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*Women of the World (Dis)Unite!
The Stratification of Women's Liberation
and the Impact on the Equal Rights Amendment*

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the schisms within the women's rights movement and the impact these divisions had on the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Based on the writings and interviews of both feminists (like Betty Friedan) and those who opposed the amendment (like Phyllis Schlafly), it first discusses the adoption of the ERA by the National Organization of Women (NOW), then the stratification of the women's movement due to the racial and sexual diversity of feminists, and finally the defeat of the ERA. The author argues that, given the diversity and stratification of American society, the women's movement did not present the united front necessary for the passage of the ERA.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; United States (U.S.); Equal Rights Amendment (ERA); Second Wave Feminism; Women's Liberation Movement; National Organization of Women (NOW); radical feminism; lesbian feminism; black feminism; anti-ERA movement*

Introduction

Riding the ferry over to Liberty Island, the cluster of women appeared to fellow passengers as a large group of pregnant tourists. Beneath their clothes, however, were not growing infants but, rather, strips of fabric carefully folded and hidden away beneath maternity blouses. Upon docking, the women disembarked and joined with others who had arrived via a second boat. The Statue of Liberty loomed before them. Two groups formed: one walked toward the pedestal while the other brought out guitars and rolled up poster boards on which they had written words of support for women's rights.¹ They marched and sang as their counterparts worked to quickly connect their pieces of fabric into a forty-foot banner. As police and fire boats approached the island, the final segment was attached. The banner unfurled in the breeze as it was thrown over the railing. Bold black capital letters emblazoned across an oilcloth proclaimed: "Women of the World Unite!" The message was clear, the women of the world sought liberation. And that included Lady Liberty.

As the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment approached, Ivy Bottini led nearly one hundred women from the New York Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) to occupy the Statue of Liberty on August 10, 1970. A symbol of freedom and hope, the statue represented what many women in America longed for—liberation. Bottini recalls the moment as thrilling: to see the Statue of Liberty draped in the banner was a victory. When the fire hoses were turned toward the women to encourage them to disperse, Bottini remembers "it was like a party: they're celebrating, we're celebrating."² It was a moment to stand together in pursuit of liberation. A moment to raise awareness for the goals of the

¹ Ivy Bottini, interview by Martha Wheelock, *Veteran Feminists of America*, August 2017, [online](#).

² Bottini, interview by Wheelock, August 2017.

movement. A moment to celebrate all that had been achieved and all that was to be achieved. But this moment at the Statue of Liberty failed to unite what was in reality a disjointed movement. It would take more than fabric to hold the Women's Liberation Movement together, and, like the makeshift banner of 1970, the movement would not be able to withstand the pressures of counter defense.

The broad spectrum of topics the movement attempted to address, combined with a vast range of different women from all walks of life, proved to be an almost impossible combination. With the varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and politics of the feminists within the women's movement, tensions quickly arose, fracturing the movement as individual coalitions were established to address specific issues. Various organizations quickly splintered off the mainstream movement in response to conflicting platforms and ideologies, with radical groups arising when they felt their specific issues were not being adequately, if at all, addressed. Radical groups such as the Lavender Menace, Society for Cutting Up Men (S.C.U.M.), and Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.) arose, deeming NOW too moderate, too middle-class, and too matronly. Smaller movements like the lesbian separatists began to establish themselves to discuss these niche issues, though even they were divided along class and racial lines. The concept of a united movement was a dream unrealized.

Though scholarship on the intersection of feminist movements is prevalent, it does not specifically address how the incredibly stratified nature of the women's rights movement affected ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA); or, rather, how did the lack of a unified movement impact the passage of the amendment? By focusing on the turbulent relationship of feminists, a larger picture emerges: the Women's Liberation Movement reflects the character of American society, diverse but divided.

Ultimately, the fractured nature of the Women's Liberation Movement prevented the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. The Equal Rights Amendment represented complete equality among the sexes. Whereas the Nineteenth Amendment singularly addressed suffrage, the ERA was meant to encompass all other aspects of life. Seemingly simple, given its few short lines, the amendment appeared broad in nature when in actuality its application was very specific. It was intended to address the concerns of all women, but for some, the amendment became a concern in and of itself. Given the diversity and stratification of American society, the women's movement did not present the united front necessary for the passage of the ERA.

