patch hoped to bolster the economic independence and self-respect of low-income women. What separated the women were issues of oversight and power. Over the years, the women learned from one another and adjusted their positions accordingly. They negotiated power-sharing and accommodated one another's preferences. Ann Stallard, the national President of the YWCA from 1991 to 1996, remembered Brier Patch as "a role model and standard for economic self-sufficiency and living the mission of the YWCA – empowering women and eliminating racism."<sup>82</sup>

Both Brier Patch and Lollipop Power sought to implement business models that reflected a woman-centered production schedule, but the class composition of the two entities meant that "feminist business" had different implications for each of them. The relative economic security of Lollipop's middle-class feminists allowed its members to experiment without worrying about the press's profit-margin. For Lollipop, feminist business practices were embodied in its product and its organization. Brier Patch likewise prized a production schedule that accommodated women's needs, but, because it was a feminist business that sought to provide low-income women with a degree of economic autonomy, economic viability

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<sup>82</sup> Email, Ann Stallard to the author, April 21, 2008, in the author's possession.

was of necessity its foremost concern.

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### **Consumer Activism**

As exciting and progressive as feminist businesses were, only a fraction of Southern women owned such enterprises or participated in them. Many more women attempted to recast their role in the economy by challenging their exclusion from the consumer marketplace and by using the power of their pocketbooks to help women and to shape both business practices and economic policy. Across the nation, the consumer movement of the 1960s and 1970s – already closely connected to both the labor movement and the nascent environmental movement – shared both ideological critiques and leaders with the women’s movement.<sup>83</sup> Most significantly, activists in each of these movements increasingly came to understand access to consumer sites and to the financial levers of consumption as rights of citizenship.<sup>84</sup> Equal access to consumption and credit were so important that, as historian Beth Bailey has argued, “changes in gender roles were negotiated and reconciled in the American consumer marketplace as much

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<sup>83</sup> Historian Lizabeth Cohen has argued that “during the consumer movement’s peak decade from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, American women served as the foot soldiers and many of the generals in the campaign to make markets and government more protective of consumers.” Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 370.

<sup>84</sup> Early civil rights sit-in protests and the urban riots of the mid-1960s, for example, were often staged in sites of consumption. Lizabeth Cohen has argued that the NWRO’s campaign against credit discrimination “conveyed a powerful message that economic justice involved ensuring that poor consumers could purchase the material goods they needed and wanted, even if they lacked the cash to pay for them.” Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 381.



as in the realm of politics or ideas.”<sup>85</sup> Like their contemporaries in other areas of the country, many Southern feminists considered their role as consumers to be as worthy of reform as their position as wage laborers.

Central to women’s equality in the consumer economy was equal access to credit. In some respects, the fight to ensure fair access to credit for all women culminated in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1973, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status. Many women, however, continued to face discrimination when applying for credit cards, mortgages, and loans.<sup>86</sup> These barriers had restricted the ability of women not only to purchase necessary items but also, in many cases, to support themselves financially. Most women could not obtain a student loan, purchase a house, or hold a credit card in their own names. As the League of Women Voters of DeKalb, Georgia, argued, access to credit was central to women’s citizenship. “In our credit-oriented economy,” the League proclaimed, “the granting or denial of credit determines where and how a person lives, what kind of home she and her dependents live in, whether she owns a car, or whether she can obtain a loan to send her children to college.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Beth Bailey, “She ‘Can Bring Home the Bacon’: Negotiating Gender in the 1970s,” in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 110.

<sup>86</sup> Emily Card, “Women, Housing Access, and Mortgage Credit,” *Signs* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980): S215-S219; Equal Credit Opportunity Act 1973, Public Law – 940249, 15 U.S.C. 1667. Companion legislation in 1974 prohibited discrimination in housing on the basis of sex or marital status.

<sup>87</sup> Newsletter, *DeKalb Voter* (LWV of DeKalb County, Georgia) 30, no. 7 (November/December 1974), folder: League of Women Voters, box 2, Peggy Childs papers, Emory.

Before the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was enacted, the Atlanta YWCA found that “women – single, married, divorced, or widowed; with or without children; rich or poor; young or old; are discriminated against by banks, Savings and Loans Associations, credit card companies, retail stores, and even the government.” To address this problem, the YWCA offered a series of seminars that taught women about credit law and techniques by which to challenge existing statutes.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, dozens of women wrote angry letters to NOW describing their disputes with local merchants and national credit agencies. The Southern Regional Director of NOW, Judith Lightfoot, experienced credit discrimination first-hand while living in Atlanta. Denied a credit card by MasterCard, she wrote a letter of complaint to U.S. Senator Sam Nunn. Nunn intervened with the company, which then issued Lightfoot a card as an “exception.” Lightfoot was irate; she had wanted not special treatment but a change in policy.<sup>89</sup>

Although unequal access to credit was a problem shared by all women, married women faced greater challenges. As the YWCA noted, “married women, whether employed or not, become financially ‘non-persons’” because their legal identities were subsumed in those of their

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<sup>88</sup> Newsletter, YWCA, no name, 2 (Winter 1973), folder: 1971, 1973 South Fulton YWCA Center Brochures, box 29, YWCA records, Emory.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Lightfoot to Sen. Sam Nunn, December 9, 1972, folder 38, box 44, National Organization for Women records, Schlesinger; Robert P. Guyton, President, National Bank of Ga., Atlanta, to Judith Lightfoot, Atlanta, November 29, 1972, folder 38, box 44, NOW records, Schlesinger. Lightfoot also had difficulty obtaining a credit card from Neiman-Marcus department stores, which refused to issue her a credit card under her own name; instead, it was issued to her as “Mrs. Arthur Lightfoot.” See Judith G. Lightfoot, Atlanta, to Credit Manager, Neiman-Marcus, Dallas, Tex., August 17, 1972, folder 38, box 44, NOW records, Schlesinger.

husbands. When Patricia Jacobs, a resident of Atlanta, applied for a credit card at a local bank under her own name, the bank contacted her husband for confirmation. “I was outraged!” she recalled. “A few days later, a man called me, apologized but said it would still have to be in my husband’s name because under the law, the husband is responsible for all debts incurred by his wife. . . . I told the man to forget it, I was *not a Mrs. Keith Jacobs*. I was an individual with my own name.”<sup>90</sup> Elaine Babcock, also from Atlanta, approached a local bank for a loan so that she could afford dental work. The bank refused to issue Babcock credit in her own name. Eventually, she was able to convince a young female clerk to loan her \$200. The amount was small, Babcock recalled, “but, anyway, I got my credit, and little by little, I gained confidence.”<sup>91</sup> Mary Long, a nurse in Atlanta, found that after her marriage ended in divorce, she could not obtain adequate credit. “I stopped using my husband’s name – so I could not acquire the things I needed,” she recalled. “People sort of took it away. Oh, no longer; you’re no longer a Paschal, so we can’t give you this [credit]. They would actually tell you stuff like that. You can’t buy furniture because you’re no longer married, and that sort of thing.”<sup>92</sup>

When Sue Millen tried to open a Sears account in Atlanta, the company refused to grant her a

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<sup>90</sup> Patricia B. Jacobs, n.d. [1973?], to Ms. De Saram, folder 38, box 44, NOW records, Schlesinger. De Saram, the recipient, headed up a credit task force for NOW.

<sup>91</sup> Babcock’s husband had refused to spend his money to have her teeth fixed even after the bank offered him unlimited credit to do so. Transcript, Eleanor Crisler Babcock, in an interview conducted by Amanda Brown, April 19, 2004, Kennesaw, Ga., p. 15, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>92</sup> Transcript, Mary Long, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, May 13, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., p. 11, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

line of credit without the signature of her husband or brother. “I said, ‘well, my brother’s not even employed and my father lives in Illinois,” Millen recalled, “why would you need their signature? I’m the one that has the job, I’m the one earning money.”<sup>93</sup> Sarah Weddington, a lawyer in Texas who later argued *Roe v. Wade* before the U.S. Supreme Court, remembered that when she applied for a credit card “the man across the desk said, ‘well, you can’t have one without your husband’s signature,’ and I explained that my husband had [just] come back from military service, I was the lawyer in the family, I was going to put him through law school, but it would be some years before he had income, and I didn’t think I needed his signature. And he explained to me that he didn’t care what I thought; I had to get my husband’s signature or no credit.” A few years later, Weddington ran for a seat in the Texas legislature and, after winning the election, sponsored the state’s Equal Credit Bill. After its passage, she returned to the same store and demanded a credit card in her own name.<sup>94</sup>

Not every woman could run for office and enact legislation. At a grassroots level, many activists developed a new solution: they created credit unions that circumvented mainstream institutions and offered women direct access to credit.<sup>95</sup> Like feminists in other regions of the

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<sup>93</sup> Transcript, Sue Ann Millen, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, July 7 and 9, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., p. 15, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>94</sup> Transcript, Sarah Weddington, in an interview conducted by Diane Fowlkes and Charlene Ball, April 15, 1998, Atlanta, Ga., p. 4, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>95</sup> The National Council of Negro Women also explored alternative credit systems. In 1968, a NCNW Task Force investigated the possibility of promoting credit unions and local-level financial institutions, but no further action appears to have been taken. National Council of Negro

country, a number of Southern women's groups established feminist credit unions designed to help women avoid the sexism built into traditional banking institutions.<sup>96</sup> The number of credit unions in the United States exploded in the 1970s, in part of because new federal legislation insuring deposits, a step which contributed stability to the industry.<sup>97</sup> Credit unions, which had a long history, were generally held together by "common bonds," and often comprised workers in a shared industry. Feminist credit unions believed their politics could serve as the unifying thread among their members.<sup>98</sup>

The Women's Southwest Feminist Credit Union (WSFCU), established in 1974, was

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Women, "Task Force Reports from the 1968 National Convention," folder 208, box 18, series 2, group 73, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington, D.C.

<sup>96</sup> Although NOW's national office supported the efforts of Southern women to create these credit unions, it was not directly or financially involved. Rather, most of NOW's activities regarding credit unions took place at the local level. In 1974, for example, the Southern Regional Council of NOW "urge[d] the individual chapters help in establishment of feminist credit unions." NOW was aware of the special limitations facing Southern women. "Credit to women," the Southern Regional Council argued, was "limited because we have the lowest paying jobs, whereas our credit is limited because our jobs are of uncertain tenure – last hired, first fired." Resolutions from 1974 Southern Regional NOW Conference, October 20, 1974, p. 2, folder 18, box 169, NOW records, Schlesinger.

<sup>97</sup> The National Credit Union Administration Act of 1970 also added a federal regulatory agency. In the decade that followed, credit union membership more than doubled from 22.8 million members in 1970 to 46 million in 1980. Assets held in credit unions quadrupled in the same period (from \$17.9 billion to \$73.2 billion). Olin S. Pugh and F. Jerry Ingram, *Credit Unions: A Movement Becomes an Industry* (Reston, Va.: Reston Publishing/Prentice-Hall, 1984), 6-7, 199.

<sup>98</sup> Credit unions had multiplied in the United States since the passage of the Federal Credit Union Act in 1934. See Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 281-282. On mutual aid societies, which offered similar savings structures, see David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chap. 2. The first feminist credit union formed in Detroit in 1973. Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman's Survival Catalog* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1973), 174.

in many respects typical of feminist credit unions. Based in Dallas, it sought to create an alternative to mainstream credit-lending agencies and to “provide equal access to credit for women.”<sup>99</sup> Because each of the four organizations that formed the WSFCU (Women’s Equity Action League, NOW, Women for Change, and the Women’s Political Caucus) worked to improve women’s rights, the WSFCU’s common bond was feminism. Membership in the credit union was not restricted to women, but all members had to join at least one of the four sponsoring groups before becoming part of the WSFCU. The credit union attracted both individual women and women’s organizations such as the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Dallas.<sup>100</sup> By offering its members loans to purchase cars, pay debts, start businesses, or make home improvements, the WSFCU helped women establish credit histories for themselves.<sup>101</sup> In addition to providing loans and savings accounts, the credit union offered free financial counseling to its members as they became equal actors in the economy.<sup>102</sup> Like

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<sup>99</sup> *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), December 1976, p. 2, box 23, National Organization for Women Newsletter Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University (hereafter, *NOW Chapter Newsletters*, Schlesinger).

<sup>100</sup> In the 1970s, much of the credit union activity in the South appears to have been geared to the needs of middle-class women. There is little evidence that these credit unions made efforts to recruit working-class members. By the 1990s, however, this had changed. Today, the WSFCU devotes its efforts to helping low-income women receive loans, file tax returns, and repair credit histories. See [www.wsfcudallas.org](http://www.wsfcudallas.org).

<sup>101</sup> The WSFCU urged women to establish credit in their own names even if they were currently married, because they faced the possibility of divorce or widowhood. At the time, the rate of divorce was growing in the metropolitan Dallas area; in 1975, over 11,000 divorces had been granted in Dallas County alone. The WSFCU also offered its members the opportunity to purchase life insurance in their own names. *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), April 1976, p. 2, box 23, *NOW Chapter Newsletters*, Schlesinger.

<sup>102</sup> The minimum deposit was \$6.00 (\$5.00 to buy a share and \$1.00 to join), with dividend payments made to each shareholder. *Ibid.*

feminist businesses, the WSFCU envisioned finance as more than an exchange of money. Defining credit as “people’s trust in people,” the business model of the WSFCU put people before profits.

Members of the Florida Feminist Credit Union (FFCU) in Miami urged women to invest their savings in loans to their “sisters” rather than putting their money in “male-owned and controlled banking institutions with sexist lending policies and employment practices.”<sup>103</sup> Organized, directed, and staffed by women, the FFCU extended loans, provided savings accounts, and offered credit to its 450 members.<sup>104</sup> Membership in the credit union assumed a shared commitment to equal rights. FFCU leaders asserted that the difference between their organization and other kinds of banks or savings and loan associations was “simply the difference between people with a common bond – in our case, feminism – setting up their own financial system for their savings and credit needs, and people giving up their savings to a corporation whose goal is to make money for its stockholders.”<sup>105</sup> The FFCU also differed from mainstream banks and credit unions in its expanded understanding of acceptable grounds for the extension of credit. Members argued that unlike traditional banks, which discriminated against women because of their marital status or because of their husband’s credit rating, the

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<sup>103</sup> Advertisement, *WomaNews* (Gainesville, Fla.) 3, no. 6 (September 1977): 5, Schlesinger Periodical File, Schlesinger.

<sup>104</sup> The FFCU was organized by “people with a common bond – sex discrimination,” *Tampa NOW* (Tampa, Fla.), May 1976, box 7, NOW Chapter Newsletters, Schlesinger.

<sup>105</sup> Advertisement, *WomaNews* (Gainesville, Fla.), 3, no. 6 (September 1977): 5, Schlesinger Periodical File, Schlesinger.

FFCU allowed women to be “honest” about why they needed a loan, “whether it be for a divorce, an abortion, tuition, vacation, or a means to become a self-directing person.”<sup>106</sup>

Patricia Ireland, a member of the FFCU and future president of NOW, received a loan from the credit union to purchase a tractor.<sup>107</sup>

Activists in the South recognized that gaining access to credit could not completely resolve women’s inequality in the consumer marketplace, but they understood that their spending decisions could have political meaning. Accordingly, many feminist groups across the region created directories to guide women in their consumer choices, particularly those that involved hiring others. Feminists organized job-placement agencies not only to help women find work, but also to encourage women to employ other women. The Women’s Center in Dallas, Texas, for example, organized a job bank to publicize open positions and to promote women-owned businesses. In addition, the job bank offered vocational assessment, training in interviewing skills, help with résumé writing, and mentoring by other women in the same occupations.<sup>108</sup> Also in Texas, NOW chapters in Dallas, Denton, Fort Worth, and Longview created the Four Rivers Women’s Directory, which aimed to support women in business and to urge NOW members to hire other women when they had need of legal services, carpentry, or other skills. As NOW explained, “‘Women mean business’ is how the saying goes these days

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Patricia Ireland, *What Women Want* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 170, 222-223.

<sup>108</sup> *Equal Times* (Dallas), 5, no. 9 (August 1976): 3, Schlesinger Periodical Files, Schlesinger. *Equal Times* was the publication of the Dallas Women’s Center.



in an age of changing concepts of women's roles." The directory provided information for women going into business for themselves and publicized their enterprises at no expense.<sup>109</sup>

Southern women also used their status as consumers to press for more equitable treatment of women workers. As consumers, women could employ the power of their purses through boycotts of products produced under unfair or exploitative working conditions. For example, like consumers across the country, Southern feminists supported striking farm workers by boycotting nonunion lettuce and grape products.<sup>110</sup> Women in Atlanta boycotted Sears department stores because managers refused to promote women to positions that earned high commissions.<sup>111</sup> Such consumer boycotts became a critical way that middle-class feminists could support their working-class counterparts.

The most consequential boycott in the South was the one targeting Farah pants. One of the most significant labor battles involving Southern women in the 1970s, the Farah strike united its largely Mexican-American workforce on the picket line and its largely white, middle-class consumer supporters at the checkout line. In the early 1970s, women across the South launched boycotts and picketed stores in opposition to the Farah Manufacturing Company,

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<sup>109</sup> *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), September 1977, p. 3, box 23, NOW Chapter Newsletters, Schlesinger.

<sup>110</sup> "Food and Drug," *Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta) 4, no. 3 (January 19, 1971): 16-17; "Salad Bowl Boycott," *Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta) 4, no. 7 (February 15, 1971): 18.

<sup>111</sup> Transcript, Joyce Durand, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, January 27, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., p. 23, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU; transcript, Janette Pratt, in an interview conducted by Joyce Durand, April 16, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., p. 25, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

which produced of men's and boys' pants at plants in El Paso, Texas.<sup>112</sup> Launched by the company's overwhelmingly female, Mexican-American employees to protest low wages and poor working conditions, the Farah strike was supported by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, NOW, and numerous local women's organizations.<sup>113</sup> The non-unionized Farah workers had decided to strike not only because their weekly pay was far less than that in unionized plants nearby, but also because they considered the production schedule at the Farah plant to be onerous and treatment of its workers unreasonable.<sup>114</sup> In response to the wildcat strike, the Farah Company used unmuzzled guard dogs to terrorize women on the picket lines. More than 1,000 striking workers were arrested on charges that they had violated an injunction prohibiting them from picketing.<sup>115</sup>

Southern women outside El Paso who sympathized with the strike found they could use their pocketbooks to support the workers. In a letter urging NOW members to support the

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<sup>112</sup> Emily Honig, "Women at Farah Revisited: Political Mobilization and Its Aftermath among Chicana Workers in El Paso, Texas, 1972-1992," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 425-452; Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig, *Women at Farah: An Unfinished Story* (copyright by the authors, El Paso, 1979).

<sup>113</sup> Gayle Gagliano, "Women Won't Wear the Pants," *Distaff* (New Orleans) 1, no. 9 (October 1973): 3-4. The Farah boycotts and pickets were widely covered and supported by women working with underground newspapers in Austin, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia. Of the workers, 95 percent were Mexican American and 85 percent were women.

<sup>114</sup> The average weekly take-home pay of the Farah workers was \$69, far less than the three unionized clothing plants of other manufacturers in El Paso, where workers earned \$102 per week. Gagliano, "Women Won't Wear the Pants," 4.

<sup>115</sup> Brochure, Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, "If You Wear the Pants in Your Family," folder: NOW Atlanta Chapter Issues/Other, box 20, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

Farah boycott, feminists were warned that “wearing Farah pants is like endorsing poverty, terrorism, company spies, law-breaking, and human misery.”<sup>116</sup> While 3,000 workers in El Paso went on strike, NOW urged its members to take action. Along with other progressive organizations across the country, NOW hoped to shift “the major battleground in the strike . . . from Farah’s seven plants in southwest Texas to the retail clothing counters of the nation.” As the United Farm Workers had demonstrated, a nationwide consumer boycott could serve as an important weapon in the battle for labor rights.<sup>117</sup> There is some evidence that this strategy worked; in 1972, Farah lost \$8.3 million and its stock fell from \$50 a share to \$6.<sup>118</sup>

Members of NOW and the National Women’s Political Caucus picketed Farah distributors by the hundreds. One feminist writer went so far as to argue that the “Farah strike has become more popular than Farah pants.”<sup>119</sup> In New Orleans, the Farah Action Committee (a group that included nuns, other Catholic activists, civil rights leaders, students, feminists, and

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 197-201; Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Nixon* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 300.

<sup>118</sup> Farah pants had netted over \$6 million the year before the strike began. Brochure, Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, “If You Wear the Pants in Your Family,” folder: NOW Atlanta Chapter Issues/Other, box 20, Martha Wren Gaines papers. The National Labor Relations Board ordered Farah to accept the unionization of its workers in 1974. Although a contract negotiated by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America won the workers pay increases, a medical insurance plan, and a grievance procedure, many of the striking workers felt that they had been left out of the negotiation process once the national union stepped in. The unionization drive was weakened by two other circumstances as well. First, because Texas was a “right-to-work” state, workers could not be required to join the union. Second, the strike’s financial impact forced Farah to reduce its workweek to four days. Coyle, Hershatter, and Honig, *Women at Farah*, 48-53.

<sup>119</sup> Gagliano, “Women Won’t Wear the Pants,” 3.

workers) organized a boycott of and conducted a weekly picket at the D. H. Holmes Department Store, which sold Farah clothing.<sup>120</sup> The Georgia Women's Political Caucus sent a truckload of food, clothing, and toys to the striking Farah workers.<sup>121</sup> Annabelle Walker, president of the New Orleans chapter of NOW, remembered the Farah boycott as a moment when black civil rights groups and women's movement groups worked together, albeit with some disagreements. "We decided to put out a resolution [supporting the Farah strike]," Walker recalled, "and one of the black male leaders said, 'yes, we want them to know that we support our brothers in Texas.' I said, wait a minute, those are sisters, 85 percent were women, but he was going to talk about brothers, you see. He was ignoring the women."<sup>122</sup> For activists like Walker, the striking women were the *raison d'être* for the boycott. The Farah boycott enabled feminists across the region to use their power as consumers as an economic and political weapon.

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## Conclusion

The groups examined in this chapter – welfare rights organizers, feminist business

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<sup>120</sup> Jane Dubrouillet, "Farah Slacks Picketed in N.O.," *Distaff* (New Orleans) 2, no. 2 (February 1974): 1, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Newsletter, *A Woman's Place* (Georgia Women's Political Caucus) 2, no. 3 (March 1974), folder: Georgia Women's Political Caucus, box 1, Peggy Childs papers, Emory.

<sup>122</sup> Walker claimed that the men in the group ultimately came around after she conducted "a little consciousness raising . . . with some of the black male civil rights leaders." Transcript, Annabelle Walker, in an interview conducted by Joyce Durand, September 24, 1999, [no place], p. 58, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

owners, and consumer rights advocates – had virtually no overlapping membership or shared spaces, but each was participating in a dialogue that sought to alter women’s status in the economy and to define economic justice more expansively than workplace equity alone. Each represented a challenge to other feminists who argued that such legislation as the Equal Rights Amendment and the Equal Pay Act would create equality for women. Welfare rights activists understood that legislation aimed at equalizing incomes could not solve Southern poverty when poor women were unable to enter the labor market. In creating alternative workspaces, feminist business proprietors sought to address the devaluation of women by companies that failed to consider the specific challenges facing female employees. Consumer advocates demanded respect for women as individuals. Economic justice meant valuing the multiplicity of women’s roles in the economy – not only as workers but also as mothers, producers, and consumers. It entailed not only better jobs but a system that valued both cooperative endeavors and individual rights. A just society would create new opportunities, counter sex stereotypes, foster consciousness-raising, bolster non-hierarchical relationships, and take into account women’s roles in both the public and private spheres.

The scattered, unorganized, and local characteristics of Southern feminists’ battles for economic justice attest to the complexity and breadth of second-wave feminism in the South and to the widespread desire for alternative economic choices. The activists described in this chapter articulated an understanding of economic justice broader than equal pay could encompass, and in so doing, they envisioned a more equitable and autonomous economic system. Yet, the multiple and distinct efforts to secure economic citizenship also suggest that

the women's movement failed to create a coherent critique of women's inequality in the Southern economy.

While this category of feminism encompassed a wide array of women, creating organizations or launching sustained critiques that transcended divisions of race and class proved challenging. In part, this difficulty stemmed from the fluidity of the meaning of economic justice. The few efforts that involved women of different backgrounds revealed that class played a large role in dividing women. The middle-class YWCA women involved in the Brier Patch project and the consumers who supported the Farah boycott did so because they wanted to help working-class women, not because they understood these efforts as part of their own economic well-being. They were supportive but not fully invested as partners. As a result, these initiatives did not lead to a construction of economic justice that united women of different classes, or joined production and consumption, wage-earning and welfare.

### **Chapter 3**

## **“Women Should be Free to Decide”: Southern Women and Reproductive Rights**

Perhaps more than any other aspect of second-wave feminism, the struggle for reproductive rights was shaped by Southern women. Drawing on multiple and varied grassroots organizations, the reproductive rights movement in the South ultimately influenced the ability of women across the nation to control their reproductive choices. From landmark legal cases that challenged restrictions on abortion procedures to widely publicized campaigns to end sterilization abuse, the South was at the forefront of the most important debates regarding reproductive justice in the late 1960s and 1970s. Diverse groups of Southern women sought to expand access to medical resources, to remove obstacles to women’s control over their own reproduction, and to explain why control over reproduction was central to women’s equality.

Battles for reproductive rights were particularly influenced by race and class because differential enforcement of laws and uneven allocation of resources so strongly influenced the experiences of different groups of women. In the South, even more than elsewhere, statutory regulations and the practices of medical officials determined women’s access to reproductive choice. Even when laws lacked specific reference to class and race, they were often enforced differently for women of color and low-income women than for middle-income and white women.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rickie Solinger contends that “white women have had the reproductive lives they have, in part, because lawmakers and policy enforcers have historically made certain laws and policies that helped define and qualify certain women as white. Likewise, African American women and other ‘nonmajority’ women have had their reproductive lives structured to various degrees by

The reproductive rights movement in the South was thus built upon differences of race, class, and history. Activists often shared a language and a politics that emphasized women's control of their bodies and their right to make the medical decisions that affected their lives.<sup>2</sup> They all challenged the control of women's reproductive choices by men or by male-dominated institutions. Only sporadically, however, did they work in coalitions across lines of race and class. Women fighting to end sterilization abuse, for example, seldom organized in the same networks as those working to expand access to abortions, even though their activism represented a similar desire to guarantee women control over their reproductive choices. Activists in the reproductive rights movement, divided by race and class, agreed that reproductive justice meant the freedom to reproduce as well as the choice not to do so, yet they rarely launched collaborative initiatives, protested together, or worked in conjunction.

Instead, the reproductive rights movement in the South was characterized by separate and multiple strands. With respect to the central issues in the struggle for reproductive rights – birth control, sterilization, and abortion – racial and class experiences shaped the ways in which Southern women interpreted the meaning of reproductive freedom. As a result, activists rarely attempted to build cross-class and cross-racial coalitions organized around reproductive

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laws and policies devised to define the nonwhite status of these women and their children.” Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>2</sup> For example, as Rickie Solinger has argued, women of different races found common ground in the claim “that forced pregnancy was inconsistent with citizenship and constitutional rights for women” and “that the right to manage pregnancy was a woman's business, not the province of boyfriends, husbands, doctors, the state, or others.” *Ibid.*, 182.



politics, and only sporadically did they recognize individual reproductive battles as part of a larger war.<sup>3</sup>

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## **Birth Control**

The introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s and the increased use of intrauterine devices (IUDs) in the 1970s reconfigured the possibilities for female-controlled contraception.<sup>4</sup> Even with the availability of a greater variety of contraceptives, many women continued to experience frustration not only in obtaining birth control devices but in acquiring information about the health risks of particular methods and about their proper use. In addition, many had little knowledge of where to obtain contraceptives if their doctors refused to help them. Southern women – black and white, rural and urban – sought out information about birth control with the firm understanding that, in the words of Chapel Hill activist Lu Stanton, “hope is not a method of contraception.”<sup>5</sup> For most women, however, that realization was only the first step in a long process, not the least because they confronted both conservative cultural mores and legal restrictions. Southern women of all races struggled to gain access to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), chaps. 9-11.

<sup>5</sup> Lu Stanton, “Contraceptive Clinic Opens,” *She* 1, no. 7 (March 1974): 3, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O’Connor papers, Wilson Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. (hereafter UNC Manuscripts); Katie Newsome Campbell, “Hope is Not a Method,” *She* 4, no. 2 (October 1975): 2, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O’Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts.

contraceptives, but racial and class identities influenced the reception of birth control. Black nationalist politics and a history of abuses by the state raised special questions for black women. Lower-income women, both black and white, although often welcoming the option of contraception, also faced coercive pressures from lawmakers and welfare agencies to reduce the size of their families.<sup>6</sup>

Many Southern women lacked information about how to obtain and use contraceptives. Darlene Leache, for example, married as a teenager and sought for many years to control her reproductive cycles, to little avail. A white woman living in a rural and conservative Tennessee community, Leache had few medical resources and little knowledge of her legal rights. For many years, her husband forbade her to take birth control pills and refused to participate in any other method of contraception. “I thought that the husband had to agree with you to take birth control pills,” she later explained. After bearing three children, she learned that she could make medical decisions on her own and had an IUD inserted, an action that dramatically increased her control over her reproductive choices.<sup>7</sup>

Like Darlene Leache, many Southern women lacked knowledge not only of how to

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<sup>6</sup> Legislators regarded state and federally funded family planning programs as attempts to cut welfare expenditures, rather than programs that would ensure women’s sexual emancipation. Officials in North Carolina, for example, argued that it was less costly to provide contraceptives than to support financially the offspring of recipients of public assistance. Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 261-262.

<sup>7</sup> Transcript, interview of Darlene Leache by Fran Leeper Buss, June 5, 1980, Newcomb, Tennessee, pp. 31-32, box 1, Southwest Institute for Research on Minority Women Oral Histories of Local Income and Minority Women, Southern Historical Collection, UNC Manuscripts. After five years, Leache decided to switch to the birth control pill, but had trouble using it effectively; she and her husband eventually had six children.

exercise birth control but also of contraceptive methods and devices. Norma McCorvey (better known as Jane Roe, the plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade*) learned nothing about contraception until after her second child was born, a circumstance she attributed to having been raised in a household “without any discussion of sex, without any talk about birth control.” McCorvey, a working-class woman from Texas, remembered being “too ashamed” to ask for contraceptive devices even if she had had knowledge of where to obtain them. Byllye Avery, a Florida native who would later become a leader in the women’s health movement, also had minimal knowledge of birth control in the early years of her marriage. Avery and her husband tried to prevent contraception but found the barrier methods they employed (a diaphragm and condoms) to be ineffective. She became pregnant “sort of by mistake.” Avery had been trying to practice birth control, but, as she later recalled, “I really didn’t know what I was doing, and I ended up being pregnant.”<sup>8</sup> The same was true for Norma McCorvey. McCorvey tried using powders to prevent pregnancy, but acknowledged that both she and most of the women she knew “were all so naive” about controlling reproduction.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to lacking knowledge of reliable contraceptive methods, some women worried about the implications of practicing birth control. Norma McCorvey, for example, was

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<sup>8</sup> Byllye Avery, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, July 21, 2005, p. 10, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. (hereafter, Smith).

<sup>9</sup> Norma McCorvey in *The Choices We Made: 25 Women and Men Speak Out about Abortion*, ed. Angela Bonavoglia (New York: Random House, 1991), 138. This book contains first-person testimonials of women’s experiences with abortion. The *Roe v. Wade* case is discussed later in this chapter.

afraid to ask her doctor to fit her for a diaphragm because she was unmarried and feared condemnation. If she used birth control, she feared that “everybody would know what I was doing, that I wasn’t married and I was having sex.”<sup>10</sup> Byllye Avery remembered that a college friend had become pregnant and had tried to abort the pregnancy with some “big black pills.” Women “heard all kinds of stories about folks drinking turpentine, kerosene, doing almost anything to keep from being pregnant,” Avery recalled. “There was that fear that pregnancy could get you anytime. If your period was a few days late, if you threw up – even if you hadn’t been sexually active – you started thinking. Maybe I’m pregnant. We were functioning with a lot of ignorance and fear.”<sup>11</sup>

In part to confront the lack of knowledge and sense of shame in asking for contraceptives, reproductive rights activists across the South established women’s health clinics to provide both information and prescriptions.<sup>12</sup> In 1970, the Atlanta Women’s Center – staffed by a coalition of volunteers from the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), and Atlanta Women’s Liberation – established a feminist library that included publications about birth control options.<sup>13</sup> College women at the University of North Carolina operated a Women’s Health Clinic for students that

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Byllye Avery in *The Choices We Made*, ed. Bonovoglia, 150.

<sup>12</sup> Feminist women’s health clinics are examined in closer detail in Chapter 4, below.

<sup>13</sup> Atlanta NOW, “Action Highlights, March 1970-September 1971,” folder 47, box 169, NOW records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter Schlesinger).

offered gynecological exams, pap smears, and birth control. The clinic also sponsored “rap group sessions” for women to discuss issues relating to contraceptive use and sexuality. “Each group is different,” reported volunteer Lucinda Mims, “one week we may spend most of the time talking about abortion and another week we’ll talk mostly about the pill.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, a women’s liberation group in Austin, Texas, provided information and counseling out of a small office at the YMCA in an attempt to remedy the obstacles local women faced in obtaining birth control.<sup>15</sup> Only a small number of doctors in Austin were willing to prescribe birth control pills or devices to unmarried women or to women under twenty-one years of age, and the local chapter of Planned Parenthood was reluctant to help students because it feared pressure from University of Texas officials. The health clinic on campus was little better. There, the underground newspaper *The Rag* discovered, doctors delivered “long lectures” to women on “fooling around before marriage” and rarely dispensed contraceptives.<sup>16</sup> “No woman,” the editors declared, “should be denied effective birth control because of our society’s hangups. No woman should be forced into an illegal abortion because a doctor could not bring himself to

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<sup>14</sup> Other topics of discussion included breast examinations, pelvic examinations, venereal diseases, and sexual relationships. Stanton, “Contraceptive Clinic Opens,” 3; Campbell, “Hope is Not a Method,” 2.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, advertisement, *The Rag* (Austin, Tex.) 4, no. 38 (August 31, 1970): 23; David J. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 391-392; Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 327-328.

<sup>16</sup> “Birth Control,” *The Rag* (Austin, Tex.) 4, no. 3 (1969): 17. See also Sarah Weddington, *A Question of Choice* (New York: Putnam’s, 1992), 26.

provide her with effective birth control.”<sup>17</sup>

Because many (although not all) birth control advocates in organizations such as NOW and the YWCA were middle class, they often did not consider the costs of birth control. By contrast, public funding of birth control was critical to poor women who relied on medical care provided under federal or state programs. The demands of such women sometimes pushed middle-class women into acknowledging a wider definition of birth control politics. In Washington, D.C., for example, poor black women who sought greater access to reproductive control worked in conjunction with white women in the city’s women’s liberation movement to increase funding and distribution of contraceptives through the city’s Department of Health.<sup>18</sup>

While many Southern women shared a desire for greater knowledge of and access to contraceptives, the use and advocacy of contraceptive birth control had different meanings for black and white women. Historically, the birth control movement in the United States had been tainted by attempts to control the African American birth rate. Eugenists had employed racial prejudice in their thinking and policies, often linking vice and crime to areas with high birth rates.<sup>19</sup> Birth control advocate Margaret Sanger sometimes cited eugenic “science” as a

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<sup>17</sup> “Birth Control,” *The Rag* (Austin, Tex.) 4, no. 3 (1969): 17.

<sup>18</sup> Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), chap. 4.

<sup>19</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, such arguments would replace crime with “culture of poverty” analyses. Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 146, 184-185. For early twentieth century discussion of eugenics and birth control, see Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), chaps. 5-6; Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), chap. 4.

political weapon in her fight to legitimize contraception.<sup>20</sup> In the 1930s, these ideas were sometimes echoed by prominent African American men. In a 1932 essay, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois criticized high birth rates among people of color, particularly among “the mass of ignorant Negroes” who “still breed carelessly and disastrously.” High birth rates, Du Bois argued, increased the “portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.”<sup>21</sup> Although Du Bois’s condemnations employed language similar to that of some white eugenicists, he did so for different reasons. As sociologist Dorothy Roberts has contended, a number of black leaders viewed reducing the birth rate as a means of lifting blacks out of poverty. “White eugenicists,” Roberts argues, “promoted birth control as a way of preserving an oppressive social structure; blacks promoted birth control as a way of toppling it.”<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding its negative representation of their sexuality and reproduction, any

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<sup>20</sup> The debate regarding Sanger’s use of eugenics remains heated. See Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Black Folk and Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* 16 (June 1932): 166. For more on Du Bois and birth control, see McCann, *Birth Control Politics*, 143; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Introduction,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Free Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 86. Loretta Ross makes a similar argument. “[I]n the early twentieth century,” she writes, “black organizations were often visible supporters of fertility control for black women, linking reproductive rights to racial advancement.” Loretta Ross, “African-American Women and Abortion,” in *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*, ed. Rickie Solinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 163.

number of African American women embraced the birth control movement of the early twentieth century for their own reasons. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, black women's clubs created educational campaigns and raised funds to support birth control clinics at the Hampton Institute (among other places), while black nurses and doctors disseminated information within their communities.<sup>23</sup> Black women's organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women supported birth control and worked to open family planning clinics in black communities.<sup>24</sup>

Although the context and options had changed by the 1960s and 1970s, the use and advocacy of contraceptives remained subject to debate among many African Americans who, across lines of class, region, and politics, expressed wariness regarding the expanded accessibility of birth control. Two nationwide studies conducted in the early 1970s found considerable suspicion of governmentally funded birth control, with nearly 40 percent of the black Americans surveyed fearing that it was intended to exterminate their race.<sup>25</sup> In a 1971

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<sup>23</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 86-87; Susan L. Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 51; Ross, "African-American Women and Abortion," 168; Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> William A. Darity and Castellano B. Turner, "Family Planning, Race Consciousness, and the Fear of Race Genocide," *American Journal of Public Health* 62 (November 1972): 1454-1459; William A. Darity and Castellano B. Turner, "Fears of Genocide among Black Americans as Related to Age, Sex, and Region," *American Journal of Public Health* 63 (December 1973): 1029-1034. These studies found that the African Americans most likely to believe that government-funded birth control was a method of genocide were male, Northern, and urban.



cover story, *Ebony* magazine, whose readership was primarily middle class, advocated increasing the number of large families among African Americans and questioned the motivation and timing of birth control availability.<sup>26</sup> Such concerns extended to activists at the grassroots. Civil rights advocate and Mississippi native Fannie Lou Hamer suggested that birth control and abortion could be forms of racial genocide, while the head of the Florida NAACP, Marvin Dawes, argued that black women should “produce more babies, not less” to augment the political power of black Americans through sheer population increase.<sup>27</sup>

The black nationalist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was especially critical of attempts to reduce the number of pregnancies among African American women. Historian Simone Caron has found that opposition to birth control among black Americans increased during the latter half of the 1960s. Young men in the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam were particularly hostile; they viewed state-funded birth control as genocide waged against African Americans.<sup>28</sup> But their opinions were not always shared by women in black nationalist

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<sup>26</sup> “[B]ack in the days of slavery, black folks couldn’t grow kids fast enough for white folks to harvest,” wrote the story’s author. “Now that we’ve got a little taste of power, white folks want us to call a moratorium on having children.” Dick Gregory, “My Answer to Genocide,” *Ebony*, October 1971, p. 66; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 98.

<sup>27</sup> On Hamer, see Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Plume, 1994), 274; Dawes is quoted in Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 99. See also Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 198.

<sup>28</sup> Simone M. Caron, “Birth Control and the Black Community in the 1960s: Genocide or Power Politics?” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 547. See also Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 254-257.

circles.<sup>29</sup> Dara Abubakari, the vice president of a separatist movement that sought to create a black nation in the South, argued that “women should be free to decide if and when they want children . . . men shouldn’t tell us. Nobody should tell us.”<sup>30</sup> Historian Jennifer Nelson contends that even when women of color agreed with male black nationalists on issues of coerced reproductive control, they still sought assistance for voluntary efforts to control their fertility.<sup>31</sup> In Louisiana, for example, when state-funded medical programs began to fund family planning in the mid-1960s, black women were six times as likely as their white counterparts to request contraceptives.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Several women in black liberation organizations rejected the call for black women to increase the number of children they bore. In her anthology on black women published in 1970, Toni Cade included an essay titled “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?” She had “been made aware of the national call to Sister to abandon birth control . . . to picket family planning centers and abortion-referral groups, and to raise revolutionaries.” But, she asked, “what plans do you have for the care of me and the child?” Quoted in Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 100. Frances Beal, another prominent feminist critic in black nationalist circles argued that “Black women have the right and the responsibility to determine when it is in the interest of the struggle to have children or not to have them and this right must not be relinquished to any.” Quoted in Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 100. For black feminists’ critiques of black nationalism more generally, see Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 26-29.

<sup>30</sup> Abubakari’s organization, the Republic of New Africa, envisioned a black separatist nation consisting of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Dara Abubakari, “The Black Woman is Liberated in Her Own Mind,” in *Black Women in White America*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 587; Simone M. Caron, “Birth Control and the Black Community in the 1960s: Genocide or Power Politics?” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 549.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 4. For black women’s critique of the black nationalist position on birth control, see also Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 147-148.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, “African-American Women and Abortion,” 161. Ross does not indicate the racial makeup of the population eligible for state-funded medical care.

Southern women supported the use of birth control and actively sought out information about contraceptives. What they did not do, however, was put birth control at the center of their movement for reproductive justice. While most activists acknowledged that woman-controlled birth control was an integral component of the reproductive rights movement, they concentrated their energy and resources on expanding access to abortion and ending the practice of coercive sterilization. Birth control advocacy appeared most often in connection with arguments regarding the legalization of abortion or the public funding of reproductive health services, but rarely merited organizing on its own.

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### **Sterilization**

As a result of different historical experiences and the ways in which public health policies had been enforced, the issue of sterilization divided women sharply along lines of race and class. As was true elsewhere in the nation, middle-class Southern women often had to fight to obtain voluntary sterilizations, while lower-income women faced coercive sterilizations by medical and legal authorities.<sup>33</sup> “Because they had different histories and because medical authorities and others assigned different values to their pregnancies, and simply to the fact of

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<sup>33</sup> See Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 5; Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutierrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004), 11-12; Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 75-79. In 1963, North Carolina passed a voluntary sterilization act that was inspired, as Johanna Schoen has argued, “by both a progressive vision of women’s reproductive rights and a conservative desire to control the reproduction of poor and minority women.” The measure was limited by its requirement of spousal consent. Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*, 119-120.

their fertility,” Rickie Solinger has argued, “white middle-class women and poor women of color often had diametrically opposed responses to sterilization.”<sup>34</sup> In Arkansas, for example, black women called for laws mandating a thirty-day waiting period before a doctor could perform a sterilization, while white women lobbied for laws that would legalize voluntary sterilization for anyone over eighteen without waiting.<sup>35</sup> These differences notwithstanding, it is critical to understand both calls for sterilization by choice and protests against mandated sterilization as part of a larger movement for reproductive rights, not least because women active in either effort were sometimes in dialogue with one another. Even when they failed to communicate, they articulated similar arguments about reproductive justice, if from different positions of power.

Protests against sterilization abuse were a nationwide phenomenon in the 1970s, but took on a specific cast in the South, where involuntary sterilization was legal in many states.<sup>36</sup> Activism in the South therefore came to center on overturning existing laws and the practices through which they were enforced. Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), both of which focused on legal discrimination, played a large role in advancing a feminist demand for women’s control over

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<sup>34</sup> Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> The legislation supported by white feminists passed; the laws sought by black women did not. The Arkansas Family Planning Act of 1973 allowed physicians to distribute birth control information and devices to anyone who asked. Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> On activism against sterilization abuse in New York City, see Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, chap. 5.

their reproductive choices. Women's organizations across the South strongly supported the activities of the ACLU and the SPLC, but their role was often limited to providing moral support and raising awareness.

For African American women, sterilization was an issue freighted with both political and personal meaning. Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans had been grossly overrepresented among those sterilized in the South. In the 1930s, the North Carolina Eugenic Commission sterilized 8,000 people it deemed mentally retarded; 5,000 of them were black. Of the 1,620 persons sterilized in North Carolina between 1968 and 1974, 1,023 were African American.<sup>37</sup> Nationwide in 1970, black women were sterilized at a rate twice that of white women.<sup>38</sup> The pattern was consistent throughout much of the South. In 1972, the Centers for

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<sup>37</sup> Thirty-seven of the women were Native American. *Whole Women Caralogue: A Guide to Resources for Women in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: Switchboard Inc., 1974): 13, folder: Health Co-op, box 7 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter Duke). The *Whole Women Caralogue*, which described feminist resources in the state, was produced by a collective of nine women from the Durham-Chapel Hill area.