I. Waves of Feminism: The Campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment

First introduced in 1921 by Alice Paul of the National Women's Party (NWP), the Equal Rights Amendment has been a contentious aspect of the women's movement since First Wave Feminism. Paul strongly believed that the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women's suffrage, would not be enough to ensure the equality of the sexes. At the 1923 Seneca Falls Convention, Paul presented a

revised version of the amendment, proposing that “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.”³ Immediately divisive, it caused a split between those who supported legislation intended to protect women workers and those who asserted that men and women be treated equally before the law. Debates immediately arose over the potential consequences of the passage of the ERA, fearing that a “blanket” amendment would “decimate the protective labor laws they had worked so hard to obtain, thus leaving working women defenseless.”⁴ Groups such as the Women’s Trade Union League, the National Consumers’ League, and the League of Women Voters saw such an initiative as detrimental to the cause of women workers and the legislative reforms that had already been achieved. Detractors of the amendment such as Dr. Alice Hamilton, a pioneer in the field of industrial medicine and the first woman faculty member at Harvard, claimed that the right method was “to repeal or alter one by one the laws that now hamper women or work injustice to them, and which oppose the constitutional amendment sponsored by the Woman’s Party on the ground that it is too dangerously sweeping and all-inclusive.”⁵ Over the decades, such arguments would continue to persist throughout the various attempts to ratify the amendment. Though their ideologies and methodologies differed, the end goal was ultimately the same—equality of all regardless of sex.

Support for the Equal Rights Amendment gained momentum during Second Wave Feminism as Women’s Liberation emerged as a concerted movement. This new wave of activity, beginning in the mid-1960s and extending through the early 1980s, broadened the range and topic of issues addressed and debated by women’s rights advocates. It moved beyond merely focusing on legal limitations and disabilities, the emphasis of First Wave Feminism, instead touching on every area of the women’s experience—family, sexuality, and work. According to John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, the energy that fueled the second wave

came from another group of younger, radical women. Women’s liberationists, as they labeled themselves, emerged from the ranks of the Civil Rights movements and the New Left. Motivated by lofty ideals of social equality, genuine democracy, and the dignity of the individual, they threw themselves into the struggle for social justice.⁶

The idea of the personal as political arose and fueled a new perception of how Americans should view women’s issues, seeing that many dilemmas were due to

³ “July 21, 1923: National Women’s Party Kicks Off Era Campaign,” *Feminist Majority Foundation*, [online](#).

⁴ Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women’s Issues, 1945–1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 9.

⁵ “‘The Blanket’ Amendment: A Debate,” *The Forum* 72 (August 1924): 145–152, here 152.

⁶ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 310.

socially constructed gender roles that were continuously enforced by various institutions of the patriarchy in order to consign women to an inferior position.

The founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) by Betty Friedan and twenty-eight other women in 1966 signaled what many historians consider the commencement of the second wave. NOW emerged as the government failed to seriously enforce recent legislation banning discrimination on the basis of sex. In its statement of purpose, the organization committed

to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men [...] to break through the silken curtain of prejudice and discrimination against women.⁷

It declared that since there was “no Civil Rights organization to speak for women, as there has been for Negroes and other victims of discrimination. The National Organization for Women must therefore begin to speak.”⁸ The organization remained at the forefront, a mainstream, liberal group that attracted the young liberationists coming from the Civil Rights movement, the politically uninitiated, and the long-standing supporters alike. It staged protests and consciousness-raising events to bring awareness to the plight of women and the social, political, and economic inequalities they experienced. By 1967, it had adopted passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, publicly-funded child care, and the repeal of all abortion laws (the first national organization to do so) among its goals in a Bill of Rights for Women.⁹

NOW worked to place itself in the public eye, to make it impossible to ignore women’s issues. They did this through the aforementioned occupation of the Statue of Liberty in 1970; the boycotts of companies such as Colgate-Palmolive in response to policies that prevented women from attaining top-paying jobs; and demonstrations at “men only” restaurants, bars, and other areas that physically illustrated sexism. The Women’s Strike for Equality was the culmination of Friedan’s leadership of NOW, a moment she proclaimed to be “one of the happiest days of [her] life...if not *the* happiest.”¹⁰ On the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Friedan called for a national strike, for women across America to lay down their burdens and take to the streets in protest. Fifty thousand women marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City, from curb to curb, arm in arm; “and so we marched, in a great swinging long line, from sidewalk to sidewalk, and the police on their horses got out of the way. And people

⁷ “Founding the National Organization for Women, 1966,” in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, ed. Susan Ware, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 238.

⁸ “Founding the National Organization for Women, 1966,” in *Modern American Women*, ed. Ware, 238.

⁹ “Highlights,” *National Organization for Women*, [online](#).

¹⁰ Lyn Tornabene, “The Liberation of Betty Friedan,” in *Interviews with Betty Friedan*, ed. Janann Sherman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 25–34, here 32.

leaned out of office windows and waved.”¹¹ Though the scale Friedan had hoped for was not achieved (secretaries were not abandoning their typewriters, and mothers were not rushing away from their stoves), the demonstration illustrated that the Women’s Liberation Movement was not to be taken lightly, that anyone who believed this a frivolous, passing fancy of but a few women was sorely mistaken.

For the National Organization for Women, the ERA became the ultimate legislative goal as it represented a means of guaranteeing the equality of women and men in the United States. In November 1967, during their second national conference, NOW officially codified their support for the amendment in the Bill of Rights for Women. In backing the ERA, Friedan believed NOW would “forge the crucial generational links between the century-long battle for women’s rights that was our past and the young women who were the future.”¹² The ERA offered a close parallel to the plight for suffrage from First Wave Feminism; “both combined symbolic and practical goals, [...] addressed the status of all women in abstract terms, [...] resonated most strongly with the views of middle-class activists, [...] required constitutional amendments, [and] enjoyed the support of mass feminist organizations.”¹³ The campaign for women’s suffrage had ultimately proved successful, so it stood to reason that ratification of the ERA could come to fruition as well. However, adopting the amendment as a central focus of the organization prompted dissension and division. Unlike with suffrage, the topic of an amendment that guaranteed universal equality was far more controversial among women. Just as in the 1920s, labor feminists rejected the amendment, once more concerned that it would undo the reforms that had already been attained. Along the same vein, some religious feminists believed that passage of the amendment would invalidate legal protections for women and result in discrimination.¹⁴ Whereas the suffrage movement had experienced greater support from women as it pushed against the views of male legislators, the ERA had to contend with the deeply divergent views of women.

II. Too Moderate, Matronly, and Middle-Class: Schisms in NOW

While the National Organization for Women represented largely white mainstream interests, its seemingly moderate stances alienated other feminists.

¹¹ Marilyn French, “The Emancipation of Betty Friedan,” in *Interviews with Betty Friedan*, ed. Janann Sherman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 64–73, here 72.

¹² Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement* (New York: Norton, 1976), 104–105.

¹³ Steven M. Buechler, *Women’s Movements in the United States: Woman Suffrage, Equal Rights, and Beyond* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 108.

¹⁴ Caryn E. Neumann, “Enabled by the Holy Spirit: Church Women United and the Development of Ecumenical Christian Feminism,” in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 113–134, here 123.

The schism that arose between the liberal and radical feminists and the difference in their beliefs is clearly manifested in the complete severing of ties by nine prominent members with the New York chapter of NOW. Deeming themselves the October 17th Movement, the women, led by Ti-Grace Atkinson, a Friedan protégé and the president of the chapter, departed after conflicts about the hierarchical structure and tactics of the organization went unresolved. As Susan Brownmiller, a member of the New York Radical Feminists, wrote in a 1970 article for *The New York Times*, “Sisterhood is Powerful,” Ti-Grace and her radical peers “had come to view the power relationship between NOW’s executive board and the general membership as a copycat extension of the standard forms of male domination over women in the society at large.”¹⁵ Rather than creating an organization that was accessible to all women, regardless of race, education, sexuality, or socio-economic status, NOW was replicating the hierarchies of the patriarchy. A select few held power, controlling the direction of the group and dictating which issues would be prioritized; thus, the common member’s voice went unheard just as the patriarchy was silencing women. Radical feminists like Atkinson and Brownmiller wanted to break down these structures and create a new order, which NOW’s system did not facilitate. They were determined to pursue issues that they felt needed to be addressed and in ways that matched.

Whereas moderate liberal groups like NOW were concerned with more traditional democratic means of campaigning for equality of the sexes, radical feminists were bolder in their actions, unafraid of how they would be perceived. In response to a question about Ti-Grace Atkinson and her ideological split from NOW, Friedan stated, “Don’t be frivolous. Don’t get into the bra-burning, anti-man, politics-of-orgasm school like Ti-Grace did. Confront the Administration, demand the same rights as the boys, go door to door when Sam Ervin [the North Carolina Senator who opposed the Equal Rights Amendment] comes up for election, and get him out.”¹⁶ Radical feminists were viewed as extremists, their actions and tactics characterized as aggressive and confrontational. Groups like the New York Radical Women,¹⁷ an early radical organization lasting from 1967 to 1969, staged and participated in vocal demonstrations such as the 1968 protest of the Miss America Pageant, which would become ingrained in history with the popular myth of the bra-burning. Radical feminists from a number of associations distributed pamphlets that decried the contest, calling it a reinforcement of sexism and perpetuation of specific standards and representations of women:

¹⁵ Susan Brownmiller, “Sisterhood is Powerful,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 1970.

¹⁶ Paul Wilkes, “Mother Superior to Women’s Lib,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1970.

¹⁷ Not to be confused with the New York Radical Feminists which was a separate radical organization formed in late 1969 by Anne Koedt and Shulamith Firestone after they had left their previous groups, The Feminists and the Redstockings. It is of interest to note that Shulamith was a member of the original New York Radical Women, which eventually dissolved and was absorbed by the Redstockings (established in January/February 1969).