<sup>38</sup> Nationwide, the number of sterilizations was 9 per 1,000 for black women as compared to 4.1 per 1,000 for white women. Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 67. See also Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "'Reproductive Choice' in the Contemporary United States: A Social Analysis of Female Sterilization," in *And the Poor Get Children: Radical Perspectives on Population Dynamics*, ed. Karen L. Michaelson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), 50-88. Sterilization abuse was also practiced against Mexican-American women in Los Angeles; see Elena R. Gutierrez, *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women's Reproduction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), especially chaps. 3 and 6; Virginia Espino, "Women Sterilized as Gives Birth: Forced Sterilization and Chicana Resistance in the 1970s," in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, ed. Vicki Ruiz (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 2000), 65-82. For information on coercive sterilization generally in American history before the 1960s, see Mark A. Largent, *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilization in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Stephen Trombley, *The Right to Reproduce: A History of Coercive Sterilization* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), especially chap. 11.

Disease Control found, for example, that women of color in Alabama (black and Hispanic) were sterilized in higher numbers than white women, as were women who received public assistance as compared to those who did not. In addition, while sterilization was the most common form of contraception for all women over the age of twenty-five in the 1970s, it was disproportionately practiced by and on black and poor women. As sterilization became an increasingly popular method of reproductive control, the number of sterilizations in the United States grew from 200,000 in 1970 to over 700,000 in 1980.<sup>39</sup> “Even when doctors did not force poor and nonwhite women to accept sterilization as a method of contraception,” historian Jennifer Nelson argues, “social and cultural factors – such as poverty, limited access to health care, lack of education, or inability to speak English – often influenced their decision to ‘choose’ sterilization over other methods of birth control.”<sup>40</sup>

In many parts of the South, sterilization was the only publicly funded method of birth control.<sup>41</sup> Thus, coercive sterilizations and public welfare were often inseparable issues in the region. County-funded clinics in Mississippi advised women to undergo sterilization

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<sup>39</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 90; Thomas M. Shapiro, *Population Control Politics: Women, Sterilization, and Reproductive Choice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 6. In the 1980s, when African Americans accounted for only 12 percent of the American population, 43 percent of the women sterilized in federally funded programs were black. See Philip Reilly, *The Surgical Solution: A History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 203. For a history of Southern sterilization practices in the 1920s and 1930s, see Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 156-180.

<sup>40</sup> Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 67-68.

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 97-98.

immediately following delivery if they wished to obtain care in the future.<sup>42</sup> In the early 1960s, the Mississippi state legislature considered a program that would have sterilized unwed mothers who relied on welfare. According to state legislator David H. Glass, its purpose was to “discourage the immorality of unmarried females by providing for sterilization of the unwed mothers.”<sup>43</sup> The bill passed in the lower house by a wide margin (seventy-two in favor, thirty-seven against) but died in the senate after members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee protested what they termed “Genocide in Mississippi.”<sup>44</sup> Although this particular measure failed, coercive sterilization was practiced across the South. The deceptive practices of both public officials and medical authorities make it impossible even to estimate the number of Southern women who were sterilized against their consent or knowledge. Doctors lied to their patients, forged consent forms, or falsified records to suggest that the women had undergone appendectomies or gallbladder removals. Some women were never informed of their sterilization, and others learned of it only years after the procedure.<sup>45</sup>

Even women who were not themselves subjected to forced sterilization were affected

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<sup>42</sup> Jefferson, “Sterilization – Common in the U.S.,” 7.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 203; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 94. Unwed fathers did not seem to factor into the program.

<sup>44</sup> Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 203; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 94. Proposals similar to the one discussed in Mississippi in the 1960s continue to appear in the South. In 2008, Louisiana state representative John LaBruzzo suggested a plan that would pay women on welfare \$1,000 to undergo tubal ligation while giving tax incentives to college-educated people to have more children. Mark Waller, “LaBruzzo: Sterilization Plan Fights Poverty,” *Times-Picayune*, September 24, 2008, A1.

<sup>45</sup> Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 204.

by the practice. Hostility and suspicion of medical authorities marked the relationship of many women with their doctors. In 1974, when New York activist Margo Jefferson described a milieu in which “ovaries and uteri have been removed with a blitheness rarely accorded diseased teeth these days,” her words resonated with black women across the nation.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the 1970s, black women in the South protested the abuse they had endured at the hands of medical practitioners, social workers, and state officials. In 1968, North Carolinian Elizabeth Riddick, a fourteen-year-old African American girl whose family relied on public assistance, was sterilized after she gave birth. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which filed several suits on behalf of sterilized women, found that of 1,620 sterilizations approved by the Eugenics Board of North Carolina between 1960 and 1968, 63 percent were performed on black women like Elizabeth Riddick.<sup>47</sup> These cases led many activists to Margo Jefferson’s conclusion that women’s reproductive health had become “a political and social weapon of abuse.”<sup>48</sup>

In the early to mid 1970s, the wielding of this abusive power was challenged by several women in the South who argued that poverty played an integral part in determining women’s reproductive rights. In North Carolina, Nial Cox, an African American woman who had been

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<sup>46</sup> Margo Jefferson, “Sterilization – Common in the U.S.,” *Black Women’s Voice* 3, no. 1 (March 1974): 7, folder 14, box 1, series 28, group 73, NCNW Records, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington, D.C.

<sup>47</sup> The ACLU also found that nearly 56 percent of the sterilizations in North Carolina between 1960 and 1968 were performed on women younger than twenty years of age. Nelson, *Women of Color and Reproductive Rights*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Jefferson, “Sterilization – Common in the U.S.,” 7.



sterilized as a teenager, sued the state for compensatory damages on behalf of herself and all other women in the state who had been permanently sterilized against their will or consent. In 1965, just weeks after giving birth to a daughter, Cox had been visited by a state social worker who informed her that unless she agreed to be sterilized, she would lose the welfare benefits that supported her family. The social worker had classified Cox as mentally deficient, in large part because North Carolina law allowed sterilization surgery without a hearing or psychological examination in cases of permanent mental incompetence.<sup>49</sup> Cox reluctantly assented, believing the procedure to be temporary. In 1970, after learning that she had been rendered permanently sterile, Cox sued the state for violation of civil rights.<sup>50</sup> “I got pregnant when I was 17,” Cox declared. “I didn’t know anything about birth control or abortion. Later on, after the operation, I saw the doctor and I asked him if I could have another baby. He said that I had nothing to worry about, that, of course, I could have more kids. I know now that I was sterilized because I was from a welfare family.”<sup>51</sup> Although Cox’s case brought considerable attention to the state’s sterilization abuses, she lost her suit and the North Carolina law regarding mental incompetence was not fully overturned until 2003, after historian Jessica

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<sup>49</sup> *Nial Ruth Cox v. A. M. Stanton, et al.*, 529 F.2d 47, (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1975), <http://cases.justia.com/us-court-of-appeals/F2/529/47/386658/>.

<sup>50</sup> Nelson, *Women of Color and Reproductive Rights*, 72; Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*, 75-76.

<sup>51</sup> ACLU press release in Hearings before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S. Senate, Ninety-third Congress, April 30, June 28-29, July 10, 1973, Part 4, pp.1585-1586.

Schoen's research once again brought the practices to light.<sup>52</sup>

In South Carolina, women on public assistance faced similarly constricted choices, although the state did not employ a eugenics board to determine mental health and reproductive rights. In Aiken, South Carolina, three physicians forced patients receiving welfare to be sterilized after delivering a child. These women – both black and white, all poor – had little choice but to accede to the decisions of local medical practitioners, who pressured the women into decisions that restricted their reproductive freedom. The Aiken cases came to light in 1973 when Carol Brown, a white mother of four, reported that Dr. C. H. Pierce had refused to deliver her fifth child unless she agreed either to be sterilized or to pay \$100 in advance against his \$250 fee.<sup>53</sup> Pierce was the only obstetrician in the county who accepted Medicaid patients.<sup>54</sup> After the story became public, Pierce explained that he required welfare recipients under his care to be sterilized after their third child because he believed that supporting large families on welfare created a heavy tax burden. Pierce told Dorothy Waters, a pregnant African American woman who relied on public assistance, that “this is my tax money paying for

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<sup>52</sup> Cox's case was dismissed because the statute of limitations had expired. On Schoen's contributions, see Dana Damico, “Easley Repeals Eugenics Statute,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, April 18, 2003; <http://againsttheirwill.journalnow.com>.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy Hicks, “Sterilization of Black Mother of 3 Stirs Aiken, S.C.,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1973, p. 27. The story dealt with the claims of several women charging Aiken authorities with practicing sterilization abuse.

<sup>54</sup> W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: A Medical History of African Americans and the Problem of Race: Beginnings to 1900* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 455; Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 162-163; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 92.

this baby and I'm tired of paying for illegitimate children.”<sup>55</sup> In 1973, more than a third of the women on public assistance in Aiken County who delivered babies were also sterilized; sixteen of the eighteen women were black.<sup>56</sup> With the help of the ACLU, two of Pierce's patients sued him for violating their civil rights, but the U.S. Court of Appeals found that he had secured appropriate consent.<sup>57</sup> As one self-described Southerner asked the Aiken County medical officials, “when have black women in the South ever had the slightest protection from the sexual aggression and sadism of white men?”<sup>58</sup>

For many, the African American sisters Mary Alice and Minnie Relf of Montgomery, Alabama, became symbols of Southern sterilization programs that discriminated along lines of race and class. The experiences of the Relf sisters exposed decades of punitive and abusive

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<sup>55</sup> “Sterilization Charges Grow,” *Washington Post*, July 24, 1973, A12; <http://openjurist.org/560/f2d/609/walker-v-h-pierce>.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Hicks, “Sterilization of Black Mother of 3 Stirrs Aiken, S.C.,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1973, p. 27; “Sterilization Charges Grow,” *Washington Post*, July 24, 1973, A12; Henry Eichel, “S.C. Mothers on Welfare Sterilized,” *Washington Post*, July 22, 1973, A1.

<sup>57</sup> Byrd and Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma*, 455. The two women were Virgil Walker and Shirley Brown. See also Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 10-11. See also *Walker v. H. Pierce* 560 F2d 609; [www.openjurist.org/560/f2d/609/walker-v-h-pierce](http://www.openjurist.org/560/f2d/609/walker-v-h-pierce).

<sup>58</sup> She signed the letter “Ms. Lynne Leslie Hagood, a native of Mississippi and a member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Bethesda, Md.” Hagood asserted that “I know as surely as I know the smell of a magnolia that almost all these people who hated welfare mothers considered themselves the pillars of some church, which makes the whole matter a hundred times worse.” Copy, Lynne Leslie Hagood, Bethesda, Md., to County Medical Officer, Aiken, S.C., n.d., folder 30, box 48, National Organization for Women Newsletter Collection, Schlesinger.

sterilization practices on the part of doctors across the South.<sup>59</sup> In 1973, twelve-year-old Mary Alice Relf and her fourteen-year-old sister Minnie were both sterilized without their consent or knowledge. The girls, whose parents received public assistance, had visited a local hospital to be administered a federally-funded contraceptive. A nurse obtained the parents' permission to administer contraceptive injections, but because both were illiterate, they did not fully understand the consent form.<sup>60</sup> A month later, when they realized that their daughters had been surgically sterilized, the Relf parents contacted the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) for assistance. The SPLC, together with the National Organization for Women, launched a class-

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<sup>59</sup> Involuntary sterilizations were so common in Mississippi that the practice came to be known as a "Mississippi Appendectomy." Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer was one of many Mississippi residents to undergo the procedure. She was sterilized while anaesthetized for a procedure intended to remove a uterine tumor. Hamer learned the truth of what had been done to her via the circuitous gossip network between servant and employer; Vera Alice Marlow, cousin of the doctor who had performed the operation and wife of a plantation owner, told her cook what she had learned about Hamer's operation. The cook told Hamer's cousin, who then informed Hamer herself. "For a long time I was very angry about what had been done to me, Hamer declared in an interview a decade later. "If he was going to give [me] that sort of operation then he should have told me. I would have loved to have children." Eventually, Hamer decided to confront the physician who had performed the hysterectomy. "I went to the doctor who did that to me," she recalled, "and I asked him, 'Why? Why had he done that to me?' He didn't have to say nothing – and he didn't." Perry Deane Young, "A Surfeit of Surgery," *Washington Post*, May 30, 1976, B1. Young attributed Hamer's increasing politicization to her experience with the doctor. See also Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 21-22.

<sup>60</sup> "Original Complaint," *Relf, Relf, and Relf v. Weinberger and Arnett*, Civil Action no. 1557-73, July 31, 1973, [www.splcenter.org/pdf/dynamic/legal/Relf\\_Original\\_Complaint.pdf](http://www.splcenter.org/pdf/dynamic/legal/Relf_Original_Complaint.pdf); J. M. McFadden, "Ala. Welfare Aides Sued over Sterilization of 2 Girls," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1973, A29; "OEO Halts Funds after Sterilization," *Washington Post* June 29, 1973, A2; J. Paul Till, "82 Persons Sterilized by Ala. Agency in Year," *Washington Post*, July 1, 1973, A21; "11 Ala. Girls Involuntarily Sterilized," *Washington Post*, July 3, 1973, A1; Sanford Ungar and Joel Dreyfuss, "US, Hill Start Probes into Sterilization of Girls," *Washington Post*, July 4, 1973, A1; Joel Dreyfuss, "The Relfs: Did They Understand?" *Washington Post*, July 8, 1973, A1; "Clinic Defends Sterilization of 2 Girls, 12 and 14," *New York Times*, June 28, 1973, 14.

action lawsuit that sought to end the use of federal funds for involuntary sterilization. In the course of preparing the case, SPLC lawyers discovered that between 100,000 and 150,000 women – half of them African American – had been sterilized annually in the 1960s and early 1970s in programs that depended upon federal funds.<sup>61</sup> The Relfs’ lawsuit brought to light the thousands of coerced sterilizations of black women throughout the South, leading to Congressional hearings and dozens of investigational reports.<sup>62</sup> The case’s notoriety forced the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare to change its regulations concerning governmental funding of forced sterilizations even before the courts reached a decision.<sup>63</sup> As the Relfs’ attorney asked, “[W]ould this medical complex have permitted a middle-class white or black parent to so easily sign away his child’s ability to procreate? Would the middle-class parent, absent the kinds of dependency pressures exerted on a welfare family, have even considered surgical sterilization for his children?”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 204; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 93; Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 216.

<sup>62</sup> *Relf v. Weinberger*, 372 F. Supp. 1196 (D.C. Cir. 1974), vacated, 565 F.2d 722 (D.C. Cir. 1977); Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 93. The *Relf* lawsuit was based on a 1973 federal regulation that required all sterilizations funded by Medicaid to be voluntary. See Debran Rowland, *The Boundaries of Her Body: The Troubling History of Women’s Rights in America* (Naperville, Ill.: Sphinx, 2004), 92.

<sup>63</sup> The U.S. District Court of Washington, D.C. ordered the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare to amend its regulations on funding of sterilization procedures. Once it did so, the Court of Appeals found that the case was moot and remanded the case back to the District Court for dismissal. The Relfs were not awarded damages. See Timothy S. Robinson, “Sterilization Regulations Held Illegal,” *Washington Post* March 16, 1974, A1; [www.splcenter.org/legal/docket/files.jsp?cdrID=59](http://www.splcenter.org/legal/docket/files.jsp?cdrID=59).

<sup>64</sup> Hearings before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S. Senate, Ninety-third Congress, April 30, June 28-29, July 10, 1973, Part 4, p. 1499.

Involuntary sterilization was tied to both race and class. Although few of them made it their primary concern, white feminists were not blind to the realities of sterilization abuse. In one article, two white women in Durham, North Carolina, acknowledged that middle-class organizations “frequently do not take into account the position of people without choices. The abortion movement emphasizes the right of women to control our bodies; but the fact that abortion, sterilization, and birth control are used as genocide against women without privilege often has been glossed over.”<sup>65</sup> Martha McKay, a white political activist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, drafted a position paper critical of her state’s practices. Decrying the sterilization of “mentally defective persons,” McKay argued that the eugenics investigations and sterilizations were “an invasion of privacy, a deprivation of due process and a denial of equal protection of the law.” McKay also tied the issue of sterilization directly to the larger debate over reproductive control. “By what reasoning,” she asked, “does the law of North Carolina contravene a woman’s right to control her own reproductive processes? If it is on the basis of incompetency across the board, where are incompetents from among the middle class?” Sterilization, she argued, was used in North Carolina “as a means of punishing poor women, most of them black, for having children out of wedlock! Their poverty denies these women access to abortions, a method used by middle-class women to negate unwanted pregnancies.”<sup>66</sup> Middle-class white activists like McKay and the organizations in which they participated were

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<sup>65</sup> Kathy Tomyris and Nancy [no last name], “Things Are Rough All Over, But ... A Look at Class,” *Feminary* (Durham, N.C.) 8, no. 2 (October 1977): 13, Schlesinger.

<sup>66</sup> Martha C. McKay, position paper on House Bill #1466, February 1974, pp. 1-2, folder: correspondence 1974, box 2, Martha McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

often outraged by such blatantly discriminatory sterilization practices, but few of them made the issue central to their activism, focusing their attention, instead, on expanding access to abortion. By contrast, middle-class black women were more likely to link the two issues. “Bitter experience has taught the black woman,” the National Council of Negro Women declared in 1973, “that the administration of justice in this country is not colorblind. Black women on welfare have been forced to accept sterilization in exchange for a continuation of relief benefits and others have been sterilized without their knowledge or consent.”<sup>67</sup>

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### **Abortion Rights**

In the late 1960s, the abortion rights movement tended to be primarily, although not exclusively, white and middle-class. Reflecting the racial and class characteristics of the activist networks most directly engaged in the campaign, the movement initially focused on overturning restrictive legislation. Women of color were active in working for abortion rights, but, as women’s health advocate Loretta Ross has contended, black feminists’ support has been overlooked because reproductive rights have largely – and erroneously – been attributed to the white women’s movement. For black women, Ross argues, “the question is not *if* we support abortion, but how, and when, and why.”<sup>68</sup> Not until the reproductive rights movement

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<sup>67</sup> The editorial expressed support for *Roe v. Wade*. *Black Woman’s Voice* 2, no. 2 (January/February 1973), quoted in Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutierrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ross, “African-American Women and Abortion,” 162, 165. Ross is a longtime women’s health advocate. In the 1970s, she directed a rape crisis center and was a plaintiff in

broadened to include women of color and lower-income women did it begin to focus on public funding as well as expanded access to abortions.

Challenges to abortion laws emerged from all corners of the nation, but the legal cases that had the greatest impact were the products of grassroots activism in the South. Agitation to modify restrictions on abortion was not new in the late 1960s and 1970s. As early as the mid-1950s, small groups of physicians and health care reformers were working to change abortion laws and practices. In the postwar years, for example, Dr. Alan Guttmacher of Baltimore, Maryland, an early proponent of reforming abortion laws, sought to change the regulations that restricted physicians' ability to perform abortions, particularly within the hospital committee system.<sup>69</sup> Under this system, teams of doctors, along with hospital administrators, made decisions regarding women's applications for abortion.<sup>70</sup> Abortions approved by the committee, deemed "therapeutic abortions," were performed in sterile hospital operating rooms by medical professionals. Guttmacher and other physicians were frustrated by statutes that prevented them from helping women and angered by bureaucratic regulations that contributed

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the suit against the manufacturers of the Dalkon Shield. In the 1980s, she served as Director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women and organized a national conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights. In the 1990s, she served as program director for the National Black Women's Health Project before founding SisterSong, a reproductive health collective composed of seventy organization of women of color across the country. [www.sistersong.net/staff.html](http://www.sistersong.net/staff.html).

<sup>69</sup> Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 218-219.

<sup>70</sup> Cynthia Gorney, *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 196-197; N. E. H. Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer, *Roe v. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 103; Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 43-44.



to the maiming or death of women who underwent illegal abortions. Physicians argued that, as historian Leslie Reagan put it, “the solution to the abortion problem was enlarging the legal space in which physicians could perform abortions.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, in the late 1960s, a number of states, spurred by physicians’ associations and lobbyists, modified, but did not abolish, their abortion statutes.<sup>72</sup> These reforms, based on the American Law Institute’s Model Penal Code, initiated a series of liberalizations intended to increase physicians’ freedom to action and expand access to abortion, although only in cases of rape, incest, or severe threat to the woman’s mental or physical health.<sup>73</sup>

While women were aided by the physicians’ challenges and by the modifications introduced by Model Penal Codes, these efforts did not put women at the center of reform. Therapeutic abortions remained difficult to procure, expensive, and limited in number. Women seeking the procedure were often subjected to demeaning and intrusive questioning before

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<sup>71</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 216. Reagan argues that there were three phases to the abortion reform movement: the professional reform movement (physicians and lawyers), the feminists, and finally the social movement lawyers who “challenged the constitutionality of the law and brought together the complaints and claims of physicians, feminists, and low-income women.” Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 218.

<sup>72</sup> The states included California, Colorado, Hawaii, New York, North Carolina, and Washington. Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 184-185. By 1972, fourteen states (Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, and Virginia) had amended their laws to allow abortions in cases in which the pregnancy threatened the mother’s life, was the result of rape or incest, or would produce a child with severe birth defects. See Andrea Tone, ed., *Controlling Reproduction: An American History* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 198.

<sup>73</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 277-281; Gorney, *Articles of Faith*, 45-48, 56-58.

hospital committees.<sup>74</sup> The process also discriminated against low-income and African American women, who had fewer resources and were less likely to have personal connections to members of the hospital committee. According to Judith Rooks, a white nurse in Atlanta, middle-class women were able to procure medical abortions because “they were friends of the obstetricians or they were a lawyer’s wife or a doctor’s wife [or] the police chief’s wife. If you were well connected, you could get this kind of a legal abortion. Or some doctors would do a legal abortion in their office at nighttime . . . but poor people, of course, didn’t have access to that, and there were a lot of deaths from illegal abortions.”<sup>75</sup>

What was novel about the challenges launched in the late 1960s and 1970s was the prominent role played by activist women and the women-centered critiques of abortion restrictions. As increasing numbers of feminists joined the fight, they shifted the terms of the debate. Restrictions on abortion, they believed, were “a fundamental feature of the subordination of women.”<sup>76</sup> The criminalization of abortion, they argued, limited their freedom and denied them the power to make decisions about their own bodies. Women’s rights advocates understood access to abortion primarily as a matter of gender equality, not

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<sup>74</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 423-439; Gorney, *Articles of Faith*, 71-72, 208-209; Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 43-45.

<sup>75</sup> Transcript, Judith Rooks, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, April 26, 2004, Atlanta, Ga., p. 16, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter GSU).

<sup>76</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 217.

physicians' rights.<sup>77</sup> Most importantly, feminists argued that women – not male physicians, religious leaders, or politicians – should be considered the experts on abortion. As *The Rag*, an underground newspaper in Austin, declared, “any real change in the Texas abortion laws will come . . . through women and other interested groups organizing to demand women’s right to safe, cheap abortion and no forced sterilization.”<sup>78</sup>

Abortion rights activism came to a head in the South in two landmark cases, *Roe v. Wade*, which originated in Texas, and *Doe v. Bolton*, a Georgia suit.<sup>79</sup> Growing out of grassroots networks, each case challenged different aspects of abortion law. *Roe* questioned whether states could prohibit abortion under all circumstances, while *Doe* addressed procedural restrictions on access to abortion.<sup>80</sup> What they shared was a feminist critique of obstacles, but together they greatly expanded the rights of women to procure abortions. Grassroots organizers donated critical early energy and resources to both lawsuits, ultimately

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<sup>77</sup> Cynthia Gorney attributes this understanding to feminist lawyers, but it was representative of a wide network of feminist activists. Gorney, *Articles of Faith*, 143. For a feminist legal critique, see Reva Siegal, “Reasoning from the Body: A Historical Perspective on Abortion Regulation and Questions of Equal Protection,” *Stanford Law Review* 44 (January 1992): 261-381; Reva B. Siegal, “Abortion as a Sex Equality Right: Its Basis in Feminist Theory,” in *Mothers in Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Isabel Karpin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 43-72.

<sup>78</sup> “Now!” *The Rag* (Austin) 5, no. 9 (December 14, 1970): n.p.

<sup>79</sup> The *Roe* and *Doe* decisions were both announced by the U.S. Supreme Court on January 22, 1973. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 598.

<sup>80</sup> As legal scholar Jack Balkin has argued, “*Roe* presented basic questions about the constitutional status of unborn life and about whether states could prohibit abortion in all circumstances. *Doe* concerned the question of what procedural hurdles the state could put in the way of abortion once it was decriminalized.” Jack M. Balkin, “Introduction,” in *What Roe v. Wade Should Have Said: The Nation’s Top Legal Experts Rewrite America’s Most Controversial Decision*, ed. Jack M. Balkin (New York: New York University Press, 2005), xi.

shaping the legal arguments in ways that proved to be limiting and class-specific. Over time, as the lawsuits moved through the courts, they became disconnected from their local connections, but the limitations imposed at the outset remained.

By 1968, Georgia abortion rights advocates had succeeded in modifying the state's abortion laws. Based on the American Law Institute's Model Penal Code, the new Georgia law enacted that year allowed abortions for specific reasons, including rape or incest; conditions that put the fetus or child at high risk of congenital anomalies; or risks to the physical or mental health of the mother.<sup>81</sup> Despite these changes, it remained difficult for many women to procure an abortion. In Atlanta, for example, Grady Memorial, the only hospital that would treat poor women, established a monthly quota of six procedures. This meant, as women's health activist Judith Rooks explained, that lower-income women "had to go to illegal abortionists who were not very skilled, so that there were many, many women admitted to Grady Hospital with complications of illegal abortions."<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, middle-class women who could afford private physicians were able to obtain safe abortions both legally and illegally. These women frequently called on family connections in order to procure legal abortions or to persuade doctors to perform the procedure in their offices.<sup>83</sup>

Because the 1968 law still restricted access to abortion for so many women, a small

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<sup>81</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 423-424. Garrow sometimes refers to Rooks as Judith Bourne, her married name. For consistency, I have employed Rooks throughout.

<sup>82</sup> Rooks interview, p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Rooks interview, p. 16; Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 45-46, 56.

group of advocates called Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion worked to pass new legislation that would remove these limitations. Established in 1967, Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion included clergymen, attorneys, psychologists, physicians, and nurses, several of whom had ties to women's rights organizations.<sup>84</sup> One of the organization's most influential members was a nurse named Judith Rooks, a recent transplant to Atlanta. Rooks herself had opposed the legalization of abortion until some of her nursing students completed a research project on the high mortality rates of pregnant Hispanic agricultural workers. It was the poorest women, Rooks concluded, who suffered the most by the restrictions on abortion.<sup>85</sup> Spurred to action, she joined other nurses and doctors in lobbying for changes to Georgia's statutes, but despite their best efforts, they failed to convince the legislature to enact reforms.<sup>86</sup>

Even as Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion attempted throughout 1968 to reform the state's abortion laws, Rooks began to devote considerable energy toward increasing women's access to abortion through grassroots, underground activism. Dismayed that the state legislature had, as she put it, "turned its back on the health needs of Georgia women," Rooks and her colleagues in Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion established a counseling service to

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<sup>84</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 340, 422-423.

<sup>85</sup> Rooks, who had recently moved to Atlanta from the West Coast, had been raised in a small town by her physician father, who opposed abortion. Rooks interview, pp. 13-14.

<sup>86</sup> Achsah Nesmith, "Approved Abortions Urged," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 22, 1970, p. A3; Gene Stephens, "Panel Tables Abortion Bills," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 4, 1970, p. A1; Gene Stephens, "Atlantan Asks Public Aid on Abortion Bill," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 5, 1970, p. A10.

provide information and to arrange legal abortions in Washington, D.C., or New York.<sup>87</sup>

Before the group had fully established these services, Rooks publicized her home address and phone number so that women in need could reach help. They were picked up by the press services and broadcast across the South. Soon she was receiving phone calls from throughout the region, “hundreds and hundreds of phone calls.”<sup>88</sup> With the Reverend Enid Herndon, a Presbyterian minister at a campus ministry at Emory University, and a number of social workers, counselors, and other ministers, Rooks established a pregnancy and abortion counseling service.<sup>89</sup> Almost immediately, she flew to New York and to Washington to inspect the clinics where they would be sending Southern women. The group pulled together lists of contact numbers, which were published in *The Great Speckled Bird*, an Atlanta alternative newspaper, and created a brochure, which they placed in obstetricians’ offices and health clinics, to inform women of their rights and options.<sup>90</sup>

“At first,” Rooks remembered, “we had very high standards for counseling, and we insisted on doing real counseling to make sure that people were sure of their decision. But the demand was so great that we really couldn’t do that. We just didn’t have enough personnel and enough time, with the hundreds of people who were calling us from all over the South.”

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<sup>87</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 423; Rooks interview, pp. 24-25.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. Quotation, Rooks interview, p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 423; Rooks interview, p.24.

<sup>90</sup> The U.S. postal service denied mailing privileges to *The Great Speckled Bird* when it began printing abortion referral service information. The journal successfully sued and continued publishing the information. *Atlanta Cooperative News Project v. U.S. Postal Service*, 50 F. Supp. 234, 238-39 (N.D. Ga. 1972).

People phoned her both from Atlanta and from places as far away as Mississippi or Alabama, and “they couldn’t say the word because ‘abortion’ was like using the most awful cuss word, the most unacceptable word.” Instead, Rooks later recalled, “you would hear this deep Southern accent saying, ‘is this [hesitating sounds] is this [hesitating sounds] are you – I want to talk to someone.’ And I would have to say it for them, you know. ‘Are you calling about information on a legal abortion?’ [gasps] ‘yes.’ And then, they would have to tell me how – what the situation was and they were really a good person, you know. ‘My 13 year old son has made a 13 year old girl pregnant and he’s really a good boy and she’s a good girl. But you know this is gonna ruin their lives. We’re good people, we’re against abortion, but this is just the necessary thing.’ And they had to convince *me* that it was okay and so I would give them the information and they’d be so relieved.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite their failure to obtain legislative changes, Rooks and her colleagues in the Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion group had decided that formal avenues of change should still be pursued. Even as they continued grassroots organizing, they agreed to fight their battle in the courts. Having already secured the pro bono legal services of three female lawyers, they began contacting obstetricians in hopes of finding a test case with which to challenge Georgia’s abortion laws.<sup>92</sup> Margie Pitts Hames, a private lawyer on pregnancy leave, became lead

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<sup>91</sup> Rooks interview, pp. 24-25.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

counsel.<sup>93</sup> In searching for a plaintiff, the group established stringent criteria. “We didn’t want an unmarried woman because we didn’t want morality to be an issue,” Rooks explained. “We wanted a married woman. We didn’t want a black woman because we didn’t want race to be an issue, because many black people thought that the effort to legalize abortion would an effort to get rid of black babies. We wanted a woman, of course, who wanted an abortion. We preferred to have a woman who wanted an early abortion . . . so our standard was, really, we wanted a white married woman who had compelling reasons to want an abortion, not just – really, women don’t make decisions to have abortions in a frivolous way, which we knew. But we didn’t want somebody who just had two children and didn’t want to have a third one.”<sup>94</sup>

In the spring of 1970, Rooks and her fellow activists found what they believed to be an ideal candidate in Mary Doe, a white woman in her late twenties or early thirties whose husband was a convicted child molester. The Does’ three children had already been removed from their care by state social workers who had found evidence of domestic violence.<sup>95</sup> After the birth of her third child, Doe had wanted to be sterilized, but the local Catholic hospital refused to perform the procedure. When she became pregnant again, she went to Grady Memorial, a public hospital, in search of an abortion, but the hospital committee had already

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<sup>93</sup> The other attorneys were Tobiane Schwartz with the Atlanta Legal Aid office and Elizabeth Rindskopf of the Emory Neighborhood Legal Office. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 425.

<sup>94</sup> Rooks interview, p. 39. For more on the Atlanta activists’ search for a plaintiff, see Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 426-428.

<sup>95</sup> Doe had been deemed incapable of taking care of her children, who were removed from her custody and placed in foster care. “Mary Doe” was the pseudonym adopted by Sandra Bensing. See Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 426-427.



reached its quota for that month and she was turned down.<sup>96</sup> One of the hospital committee members approached Doe and suggested a mutually beneficial arrangement whereby she would agree to act as the plaintiff in their case and the committee would pay for medical consultation and a legal abortion at a private hospital. The committee arranged for three psychiatrists to complete the requisite mental health evaluations on a pro bono basis, and, because Doe wanted to be sterilized at the same time, Rooks privately raised funds for her sterilization procedure and subsequent hospital stay.<sup>97</sup>

Despite Doe's position as plaintiff, the real drive for the case came from Judith Rooks and Margie Pitts Hames, who cobbled together the medical, social, and legal arguments. As the case was beginning to come together, Rooks accepted a job with the federal Centers for Disease Control, in Atlanta, that afforded her the opportunity to collect information on legal

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<sup>96</sup> Rooks interview, pp. 39-41.

<sup>97</sup> Doe proved to be a less than ideal plaintiff. She failed to arrive on the day scheduled for her abortion procedure because of legal troubles relating to her husband. In order to pay his bail, she had stolen money and gone to Missouri to bail him out of jail. Doe contacted Margie Pitts Hames to tell the Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion that she still wanted the abortion but had no means of returning to Atlanta. Rooks began raising additional funds to pay for an airplane ticket and for the more expensive second-trimester procedure. By her sixteenth week, however, Doe had experienced quickening – sensations of the fetus's movement – and changed her mind about the abortion. Nevertheless, Rooks's organization agreed to continue helping her; Pitts Hames donated maternity clothes, while Rooks arranged for food stamps and nutrition counseling. Mary Doe ultimately gave her baby up for adoption. Pitts Hames was able to retain Doe as plaintiff because she convinced the courts that pregnancies would progress faster than the courts could respond. Because Doe was in the late stages of her pregnancy when she had to appear before the court, Rooks's group "packed the courtroom with pregnant women so that Mary Doe's anonymity would be protected." Margie Pitt Hames later helped Doe divorce her husband and get a job. Mary Doe became a born-again Christian and was convinced by a right-to-life group that "she had done a terrible sin [in serving as plaintiff in the case] and she recanted . . . and said she wished she had never done it." Rooks interview, pp. 42-44, 47-48; Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 444-445.

statutes and morbidity rates relating to abortion from across the country, information that became the cornerstone of *Doe v. Bolton*. Rooks’s research revealed disparity in the care received by middle-class and lower-income women.<sup>98</sup> “Under even a liberal abortion law,” Rooks argued, “the main people who got abortions were well-educated, middle or upper middle class white women who were married, and the main people who died from illegal abortions, in the presence of that law, were black, unmarried, and poor.”<sup>99</sup> Pitts Hames incorporated Rooks’s research into the *Doe* case, which rested on the argument that the procedural hurdles that prohibited equal access to abortion represented an unconstitutional infringement on women’s right to privacy.<sup>100</sup>

Although *Doe v. Bolton* has often been overlooked, it proved to be as important as the better known *Roe v. Wade*. Abortions, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Doe*, did not have to be performed in hospitals accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals, as a Georgia statute required, nor did they have to be approved by a hospital abortion

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<sup>98</sup> Rooks discovered that “almost all of the legal abortions . . . the vast number of legal abortions in Georgia were to white women and to married, upper middle class, professional class . . . who could go to their doctors and say, ‘I know that it’s legal and I want to have an abortion.’ And it was almost all for mental health reasons (then would get three doctors to agree she was suicidal, depressed, etc.). . . . but the women who didn’t know about the law, couldn’t afford to go to three private doctors [and] had to rely on Grady Hospital in Fulton County or some charity, some other place – they really did not have access.” Rooks interview, p. 35.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>100</sup> Marian Faux, *Roe v. Wade: The Untold Story of the Landmark Supreme Court Decision that Made Abortion Legal* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 236; Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 446; Hull and Hoffer, *Roe v. Wade*, 159-160.

committee.<sup>101</sup> This ruling opened the door for women’s health clinics and private facilities to provide abortion services. The *Doe* decision was based not only on a right to privacy, but on due process and equal protection grounds. In finding that the hospital therapeutic abortion committee system was unconstitutional, the Court held that, as historian Leslie Reagan has argued, “policies designed to restrict access to abortion, such as those in the Georgia reform statute, violated the rights of women to health care and of physicians to practice.”<sup>102</sup>

By contrast, the more famous *Roe* decision put the experiences of women – rather than the limitations placed on practitioners – at the center of the debate.<sup>103</sup> This difference stemmed in large part from the fact that Texas, unlike Georgia, had not adopted the American Law Institute reforms that allowed for legal abortions in exceptional cases. All abortions, except those required to save the life of the mother, were illegal in Texas.<sup>104</sup> Like the *Doe* case, *Roe* was the result of years of activism on the grassroots level by feminists who sought not only to reform existing legal statutes but also to create feminist alternatives.

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<sup>101</sup> *Doe v. Bolton* 410 U.S. 179 (1973); Tone, *Controlling Reproduction*, 198. The Court also found unconstitutional the state’s attempt to require Georgia residency before receiving an abortion. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 608-609; Hull and Hoffer, *Roe v. Wade*, 159-160. The *Roe* and *Doe* cases were adjudicated together so that the Court could weigh the merits of the case from a state without any legal abortions and those from a state with provisional abortion procedures.

<sup>102</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 244.

<sup>103</sup> *Roe* found that physicians along with their patients should determine the course of treatment.

<sup>104</sup> Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 45; Rooks interview, p. 49. In 1967, a coalition of physicians and women activists, including the head of the Fort Worth Junior League, unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the Texas legislature to institute abortion reforms based on the Model Penal Code. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 325-326.

In the late 1960s, a group of women in Austin, all of whom were affiliated with the University of Texas, established a pregnancy counseling and abortion referral service. The impetus for doing so emerged from a series of consciousness-raising meetings that focused on contraception and abortion. In talking about the need for more reliable birth control, the women came to realize that they “could not truly determine their own destinies in terms of education, employment, and physical and psychological health until they could control the number and spacing of their children.”<sup>105</sup> They believed that abortion was necessary when contraceptives had failed. As Austin feminist and recent law school graduate Sarah Weddington later recalled, the group first tried to inform women about how to prevent pregnancy. But if asked about abortion, members would provide information about the “good and bad places,” both in Texas and across the border in Mexico, because many women were too poor or too ill-equipped to travel to California or New York, where abortion laws were less restrictive. “Stories of abortion mills and self-induced abortions were uncomfortably common,” Weddington reported.<sup>106</sup> Members of the consciousness-raising group were committed to the belief that “every woman, whatever her income level, whatever her color or background, who wanted to terminate a pregnancy should have the safest access to the safest services possible.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 24-27, quotation on 26-27.

<sup>106</sup> Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 27. Weddington herself had traveled to Mexico to procure an abortion. See Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 393-394.

<sup>107</sup> Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 389-390; *ibid.*, 29-30.

Originally established to serve women associated with the University of Texas, the referral project, known officially as the Women's Liberation Birth Control Information Center, began to attract attention in the wider Austin community. In October 1969, the center published an advertisement in the city's underground newspaper, *The Rag*, about a newly established hotline that offered information about abortion and ways to obtain the procedure. Bea Durden, who held a Ph.D. in biology from Yale University and wrote for *The Rag*, was contacted so often via the hotline that she began to fear the attention of legal authorities. Concerned that her phone had been tapped, she asked for callers' numbers so that she could return their calls from a pay phone.<sup>108</sup>

Weddington, who knew some of the women socially and had participated in the consciousness-raising meetings, tried to help them sort out the legal risks of their actions. Abortion was legal in California and New York, the activists knew, but they were unsure if they could be subject to prosecution as accomplices if they helped women procure abortions in those states. "I didn't know the answer to that question," Weddington recalled, "but I told them I'd go to the library and look it up. And that was the beginning of *Roe v. Wade*, that trip to the library."<sup>109</sup>

As Margie Pitts Hames had done in Atlanta, Weddington decided to enlist a pregnant

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>109</sup> Transcript, Sarah Weddington, in an interview conducted by Diane Fowlkes and Charlene Ball, April 15, 1998, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 5-6, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

woman (rather than the abortion counseling group) to act as plaintiff in a case testing the state's abortion laws.<sup>110</sup> In 1969, Jane Roe, a working-class white woman who lived in Dallas, became pregnant while working at a carnival in Georgia. Returning to Dallas, she “decided [she] couldn't bring another child into the world.”<sup>111</sup> It was her third pregnancy, but she had lost custody of both of her children.<sup>112</sup> Determined to terminate her pregnancy, Roe tried in vain to obtain an illegal abortion in a Dallas clinic housed in the back rooms of a dentist's practice. “I got real bad vibes when I walked up to it,” she later recalled, “the place had been busted. It was abandoned. There was still some stuff there, but no people. It was very eerie. So, I had no choice at all. I stood there maybe for fifteen minutes or so, and I cried. I don't know why – just being scared, just wanting something to happen that I knew would never happen.” Roe's regular doctor recommended that she speak to an attorney about adoption procedures, even though she preferred to have an abortion. The attorney put her in touch with Sarah Weddington and another young feminist lawyer, Linda Coffee, who were searching for a

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<sup>110</sup> Weddington's research put her in touch with a network of attorneys in other states who were also working on abortion cases, most notably Margie Pitts Hames. The attorneys would share both information and pleadings. Weddington interview, p. 6. At the outset of *Roe v. Wade*, Jane Roe was not the only plaintiff. Mary and John Doe (Marsha and David King), a married couple from Dallas, served as co-plaintiffs, but the Dallas County District court ruled that they lacked standing as their complaint described a possible future need, not an existing problem. See Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 400-401, 404-407, 515-517, 601; Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 54, 56; Cynthia L. Cooper, “Roe Plaintiff Restates the Case She Helped Win,” September 21, 2008, [www.womensnews.org/article.cfm?aid=379](http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm?aid=379).

<sup>111</sup> The plaintiff later publicly revealed herself to be Norma McCorvey. Norma McCorvey in *The Choices We Made*, ed. Bonavoglia, 137.

<sup>112</sup> Her mother had petitioned the courts of custody for one daughter after learning that Roe was waiting tables at a bar that catered to gay patrons. The father of her second daughter had sole custody of her. McCorvey in *The Choices We Made*, ed. Bonavoglia, 138.

plaintiff.<sup>113</sup>

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe* was significant and wide-reaching, expanding the reproductive rights of women across the nation. Nevertheless, the ruling was limited in many respects and, in the decades following the decision, has been widely criticized by feminist historians and legal scholars. "While *Roe v. Wade* granted women the right to choose abortion in consultation with their physicians," historian Johanna Schoen argues, "it rejected the notion that women had a *right* to abortion on demand. By doing so, it upheld states' right to limit access to abortion if they found that they had an interest in doing so."<sup>114</sup> *Roe*, as Schoen notes, "did not grant women a right to abortion, whether in the first trimester or later. However, the decision gave physicians the right to perform abortions, elective or therapeutic, whenever they found the operation necessary."<sup>115</sup> The *Roe* decision found that women had a constitutional right to reproductive privacy and that the government could limit abortion only in the period after the fetus's viability. As Rickie Solinger has argued, "many advocates of reproductive rights were disappointed and concerned in 1973 that the majority opinion in *Roe* had relied on privacy instead of on the constitutional principle of equal protection."<sup>116</sup> Similarly, legal scholar Reva Siegal has contended that "privacy" assumed a middle-class relationship with one's doctor and minimized the ways in which doctors exerted power over the decisions women

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>114</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*, 193.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>116</sup> Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 185-186.

made about their health.<sup>117</sup>

The limitations of the decisions in both *Doe* and *Roe* were attributable, in part, to the ways in which proponents had shaped the debate. Most of the activists in Georgia Citizens for Hospital Abortion and the Austin women's liberation group that, respectively, birthed *Doe* and *Roe* were middle-class. The relative homogeneity of their grassroots networks blinded some of them to the concerns of lower-income women, who argued that public funding was as important as the abrogation of restrictions. As both *Doe* and *Roe* indicated, middle-class feminists were aware that lower-income women had difficulty procuring abortions. Both cases, after all, centered on poor women. But, generally speaking, middle-class activists lacked an understanding of the reforms poor women needed. Activists such as Judith Rooks and Sarah Weddington believed that changing the laws would ensure women's reproductive rights. Low-income women argued that availability was only part of the problem. They required public assistance in funding their reproductive health.

Middle-class activists came to understand the demands of their working-class sisters in two ways: through personal interaction and through political protests against cuts in public funding for reproductive services. The experiences of activists in the Gainesville, Florida, area represent the first path. In 1971, Bylye Avery, a middle-class African American health activist in Gainesville, began working with the Clergy Consultation Service to refer women to New

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<sup>117</sup> Reva Siegal, "Reasoning from the Body: A Historical Perspective on Abortion Regulation and Questions of Equal Protection," *Stanford Law Review* 44 (January 1992): 261-381. Siegal deems these potential restrictions a consequence of "the social organization of reproductive relations."