The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol. The Pageant contestants epitomize the roles we are all forced to play as women. The parade down the runway blares the metaphor of the 4-H Club county fair, where the nervous animals are judged for teeth, fleece, etc., and where the best 'Specimen' gets the blue ribbon. So are women in our society forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous 'beauty' standards we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously.¹⁸

Unlike their liberal counterparts, radical feminists were far less concerned with putting on a façade that was palatable to the masses, flouting conventions of conduct and respectability with their often flamboyant actions. But even these groups had their tensions, organizations appearing and then dissolving as arguments over topics pushed members away, politics being a particularly heated debate. Disagreements also arose over sexual matters, which the debates over lesbianism illustrate.

III. Silenced, Exiled, and Pushed Aside: Lesbians in the Mainstream Feminist Movement

In the United States, homosexuality was condemned and deemed a psychological disease, a perversion or deviancy of gender and sex. Feminists, products of this culture, "were no less likely than other Americans to view lesbians with disdain, to see their sexuality as a pathological aberration at worst, or a private matter of no political consequence at best."¹⁹ In the words of Gene Damon, a member of an early homophile group (The Daughters of Bilitis), to be a lesbian was to be isolated and removed; "For the crime (psychological, religious, social, or whatever) of preferring women in bed to men, a woman is automatically out of the human race."²⁰ Homosexuals were feared because they did not exist within the boxes the heterosexual patriarchy had established. There was something "wrong" with them, they were psychologically sick. Rita Mae Brown, a radical lesbian and author of *Rubyfruit Jungle*, published an article in the July/August 1995 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, titled "Reflections of a Lavender Menace: Remember When the Movement Tried to Keep Lesbians in the Closet?" that discussed her experience revealing her sexuality:

The second wave of the women's movement...shivered in mortal terror of lesbians. I told the truth about myself at one of the early National Organization for Women (NOW) meetings in 1967, which meant that women in Pucci dresses tore their hemlines squeezing one another out the door. A short time thereafter Betty Friedan helped coin the term 'Lavender Menace,' although I don't know if she wants to take credit for it. And a short time after that, I was unceremoniously shown the door.²¹

¹⁸ "No More Miss America! (1968)," *The Chicago Women's Liberation Union Herstory Project*, [online](#).

¹⁹ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 316.

²⁰ Gene Damon, "The Least of These: The Minority Whose Screams Haven't Yet Been Heard," in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 333-342, here 335.

²¹ Jennifer Chapin Harris, "After the Mystique is Gone," in *Interviews with Betty Friedan*, ed. Janann Sherman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 166-170, here 166.

It would ultimately be lesbian feminists who argued that homosexuality was not a choice, that it was a part of their essence, their very being. Meanwhile, homosexuality would continue to be considered a mental disorder until 1973.²² Even beyond the early 1970s, though, many individuals would (and still) deem it to be an unnatural choice, a condition. Though lesbian feminists were fighting to dispel this condemnation, this discrimination, other feminists were not so inclined to agree that homosexuality was a pressing matter to discuss. The rallying cry of the “personal as political” only went as far as what predominately white, heterosexual women believed it should cover, what ultimately benefited them.

As the leader of the National Organization of Women and author of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan had a large amount of influence and power over the mainstream feminist movement. On multiple occasions, she publicly rejected the idea of lesbianism as being a feminist issue, which stemmed largely from her own discomfort with homosexuality and the view that it was a private matter best kept to the bedroom. The idea that women desired to publicly exhibit their sexuality horrified her: “she was shocked by the idea of a public declaration of lesbianism.”²³ Lesbian feminists believed that Gay Liberation and Women’s Liberation were struggling to attain the same goal: freedom to define themselves, to not be judged by sex or sexual orientation. However, for the “liberal feminists of NOW, an alliance with lesbians was still not on the agenda; indeed, Friedan led a purge of the New York NOW chapter, ridding it of lesbians and lesbian sympathizers.”²⁴ Ivy Bottini, the president of that particular chapter, was forced to resign and veritably run out of town. In a letter to Friedan, Rita Mae Brown criticized her actions, questioning how she could exclude dedicated activists from the cause:

[At a time] when women are being discriminated against and treated unfairly, I would expect you and your fellow members of NOW to unite with all members of our gender, regardless of sexual orientation, against a male dominated society. Instead of welcoming our support as fellow women’s rights activists you have expelled Ivy Bottini and myself simply because of our sexual orientation. Yes, we are lesbians, Ms. Friedan, but is it fair to deny us membership on this premise?²⁵

The fear of a non-normative sexuality—and the negatives associated with it—drove Friedan and other leaders to push even the staunchest feminists away from the mainstream. A prominent figure within gay and women’s activist groups, Ivy Bottini had contributed to the foundation of the first chapter of NOW in 1966, orchestrated the 1970 takeover of the Statue of Liberty, and helped organize the

²² Jack Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality,” *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565–575, here 565.

²³ French, “Emancipation of Betty Friedan,” 71.

²⁴ Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 94.