York to obtain legal abortions. Women in the area approached Avery, who was already well-known for her women's health advocacy, for information about how to obtain an abortion and how to travel to New York. At first, most of these women were white and had enough money to make the journey North at their own expense. But an encounter with a low-income, African American patient pushed Avery to recognize the limitations in the programs of the Clergy Consultation Service. "[A] black woman called, and we tried to give her the phone number," Avery recalled, "and she said she didn't need no telephone number in New York. She didn't know nobody in New York. She didn't have no way to get to New York, you know. She didn't have no money for New York and all. And that woman died from a self-induced abortion. So we really understood that it's not only just having it available, it has to be accessible."<sup>118</sup> Experiences such as these convinced Avery that she should devote her energy to creating local resources. In 1974, after the *Roe* decision had legalized abortion, Avery and two other women, Judy Levy and Margaret Parrish, opened the Gainesville Women's Health Center to provide abortions (among other services) to women in north Florida.<sup>119</sup>

Although some middle-class feminists had personal experiences like Avery's that expanded their activism, many more were spurred to action by the passage of the Hyde Amendment. Attached to federal Medicaid legislation in 1976 and renewed and expanded

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<sup>118</sup> Avery interview, Smith, p. 15. For Avery's activism as a women's health advocate, see Chapter 4, below.

<sup>119</sup> Byllye Y. Avery, "Breathing Life into Ourselves: The Evolution of the National Black Women's Health Project," in *The Black Women's Health Project: Speaking for Ourselves*, ed. Evelyn C. White, 2nd edition (Seattle: Seal Press, 1994), 4-5. This essay was adapted from a speech delivered by Avery in 1988 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

thereafter, the amendment prohibited the use of federal funds for abortion services. Only if the individual states provided funds would publicly-funded abortions be available to women on Medicaid.<sup>120</sup> Prohibiting the use of federal funds “to pay for or to promote or encourage abortions,” the Hyde Amendment left hundreds of thousands women without access to reproductive control.<sup>121</sup> The amendment had an immediate effect on the availability of legal abortions to poor women; the number of abortions paid for by Medicaid dropped from 295,000 to 2,000 in the first year after the amendment’s passage.<sup>122</sup> Between 1976 and 1979, federal funding of Medicaid abortions fell by 99 percent.<sup>123</sup> The withdrawal of federal funding

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<sup>120</sup> Sponsored by Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R.-Ill.), the restrictions that became known as the Hyde Amendment were appended to the 1976 appropriation bills for the Department of Labor and the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare. The Hyde Amendment was actually a series of restrictions. In 1976, Congress restricted abortions covered under Medicaid to cases in which the life of the pregnant woman was in danger. In 1977 and 1978, Congress added exceptions for rape, incest, and severe and lasting health damage (as confirmed by two physicians). James Trussell, Jann Menken, Barbara L. Lindheim, and Barbara Vaughn, “The Impact of Restricting Medicaid Financing for Abortion,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (May/June 1980): 120; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 231.

<sup>121</sup> Researchers from the Alan Guttmacher Institute found that approximately 20 percent of women who would have been eligible for Medicaid-funded abortions before the Hyde Amendment were unable to obtain them. In Georgia, the percentage was slightly lower (18 percent), largely because municipal hospitals subsidized abortion costs. James Trussell, Jann Menken, Barbara L. Lindheim, and Barbara Vaughn, “The Impact of Restricting Medicaid Financing for Abortion,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (May/June 1980): 128-129; Richard Lincoln, Brigitte Döring-Bradley, Barbara L. Lindheim, and Maureen A. Cotterill, “The Court, the Congress, and the President: Turning Back the Clock on the Pregnant Poor,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 9, no. 5 (September/October 1977): 207. A series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions (*Beal v. Doe* [1977], *Maher v. Roe* [1977], *Harris v. McRae* [1980]) upheld these restrictions.

<sup>122</sup> Trussell, Menken, Lindheim, and Vaughn, “The Impact of Restricting Medicaid Financing for Abortion,” 134

<sup>123</sup> In 1978, federal contributions to abortion funding under the Medicaid program ranged from 50 to 90 percent of the total subsidy, with state funds making up the remainder. Rachel

left many women with no options at all. In Mississippi, for example, the average cost of an abortion was ten times higher than the monthly Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) check.<sup>124</sup>

In effect, the Hyde Amendment created a two-tiered abortion rights policy – one for poor women and one for women who could afford private care. A Centers for Disease Control report pointed to a thirty-seven-year-old Georgia woman, a recipient of AFDC funds, who died of complications from an attempted self-induced abortion. The woman, who had had twelve previous pregnancies, was denied a Medicaid-funded abortion.<sup>125</sup> In McAllen, Texas, Rosaura Jimenez, a Mexican-American woman, died from complications following an unlicensed abortion. The CDC attributed her death to the state’s decision to withdraw public funding for abortions.<sup>126</sup> Because 39 percent of African American women relied on Medicaid

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Benson Gold, “After the Hyde Amendment: Public Funding for Abortion in FY 1978,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (May/June 1980): 131.

<sup>124</sup> In all but twelve states across the nation, the cost of an abortion exceeded the average monthly AFDC payment. The imbalance in Mississippi was particularly high, both because the cost of the procedure was among the highest in the nation and the monthly AFDC payment was the lowest of all states. In Mississippi, the cost of an abortion was \$480, while the average monthly AFDC payment was \$48. Lincoln, et al., “The Court, the Congress and the President,” 211.

<sup>125</sup> Trussell, Menken, Lindheim, and Vaughn, “The Impact of Restricting Medicaid Financing for Abortion,” 129.

<sup>126</sup> Ellen Frankfort and Frances Kissling, *Rosie: The Investigation of a Wrongful Death* (New York: Dial Press, 1978), 5; Centers for Disease Control “Cluster of Abortion-Related Complications,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 26, no. 44 (November 4, 1977): 1; Bill Peterson, “Doubts Arise about Abortion ‘Martyr’,” *Washington Post*, November 28, 1977, A6. Since 1995, the Abortion Access Project has organized Rosie Jiménez Day on October 3 in remembrance of women who are denied access to legal and funded abortion care. [www.abortionaccess.org/content/view/59/62/](http://www.abortionaccess.org/content/view/59/62/).

for their health care costs, while only 7 percent of white women did so, the Hyde Amendment embedded racial discrimination into federal policy.<sup>127</sup>

The Hyde Amendment and the outraged response of lower-income women to its passage pushed many middle-class activists to include public funding of reproductive services, including abortion, in their reproductive rights activism. The North Carolina-based Coalition for Choice argued that “the Hyde Amendment, which cuts off federal funding for most abortions, is blatantly discriminatory against poor women and threatens the right of all women to choose a medically safe abortion.”<sup>128</sup> The statewide coalition, of which both the Durham Women’s Health Cooperative and the YWCA were a part, worked to ensure funding and access to abortions for all women. As Suzi Woodard, a member of the Durham Women’s Health Cooperative contended, “without public assistance, these women’s choices can become either having an unwanted child or visiting one of the unlicensed and dangerous ‘back-alley’ abortionists who still exist in Durham and other communities. The women affected most by the restrictions on this public money are clearly young and minority women.”<sup>129</sup> Jackie Frost, the Southern Regional Director of NOW, urged every chapter of the organization to write to political representatives to protest the Hyde Amendment, arguing that the spending cuts

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<sup>127</sup> Lincoln, et al., “The Court, the Congress, and the President,” 213.

<sup>128</sup> “Draft for Coalition for Choice Brochure,” enclosure in letter from Suzi Woodard (Durham YWCA Women’s Health Co-op) to YWCA Board Members (Durham), March 27, 1978, folder: Health Co-op, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA papers, Duke.

<sup>129</sup> Suzi Woodard (Durham YWCA Women’s Health Co-op) to YWCA Board Members (Durham), March 27, 1978, folder: Health Co-op, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA papers, Duke.

amounted to “discrimination against poor women.”<sup>130</sup>

Southern women’s participation in abortion rights battles went beyond the courts and political protest. Even as the legal cases were moving through the court system, grassroots activists pursued various strategies for expanding access to abortion.<sup>131</sup> Feminists continued to protest legal restrictions by lobbying their political representatives, but they also adopted new tactics and slightly different goals that aimed not only to overturn laws but also to change the perceptions of abortion. Both before and after *Roe*, Southern women sought to ensure that women could gain access to safe procedures and to remove the stigma attached to the experience of undergoing an abortion. Across the South, feminists hosted speak-outs to publicize their experiences, established referral and transportation services for women seeking abortions, and operated feminist-run abortion clinics.

The speak-outs in particular “made what had been private and personal, political and public,” one historian suggests.<sup>132</sup> At speak-outs, women openly declared that they had had illegal abortions, making public what had been intensely private experiences.<sup>133</sup> Women at speak-outs hoped to remove the shame, stigma, and fear that illicit procedures had created. As

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<sup>130</sup> Her letter included a list of all Southern senators on the Finance Committee and all Southern representatives on the House Ways and Means Committee. Jackie Frost (Southern Regional Director) to Chapter Presidents, Convenors, State Officers, [no month] 1974, folder 18, box 169, NOW records, Schlesinger.

<sup>131</sup> Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 185.

<sup>132</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall, *Women and Abortion: The Body as Battleground* (Westfield, N.J.: Open Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>133</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 229-230.

historian Leslie Reagan has argued, feminists intended the battle over abortion rights to blur the boundaries between private experience and public debate.<sup>134</sup> In 1972, activists in San Antonio, Texas, for example, sponsored Abortion Action Week in conjunction with feminists across the country. The San Antonio event included speak-outs by women who had experienced legal or illegal abortions; a play “But What Have You Done for Me Lately” by Myrna Lamb, acclaimed feminist playwright; and a film on abortion. Event organizers provided free child care and access to medical professionals and counselors to answer questions on physical and psychological aspects of abortion. Although expanding access to and decriminalizing abortion were the organizers’ central concerns, they acknowledged that reproductive freedom was a wide-ranging battle, entailing “the struggle to repeal all anti-abortion laws, restrictive contraceptive laws, and forced sterilization.”<sup>135</sup> That same year, activists in Georgia hosted a similar event at a Unitarian Universalist church in which women gave vivid accounts of their abortion experiences. Between 150 and 200 women testified to the need of greater openness, as well as increased access to safe and legal abortions.<sup>136</sup>

Reproductive rights activists across the South also tried to expand women’s access to abortion through strategies both political and extra-legal. Before *Roe* legalized abortion, locally

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<sup>134</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 2-3. Reagan focuses primarily on Chicago, but also includes examples from New York, Detroit, Baltimore, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

<sup>135</sup> *Women Unite!* (San Antonio, Tex.) 1, no. 2 (May 1972): 2, folder: Women’s Liberation Pamphlets 1970-1972, box 1, Tampa Women’s Liberation papers, GSU.

<sup>136</sup> “Abortion Is Our Right,” *Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta, Ga.), October 30, 1972, pp. 6-7.

organized abortion counseling or referral services across the region provided information about how to obtain abortions. In Louisville, Kentucky, for example, local feminists created the Problem Pregnancy and Abortion Counseling project in October 1970. The project – composed of students, mothers, housewives, and working women – counseled women seeking to end pregnancies and discussed alternatives; all counseling was done confidentially. If a pregnant woman chose to proceed with an abortion, the project arranged a referral for safe and legal hospital abortions in New York. In addition, it helped find volunteers to care for the women’s children while they traveled to New York, loaned cars for the journey, and petitioned local doctors to support abortion rights.<sup>137</sup> Sisters Helping Sisters, a New Orleans abortion counseling collective, operated from at least 1972 to 1974.<sup>138</sup> Meanwhile, the Atlanta YWCA supported the repeal of all laws prohibiting abortions performed by medical professionals.<sup>139</sup>

As *Roe* and *Doe* wound through the courts, the cases increasingly lost touch with their feminist groundings. In part, this shift was predictable and understandable. The cases

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<sup>137</sup> Before *Roe v. Wade*, Kentucky had what were considered “liberal” abortion laws; women could have abortions legally if they could prove that having the child would endanger their physical or mental health. In order to prove this, however, they had to procure statements from physicians and psychiatrists and then appear before a board of six hospital officials who adjudicated their cases. The process was, in the words of one Louisville feminist, “expensive, humiliating, and time-consuming.” “Abortion,” *Women’s Newspaper Collective* (Louisville, Ky.) 1, no. 3 (February 17, 1971): 16, Schlesinger.

<sup>138</sup> “Help a Sister,” *Distaff* (New Orleans, La.) 1, no. 9 (October 1973): 7, Schlesinger; Mary Gehman, “N.O. Women’s Movement: A Comprehensive Herstory,” *Distaff* (New Orleans, La.) 2, no. 3 (March 1974): 8-9, Schlesinger.

<sup>139</sup> Atlanta YWCA, *Y-line*, Fall 1970, p. 2, folder: 1970 Miscellaneous Brochures, box 29, YWCA of Greater Atlanta records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.

depended on networks of feminist activists to initiate legal proceedings and to recruit sympathetic attorneys, but once they moved into the courts, local activists generally had little connection to the legal maneuverings. Even so, reproductive rights activists continued to organize and to mobilize at the grassroots. In so doing, they made important contributions to the experiences of local women. At the same time, the efforts of Southern women to challenge legal restrictions changed the lives of women across the nation. It would be a mistake to regard legal challenges as having separate histories from such grassroots feminist activism as speak-outs and referral services, however tenuous those connections became over the years of legal wrangling. Across the South, abortion activists and networks embraced both agitation to change the law and underground efforts to expand women's access to abortion in their battle to expand women's reproductive rights.

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## **Conclusion**

“Reproductive liberty must encompass more than the protection of an individual woman's choice to end her pregnancy,” argues women's health activist Dorothy Roberts. “It must encompass the full range of procreative activities, including the ability to bear a child, and it must acknowledge that we make reproductive decisions within a social context, including inequalities of wealth and power.”<sup>140</sup> Activists for reproductive justice in the South only rarely succeeded in encompassing that full range; they seldom conceptualized birth control,

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<sup>140</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 6.



sterilization, and abortion as a unified issue. Building coalitions of women from diverse backgrounds was difficult when material and legal experiences were so different. Race and class shaped not only women's access to methods of reproductive control, but also the very meaning of reproductive justice. These differences hindered the development of coalitions that crossed lines of race and class.

Despite these divisions, Southern women from many different walks of life were at the center of the national movement for reproductive justice. Although reproductive rights animated feminists across the nation, the activism and experiences of Southern women did much to shape the contours of the movement. The landmark legal cases launched by grassroots activists in the South brought about transformative change for all American women. Historian Jennifer Nelson has argued that “New York feminists contributed disproportionately to the creation of a reproductive rights discourse in the 1970s and 1980s” and that “for most of the 1960s, the abortion rights movement remained the domain of a relatively small number of professionals concentrated in New York and California who fought their battle in the state court system.”<sup>141</sup> This blinkered view cannot withstand scrutiny. Southern women, Southern laws, and the Southern health care system were integral to the reproductive rights movement.

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<sup>141</sup> Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 15, 17.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Providing Women-Centered Care: Southern Women's Health Clinics and Rape Crisis Centers**

Even as the reproductive rights movement failed to construct longstanding coalitions that bridged divisions of race and class, efforts to put into practice its core philosophy – women's control of their bodies – generated alliances that sometimes crossed those very same lines. In the establishment of women's health clinics and rape crisis centers, diverse groups of women found not only a fulfillment of their politics, but also a space in which to build connections with other activists. In Atlanta, to take only one example, public disclosure of the metropolitan area's alarmingly high rape statistics motivated women across the city to lobby for the creation of a rape crisis center, to launch a public safety campaign, and to demand reform of existing rape laws. Throughout 1975, members of the League of Women Voters compiled crime statistics, while local branches of the Young Women's Christian Association sponsored self-defense classes. Women from middle-class organizations such as the National Organization for Women, the Black Women's Coalition, and the Feminist Action Alliance joined with students from local colleges (including Spelman, Emory, and Georgia State) to protest the treatment of rape victims by the local police department, while representatives from the Nation of Islam, B'nai Brith, the Girl Scouts, and the Jonesboro North Tenant Association (a group of public housing residents) lent their energies to rape prevention.<sup>1</sup> All of these organizations worked

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<sup>1</sup> Report, City of Atlanta Department of Police, *1973 Annual Report*, p. 33, folder: Atlanta Police Department, box 7; *InterAction* (Feminist Action Alliance, Atlanta, Ga.) 11, no. 9 (November 1975): 5-6, folder: Newsletter, 1974-1975, box 3; "Fifteen Month Report of Workshops, Talk Shows, and Seminars of the Multi-Area Rape Crisis Council, Inc.," n.d. [1975?],

together in a coalition known as the Multi-Area Rape Crisis Council to establish a clinic for rape victims at Grady Memorial Hospital, eventually raising enough funding to support a full-time staff member, a 24-hour crisis hotline, and a citywide educational campaign.<sup>2</sup>

The creation of Atlanta's rape crisis center represented a rare convergence of disparate women's groups. If that convergence followed in part from the harsh reality that the threat of sexual violence affected all women, it was also a product of focused effort on the part of dedicated activists. In other parts of the South as well, anti-rape campaigns mobilized a wide range of women and likewise generated cross-class and cross-race cooperation. Although women's health centers seldom resulted from equally diverse alliances, they too generated the possibility of coalition-building around women-centered care. The desires to create autonomous spaces and to change the relationship between doctor and patient were shared by women from varied backgrounds.

In their aims and organization, the women's health and anti-rape movements combined elements of both the feminist business movement and the reproductive rights movement. In part, the connection to reproductive rights was philosophical, particularly the claim of women to control over their own bodies. For "Lee," a feminist in Durham, North Carolina, the local women's health clinic provided the means for women-controlled care. "After all, sisters," she

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folder: City of Atlanta Rape Task Force 1975, box 7, Feminist Action Alliance records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter Emory).

<sup>2</sup> Newsletter, *Rape Crisis Center News*, Grady Memorial Hospital, Atlanta, Ga., October 1980, folder: Organizations/Newsletters, box 3, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

asserted, “as we control our bodies and minds, we can free ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> Connections to the reproductive rights movement were often tangible, with overlapping memberships and resources, while those to the feminist businesses were more abstract. Like women operating feminist businesses, activists in the women’s health and anti-rape movements believed that women-centered spaces provided alternatives to the impersonal, bureaucratic practices that dominated mainstream care.

Both the anti-rape and the women’s health movements recognized that women required special resources, not replicas of those provided to men. They argued that women’s needs were distinctive and that the resources currently available were inadequate. “Sisters, do you need to find a gynecologist who treats you like a human being; a therapist who doesn’t Freudinize your mind; abortion, adoption, VD, and/or birth control information or counseling; pregnancy screening, done by a woman?” asked an article extolling the Durham, North Carolina, Women’s Health Clinic. “Do you want free care, without the red-tape of a hospital?”<sup>4</sup> Like feminist businesses, the women’s health movement and the anti-rape movement were expressions of Southern women’s critiques of male-dominated institutions. Establishing women’s health clinics and rape crisis centers, however, required activists to contend more directly with mainstream institutions than feminist business owners ever did. Existing medical and legal practitioners were often unsympathetic or even hostile to their goals,

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<sup>3</sup> Lee [no surname], “Women’s Health Cooperative of Durham,” *A Feminary* (Chapel Hill, N.C.) 5, no. 21 (October 1974): 2, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter Schlesinger).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

yet activists in the women's health movement were more successful in reforming medical and legal practices than feminist businesses were in remaking capitalism.

The women's health and anti-rape movements sought to do more than create separate resources. Women active in these networks also began to explore ways of remaking women's relationships to state agencies and medical institutions. Rather than rejecting outright interaction with traditional medical providers, police, and district attorneys, activists argued that the goal of their movements ought to be reform of existing resources rather than complete separation. They believed that their clinics could be autonomous while simultaneously injecting a feminist critique into mainstream institutions. Much of the literature on these two movements has investigated the degree to which women's health clinics and rape crisis centers were ultimately "coopted" by mainstream institutions controlled primarily by male authorities. Drawing on Weberian critiques of the nature of the state's relationship to the individual, these studies have concluded that increased involvement by state authorities undermined the feminist goals and structures of women's health clinics and rape crisis centers. By channeling these endeavors into more conservative ends, such critics argue, the state coopted potentially radical reforms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 199-200; Amy Fried, "'It's Hard to Change What We Want to Change': Rape Crisis Centers as Organizations," *Gender and Society* 8, no. 4 (December 1994): 567-569; Nancy A. Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xii, 12, 58-59, 160; Sandra Morgen, "The Dynamics of Cooptation in a Feminist Health Clinic," *Social Science and Medicine* 23, no. 2 (February 1986): 201-210. Martha C. Ward, for example, argues that the Family Health Foundation collapsed after it accepted federal funding. The foundation was not a feminist health clinic but a joint operation between Tulane University researchers and progressive physicians. Martha C. Ward, *Poor Women, Powerful Men: America's Great Experiment in Family Planning* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), especially chap. 7. Judith Ezekiel has identified a similar pattern in Dayton, Ohio, where the local women's liberation group lost control

This interpretation may not be an appropriate way to understand the women's health movement in the South. Tensions between attempting to reform legal and medical institutions on the one hand and creating alternative resources on the other certainly existed, but they did not manifest themselves as centrally as has been depicted. Rather, many Southern activists strove from the beginning to have their activities absorbed into larger institutions. In so doing, they argued, existing medical and legal structures would be infused from within by feminist conceptions of health and autonomy.

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### **The Women's Health Movement**

In the 1970s, the women's health movement created advocacy networks, published health materials, and operated clinics across the nation.<sup>6</sup> Although the movement had few national organizations or leaders, activists across the country shared a desire to improve health resources, increase women's reproductive freedom, and reshape the patient-doctor relationship. Few studies, however, have investigated the extent or nature of the women's health activism in the South.<sup>7</sup> Across the region, the rubric "women's health movement" served

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of its rape crisis center when municipal authorities assumed responsibility for its funding and staff. Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 138-141.

<sup>6</sup> Judy Norsigian, "The Women's Health Movement in the United States," in *Man-Made Medicine: Women's Health, Public Policy, and Reform*, ed. Kary L. Moss (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 79-97.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Rosen has argued that "by the end of the 1970s, a loosely connected women's health network stretched from Boston to Los Angeles, with local, national, and even international organizations that monitored health policies aimed at women." Although Rosen provides not a single example from the South, a vibrant women's health movement also existed there. Ruth

as an umbrella for a number of initiatives, including expanding and reforming women's access to health care, challenging the treatment of women by male physicians, increasing the number of women in the medical profession, improving education regarding women's health, and experimenting with alternative, Eastern, or holistic medical practices. These efforts usually sought to address the physical, mental, and emotional health of women as a single entity and to humanize the experience of patients.

Although sometimes organized into loose national or state federations, most feminist groups concerned with improving women's health operated at the grassroots.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, activists involved with women's health centers learned much from one another and engaged in frequent communication. In 1977, in typical fashion, women in Fayetteville, Arkansas, who wanted to create a women's health clinic contacted other health activists in national organizations (particularly the National Women's Health Network, based in Washington, D.C.), in other states (evident in their communications with organizers of women's clinics in Iowa and New Mexico), and at the nearby University of Arkansas.<sup>9</sup> A year earlier, when a

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Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 179-180.

<sup>8</sup> Historian Andrea Boroff Eagan estimates that nearly 1,200 women's health groups existed in the United States in by 1977. Andrea Boroff Eagan, "The Women's Health Movement and Its Lasting Impact," in *An Unfinished Revolution: Women and Health Care in America*, ed. Emily Friedman (New York: United Hospital Fund of New York, 1994), 16.

<sup>9</sup> The Mari Spehar Health Education Project, which was to house the health center in Fayetteville, was established in memory of a woman who had died as a result of complications caused by the use of a Dalkon Shield intrauterine device. Operating out of the University of Arkansas's Women's Center and then a local Presbyterian Church, the project sponsored numerous educational seminars on women's health but never succeeded in funding a women's health clinic. Zeryn Zaire, "Mari Spehar Health Education Project, Fayetteville, Arkansas," in

group of Atlanta women decided to open a feminist women's health clinic, they solicited the advice of friends in Tallahassee, Florida, who had been operating a successful clinic for years. Like the Florida clinic, the Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Center grew out of a small, self-help group founded by dedicated feminists. They hoped to transfer the empowerment they had gained in that group to a wider women's community and to translate their feminist politics into practical uses.<sup>10</sup> Nancy Boothe, an organizer of the Atlanta clinic, emphasized the importance of connections among grassroots activists interested in the women's health movement across the country. "The Feminist Women's Health Centers would support each other," she explained. "If somebody was short of staff, they would send employees to other clinics. They would send money – they shared their money to keep all the doors open."<sup>11</sup>

Feminist health clinics shared a philosophy of care but varied widely in their services,

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*Pattens for Change: Rural Women Organizing for Health*, ed. Dorothy E. Battenfeld, Elayne G. Clift, and Robin P. Graubarth (Washington, D.C.: National Women's Health Network, 1981), 50-51. Records of the project can be found in Series 5 (Mari Spehar Health Education Project Files, 1971-1981), boxes 22-28, Women's Library Collection, Special Collections, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Ark.

<sup>10</sup> Transcript, Nancy Boothe, in an interview conducted by Amanda Brown, July 3, 2007, Atlanta, Ga., p. 44, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter GSU) [unprocessed interview; page numbers may change]; "2 New FHWC's," *The Feminist Women's Health Center Report* (annual report by the Feminist Women's Health Center, Tallahassee, Fla.), 1977, p. 7, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter Duke).

<sup>11</sup> Boothe interview, GSU, p. 44.



membership, and organization.<sup>12</sup> Like feminist businesses, many health clinics adopted non-hierarchical leadership and cooperative work-sharing. In the South, most women's health clinics provided a combination of gynecological, reproductive, and comprehensive health care, usually on a non-profit basis.<sup>13</sup> Some began by offering solely gynecological services but expanded to more comprehensive care as activists modified their understanding of health. Activists in a Gainesville, Florida, gynecological clinic, for example, decided to expand its services when they realized that safe pregnancies would result only if women were healthy throughout their lives. The clinic began screening its patients for lupus, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.<sup>14</sup>

Although the women's health movement was attractive to many Southern women, it seems to have derived most of its organizational energy from the generation born in the years immediately following World War II. A number of feminist women's health clinics, including those in Durham, North Carolina, and Tallahassee, Florida, were organized by students at local universities.<sup>15</sup> Some were long-lived; the Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Clinic, which

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<sup>12</sup> Information about services and clients at women's health centers is particularly difficult to obtain. For privacy reasons, access to the records of many health clinics are not open to researchers. In addition, the local and short-lived character of many of the clinics meant that records were not always maintained or preserved.

<sup>13</sup> Boothe interview, GSU, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Byllye Avery in *The Choices We Made: 25 Women and Men Speak Out about Abortion*, ed. Angela Bonavoglia (New York: Random House, 1991), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Margie Menzel and Renee Bradshaw, "Feminist Women's Health Center," *Spectrum* [no vol.] no. 28 (Winter Solstice 1981): 9, 26, folder: Women's Liberation Pamphlets and Newspapers 1970-1972, 1981, box 1, Tampa Women's Liberation records, GSU.

opened in 1976, is still in operation.<sup>16</sup> Other clinics, such as the one established at the Florida State University Women's Center, operated for a short time, functioning only when classes were in session or while committed volunteers were able to donate their time and energy.<sup>17</sup>

In the South, as was generally true across the nation, the women's health movement encouraged the creation of organizations that crossed racial and class lines and the establishment of institutions that served women of diverse backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> Black and white women were able to find common ground in their attempts to reform the medical profession. "Community-based local women's health clinics," historian Ruth Rosen has argued, enabled "women from different worlds" to organize together.<sup>19</sup> They did not however, always work together easily in the women's health movement or that they always shared the same goals. In the South, many of the women's health clinics created by middle-class women were intended to remedy not a lack of services but the commodification of health care and the paternalism of

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<sup>16</sup> For information about current Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Center activities, see [www.atlwhc.org](http://www.atlwhc.org).

<sup>17</sup> Menzel and Bradshaw, "Feminist Women's Health Center," 9, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Historian Ruth Rosen has contended that "most of the original health advocates were college-educated, middle-class, and white: women's liberation activists, nurses, a few women doctors, and research scientists, all of whom saw their greatest problem as a lack of information rather than access to medical care, which was the barrier faced by poor women. In the seventies, for the first time, poor and minority women – supported by government training programs – began entering these programs as aides to work in women's health clinics." Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 180.

<sup>19</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 180. Rosen has contended that state training programs aided in the diversification of women's health clinics, particularly in the training of poor and minority women as nurses's aides.

male doctors.<sup>20</sup> Working-class activists and patients, on the other hand, viewed feminist health clinics as compensating for a crucial absence in the community. As an African American activist in Tallahassee (probably Eva Oliver) argued, poor health care was a problem for all women, but was especially worrisome for women of color and poor women, who had less access to health care and, therefore, greater need of feminist health centers.<sup>21</sup> Established in 1974, the Gainesville, Florida, women's health clinic emphasized comprehensive health care for black women, focusing on gynecological health as well as treatment and testing for such conditions as high blood pressure and diabetes. Byllye Avery's work in the Gainesville clinic later spurred her to create the National Black Women's Health Project, an advocacy and educational organization. Like feminist women's health clinics, the project introduced women-centered critiques to conventional medical practitioners, sought to increase women's understanding of health, and offered alternative health options.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Byllye Avery found that, despite her effort to publicize the Gainesville Women's Health Clinic's offerings in church bulletins and mailings to African American neighborhoods, few black women in the area took advantage of the clinic's services. Young white women were more likely to use the clinic because they were searching for alternative health care options rather than lacking for care itself. Byllye Avery, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, July 21, 2005, p. 16, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. (hereafter, Smith).

<sup>21</sup> Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), December 1976, folder: *The Examiner*, Tallahassee Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92/072), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>22</sup> By the late 1980s, the National Black Women's Health Project had grown to more than 130 chapters in twenty-two states across the nation and six countries. Byllye Y. Avery, "Breathing Life into Ourselves: The Evolution of the National Black Women's Health Project," in *The Black Women's Health Project: Speaking for Ourselves*, ed. Evelyn C. White, 2nd edition (Seattle: Seal Press, 1994), 6-7. For information about the post-1980 black women's health movement, see Deborah R. Grayson, "'Necessity Was the Midwife of Our Politics': Black Women's Health Activism in the 'Post'-Civil Rights Era (1980-1996)," in *Still Lifting, Still*

Because so many different women were engaged in health care reforms, the women's health movement in the South necessarily served multiple purposes. It not only critiqued the treatment and care of women by conventional medical providers, but also created women-centered spaces and challenged the domination of male physicians. These goals were not unrelated. The creation of feminist health centers often grew out of critiques of male-dominated medical institutions and the paternalistic treatment of women by male doctors. But women-centered spaces were more than a reaction to current treatment options; they were an attempt to create alternatives and to reform – by example or by interaction – mainstream medical institutions.

The desire for women-controlled and women-centered health clinics was widespread in the South. "Ignorance about our bodies and our health care rights," contended the editors of *Southern Feminist Connection*, "keeps us dependent on Southern male doctors to control the health and functioning of our bodies."<sup>23</sup> Like their counterparts elsewhere in the nation, Southern feminists resented the paternalistic attitudes of doctors and their practice of withholding information. "Women's fears and questions have too often been met with paternalism or brushed off as insignificant or irrelevant," declared the Durham Women's Health

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*Climbing: Contemporary African American Women's Activism*, ed. Kimberly Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 131-148.

<sup>23</sup> "Southern Feminists – Activate!" *Southern Feminist Connection* (Winston-Salem, N.C.), March 1976, p. 3, folder: Southern Feminist Connection, box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

Cooperative in its mission statement.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Gainesville Women's Health Clinic worked to "reverse the traditional role of the doctor as the all-powerful, wise dictator."<sup>25</sup> These concerns drove women across the South to establish women-centered health clinics and to insist that women should have greater control over their health care. Activists in the women's health movement sought to increase women's knowledge of their bodies and to expand their influence on the medical care they received. Byllye Avery, a founder of the Gainesville clinic, delineated the difference between treatment by male doctors and the clinic's practitioners by explaining that "we treat women like human beings, not just bodies, and always explain what we're doing in terms that can be understood. We want to demystify medicine."<sup>26</sup> Women's health clinics aimed not only to critique the current system, but also to offer an alternative model.

Critical appraisals of the care provided by male doctors sometimes emerged out of consciousness-raising groups. In these groups, women came to realize that they shared experiences of sexist treatment by male practitioners and a general ignorance of their own physiology. The Gainesville clinic, for example, grew out of a discussion group hosted around a kitchen table.<sup>27</sup> Many women's health advocates considered consciousness-raising to be

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<sup>24</sup> Mission statement, Durham Women's Health Cooperative, n.d. [1974], folder: Health Co-op, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Lehnen and Robin Wagener, "Feminists Mind Own Business," *WomaNews* (Gainesville, Fla.) 3, no. 6 (September 1977): 7, Schlesinger.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Simmons, Bonnie J. Kay, and Carol Regan, "Women's Health Groups: Alternatives to the Health Care System," *International Journal of Health Services* 14, no. 4

central to the movement, particularly because these exercises often led women to conclude that “the health system itself” was “a problem as great as any infectious or degenerative disease.”<sup>28</sup>

These realizations pushed some women to seek greater knowledge of their own bodies and to challenge the medical treatment they received. In 1974, a group of women established the Durham Women’s Health Cooperative as a feminist alternative to medical care in the city. “America’s health system,” they argued, “[has] long failed to adequately meet the unique needs of women and their bodies.” The Durham cooperative was interested in providing medical care that treated women’s physical, emotional, and psychological needs.<sup>29</sup> One of its first initiatives was the creation of a centralized sharing system that would inform local women about local health care resources. This information would help women select a doctor based on information provided by other women, rather than simply picking a name out of a phonebook. The Durham Women’s Health Cooperative used this information to create a directory, available at the cooperative and at the local women’s center as well as for sale, that evaluated the services of local doctors. As the directory indicated, the leaders of the cooperative believed that women needed to be more directly involved in their own health care. After compiling the directory, they launched a campaign to increase women’s awareness of their rights as patients,

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(1984): 624.

<sup>28</sup> Rachel Gillett Fruchter, Naomi Fatt, Pamela Booth, and Diana Leidel, “The Women’s Health Movement: Where Are We Now?” in *Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women’s Health*, ed. Claudia Dreifus (New York: Vintage, 1977), 272.

<sup>29</sup> Durham Women’s Health Cooperative, mission statement, n.d. [1974], folder: Health Coop, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke. The Durham Women’s Health Cooperative operated out of the Harriet Tubman YWCA branch in Durham.

urging them to question doctors and to demand information about health care.<sup>30</sup>

Feminist health clinics created environments that were women-centered. They offered operating hours that made it convenient for working women to use the clinic's services and sometimes provided child care.<sup>31</sup> Often, they were staffed by volunteers committed to the women's health movement or by coalitions of feminist health practitioners and female patients.<sup>32</sup> Drawing lessons from feminist organizations and consciousness-raising groups that espoused non-hierarchical organization, many clinics strove to operate democratically, with staff members and volunteers sharing responsibilities and decision-making. The Durham Women's Health Cooperative, for example, operated with no designated hierarchy. Each member decided how much time and energy she was able to contribute. Decisions about policy and activities were made by members at regular meetings, and the only requirement for membership in the cooperative was membership in the YWCA.<sup>33</sup>

Non-hierarchical organizations were a product not only of feminist origins but of a desire to challenge the idea that male medical doctors were the only people entitled to dispense

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<sup>30</sup> Durham Women's Health Cooperative, mission statement, n.d. [1974], folder: Health Coop, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke. The Durham YWCA, using several dozen surveys of various doctors completed by local women, compiled a general referral system. The surveys were held in binders, now housed at Duke. See binder 1: Dr. & Consumer Surveys – Family Practice/GP, binder 2: Mental Health Providers, binder 3: Clinics, Specialists, Abortion Clinics, binder 4: Dental, binder 5: OB-GYN, box 3 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>31</sup> Eagan, "The Women's Health Movement and Its Lasting Impact," 25.

<sup>32</sup> Fruchter, Fatt, Booth, and Leidel, "The Women's Health Movement: Where Are We Now?," 271-278.

<sup>33</sup> Internal memo, "Involvement in the Durham YWCA Women's Health Cooperative," n.d. [1974?], folder: Health Coop, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

advice or knowledge. As Ruth Rosen has argued, women's health activists were as concerned with disseminating biological knowledge as they were with challenging male doctors' control over women's health.<sup>34</sup> Activists in the women's health movement wanted to transfer the knowledge of the male medical community to women at large.

In addition to challenging the power structure of traditional medical practice, many women's health advocates strove to transform the experience of consulting a medical practitioner from a clinical and distant encounter to one that was warm and welcoming. In 1974, when Byllye Avery and several friends opened the Gainesville Women's Health Clinic (GWHC), they chose to operate in an old, Victorian home. "The first thing we did," Avery remembered, "was renovate the building and make it an absolutely wonderful space. We painted the walls in nice colors. The furniture in the living room was all denim. We put plants in all the rooms, even the bathrooms, and lots of wonderful posters . . . . We had one couch and several recliners because we felt that the women did not necessarily need to be laid out in beds. . . . We had a beautiful blue shag rug that went through the whole clinic, even the exam rooms. That's what everybody who came there talked about – shag carpets were the rage." Changing the physical aspect of spaces helped set a tone that suggested a different kind of care would be provided. The shag carpet was more than a stylish accessory. As Avery suggested, adding personal and comfortable decorating touches indicated that "we had the gall to say, 'we don't have to have these horrible tile floors just because this is a health-care facility.'" <sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 176.

<sup>35</sup> Avery in *The Choices We Made*, ed. Bonavoglia, 148-149.



The Gainesville clinic offered comprehensive health services for women, designed to treat not only the body, but also the mind and spirit. It provided reproductive health care and operated a well-woman gynecological clinic. In addition to medical services, the clinic sponsored counseling and workshops on such issues as sexuality, divorce, and personal relationships. To supplement its educational mission, it published a quarterly magazine, *Sage-Femme*, that analyzed women's health care from global and political perspectives. The magazine also provided information about disease prevention, prescription drugs, medical procedures, and medical terminology.<sup>36</sup> Avery and other women at the Gainesville clinic also hosted a series of educational seminars focused on health and sexuality, led yoga classes, and learned massage techniques. "We just really sort of gave ourselves permission to learn who we are, to explore who we are to our fullest," Avery later recalled. "And it gave us such a sense of pride, who we are. And it really ended up having a lot of carryover into other areas."<sup>37</sup>

Spurred in part by its patients, the Gainesville clinic developed a holistic understanding of women's reproductive health that conceptualized women-centered care as a lifelong undertaking. In 1978, four years after opening the clinic, Avery was approached by a group of pregnant women who "started raising questions about doctors, about how they were treated at birth, about where should they have their babies."<sup>38</sup> Many wanted the option of giving birth at

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<sup>36</sup> Press release, Gainesville Women's Health Center, Inc. August 1978, folder: Other Women's Periodicals, box 2 (Acc. 92/072), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>37</sup> Avery interview, Smith, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

home or at the clinic with the help of midwives. In response, Avery and two other women, Judy Levy and Margaret Parrish, opened Birthplace, a natural birthing center. In conjunction with the Gainesville Women's Health Clinic, Birthplace would, they hoped, provide a feminist "reproductive health experience" and a demonstration that women needed different care than men.<sup>39</sup> Avery, who assisted in deliveries at the center in the 1970s, remembered her time there as "exhilarating work." At Birthplace, she labored to create an environment that emphasized the importance of women's involvement in their own health care. As a result of her work at Birthplace, Avery came to believe that women did not receive the care they deserved at major hospital facilities. Birthplace, for example, created prenatal care programs that provided each pregnant woman with a support group of other pregnant women. Rather than sitting alone in a waiting room, each woman spent time with her support group while waiting for her physical checkup. The support groups allowed women to share their fears and worries with each other.<sup>40</sup>

Feminist health clinics like Avery's in Gainesville provided reproductive health care as well as information about nutrition, occupational health, and aging. Many of them also sponsored alternative health clinics and psychological counseling. The Durham Women's Health Cooperative operated in an office in the local YWCA from which it provided counseling over the phone and in person. The cooperative offered women information about abortion

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<sup>39</sup> Avery, Levy, and Parrish left the GWHC in the hands of the board when they left to create Birthplace. Their departure was, in part, a result of some personal disagreements with other women on the GWHC board. Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Avery, "Breathing Life into Ourselves," 5-6.

procedures, childbirth, venereal disease, birth control methods, and other health care issues, and kept copies of the clinic-produced medical services directory to assist women in selecting practitioners. One morning each week, the cooperative offered pregnancy screening by a medical technician at a cost lower than elsewhere in the area.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to providing medical services, women's health clinics were often important sites for political activism on such issues as abortion rights, access to health care, and product safety.<sup>42</sup> Activists in the Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Clinic conducted research on sterilization abuse and on population control and picketed the local offices of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to protest federal limitations on abortion.<sup>43</sup> The Durham Women's Health Cooperative protested against restrictions on Medicaid-funded abortions in the Hyde Amendment and lobbied for public funding of safe, legal abortions.<sup>44</sup> Mirroring the reproductive rights movement and connected to it, political activism with regard to women's

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<sup>41</sup> The Health Cooperative asked for a one dollar donation for pregnancy screening. Durham Women's Health Cooperative, mission statement, n.d. [1974], folder: Health Coop, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke; Lee [no surname], "Women's Health Cooperative of Durham," *A Feminary* (Chapel Hill, N.C.) 5, no. 21 (October 1974): 2, Schlesinger.

<sup>42</sup> Eagan, "The Women's Health Movement and Its Lasting Impact," 24. Eagan also found that working in feminist women's health clinics was often a starting point for many women's entry into traditional medicine as they found support to pursue degrees or careers as nurses, midwives, or physicians.

<sup>43</sup> "Atlanta FWHC Update" and "First WATCH Conference Convenes in Tallahassee," *Feminist Women's Health Center* (Atlanta), November 1977, pp. 4-5, folder: WATCH (Tallahassee), box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke. For Southern women's reactions to the adoption of the Hyde Amendment, see Chapter 3, above.

<sup>44</sup> Suzi Woodard (Durham YWCA Women's Health Co-op) to YWCA Board Members (Durham), March 27, 1978, folder: Health Co-op, box 1 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

health issues represented another means to infuse feminist critiques and practices into conventional medical practices and institutions.

Women's health clinics relied on the assistance of doctors in local or nearby community to perform abortions. The Gainesville Women's Health Clinic, for example, arranged for a Jacksonville doctor to provide backup medical supervision while abortions were performed by residents from a hospital in Jacksonville on their days off.<sup>45</sup> Women's health centers were required by law to have physicians perform some procedures, but many activists hoped that this interaction would work in both directions. Ideally, the feminist health clinics would benefit from physicians' medical services, while demonstrating to them the importance of women-centered care.

Many women's health clinics, however, were unable to develop or sustain cordial relationships with the local medical establishment. Indeed, health activists often faced harassment and legal threats from doctors and medical associations. In order to protect the clinics from harassment, a group of activists from across the South formed WATCH (Women Acting Together to Combat Harassment) at the Southeastern Women's Health Conference in Gainesville, Florida, in April 1976. This conference, which included representatives from a number of women's groups and women's health clinics across the region, offered an opportunity for activists to recognize "common harassments" and to "begin to pool resources

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<sup>45</sup> Avery in *The Choices We Made*, ed. Bonavoglia, 148-149.

and combat such harassment.”<sup>46</sup>

The following year, WATCH convened a conference in Tallahassee, Florida, to organize, as the group put it, “resources, experiences, and ourselves.” Between forty and fifty women from around the country attended. Conference-goers joined in a series of workshops that addressed such issues as zoning and licensing (which had been used in several cities to block women’s health initiatives) and the hostility of doctors and hospitals toward feminist health clinics. In Tallahassee and Los Angeles, activists reported, clinics had been forced to close when medical personnel who worked there part-time were threatened with termination by their mainstream medical employers.<sup>47</sup>

WATCH was formed, in part, as a response to harassment of the Tallahassee Feminist Women’s Health Center (TFWHC). The establishment of the Tallahassee center and the demands of local activists in the women’s health movement constituted a direct challenge to the dominance of male medical professionals. In response, prominent doctors and at least one state agency began pressuring physicians to deny the center their services. The struggle over control of women’s health issues came to a head when a group of activists associated with the center decided to sue male doctors for monopolizing – and therefore jeopardizing – women’s health care. In a case that drew national attention, the Tallahassee center launched a lawsuit

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<sup>46</sup> “First WATCH Conference Convenes in Tallahassee,” *The Feminist Women’s Health Center Report* (annual report by the Feminist Women’s Health Center, Tallahassee), 1977, p. 4, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women’s Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>47</sup> “First WATCH Conference Convenes in Tallahassee,” 4.

against local doctors, charging that they were practicing restraint of trade by obstructing the clinic's ability to provide health care.<sup>48</sup>

By 1976, the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center was offering a wide range of health care. More than 200 women visited the center each week for services that included pregnancy screening, well-woman gynecology, and general health information.<sup>49</sup> It was the center's provision of first-trimester abortion services, however, that drew the ire of local doctors. Between 1974 and 1977, nearly 4,000 women received abortions at the center.<sup>50</sup> The TFWHC charged \$150 for an abortion, a fee that was between \$50 and \$100 lower than that charged by doctors. In 1975, several local gynecologists began exerting pressure on the doctors who worked at the center. The head of the Florida Board of Medical Examiners followed suit, warning the doctors that their careers could be in jeopardy unless they withheld their services from the TFWHC.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Paula Span, "A New Era for Feminist Health Clinics," *New York Times*, November 23, 1980, SM27.