²⁵ Rita Mae Brown, “1974: October 24, Rita Mae Brown to Betty Friedan,” in *Women’s Letters: America from the Revolutionary War to the Present*, ed. Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler (New York: The Dial Press, 2005), 666.

Women's Strike for Equality. Yet she was simply expelled due to her sexuality. When she had been perceived as heterosexual (she was married with children when she helped found the first chapter), she had been considered reliable and was highly respected, but once she came out she was a liability. The potential to be associated with the undesirable image of the lesbian was a powerful motivation for straight feminist leaders to cast aside their homosexual sister-in-arms.

According to Marilyn French, Friedan and other leaders within NOW believed that supporting lesbians

would be a tactical error: she [i.e., Friedan] felt lesbianism as a political stance to be anti-male, and her own position, from the beginning, had been to gain rights for women without alienating men, but rather seeing them as fellow victims of divisive, repressive, dehumanized society.²⁶

Friedan maintained that feminism was ultimately a movement of both men and women. It was necessary to work with men in order to fix the system. In a 1981 interview, Friedan discussed the issue of including lesbianism in the debate of feminist priorities:

It is all very well for wiser leaders of the women's movement today to insist, correctly, that the Equal Rights Amendment has nothing to do with either abortion or homosexuality – that, in fact, it has nothing to do with sexual behavior at all. The sexual politics that distorted the sense of priorities of the women's movement during the '70s made it easy for the so-called Moral Majority to lump ERA with homosexual rights and abortion into one explosive package of licentious, family-threatening sex.²⁷

Friedan worried that any perceived support for same-sex relationships would damage the organization's credibility and provide opponents with ammunition against it. In her eyes, lesbianism was inherently anti-male and anti-family and would thus drive away supporters of the movement, which would be costly when trying to campaign for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. To include lesbianism was to distort the purpose of the movement, to invite condemnation from the Moral Majority, and thus be unable to achieve their goals.

Silenced, exiled, or pushed aside, many lesbian feminists came together to form their own communities and organizations to respond to their needs. Rita Mae Brown left NOW in 1970 and assisted in the establishment of the Radicalesbians, whose manifesto, "The Woman-Identified Woman," criticized the omission and neglect of lesbian voices by the movement:

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of Women's Liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution. Together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves.²⁸

²⁶ French, "Emancipation of Betty Friedan," 71.

²⁷ Mary Walton, "Once More to the Ramparts," in *Interviews with Betty Friedan*, ed. Janann Sherman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 39–51, here 49.

²⁸ Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, ed. Sarah Lucia-Hoagland and Julia Penelope (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), 21.

The short document established the presence of lesbians in politics, calling attention to their exclusion, and serving as a base for further literature by radical lesbians. As a subset of the feminist movement, radicals located the root cause of women's oppression in the patriarchy. For radical lesbian feminists, the patriarchy oppressed them not just through their gender, but their sexuality as well. However, it was not simply men who restricted them, but their straight sisters as well, who silenced them and reinforced the ideals they were fighting against.

Lesbian separatists adopted and exemplified to the extreme the ideal of the woman-identified woman. Separatism as a movement is the advocacy of a state, sometimes physically apart from the larger group in terms of culture, ethnicity, race, religion, or gender; and the strategy had existed for decades before some lesbians adopted the idea in conjunction with their ideals of feminism.²⁹ In a 1988 article, "Lesbian Separatism: A Historical and Comparative Perspective," Bette S. Tallen, a Jewish, lesbian feminist, places the movement within the context of other such narratives, especially that of black separatism, in order to better define it. By juxtaposing lesbian separatism with other movements, she is able to effectively compare how the white male patriarchy has oppressed minorities and sought to erase those who did not conform or resemble very specific ideals. This comparative perspective ultimately enables her to explain how it differs as a movement of its own. According to Tallen, separatism is

based on both a resistance to and a rejection of the dominant oppressive culture and the imperative for self-definition. Lesbian separatism, unlike some other separatist movements, is not about the establishment of an independent, physical state; it is about the development of an autonomous self-identity and the creation of a strong solid lesbian community.³⁰

The lesbian separatists believed that in order to end their oppression they needed to isolate themselves from the society that subjugated them; to eliminate male supremacy by eliminating that which caused it – men. Consequently, this meant that participation in government was not an option. In general, legislative campaigning was not a priority. It was far more about living in a separate reality, free from the constraints of American society as it was constructed at the time.

When compared to lesbian separatist organizations, radical feminist groups appeared far more moderate in their ideals. Lesbian separatists represented an extreme form of feminism that manifested itself in very physical ways. The Furies, a Washington D.C. based separatist community that was founded in part by Rita Mae Brown during the summer of 1971, created a commune consisting of twelve women, aged eighteen to twenty-eight, (and three children) who shared chores and held some money in common. They even opened a school to teach other women auto and home repair so that they would no longer be dependent on men.

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "Separatism."

³⁰ Bette S. Tallen, "Lesbian Separatism: A Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, ed. Sarah Lucia-Hoagland and Julia Penelope (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), 132-144, here 141.

The commune also published a magazine of the same name that was distributed among separatists and other women who had created their own communities. In the January 1972 debut edition, Ginny Berson, a member of the collective, argued that “[l]esbians must get out of the straight women’s movement and form their own movement in order to be taken seriously, to stop straight women from oppressing [them], and to force straight women to deal with their own lesbianism.”³¹ As lesbian separatists, the Furies advocated for the complete severing of ties with men and the rejection of heterosexuality along with all the privileges it afforded.³² In fact, they actually introduced and defined the word heterosexism, or the concept that the subjugation of homosexuals was based on the assumption that heterosexuality was the norm, that any other sexuality was non-normative or unnatural. To them, a woman could not truly call herself a feminist unless she removed herself from the male-dominated society. In the words of Barbara Solomon, lesbianism

is key to liberation and only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance. Those who remain tied to men, individually or in political theory, cannot always put women first...any women relating to a man cannot be a feminist. Women who give love and energy to men rather than women obviously think men are better than women.³³

The Furies and related groups were not afraid to explicitly challenge heterosexual feminists. This confrontation forced heterosexual feminists to reanalyze their assumptions of homosexuality, specifically lesbianism, and the centrality of institutionalized heterosexuality to the oppression of all women.

Quietly exiling lesbians to the recesses of the mainstream organizations, or outright purging them, was in part an attempt by NOW to cultivate a palatable and respectable image, to form a reputation that endeared them to the fickle crowds who could and would both support and condemn in the same breath what feminists were working to achieve. Friedan and other heterosexual, liberal feminists were highly cognizant of the view of the masses, especially the portrayal the media outlets attributed to their organizations. Because NOW was one of the largest and most organized of the feminist groups, attention tended to focus on them. For straight feminists, the condemnation that was attached to female homosexuality represented rejection from society. According to Anne Koedt, to be

³¹ Ginny Berson, “The Furies,” quoted in Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 232.

³² The Furies (as well as other separatist groups) believed that lesbianism was a choice rather than an innate part of their being and therefore encouraged women to “become” lesbians. It was the ultimate way of removing men from one’s life. Thus, a small percentage of the lesbians present within the movement were not lesbians in the sense that they were sexually attracted to women but more along the lines of loving women for being women and putting them before any men.

³³ Barbara Solomon, “Taking the Bullshit by the Horns,” quoted in Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 154.

“called lesbian touched real fears: to the extent that a woman was involved with man, she feared being considered Unfeminine and Unwomanly, and thus being rejected.”³⁴ If NOW hoped to achieve its legislative goals, it needed to avoid being conflated with feminists who were less accepted by society. As lesbian feminist Karla Jay states in her 1999 memoir, *Tales of the Lavender Menace*,

conservative elements of the women’s movement were openly hostile to lesbians...Betty Friedan had branded us a ‘lavender menace.’ Lesbians, she believed, would blight the reputation of the National Organization for Women if its members were labeled ‘man-haters’ and ‘a bunch of dykes.’ The very threat of such appellations led NOW to deny the number of lesbians in its ranks.³⁵

Although lesbians had been involved since the inception of the movement and had played prominent roles, Betty Friedan, Susan Brownmiller, and other straight feminists were ready to discard those who endangered the goals of NOW and their respective collectives. Even after the organization had adopted a resolution in 1971 stating that lesbian rights were a legitimate concern of the feminist movement, their issues still went largely unaddressed in the mainstream arena for many years.

Though lesbians had been present and vocal in their support of Women’s Liberation, the mainstream movement as represented by NOW alienated them, pushing them to the wayside. Out of fear of association with homosexuality and the stereotypes it invoked, liberal feminists hastily denied their fellow women, “accepting the verdict that it was an issue of no significance. [However], lesbians were involved in building the feminist movement from the outset and they responded to the hostility of heterosexual feminists by constructing a sexual politics of their own.”³⁶ Lesbians formed and established their own organizations to delve into their distinct desires, to address the issues that were most pressing to them. They refused to be silent and became a vocal presence, constantly reminding those around them that they too had a voice, they too had rights to exercise, and they would not be left to the wayside because their sexuality made others uncomfortable.

IV. Black Feminism and the Lack of Representation in the Mainstream Movement

Due to the varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and politics of the feminists within the women’s movement, it was impossible to create a unified movement. Individual coalitions were established to address specific issues, particularly along racial lines. For many black feminists, the mainstream women’s rights movement was decidedly white in terms of its goals. In a 1996 interview, black feminist Barbara Emerson explained that early on she viewed Women’s Liberation as being “for white women who needed to be liberated, and [that she] agreed that they needed

³⁴ Anne Koedt, “Lesbianism and Feminism,” *The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Herstory Project*, [online](#).

³⁵ Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 137.