<sup>49</sup> Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), April 1977, p. 3, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, records, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke University. The Tallahassee FWHC was located in a low-income neighborhood, four blocks from the Governor's residence and near the University of Florida. Brenda Joyner, "Fighting Back to Save Women's Lives," in *From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom: Transforming a Movement*, ed. Marlene Fried (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 207.

<sup>50</sup> Abortions were performed at the FWHC's Women's Choice Clinic. Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), April 1977, p. 3, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, records, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>51</sup> "Anti-Trust Suit: Verdict Before Trial," *The Feminist Women's Health Center Report* (annual report by the Feminist Women's Health Center, Tallahassee), 1977, p. 6, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

In response, activists at the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center filed suit against several local physicians who, they claimed, were conspiring to monopolize the women's health market. They alleged that the doctors in question were trying to maintain and strengthen their control over women's health care by pressuring other physicians into refusing to volunteer their time or to be employed at the clinic. Feminist activists believed these doctors were objecting to the TFWHC because they were losing business, especially in first-term abortions.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the issue of who should provide abortion services, the TFWHC and local physicians disagreed over a key question of ethics. The physicians objected to the center's practice of advertising its abortion services, which they regarded as unethical. The women at the center, on the other hand, believed that it was "our responsibility to inform women about the availability of abortion services" and that those services should be "safe, legal, and relatively inexpensive."<sup>53</sup> The TFWHC contended that local physicians labeled its practices "unethical" simply because "so many women as informed medical consumers have decided to use the

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<sup>52</sup> "Statement to the Press" delivered to the press by Linda Curtis (Director of the Feminist Women's Health Center), October 1, 1975 [copy mailed to the Durham Women's Health Coop], folder: Correspondence, Special Collections Library, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke. The case was *Feminist Women's Health Center v. Mahmood Mohammed, D.D., C.H. Curry, Jr., M.D., Edwin D. Crane, III, M.D., J. Howard Griner, M.D., H. Hutson Messer, M.D., and George Palmer, M.D.* (586 F.2d 530).

<sup>53</sup> Clipping, Pat Harbolt, "'Monopoly' Suit Hits Physicians," *News-Herald* (Panama City, Fla.), October 2, 1975, p. 15, folder: Correspondence, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke. The clinic performed only first-trimester abortions, which were far less dangerous than second-trimester procedures and did not require hospitalization. "Statement to the Press" delivered to the press by Linda Curtis, Director of the Feminist Women's Health Center, October 1, 1975 [copy mailed to the Durham Women's Health Coop], folder: Correspondence, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

services offered at the Women's Choice Clinic instead of their services."<sup>54</sup> The physicians wanted to do more abortions, the center charged, but were unwilling to provide their services to all women. Unlike doctors in private practice, the center provided abortion services to women receiving Medicaid, to those who could not afford to pay the full fee, or to those who could not pay at all. As the women's health activists saw it, the doctors viewed women's bodies as "commodities" that were "parcelled [sic] out to a selected few men who want to maintain their control over women."<sup>55</sup> Control of women's bodies, the TFWHC charged, was inextricably linked to women's equality. The physicians, unlike the TFWHC, viewed women's health care as a business from which to gain financially, not as a service. In fact, many women at the center were surprised to find themselves designated as "competitors" in the women's health field. They had assumed that the center would work in partnership with local doctors, each learning from the other.<sup>56</sup>

Members of the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center traveled around the country raising funds and support from a wide variety of groups, including the American Public Health Association, the National Abortion Council, the U.S. Department of Justice (which was preparing an amicus brief), the Southern Poverty Law Center, and other feminist health

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<sup>54</sup> The Women's Choice Clinic was the name used by activists for the office that performed abortions within the TFWHC.

<sup>55</sup> "Statement to the Press" delivered to the press by Linda Curtis, Director of the Feminist Women's Health Center, October 1, 1975 [copy mailed to the Durham Women's Health Coop], folder: Correspondence, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>56</sup> Clipping, Pat Harbolt, "'Monopoly' Suit Hits Physicians," *News-Herald* (Panama City, Fla.), October 2, 1975, p. 15, folder: Correspondence, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.



clinics.<sup>57</sup> The center obtained hundreds of pre-trial statements from local women who testified to their need of its services. More than one hundred women volunteered to serve as witnesses attesting to the low quality and high cost of health care provided by local doctors and the need for a clinic such as the TFWHC.<sup>58</sup> Activists across the South rallied to the cause; members of the Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Clinic, for example, traveled to Florida to demonstrate their support.<sup>59</sup>

At first, the case seemed to be leaning in favor of the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center. In a preliminary hearing in June 1976, U.S. District Court Judge William Stafford ruled that the evidence seemed clear that the doctors had in fact tried to close the center and that the doctors' only defense would therefore be to demonstrate that they had acted in the public interest in so doing.<sup>60</sup> Six months later, however, the night before the trial was scheduled to begin, Judge Stafford dismissed the suit without explanation.<sup>61</sup> He would

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<sup>57</sup> "Anti-Trust Suit: Verdict Before Trial," *The Feminist Women's Health Center Report* (annual report by the Feminist Women's Health Center, Tallahassee), 1977, p. 6, YWCA records, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>58</sup> "Anti-Trust Suit: Verdict Before Trial," 6.

<sup>59</sup> "Tallahassee Antitrust Suit Update!" *Feminist Women's Health Center* (Atlanta), November 1977, p. 4, folder: WATCH (Tallahassee), records, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>60</sup> "Anti-Trust Suit: Verdict Before Trial," 6.

<sup>61</sup> *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), April 1978, p. 3, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke; Sheryl Burt Ruzek, *The Women's Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control* (New York: Praeger, 1978), 161.

later argue that the health and welfare of citizens were best protected when the medical profession disciplined itself and that the refusal of doctors to cooperate with the center and their criticism of the center's practices were entirely appropriate. He refused to grant a re-hearing. The TFWHC considered an appeal to the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court in New Orleans but dropped the effort in the face of mounting legal costs. Despite the activists' argument that local doctors were more concerned with maintaining their own economic and professional power than with the welfare of women in the community, their legal strategy failed.<sup>62</sup>

The monopoly suit was not the only attempt by women's health activists to challenge male doctors' dominance in Tallahassee. At the 1977 WATCH conference, many participants expressed deep concern about the practices of obstetricians during childbirth and delivery. Inspired by a film that depicted the struggles of Chicago women to continue operation of a women-centered maternity ward, they decided to investigate the local hospital, Tallahassee Memorial.<sup>63</sup> Planning to expose childbirth practices that had either been condemned by the World Health Organization or that the activists regarded as anti-feminist (such as the immediate,

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<sup>62</sup> Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), December 1976, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, YWCA records, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>63</sup> The participants viewed a documentary film, "The Chicago Maternity Center Story," which portrayed the struggle of black, Hispanic, and white women to save the seventy-eight-year-old Chicago Maternity Center's home delivery service from being closed by a major medical center. The film depicted a home delivery and explained why modern medicine offered high-cost, hospital-based care rather than patient-centered, home care. The efforts of the Chicago women failed; the hospital opened a new women's hospital without a home delivery service. It was after watching this film that the women at the conference decided to investigate the Tallahassee Memorial Hospital maternity ward. "First WATCH Conference Convenes in Tallahassee," 5; letter from WATCH, Tallahassee, Florida, to Feminist Women's Health Clinic, Durham, N.C., February 4, 1977, folder: WATCH, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

postpartum separation of newborns from their mothers), they decided that only personal inspection would suffice. The activists were most concerned about a dramatic increase in caesarian deliveries at the hospital, which they attributed to the use of internal fetal heart monitors. Accompanied by a reporter and a photographer from a local television station, thirty conference attendees visited the hospital's maternity wing. They entered the hospital through the front door and walked directly to the maternity wards. All of the women later claimed that no one objected to their presence. When a few of the women entered the nursery, they were asked to leave and did so.<sup>64</sup> They believed the episode was over.

Two days later, the film recorded by the photographer was seized by the state's attorney general, and four of the activists – Ginny Cassidy, Janice Cohen, Linda Curtis, and Carol Downer – were arrested for trespass. The local media characterized their entry into the hospital as an “invasion” and suggested that they had barged in through the emergency room and entered the nursery despite warnings. Linda Curtis, a Florida native, was a founder of the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center. The other three women were from New York and California. All of them were experienced activists in the women's health movement; each of them had either founded or administered a women's health clinic or worked as a health-care educator.<sup>65</sup> All were committed to women's health issues such as childbirth, abortion services,

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<sup>64</sup> Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), April 1977, p. 1, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, records, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>65</sup> In 1972, while attending the University of Florida in 1972, Curtis had begun working with a campus abortion referral service called Abortion Information Dissemination (AID). She had been active in the TFWHC's lawsuit against local doctors. Janice Cohen, from New York,

and well-woman care. Carol Downer, the best-known of the four, had faced legal charges in the past for her women's health activism; she had been tried and acquitted in 1972 on charges of practicing medicine without a license at a feminist women's health clinic in Los Angeles.<sup>66</sup>

While the four women awaited trial, activists in the Tallahassee women's health movement began an extensive campaign to educate the community about childbirth practices. They met with local women's groups, including the Tallahassee chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and local church congregations, and distributed newsletters hoping to inform people about feminist childbirth, an experience that minimized the role of doctors. Like other activists in feminist health clinics, those in Tallahassee envisioned a reformed experience of childbirth – one that would include fathers, exclude the sedation of

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was a filmmaker who documented the work of women's health clinics nationwide. She also served as public relations director for the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Clinic. Ginny Cassidy, a nurse from California, was active in the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Clinic and a founder of Womancare, a woman-controlled clinic in San Diego that assisted in home deliveries. Press release, "Feminists Railroaded in Tallahassee Trespass Case," WATCH (Women Acting Together to Combat Harassment), n.d. [1977], p. 3, folder: WATCH (Tallahassee), box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke; clipping, Pat Harbolt, *The Flambeau*, March 7, 1977, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>66</sup> "Feminists to Stand Trial for Reclaiming Birth," *The Feminist Women's Health Center Report* (annual report by the Feminist Women's Health Center, Tallahassee), 1977, p. 1, 3, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke. In 1972, Downer had helped a woman insert a speculum and perform a self-exam, suggested that a woman consume yogurt to treat a yeast infection, and performed a procedure known as menstrual extraction in which menstrual blood and a fertilized egg were withdrawn from a woman's body before menstruation began. "Feminist Women's Health Centers: Interview with Dido Hasper," in *Women's Culture: Renaissance of the Seventies*, ed. Gayle Kimball (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 266; Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 176-177.

laboring mothers, and end the separation of mothers and babies in hospital wards.<sup>67</sup> The Tallahassee feminists believed that the process of childbirth needed to be returned to women because “medical technology, not being in our control, has served to erode our own participation and control over birthing practices.”<sup>68</sup>

The women arrested in Tallahassee garnered support from feminists across the nation and around the globe. From France, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that she had “heard about the arrest of Mrs. Carol Downer and some other responsible, concerned women [who were] treated like vulgar criminals. That reminds me of very old stories. For centuries, women knew how to cure diseases and help pregnant women. . . . But men had POWER. So they said those women were witches and burned thousands and thousands of them. Are we still in the Middle Ages?”<sup>69</sup> Feminist writer Barbara Ehrenreich argued that the actions of the activists were critical to empowering patients and improving medical care. “The only hope for improvement of hospital care lies in the efforts of community groups and knowledgeable patient advocates (such as the defendants),” she wrote. Feminists throughout the country traveled to Florida to attend the trial in 1977, and women’s health clinics across the nation raised money for the activists’ defense fund.<sup>70</sup> At its national convention, NOW declared its unequivocal

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<sup>67</sup> Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), April 1977, p. 1, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women’s Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>68</sup> “First WATCH Conference Convenes in Tallahassee,” 5.

<sup>69</sup> “Feminists Railroaded in Tallahassee Trespass Case,” 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

support for the actions of the four women arrested in Florida. Echoing the arguments of the Tallahassee women's health care activists, NOW declared that women, as consumers and citizens, should have the right to inspect their health care facilities, and articulated the same concerns about potentially dangerous medical practices used in the obstetrical and maternity wards, along with the medicalization of childbirth.<sup>71</sup>

Despite such widespread public support, the four women were found guilty of trespass. In May 1977, the judge sentenced Downer and Cassidy to sixty days in the county jail and a fine of \$1,000 each, while Curtis and Cohen each received a sentence of thirty days in jail and a \$500 fine.<sup>72</sup> Activists in the Tallahassee women's health movement argued that the women's conviction constituted "a violation of the basic rights of women, consumers, and citizens." They further alleged that their right "to document and disseminate information about harmful practices in public facilities" had been abridged.<sup>73</sup> Florida State University's newspaper decried the verdicts as harsh and unwarranted. "The City of Tallahassee," the editorial asserted, "has good reason to be embarrassed by the conviction and sentencing of four feminist health activists." The paper cited the anti-trust lawsuit filed by the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center as one reason that "feminist women's health centers understandably draw the wrath of doctors

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<sup>71</sup> "NOW Supports Hospital Inspection," *The Feminist Women's Health Center Report* (annual report by the Feminist Women's Health Center, Tallahassee), 1977, p. 3, folder: *The Examiner*/Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>72</sup> The judge cited Downer's and Cassidy's entrance into the nursery as the reason for their harsher sentences. "Feminists Railroaded in Tallahassee Trespass Case," 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

and hospital administrators.”<sup>74</sup>

As the events in Tallahassee revealed, the relationship between activists in the women’s health movement and local medical practitioners was complicated and sometimes deeply conflicted. Feminist health activists wanted to provide health care on their own whenever possible, but they depended on doctors to perform procedures and on the facilities of hospitals for serious cases. Women’s health clinics sought, however, to remake those relationships by instructing doctors and hospitals in feminist principles of care. Activists hoped that physicians and hospitals would follow the examples set by feminist clinics and apply them to mainstream medical practices.

Women’s health clinic activists also believed that the health-care practices they offered could be transformative for their patients beyond their doors. By encouraging patients to ask questions of their health practitioners and become knowledgeable about treatment options, they sought to increase women’s self-empowerment. Because most clinics could not offer comprehensive care, patients had to obtain some medical services elsewhere. Women’s health clinic advocates hoped that their patrons would carry their experiences into other doctors’ offices, breaking down the distance between physicians and patients and demanding full knowledge of their medical options.

Most studies of the women’s health movement have considered the adoption of a few women-centered reforms by mainstream medical practitioners and institutions as a cooptation

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<sup>74</sup> Clipping, editorial, *Flambeau* (Florida State University), May 25, 1977, folder: WATCH (Tallahassee), box 2 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

of the movement that robbed it of its radical implications.<sup>75</sup> But it is clear that for many feminist activists, the adoption of these reforms was central to their mission. They wanted not only to create alternatives, but also to reform existing medical practices.

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### **The Anti-Rape Movement**

Like their counterparts in the women's health movement, anti-rape activists in the South had a complicated relationship with the state, but were often quite willing to seek support from legal and medical institutions. In the 1970s, feminists across the nation worked to reform rape laws and to transform Americans' understanding of the causes and consequences of sexual violence. But the issue was especially fraught in the South.<sup>76</sup> Since the late nineteenth century, the region's dominant sexual and racial order had been based on three reified social constructions: white women's sexual vulnerability, black women's sexual availability, and black

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<sup>75</sup> Morgen, "The Dynamics of Cooptation," 201-210; Ward, *Poor Women, Powerful Men* especially chap. 7

<sup>76</sup> See Peter W. Bardaglio, "'Shameful Matches': The Regulation of Interracial Sex and Marriage in the South before 1900," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 112-140; Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), especially chap. 5; Merril D. Smith, *Sex without Consent: Rape and Sexual Coercion in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).



men's hypersexuality.<sup>77</sup> These constructions worked together to create racialized understandings of rape and respectability, and to bolster white supremacy.

Historically, the enforcement of rape laws in the South had been decidedly uneven, particularly as the rape of African American women by white men went unpunished and unrecognized as a crime at all. Black women countered with assertions that they deserved the same respect accorded white women and that their bodies were sexually unavailable, offering as evidence the respectability of their persons and their lives.<sup>78</sup> The extra-legal punishment of black men for alleged rapes of white women was part of the same system of violence predicated on racial and gender hierarchies. This sexual order had not gone unchallenged. The anti-lynching campaigns initiated by Ida B. Wells at the turn of the twentieth century and by Jessie Daniel Ames and the Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching in the 1930s differed from the anti-rape campaigns of the 1970s in many ways, but they represented important challenges to white supremacist assumptions.<sup>79</sup> Like the anti-rape campaigns that would follow, early twentieth-century reformers expressed a desire to undermine myths about women's sexual availability, about sexual violence, and about the identity of rapists.

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<sup>77</sup> E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 31-32, 35.

<sup>78</sup> On black women's claims to respectability, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>79</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions* (New York: Amistad, 2008); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

Before Southern women could confront sexual violence in the 1960s and 1970s, they had to acknowledge its racialized history in their region.<sup>80</sup> The South's long and painful experience with racially charged rape accusations led both black and white women to approach rape with a combination of caution and determination. Thus, although anti-rape campaigns were national in scope, they had particular resonance in the South. The rape of black women had only recently begun to receive the attention of legal authorities in the region, and sexual violence against African Americans continued to be marginalized by prosecutors.<sup>81</sup> Black feminists therefore demanded not only vigorous prosecution of sexual assault, but also a recognition that their ancestors had borne the weight of a social order based on racial and gender stereotypes.

White women in the South confronted not just their forebears' history in racially charged rape cases, but expectations of gendered behavior that proscribed public discussion of

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<sup>80</sup> In recent years, scholars have found that interracial sexual relations in the South were more fluid than Jim Crow stereotypes suggest. Despite legal and proscriptive prohibitions, they contend, blacks and whites engaged in a range of sexual behavior with each other. See, for example, Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997). In addition, historians Lisa Lindquist Dorr and Diane Sommerville have both discovered that despite representations in popular literature and the popular imagination, charges of rape involving black men and white women did not necessarily lead to violent vigilantism or retribution. Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race*, 1-47; Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 200-259. Nevertheless, the racial implications of rape in the South cannot be minimized. Every one of the fifty-four men executed for rape in Virginia between 1908 and 1965 was African American. Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race*, 206.

<sup>81</sup> Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race*, 232.

sexual intimacy.<sup>82</sup> In 1972, Anne Braden, a white civil rights activist from Louisville, called for reexamination of the implications of white womanhood. She urged white Southern women to consider the case of Thomas Wansley, a young black man imprisoned on rape charges.<sup>83</sup> “Whether we like it or not,” she wrote, “he is in prison because of us.” Rape, Braden emphasized, had been a crime decried only if the victim was white and the assailant black. Black women who were raped had rarely been accorded either sympathy or justice. Rape, Braden argued, had been “the cry that for the last 100 years in the South has undergirded the myths about women and made it impossible for us to fight for our own freedom.”<sup>84</sup> Southern courts had helped to construct and sustain the racial disparity in rape convictions, Braden recognized, and she denounced their actions. But she was conscious that Southern white women played a part in the process as well.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> Wansley was arrested in 1961 in Lynchburg, Virginia, at the height of the sit-in movement. A fifty-seven year old white woman said she was raped, and Wansley was arrested after a massive manhunt. Although the woman was not able to identify him, Wansley was convicted on two counts and given two death sentences. See Alison Edwards, *Rape, Racism, and the White Women’s Movement* (Chicago: Sojourner Truth Organization, 1979): 8; Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 318-320.

<sup>84</sup> Anne Braden, “Free Thomas Wansley: A Letter to White Southern Women from Anne Braden,” SCEF pamphlet, December 1972, p. 1, folder 3.4: 1973/1974 Corres. to Groups, box 3, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>85</sup> Braden had first awakened to the racial disparity in rape convictions as a twenty-two-year-old court reporter in Birmingham, Alabama. One day, she recalled, “a young black man was being tried – not for rape, but something called ‘assault with intent to ravish.’ A young white woman testified that he passed her on the opposite side of a country road and looked at her in an ‘insulting’ way. He was sentenced to 20 years. I was appalled by the case. Torn by what was happening to the black man. But torn, too, as I watched the white woman. She appeared to be

Braden argued that her struggle to win Thomas Wansley's release on appeal was not in conflict with the anti-rape campaigns of feminists across the nation. She recognized that it would be difficult for feminists to support Wansley "at a time when the women's movement in this country is struggling to make our society recognize and deal with the crime of rape," but she argued that "my position is not at odds with this struggle; it is simply another dimension." The privileges of white womanhood "are not real – they are a device through which we are kept under control." Braden believed that a strong women's movement, particularly in the South, would be impossible until it confronted the racist myths of Southern womanhood that "have kept us divided."<sup>86</sup> For Braden, no issue was built upon mythologized gender expectations and historical baggage more than rape.

Braden was not the only anti-rape activist in the South who argued for the need to debunk myths regarding the crime. Rape, such activists contended, was not something women "asked for," nor was it something that occurred only in dark alleys. Southern activists were also careful to note that rape was more often intraracial than interracial.<sup>87</sup> This distinction

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very poor, but she had obviously dressed in her best – and for that day she was queen in the courtroom. The judge, the prosecutor, her father who told of her fright when she came in from that walk – all rallied round to defend her honor." Braden, "Free Thomas Wansley," 2. See also Catherine Fosl's biography of Braden, *Subversive Southerner*.

<sup>86</sup> Braden, "Free Thomas Wansley," 8.

<sup>87</sup> Pamphlet, Sallie M. Shuping, "Rape: A Sourcebook for Carolina Women," 1977, folder: Org. Materials, Women's Forum 1976-77, 1980, box 1, Margaret Anne O'Connor papers, General Manuscripts, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C. (hereafter, UNC Manuscripts); Georgia Commission on the Status of Women, "Rape and the Treatment of Rape Victims in Georgia," n.d. [1974?], p. 3, Judith Lightfoot papers, folder 18, box 7, Schlesinger.

carried important historical weight in debunking racial and gender stereotypes, particularly by reinforcing the truth that both black and white women faced the danger of rape.<sup>88</sup> Anne Braden, for example, publicly criticized Northern feminist author Susan Brownmiller for minimizing the rape of black women in her pathbreaking study, *Against Our Wills*.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, as legal scholar Angela P. Harris has suggested, even well-meaning white feminists embedded essentialist gendered conceptions into their anti-rape work. While both black and white women were vulnerable to rape and to inadequate legal protection, Harris argues, black women had to acknowledge both “their own victimization and the victimization of black men by a system that has consistently ignored violence against women while perpetrating it against men.”<sup>90</sup> Moreover, as African American Studies scholar Hazel Carby has insisted, the rape of black women “has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching.”<sup>91</sup>

Black women in the South had long worked to expose the myths surrounding their own sexuality while at the same time protecting themselves from rape. Ida B. Wells’s campaign to end lynching was as much an attempt to publicize the violence committed against black women

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<sup>88</sup> Angela P. Harris, “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal History,” in *Representing Women: Law, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Susan Sage Heinzelman and Zipporah Batshaw Wiseman (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>89</sup> Anne Braden, “A Second Open Letter to Southern White Women,” *Southern Exposure* 4, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1976): 50-53.

<sup>90</sup> Harris, “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory,” 121.

<sup>91</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39.

as it was an effort to end extralegal prosecutions of black men.<sup>92</sup> Wells was not alone in this critique. Historian Deborah Gray White has found that black clubwomen were critical of black men for failing to defend them against attacks on their sexual behavior, while Darlene Clark Hine has suggested that rape contributed to a culture of dissemblance among black women that “created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.”<sup>93</sup> In the years that followed World War II, historian Lisa Lindquist Dorr contends, civil rights organizations were increasingly successful in bringing cases of the rape of black women to trial. While legal authorities in the South had long ignored sexual violence against black women, particularly that perpetrated by white men, the black press’s coverage of the rape of black women led to increased pressure on white officials to prosecute such cases.<sup>94</sup>

The tangled relationship of rape and race came to a head in the Joann Little case in 1974. While awaiting a hearing on a breaking and entering charge, Joann (sometimes referred to as Joan, Jo Ann, or Joanne) Little, a twenty-year-old African American woman from Beaufort County, North Carolina, was sexually assaulted by a white jailer. Defending herself against the attack, she fatally stabbed the jailer with the icepick he had used against her. She

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<sup>92</sup> Giddings, *Ida*.

<sup>93</sup> Deborah Gray White, “The Cost of Club Work, the Price of Feminism,” in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebeck (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 254-256; Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912.

<sup>94</sup> Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race*, 232-239.

was later charged with first-degree murder.<sup>95</sup> Little's case, which became widely known both in the South and across the nation, centered on a woman's legal right to defend herself against sexual assault.<sup>96</sup> But the case also demonstrated the multiple ways in which anti-rape activists related to the state. As Genna Rae McNeil has argued, Little's supporters were a diverse group who rallied around the case for multiple reasons. Little's attorneys, her family, and political supporters such as Angela Davis concentrated on winning a not-guilty verdict. For others, including a former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of the singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock, Little represented women's vulnerabilities and strengths and the oppressive nature of the state.<sup>97</sup> For women who were concerned with sexual violence, the Little case presented an opportunity to criticize the state's treatment of assault victims and to press for reform of self-defense laws.

Feminists across the South were galvanized by Little's case. Both black and white women organized protests, raised money for her defense, and lobbied congressmen for her release from jail. NOW's national Rape Task Force and its local chapters contributed to Little's defense fund.<sup>98</sup> A number of feminist activists worked with civil rights organizations to

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<sup>95</sup> The jailer, Clarence Alligood, had used the icepick to coerce Little into performing oral sex. Genna Rae McNeil, "'Joanne Is You and Joanne Is Me': A Consideration of African American Women and the 'Free Joan Little' Movement, 1974-1975," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 259-261.

<sup>96</sup> McNeil, "'Joanne Is You and Joanne Is Me'," 259-261.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-269. In her famous recording, "Joanne Little," Reagon compared society to a prison.

<sup>98</sup> McNeil, "'Joanne Is You and Joanne Is Me'," 273.

raise funds and awareness.<sup>99</sup> North Carolina chapters of NOW supported Little, describing the case as “symbolic of the struggle of all women throughout history.”<sup>100</sup> NOW members did more than issue proclamations; dozens of them carried placards decrying Little’s trial, marched, and chanted slogans on the steps of the Wake County Courthouse.<sup>101</sup> Durham’s NOW chapter raised money for Little’s defense fund.<sup>102</sup> *Feminary*, a newsletter based in Durham, North Carolina, published fundraising calls for Little’s defense, and its calendar of events included a march and demonstration “to protest women’s prison conditions and to support Joanne Little.”<sup>103</sup> The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the Women’s Centers of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill held a demonstration in front of the women’s prison in Raleigh to support Little and to bring attention to the treatment of female prisoners.<sup>104</sup> In Atlanta, representatives from the Black Women’s Coalition worked with the

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<sup>99</sup> Among the civil rights organizations most active in supporting Little’s defense were the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Concerned Women for Fairness to JoAnn Little [which later became Concerned Women for Justice], and the Southern Poverty Law Center. *Ibid.*, 262-263.

<sup>100</sup> NOW-NC State Convention Resolutions, n.d. [1974], folder 18, box 169, NOW records, Schlesinger.

<sup>101</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, “Women’s Group Pledges Support to Joan Little,” n.d. [1974], p. 3, folder 18, box 169, NOW records, Schlesinger.

<sup>102</sup> NOW-Durham minutes, December 4, 1974, Durham, N.C., and minutes, April 2, 1975 meeting, Durham, N.C., folder 1, [no box], National Organization for Women, Durham, N.C. Chapter papers, Duke.

<sup>103</sup> *A Feminary* 5, no. 21 (October 1974): 8, Schlesinger. The newsletter’s title became simply *Feminary* after 1975, but usage varied throughout the 1970s.

<sup>104</sup> Newsletter, *Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (Chapel Hill-Durham Branch), November 1974, folder: Local Women’s Organizations, box 2 (Acc. 92/072), YWCA records, Duke.



Feminist Action Alliance, a largely white, middle-class feminist group, to raise funds and public awareness for Little's defense.<sup>105</sup>

Many of these activists viewed Joann Little's experience as representative of the oppression of all women. The middle-class and mostly white editorial board of *Feminary* argued that Little's case demonstrated the "right of women to defend themselves from rape attacks." For them, the case was as much about the criminal justice system as it was about an individual woman. In Little, they saw a woman who had violated social prescriptions – particularly of submissiveness and passivity – and a prosecution that interpreted one kind of bodily harm (sexual assault) as less serious than another (murder). They clearly believed that Little's case was inextricably tied to the rights of all women. "Joanne's right to self-defense," *Feminary* argued, "is our right to defend ourselves from such attacks."<sup>106</sup>

Although activists such as the *Feminary* editors understood Little's predicament as representative of the vulnerability of all women, many feminists were careful to acknowledge the racial implications of the charges against her. The editors of the Winston Salem, North Carolina, newsletter *Southern Feminist Connection* argued that the case clearly "involves a woman's right to defend herself against personal attack," but also that "Joann Little's trial and incarceration were prime examples of what happens to southern women who are black or in

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<sup>105</sup> Minutes, Feminist Action Alliance, February 19, 1975, p. 1, folder: Minutes 1975, Feminist Action Alliance records, box 2, Emory; minutes, Feminist Action Alliance, March 5, 1975, p. 2, folder: Minutes 1975, box 2, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

<sup>106</sup> *Feminary* 6, no. 14 (July 6, 1975): 1, binder: *A Feminary*, Back Issues 1975, Box 7 (Acc. 92-072), YWCA records, Duke.

some other way do not ‘deserve’ the pedestal of the southern gentlemen.”<sup>107</sup> Recognizing such racialized expectations of womanhood was difficult into translate to programmatic reforms, but an understanding that rape was a threat to all women in itself represented a challenge to historical constructions of race and gender.

Anti-rape activists were not, however, always successful in extricating themselves from their own particular class and racial experience. “Historically,” the Atlanta YWCA declared, “we grew in sheltered environments where we were trained to treasure our ‘helplessness,’ supposedly synonymous with ‘femininity.’”<sup>108</sup> Embedded in the YWCA’s “we” was an assumed identity that was both white and middle-class. The YWCA’s declaration failed to recognize that women of color and working-class women had never been accorded “sheltered environments” and had rarely been characterized as “helpless” or “feminine.” The YWCA was more successful in promoting programs that equipped women to avoid sexual assault. Urging women to learn how to protect themselves, the YWCA offered a number of suggestions that might increase a woman’s chances for escaping assault, including keeping keys in hand, parking in well-lit areas, avoiding dark streets, and carrying a police whistle, a sharp object, or a burning solution with which to unnerve or impair the assailant. In addition, YWCA chapters

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<sup>107</sup> *Southern Feminist Connection* (Winston-Salem, N.C.) 1, no. 1 (May 1975): 4, folder: Southern Feminist Connection, box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke; “Southern Feminists – Activate!” *Southern Feminist Connection* (Winston-Salem, N.C.) 1, no. 10 (March 1976): 4, folder: Southern Feminist Connection, box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>108</sup> Flyer, YWCA Women’s Center, “Self Defense and Rape,” Atlanta, Ga., n.d., folder: Rape ‘75-‘77, box 7, Feminist Action Alliance papers, Emory.

across the region began hosting self-defense classes.<sup>109</sup>

Despite racialized differences in the meaning and experience of sexual assault, the anti-rape movement attracted a broad spectrum of women throughout the 1970s.<sup>110</sup> Because women shared (if not equally or in the same ways) a vulnerability to sexual assault, anti-rape activism resulted in the creation of the sort of cross-class and interracial coalitions that developed less frequently around other feminist causes. The Atlanta anti-rape initiatives, for example, drew on the activism of members of the League of Women Voters, the Feminist Action Alliance, and the Black Women's Coalition. These women sought not only to reform rape laws but also to establish a rape crisis center housed in the local Grady Memorial Hospital.<sup>111</sup> Historian Anne Valk has found that in Washington, D.C., activism in anti-rape campaigns created a space in which black and white feminists worked together, even if they did so with different understandings of the roles of race and violence.<sup>112</sup> In Dallas, working-class

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<sup>109</sup> For examples, see newsletter, Atlanta YWCA, vol. 3, Spring 1973, folder: 1971, 1973 South Fulton YWCA Center Brochures, box 29, YWCA records, Emory; *Women's Free Express* (Nashville), 1, no. 1 (March 1974), folder: Women's Free Express (Nashville), box 3 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke; pamphlet, Durham Women's Center YWCA, Durham, N.C., 1974, folder: WHC History File, box 4 (Acc. 92-027), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>110</sup> Maria Bevacqua, a professor of women's studies, argues that anti-rape activism engaged both black and white women, feminists in both liberal and radical organizations, and women of different generations. She does not, however, consider regional differences. Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, especially chap. 1. According to political scientist Amy Fried, rape crisis centers were likely to attract activists with "diverse and potentially clashing perspectives." Fried, "'It's Hard to Change What We Want to Change,'" 564.

<sup>111</sup> *InterAction* (Atlanta, Ga.) 11, no. 9 (November 1975): 5-6, folder: Newsletter, 1974-1975, Box 3, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. The League of Women Voters conducted a survey of rape cases statewide. *InterAction* was a publication of the Feminist Action Alliance.

<sup>112</sup> Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 159.

and middle-class women united over concern regarding the city's high number of assaults and a sense that local law enforcement failed to accord rape a high priority. In 1976, the Kitty Genovese Project, created by Nikki Craft and Ruth Rinehart, two young working-class white women in Dallas, aimed to publicize the failings of the local criminal justice system. Named in honor of a woman who had been assaulted in New York City in 1964 while her neighbors failed to respond, the Kitty Genovese Women's Project set out to unearth and publicize statistics about rape in the Dallas area. Because the county did not compile information about sexual assault, little definitive knowledge existed. Craft and Rinehart, both of whom held full-time jobs, spent their lunch breaks, evenings, and weekends at the county courthouse sorting through thousands of crime records dated between 1960 and 1977. They then printed the names of more than 2,000 indicted sex offenders on 22,000 leaflets which they distributed across the city, but particularly in neighborhoods where repeat offenders were known to reside. The printing and distribution costs were covered, in part, by a group of affluent Dallas women calling themselves Friends of Kitty Genovese, who also paid for advertising space in the *Dallas Sunday News* to reprint the names. On March 8, 1977, International Women's Day, members of the group read the names of the sex offenders on the air over local community radio KCHU – a task that took thirteen hours.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> "Kitty Genovese Women's Project Statement of Purpose," in *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence* ed. Frédérique Delacoste and Felice Newman (Minneapolis: Cleis Press, 1981), 242-246; Jayne Loader, "Exposing the Racist Next Door," *Seven Days*, April 25, 1977, accessed at [www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/KGWP1.html](http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/KGWP1.html); Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 69-70. Nikki Craft is better known now for her work in anti-pornography campaigns.

Across the South, women in grassroots organizations and in chapters of national groups sought to increase safety education and to change the way police, prosecutors, and the courts treated rape victims. Activists in anti-rape campaigns worked to revise laws, create resources to assist victims, and help women learn self-defense. Others concentrated their efforts on challenging myths about where and why women were raped. Nancy Boothe, a nurse in an Augusta, Georgia, veterans' hospital, came to understand how these efforts were interconnected. After reporting incidents of patient abuse in the hospital, Boothe was raped by one of the orderlies in an attack designed to punish and silence her. When she reported the attack, her fiancé broke off their engagement. She felt "blamed" by friends and ill-treated by state law. In particular, she criticized Georgia's policy of charging a fee to file a rape complaint. Boothe organized protests against Georgia's rape statutes and began volunteering at a rape crisis center, devoting much of her time to providing the kind of care she herself had not received.<sup>114</sup>

Rape crisis centers ranged from highly institutionalized to informal and loosely structured. The Dallas Rape Crisis Center, for example, was little more than a 24-hour telephone hotline manned by volunteers to counsel victims of sexual assault.<sup>115</sup> At the other end

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<sup>114</sup> Boothe had experienced escalating harassment after she reported the orderlies' abuse of patients, e.g., her tires were slashed, and the fire department was sent to her house in the middle of the night. Boothe interview, GSU, pp. 29-31.

<sup>115</sup> Volunteers also visited local community and school groups to educate them about rape prevention and victim resources. In 1971, the Dallas Rape Crisis Center sent volunteers to more than 150 rape prevention sessions. "Rape Crisis Center Aids Area Victims" *Everywoman* (Dallas, Tex.) 7, no. 3 (March 1981): 7, folder: Liberation Movement, box 1, Elizabeth C. Alden papers, Duke.

of the spectrum were the clinics organized at local hospitals in Atlanta and in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, which operated 24-hour hotlines, provided emergency assistance to victims needing safe housing or transportation, and supported victims through each stage of the legal process.<sup>116</sup>

Like women's health centers, rape crisis centers were women-centered spaces, but their founders expected far more of them than solace for rape victims. By design, rape crisis centers were also attempts to reform the treatment of women by mainstream legal and medical communities. They often worked closely with local officials, not only out of necessity but as part of their reform mission. Activists established Atlanta's rape crisis center at a local hospital to ensure that victims received women-centered care by trained medical and legal professionals.<sup>117</sup> Women in the Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina created a rape crisis center staffed by volunteers from NOW and other feminist groups, with medical and legal support provided by the North Carolina Memorial Hospital and the police departments of Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and the University of North Carolina.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Shuping, "Rape: A Sourcebook for Carolina Women," 1; Marsha Lamm, "Dial 967-RAPE," *She* 3, no. 1 (September 1974): 2, 8, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O'Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>117</sup> Activists at the center often helped police authorities and district attorneys gather evidence. Editorial, Dale Clark, WAGA TV 5, Atlanta, May 23, 1977, folder: Miscellaneous Materials, box 3, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

<sup>118</sup> Shuping, "Rape: A Sourcebook for Carolina Women," 10; Sherry, "The Chapel Hill Rape Crisis Center," *Feminist Newsletter* 5, no. 12 (June 16, 1974): 2, 4, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, box 30, folder: Feminist Newsletter volume V, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke. The Rape Crisis Center had grown out of a meeting of NOW in which members expressed indignation about the lack of services for rape victims. Lamm, "Dial 967-RAPE," 2, 8; interview of Miriam Slifkin by Lynne Degitz, March 24, 1995, interview G-0175, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.; newsletter, *Rape Crisis Center News* (Chapel Hill, N.C.), March 1976, Minnie Bruce Pratt

Along with creating rape crisis centers, reforming rape statutes became central to the anti-rape movement in the South. Changing rape laws meant introducing statutes that were pro-victim and pro-woman. As Southern feminists lobbied for the revision of legal codes, however, they ran into resistance from some male legislators. Mary Ann Large, a member of NOW's Rape Task Force, was convinced that Southern male representatives could not abandon "the traditional magnolia blossom, southern belle image," and were therefore astonished when women raised the issue of sexual violence. "'Thu vera idea' that southern women should even want to discuss such a 'shockin and disturben' subject," Large remembered, was "a surprise to them." Large was forced to repeatedly remind legislators that Southern women faced statistically high rates of sexual crimes when compared to other regions of the country.<sup>119</sup> When Georgia state representatives Cathey Steinberg and Eleanor Richardson cosponsored a bill to reform a section of Georgia's rape statute, they received a derisive response. The bill was intended to remove a provision of the state criminal code declaring that held that "no conviction shall be had on the unsupported testimony of the female." Its passage would have made Georgia the last state in the nation to remove such corroboration requirements. In 1977, when the bill reached the floor of the House, Steinberg recalled, "I never saw a group be so obnoxious in my entire life." The representatives "made jokes, they whistled, they hooted, they made comments like, 'she deserves what she gets,' and they

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papers, folder: Rape Seminar June 5, 1976, box 93, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke.

<sup>119</sup> Memo from Mary Ann Large, Coordinator, NOW Rape Task Force, to NOW Region State Coordinators and Jackie Frost, January 30, 1974, folder: NOW Rape Task Force Memorandum, box 15, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

laughed and they chuckled. They hooted and *tabled* the bill.”<sup>120</sup> Steinberg resolved that she would make rape law reform the center of her legislative career. When the Speaker of the House told her that the bill “would only pass over his dead body,” she contacted feminists across the state. A coalition of fifty women’s organizations, along with representatives from the district attorneys and police departments, came to a meeting to rally support for the bill. The bill passed by a margin of 117 to 53, but the campaign cost Steinberg professionally. She lost her position on the Judiciary Committee, which she had wanted “so badly,” and was replaced by a freshman, Republican woman opposed to the ERA.<sup>121</sup>

Feminists like Steinberg believed that altering rape laws would help minimize the public, if not the personal, dimensions of rape.<sup>122</sup> Low conviction rates and humiliating treatment by the police and the courts kept many women from testifying against their attackers. High standards of proof (such as corroboration requirements) and laws biased in favor of defendants contributed to the low number of convictions for rape.<sup>123</sup> Anti-rape activists argued that new laws would better protect women and lead to higher conviction rates. To spur changes, many feminist groups promoted model or alternative rape laws that reflected a feminist understanding

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<sup>120</sup> Transcript, Cathey Steinberg, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, March 21 and 28, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 19-22, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>121</sup> Steinberg interview, pp. 19-22. According to Spohn and Horney, the bill that passed was one of the weakest rape laws in the country. Cassia Spohn and Julie Horney, *Rape Law Reform: A Grassroots Revolution and Its Impact* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 97.

<sup>122</sup> Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 90-98.

<sup>123</sup> Spohn and Horney, *Rape Law Reform*, 104, 117.



of the crime, from the victim's point of view. Model laws generally sought to create a shield for the victim's identity, to eliminate the death penalty for rape (in order to increase the likelihood of conviction), to create graduated levels of offenses, and to expand the definition of rape to include anal and oral penetration, acquaintance rape, and marital rape.<sup>124</sup> Although activists in most Southern states were not able to secure all of the reforms they sought, they did manage to win a number of victories. In 1975, Texas enacted a rape shield law designed to limit admissibility of the victim's sexual history and also modified slightly its definition of non-consensual sexual activity to include situations in which the victim was physically or mentally unable to resist. Georgia adopted a rape shield law in 1976 and in 1978 eliminated the necessity for corroboration of the assault.<sup>125</sup>

Anti-rape activists considered their work to be closely connected to that of doctors and nurses, police departments, and district attorneys. While reformed rape laws represented the introduction of women-centered philosophies in jurisprudence, efforts to create rape crisis centers were intended to usher similar ideas into medical and legal practice.<sup>126</sup> In order to

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<sup>124</sup> Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 100; Spohn and Horney, *Rape Law Reform*, 40-46. In 1977, in its *Coker v. Georgia* (433 U.S. 584) ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the death penalty for rape convictions.

<sup>125</sup> Anti-rape activists managed to broaden the legal definition of rape only gradually. Texas removed its exemption for spousal rape in 1983, but Georgia did not do so until 1996. Spohn and Horney, *Rape Law Reform*, 40-41.

<sup>126</sup> In the mid-1970s, the Southeastern Rape Crisis Center Coalition met annually to discuss the challenges of operating a rape crisis center, fundraising, and pushing for legislative changes. The conference drew activists from rape crisis centers across the South, including Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. See *People Against Rape*, Charleston, S.C., to Feminist Action Alliance, November 5, 1976, folder: Miscellaneous Correspondence, box 7, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

improve the treatment of victims, feminists in Atlanta helped the city's police department secure a grant for the development of a special unit devoted to investigating rape crimes and assisting rape victims.<sup>127</sup> Anti-rape activists also worked closely with the Atlanta police to sponsor a Rally Against Rape in Piedmont Park, which included demonstrations of rape-prevention tactics, as well as basic methods of self-defense. Following the rally, the Feminist Action Alliance hosted a forum that included the mayor, members of the city council, and representatives of the city's police department, all of whom reiterated the priority they accorded the problem of rape.<sup>128</sup>

Anti-rape activists sought not only to create women-centered treatment and legislation, but also to reform the attitudes and behavior of legal, law enforcement, and medical officials. Far from considering the opening of their rape crisis centers in conjunction with local hospitals as cooptation of their movement, activists in Atlanta and Chapel Hill-Carrboro celebrated their establishment as great victories. "We have found," the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Rape Crisis Center reported, "that our services and theirs are complementary: while they have the professional training and medical knowledge, our volunteers have the time and mobility to get rape victims to and from the ER and continue with long-range counseling."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> The Atlanta Police Department was awarded \$350,000. Heather F. Lawson (Vice-President, Feminist Action Alliance) to Tony Jones (editor, *Harpers Weekly*), April 30, 1975, folder: VP Correspondence, 1974-75, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

<sup>128</sup> Report, "Major Activities of the Rape Task Force," December 1975, pp. 4-5, folder: RTF Materials, box 7, Feminist Action Alliance, Emory.

<sup>129</sup> Newsletter, *Rape Crisis Center News* (Chapel Hill, N.C.), March 1976, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, folder: Rape Seminar June 5, 1976, box. 93, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke.

Scholars such as Sandra Morgen and Marlene Fried have suggested that this negotiation with male-dominated institutions represented only a moderate reform, but the South's particular history with rape meant that attempting to transform mainstream institutions was a radical endeavor. In comparison to other regions of the country, rape laws in the South prior to the 1970s were decidedly weighted in favor of the accused.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, since the decades following Reconstruction, representatives of the state had interpreted rape in highly racialized and class-specific ways. Both the allegation and experience of rape had long been a racially fraught crime in the South. Conservative politics coupled with institutionalized racism thus compelled anti-rape activists to focus their reform efforts not only on attackers, but also on the state. Their activism, however gradual and modest, pushed Southern states and Southern medical authorities into adopting women-centered reforms and overturned decades of systemic gender and racial hierarchy.

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## **Conclusion**

Most activists in the women's health movement sought to create alternatives to mainstream institutions and to reform the practices of the police, district attorneys, and medical authorities. The goal was not only to lead by example but to transform powerful institutions. Physician and long-time health advocate Helen Rodriguez-Trias has argued that the "greatest weakness" of the women's health movement was "its overall failure to address the need for

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<sup>130</sup> Spohn and Horney argue that states such as Georgia and Texas enacted laws that were far more conservative than those of Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Spohn and Horney, *Rape Law Reform*, chap. 2.

power within the institutions where most of the abuses were taking place.”<sup>131</sup> Valid though this critique may be with respect to the women’s health movement elsewhere in the nation, it does not adequately describe Southern women’s efforts to improve women’s health and reform the health system, because in the South, many such projects entailed both the creation of female-centered spaces and the reform of state practices. For the women’s health and anti-rape movements in the South, mainstream institutions and their practices were a target of reform from the outset.

In the South, the question of cooptation arose more frequently with respect to women’s health clinics and less often in the anti-rape movement. The intransigence of male doctors, as well as the power of the American Medical Association and local hospitals, convinced many activists that creating alternative health care institutions would have to precede the reform of existing ones. Women’s health clinics necessarily had to cooperate with doctors, but they tried to do so on their own terms. In these interactions, they endeavored to change the way doctors interacted with their patients and the kind of care their practices offered. For the most part, women’s health centers were created to provide an alternative to mainstream care. In the early and mid-1970s, virtually all such centers operated in areas where medical services were

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<sup>131</sup> Rodriguez-Trias was a founding member of the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, of the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, and of the Women’s Caucus of the American Public Health Association. In 2001, she was awarded the Presidential Citizen’s Medal for her work on behalf of women, children, people with HIV and AIDS, and the poor. See [www.nlm.nih.gov/changingthefaceofmedicine/physicians/biography\\_273.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/changingthefaceofmedicine/physicians/biography_273.html). For the quotation, see Helen Rodriguez-Trias, “The Women’s Health Movement: Women Take Power,” in *Reforming Medicine: Lessons of the Last Quarter Century*, ed. Victor W. Sidel and Ruth Sidel (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 124.

already available. Not until late in the decade did feminists begin to establish women's health centers that addressed the lack of care in rural or impoverished areas. Efforts such as the National Black Women's Health Project and the Rural Women's Health Advocacy Project sought to ensure that all women received not only adequate health care, but women-centered care.

Unlike women's health centers, rape crisis centers were established to fill a void in the care provided to women. They were not alternatives to mainstream resources, as virtually no Southern cities or towns provided specialized services to rape victims. The crisis centers introduced victim-centered resources – medical and legal advocates, 24-hour hotlines, educational programs – across the South. Because little in the way of such services existed prior to the 1970s, activists in the anti-rape movement were more willing than those in the women's health movement to cooperate with and try to reform mainstream institutions. Although often less formally organized than women's health clinics, rape crisis centers created feminist resources while attempting to inject a feminist consciousness into mainstream medical and legal institutions.

The creation of women's health clinics and work in anti-rape initiatives appealed to a wide variety of activists, in part because the inadequacies of mainstream institutions affected all women, whatever their race or class. While initiatives such as the Gainesville Women's Health Clinic and Atlanta's Grady Memorial rape crisis center were unusually successful in attracting diverse coalitions of activists, they illustrated the possibility of integrated, cross-class organizing. Class and race quite certainly continued to influence not only Southern women's understanding

and experience of mainstream legal and medical institutions, but also the ways in which they used health clinics and anti-rape resources. Nevertheless, the women's health movement was the most unified aspect of second-wave feminism in the South.

## Chapter 5

### Changing the Direction of the River: Southern Women's Political Activism

In 1977, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) launched the Southern Women's Rights Project to address legal forms of sexual discrimination. Although never sufficiently staffed or funded, the project represented an attempt to rectify regionwide inequities and to identify causes that would attract a broad range of activists concerned with expanding women's rights.<sup>1</sup> Based in Richmond, Virginia, the Southern Women's Rights Project served as a "regional clearinghouse on women's issues," providing speakers on such topics as job discrimination, reproductive freedom, the Equal Rights Amendment, occupational health hazards, and gender bias in education. The project also organized local workshops, published educational materials, and counseled women about their experiences of discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Betsy Brinson, who hailed from North Carolina and was an experienced ACLU official, headed the initiative, which sought to encourage the development of grassroots women's rights projects with local ACLU affiliates across the South.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, local activists would recruit attorneys to

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<sup>1</sup> The Southern Women's Rights Project was largely unaffiliated with the national ACLU Women's Rights Project, which was created in 1972 by Ruth Bader Ginsberg to pursue gender equality through litigation across the nation. See Fred Strebeigh, *Equal: Women Reshape American Law* (New York: Norton, 2009), 46-47; [www.aclu.org/womensrights/](http://www.aclu.org/womensrights/).

<sup>2</sup> The ACLU gathered these individual stories into a "brief bank" that was intended to serve as the basis of class-action legal suits. Betsy Brinson to Meegan Rosenfeld, September 8, 1978, box 1, American Civil Liberties Union Southern Women's Rights Project, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va. This initiative does not seem to have come to fruition.

<sup>3</sup> Brinson earned a B.A. in American history from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a Ph.D. in Women's Studies from the Union for Experimenting Colleges and

work on women's rights litigation, launch lobbying campaigns in state legislatures, raise funds for women's rights initiatives, and build coalitions with other local women's groups.<sup>4</sup> These efforts, the ACLU believed, would serve as the foundation for a regionwide women's rights movement. Under Brinson's direction, the Southern Women's Rights Project, unlike most of the ACLU's initiatives, devoted more energy and resources to building organizational strength than to pursuing specific litigation.<sup>5</sup> Organizing Southern women took priority over legislative efforts or legal challenges. The South was the only part of the nation targeted by the ACLU for such a project, in part because the organization believed, as Betsy Brinson put it, that the region was "far behind other areas of the country on women's issues."<sup>6</sup> After seven years working as the ACLU's state director, first in North Carolina and then in Virginia, Brinson was well acquainted with the legal restrictions experienced by Southern women.<sup>7</sup>

Although the ACLU was right to point to the "well-known conservatism of Southern

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Universities in Cincinnati, Ohio. She worked for the ACLU as North Carolina state director (1970-1974), as Virginia state director (1974-1977), and as program director of the Southern Women's Rights Project (1977-1981). Betsy Brinson Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va.

<sup>4</sup> Minutes, board of directors, ACLU of Georgia, July 11, 1977, folder: Racism and Black History, box 10, Eleanor Richardson papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter Emory).

<sup>5</sup> On the ACLU, see Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Newsletter, ACLU, *Women's Rights Report* 1, no. 1 (March 1979): 6, folder: Organizations/Newsletters, box 3, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

<sup>7</sup> For biographical information on Brinson, see the Virginia Historical Society's webpage, [www.vahistorical.org/arvfind/brinson.htm](http://www.vahistorical.org/arvfind/brinson.htm).



legislators,” it lacked an appreciation of the considerable feminist organizing already underway across the region. The ACLU pointed to the South’s “lower quality of education, social services, and employment opportunities” as evidence that Southerners were unaware of “what constitutes discrimination or what legal remedies are available.” The failure of most Southern states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) suggested to the ACLU “an overall lack of awareness on women’s issues, not only on the part of the legislators but also among their constituents.” The ACLU believed that the “majority of southern women” possessed “neither the knowledge nor the resources” to challenge discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

The ACLU’s opinions were shaped, in part, by the fact that women’s political rights were uniquely circumscribed in the South. Women faced restrictions on jury service throughout the nation, but only in three Southern states (Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina) were they entirely barred from the jury box. In the South, residency played an important role in determining women’s legal rights, because most Southern states tied women’s residence to that of their husbands, and residency requirements affected not only voting status, but also access to state-supported educational institutions and student loans, and custodial arrangements.<sup>9</sup> In

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<sup>8</sup> Newsletter, ACLU, *Women’s Rights Report* 1, no. 1 (March 1979): 6, folder: Organizations/Newsletters, box 3, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. Nine Southern states failed to ratify the ERA. A subsequent section of this chapter discusses the ratification campaigns in the South.

<sup>9</sup> In 1977, as part of International Women’s Year activities, each state commissioned a study that examined and categorized gender discrimination in law. See, for example, Lucy S. McGough, *The Legal Status of Homemakers in Georgia* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Women Policy Studies/National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, 1977); Sylvia Roberts, *The Legal Status of Homemakers in New Orleans* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Women Policy Studies/National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, 1977). In Georgia, National Organization for Women (NOW) activists

Louisiana, community property laws made the husband “head and master of the community,” awarding him control of his wife’s assets and the right to dispose of jointly held property without her knowledge or consent.<sup>10</sup> Statutes such as these spurred diverse groups of Southern women into action aimed at overturning legal discrimination.

Like the women’s health and reproductive justice movements, political activism aimed at challenging laws drew women of different classes and races into coalitions.<sup>11</sup> Political-legal activism contesting discrimination would presumably benefit all women, allowing advocates to argue that they were working to improve the lives of women without regard to class or race.

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successfully lobbied to overturn a law that barred a woman from voting in the state if her husband maintained a legal residence elsewhere. In 1974, Patricia Kane of Albany, Georgia, launched a class-action suit that resulted in a ruling that the law was unconstitutional. *Page One* (Atlanta, Ga.) 1, no. 8 (January 1974): 3, box 7, National Organization for Women Newsletter Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter Schlesinger). On challenges to North Carolina’s spousal residency laws, see speech by Martha McKay, “ERA: Equality Under the Law Shall Not be Abridged,” delivered to classroom teachers of North Carolina, n.p., Spring 1973, p. 6, folder: correspondence 1971 (October-December), box 1, Martha McKay papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C. (hereafter UNC Manuscripts).

<sup>10</sup> Louisiana attorney Janet Mary Riley spent nearly a decade working to modify the “head and master” laws. After the Louisiana State Law Institute appointed Riley to revise the state’s civil code, she suggested an “equal management” plan that would allow either spouse to manage community property. She worked for years to persuade the state to adopt the modification. Finally, in 1979, state Senator Tom Casey drafted a resolution based on her suggestions, and it became law later that year. For an obituary for Riley, see [www.philly.com/inquirer/obituaries/20080709\\_Janet\\_Mary\\_Riley\\_Won\\_female\\_rights\\_92.html](http://www.philly.com/inquirer/obituaries/20080709_Janet_Mary_Riley_Won_female_rights_92.html). The “head and master” law was overturned in *Kirchberg v. Feenstra*, 450 U.S. 455 (1981).

<sup>11</sup> This chapter employs a traditional and narrow view of politics. I do not mean to suggest that women’s activism in the spheres of economic rights or health rights was not political. Rather, I hope to suggest in this chapter that traditional politics (e.g., voting, jury service, and office holding) provided one way that women were able to find common ground across ideological, class, and racial divides. In the specifics of policy, they found less agreement.

Moreover, battles to end legal discrimination provided activists with issues on which they could take the high ground and, for the most part, avoid any taint of radical feminism. Whether in the courts or through campaigns for legislation and political office, political-legal activists claimed that winning legal equality would solve any number of problems that women encountered in both the public and private realms. In some respects, the goals of political activists served to unite Southern women because, on its face at least, legal discrimination affected all women in similar ways. At the same time, however, legal strategies ultimately proved to be insufficient in addressing the inequalities in Southern women's lives and inadequate as the foundation of a diverse women's movement.

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### **Jury Service**

Some activists argued that the most effective way to attack legal discrimination against women would be to persuade the U.S. Supreme Court to rule that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment applied to women.<sup>12</sup> Jury service, they contended, could serve as an ideal test of laws that restricted women's civil rights. Led by Pauli Murray, Dorothy Kenyon, and Marguerite Rawalt, they concentrated their efforts on the South, where the legal distinctions in jury service were most stringent and where conservative judges would be likely

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<sup>12</sup> In the early 1960s, feminists interested in legal reform often disagreed about whether to pursue the ERA or launch Fourteenth Amendment appeals. This distinction seems to have had little relevance to Southern activists, who pragmatically embraced both approaches. For a discussion of the alternative legal approaches and their respective advocates, see Serena Mayeri, "Constitutional Choices: Legal Feminism and the Historical Dynamics of Change," *California Law Review* 92, no. 3 (May 2004): 755-839.

to issue decisions that could be appealed to federal courts. Into the mid-1960s, three states, all in the South, prohibited women from serving on either grand juries or trial juries. Although the laws of several states across the nation placed partial restrictions on women's jury service and many states employed extralegal tactics and gendered conceptions of capability to exclude women from the jury box, only Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina barred women altogether.<sup>13</sup> These three states alone, as attorney Marguerite Rawalt discovered, excluded women "no matter what race, nationality, religion, solely because of sex."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, many Southern states excluded African Americans of either sex. Early attempts to challenge exclusionary laws had been largely unsuccessful. In 1961, *Hoyt v. Florida* had upheld the exclusion of women from jury service when the U.S. Supreme Court determined that women were "the center of home and family life" and thus belonged in the domestic sphere, not the

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<sup>13</sup> Plaintiff's brief, *Gardenia White et al., Plaintiffs, v. Bruce Crook et al., Defendants*, 251 F. Supp. 401 (1966), pp. 55-56, folder 672, box 38, Pauli Murray papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>14</sup> Twenty-one states provided for uniform jury service, placing the qualifications of men and women on the same basis, and excusing any citizen, man or woman, "for reasonable cause." Twenty-three states had "permissive" jury service laws for women, which excused any woman merely on her statement that she did not care to serve. Eight states specifically exempted women (but not men) on the basis of home or child care duties, two allowed women to serve "only when courthouse facilities are proper," and two excluded women from serving in trials involving certain violent crimes. Speech, Marguerite Rawalt, "The Invisible Sign on the Court Room Door," Washington, D.C., November 1, 1966, folder 5, box 5, Marguerite Rawalt papers, Schlesinger; Marguerite Rawalt, "Jury Service for Women – A Constitutional Right within the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment," *Women Lawyers* 52, no. 2 (spring 1966): 50, 52, folder 6, box 5, Marguerite Rawalt papers, Schlesinger. See also Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 312.

courtroom.<sup>15</sup> Discriminatory jury laws and the *Hoyt* decision spurred a number of Southern women to mount legal and extralegal challenges throughout the 1960s and 1970s, first in the courts and then informally, via political organizations.

In 1966, these efforts reached fruition in *White v. Crook*, an Alabama case that simultaneously challenged both the *de jure* practice of excluding women from juries and the *de facto* practice of excluding African Americans. The lead attorneys, Pauli Murray, an African American lawyer born in North Carolina, and Marguerite Rawalt, a white attorney from Texas, argued that the struggles for women's rights and African American rights were not only similar, but intertwined.<sup>16</sup> For decades, Murray contended, black and white Southern women had worked both together and in parallel organizations to expand civil rights in the region.<sup>17</sup> For Murray, the decision to link gender and racial discrimination was personal as well as political

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<sup>15</sup> Gwendolyn Hoyt, who had bludgeoned her husband with a baseball bat after arguing about his infidelities, had been convicted of murder by an all-male jury. Hoyt argued that, as a result of the exclusion of women from the jury, she had been deprived of her Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection under the law. Female jurors, she believed, would have understood her plight better than men and would have been more sympathetic of her temporary insanity defense. Florida law provided that women could serve as jurors only if they specifically requested to be put on the jury rolls. When Hoyt was convicted, only 10 women appeared on the list of 10,000 people eligible to serve as jurors in Hillsborough County, where she was tried. *Hoyt v. Florida*, 368 U.S. 57 (1961); <http://law.jrank.org/pages/13241/Hoyt-v-Florida.html>; Patricia Ireland, *What Women Want* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 74; Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 124-128, 151-184.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Kenyon, a women's movement veteran, also contributed her legal services. Kenyon, who was seventy-eight years old at the time, had been active in women's rights efforts since the suffrage campaigns of the early twentieth century. Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 437; Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Plaintiff's brief, *White v. Crook.*, pp. 38-42.

and pragmatic. She herself had experienced both and was acutely aware of their interconnection.<sup>18</sup>

When Gardenia White, a black woman from Alabama, became the lead plaintiff, she gave Murray and Rawalt a valuable new legal argument.<sup>19</sup> The suit had been initiated by several black men in Lowndes County, Alabama, who claimed that they were never called to serve on juries.<sup>20</sup> But the situation was different for black women. The names of black men “would be put on panels but somehow or other, they were never called to serve,” Rawalt explained. “So it was a practice there not to call the black men. But it was *law* that a black woman couldn’t serve.”<sup>21</sup> The addition of Gardenia White thus contributed an important new

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<sup>18</sup> See Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Mayeri, “Constitutional Choices,” 763. For Murray’s seminal article describing the connections between racial and gender discrimination, see Pauli Murray and Mary O. Eastwood, “Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII,” *George Washington Law Review* 34, no. 2 (December 1965): 232-256. For more on Murray, see the roundtable in special issue of *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 54-87.

<sup>19</sup> Gardenia White may have been the same woman who joined the board of the Southeast Women’s Employment Coalition (SWEC), but little biographical information about her is available in the court documents or elsewhere. See Chapter 2, above.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Morgan, *One Man, One Vote* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1979), 40. Morgan was an attorney for the ACLU who helped organize the case.

<sup>21</sup> Marguerite Rawalt, interview by John T. Mason, Jr., June 4, 1979, Arlington, Va., p. 409, folder 36, box 1, Marguerite Rawalt papers, Schlesinger (emphasis added). Murray and Rawalt were also angered by the inclusion of women among groups whom the state had declared incapable of jury service. “The irrelevancy of the sex factor becomes more striking,” Murray and Rawalt argued, “when compared with the other jury qualifications and disabilities set forth by the Alabama statute. Persons who are habitual drunkards, or who are afflicted with a permanent disease or physical illness making them unfit to discharge the duties of a juror, or who have been convicted for an offense involving moral turpitude are like women disqualified for jury service.” Plaintiff’s brief, *White v. Crook.*, pp. 51-52.

constitutional challenge. Murray and Rawalt argued that by excluding women from jury service, the Alabama statute violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. “The fact of sex *per se*,” they claimed, “is obviously irrelevant to the proper functioning of the jury system.” Because the courts had already ruled that there was no biological difference between people of different races, Murray argued that there existed “no difference between a legal distinction predicated solely upon race and one resting solely upon the fact of sex with respect to jury service.” She further contended that the law’s restrictions on jury service had become increasingly outmoded as women assumed expanded positions of power and authority. Women in Alabama, she pointed out, served in state government as tax assessors, treasurer, and auditors. “More important,” Murray maintained, “the Presiding Judge of the State Court of Appeals, Annie Lola Price, is a woman. She can reverse the verdict of a jury. She could resign and practice law before a jury. But solely because she is a woman she is not eligible to serve on a jury.”<sup>22</sup>

In February 1966, the federal appeals court in Alabama ruled in favor of Gardenia White under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, ordering county officials to add African Americans to the jury rolls and voiding the state law that had excluded women of all races from jury service.<sup>23</sup> To the dismay of the feminist attorneys, however, Alabama chose not to appeal the ruling, leaving the question of women’s Fourteenth Amendment rights

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<sup>22</sup> Plaintiff’s brief, *White v. Crook*, quotations on 51-52, 53, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 437; Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*, 64-65.

unanswered by the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>24</sup>

While feminists celebrated *White v. Crook* as a repudiation of sex differences in law and a victory for equality, Southern women continued to struggle to serve on juries. Removing the legal barriers to jury service did not resolve women's unequal standing before the courts, nor did it erase gendered ideas of women's capacity to serve. In the early 1970s, a Louisiana state legislator confessed to Annabelle Walker, a member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), that he felt uncomfortable with women serving on juries. "He said, 'I don't know about this women serving on juries,'" Walker later recalled. "He said, 'what if a woman, what if she's pregnant?' I said, 'so what? Are you afraid she can't fit into the jury box?' [laughter]"<sup>25</sup> Many feminists met the continued exclusion of women from jury service with more than derisive humor. In 1976, twelve residents of rural Burke County, Georgia, accused the local jury commissioner, the jury clerk, and the county Board of Education with race and sex discrimination. They cited a pattern of discrimination that had systematically excluded women and blacks from jury service and from policy-making for the county school system. Although the county was 53 percent female, only 2 percent of the jury pool was female and no women

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<sup>24</sup> Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*, 66; Mayeri, "Constitutional Choices," 783. In 1966, the Supreme Court declined on jurisdictional grounds to take up on a women's jury service complaint from Mississippi, *Hall v. Mississippi*, that sought to apply the *White* decision in other states. *Hall v. Mississippi*, 187 So.2d 861 (Mississippi 1966). Several years later, in *Reed v. Reed*, an Idaho probate case, the Supreme Court ruled that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment did protect women's interests. *Reed v. Reed*, 404 U.S. 71 (1971).

<sup>25</sup> Transcript, Annabelle Walker, in an interview conducted by Joyce Durand, September 24, 1999, p. 53, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter GSU).



served on the Board of Education.<sup>26</sup> Such de facto restrictions were common across the South. As late as 1975, women in Atlanta encountered hostility when they tried to ascertain the dynamics of representation on juries. The local League of Women Voters chapter took this issue very seriously and launched an investigation. Ken Stringer, chairman of the jury commission, informed the League that he “categorically eliminates from consideration married women between the ages of 20 to 40 because they are likely to have small children.” When the League pushed for women’s equal representation on juries, Stringer replied, “you wouldn’t want to be tried by a bunch of women.”<sup>27</sup> The League, however, continued to pressure the county to amend its procedures until it forced the jury commission to institute a random, computerized selection process.<sup>28</sup>

The victory in the *White* decision was thus limited by barriers that continued to be erected by local jury commissions, yet its very existence suggested radical possibilities. To have black and white women considered not only each other’s equals but also the peers of men carried significant symbolic weight in a society long marked by racial segregation as well as deep gender divides. Campaigns to extend equal jury service to women were thus far more radical than even their proponents realized. Indeed, they held within them the possibility of

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<sup>26</sup> *The Applecart* (Augusta, Ga.) 4, no. 6 (June 1976), folder: Georgia Chapters Publications – Central Savannah River Area, box 19, Martha Gaines Wren papers, Emory. *The Applecart* was published by the Central Savannah River Area chapter of NOW.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Moran, “Report of Telephone Interview with Mr. Ken Stringer, Chairman, DeKalb County Jury Commission,” July 29, 1975, folder: LWV, box 2, Charlotte Moran papers, Emory. As of May 2007, when I examined the Moran papers, they were unprocessed.

<sup>28</sup> League of Women Voters of DeKalb County, Annual Report, 1975-76, folder: DeKalb Newsletter 1976, box 4, League of Women Voters records, Emory.

overturning racial and gender hierarchies. Equal access to jury service did not mean that women would be prosecuted equally or admitted to the bar equally or elected as judges equally. But many female defendants believed that female jurors would be more sympathetic or understanding than male jurors.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the fight for equal jury service was part of a larger battle to expand the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment beyond racial discrimination by claiming that all women faced similar barriers and deserved constitutional protection. Later landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court built upon the legal arguments employed by Pauli Murray and Marguerite Rawalt in *White v. Crook*.<sup>30</sup> As nineteenth-century feminists had foreseen, the inclusion of sex as a class protected by the Fourteenth Amendment proved to be critical in the expansion and guarantee of women's rights.<sup>31</sup>

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### **The Equal Rights Amendment**

While a small group of feminist lawyers attempted to use the Fourteenth Amendment to redress legal discrimination, a more diverse coalition of women supported ratification of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing women's equality before the law. Women across the country mobilized local constituencies to lobby their state legislatures to ratify the

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<sup>29</sup> This claim had been the basis of the unsuccessful appeal in *Hoyt v. Florida*. See Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies*, 131-132.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, *Reed v. Reed* (1971).

<sup>31</sup> On nineteenth-century feminists, see Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 122-123; Lynne Olsen, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 30-32.

Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), but failure of the effort in nine Southern states led many inside and outside the region to believe that the amendment lacked appeal south of the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the ERA generated remarkably widespread support in the South – support that crossed lines of race, class, and political persuasion and led to the creation of dynamic and diverse coalitions of women. Reasons for supporting the amendment varied as widely as the constituencies in the ERA campaigns.

First proposed by the National Women’s Party in 1923, the ERA simply declared that “equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” In subsequent decades, the amendment faced numerous challenges from feminists and non-feminists alike.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, it was repeatedly endorsed by both political parties in their national platforms.<sup>34</sup> Despite such support, it took activists nearly five

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<sup>32</sup> The nine Southern states that failed to ratify the ERA were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. In addition, opponents of the ERA subsequently mounted campaigns in Texas calling on the state to rescind its ratification. Six states outside the South also failed to ratify the amendment (Arizona, Illinois, Missouri, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Utah). See [www.equalrightsamendment.org](http://www.equalrightsamendment.org).

<sup>33</sup> In particular, a number of labor feminists feared that the amendment held the potential to undermine laws meant to protect women workers. See Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 2; Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), chap. 4; Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women’s Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), chap. 1; Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Why Were Most Politically Active Women Opposed to the ERA in the 1920s?” in *Women and Power in American History: A Reader*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991), vol. 2, 175-182.

<sup>34</sup> Harrison, *On Account of Sex*, 49; Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 81.

decades to move the amendment out of committee and onto the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>35</sup> In 1971, the ERA passed in the House by a wide margin. The Senate followed suit a year later.<sup>36</sup> Following this overwhelming approval by the U.S. Congress, the amendment moved to the states, gaining rapid ratification in the North, Midwest, and West. As of March 1973, only eight more states were needed to make the amendment part of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>37</sup> By 1975, however, when five more states were needed, ratification efforts were encountering increasing opposition, which grew even stronger as the decade wore on.<sup>38</sup>

While feminists remained united in their support for the ERA, it faced new opposition in the 1970s. Opponents charged that the amendment would abrogate spousal financial support laws, compel women's inclusion in the draft, and prohibit sex-segregated restrooms, prisons, schools, and other institutions.<sup>39</sup> Opposition to the ERA also became tied to a resurgent

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<sup>35</sup> Gilbert Y. Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality: The Political Fortunes of the Equal Rights Amendment* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985), 15.

<sup>36</sup> The vote in the House in 1971 was 354 in favor, 23 against. The Senate also approved the amendment by a wide margin, 84-8. Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality*, 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> Spruill, "Gender and America's Right Turn," 77. The amendment ultimately fell three states shy of the thirty-eight to ratify. Congress had set June 30, 1982 as the deadline for ratification. As Gilbert Steiner points out, "a switch of seven votes – three in the Nevada senate, two in the North Carolina senate, two in the Florida senate – would have made the ERA the twenty-seventh amendment to the Constitution." Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality*, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality*, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 11-14; Rymph, *Republican Women*, 215-217; Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality*, 47-48, 56-58.

conservative movement that described itself as “pro-family” and “pro-life.”<sup>40</sup> According to political scientist Gilbert Steiner, “the initial slowdown in the pace of ratification – first visible in mid-1973 and more evident by early 1974 – parallels both the emergence of interest in overcoming the Supreme Court’s liberalization of the right to abortion, and the emergence of national admiration for Senator Sam Ervin as an interpreter and defender of the Constitution.”<sup>41</sup> Ervin, a Democrat from North Carolina, had gained a national reputation for his defense of the Constitution during the Watergate hearings of 1973. When he became a leading opponent of the ERA, many Americans listened.

By the mid-1980s, a number of circumstances thus suggested that the ERA lacked support in the South. Sam Ervin, one of the ERA’s most vocal opponents in the Senate, was a Southerner. Few Southern states had ratified the amendment. And a nascent conservative movement opposed to the ERA was gaining ground in many parts of the South. Nevertheless, the battle for the ERA drew some of the widest support for any feminist initiative in the region, crossing lines of class and race, religion and culture. Across the South, the ERA coalition included dozens of organizations, including those of university women, churches, labor unions,

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<sup>40</sup> Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), chap. 9.

<sup>41</sup> “The first three states to ratify – Hawaii, Delaware, and Nebraska – did so without recording a single dissenting vote,” Steiner notes. “Eleven states ratified before the opposition vote in any state senate reached double digits. Among the sixty-five legislative bodies in the thirty-three states that ratified between March 1972 and February 1974, just six showed favorable pluralities smaller than ten votes, and only the Kentucky senate’s twenty-to-eighteen count in June 1972 can be term a squeaker. But the only states that ratified after February 1974 – North Dakota in February 1975, Indiana in January 1977 – each did so by squeaker votes.” Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality*, 98-99.

teachers, nurses, and business and professional women. Republican and Democratic organizations as well as nonpartisan groups joined the ERA coalition.<sup>42</sup> Nonpartisan organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the National Council for Negro Women threw their support behind ratification. The League, which had backed the amendment since 1954, sponsored events like “An ERA Evening: Uppity Women Unite” in North Carolina to rally support for ratification.<sup>43</sup> The National Council for Negro Women endorsed the amendment because it would “insure the rights of all people under the law . . . [and] the minority woman is in most need of protection under the law.”<sup>44</sup>

For many women, the ERA transcended liberal and conservative political divisions, drawing support that ranged from the Socialist Workers Party to the conservative Church

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<sup>42</sup> The coalition in Georgia, for example, included the Atlanta Council of the AFL-CIO, the Association of American University Women, Church Women United, Common Cause, the Communication Workers of America, Federally Employed Women, Feminist Action Alliance, Georgia Association of Educators, Georgia Federation of Business and Professional Women, Georgia Federation of Democratic Voters, Georgia Federation of Women’s Clubs, Georgia Nurses Association, Georgia State Commission on the Status of Women, League of Women Voters of Georgia, Methodist Women United, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of Negro Women, NOW Georgia, United Auto Workers, and Young Women’s Christian Association. For a partial list, see Dotsie Holmes (Coordinator, Georgia Council for the Equal Rights Amendment) to candidates running for office, July 4, 1976, Atlanta, Ga., folder: Correspondence-Political, box 1, ERA Georgia records, Emory.

<sup>43</sup> *Act NOW* (Charlotte, N.C.), May 10, 1974, box 20, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger. On the League, see Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters, 1920-1970* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989).

<sup>44</sup> Resolutions, 38th National Convention of NCNW, Washington, D.C., November 6-13, 1977, p. 15, folder 253, box 20, series 2, group 73, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, Bethune).

Women United.<sup>45</sup> In Georgia, Church Women United lobbied the state legislature for the amendment's ratification, raised funds for the Georgia Council for the ERA, and helped form a group called People of Faith for ERA.<sup>46</sup> The approval of Church Women United opened the door for rural and conservative Southerners to join the ERA coalition. For example, Eva Parker, a rural African American woman, became an ERA proponent after a series of meetings with white Methodist women in Church Women United.<sup>47</sup> Many Southern women who supported the ERA, including members of the conservative Federations of Women's Clubs, were not part of a larger feminist movement and, in fact, opposed most other feminist goals.<sup>48</sup>

The ERA generated widespread support in part because its meaning was malleable.

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<sup>45</sup> Transcript, Mary Riddle, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, July 24, 2004, Atlanta, Ga., p. 12, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU; Jeffrey G. Jones, "Georgia and the Equal Rights Amendment," M.A. thesis, Georgia State University, 1995, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> People of Faith for ERA drew many members from Unitarian Universalist and Methodist congregations, especially women organized in Church Women United groups. Although Church Women United was both politically and socially conservative, it did sometimes adopt liberal positions, including support of the ERA and for the reform of state's rape laws. One of its most active members, Eleanor Richardson, was also a member of the Georgia legislature. Minutes, Executive Committee, Church Women United in DeKalb County, November 30, 1979, folder: Minutes, Reports, Newsletters, 1977-1980, box 3, Church Women United in DeKalb County (Ga.) records, Emory.

<sup>47</sup> Transcript, Eva Parker, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, April 27, 2000, Atlanta, Ga., Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>48</sup> Mrs. E. Lee Jones (North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs) to Senator Charles B. Deane, Jr., January 5, 1973, folder: correspondence 1973, box 2, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts. In the mid-1970s, typical activities of the General Federation of Women's Clubs included lessons on gift-wrapping and découpage. See President's Report, the Women's Club of Goldston, 1973, folder: Correspondence 1970s, box 1, North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs papers, UNC Manuscripts.

Women from different economic and partisan backgrounds were able to interpret the amendment's provisions for their own purposes. Both middle-class and working-class women saw in the amendment the possibility of economic equality, while political activists discerned the guarantee of civil rights. Virginia Ackerman, a white stockbroker in Georgia, endorsed the ERA because she "knew that the passage of the ERA could right a lot of wrongs," particularly in protecting abused women and expanding women's economic opportunities. Mary Cox, treasurer of Atlanta NOW and of Shirley Chisholm's Georgia campaign, believed that the ERA was critical in "gaining rights for all women" and could "aid the entire civil rights movement."<sup>49</sup>

Women interested in anti-poverty initiatives considered the ERA a potentially valuable tool in assisting indigent women. The Durham League of Women Voters chapter, which was dominated by middle-aged white women, viewed the ERA as a resource for combating women's poverty. "The majority of poor people," the League argued, "are women. The ERA will mean new opportunities for them."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the Resource Center for Women and Ministry, based in Durham, North Carolina, considered passage of the ERA an anti-poverty initiative. "Poverty," the Center declared, "is a woman's issue. . . . To be concerned about poverty in the United States today is to be concerned about the plight of women and the

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<sup>49</sup> Newsletter, *NOW Notes* (Atlanta), June 1972, pp. 2-3, folder: NOW Atlanta Chapter Publications 1972, box 20, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory

<sup>50</sup> Newsletter, *Tarheel Voter*, April 1974, pp. 2, 4, folder: North Carolina Tarheel Voter, 1969-1974, box 1, League of Women Voters of Durham, N.C. papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter Duke). My characterization of the chapter's membership is based on an examination of photographs in the collection.



problem of sex discrimination.”<sup>51</sup> The Georgia Poverty Rights Organization likewise supported the ERA as anti-poverty measure. The amendment, it argued, “is a needed step toward freedom and equality” and would result in greater job opportunities for poor women.<sup>52</sup>

Southern working women backed the ERA as well.<sup>53</sup> In Atlanta, labor feminists in local chapters of the Office and Professional Employees International Union, Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Union, and Steelworkers Union all raised funds for the ERA coalition.<sup>54</sup> Middle-class women both in and outside the workforce also supported the amendment. Feminist attorney Marguerite Rawalt urged her fellow Texas clubwomen to push for the ERA’s ratification, which she described to them – somewhat flatteringly – as a continuation of their efforts to improve the status of women “in education, employment, [and] civil rights.” The amendment, she argued, could be particularly beneficial to homemakers, who deserved “the right to be legal partners with their husbands in civil rights and property rights.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, while

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<sup>51</sup> The Resource Center found that “we live in a country where women earn 59 cents for every dollar earned by men, where 32% of the households headed by women are below the poverty level compared to 6% of those headed by men, where older women receive only \$215 per month in social security benefits compared to \$325 received by men (1978), and where 79% of all poor people are women and children.” “Poverty & ERA,” *South of the Garden* 3, no.1 (October 1980): 1, box 8, Resource Center for Women and Ministry records, Duke.

<sup>52</sup> Press release, Frances Pauley, Georgia Poverty Rights Organization, January 6, 1977, folder: Press Releases 1976-1984, box 37, Frances Freeborn Pauley papers, Emory.

<sup>53</sup> Transcript, Ruth Stanley, in an interview conducted by Chris Lutz, July 7, 1995, pp. 19-20, Atlanta, Ga., L1995-12, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>54</sup> Transcript, Sarah Butler, in an interview conducted by Susan Millen, October 23, 2004, Gainesville, Ga., pp. 5-7, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>55</sup> Marguerite Rawalt to Mary Kathleen Taylor [editor, *The Clubwoman*], March 15, 1976, folder 27, box 32, Marguerite Rawalt papers, Schlesinger.

Southern women supported the ERA for different reasons, the fight for the amendment demonstrated that the possibility of legal equality offered attractive solutions to a variety of problems.

Historians and political scientists have devoted considerable energy to explaining the failure of ERA campaigns across the nation, largely concluding that the amendment lacked sufficient popular support in unratified states and faced stiff opposition in conservative state legislatures, especially in the South. Misunderstandings about the amendment's powers undermined the possibilities for ratification, as did weak legal arguments.<sup>56</sup> Others have pointed to the very diversity of the ERA coalition as its undoing. In Georgia, for instance, personal disagreements and disputes over tactics led to a decisive split among ERA supporters<sup>57</sup> In

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<sup>56</sup> Janet K. Boles who has compared ERA ratification campaigns in Georgia, Illinois, and Texas, argues that the particular composition of each state's coalition led to the development of different strategies in lobbying for the amendment. She characterizes the Georgia ERA advocates as well-educated, upper middle-class women who relied on traditional lobbying techniques. Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment: Conflict and the Decision Process* (New York: Longman, 1979). Mary Frances Berry attributes the failure of the ERA ratification to a difficult amendment process and proponents' inability to demonstrate the amendment's necessity. Mary Frances Berry, *Why ERA Failed: Politics, Women's Rights, and the Amending of the Constitution* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986). Meanwhile, Donald G. Mathews and Jane Sherron de Hart, in their examination of the ERA battle in North Carolina, argue that ratification was probably never possible because gender and political differences so separated opponents in the debate. Donald G. Mathews and Jane Sherron DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA: A State and a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>57</sup> In Georgia, the ERA coalition split into two groups, Georgians for the ERA and ERA Georgia. Initially, the split generally (although not absolutely) followed political lines, with more radical groups forming G-ERA in order to sponsor a protest march that featured Gloria Steinem as a keynote speaker. After several years, however, the split was better characterized as a dispute over leadership. See Mamie K. Taylor interviewed by Janet T. Paulk, August 15, 1981, cassette, ERA Georgia papers, Emory; transcript, Maria Getzinger Jones, in an interview conducted by Joyce Durand, November 16, 1998, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 7-8, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project,

comparison, opponents of the amendment were relatively unified.<sup>58</sup> ERA opponents in Georgia, organized in a group called STOP ERA, shared a general belief that women deserved a privileged, not an equal, place in society.<sup>59</sup> By contrast, pro-ERA groups were remarkably heterogeneous in their interests, life experiences, and tactics.<sup>60</sup>

Failed ratification campaigns were profoundly disappointing to many Southern feminists. The ERA had represented an opportunity for wide-ranging change and created diverse coalitions of activists. But rather than serving as a springboard to further activism, most of the coalitions disbanded as ratification efforts failed. For many activists, the end of the ERA campaigns was also personally demoralizing. ERA advocates often remembered the failure of

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Special Collections Department, GSU; transcript, Sherry Sutton, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, November 8, 1998 and March 7, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., p. 52, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU; Vicki Gabriner to Jackie Frost, April 7, 1974, folder 1.5: Vicki Gabriner, box 1, Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance papers (hereafter ALFA), Duke; Vicki Gabriner to Gloria Steinem, December 25, 1973, folder 8.12: G.E.R.A. (Georgians for the Equal Rights Amendment), box 8, ALFA papers, Duke; Jones, "Georgia and ERA," 45-49.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew Lassiter, "Inventing Family Values," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 22-23..

<sup>59</sup> Jones, "Georgia and the ERA," 26; Spruill, "Gender and America's Right Turn," 77. On STOP ERA, see also Rymph, *Republican Women*, 214-215.

<sup>60</sup> Historians remain divided as to the diversity of the ERA coalition. Sociologists Theodore S. Arrington and Patricia Kyle argue that the ERA coalition in North Carolina was relatively homogenous (middle-aged, married, white, middle-class), but they failed to examine working-class, African American, or radical feminist groups. Theodore S. Arrington and Patricia A. Kyle, "Equal Rights Amendment Activists in North Carolina," *Signs* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 666-680. Jacklyn Cock and Alison R. Bernstein argue that the ERA failed because pro-amendment forces "could not sustain a genuine cross-class, cross-racial movement." See Jacklyn Cock and Alison R. Bernstein, *Melting Pots and Rainbow Nations: Conversations about Difference in the United States and South Africa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 166.

the amendment in heartbreaking terms. In 1976, when the Georgia legislature voted against ratification, Sherry Sutton and a friend were observing from a visitors' lounge at the state capitol. After the defeat, Sutton remembered, "we both were a little bit teary." Her companion "reached into her purse; and she only had one Kleenex. So I'll never forget her standing there and tearing that Kleenex in two; and we each boo-hooed into half a Kleenex for a few minutes and then decided that we would get everybody together and celebrate the work that we had done."<sup>61</sup> As Sutton's story suggests, many activists were proud of their work, but relatively few managed to sustain momentum or maintain the coalitions that had taken shape in support of the amendment.

The very diversity of ERA coalitions testified to the significance that many Southern women attributed to legal equality. But the amendment was no panacea. Ratification would have done little to address structural inequalities in the economy, at least not immediately, nor would it have introduced the women-centered work environments that feminist businesses sought. The ERA would have not have created health services geared toward women or rectified Southern states' restrictions on women's reproductive freedom. Nevertheless, women engaged in all of these causes supported the amendment. Even if they rarely agreed on any other issue and even if they found common ground on the ERA for different reasons, activist women of all stripes considered the dismantling of legal restrictions to be a worthwhile

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<sup>61</sup> Transcript, Sherry Sutton, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, November 8, 1998 and March 7, 1999, Atlanta, Ga., p. 72, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

investment of their time and resources.

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## **Women in Government**

Challenging discriminatory laws was only one front in the fight to dismantle gender inequality. Many feminists believed that changes in women's legal status would come only when women themselves held positions of power in government and won political office on their own terms. Organizations that sought to put women into elected office typically included a narrower range of activists than the ERA campaigns, but they still drew in large numbers. Historians have identified the women attracted to political organizing in other parts of the nation as "liberal" or "politico" feminists.<sup>62</sup> Although Southern women rarely adopted these labels, the pattern seems to hold true in the South as well. There, as elsewhere, middle-class women predominated in the organizations, both local and national, that sought to increase the number of women in government.

Southern women had played important roles in political activism and political iconography for generations.<sup>63</sup> Yet, by the 1970s, many were deeply frustrated by the limits they faced. Women, a veteran political activist in Chapel Hill remarked, "want in on the

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), especially chap. 2.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

decision making in our society. In politics, they've rung the doorbells and made the phone calls and stuffed the envelopes – if they've been let into the traditional smoke-filled room, it's just been to empty the ashtrays.”<sup>64</sup> Southern women activists, like feminists across the nation, sought to increase women's participation in politics. They encouraged women to seek office in their own right, even as the women's movement opened up new avenues for political participation. The Orange County (North Carolina) Political Caucus, for example, urged its members to “Make Policy, Not Coffee.” The caucus, which held its meetings in local churches, worked to “get women more actively involved in politics and to educate them in political issues which have until recently been confined to smoke-filled meeting rooms full of male candidates.” Bobette Eckland, the organization's chairperson, argued that women had always worked hard in politics but their work had been “confined to composing mailing lists and giving coffees.”<sup>65</sup> As historian Catherine Rymph has described the changes of the 1970s, “women who once might have joined clubs and volunteered for the party began running for office themselves, leading autonomous women's organizations, or otherwise participating in political life on their own terms.”<sup>66</sup>

Both grassroots groups and local chapters of national organizations attracted political

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<sup>64</sup> Speech, Liz Hair, to Charlotte Rotary, n.d. [1972?], p. 5, folder: correspondence 1971 (October-December), box 1, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts. Hair spent twelve years on the Orange County (N.C.) Board of Elections before serving as County Commissioner.

<sup>65</sup> Lynn Bankhead, “Political Caucus Meets,” *She* 1, no. 4 (December 5, 1973): 2, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret Anne O'Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>66</sup> Rymph, *Republican Women*, 188.

activists across the South. The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) demanded “the inclusion of women in appointive positions at decision making levels of all federal, state, and local departments, agencies, boards, and commissions.”<sup>67</sup> Historically, the NCNW had focused on securing the political rights of African Americans, but by the end of the 1960s, it was also encouraging women to become more politically active. Pointing to the “urgency of the situation,” the NCNW urged its members to “develop an awareness among all women of their responsibilities as voters, residents, and taxpayers.”<sup>68</sup> In Dallas, the middle-class organization Women for Change sought to increase not only the number of women serving in governmental positions, but also the participation more generally of women in government.<sup>69</sup>

In most cases, Southern activists supported nonpartisan drives to put women in office. Organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Women’s Political Caucuses, and the Feminist Action Alliance adopted a nonpartisan goal of increasing the number of women holding appointed or elected offices. These efforts reflected an assumption that placing women in positions of power, whatever their party or political persuasion, would translate into the

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<sup>67</sup> Resolutions, NSNW, 33rd Annual Convention, November 6-10, 1968, pp. 4-5, folder 208, box 18, series 2, group 73, Bethune.

<sup>68</sup> “NCNW Commitments to Action,” adopted at the 33rd National Convention [1968], p. 4, folder 208, box 18, series 2, group 73, Bethune.

<sup>69</sup> Women for Change Center mission statement, enclosed in Maura McNiel to Sara Evans, November 8, 1974, folder: Boyte, Sara Evans 1966-1975, box 1, Boyte family papers, Duke. The Women for Change Center, also known as the Dallas Women’s Center, housed the Dallas Women’s Coalition and provided meeting space to groups working for equal rights for all people. It also leased office space to the National Political Caucus, the Dallas Association for Parent Education, and the Women’s Southwest Federal Credit Union. “Who We Are,” *Equal Times*, August 1978, pp. 1, 14, folder: Equal Times, box 2, Elizabeth C. Alden papers, Duke.

advancement of all women's rights. In a statement typical of women engaged in political organizing, Diane Fowlkes, a political scientist at Georgia State University, recalled that Feminist Action Alliance members were dedicated to helping women win elections "because most of the men who were in office were not going to change the laws and it was important to get women in office who would work on changing the laws."<sup>70</sup> In addition, many activists believed that women would raise issues that male politicians had ignored or given short shrift. Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, the first African American director of the U.S. Women's Bureau and a North Carolina native, urged the Orange County Political Caucus to concentrate its activism on policies that had been largely overlooked by male politicians. The caucus, she contended, should consider such issues as pensions for the elderly and increased funding for kindergartens and daycare centers.<sup>71</sup>

The Feminist Action Alliance (FAA) exemplifies many characteristics of women's political activism in the 1970s, particularly its grassroots nature, its emphasis on practical skills-building, and its belief that women-as-women were critical for change. Based in Atlanta, FAA acted as a clearinghouse for information about women running for office and about local politicians' stances on women's rights issues. Throughout the 1970s, FAA committed itself to

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<sup>70</sup> Transcript, Diane L. Fowlkes, in an interview conducted by Dana Van Tilborg, September 27, 1995, Atlanta, Ga., p. 14, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>71</sup> Lynn Bankhead, "Political Caucus Meets," *She* vol. 1, no. 4 (December 5, 1973), p. 2, folder: Printed Materials, *She* newsletter 1973-1978, box 2, Margaret O'Connor papers, UNC Manuscripts.



“seeing that increased numbers of qualified women win public office,” regardless of their political persuasion.<sup>72</sup> In order to accomplish this goal, it worked to educate women about the political process, provide opportunities for women to develop leadership skills, and encourage women to seek office. It also lobbied for laws “of special interest to women,” especially the ERA and reformed rape statutes, and pushed for affirmative action policies that would “increase female participation in leadership and decision-making roles in political parties and public institutions.”<sup>73</sup>

Beginning in 1974, FAA hosted an annual conference at Georgia State University that provided information about lobbying, community organizing, campaign financing, and media relations.<sup>74</sup> A number of participants in these conferences went on to win positions in the Georgia General Assembly and on city councils, school boards, and county commissions across the state. The conferences were developed to encourage more women to run for office and to teach them how to manage campaigns.<sup>75</sup> In addition, the Alliance sponsored intensive, nonpartisan workshops for women candidates to help them learn skills crucial to successful

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<sup>72</sup> Linda Barr to “Friends,” March 20, 1978, folder: Miscellaneous, 1978, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. Barr was FAA’s political action director.

<sup>73</sup>“Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance],” n.d. [1980], pp. 2-3, folder: Miscellaneous, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

<sup>74</sup> Press release, Feminist Action Alliance, “Georgia Women and Politics Conference,” May 21, 1977, folder: Ga. Women and Politics Conference ’77, box 6, Feminist Action Alliance papers, Emory.

<sup>75</sup> “Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance],” p. 13.

campaigns, including raising money, targeting the media effectively, and organizing supporters.<sup>76</sup> The FAA also compiled lists of women qualified for appointment to statewide offices. In 1977, for example, the group wrote letters to prominent politicians recommending potential female candidates to fill vacant positions on the federal court in Georgia, the Atlanta Economic Development Authority, and the Cobb County health board.<sup>77</sup>

Like the Feminist Action Alliance, Women's Political Caucuses sponsored nonpartisan efforts to put women into positions of political power. Founded in 1971, the National Women's Political Caucus supported female candidates in both the Democratic and Republican parties and promoted a women's right agenda. Across the nation, women adopted the model and motivation of the National Women's Political Caucus in their own states.<sup>78</sup> The decision to adopt a nonpartisan identity meant that the Women's Political Caucuses attracted a wide variety of members and helped minimize charges of radicalism.<sup>79</sup>

In 1971, Martha McKay, a Chapel Hill businesswoman, organized the North Carolina Women's Political Caucus (NCWPC), sending out hundreds of letters to women's organizations, politicians, representatives of both political parties, and prominent female

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<sup>76</sup> Linda Barr to "Friends," March 20, 1978, folder: Miscellaneous, 1978, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. See also "Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance]," n.d. [1980], p. 13, folder: Miscellaneous, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Linda Barr to Senator Sam Nunn, January 31, 1977, folder: Political Action 1977, box 6, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory. Copies of this letter were also sent to Senator Herman Talmadge and to Robert Lipshutz, White House Counsel.

<sup>78</sup> Rymph, *Republican Women*, 198.

<sup>79</sup> Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 187-189; Rymph, *Republican Women*, 207-208.

professionals across the state.<sup>80</sup> The NCWPC attracted women from a wide range of ideological, racial, and economic backgrounds and generated considerable interest. More than 800 women attended its first meeting. NCPWC membership drew from the ranks of homemakers, doctors, lawyers, and professors, and the organization gained the support of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs, the Chapel Hill chapter of NOW, local chapters of the National Council of Negro Women, and the North Carolina Federation of Business and Professional Women. Women from both political parties joined, although the organization seems to have been led primarily by Democratic women.<sup>81</sup> The NCWPC appealed to women across lines of class. When a local welfare rights organizer complained to McKay that she was unable to attend a meeting because the group provided no daycare services, McKay made sure that future meetings did.<sup>82</sup>

McKay was careful to keep the NCWPC nonpartisan and to remove any hint of radicalism from the organization's literature. In part, this approach reflected her desire to attract the broadest possible membership. But McKay also realized that "had a lib group done

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<sup>80</sup> Copies of the letters may be found in the Martha C. McKay papers. For examples, see Esmeralda Rich Hawkins (N.C. State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, Rocky Mount, N.C.) to Martha McKay, November 28, 1971, and Martha C. McKay, Chapel Hill, N.C., to Hargrove Bowles [gubernatorial candidate], November 13, 1971, folder: correspondence 1971 (October-December), box 1, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>81</sup> McKay had served as precinct committeeperson of the North Carolina Democratic Party, 1950-1975, as well as several other positions in the local party organization. She also served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1964 and in 1972. After her success in organizing the NCWPC, McKay succeeded Bella Abzug as co-chair of the National Women's Political Caucus.

<sup>82</sup> Joyce Widener to Martha McKay, January 26, 1974, folder: correspondence 1974, box 2, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

it this would not have been possible, for although our women have many of the same feelings of women everywhere, most eschew the vocabulary and militancy of some parts of that movement.” Despite the NCWPC’s seemingly moderate politics, McKay believed the organization had radical implications. She was convinced that “once we get started these women may tear things apart for the simple reason that Southern women have been pressed even more firmly into the home-hearth-decoration-non-entity mold than women in other regions. When they break out I believe it will be with a bang.”<sup>83</sup> Although nominally nonpartisan, the organization was firm in its support of women’s rights. It created questionnaires for political candidates that mapped out their positions on such issues as daycare funding, abortion rights, and the ERA. It lobbied for public funding for daycare centers and kindergartens. It worked to eliminate job and pay discrimination against women. It pressed for ratification of the ERA. And it strove to put more women in important appointive positions.<sup>84</sup>

Women who ran for office with the support of the Women’s Political Caucuses often evinced a conviction that their election would improve the lives of all women. North Carolina resident Liz Hair, for example, ran for county commissioner after joining the Women’s Political Caucus in her state. Hair believed that her election would open doors for other women and serve as an example for a younger generation. “I was there initially in behalf of that eldest

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<sup>83</sup> Martha McKay to Shana Alexander, January 7, 1972, folder: correspondence 1972, box 2, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>84</sup> Flyer, Annual State Meeting, North Carolina Women’s Political Caucus, Saturday, January 27, 1973, Raleigh, N.C., folder: NWPC, box 3, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

daughter of ours, who had a tough enough load to carry without taking a cut in pay because she was born female,” Hair recalled. “We have three younger daughters. I was there in their behalf too – hoping their talents, their expensive educations, their LIVES wouldn’t be automatically circumscribed by typewriters and xerox machines and low paychecks if they went to work, either thru choice or necessity.” In addition to setting an example, Hair believed her election would benefit all women, regardless of class. She joined the Women’s Political Caucus and sought political office “on behalf of the women who still qualify for welfare payments while working at entry level state jobs, the women who are paid 60 cents on the dollar for identical jobs with men, who are *protected* from the dizzying heights of success as raises and promotions pass them by – even though they may be struggling alone, as many women are, to feed and clothe and house and educate a family.” Even more, she argued, “I was there also, I suppose, in indignation at the unequal social and economic value placed on women’s contributions versus men’s.”<sup>85</sup>

Political activism resulted in a number of changes across the region. In the past, Southern women legislators had tended to take the “widow’s route.” That is, a majority of female legislators were unelected and filled positions left by their deceased husbands.<sup>86</sup> By the

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<sup>85</sup> Liz Hair, speech to Charlotte Rotary, n.d. [1972?], p. 3, folder: correspondence 1971 (October-December), box 1, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>86</sup> Martha H. Swain, “The Public Role of Southern Women,” in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1983), 45; Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, “Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women: A Retrospective for the Millennium,” in *Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective*, ed. Melissa Walker, Jeanette R. Dunn, and Joe P. Dunn (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 78. The first four women to serve in the U.S. Senate

1970s, women were earning their positions on their own merits. In nearly every Southern state, the number of women holding elective and appointive offices increased during the 1970s.<sup>87</sup> At the federal level, the number of Southern women in the U.S. House of Representatives grew from zero in 1969 to six in 1979, representing a third of all congresswomen.<sup>88</sup>

Many activists assumed that simply electing women to office would lead to the creation of women-centered policies. In some respects, this assumption proved to be true. In the 1970s, Southern women sponsored legislation that expanded women's opportunities and reduced discrimination against them. In Texas, the election of a number of women – both Republican and Democratic – to the state legislature in 1972 and 1974 led to the introduction of several bills intended to improve the lives of women. Female representatives introduced and passed legislation to enact equal credit regulations, reform the treatment of rape victims, create

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(Rebecca Latimer of Georgia, Hattie Wyatt Carraway of Arkansas, Rose McConnell Long of Louisiana, and Dixie Bibb Grave of Alabama) were all Southern women who received the appointment upon the death of their husbands. In 1980, Paula Fickes Hawkins became the first Southern woman elected to the U.S. Senate whose husband had not previously held the seat. Mart Martin, *The Almanac of Women and Minorities in American Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 12-18. Although women from other regions also served the remainder of their deceased husbands' terms, the practice was overwhelmingly Southern. See Irwin N. Gerzog, "Changing Pathways to the U.S. House of Representatives: Widows, Elites, and Strategic Positions," in *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Rosenthal (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 96-99.

<sup>87</sup> Only Tennessee and Mississippi saw decreases in the number of women serving at the state level. Center for the American Woman and Politics, *Women in Public Office: A Biographical Directory and Statistical Analysis*, 2nd edition (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 5A. See also Elizabeth M. Cox, *Women State and Territorial Legislators, 1895-1995: A State-by-State Analysis* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1996), 31, 46-48, 88-96, 133-135, 166-169, 226-231, 262-265, 272-276.

<sup>88</sup> Martin, *The Almanac of Women and Minorities in American Politics*, 60-66.

job protection for pregnant teachers, and fund child care.<sup>89</sup> In Georgia, state representatives Cathey Steinberg and Eleanor Richardson worked to increase support ratification of the ERA and introduced legislation to reform the state's rape laws.<sup>90</sup> Texas's reformed rape law was the product of a bill jointly introduced by a Democratic congresswoman, Sarah Weddington, and a Republican congresswoman, Kay Bailey Hutchinson. Hutchinson believed that women found it easier to cross political aisles because they shared certain experiences, regardless of party. "A man," she argued, "wouldn't have experienced the trauma of rape or the discrimination in getting credit if you've been divorced, or if you're a young and single woman. So I think we did make a difference because we were women and because we were willing to work together for some of these common goals."<sup>91</sup>

The belief that any woman holding office would use her political influence to improve the lives of all women may have been naive, but it embodied the notion that all women shared similar problems and aspirations. Activists in nonpartisan organizations such as the Feminist Action Alliance and the Women's Political Caucuses generally assumed that women shared universal needs and desires. Despite what feminists had hoped, however, many women actually elected to office failed to demonstrate solidarity with an imaginary, monolithic sorority

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<sup>89</sup> Nancy Baker Jones and Ruthe Winegarten, *Capitol Women: Texas Female Legislators, 1923-1990* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 153, 159, 170.

<sup>90</sup> Transcript, Cathey Steinberg, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, March 21 and 28, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 17-22, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU. For more on efforts to reform Georgia's rape laws, see Chapter 4, above.

<sup>91</sup> Hutchinson quoted in Jones and Winegarten, *Capitol Women*, 159-160.

of women. Women's nonpartisan coalitions – so critical in campaigns like the battle for the ERA – were difficult to hold together when it came to running for office. As Jane Sherron DeHart has argued, “making the transition from mobilization politics to electoral politics. . . meant moving beyond the bounds of a sorority where nonpartisanship cloaked an inability to exert real influence on power.”<sup>92</sup> Even so, many political activists remained committed to the ideal of a sisterhood of all women. This idealized universal sisterhood frequently disregarded the needs and critiques of working-class women and women of color, but in a region of the country that only a decade earlier had violently resisted attempts to racially desegregate, the belief that all women could benefit from the same legal reforms suggested the possibility of equality.

The very act of holding political office and campaigning for political causes such as the ERA disrupted traditional ideas about women's place in Southern society. Annabelle Walker, president of the New Orleans NOW chapter, encountered incredulity when she traveled to the state capital to lobby for women's rights. Walker's presence, not to mention her politics, led a state legislator to declare, “well, honey, it just don't feel right.” That gendered mentality, Walker remembered, “was what we had to struggle with. You couldn't talk logically with some of them at all.”<sup>93</sup> In North Carolina, male state legislators argued that women's “grace and

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<sup>92</sup> Jane Sherron DeHart, “Rights and Representation: Women, Politics, and Power in the Contemporary United States,” in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 219.

<sup>93</sup> Walker interview, p. 53, GSU.



charm” entitled them to special protection, but not to equal rights. As one state senator asked, “what’s wrong with our placing women on a pedestal and recognizing their beauty?”<sup>94</sup> In addition to manufacturing disruptive images of women in the military and unisex bathrooms, opponents of the ERA suggested that legal equality would diminish the meaning of womanhood.<sup>95</sup>

Faced with the prospect of sharing political power and political spaces with women, some Southern men tried to belittle female legislators and remind them of their place in the region’s gender hierarchy. In 1972, when Sarah Weddington, a white lawyer from Austin, first ran for the Texas House of Representatives, her opponent refused to call her by name, instead referring to her as “that sweet little girl.” Weddington recalled that her physical appearance became part of the campaign, largely because her opponent accused her of attempting to “confuse the voters” by dressing conservatively on the campaign trail rather than wearing the “short dresses and long hair” she had worn while attending the University of Texas law school.<sup>96</sup> Senfronia Thompson, an African American attorney who was elected to the Texas state legislature that same year, experienced discrimination on account of both her race and her gender. After a male representative referred to her as his “mistress,” she gave a scathing

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<sup>94</sup> Speech, Martha McKay, “ERA: Equality Under the Law Shall Not be Abridged,” delivered to classroom teachers of North Carolina, n.p. [Spring 1973], p. 4, folder: correspondence 1971 (October-December), box 1, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

<sup>95</sup> Mathews and DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA*, 165-168.

<sup>96</sup> Weddington won the primary and then the election, becoming the first woman to be elected from Travis County to the Texas House of Representatives. Sarah Weddington, *A Question of Choice* (New York: Putnam’s, 1992), 127.

speech on the floor of the house critiquing her treatment. Many of the male representatives, she recalled, were “offended” by her speech and considered it inappropriate. “I felt compelled to put everyone on notice that I was a duly elected official, just like they were,” Thompson recalled. “I was always going to respect them, and I was going to demand respect from them.” Many of her colleagues had suggested that she ignore the incident, but Thompson was determined to ensure that no other female legislator would be similarly demeaned.<sup>97</sup>

While Thompson and others were attempting to demonstrate by their very presence that women had an equal ability to hold political office, other political activists found it useful to manipulate ideas of proper gender roles. Turning gender stereotypes into advantages was an avenue open only to a certain segment of Southern women, primarily those who were white and middle-class. Some Southern female politicians followed the path of Lindy Boggs of Louisiana, who rejected the image of “woman’s libber” by embracing the identity of a Southern lady. From this “safe” position, Boggs was able to push for legislation on civil rights and pay equity for women in government service.<sup>98</sup> During her first campaign for the Georgia House of Representatives, Atlanta guidance counselor Cathey Steinberg highlighted the issues of “motherhood and apple pie.” When her male opponent claimed that he devoted his time to “issues that are really important,” Steinberg replied by (insincerely) apologizing for her opponent’s belief that motherhood and apple pie were unimportant. “I can’t think of anything more important,” she told her audiences. “I’m a mother and I have children and I care about

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<sup>97</sup> Thompson quoted in Jones and Winegarten, *Capitol Women*, 177.

<sup>98</sup> Wilkerson-Freeman, “Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women,” 78.

this community and I know you do too.” And that, she later recalled, “was his downfall. Everywhere I went after that I said, ‘my opponent said he doesn’t care about motherhood and apple pie.’” Although Steinberg successfully manipulated stereotypical notions of womanhood to gain election, she found that her support of the ERA and of reforming the state’s rape laws transformed her image in ways she could not control. “What’s interesting,” she remembered, “is that I got elected as a mom – motherhood and apple pie. Then I came down to the legislature and before I knew it, I was called Cathey Steinem.”<sup>99</sup>

Ironically, the very women who advocated legal equality sometimes supported their argument by manipulating gendered ideas of Southern womanhood. In Louisiana, ERA advocates engaged in political theater in an attempt to attract attention to their ratification efforts. Annabelle Walker, the president of the New Orleans NOW chapter, organized a group of women to drive to the state capital to push the legislature into bringing the ERA out of committee and onto the floor for a vote. As part of the delegation, Walker carried a parasol and wore her wedding dress, a traditional gown with a hoop skirt. “I was putting across a kind of mixed up message of the Southern Belle female,” Walker later recalled. She did so, she argued, “partly to counter the accusation that we were met with so often, which was that all you feminists are a bunch of dykes, you come up here in combat boots, and so forth. Well no, here I am in my lace and my hoop skirt and yes, I still want equal rights, and no we don’t want to be

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<sup>99</sup> Transcript, Cathey Steinberg, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, March 21 and 28, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 17-18, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

just on a pedestal.”<sup>100</sup> Walker’s political theater caught the attention of *Time* magazine, which published a photograph of her in her wedding dress accompanying an article about the women’s movement in the South. The article was entitled “The Belle: Magnolia and Iron.”<sup>101</sup>

Although few women imitated Walker, she was not alone in manipulating the storied qualities of Southern ladyhood on behalf of feminist goals. Atlanta resident Virginia Ackerman contended that ERA advocates “learned to turn on that Southern charm for those good ol’ boys.” She believed that flattery and manipulation of the expectations of “Southern ladies” was a useful tool in the pro-ERA battle. “You have to join them and beat them at their own game,” she argued. “We out-Southerned them.” Ackerman, a white stockbroker, decided to try to increase awareness of the ERA by setting up a card table with ERA buttons and literature at a shopping center outside Atlanta. “I wore my little housewifey-looking outfits so I wouldn’t be intimidating in Cobb County,” she recalled, “because that was not the thing – to come, you know, striding into Cobb County on a horse, and I remember I wore a little white skirt, a little green t-shirt, and so I didn’t look threatening at all.” Ackerman was convinced that public perceptions of the women’s movement needed to be changed before the ERA had any chance of succeeding. She worked with a group called Homemakers for ERA to promote the idea that “the ERA would benefit all women . . . that we were regular housewives, we were regular folks, we were not bra-burners or anything like that, that the ERA would help regular

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<sup>100</sup> Walker interview, p. 51, GSU.

<sup>101</sup> “The Belle: Magnolia and Iron,” *Time*, September 27, 1976, pp. 94-95.

housewives.”<sup>102</sup>

Employing gendered tactics and imagery to win support for women’s rights built upon particular conceptions of white, upper-class Southern womanhood. The decision to do so was often pragmatic but also reflected the limits of universal conceptions of womanhood. At best, such tactics suggested an ignorance of both the real and symbolic uses of white womanhood to restrict the rights of women of color and poor women. As League of Women Voters member Dotsie Holmes argued, state legislators who opposed the ERA by adopting the argument that the amendment would end special protections for women failed to recognize that those protections did not extend to all women. “The women that *they* knew were very much protected,” Holmes pointed out. “They were at the club every day playing golf or swimming and yes, they were very well protected but most middle class women and working women certainly weren’t protected in any kind of way.”<sup>103</sup>

By the 1970s, women’s political activism had a long history of exploiting racial and class divisions. Louise Michele Newman has demonstrated that white suffrage activists at the turn of the century frequently used racial ideology to bolster support for women’s voting rights, while Elna Green and Suzanne Lebsack have shown that Southern white women sometimes

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<sup>102</sup> Transcript, Virginia M. Ackerman, in an interview conducted by Charlene Ball, June 17, 1998, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 15, 10-11, 12, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter GSU).

<sup>103</sup> Transcript, oral interview, Dotsie Holmes by Betty Groepper and Lenecia Bruce, August 10, 1994, pp. 3-4, folder: Holmes, Dotsie, box 17, League of Women Voters records, Emory.

embraced women's suffrage at the expense of black women.<sup>104</sup> The belief that political and legal activism would benefit all women ignored a past in which white women had often won a modicum of progress at the cost of black women's rights. Lesbian feminist writer Minnie Bruce Pratt, a white North Carolinian, recognized the importance of race only in retrospect. "During none of those three votes [for the ERA], over six years, did I examine the long complicated relation between the struggle for women's suffrage and Black suffrage through Constitutional amendments . . . I puzzled over why black women were not more active in the ERA campaign without figuring out how *women's rights* had been a code for *white* women's rights."<sup>105</sup>

Political activism was limited in other ways as well. The prospect of women's office-holding promised many changes and held wide appeal, but few activists fully recognized the larger barriers to power in the world of state and national politics. In the 1970s, Southern women who were elected to state office rarely held powerful positions on legislative committees or in political parties.<sup>106</sup> While the number of women serving in government office at all levels

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<sup>104</sup> Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Elna Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Suzanne Lebsack, "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsack (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 62-100. Lebsack argues that antisuffragists deployed racist appeals more frequently and virulently than did suffragists.

<sup>105</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion: Essays, 1980-1991* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1991), 49. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>106</sup> At the federal level, fewer women held elective office, but those who did were more successful in securing important committee appointments than were their counterparts in Southern state legislatures. In 1977, Congresswoman Lindy Boggs (D-La.) sat on the House Appropriations committee, while Congresswoman Barbara Jordan (D-Tex.) sat on the Judiciary Committee. Center for the American Woman and Politics, *Women in Public Office*, 4-6.

increased dramatically throughout the decade, women remained a very small minority.<sup>107</sup> Many activists also lacked an appreciation of the limitations of legislation and office-holding as means of altering gender hierarchies.

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## **Conclusion**

In 1972, the National Organization for Women (NOW) held a conference in Nashville, Tennessee, to bring together Southern women to plan political strategy. New York feminist Bella Abzug, who took part in the gathering, hailed it as “new kind of ‘southern strategy’ for 1972 – a political strategy for women who have been shut out of power and who are determined that this is the year to win full citizenship and participation in political decision making for the women of the South – white and black.”<sup>108</sup> Abzug’s call for increased political activism was welcomed by Southern feminists across lines of race, class, and ideology who embraced legal and political activism as central to women’s advancement.

Political activism created opportunities to build coalitions of Southern women based on the supposition that formal equality was a goal shared by all women. Issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment and increasing the number of women elected to office offered the possibility of bridging racial and class divides. In acting on such impulses, political activists sometimes

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<sup>107</sup> In 1977, the proportion of representatives in Southern state legislatures who were women ranged from a high of 14 percent in North Carolina to a low of 2 percent in Alabama. Center for the American Woman and Politics, *Women in Public Office*, 5A.

<sup>108</sup> *NOWletter* (Baton Rouge Chapter of NOW) 1, no. 11 (February 1972): 2, box 9, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

evinced an unsophisticated belief in universal sisterhood. Stressing the shared characteristics of women's economic and political subordination, feminists – particularly white, middle-class feminists – embraced sisterhood as a powerful metaphor and an organizing tactic. Yet as scholars such as Bonnie Thornton Dill have shown, belief in an “all-inclusive sisterhood” rested on racial and class assumptions that reality could not sustain.<sup>109</sup>

Many political activists also assumed that equality in law would translate to equality in fact. They expected formal legal changes to alter structural inequity. Despite their best intentions, however, it was unlikely that legal equality would in and of itself rectify women's subordinate political and economic positions. Passage of the ERA was not going to mean that men and women would hold the same jobs, nor would it rectify imbalances in women's domestic responsibilities. Equal jury service would not necessarily lead to equal treatment before the courts. Increasing the number of women in office would not necessarily mean that female legislators would seek to expand women's rights. Activists who sought legal equality, then, were advocating a limited solution to the problems of women's unequal status. Feminist scholars have identified this difference as the distinction between equality and equity. Equality often pertained to formal, legal status, while equity meant a redress of structural imbalances of power in the economic, political, and private spheres.<sup>110</sup> Calls for equality were often used interchangeably with calls for sameness between men and women, but such approaches failed

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<sup>109</sup> Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood,” *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 131-150.

<sup>110</sup> See especially Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1988).



to account not only for women's special needs but also for the structural differences between men's and women's places in Southern society.<sup>111</sup> Thus, equality often referred to equality of opportunity, whereas equity suggested a more complex goal that emphasized outcomes and results.<sup>112</sup> Women experienced discrimination because of complicated gender dynamics that interlaced private and public spheres and intertwined with racial and class identities. Many activists failed to acknowledge that legal discrimination itself affected women differently according to their race and class.

The difference between equality and equity imposed an important limitation on the solutions proposed by political and legal feminists not only in the South, but across the nation. Gaining political power meant more than acquiring a seat at the table. As Southern lawyer Sylvia Roberts cogently remarked, political activists "are not interested in getting into the mainstream without changing the direction of the river and the quality of the water."<sup>113</sup> Such a

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<sup>111</sup> The literature on "difference versus equality" is voluminous. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>112</sup> Ellen Frankel Paul, *Equity and Gender: The Comparable Worth Debate* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1988), 121-123. In her study of women's economic status in the European Union, Barbara Hobson has found that "principles of equal opportunity and equal treatment do not result in equity in pay and promotion. As a significant proportion of women work in gender segregated occupations and workplaces, they are unable to challenge structural features of the market in a legal framework that requires one to find a male comparator in the same organization." Barbara Hobson, "Some Reflections and Agendas for the Future," *Social Politics* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 198.

<sup>113</sup> *NOWletter* (Baton Rouge) 1, no. 8 (November 1971): 6, box 9, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

broad critique, however, was rarely articulated by Southern feminists and even more infrequently buttressed by policy proposals.

Despite the limitations of formal equality, many women discerned in political activism more radical possibilities. The very assertion of equality held within it the glimmer of a chance for equity of results. In addition, the particular history of the South meant that a blind faith in equality was itself radical. Place mattered. In the South, the idea that all women should be equal before the law constituted a repudiation of generations of racial discrimination. Legal equality, while generally considered a moderate challenge, offered a number of practical changes that could have radical implications in the South. Equal jury service, for instance, created the possibility of black women sitting in judgment of white men. While the ERA did not necessarily imply structural changes in employment or political power, it held out the possibility of forcing conservative state and local governments to treat women equally, regardless of class or race. Women holding political office might not necessarily lead to more women's rights legislation, but it challenged longstanding conceptions of Southern womanhood. The context in which equality was sought – specifically, a region which had only a decade earlier begun to dismantle its structure of formal racial segregation – meant that equal opportunity was, in some respects, as radical as the fight for equity.

For many Southern women – across lines of class, race, and geography – political activism was the key to fighting sex discrimination. Moreover, political and legal activism was able to attract a more diverse coalition of supporters than work on economic or health reforms. If the reasons were complex, one underlying consideration surely stood out from the others,

namely the fact that political reforms demanded equality, not equity, a goal both more palatable to larger numbers of women and easier to explain.

## Chapter 6

### “For the First Time, I Wasn’t Alone”: Lesbian Organizing in the South

In 1975, the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) organized a conference to address the issues confronting lesbians in the South. Attracting more than three hundred participants, the Great Southeast Lesbian Conference included representatives of lesbian and feminist organizations from eighteen states. Noted lesbian-feminist activist Charlotte Bunch led workshops on “Class and Feminism,” “Revolutionary Theory and Strategy,” and “Socialist Feminism.” The Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists from North Carolina conducted a workshop on group dynamics, while members of the Atlanta chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) chaired a session on “Lesbians Working/Not Working within the Establishment.” Other workshops focused on coming out, couples communication, and feminist theater. The conference also featured leaderless sessions akin to consciousness-raising groups on topics such as Third World lesbians, lesbian mothers, and living in the city.<sup>1</sup> Sessions were held at ALFA headquarters and in the homes of ALFA members. Drawing its energy and membership from the many women’s organizations in the region, the conference suggested the centrality of feminism to lesbian activism in the South, but also hinted at a growing desire among

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<sup>1</sup> *The Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta), June 5, 1975, p. 6; schedule of events, Great Southeast Lesbian Conference, n.d. [May 1975], folder 1.9: Great SE Lesbian Conference, box 1, Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance papers (hereafter ALFA), Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter Duke); *Feminary* 6, no. 12 (June 7, 1975): 2, binder: *A Feminary*, Back Issues 1975, box 7 (Acc. 92-072), YWCA records, Duke.

lesbian activists to organize separately.<sup>2</sup>

Queer studies scholarship has investigated gay and lesbian life almost exclusively in the cities of the Northeast and the West.<sup>3</sup> The Great Southeast Lesbian Conference, however, testified to the very real successes and the deep organizing gay men and women had achieved in the South as well. As historian Carolyn Law has argued, “popular myth” holds that “gay people cannot live in the repressive atmosphere of the South, that all gay and lesbian southerners are driven out, indeed are suspect if they choose to stay or cannot leave. The

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<sup>2</sup> The conference also demonstrated the hostile climate in which lesbian organizing took place. ALFA warned conference-goers in advance that the meetings were likely to attract the attention of neighbors and the police. It therefore advised them to avoid drug use or “obvious displays of affection,” because ALFA members were “concerned about present legal hassles and future vandalism. This is a dangerous area for women.” ALFA was right to worry. During the conference, five women from the Durham, North Carolina, area were arrested at a late-night restaurant after a dispute over the bill. The women were charged with creating a turmoil and criminal trespass. During the arrest, they endured verbal abuse from the police officers and restaurant patrons, including such epithets as “goddamn lesbian, butch bitches, bull dykes.” After a gay male restaurant patron rebuked the police for treating the women with such brutality, he too was arrested (for obstructing an officer) and harassed about his homosexuality. When word of the arrests reached conference attendees at a performance of the Red Dyke Theater, the theater-goers raised enough money to pay the women’s bail. Ultimately, each of the five women was found guilty of causing a turmoil (not trespass) and sentenced to a ten days’ suspended sentence and a fine of \$35. *The Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta), June 5, 1975, p. 6

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rights of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006); Emma Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-72* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

result, in the logic of the myth, is that there cannot be gay culture in the South.”<sup>4</sup> For historian Donna Jo Smith, that myth encapsulates stereotypical imagery of both the South and gay life, which in effect declares the two utterly incompatible. “For some,” Smith contends, “the notion of a ‘southern queer’ is an oxymoron, conjuring up images of a drag queen with a pickup truck and gun rack or of a dyke with big hair and Birkenstocks.” This tangled imagery, she concludes, has led Americans across the nation to believe that “it’s harder to be queer in the South than in the rest of the nation.”<sup>5</sup> In response to these ideas, the ethnographer E. Patrick Johnson has attempted to “debunk the common myth that the South is a place where it is *more* difficult to be a black gay man, in part because – according to another common myth – black folks, in general are more homophobic than whites, southern or otherwise.” In fact, Johnson found that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, “many black communities around the South, and especially those in rural towns, accommodated sexual dissidents in ways unimaginable.”<sup>6</sup> While most studies of gay life in the South have focused on men, the wide appeal of the Great Southeast Lesbian Conference suggests that the history of lesbians in the region deserves similar examination.

In his pathbreaking collection of essays, *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*,

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Leste Law, “Introduction,” in *Out in the South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Donna Jo Smith, “Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 370, 381.

<sup>6</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 6.

John Howard argues that gay history in the South has been different than in other parts of the nation primarily because race, religion, and rurality have so shaped Southern life. These three factors, he is careful to note, were not exclusive to the region, but they tended to exert disproportionate influence on the lives of gays outside the North and West. In the South, he asserts, racial categories “inform and structure homosexual interactions in profound ways.”<sup>7</sup> In many places, although not all, gay and lesbian life in the South was segregated by both race and class.<sup>8</sup> As for religion, the South’s thoroughgoing commitment to evangelical Protestantism strongly affected the “legal, medical, and religious discourses” of homosexuality. Nevertheless, Howard maintains, “the continued, insistent religiosity of many lesbian and gay Southerners means religion is anything but a one-way, oppressive force.”<sup>9</sup> For example, the Metropolitan Community Church, a progressive Protestant denomination, welcomed lesbian and gay members across the South and played a large part in the political organizing of gay men in rural Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the rural backgrounds and communities of many gay Southerners meant

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<sup>7</sup> John Howard, “Introduction,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> James Sears argues that such segregation was particularly true of New Orleans. See James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 96, 295.

<sup>9</sup> Howard, “Introduction,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> In 1974, for example, nearly all the activities for Atlanta’s Gay Pride week were hosted by the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). Events included a discussion group focused on “Homosexuality and the Law,” a talent show, a beauty contest, and film screenings. See schedule for Gay Pride Week Celebration ‘74, folder 1.7: Activities, box 1, ALFA records, Duke. On the Metropolitan Community Church in the South, see Howard, *Men Like That*, chap. 6. Founded in Los Angeles, California, in 1968, the MCC was dedicated to a positive ministry to gay people and their families. For information about the MCC generally, see [www.mcccchurch.org](http://www.mcccchurch.org).

that “space and movement” were critical to the development of gay political organizing.<sup>11</sup>

For lesbians in the South, it may be that space and the existence of other feminist networks were just as crucial. The majority of lesbian organizations appear to have been located in cities or in college towns, and most (if not all) had connections to local feminist organizations and activists. Because the few scholarly studies that have focused on the South have, for the most part, examined gay men and not women, understanding of lesbians’ lives remains limited.<sup>12</sup> This chapter examines lesbian community formation, identity politics, and civil rights activism in the South during the 1970s. It demonstrates that experience in mobilizing around women’s issues and the vibrancy of feminist networks proved to be central to the development of lesbian organizations in the region. It also argues that the energies of lesbians were critical to feminist organizations across the South.

Civil rights activism was important to many lesbian Southerners, but just as many poured their energies into creating communities that respected and supported them and into creating identities that validated and celebrated gay life. Historian John D’Emilio has articulated a four-part model of gay history that posits a sequential narrative of desire, identity, community

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<sup>11</sup> Howard, “Introduction,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> In 1997, Pippa Holloway urged historians to begin investigating the lives of lesbian women in the South, but few have responded to the call. Pippa Holloway, “Searching for Southern Lesbian History,” in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 258-272. On gay life in Mississippi, see John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xvi, 240-242, 245-255.



or culture, and political movement.<sup>13</sup> This model offers many advantages, but its assumption that these elements developed sequentially is of limited relevance, with respect to the lesbian experience in the South. D’Emilio’s sequence assumes that community and organization necessarily presaged political action. Yet, as historian Vicki Ealor has argued, “a thriving subculture does not guarantee civil rights organizing; some would say it even undermines it, since the more secure individuals feel as a part of the community the less they may see any need for change.”<sup>14</sup> In the South, a relatively healthy subculture in the postwar years did not in fact create a groundswell of civil rights organizing. Instead, it was the women’s movement that provided not only strategies and language, but also membership for separate lesbian organizations.

D’Emilio’s model overemphasizes connections between the gay rights movement of the postwar period and that of the 1970s. In the 1970s, lesbian women in the South forged greater connections with feminists than with gay men, according their feminist politics a higher status than their sexual identities. In addition, the women’s movement served both as a source of inspiration and as a training ground for many lesbian activists. The postwar communities established by lesbians may have provided important role models, but they rarely created organizations that survived into the 1970s. While postwar lesbians and those active in the 1970s shared an emphasis on community-building, the political activism and organizing methods

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<sup>13</sup> John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100-113.

<sup>14</sup> Ealor, *Queer America*, 93.

of the latter period evinced greater commonalities with feminists of the women's movement than with gay organizing in the years after World War II. In the 1970s, the women's and lesbian feminist movements in the South shared not only members, but also tactics and a political vocabulary.

For many lesbians, it was impossible to separate their feminist activism from their sexuality. "In daily life lesbian oppression is women's oppression," wrote one anonymous lesbian feminist in North Carolina. "The pains and troubles which lesbians experience on the street, at the job, with health care, and in their societal image are generally those of all women because men react to us by sex."<sup>15</sup> Although gay women faced compounded discriminations (by sex, gender, sexuality, and sometimes race and class as well), lesbian women in the South frequently argued that lesbian and straight women shared many of the same experiences. Hostility or distance on the part of straight women was therefore surprising and hurtful to many lesbian feminists. "In the women's movement, we expect the freedom to let fall our masks, to communicate our beliefs and emotions to other women," the anonymous writer avowed. "Instead we are ghettoized politely into an occasional workshop."<sup>16</sup> Throughout the 1970s, lesbians across the nation struggled to work with straight women in women's organizations. Lesbian women had two alternatives: to continue to collaborate within women's organizations with mixed membership or to form separate ones. More often than not, even when choosing

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<sup>15</sup> turtle [pseudonym], "The Politics of Lesbianism – Chapel Hill," *The Feminist Newsletter* 5, no. 6 (March 24, 1974): 7, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, folder: Feminist Newsletter-volume V, box 30, Duke.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the latter option, lesbian women in the South continued to invest in coalition-building with straight women whom they considered allies.

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### **Postwar Gay Communities**

In the years immediately following World War II, gay life in the South, as in other regions of the country, was marked by nascent organizing within an environment of isolation and repression. In the 1950s and 1960s, most Southerners, historian Pete Daniel writes, “had little tolerance for known homosexuals.” Men and women faced arrest for cross-dressing. Police regularly raided gay parties and bars.<sup>17</sup> Such repression notwithstanding, the communities constructed in the postwar years – on softball fields, in bars, in theaters – laid the groundwork for gay activism in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> By the 1960s, several Southern cities like Houston, Dallas, New Orleans, Memphis, and Atlanta were all the sites of sizeable gay communities. Houston, “the homosexual playground of the South,” was home to a dozen gay bars and clubs, at least some of which were owned by straight women.<sup>19</sup> Bonnie Strickland, a psychology researcher at Emory University, remembered Atlanta in the 1960s as a “mecca for [gay] men and

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<sup>17</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 157, 159-160.

<sup>18</sup> Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> According to Sears, gay clubs in Houston, “unlike Mafia-controlled bars of many northern cities,” were often owned by straight women. “There was Effie’s Pink Elephant (which had been around since the forties), catering to older gay men; Verlon’s Surf Lounge; the Round Table on Westheimer, owned by Dorothy; Rocky’s, a hole-in-the-wall working-class club on West Dallas; and the Desert Room, whose famed Sunday afternoon tea dances were guarded by Hazel with a watchful eye for the police and an agile thumb set to flicker the lights.” Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 49.

lesbians.” Although few of the new arrivals expressed their sexuality publicly in those years, the city “offered large closets of opportunities for gays and lesbians from all over the South.”<sup>20</sup>

Many of the South’s gay communities remained insular and isolated, in part as a means of self-defense against police repression and public condemnation. Like other lesbians, Bonnie Strickland feared the attentions of the police and the reactions of coworkers, neighbors, and friends. Police departments often raided bars frequented by lesbians and gays and kept records of gay men and lesbians. Strickland herself managed to avoid arrest, but she recalled a number of instances in which lesbians who had gathered for parties in private homes were forced to flee police raids through windows and down back alleys. The women were arrested “simply for socializing with friends.” Strickland restricted most of her socializing to softball, basketball, poker, and occasional private parties. “Many of my lesbian friends,” she remembered, “lived near each other in the new apartment complexes that were being built in the suburbs of Atlanta, and we planned our own, exclusive social and sports events.”<sup>21</sup> Living in proximity was important not only in providing shared, safe spaces but in supporting the development of community institutions such as bars and coffee houses. As historian Marc Stein has noted, enclaves of gay life helped make small towns within big cities.<sup>22</sup>

Like Atlanta, Memphis was home to a diverse and well-organized lesbian community in

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<sup>20</sup> Bonnie R. Strickland, “Leaving the Confederate Closet,” in *Out in the South*, ed. Dews and Leste, 107, 108.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the importance of neighborhoods in supporting independent gay life, see Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love*, especially chap. 1-2.

the postwar period. Historian Daneel Buring has argued that the relative anonymity of urban life made cities such as Memphis particularly attractive to rural lesbians.<sup>23</sup> Fearing backlash from socially or religiously conservative communities, these women sought to avoid harassment at work and threats to their physical safety. The coming-out stories that Buring collected from Memphis lesbians revealed a pattern of sexual identities hidden from both their families and society at large.<sup>24</sup> These hidden identities led lesbian women to create two quasi-public institutions whose real nature was evident only to those within the gay world. Lesbian bars and the city's softball league became central to the development of the Memphis lesbian community, largely because they allowed gay women to create lives of their own in public spaces yet still afforded a cover of deniability.<sup>25</sup> Pete Daniel contends that most lesbian women in Memphis "never told their parents or openly admitted their sexual preference." Rather, they congregated in "friendly 'mom-and-pop bars' and juke joints where they danced, flirted, and fought."<sup>26</sup> But

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<sup>23</sup> Buring argues that "the South's distinctive regional character contributed to the invisibility of its lesbian communities," but this invisibility seems to have been less a regional distinction than a nationwide feature in the postwar period. See Daneel Buring, "Softball and Alcohol: The Limits of Lesbian Community in Memphis from the 1940s through the 1960s," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. Howard, 204-205.

<sup>24</sup> According to Buring, these stories shared much in common with the experience of lesbians in other parts of the country in this period. Buring, "Softball and Alcohol," 207.

<sup>25</sup> "Although Memphis had no strictly lesbian bars prior to the 1960s," Buring explains, "during the 1940s and 1950s lesbians who were interested in frequenting bars with other lesbians often went to mixed bars. Mixed bars were actually straight bars in which lesbians and gay men felt comfortable and whose owners were supportive and protective of their homosexual clientele." In the early 1960s, however, "a few bars catering specifically to gay men and lesbians opened, but the frequency of police harassment and the concomitant threat of exposure often resulted in their closure." Buring, "Softball and Alcohol," 210-211.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 159-160.

in Memphis the heart of the lesbian community was the women's softball league. "I think that softball fields were the only place that most of us felt comfortable," one woman remembered.<sup>27</sup> Softball, Buring found, "continually provided Memphis lesbians with a public space that served as an athletic and social gathering point."<sup>28</sup> The lesbian community in Memphis remained, in Buring's words, "largely underground," but institutions such as bars and the softball league opened possibilities for gay women to meet and organize together.

Despite the support provided by these communities in the postwar years, many gay women struggled with the decision to reveal their sexual identities publicly. Southern author Lillian Smith, for example, concealed her lifelong relationship with Paula Snelling. "I am sorry my letters are burned," Smith wrote to Snelling in June 1952, "that is my ambivalence. My shame about something different and completely good."<sup>29</sup> Bonnie Strickland, the Emory University researcher, characterized her public and private lives as "distinct and disconnected" during her first years in Atlanta in the early 1960s. She made sure that her teaching, research, and clinical practice never overlapped with her social world of women's softball teams and parties with predominantly lesbian women. "With few exceptions," she recounted, "my work colleagues and close women friends never met. My partner's picture was *not* on my office

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 159-160.

<sup>28</sup> Buring, "Softball and Alcohol," 213; Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 159-160.

<sup>29</sup> Lillian Smith to Paula Snelling, June 19, 1952, quoted in *How Am I To Be Heard? The Letters of Lillian Smith*, ed. Margaret Rose Gladney (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 136. See also Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 156. On gay women's identity concealment through letter burning, see Estelle B. Freedman, "The Burning of Letters Continues': Elusive Identities and the Historical Construction of Sexuality," in *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida M. Black (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 51-68.

desk, and my friends preferred the sports pages over my research articles.” To maintain the pretense of heterosexuality, Strickland attended university events with “handsome, charming gay men.” She ruefully recalled that her Emory colleagues and her family were “happily matchmaking, benignly indifferent to the fact that I would rather have a wife than be one.”<sup>30</sup> In the postwar years, as lesbian communities began to take shape, women like Strickland struggled with the prospect of revealing their sexuality to friends and family and to the public at large. The decision to do so despite potentially devastating consequences was often the first step in community formation.

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### **Lesbian Communities in the 1970s**

In the 1970s, gay women across the South began to organize both socially and politically. The organizations they formed differed radically from the nascent groups of the postwar period, both in membership size and scope of activity. Historian James T. Sears has argued that for gay people in the South, the 1970s were characterized by “networks and activism, immediacy and confrontation, openness and revelry.”<sup>31</sup> Lesbian organizations in the region ranged from farm collectives to bookstores to political action groups.<sup>32</sup> Many

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<sup>30</sup> Strickland, “Leaving the Confederate Closet,” 107.

<sup>31</sup> Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestone*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> On the lesbian farm collective outside Fayetteville, Arkansas, see Suzanne Pharr, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, June 28, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. (hereafter, Smith), pp. 42-45. On other radical lesbian agricultural projects in the 1970s, see Ariel Levy, “Lesbian Nation,” *The New Yorker*, March 2, 2009, pp. 30-37.

organizations served multiple functions, laying a foundation for community formation, political action, and cultural enrichment. Postwar gay communities may have opened spaces in which the activists of the 1970s could operate, but older institutions did not necessarily nourish the development of a younger generation. In fact, many of the South's lesbian activists emerged not from the homophile movements of the 1950s and 1960s, but from the women's movement. Even as lesbian activists in feminist circles highlighted their sexual identities, they tried to reconcile gay politics with feminist politics. In many cases, Southern lesbians struggled with heterosexual feminists over issues of sexuality but at the same time were reluctant to disassociate themselves from other activists interested in women's rights. Lesbian activists in the 1970s sought to create identities, communities, and politics that prized both women's and gay rights.

For many lesbians in the South, organizations comprising gay men and women offered few benefits. Many lesbian women found the gay rights movement to be sexist and exclusionary and did not necessarily equate their needs with those of gay men.<sup>33</sup> Organizations such as the Gay Alliance in Louisville, Kentucky, which was established in 1974 to fight the oppression of all homosexuals, were dominated by gay men. Men represented a majority of the Alliance's membership and held most positions of leadership. In addition, historian Kathie Williams argues, "much like the homophile movement of the 1950s, men tended to exclude

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<sup>33</sup> Similar tensions existed in the homophile movement of the postwar period as well. See Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 87-88; Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: The Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006), 20.



women's issues from their lists of concerns."<sup>34</sup> Some lesbians believed gay men held sexist ideas about women in general and found it impossible to reconcile these discriminatory attitudes in such a way as to build alliances of homosexuals. Lesbians in the Southeastern Gay Coalition in Atlanta expressed "deep reservations" about working with gay men who did not treat them as equals.<sup>35</sup> Under such circumstances, the women's movement proved to be a more comfortable ally, even when the relationship between lesbian women and other participants was fraught with tension and painful negotiations.

Early in the 1970s, many lesbian organizations emerged directly from women's organizations and maintained close ties with feminist activists who were involved in many different issues. Founded in the fall of 1974, the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists (TALF), a group of approximately fifty women from the Durham-Chapel Hill-Raleigh area of North Carolina, drew its members from local women's groups, including the Durham Women's Center, the Triangle Women's Union, the Women's Graphics Collective, the Durham Women's Radio Collective, the feminist journal *Feminary*, and others. As several of the women became more interested in organizing around issues of sexuality, they created TALF, which they hoped would promote lesbian and feminist politics.<sup>36</sup> TALF also served an

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<sup>34</sup> Kathie D. Williams, "Louisville's Lesbian Feminist Union: A Study in Community Building," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. Howard, 226.

<sup>35</sup> Lesbian Caucus of the Southeastern Gay Coalition, "Position Paper," 1972, folder 16.3: Southeast Gay Coalition, box 16, ALFA papers, Duke.

<sup>36</sup> A few of the women in TALF had been members of Duke University's Gay and Lesbian Alliance Rap Group, which had brought together isolated groups of gay men and women in the Triangle area, serving as both a support group and a consciousness-raising group. "Triangle Area Lesbian Feminist – An Introduction," 1976, folder: Women's Center, box 4 (Acc. 92-027),

important role in building a lesbian community in the Triangle area. For example, TALF members helped Beci Dobbs, who struggled to reveal her sexuality openly, by offering her both friends and role models. It was as a result of her membership in TALF that she began to feel more comfortable with a lesbian public persona and with open expressions of physical affection for other women. “For the first time,” she wrote, “I wasn’t *alone*.”<sup>37</sup> TALF had created a distinct community of women who shared interests and desires. At the same time, members of TALF remained active in women’s organizing in the region, opening their homes, for example, to out-of-town visitors who attended the “Free Joann Little” rallies.<sup>38</sup>

While TALF maintained a cordial and productive relationship with a number of other women’s organizations, women in some parts of the South endeavored to create greater distance between straight and gay organizations. Between 1973 and 1975, for example, the Tallahassee Lesbian Collective offered lesbian women an opportunity to live collectively and organize politically on their own, apart from straight feminists. A number of women had rented a house with the intention of creating a Women’s Center near the Florida State University campus, but discovered in so doing that what they really desired was a shared living space for lesbians. The opening of the house “was the first time lesbians could go somewhere to be

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YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>37</sup> Beci Dobbs, “On Being the High School Dyke,” *Feminary* (Durham, N.C.) 8, no. 2 (October 1977): 38, Schlesinger Periodical collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter Schlesinger).

<sup>38</sup> Editorial, *A Feminary* 6, no. 14 (July 6, 1975): 1, folder: A Feminary-volume VI, box 30, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke. On the Joann Little case, see Chapter 5, above.

themselves and congregate together without having to go to a bar,” recalled one of the collective’s founding members. In addition to creating a community for the women living in the house, the collective hosted coffee nights that featured lesbian musicians and taught women skills such as electronics, carpentry, and car repair. The Tallahassee Lesbian Collective women “had fun together, too: taking showers, cutting each other’s hair, and taking care of each other when they were sick.” The group also operated a feminist bookstore, Herstore. Ultimately, the collective collapsed as its members disagreed over the direction of their organization, with some women interested in devoting more energy to political activities while others emphasized creating new kinds of familial relationships. By March 1975, the collective had all but disbanded. “All of it was going too fast,” a founding member remembered. “We were caught up in trying to change all things at once.”<sup>39</sup>

The emergence of the Lesbian Feminist Union (LFU) in Louisville, Kentucky, suggested a third path for the development of lesbian organizations. In this case, a small group of lesbians split from the local chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) when straight members evinced discomfort with issues of sexual orientation. Between 1974 and 1979, the LFU provided meeting space, operated a feminist and lesbian library, and offered

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<sup>39</sup> Personal jealousies and rivalries also played a part in the group’s demise. The women who lived in the collective all seem to have been white and middle-class, but visitors to the house may have been drawn from a more diverse population. Sherry Rauch, “The Tallahassee Lesbian Collective,” *Spectrum* [no vol.] no. 28 (Winter Solstice 1981): 10, folder: Women’s Liberation Pamphlets and Newspapers 1970-1972, 1981, 2 of 2, box 1, Tampa Women’s Liberation papers, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter, GSU). On Herstore, see Chapter 2, above.

housing to both local lesbians and visitors from out of town.<sup>40</sup> Interested not only in political action, the LFU sought to create a “Lesbian Nation” that nourished an indigenous and authentic culture of its own. To this end, twenty women from the LFU opened a bar called “Mother’s Brew,” which hosted lectures by lesbian-feminist writers and political activists from across the nation. “The Brew was the real center of our culture,” one member of the LFU maintained. “In fact it may have been more unifying to this community than the LFU itself. The bar was a place for spiritual women, political women, and bar dykes.” The LFU’s concept of a Lesbian Nation encouraged lesbians to create economically independent communities with their own businesses and services, and the LFU itself opened a food cooperative where women exchanged their labor for food and child care services. Women in the LFU also opened the Bluegrass Feminist Credit Union to provide savings accounts and small loans.<sup>41</sup>

Like the LFU in Louisville, lesbian groups across the South wedded political organizing to cultural creation. Beginning in 1975, lesbian feminists in Houston published a newspaper, *Pointblank Times*, and formed a political organization known as Lesberadas.<sup>42</sup> In Mississippi, lesbian members of the Jackson Women’s Center, mostly young white women, sponsored consciousness-raising groups, collected materials for a feminist library, and published a short-

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<sup>40</sup> Williams, “Louisville’s Lesbian Feminist Union,” 228-229.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 229, 232-233. Kathie Sarachild was one of the first to give a lecture at Mother’s Brew. For a discussion of feminist credit unions, see above, chap. 2.

<sup>42</sup> See folder: *Pointblank Times* (Houston), box 2 (Acc.91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

lived lesbian newspaper, *Sting Like a Butterfly*.<sup>43</sup> In Atlanta, Linda Bryant opened Charis Books as a place where women could find Christian, feminist, and lesbian literature and enjoy music and lectures.<sup>44</sup> The Triangle area of North Carolina was home to *Feminary*, a lesbian-feminist journal. Originally a local feminist publication, *Feminary* underwent a transformation in the mid-1970s as it began to publish the writings of lesbians from across the South. *Feminary* operated as a collective, with members sharing editorial and printing duties as much as possible. It was dedicated to the women's liberation movement, to anti-racism, and to class struggle.<sup>45</sup>

The most influential lesbian organization in the South was the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA), a group with social, educational, cultural, and political aims. Atlanta, as one ALFA member noted, was "the gay capital of the south [sic]."<sup>46</sup> Gay men and women had long

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<sup>43</sup> L. Landram, "Rapping Down the Dusty Lavender Road," *Sting Like a Butterfly*, January 19, 1973, quoted in Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 342-343n. 23.

<sup>44</sup> On Charis, see Saralyn Chesnut and Amanda C. Gable, "'Women Ran It': Charis Books and More and Atlanta's Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1971-1981," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. Howard, 241-284; transcript, Linda Bryant, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, September 29, 2005, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 1-5, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU. This is an unprocessed interview; page numbers may change. For a discussion of Charis as a feminist business, see above, Chapter 2.

<sup>45</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, March 16, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Smith, pp. 42-45; Mab Segrest, *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1985), 72-77. *Feminary* began publishing in 1969 as the *Female Liberation Newsletter*, but changed its name in October 1974 to *A Feminary*. The following year, it dropped the article from its title, becoming *Feminary*. It ceased publication in 1985. On the varying title of the newsletter, see also flyer, "Feminary: A Feminist Journal for the South," n.d. [1978], folder: Feminary submissions, correspondence, minutes, box 29, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke.

<sup>46</sup> Transcript, Elizabeth Knowlton, in an interview conducted by Charlene Ball and Diane Fowlkes, February 16, 1998, Atlanta, Ga., p. 16, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections

found it attractive, particularly because its size allowed for the formation of separate communities and the possibility of anonymity. Nevertheless, there had been no “out-front lesbian feminist community” in the city until ALFA formed in 1972.<sup>47</sup> The founding members created ALFA not only because they felt that Atlanta lesbians needed an organization to call their own, but also because, as the organization’s newsletter put it, “Atlanta’s Women’s Liberation was too straight and the Gay Liberation Front was too male.”<sup>48</sup> ALFA’s membership was predominantly white, but economically diverse, and the group’s activities were intended to appeal to as wide a range of lesbians as possible.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, ALFA served multiple purposes. In order to educate the public about both feminism and lesbianism, the alliance organized a speakers’ bureau, maintained a feminist library, and hosted conferences. ALFA members devoted considerable energy to organizing for political causes, supporting women’s rights, and working to expand gay rights across the South. They organized demonstrations to protest homophobic policies and practices of Atlanta’s newspapers and the city’s police force, and frequently donated their time to

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Department, GSU.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Atalanta*, August 1977, p. 3, folder 6.5: *Atalanta* 1977, box 6, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>49</sup> ALFA’s membership hovered around one hundred women throughout the decade. According to the organization’s newsletter, the dues-paying membership in 1977 numbered 115 women who were “basically white, middle class, in the 18-35 age group.” *Atalanta*, August 1977, no. 8, p. 3, folder 6.5: *Atalanta* 1977, box 6, ALFA records, Duke. ALFA member Elizabeth Knowlton recalled that the softball team was a particular attraction for working-class lesbians. Knowlton interview, GSU, p. 16.

outreach efforts in local schools and on local radio and television.<sup>50</sup> The organization also played an important part in the social life of the city's lesbians. ALFA sponsored a lesbian softball team that participated in a citywide league, screened films of interest to lesbians, and sponsored a series of conferences of Southern women writers.<sup>51</sup>

Although many of these activities were geared toward ALFA members, they also attracted the attention of women from across the South. Many women coming to terms with their sexuality reached out to ALFA for support and information. ALFA's files contain dozens of letters from women across the region with queries about where to meet other lesbians and safe places to stay when visiting from out of town, along with requests for ALFA's published materials. Many women wrote to ALFA thanking the organization simply for existing and for publishing a newsletter that connected lesbian women to one another.<sup>52</sup> In a typical letter, Cathy Durrett, whose residence is unknown, contacted ALFA as soon as she learned she was moving to Atlanta. "I'm going to the Atlanta College of Art," she wrote, "and . . . I'm anxious to get in touch with some feminist sisters. Could y'all please send me info on rap groups, meetings, lectures, bookstores, phone numbers – whatever."<sup>53</sup> Kay Hines, who had recently

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<sup>50</sup> *Atalanta*, August 1977, folder 6.5: Atalanta 1977, box 6, ALFA records, Duke; "ALFA House Open," *Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta) 5, no. 39 (October 9, 1972): 14.

<sup>51</sup> See surveys, folder 1.28: 1973 ALFA Survey, box 6, ALFA records, Duke. On the conferences, *Womanwrites*, see Knowlton interview, GSU, pp. 25-28; Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion: Essays, 1980-1991* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1991), 132-133; folder: *Womanwrites 1979*, box 38, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke.

<sup>52</sup> See box 3, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>53</sup> Cathy Durrett to ALFA, n.d. [1973/1974], folder 3.2: 1973/1974 Corres. to Individuals, box 3, ALFA records, Duke.

moved to Atlanta from Texas, wrote to ALFA to express her feelings of loneliness in her new city. “My family doesn’t ‘know’ about my feelings altho’ I’m sure they suspect,” she confessed, “and I’m getting sick and tired of hiding. When I left my lover, I also left my gay friends.”<sup>54</sup> Elaine Fiedler learned about ALFA soon after she arrived in Atlanta, but she hesitated for weeks before making contact, meanwhile experiencing “a kind of desperate need to talk to somebody.” Eventually, she realized that ALFA members could provide both support and the basis of a community.<sup>55</sup>

Many letters spoke to the isolation and fear of Southern lesbians still struggling with their sexual identities. A seventeen-year old girl from rural Statesville, North Carolina, wrote to ALFA in search of a correspondent who might share her experiences. “Dear Sisters,” she wrote, “I guess it seems pretty weird getting a letter from someone you don’t even know, but I’m at the end of my line it seems.” She felt increasingly “desperate” as students in her high school spread rumors about her. “I have very rigid parents,” she wrote, “who I don’t get along with at all. They suspect and accuse me of being a lesbian, but I haven’t confirmed their beliefs for them. You see I’m still backed way back in the closet, fearful of rejection.”<sup>56</sup> For women like her, ALFA sought to create a safe space. Vicki Gabriner, an early and vocal leader of the

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<sup>54</sup> Kay [Hines] to Lorraine [Fontana], n.d. [1973/1974], folder 3.2: 1973/1974 Corres. to Individuals, box 3, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>55</sup> Elaine Fiedler to ALFA, n.d. [1973/1974], folder 3.2: 1973/1974 Corres. to Individuals, box 3, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>56</sup> Caroline [no surname] to ALFA, April 21, 1978, folder 3.5: 1975/1976 Corres. to Individuals, box 3, ALFA records, Duke.



alliance, understood that the ALFA house could serve as a secure and welcoming place where women from across the South could “come to just be with other lesbians.”<sup>57</sup>

AFLA members worked diligently to create a network of feminists, both lesbian and straight, throughout the South. In order to increase Southern women’s connections with and knowledge of one another, ALFA established a feminist library that collected material from across the region.<sup>58</sup> The library made it possible for women to learn about feminist communities in other cities and to establish contacts with like-minded activists. *Atalanta*, the organization’s monthly newsletter, included a section entitled “Lesbian Region” that featured information about lesbian activities and resources throughout the South.<sup>59</sup> And one of the purposes of ALFA’s 1975 Great Southeast Lesbian Conference was to foster communication among lesbians across the region.

As the organization of the regional conference suggests, ALFA took seriously its leadership in issues concerning lesbians throughout the South. In 1973 and 1974, ALFA organized protests against the arrest and trial of Freddie Creed, a lesbian in Alabama who had been charged with disorderly conduct and sexual perversion for publicly kissing her lover in a Birmingham bar.<sup>60</sup> ALFA members maintained an extended correspondence with Creed and

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<sup>57</sup> Gabriner quoted in Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 110.

<sup>58</sup> Memo, Southern Feminist Library and Archives, n.d. [1981?], folder 1.22: Original Forms, box 1, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>59</sup> *Atalanta*, June 1979, p. 3-5, folder 6.6: *Atalanta* 1978, box 6, ALFA papers, Duke; *Atalanta*, March 1979, pp. 3-4, folder 6.7: *Atalanta* 1979, box 6, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>60</sup> For more on Creed, see John Foust, “Put Down, Put Off: 'Bama Lesbian is Put Out,” *The Advocate*, March 27, 1974, p. 8.

other Birmingham lesbians, passing information about the case on to women throughout the South via its newsletter and press releases.<sup>61</sup> ALFA did so because it understood the persecution of lesbians in one part of the South as the persecution of lesbians everywhere. “We in Atlanta are pretty lucky,” noted Pam Parker, an ALFA member who traveled to Birmingham to observe the trial. “At least we don’t have this overwhelming fear of being busted just because we hold hands or kiss someone.” The relative safety of Atlanta lesbians did not suggest to Parker or other ALFA members that they should not join the struggles of other gay women. “We have all the more reason to fight,” Parker insisted. “We’ve got to come out and fight back until this stupid, pointless persecution of our sisters and brothers stops because when one of us is on trial, we are *all* on trial.”<sup>62</sup>

Even as it concentrated on expanding and protecting gay women’s rights, ALFA remained conscious of its identity as an organization that was both lesbian and feminist. ALFA members realized that the “F” in the organization’s acronym often assumed a subordinate position in public perception, but most of them never felt that feminist causes were separate from their struggles as lesbians. ALFA members perceived “a unique bond uniting all women which stems from their common women [sic] experience in a male-dominated society.” The

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<sup>61</sup> Freddie Creed to Lorraine [Fontana] and ALFA, January 1, 1974; Freddie Creed to ALFA, November 1, 1973, folder 3.3: 1973/1974 Corres. to Individuals, box 3, ALFA records, Duke; press release, n.d. [1973], folder 1.7: Activities, box 1, ALFA records, Duke. See also *The Great Speckled Bird* (Atlanta), July 2, 1973; *Atalanta*, May 1974, pp. 4-5, folder 6.2: Atalanta 1974, box 6, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>62</sup> Pam Parker, “Freddie’s Trial(s),” *Atalanta*, February 1974, p. 5, folder 6.2: Atalanta 1974, box 6, ALFA records, Duke. Emphasis in the original.

organization knew that both its members and the general public sometimes questioned its collaboration with the women's movement. "As gay women," ALFA acknowledged to its members, "you are not oppressed by men in personal relations, you have no need for birth control, better childbirth, or abortions."<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, ALFA argued, any number of concerns affected all women, regardless of sexual preference, pointing in particular to discrimination in pay and to the treatment of female employees by male bosses. ALFA devoted considerable energy to campaigning for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), sponsoring anti-rape initiatives, and fighting for abortion rights. As Elizabeth Knowlton, an early member of the organization recalled, ALFA was not "a gay organization." "I mean, it was gay in the sense that we were gay," she explained, "but it was a lesbian-feminist organization." Knowlton was often surprised when the organization's feminist politics drew as much attention as its lesbianism. "It always amused me over the years how many times people could not deal with the F in ALFA," she continued. "They could deal with the L fine. It was the F."<sup>64</sup> For most ALFA members, it was impossible to separate their lesbian politics from their commitment to feminism, which they conceptualized as the expansion of all women's rights and opportunities.

This dual commitment derived in part from the fact that many lesbian women first came to terms with the limitations in their lives through the women's movement. "[T]he oppression of women was a revelation to me; the liberation of women was my freedom," North Carolina

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<sup>63</sup> *Atalanta*, July 1977, p. 7, folder 6.5: *Atalanta* 1977, box 6, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>64</sup> Knowlton interview, GSU, p. 17.

lesbian writer Minnie Bruce Pratt recalled. “There was tremendous exhilaration in being part of a liberation movement, in gathering together with other women to explore how to get freedom.”<sup>65</sup> The women’s movement generated an understanding of oppression, sparking an exploration of other kinds of exploitation and repression. Feminist theory offered malleable understandings of gender and critiques of male power. Lesbian feminists also adapted the tactics of the women’s movement, especially consciousness-raising and newsletters, to their own activism.

Nevertheless, many lesbians questioned whether they belonged in a wider women’s movement if the aims of that movement did not always encompass those of lesbian women. Writing in a lesbian feminist newspaper published in Jackson, Mississippi, Chris Lundberg asked if “putting our energies into ERA, battered wives, abortion, helping the war against anti-sexism will help us build allies in our war against anti-sexual preference.” Like other lesbian feminists, Lundberg wondered whether straight women would support lesbian rights with a fervor equal to their other demands. “Will these same sisters,” she asked, “who only several short years ago said, ‘keep quiet, your lesbianism is a threat to our success,’ will they help us when we need them?”<sup>66</sup>

In addition to such philosophical and tactical challenges, lesbian feminists frequently questioned their own role in feminist organizations. The place of lesbians in NOW, for

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<sup>65</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/He* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1995), 15-16.

<sup>66</sup> *Lesbian Front* (Jackson, Miss.), May 1976, p. 2, folder: Lesbian Front (Jackson, Miss.), box 2 (Acc.91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

example, had been contested since the organization's founding. In 1969, NOW founder Betty Friedan infamously decried lesbian rights as the "lavender menace" that threatened to undermine the organization's legitimacy.<sup>67</sup> Feminists like Friedan saw issues of sexuality as distractions from political or economic organizing. In NOW's early years, its national leaders generally tended to view sexual orientation as a private matter that was not pertinent to NOW's goals. For lesbian feminists, political scientist Barbara Arneil has suggested, the distinction was problematic for two reasons. "First, lesbianism is reduced to sexuality and sexual behavior," rather than either a political choice or an inherent feature of women's identity. Second, "it allows women to be lesbians only in the private sphere."<sup>68</sup> Historians have often pointed to the 1970 "purges" of lesbians such as Rita Mae Brown and Ti-Grace Atkinson from the New York City chapter of NOW, the organization's largest, as evidence of the organization's hostility to lesbian rights.<sup>69</sup> NOW's stance began to moderate later that year when Aileen Hernandez became the national leader of the organization, particularly after she publicly

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<sup>67</sup> Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, "A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (January 2007): 96.

<sup>68</sup> Barbara Arneil, *Politics and Feminism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 73.

<sup>69</sup> Brown and Atkinson were not expelled from NOW, but they were voted out of office and banished from participating in certain activities. For historians' views on the purges, see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in American, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 212-219; Gilmore and Kaminski, "A Part and Apart," 103; Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 38-41.

declared all women – regardless of sexual orientation – to be “sisters.”<sup>70</sup> The following year, spurred by the anger of lesbians and their heterosexual allies, NOW’s national board passed a resolution expressing support for lesbians’ rights.<sup>71</sup>

Whatever its impact on NOW’s national policies and practices, the 1971 resolution did little to settle the issue at the local level, particularly in the South. Throughout the South, NOW chapters struggled with issue of lesbian rights. Karen Kester, a NOW organizer from Mississippi, worried that national NOW’s support for lesbian rights would hurt the organization’s growth in her state. “We live in an un-urbanized state which is almost fanatically religious and very much to the right,” she wrote. “We are concerned with building our credibility at this point.” Fearing that NOW would lose members to “the more credible and acceptable League of Women Voters,” she urged NOW to abandon its support for lesbians. “We can’t afford to be very vocal about such emotion laden subjects as lesbianism,” she argued, “although many of us are lesbians.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> In 1970, in defense of Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* and Millet’s revelation that she was bisexual, Hernandez issued a statement that condemned “sexual McCarthyism.” She declared the need to “free all our sisters from the shackles of a society which insists on viewing us in terms of sex.” Quoted in Gilmore and Kaminski, “A Part and Apart,” 106.

<sup>71</sup> The 1971 resolution has been the subject of some debate among historians. Sara Evans contends that it ended debate regarding lesbian issues within NOW. Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 51. Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, by contrast, argue that in Memphis the resolution was “not an end but rather a beginning of debates about women’s sexuality . . . within NOW.” According to Gilmore and Kaminski, lesbian issues continued to be divisive in the Memphis NOW chapter. Gilmore and Kaminski, “A Part and Apart,” 97. My own findings accord more closely with those of Gilmore and Kaminski.

<sup>72</sup> Karen [M. Kester] to Martha [Gaines], May 14, 1976, folder: NOW Planning Committee Correspondence, box 15, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Manuscript, Archives, and

The NOW chapter in Dallas also struggled with lesbian issues. In March 1976, in a departure from her usual chatty monthly letter, the chapter's president, Meri Westergaard, took up the matter of sexuality with unwonted seriousness. Addressing members who felt "uneasiness with the issues of Sexuality and Lesbianism," Westergaard attempted to explain both her own feelings on the subject as well as the positions taken by national NOW. "Many people I have talked to," she wrote, "share your concern over the direction that NOW is taking in [sic] the Lesbian Rights issue." At its conferences earlier in the decade, NOW had voted to support lesbian women in their quest for full equality, although it maintained that sexual preference was a matter of individual choice and essentially a private matter. Westergaard "wholeheartedly" agreed; the "women's movement," she argued "is about choices – and I hope we can open many doors." Despite Westergaard's commendation of "women who are working to assure equality of rights for gays and straights," she remained concerned that issues of sexuality would hurt the women's movement. "My major concern over the issue of lesbianism," she wrote, "is that it acts as a 'red flag' which diverts the public's attention from the whole arena of women's issues." Westergaard argued that the tendency of mainstream media to devote attention to lesbians shifted attention away from NOW's activities on behalf of all women. Because homosexuality was "controversial," NOW's work with regard to marriage and divorce equity, equal pay, and Title IX would be "overlooked."<sup>73</sup>

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Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter, Emory). Kester was the Mississippi state NOW coordinator.

<sup>73</sup> *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), March 1976, p. 1, box 23, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

Such marginalization of lesbian rights was not confined to the Dallas chapter. Judith Lightfoot, the chair of NOW's national board and a leader in its Atlanta chapter, similarly failed to understand why NOW should put lesbian rights at the forefront of its priorities. Arguing that NOW was "not afraid of lesbians or lesbianism," she pointed to the organization's support of a local lesbian discrimination case as evidence of its gay rights credentials. In addition, Lightfoot argued that the issues facing lesbian women were scarcely different from those affecting straight women, particularly employment discrimination, harassment in public spaces, and difficulty in obtaining credit. She also believed that local NOW chapters should be able to decide for themselves which issues motivated them. Lesbianism, she argued, was "an issue in some places, not in others. No one should force their [sic] perspective on anyone else. NOW is for choice, isn't it?"<sup>74</sup>

This kind of evasion infuriated lesbians. Vicki Gabriner, an outspoken leader of ALFA, pushed Lightfoot to acknowledge Atlanta NOW's failure to address gay rights. Lightfoot, fearing what she considered a "waste of our energies," responded by urging ALFA to "let it rest for now, for NOW."<sup>75</sup> Lightfoot failed to understand why lesbian feminists could not divorce

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<sup>74</sup> Judith Lightfoot to Vicki Gabriner May 8, 1974, folder 4, box 2, Judith Lightfoot papers, Schlesinger. Although the issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, national NOW and its local chapters engaged in a series of debates over the organization's priorities and leadership throughout the 1970s. NOW has often been considered a national organization, but its federated character meant that local chapters had considerable independence and control. See Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>75</sup> Judith Lightfoot to Vicki Gabriner, May 8, 1974, folder 4, box 2, Judith Lightfoot papers, Schlesinger.



the rights of sexual minorities from women's rights, and she paid little attention to the specific and distinct forms of discrimination that lesbian women faced both in the workplace and in public spaces. In response, Gabriner acknowledged that "compromises are made constantly." But, she warned, "some compromises are more than compromises, they are total surrender." She reminded Lightfoot that lesbian feminists had been at the forefront of the women's movement and the battle for the ERA, but had been asked repeatedly to moderate calls for lesbian rights. Such requests, she argued, "are *not* tactical demands, although they may seem to be." Those who asked lesbian feminists not to press for lesbian rights "are really asking that we not exist at all – in the movement, in the society, in their fantasies – nowhere!" Gabriner conceded that straight women might come to the defense of lesbian women in the future, in exchange for a tabling of the issue in the present, but she feared that this future promise would never be fulfilled. "These women will never come to our support," she despaired, "because it will always be too risky and we will always be too 'sick' and too threatening."<sup>76</sup>

The marginalization of lesbians and lesbianism not only undermined NOW's stated commitment to all women, it also threatened the vitality of its membership. Many of the organization's chapters relied heavily on the energy of lesbians. The New Orleans chapter of NOW, for example, was organized largely by lesbian feminists. Led by Suzanne Pharr, a white woman originally from rural Georgia, several women participating in a consciousness-raising group began their feminist work by "discussing life-altering experiences: entering puberty,

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<sup>76</sup> Vicki Gabriner to Jackie Frost, April 7, 1974, folder 1.5: Vicki Gabriner, box 1, ALFA records, Duke. Emphasis in the original.

competing against boys, understanding gender roles” before forming a NOW chapter. “There wasn’t any difference between lesbian feminism and feminism,” Pharr remembered. “We were it!”<sup>77</sup> The same may have been true in Atlanta. Joyce Durand, a member of NOW’s Atlanta chapter, recalled that “NOW was one of the women’s groups that had more lesbian involvement than some of the others.” Even in the presence of organizations such as ALFA that were more explicitly committed to lesbian rights, NOW remained attractive to lesbians in the city and the chapter eventually incorporated gay rights in its platform. Nevertheless, its members continued to disagree about how much attention should be paid to lesbian issues. “I don’t think NOW ever completely abandoned the lesbians among us,” Durand recalled, “but it was always a tension there. I would like to think that we were working for the rights of *all* women, and that most of our goals were the same, if not all our goals, whether we were straight or gay.”<sup>78</sup> Such appeals to universal sisterhood reflected both the importance that many lesbian feminists placed on women’s organizing and a desire to smooth over conflicts in their coalitions with other feminists.

Despite the prominent role lesbians played in NOW, many of them did not consider the organization fully committed to their particular problems and concerns. Atlanta’s Vicki

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<sup>77</sup> Janet Allured, “The New Orleans Women’s Movement, the Lesbian ‘Vanguard,’ and the Fashioning of a Feminist Identity,” unpublished paper delivered at the Southern Historical Association annual meeting, October 11, 2008, New Orleans, La. (cited with permission of the author); Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 68-70 (Pharr quoted on p. 70).

<sup>78</sup> Transcript, Joyce Durand, in an interview conducted by Janet Paulk, January 27, 1997, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 26-27, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, Georgia Women’s Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU. Emphasis in the original.

Gabriner argued that NOW failed to voice support for lesbian rights. “It is not true that NOW is a lesbian organization,” she wrote, “and in fact it has a long way to go before it really begins to meet the needs of lesbians qua lesbians.”<sup>79</sup> Despite their centrality in the New Orleans chapter of NOW, many of the lesbian members felt ostracized within the larger organization by the policies of Friedan and the national office. In 1970, a number of them split from NOW to form the New Orleans Gay Liberation Front.<sup>80</sup> In other cities, lesbians formed semi-autonomous Sexuality and Lesbianism Task Forces within NOW chapters.<sup>81</sup>

Tension between straight and gay women was not unique to NOW. It arose in many feminist organizations, in part because the progressive population in certain areas was too small to accommodate both a straight feminist organization and a lesbian feminist one.<sup>82</sup> In some cities, lesbians organized and led women’s centers and feminist organizations without placing a focus on sexuality.<sup>83</sup> In other cases, feminist organizations that sought mainstream appeal struggled with the decision to incorporate lesbian rights into their platforms. Conflict over the

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<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, Gabriner believed that NOW had the potential to create an atmosphere supportive of lesbian rights. Vicki Gabriner to Jackie Frost, April 7, 1974, folder 1.5: Vicki Gabriner, box 1, ALFA records, Duke.

<sup>80</sup> Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 70.

<sup>81</sup> Historian James Sears has argued that “for lesbian-feminists there was seldom ‘a room of one’s own.’ Many southern towns lacked a critical mass of lesbian-feminists to form separate groups. Let alone organized living collectives.” Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 136.

<sup>82</sup> Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 136.

<sup>83</sup> As examples, Sears cites “Beth Marschak in Richmond, lesbians such as Merrill Mushroom in Knoxville, Elizabeth Knowlton in Durham, Pokey Anderson in Houston, and Suzanne Pharr in New Orleans.” Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 136.

role of lesbians in the women's movement played a prominent role the 1977 International Women's Year conference in Houston. Much coverage of the conference in the feminist press debated whether lesbianism was a "woman's issue."<sup>84</sup> In Atlanta, the Feminist Action Alliance, a largely middle-class and white organization, took the official position that "homosexuality is not a women's rights question." The alliance affirmed its dedication to "improving the position of women in society" and opposing "all forms of discrimination," but did not consider lesbian rights a priority. Because the Feminist Action Alliance considered sexuality a matter of individual choice, it understood the problems of lesbians to be individual, rather than the result of systemic discrimination. The alliance urged "any person or group to attempt to correct perceived injustices through public education and legislative channels."<sup>85</sup>

The YWCA was central to the women's rights movement in many Southern cities, but it rarely confronted the controversies surrounding sexuality. In Richmond, Virginia, the YWCA was forced to wrestle with lesbianism after it decided to allow the Organization for Women's Liberation (OWL), a younger, more progressive group to use its meeting space. Beth Marschak, a member of OWL, remembered that "unlike national feminist groups with [a] more reform orientation focusing mainly on equality, we had a radical perspective. We looked at women and men's roles historically with a more analytical and systemic analysis. Issues around

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<sup>84</sup> Pokey Anderson, "IWY Declares Lesbianism 'Not a Woman's Issue,'" *Pointblank Times* (Houston) 3, no. 2 (March 1977): 6; Pokey Anderson, "IWY Revisited: Lesbian Rights ARE a Women's Issue!" *Pointblank Times* (Houston) 3, no. 4 (August 1977):14-15, folder: Pointblank Times (Houston), box 2 (Acc.91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

<sup>85</sup> "Introduction [to the Feminist Action Alliance]," n.d. [1980], p. 5, folder: Miscellaneous, box 1, Feminist Action Alliance records, Emory.

lesbians just obviously would come up with women interested in matriarchal societies and the whole Amazon idea.” OWL published a newsletter, hosted consciousness-raising groups, and operated an information and referral telephone service. When YWCA board members read an issue of the newsletter featuring a lesbian love poem and a suggestive pencil drawing of a woman, Marschak recalled, “they totally flipped out!” The board deemed the issue in question to be “pornographic” and “vulgar” and threatened to evict OWL from YWCA premises. Most of OWL’s members were heterosexual but supported lesbian rights. They refused to moderate their position, and OWL eventually disbanded.<sup>86</sup>

Tension over lesbian rights also took center stage at the Austin Women’s Center, a coalition of organizations that included NOW, the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL), and the Austin Women’s Political Caucus. In April 1975, the Austin Lesbian Organization (ALO) voted to disaffiliate from the Women’s Center and its coalition members because it believed that the other organizations had not evinced sufficient support for lesbian rights. Although the conflict came to a head over a specific issue, it suggested deeper anxieties. In March, the ALO had sponsored a dance that drew condemnation from local business and political leaders. A number of the center’s member organizations had refused to publicize the dance, arguing that the publicity it garnered might harm not only the political candidates endorsed by the Austin Women’s Political Caucus but also the center’s chances of obtaining federal funding for the restoration of their building. A few days after the dance, the Women’s

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 135-136.

Center was threatened with eviction by its landlord. Although they suspected that the lesbian dance was the “immediate cause” of the notice to evict, most members of the Women’s Center refused to disaffiliate from ALO.<sup>87</sup> Despite this support, ALO members felt that the center’s refusal to publicize the group’s activities indicated a lack of principled support for lesbian rights.<sup>88</sup> The ALO thereupon moved its meetings to the YWCA branch on the University of Texas campus, where it hosted social activities, fielded a soccer team, created a political action committee, and sponsored a theater group.<sup>89</sup>

Bridging the divide between lesbian and straight women required conscious efforts to build alliances, open dialogue, and share battles. One lesbian in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, area (who admitted to being “so fearful of ridicule or worse” that she declined to identify herself) urged straight and gay women to communicate directly. “Straight women,” she argued, “need to talk more not *about* lesbians, but *to* them, acknowledging their position as positive to the Women’s Movement.” She recognized that “answering the accusation that Women’s Liberation is all dykes with ‘Yes, some of us are lesbians’ may take guts but is more helpful than a response of ‘no, no, not us!’” She also urged feminists to “talk about being a

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<sup>87</sup> The Women’s Center was given no official reason for the eviction notice, but the timing of the notice suggested a connection to the ALO dance.

<sup>88</sup> *Austin NOW* (Austin, Tex.), May 1975, p. 4, box 23, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

<sup>89</sup> ALO also had a contentious relationship with the local NOW chapter. In 1975, in an attempt to restore good relations with Austin NOW, it created a Communications Committee to exchange information and newsletters. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

lesbian in a positive although realistic way to your daughters.”<sup>90</sup> In Austin, after the disagreements between lesbian feminists and other members of the Women’s Center led to splintered organizations, a number of women decided to form a new group to reestablish contact between lesbian and straight women. Women for Women, as the group was known, hoped to repair relationships and bridge differences by holding formal meetings and opening lines of communication. Consciousness-raising techniques were rejected because Women to Women was open to all interested women and did not offer, as one NOW member put it, a “fixed, closed membership” that would “permit the sense of intimacy that can lead to completely open sharing of feelings.” Rather, Women to Women was intended to provide a forum for resolving problems and for promoting better understanding and communication among women by hosting joint meetings and exchanging newsletters.<sup>91</sup>

For the most part, straight and lesbian feminists in the South worked together to expand women’s rights and participated in campaigns for legal equity as a feminist whole. Some restrictions, however, affected lesbian women in ways that differed from their straight sisters. The struggle to retain custodial rights over children was particularly onerous for lesbian women, who encountered both public hostility and discrimination in the courts. Building alliances between straight and gay feminists was critical when the custodial rights of lesbian women were threatened, and feminist organizations frequently came to their aid. Lesbian mothers were

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<sup>90</sup> “The Politics of Lesbianism – Chapel Hill,” *Feminist Newsletter* (Chapel Hill, N.C.) 5, no. 6 (March 24, 1974): 7. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>91</sup> *Austin NOW* (Austin, Tex.), May 1975, p. 1, box 23, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

forced to prove not simply that they were adequate parents, but that they were the same as heterosexual mothers. Building on the work of anthropologists and sociologists, they sought to demonstrate that their sexual preference in no way influenced or determined how they raised their children.<sup>92</sup> Many of these women faced custody battles after divorcing their husbands and beginning new lives as lesbians. North Carolina writer Minnie Bruce Pratt, for example, fell in love with a woman after she had been married for nearly ten years. She waged a protracted and nasty custody fight with her husband over her two sons, but ultimately lost.<sup>93</sup> “How can I give up on M [Marvin, her husband] and hang on with [my] boys,” she asked in her diary, “why do this political work and give up the marriage? For *women*.”<sup>94</sup> Pratt could not accept abandoning either her lover or her feminist politics in order to retain custody.

Like most lesbian custodial disputes, that of Minnie Bruce Pratt gained little attention outside her immediate family and circle of friends. Mary Jo Risher’s custody battle by contrast, drew national attention.<sup>95</sup> In 1975, the Risher case became one of the first in the nation to rule

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<sup>92</sup> Ellen Lewin, *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1-4, 12-17. In 1973, the women in a lesbian couple produced a documentary, “Sandy and Madeleine’s Family,” that included testimony from famed anthropologist Margaret Mead to support their custody cases against their former husbands. See Lewin, *Lesbian Mothers*, 3-4.

<sup>93</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt interview, Smith, p. 11. Pratt self-identified as a “femme” and was attracted to “butch women.” The meanings of these gender roles have not yet been fully explored in the Southern context. See Pratt, *S/He*, 13-15, 19.

<sup>94</sup> Diary entry, September 19, 1975, box 2, Minnie Bruce Pratt papers, Duke. Emphasis in the original. “Admitted Lesbian Loses Custody of Son,” *Fayetteville Times*, Wednesday, December 24, 1975 (attached to page December 22, 1975, box 2).

<sup>95</sup> Guy Gifford Gibson, *By Her Own Admission: A Lesbian Mother Fights for Her Son* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 249-250. After covering the trial for *Iconoclast*, an alternative Dallas



on the parental custody rights of homosexual parents. Argued in front of a jury in the Dallas Domestic Relations Court, the case hinged not only on the testimony not only of the child in question, but also on the arguments made by psychologists, pastors, and social workers who put lesbian motherhood, rather than the lesbian's son, at the center of the dispute.<sup>96</sup>

Mary Jo Risher, a nurse in Dallas, Texas, who taught Sunday school at her Baptist church and was a past president of the Dallas County Parent Teacher Association, was the mother of two sons, ages nine and seventeen at the time of the trial. In 1972, after more than a decade of marriage, she divorced her husband and was awarded custody of her children. Two years after the divorce, Risher moved in with Ann Foreman, her girlfriend. This change in living circumstances prompted her ex-husband to sue for custody of his younger son, Richard, on the grounds that Risher's sexual preference made her an unfit mother.<sup>97</sup> Much more than custodial

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newspaper, Gibson published a book that included a biography of Risher, a series of interviews with attorneys and others involved in the case, and a narrative of the trial. The case was made famous, in part, after a television movie depicting the trial aired on ABC in 1978. The movie, *A Question of Love*, starred Oscar-nominees Gena Rowlands and Jane Alexander, and the screenplay was written by William Blinn, who also penned *Brian's Song* and episodes of *Roots*. See John O'Connor, "The Preoccupation with Sex," *New York Times*, November 26, 1978, p. D35.

<sup>96</sup> Risher's ex-husband had requested that the custody dispute be resolved by a jury, rather than by a judge. Mary Jo Risher had not preferred a jury trial, partly because she believed it would draw greater public attention. At the trial, the expert testimony on behalf of Mary Jo Risher included two psychologists, Dr. Robert Dain, assistant dean at the University of Texas Health and Science Center, and Dr. Dolores Dyer, who was in private practice in Dallas. Risher's attorneys had contacted Dyer on the recommendation of local feminist activists. Doug Risher's attorney put on the stand Dr. Roy Austin, a counselor for two Baptist Churches, and Philip B. Smith, pastor of Lakeland Baptist Church. Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 113-114.

<sup>97</sup> Only the custody of nine-year-old Richard Risher was at issue. By the mutual consent of his parents, seventeen-year-old Jimmy lived with his father. Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 138.

worthiness was at issue. As the Dallas chapter of NOW put it, “Mary Jo’s sexual preference will be on trial.”<sup>98</sup> Risher herself described the custody dispute in simple terms: “It was a matter of a little boy who wanted to stay with his mother, and a mother that knew she was a good mother and wanted to keep him.”<sup>99</sup>

Even before the trial, Risher had feared publicly exposing her relationship with Ann Foreman. When she underwent minor surgery in January 1975, she was more concerned about discovery of her relationship than any possible medical complications. “As a nurse,” Risher later explained, “I had seen hundreds of patients enter surgery, with their wives or husbands at their side, holding hands, hugging. Ann was there of course, but she had to act like some disinterested friend. We didn’t dare show any affection. She couldn’t reassure me the way I needed for fear someone I worked with would pick up on it.”<sup>100</sup> Risher described her relationship with Foreman as “very conservative in the beginning.” None of her coworkers were aware of it, and only a few friends were let in on the secret. “Ann and I,” Risher confessed, “are not people who could come out of the closet and say ‘look, here we are; we are lesbians and we are going to fight for this cause.’”<sup>101</sup> The custody trial ended any illusions

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<sup>98</sup> *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), November 1975, p. 3, box 23, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

<sup>99</sup> “Mary Jo Risher and Ann Foreman Talk about Their Book, Their Lives, and Their Legal Battles” *Equal Times* (Dallas), August 1977, pp. 11-12, folder: Equal Times, box 2, Elizabeth C. Alden papers, Duke.

<sup>100</sup> Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 105.

<sup>101</sup> “Mary Jo Risher and Ann Foreman Talk,” 11-12.

she might have had about guarding her privacy.<sup>102</sup>

The week before Christmas, 1975, after a tense and intrusive trial, Risher lost custody when the jury of ten men and two women found that a “material and substantial change” had occurred in her home.<sup>103</sup> That change was Risher’s relationship with Ann Foreman. Among the complaints lodged against Risher were accusations that she had hosted wild parties and that she and Foreman had engaged in sexual acts in front of their children.<sup>104</sup> The custody petition of Risher’s ex-husband’s charged that his son was living in an “immoral and undesirable environment.”<sup>105</sup> Expert testimony by psychologists and social workers differed as to whether Risher’s home was damaging to her child’s mental health.<sup>106</sup> The attorney representing Risher’s former husband urged the jury not to make his son “the guinea pig of somebody’s social experiment.”<sup>107</sup> The testimony of Risher’s older son was also damaging to her case. Jimmy, age seventeen, who was living alternatively with his father and his grandmother, testified that he was embarrassed by his mother’s sexuality and pleaded that his younger brother be removed

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<sup>102</sup> The trial also forced Foreman to come out to her co-workers. Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 116, 150-151.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>104</sup> Risher denied these allegations. Foreman had custody of her own daughter, Judie Ann, who lived with her in the home she shared with Risher.

<sup>105</sup> Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 84-86.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-166, 193-209. Until the revised publication of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association diagnosed homosexuality as “sexual orientation disturbance.” See Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), chap. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 232.

from her care.<sup>108</sup> Risher was surprised that the court weighed Jimmy's testimony so heavily. "Well, what teenager is not embarrassed by his parents?" she asked. "I was embarrassed by my parents, too."<sup>109</sup> Because Jimmy had never evinced such sentiments prior to the trial, Risher suspected that her ex-husband had promised to give him a car in exchange for his testimony.<sup>110</sup> After six days of testimony, the jury returned a verdict that awarded custody to Risher's former husband.<sup>111</sup> In addition to losing custody, Risher was required to pay \$95 per month to her ex-husband as child support.<sup>112</sup> The jury's decision, she believed, was based on her sexual orientation, not on her fitness as a mother.<sup>113</sup>

Sociologist Sandra Pollack has argued that the Risher case demonstrated that the legal system was homophobic and that neither judges nor juries were capable of detaching women's sexuality from arguments about custodial capability.<sup>114</sup> More problematically, however, Pollack

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<sup>108</sup> *Pointblank Times* (Houston) 2, no.3 (March 1976):1, folder: Pointblank Times (Houston), box 2 (Acc.91/128), YWCA records, Duke. See also "Lesbian Fighting to Keep Her Son," *New York Times*, December 21, 1975, p. 35.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> "Lesbian, in Texas Trial, Loses Son to Ex-Husband," *New York Times*, December 24, 1975, p. 42.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*; Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 236.

<sup>112</sup> Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 255. Risher earned \$450 a month as a nurse, but was several thousand dollars in debt after the trial. She was awarded visitation with her children every other weekend, on alternate holidays, and a week during the summer.

<sup>113</sup> "Lesbian Fights to Get Son Back; Seeks Funds Here for an Appeal," *New York Times*, January 31, 1976, p. 45.

<sup>114</sup> Phyllis Chesler argues that heterosexual women, particularly those who are working-class or members of racial and ethnic minorities, face similar challenges. See Phyllis Chesler, *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).

also contends that Risher's defense suggested "the futility of seeking safety in the argument that we are 'all really the same' – that lesbian mothers and straight mothers are not so different after all."<sup>115</sup> At the time, however, few women felt that this assessment was futile. In fact, the lesbian and straight feminists who rallied to Risher's cause emphasized the common problems shared by all women. Risher received considerable sympathy in local and national media coverage and from local feminist organizations.<sup>116</sup> National NOW contributed funds to her battle to retain custody, as did the local chapter. "Labels," the Dallas NOW president was dismayed to find, "were more important than the fact that Mary Jo is a kind, decent, and loving person who loves her son."<sup>117</sup> Several members of the Dallas chapter of NOW joined the Friends of Mary Jo Risher to raise funds for her legal expenses, and many sat in the courtroom gallery each day. Galvanized by the case, they created a task force on sexuality and lesbian issues in their chapter.<sup>118</sup>

As the Risher case suggests, some feminists – gay and straight alike – believed that women faced similar forms of discrimination before the courts, but their views were short-sighted. Legal strategies were less-than-promising venues for advancing lesbian rights not only because all women were likely to face hostile juries but also because sexuality was not yet a

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<sup>115</sup> Sandra Pollack, "Lesbian Parents: Claiming Our Visibility," in *Woman-Defined Motherhood*, ed. Janice Price Knowles and Ellen Cole (New York: Haworth Press, 1990), 184.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-184.

<sup>117</sup> *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), March 1976, p. 1, box 23, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

<sup>118</sup> Gibson, *By Her Own Admission*, 144, 211-212.

protected class under federal or state law. Lesbians faced dual categories of discrimination, sexuality and sex, problems that few feminist coalitions in the South were ready to take on at all, much less view as central to their concerns.

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## **Conclusion**

Despite the best efforts of lesbian feminist organizations such as the Atlanta Feminist Lesbian Alliance and feminist organizations such as NOW, many lesbians in the South remained disconnected from one another and subject to ongoing discrimination. Gay women in rural communities and outside large urban centers, in particular, continued to feel isolated. Two sociologists studying rural gay life found that when they asked people to “talk about the differences between being gay in the mountains and in urban areas, all expressed feelings of isolation in the mountains. While growing up, they had no one to turn to for guidance, support, and information when they began realizing they were homosexual.”<sup>119</sup> In *Sting Like a Butterfly*, a short-lived lesbian journal, an anonymous Mississippi State University student asked, “Who is the lesbian in Mississippi?” She concluded, rather bleakly, that a lesbian in “rural America” was different from “her lesbian sisters in Metropolitan America” because she had “no gay community, no gay bars, no populace of straights who support her, no church who will minister to her, no civil-rights groups who will risk an alliance, . . . no alternative shelter that a gay woman could turn to for a livelihood and support if and when she lost her job or has

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<sup>119</sup> Kate Black and Marc A. Rhorer, “Out in the Mountains: Exploring Lesbian and Gay Lives,” in *Out in the South*, ed. Dews and Law, 17.

been exiled from home.”<sup>120</sup> Geographical location thus played an important role in the lives of gay Southerners.<sup>121</sup>

The strength of lesbian communities in the South depended not only on their own organizations, but also on the support they could draw from local feminist networks. Working with straight feminists offered both advantages and drawbacks, as lesbian organizing was both an integral part and an outgrowth of the women’s movement. Coalition-building across and within organizations greatly increased the number of women working toward lesbian women’s rights. Such cooperation had to be painstakingly and deliberately created. In its third annual conference, for example, the Montgomery, Alabama, chapter of NOW included a session titled “Interaction between Straight and Gay Feminists: Understanding Each Other and Getting Along.”<sup>122</sup> This session suggested that, at the grassroots, gay and straight women in the South were still negotiating their relationships long after the national organization had attempted to resolve the place of lesbians in NOW. At the same time, the Risher case demonstrated that straight feminists could serve as vocal supporters of lesbian rights.

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<sup>120</sup> L. Landrum, “Rapping Down the Dusty Lavender Road,” *Sting Like a Butterfly*, January 19, 1973, quoted in Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 342-343n. 23. In 1972, Anne de Bary and Donna Myhre founded the Mississippi Gay Alliance in Starkville, Mississippi. It gained some notoriety for its lawsuit against the University of Mississippi after the school’s student-run newspaper refused to print advertisements describing the group’s outreach and counseling efforts. De Bary argued that this refusal violated the group’s First Amendment rights, but the U.S. Circuit Court for the Fifth District disagreed and found in favor of the student paper. *Mississippi Gay Alliance v. Goudelock*, 536 F.2d 1073 (5th Cir. 1976).

<sup>121</sup> Howard, “Introduction,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 5.

<sup>122</sup> *From NOW On* (Montgomery, Ala.), September 19, 1975, box 1, NOW Newsletters, Schlesinger.

Working with straight feminists, however, did not necessarily create optimal conditions for lesbian women. Mobilizing in separate organizations like Louisville's Lesbian Feminist Union allowed for safe spaces in which to nurture communities and conceptualize lesbians' distinct needs. Although local NOW chapters paid lip service to lesbians' civil rights, it was organizations such as ALFA that succeeded in creating lesbian communities while maintaining an emphasis on opposing discrimination and harassment. More problematically, organizations that included both gay and straight women tended to universalize the experiences of women, thereby flattening the differences between women of different sexualities and de-emphasizing the distinct challenges that lesbian women faced.



## Conclusion

In the late 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminism transformed American society, creating new legal rights for women, remaking gender roles, and altering women's position in the economy. Although largely omitted from both popular and scholarly accounts, Southern women played critical roles in the second wave, not only in their local communities but also in the legal, cultural, and political activism of the national women's movement. At the grassroots, Southern women engaged in a wide array of feminist activism, from establishing credit unions to opening health clinics, from publishing newspapers to suing discriminatory employers, from creating labor unions to opening rape crisis centers, from challenging sterilization abuse to protesting discrimination against lesbians, and from setting up feminist businesses to organizing domestic workers. Their initiatives included attempts to place women in non-traditional work, campaigns for political office, the creation of a nationwide health initiative for black women, and court cases that established reproductive freedom and mandated equal pay.

In many ways, second-wave feminism in the South was similar to that occurring elsewhere in the nation. The movement drew from a wide range of sources, including longstanding women's organizations such as the YWCA and the League of Women Voters, the civil rights movement, and the Old and New Lefts. Participants embraced an array of issues ranging from reproductive rights to economic justice to sexual expression. After an early focus on legal and economic issues, the movement broadened both its tactics and its targets of reform. Scattered activism in the early 1960s was replaced by more concentrated efforts by the beginning of the 1970s. In the South, as elsewhere in the nation, feminist reforms in the

1960s and early 1970s tended to rely on legal maneuverings, while organizing in the mid- and late 1970s increasingly occurred at the grassroots. Southern cities witnessed a flourishing of consciousness-raising groups, feminist businesses, and women's health clinics, all of which were organized locally. Atlanta, Austin, and Durham-Chapel Hill, for example, were all home to women's liberation groups by 1969 and to women's health clinics and lesbian feminist organizations by the mid-1970s.

Nevertheless, the South remained in many ways unique, a result of differences in historical experiences, demography, economic resources, and the character and extent of political opposition. Among the challenges Southern feminists confronted were the region's relatively high proportion of rural residents, its weak welfare state, and its political conservatism. The obstacles to feminist organizing may have been greater in the South than elsewhere in the nation. Deep social and political conservatism had long shaped the region. What is worse, conservative opposition in the South, unlike in most of the rest of the nation, was well-organized even before the rise of the New Right in the early 1970s. While the origins of the New Right can be traced to multiple sources, in the South conservative politics were tied to longstanding traditions of resistance to federal power and to racial integration, most recently the massive resistance campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>1</sup> One-party politics in many states

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<sup>1</sup> Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Clive Webb, ed., *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

closed off avenues of electoral reform, while rural districts continued to dominate many state legislatures until reapportionment campaigns began to gain traction in the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

The conservative complexion of state and local governments may have convinced many Southern feminists that the federal courts offered a more promising road to change than local legislation. Women's rights activists in the South were particularly successful in using lawsuits to dismantle gender inequality. From employment discrimination (*Weeks v. Southern Bell*, 1965) to discrimination in jury service (*White v. Crook*, 1966) to welfare rights (*King v. Smith*, 1968) to abortion reform (*Doe v. Bolton*, 1973, and *Roe v. Wade*, 1973), Southern feminists effectively employed legal suits to undermine practices, statutes, and restrictions that had played important roles in confining women to subordinate positions and limited their freedom. In so doing, initiatives that began at the Southern grassroots had nationwide impact, transforming the legal, economic, reproductive, and social landscape for women throughout the country.

Just as the strength of conservatism in the South funneled women's activism into particular channels, so too did the region's history of white supremacy. Race relations in the South influenced the development of second-wave feminism in notable ways. On the one hand, mobilizing across lines of race was especially threatening to the social order in a region with a racial hierarchy that had been protected by state laws and local ordinances, social mores, and violence. Interracial organizing was thus a more radical feature of feminism in the South than

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<sup>2</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 308-309.

elsewhere. At the same time, because many Southern feminists had experience with civil rights organizing (or were, at least, witnesses to it), some of them understood the power of interracial collaboration and were deeply committed to it.

Although women across the nation had difficulty organizing across lines of race, a long history of legally enforced segregation left Southern women in especially difficult circumstances. In the South, women of color and white women almost always found themselves in different schools, different churches, different occupations, and different neighborhoods. Decades of mistrust, hatred, exploitation, and violence had erected daunting barriers. The legacy of white supremacy made cooperative organizing by black and white women even more challenging than in other parts of the nation, and gave special weight to questions of intertwined discriminations. In particular, the region's history of racial and gender hierarchies shaped the imperatives, limitations, and representations of Southern women's sexuality. The construction of white Southern womanhood rested on separation from black men; segregation and racial violence were designed to formally maintain that separation.<sup>3</sup> As Jacqueline Dowd Hall has argued, "the racism that caused white men to lynch black men cannot be understood apart from the sexism that informed their policing of white women and their exploitation of black women."<sup>4</sup> Gender

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<sup>3</sup> See Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford, 1992), chap. 6; James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174-176; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching*, rev. ed. (1979; repr., New York: Columbia University

identity, sexual expression, and sexual violence were all intricately tied to race.

Racial hierarchies also affected the structure of the Southern workforce. Southern employers had long deployed racialized tactics to divide Southern workers.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, the J. P. Stevens textile strike highlighted the difficulty of organizing across racial and gender lines when the labor market was highly segregated and the company intentionally tried to divide its workers from one another. Few whites wanted to join a union dominated by African Americans even before the company proclaimed that the union's intention was to give "white" jobs to blacks.<sup>6</sup> The racial realities of the South thus created several obstacles to interracial women's activism.<sup>7</sup>

The region's recent experience with the civil rights movement had imparted to many activists the lesson that organizing across lines of race was critical. Black and white women did

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Press, 1993), xx.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Jacqueline Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, LuAnn Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), especially chap. 2; Timothy J. Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Minchin, *Fighting against the Odds: A History of Southern Labor since World War II* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 132; James Hodge, "The Real Norma Rae," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. Robert H. Ziegler (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 258.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Ellen Smith, "The Social Relations of Southern Women," in *Neither Separate nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the South*, ed. Barbara Ellen Smith (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 13-33. In this essay, Smith, a sociologist, criticizes the lack of scholarly study of contemporary Southern women and urges further investigation into the complex relationships between white women and women of color in the South.

not face similar dangers in the civil rights movement, nor did they play the same roles, but they did work together in many parts of the South.<sup>8</sup> This experience led some women to emphasize interracial collaboration when they turned to mobilizing in the women's movement. White activist Anne Braden of Louisville, Kentucky, for example, insisted that any women's organization with which she associated must be integrated.<sup>9</sup> Long years of work in the civil rights movement had left her with an appreciation of the importance of interracial organizing. Eva Oliver, an African American woman in Florida, urged black and white women to build on the legacies of civil rights organizing by working together to address the shared need for improved health care.<sup>10</sup> Casey Hayden, a white native of Texas and a longtime civil rights activist, intentionally sought out both black and white women when she shifted her activism to women's rights.<sup>11</sup> Even if the civil rights movement had not fully removed barriers between black and white Southerners, it had broken down many divisions. The relationship between black and white women in the civil rights movement thus served as both example and inspiration

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<sup>8</sup> Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Anne Braden, "A Second Open Letter to Southern White Women," *Southern Exposure* 4, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1976): 50-53.

<sup>10</sup> Clipping, *The Examiner* (Tallahassee), December 1976, folder: *The Examiner*, Tallahassee Women's Health Center, box 2 (Acc. 92/072), YWCA records, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter Duke).

<sup>11</sup> Casey Hayden, "Fields of Blue," in *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*, by Constance Curry, Joan C. Browning, Dorothy Dawson Burlage, Penny Patch, Theresa Del Pozzo, Sue Thrasher, Elaine Delott Baker, Emmie Schrader Adams, and Casey Hayden (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 333-375.

to many Southern participants in the women's movement.

While many of the challenges facing Southern women – underfunded welfare programs, conservative politics, racial tension – prevailed across the region, the South was not monolithic. Differences in feminist organizing *within* the region suggest that while Southern women embraced a variety of reforms, they accorded certain issues higher priority in specific areas. While women's activism in the three areas that have received closest attention in this dissertation (Atlanta, Georgia; Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and Austin and Dallas, Texas) suggests commonalities across the South, it also points to subtle differences. Activists in each location sought to improve women's economic opportunities in a variety of work environments. Each of the three areas was home to efforts to secure economic justice outside traditional workplaces, from feminist businesses to feminist credit unions. After identifying inequalities in health care and reproductive rights, women in each area launched efforts to expand access, either through lawsuits or by the creation of local resources. All were home to chapters of national feminist organizations, such as NOW and the YWCA, as well as the site of numerous grassroots groups.

While feminists in each of the three areas devoted their attention to similar issues, they did not necessarily give them the same weight or rank them in the same order of priority. The especially restrictive abortion laws of Texas encouraged women's rights activists there to put reproductive rights at the center of their campaigns for gender equity. Economic activism was of greater concern to the working-class and middle-class women of Atlanta than it was to college students in Durham and Chapel Hill. The concentration of students in the latter

generated, however, a flourishing publishing culture. The Durham-Chapel Hill area saw the emergence of a number of feminist newsletters and journals, most notably *Feminary* and *She*, both of which circulated not only locally but throughout the South, as well as the feminist book-publishing collective, Lollipop Press. It was also home to prominent lesbian feminist writers Minnie Bruce Pratt and Mab Segrest and nourished the scholarship of feminist historian Sara Evans.

These differences imparted particular accents to Southern feminism, but many women in the region (as well as most outsiders) believed that the South had a distinct regional identity. Women in local organizations across the South developed regional networks that highlighted their common experiences. Three years after successfully organizing at the local level, members of the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance hosted the Great Southeast Lesbian Conference as a means of articulating regional goals, identifying shared problems, and establishing contacts with lesbians across the South. Womanwrites, a conference highlighting the literary work of Southern women, emerged from the discussions and exchange of newsletters between feminist groups in North Carolina and Georgia.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, a Southern identity was regularly claimed by grassroots activists who founded regional organizations like the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition and established regional newsletters like the *Southern Feminist Connection*. National groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) built on

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<sup>12</sup> Transcript, Elizabeth Knowlton, in an interview conducted by Charlene Ball and Diane Fowlkes, February 16, 1998, Atlanta, Ga., pp. 25-28, Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University (hereafter, GSU); Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion: Essays, 1980-1991* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1991), 132-133.



and reinforced regional distinctiveness by subdividing their memberships geographically and by hosting regional conferences.

At both local and regional levels, coalitions were central to women's organizing throughout the South. In Atlanta, Austin, and Durham-Chapel Hill, as in other areas of the South, second-wave feminism was characterized by diverse groups of women mobilizing in coalition. Coalitions addressed many of the obstacles facing Southern feminists, creating conditions that made interracial organizing possible and establishing wide support for reform initiatives. Coalitions allowed women to work together on specific issues while acknowledging (and sometimes sidelining) the difficult and persistent divisions of race and class.

The viability and strength of feminist coalitions depended on a number of circumstances, including not only the issues at hand, but also the tactics adopted and personal relationships among the activists involved. Generally, however, economic issues proved to be the most difficult to translate across lines of race and class. Deep divisions in wealth and resources meant that Southern women did not share economic interests or problems; as a result, they failed to develop a conceptualization of economic justice that appealed to a wide variety of activists. Other issues, particularly women's health and reproductive rights, led to the development of more fruitful coalitions. As Maria Bevacqua has demonstrated, rape served as a "bridge issue" that drew together women of different races and classes, in part because they shared (if not equally or the in same way) physical vulnerabilities and legal hurdles.<sup>13</sup> The broad

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<sup>13</sup> Maria Bevacqua, "Reconsidering Violence against Women: Coalition Politics in the Antirape Movement," in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore and Sara Evans (Urbana: University of

range of organizations that created the Multi-Area Rape Crisis Center in Atlanta suggests that rape could serve as the basis for successful coalition organizing in the South despite the racial differences that were so deeply embedded in the history and experience of the crime. Some coalitions thrived even when the goal was one to which constituent members attached divergent meanings. ERA coalitions, for example, drew together women of different races, classes, and political leanings. Even as they worked toward a common end, they did so for different reasons and attached different expectations to the amendment.

Organization through coalition produced a number of accomplishments both in the South and in the nation as a whole. Critical legal victories depended on the support of wide arrays of activists, drawing on both the inspiration of local feminists and the resources of national organizations. At the local level, Southern women operated health clinics and rape crisis centers, organized daycare cooperatives, and established feminist businesses. The increased number of women elected to local, state, and national office was due, in part, to the efforts of diverse groups of activists in Women's Political Caucuses. Moreover, many of the South's grassroots initiatives had national consequences. Women throughout the nation benefited as a result of legal cases launched by Southern women. The establishment of a local health care clinic in Gainesville, Florida, led to the development of the national (and, in time, international) Black Women's Health Project. Ironically, activists in the most conservative region of the nation became in some respects the vanguard of second-wave feminism.

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Illinois Press, 2008), 163-177 (quotation on 166).

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As this dissertation has shown, Southern women from many backgrounds were critical participants in second-wave feminism. Why, then, have they been largely omitted from the historiography of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s? The answer lies in several parts.

Northern feminists, unlike their Southern sisters, published widely. While Southern women generated numerous underground newspapers and literary journals, they did not generally produce the publications that have become part of the canon of second-wave feminism. Collections of second-wave literature, such as *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, include few contributions by Southern women.<sup>14</sup> This disparity in print may in part be a result of the concentration of publishing houses and national media in the Northeast. Certainly, the activism of Northern women garnered far more attention in the national media than did that of their Southern counterparts. The women active in Northern networks later perpetuated this imbalance by publishing numerous memoirs, feminist tracts, popular histories, and scholarly monographs.

Ideas about Southern women and about the South itself have also shaped perceptions of feminism in the region. Viewing the South as fundamentally conservative, scholars and the public at large may have expected Southern women to be less interested in gendered reform. The rise of New Right conservatism and the growing strength of the Republican party in the

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds. *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Of the Southern documents, only "Toward a Female Liberation Movement" (also known as "The Florida Paper") by Beverly Jones and Judith Brown has been widely reprinted. See Miriam Schneir, *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 108-111.

1970s have dominated scholarly literature about the region. Studies of the conservative movement and the backlash against liberal reform have, for the most part, concentrated on the role that race and taxes, rather than gendered reform, played in accelerating these developments.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the strength of the New Right in the South has obscured progressive activism that took place concurrently, including second-wave feminism.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, stereotypes about Southern women – black and white – abound. Southern women have only rarely been portrayed as activists. Within the South, however, many feminists were well aware of the wide range of experiences of both their ancestors and their contemporaries. The Resource Center for Women and Ministry in Durham, North Carolina, for example, recognized that Southern women had assumed many roles over the years, including “southern lady, slave woman, abolitionist, educator, evangelist, farm wife, migrant

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<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Spruill’s recent work on International Women’s Year (IWY) activities in Mississippi constitutes a notable exception. Spruill attributes the growth of conservative Republican power in Mississippi to protests surrounding the IWY state meetings. Marjorie Spruill, “Gender and America’s Right Turn,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 71-89. For accounts of the ascendancy of conservatism in the region that neglect feminism, see Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Recognizing the existence and extent of women’s activism in the South not only challenges misconceptions about Southern women, but also raises new questions about the South itself. That the women’s movement in the South shared so many features with the movement elsewhere in the nation may suggest a general breaking down of regional distinctiveness. The existence of a vibrant feminist movement in the South thus requires reexamination of the region’s history even as it calls into question long-held axioms about second-wave feminism.

worker, union organizer, domestic worker, [and] welfare mother.”<sup>17</sup> As this dissertation has demonstrated, Southern women’s experiences and identities were more diverse than scholars have generally assumed.

The reluctance of many Southern women to embrace the identity of “feminist” has further obscured their activism. Martha Gaines, a white activist from Atlanta, was often frustrated that so many of her Southern sisters were reluctant to embrace the appellation. Her address to an Atlanta YWCA chapter in the mid-1970s took women to task for avoiding the label. Entitled “I’m for Equal Pay for Equal Work but I’m against Women’s Liberation,” Gaines’s speech pointed out the contradiction between women’s actions and their fears. “Why are so many people afraid of the term?” she asked. “I think what it means is ‘I’m for getting rid of discrimination but I don’t want anybody to call me a radical.’” Challenging gender discrimination *was* radical, she argued, and mainstream organizations such as the YWCA had been home to Southern activists for generations.<sup>18</sup>

Reluctance to adopt the name “feminist” no doubt stemmed in part from negative media portrayals of the women’s movement. In 1970, Sylvia Roberts, a prominent NOW member from Louisiana, contended that “the struggle to overcome the ‘burned bra’ stigma is far from over. Practically every interview I have ever had assumes all persons interested in women’s

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<sup>17</sup> *South of the Garden* 1, no. 1 (October 1978), box 8, Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South records, Duke

<sup>18</sup> Martha Gaines, “I’m for Equal Pay for Equal Work but I’m against Women’s Liberation,” no place [YWCA?], n.d., folder: speaking engagements and speech material, box 4, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter Emory).

rights burn underwear, and that it is somehow part of the liberation process to take off one's clothes."<sup>19</sup> For some Southern activists, rejecting the term "feminist" was a strategic decision. By avoiding potentially inflammatory imagery, they hoped to advance women's rights without having to defend their ideology. Others found the women's movement as defined by the mainstream press to be alienating. Leslie Lilly, a leader of the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC), believed that feminism was widely misrepresented and misunderstood. "If you would ask ten different people the definition of a feminist," she remarked, "six would say she is a 'bra-burner', two would say she is white and almost always middle class, one would say she has hairy legs and hates men, and the last would say she is not one BUT. . . ." Finding the effort to overcome these images too distracting, some activists simply rejected the label altogether. For women of color, the rubric "women's liberation" conveyed both racial and class limitations. "I believe in women's liberation," Louisiana activist Quincy Hamilton argued, but "most black women are reluctant to join any movement that lends aid to women's liberation." The real problem, she insisted, was that "the depth, the intensity, the suffering and depravity of the real oppression blacks have experienced cannot be minimized in accordance with women who have in the past suffered little more than boredom, general repression, and dish-pan hands."<sup>20</sup> The language and imagery associated with the women's movement thus

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<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Roberts, "Report of Activities in the Southern Region of NOW," September 1970, p. 6, folder 17, box 169, NOW records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (hereafter Schlesinger).

<sup>20</sup> *NOWletter* (Baton Rouge Chapter of NOW) 2, no. 6 (June 1973): 2-3, box 9, NOW Chapter Newsletters, Schlesinger.

proved unappealing to many Southern women.

The failure of most Southern states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) further strengthened beliefs that feminist activism was weak in the region. When fighting for the ERA, Southern women battled not only stereotypes about themselves but also the assertions of male political leaders that the amendment was unnecessary in a region where women were celebrated and protected. As North Carolina feminist Martha McKay remarked, “[T]he talk about pedestals and protection didn’t sound much like reality to many of us.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, many longtime Southern activists resented any suggestion by Northern feminists that they were incapable of winning the ratification campaign alone. When national NOW initiated a plan in which each Southern state was “adopted” as a junior partner by a ratified state, Southern feminists bristled. “‘Yankee identification’,” Atlanta resident Judith Lightfoot believed, “would ruin any chances in a lot of Southern states.” Lightfoot felt affronted that NOW chapters in the Northeast were interfering in the Southern campaigns in the first place. “What the hell do they know about ratification anyway?” she wondered. “Most of those NE states didn’t have to battle for ERA and therefore have no experience with it.”<sup>22</sup>

As the struggle for the ERA suggests, the relationship between Southern and Northern

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<sup>21</sup> Martha McKay, “ERA: Equality under the Law Shall Not Be Abridged,” speech delivered to classroom teachers of North Carolina, no place, Spring 1973, p. 4, folder: correspondence 1971 (October-December), box 1, Martha C. McKay papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C. (hereafter UNC Manuscripts).

<sup>22</sup> Judy Lightfoot (Atlanta) to Jackie Frost (Charlotte), November 13, 1974, folder 21, box 6, Judith Lightfoot papers, Schlesinger.

feminists was complicated. Although Southern women are largely absent from standard accounts of the second wave, they were not ignored by their contemporaries. Prominent national women's organizations established vibrant chapters throughout the South. Feminists were well aware of what their counterparts in other states and other regions were doing and thinking. Underground newspapers in Austin and Atlanta, for instance, ran weekly updates of activities in other areas of the country as well as across the South. NOW organized annual conferences of its chapters in the Southeast Region and sent Southern representations to national meetings.<sup>23</sup> Women across the nation learned from each other and negotiated within umbrella networks.

Nevertheless, Southern and Northern women sometimes found it difficult to work together. Karen Kester, a leader in a NOW chapter in Mississippi, chafed under the national organization's mandate to adopt universal strategies and goals. The policies of national NOW, she believed, would isolate women in the rural South. "What works well in Washington, D.C., will not work here," she explained. "It is not simply a matter of being behind so that the old strategies can be employed but that we are different and must develop unique strategies. We

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<sup>23</sup> In terms of geographical representation, NOW was a particularly balanced organization. In 1974, Southerners comprised slightly more than a quarter of the national Board and Executive Committee and a quarter of the organization's total membership. Eleven members of the Board came from states NOW designated as the Southern Regional Conference, while the Eastern Conference provided ten, the Midwestern nine, and the Western eight. Three Southern board members lived in Texas, two in the District of Columbia, and one each in Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Broken down by region, 32 percent of NOW's membership came from the East, 25 percent from the Midwest, 24 percent from the South, and 19 percent from the West. See ballot for location of Board meeting, 1974, folder 10, box 2, Judith Lightfoot papers, Schlesinger.



are trying to build alliances with other organizations, such as some of the church groups, which believe it or not, have some power, and the NAACP which is quite active (as there is a lot to do with our racism yet!) but are also very sexist.”<sup>24</sup> Atlanta NOW member Judith Lightfoot believed that chapters elsewhere could learn from the Southern example. Commending Southern women’s “inspiring leadership” and “cautious but solid character,” Lightfoot argued that “unlike the knee-jerk liberals of the North who jump into every cause for the underdog, Southerners tend to look before they leap.” Southern women committed to their activism “solidly and permanently.” The women’s movement, she concluded, was stronger in the South “because it is more solid.”<sup>25</sup>

In some cases, Southern feminists felt that their Northern counterparts paid too little attention to their efforts. In establishing a regional feminist newsletter, the editors of *Southern Feminist Connection* hoped to publicize the women’s movement south of the Mason-Dixon line. “We realized that information about Southern feminists’ activities has been extremely difficult to obtain,” they explained in an introductory editorial. “National publications do not adequately cover the work of Southern women. We are not fragile magnolia blossoms, but intelligent, active, and proud women.”<sup>26</sup> When Sylvia Roberts visited the New York NOW

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<sup>24</sup> Karen [M. Kester] (Mississippi State NOW Coordinator), Gulfport, Miss., to Martha [Gaines], Atlanta, Ga., May 14, 1976, folder: NOW Planning Committee Correspondence, box 15, Martha Wren Gaines papers, Emory.

<sup>25</sup> Clipping, “NOW Chairman Calls on Textile Women,” *Aiken Standard* (Aiken, S.C.), September 27, 1974, folder 2, box 1, Judith Lightfoot papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>26</sup> Editorial, *Southern Feminist Connection* (Winston-Salem, N.C.) 1, no. 1 (May 1975): 2, folder: Southern Feminist Connection, box 2 (Acc. 91/128), YWCA records, Duke.

chapter to discuss her victory in *Weeks v. Southern Bell*, the meeting turned to “attitudes in the South about the subject of women’s rights.” Roberts found that “many New York NOW members expressed amazement” as she recounted the strategies and depth of the movement in the South.<sup>27</sup>

Southern women resented suggestions that the feminist movement was retarded in their region. When New York feminist Gloria Steinem visited Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to deliver a speech, the reaction of local feminists was mixed. “I enjoyed and profited from your good lecture last night in Memorial Hall here in Chapel Hill,” a Mrs. C. E. Schweitzer wrote to Steinem, “and it is a shame to carp on a performance which was essentially so fine. However, I think that you too might appreciate knowing that some of your remarks on the progress of the South have a condescending premise: that is, the South is backward; my haven’t you ladies been doing well! Women are familiar with such congratulatory remarks from men speakers at women’s groups, and it is just this sort of relationship we are struggling against.” “The South is really to the North as women are to men,” Schweitzer concluded.<sup>28</sup>

The omission of Southern women from narratives of second-wave feminism resulted from more, however, than intra-movement squabbles. Most significantly, the historiography of the second wave developed in a way that emphasized origins rather than coalitions, and coalitions were central to Southern feminism. A focus on origin stories influenced the narrative

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<sup>27</sup> Roberts, “Report of Activities in the Southern Region of NOW,” 3.

<sup>28</sup> Mrs. C. E. Schweitzer, Chapel Hill, N.C., to Gloria Steinem, New York, N.Y. (cc’ed to Martha McKay), February 8, 1974, folder: correspondence 1974, box 2, Martha C. McKay papers, UNC Manuscripts.

in a roundabout way. Because few studies have examined the New Left in the South, for example, the critiques articulated by women within those circles and their subsequent creation of separate organizations has gone unexplored.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the lack of scholarship on labor feminism or longstanding women's organizations in the South has led to an assumption that these were important training grounds only in the North.<sup>30</sup> In the absence of a deep literature on women's activism in the postwar South or on the New Left in the region, it is easier to understand why the second wave has received scant attention.

The historiography of the civil rights movement, the one contributing strain to second-wave feminism that has been closely examined, has likewise had a strange effect on the development of scholarship on Southern feminism. The influence of Sara Evans's work and the experiences of activists such as Wini Breines have bequeathed a peculiar slant to understandings of the legacy of civil rights activism for second-wave feminism.<sup>31</sup> Despite the impression given by these works, most Southern women involved in the civil rights struggle did

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<sup>29</sup> The only significant work on the New Left in the South is Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> There is no scholarship on, for example, the history of organizations such as the League of Women Voters, the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the National Council of Negro Women, or the YWCA in the South. Similarly, Southern women's labor feminism has not been studied in the ways that Dorothy Sue Cobble examined Northern women in labor unions. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Wini Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

not leave the South to form women's rights organizations. They did so right in their own region, building on existing networks and resources. For example, Sue Thrasher, a white Southerner from Savannah, had a long history with progressive organizations in the South (including civil rights groups and Students for a Democratic Society) before joining the women's movement in Atlanta. "It took me a while to discover the women's movement," Thrasher later recalled. "I read *The Feminine Mystique* when I was working for SSOC [Southern Student Organizing Committee], desperately looking for something that would tell me I wasn't crazy for feeling angry at times. But Betty Friedan's words weren't for me; they did not speak to a farm girl who grew up working the land and whose mother labored in a factory." After Thrasher moved to Atlanta in the early 1970s, she became part of the women's liberation movement there, joining, among other organizations, the Women's Caucus of *The Great Speckled Bird*, a liberal and increasingly feminist newspaper.<sup>32</sup>

As Thrasher's experience indicates, a good many Southerners who participated in the civil rights movement shifted their activism to feminism but remained in the South. Sara Evans was right to suggest that many white women in the civil rights movement drew parallels between their experiences and those of African Americans, but she intimates that this connection was drawn primarily by women from the North. It seems strange to exclude from this argument the Southern women, black and white, who were active in the civil rights movement. Many of them discovered first-hand that social justice in the South was constrained by the many hierarchies of

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<sup>32</sup> Sue Thrasher, "Circle of Trust," in *Deep in Our Hearts*, by Curry et al., 251.

their society. Dorothy Dawson Burlage, a Southern white woman who had been active in YWCA integration efforts and voter registration projects, certainly came to this conclusion. “My marriage and struggle for an identity . . . forced me to address the tangle of gender, racial, and class issues in the South, especially as they influenced my own life,” Burlage later recounted. “Somehow I had always intuitively understood that there was a connection between the segregation of blacks and the creation of suffocating roles for white women. The positions of blacks and of white women were part of the same myth about the Old South.” After reading Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream*, Burlage came to understand the role that white women had played in maintaining segregation and to criticize the myth of the southern lady. She credited a number of black and white Southern women – including Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Casey Hayden, and Mary King – with helping her to address feminist issues.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike many white Southerners, African American women had intimate knowledge of the workings of these interconnected hierarchies, for they had long experienced the double discrimination of sex and race. As was true in the North as well, Southern black women advanced feminism both through women’s organizations and within mixed-gender civil rights, welfare, and labor organizations.<sup>34</sup> Black welfare rights activists in the Georgia Poverty Rights

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<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Dawson Burlage, “Truths of the Heart,” in *Deep in Our Hearts*, by Curry et al., 118.

<sup>34</sup> Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Both Roth and Nelson have begun to reconstruct the activism of women of color in second-wave feminism, but neither devotes much attention to the South.

Organization sought to expand funding for housing and public support, as well as to secure access and funding for reproductive health services.<sup>35</sup> Atlanta resident Sarah Butler lobbied for the ERA not as part of a women's organization but from within her labor union.<sup>36</sup>

A significant result of recognizing the nationwide character of second-wave feminism may be the overturning of historiographical dichotomies that have divided the movement into liberal versus radical, or cultural versus political. As historian Doug Rossinow has argued with respect to developments in Austin, Texas, the divisions between "cultural feminism" and "political feminism" identified by Alice Echols did not characterize the women's liberation movement everywhere. In Austin, cultural feminism and political feminism functioned in ways that were more complex than simple opposition. Rather than understanding cultural feminism as "antagonistic toward more conventional political activism," Rossinow claims, activists in Austin "viewed cultural feminism as conducive to their protest activities, not as a retreat from political agitation."<sup>37</sup> Many other Southern feminists also saw political and cultural activism as parts of a whole.

What is more, the labels "liberal" and "radical" carried different meanings in the South

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<sup>35</sup> For information on the activities of the Georgia Poverty Rights Organization, see *Poor People's Newspaper* in folders: Poor People's Newspaper, 1972-1975 and Poor People's Newspaper 1976-1977, box 70, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, Emory.

<sup>36</sup> Transcript, Sarah Butler, in an interview conducted by Susan Millen, October 23, 2004, Gainesville, Ga., Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives, Georgia Women's Movement Oral History Project, Special Collections Department, GSU.

<sup>37</sup> Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 312.

than they did elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> The second wave has often been described as divided into two wings: a liberal wing comprising activists who sought to reform the economic, educational, and legal status of women, and a radical wing comprising activists who sought to create a new system of gender roles and responsibilities. In much of the South, however, social conventions and gender stereotypes restricted women so severely that nearly any liberal political activity was considered radical, forcing organizations usually described as “liberal” into unorthodox, radical positions. The president of NOW’s Dallas chapter, for example, claimed that her organization was “*the* radical group for change in women’s rights in Dallas.” A list of the chapter’s activities – by no means atypical for the South – suggests that she was right. Dallas NOW established a rape crisis center, a battered women’s shelter, and a production company for women’s music; created abortion rights action committees; and countered ERA rescission efforts.<sup>39</sup> Within current historiographical divisions, many of these activities would be construed as radical, but they were conducted in what is traditionally considered a liberal organization. Second-wave feminism in the South challenges other such dichotomies. As the political activism described above, in Chapter 5, illustrates, Southern feminism reconceptualizes the implications of equity versus equality. While most scholars have suggested that solutions

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<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Gilmore has recently argued that categories such as “liberal” and “radical” held little meaning in cities such as Memphis, Tennessee, and Columbus, Ohio. See Stephanie Gilmore, “The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide,” *NWSA Journal*, 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 94-117; Stephanie Gilmore, “Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide: The National Organization for Women in Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Cynthia Rutledge, editorial letter, *NOW Hear This* (Dallas County, Tex.), n.d. [1975?]: 1, Carton 23, NOW Newsletters, NOW records, Schlesinger. Emphasis in the original.

privileging equality of rights led to narrow and limited reform, in the South, equality had radical implications. Because legal equality held the possibility of overturning generations of white supremacy and gender hierarchies, it was more radical than moderate in the Southern context.

By focusing on the way the women's movement was organized, rather than its origins, this dissertation suggests that the South has been omitted from narratives of second-wave feminism not because it was so different from the North – although it was different in important ways – but because of perceptions about the region and quirks in the development of the movement's historiography. Despite the movement's widespread appeal in all parts of the country, the narrative has become embedded in the North. Across the South, women on college campuses, in suburban communities, and in cities formed consciousness-raising groups, child-care cooperatives, political action committees, anti-rape campaigns, and women's health care centers. Although sometimes connected to national organizations, many of these groups functioned independently, responding to local needs. The issues of concern to Southern feminists were similar to those engaging women across the nation. Southern women fought sexist stereotypes, promoted women's participation in the electoral process, sought greater reproductive choice, challenged sex roles in marriages, demanded economic justice, and protested discriminatory legislation and public policies. Despite the many boundaries dividing southern society, Southern women – young and old, working class and middle class, rural and urban, black and white – engaged in feminist activism. Although they did not necessarily embrace the same issues or organize in the same activist networks, their efforts to improve the lives of women marked them all as feminists.



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**Southern Methodist University (Dallas, Tex.), Archives of Women of the Southwest**

Kay Walker Cole papers

**University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, N.C.) General Manuscripts,  
Wilson Library**

Lollipop Power Press papers

**University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, N.C.), Southern Historical  
Collection**

Martha McKay papers

Margaret O'Connor papers

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