³⁶ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 316.

to be liberated as women. But [she] did not see that as [her] primary oppression."³⁷ The goals of organizations like NOW were not the priorities of black women who saw their oppression as being firmly rooted in race more than sex. Emerson "thought it was a white women's movement, not necessarily because [she] thought it was exclusionary of women of color, but simply because [she] thought the agenda was a white women's agenda. It was what white women needed."³⁸ Differences in outlook divided white middle-class feminists and black women; the priorities of one group were not that of the other. For instance,

white feminists insisted that all restrictions on abortion should be lifted; black women feared the overuse of abortion (and sterilization) in the black community for 'population control.' Condemnation of men, a key motif of radical feminism, made black women uneasy because of their bond with black men as partners in the struggle against racism.³⁹

Women's Liberation, and feminism as a whole, came to be seen by some black women as purely a white woman's issue. Women like Barbara Emerson initially hesitated to call themselves feminists because they saw the objectives of the women's movement as separate from their own.

Social issues that were crucial to black women were not addressed by existing feminist organizations, which resulted in the underrepresentation of black women in the mainstream movement. Consequently, black women had to form their own organizations so as to address their needs. Groups such as Black Women Organized for Action and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) were formed in 1973 to tackle issues such as welfare, reproductive freedom, domestic workers, drug addiction, prisons, and violence against black women. In their statement of purpose, the NBFO declared that

[t]he distorted male-dominated media image of the Women's Liberation Movement has clouded the vital and revolutionary importance of this movement to Third World women, especially black women. The movement has been characterized as the exclusive property of so-called white middle-class women.⁴⁰

The NBFO was established to take on the particular and specific needs of black women. The mainstream women's movement was dominated by white women, but it was not their "exclusive property." Black women carved out their own place within the broader movement, creating their own spaces. Their differing needs

³⁷ "Interview with Barbara Emerson," quoted in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 64.

³⁸ "Interview with Barbara Emerson," quoted in *Feminist Memoir Project*, ed. DuPlessis and Snitow, 69.

³⁹ Miriam Schneir, *Feminism in our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 171.

⁴⁰ "National Black Feminist Organization State of Purpose," quoted in Miriam Schneir, *Feminism in our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 173.

and perspectives kept numerous black and white feminist groups from joining together in support.

Some black women operated within the mainstream movement, but they had to contend with racial marginalization. In her essay “Sisterhood in Black and White,” Barbara Omolade, a member of the Women’s Action Alliance, explains that

Black women [...] were integral parts of Second Wave Feminism but [their] roles were always being contained, discouraged, and limited by white women who in spite of their so-called ‘feminist politics’ replicated existing power relationships, which minimized and subordinated [black women] because of [their] race.⁴¹

Just as lesbians had to face the homophobia of the time, black women had to withstand and combat the racism present within the women’s movement. Black women were excluded from conferences and workshops, and prevented from attending events by their fellow feminists. Despite the cry for unity in the campaign for equality, mainstream feminists were guilty of the same exclusionary practices they condemned. Through their own actions, white feminists fostered divisions within the women’s movement, pushing away much needed support, particularly when it came to campaigning for legislation like the ERA.

V. A Singularly United Movement: The Campaign Against the ERA

As the mainstream movement remained divided due to a combination of divergent perspectives and purposeful alienation, an opposition movement arose fueled by detractors of the ERA. In their attempts to unite women, the Women’s Liberation Movement had never considered that the largest opponent would become women themselves. Women like Phyllis Schlafly, organizer of the “STOP ERA” campaign, and Beverly LaHaye, founder of Concerned Women for America, created counter-movements in direct reaction to what they were seeing from the likes of NOW and Betty Friedan. The campaign for equal rights between the sexes became a war over gender roles within American society, pitting women against women.

In contrast to the Women’s Liberation Movement, the anti-ERA movement was far more united in the pursuit of its own goal. Ultimately, opponents of the ERA had a singular objective—prevent the ratification of the amendment. The reasons behind their objections need not be the same across the movement, only the eventual outcome. Consequently, opponents could attack the amendment for a variety of different, even contradictory reasons. When Phyllis Schlafly entered the fray in 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment had been ratified by twenty-eight states and appeared to be well on its way to ratification given the strong public support. A decade later, the amendment fell three states short of the necessary thirty-eight

⁴¹ Barbara Omolade, “Sisterhood in Black and White,” in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 377–408, here 388.

for ratification to the Constitution, due in large part to the grassroots conservative anti-ERA movement. In her “STOP ERA” campaign, Schlafly framed the amendment as a war on traditional gender roles that would erode the institutions of family and marriage. She argued that the ERA would take away gender-specific privileges that women currently benefited from including exemption from Selective Service (the military draft), “dependent wife” benefits under Social Security, and single-gender restrooms as well as lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage and abortion.⁴² As she proclaimed in a 1973 speech, passage of the ERA would result in the loss of financial support from husbands:

Since the women are the ones who bear the babies and there’s nothing we can do about that, our laws and customs then make it the financial obligation of the husband to provide the support. It is his obligation and his sole obligation. And this is exactly and precisely what we will lose if the Equal Rights Amendment is passed.⁴³

The language of the ERA did not hint at such possible applications, but the message that women had something to lose rather than gain seemed increasingly credible. In order to win support for her campaign, Schlafly sought out those who were seemingly underserved or neglected by the women’s rights movements. In the early 1970s, NOW briefly attempted a program to provide assistance to widowed and divorced women, since many widows were ineligible for Social Security benefits and few divorcees received alimony. In addition, after a career as a housewife, few had the ability to enter the workforce due to a lack of necessary work skills. The program encountered sharp criticism from young activists who placed priority on poor minority women rather than middle-class women. By 1980, NOW was downplaying the program as it exclusively focused on ratification of the ERA. Phyllis Schlafly stepped into the vacuum left by NOW, denouncing and condemning the feminists for abandoning older, middle-class widows and divorcees in need.⁴⁴ Her message that the ERA would result in a loss of privileges exploited the fears of many women, particularly those whose identities were closely tied to the domestic sphere.

Having a single goal proved to be a major advantage for the anti-ERA movement. Feminist organizations like NOW struggled to determine how the amendment would be applied and foster a united movement in support of it. The broad language provided room for interpretation, which divided feminists. Unable to adequately articulate a female definition of equality, the women’s movement had left itself open to attack. Opponents did not need to worry about having a unified argument against the amendment; rather, they simply had to

⁴² “Woman; 107; Equal Rights Amendment, Part 2,” 1973-12-06, WNED, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress), Boston and Washington, DC, [online](#).

⁴³ Michael Martin, “Phyllis Schlafly Still Championing the Anti-Feminist Fight,” *NPR*, March 30, 2011, [online](#).

⁴⁴ Lisa Levenstein, “‘Don’t Agonize, Organize!’: The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contest Goals of Postwar Feminism,” *The Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (2014): 1114–1138.

pinpoint areas of contention, many of which were already used to condemn the women's movement. Opponents like Beverly LaHaye characterized the entirety of the women's movement as harmful and the ERA as being a vehicle of injury. As she stated in a 1988 interview, "I think the women's movement really hurt women because it taught them to put value on the career instead of the family...Feminism really blotted out motherhood...family must come first for a woman; it's just not natural any other way."⁴⁵ To pass the ERA was tantamount to declaring femininity and the traditional role of women as dead. The amendment seemingly confirmed the accusations that were levied against feminists, that they were man-hating extremists who threatened American values and the American way of life. As conflicts continued between pro-ERA feminists and opponents,

the ERA came to be seen as an issue that pitted women against women and, moreover, women of the Right against women of the Left. Once the ERA lost its aura of benefiting all women and became a partisan issue, it lost its chance of gaining the supermajority required for a constitutional amendment.⁴⁶

In the end, the women's movement ran out of time. The deadline passed. A divided women's movement could not overcome a strong opposition force united by one objective.

Conclusion

Women's Liberation was by no means a consolidated movement; rather, it was highly stratified with numerous coalitions and organizations all vying for their own priorities. In general "efforts to bring greater unity across the spectrum of burgeoning feminist activism was unsuccessful because there were simply too many points of contention on issues of organization, ideology, strategy, and tactics."⁴⁷ Reflective of American society, the Women's Liberation movement was incredibly diverse along social, political, economic, racial, religious, and sexual lines. No one group could adequately or accurately represent all aspects of the women active within the movement. Consequently, as historian Susan Ware has observed, "Women's Liberation was all mass and no organization; groups formed and disbanded spontaneously, often not knowing of each other's existence; there were no leaders."⁴⁸ Though NOW persisted in its goal of ratifying the ERA, the lack of unity (particularly at the state level) meant that, once the amendment stalled, it could not subdue its opposition. In the case of the ERA, it was nigh impossible to overcome the obstacles that lay before it:

⁴⁵ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), 253–254.

⁴⁶ Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 6.

⁴⁷ Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States*, 64.

⁴⁸ Susan Ware, "Feminist Guerrilla Theater, 1968: Robin Morgan," in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, ed. Susan Ware, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002) 240.

an old issue nonetheless had new and inexperienced proponents in the late 1960s and early 1970s, sophisticated leadership did not develop until it was too late, and the promotion of equality as an abstract goal could not withstand the damage done by a well-organized, conservative countermovement in a time of growing reaction.⁴⁹

In order for the ERA to have been ratified, a unified movement of women would have been necessary; however, that was not a possibility. The women of America could never fully unite in support or condemnation of any one topic, their perspectives as divergent as their backgrounds. The banner flown across the Statue of Liberty on that bright, sunny day in 1970 had extolled women to unite; the call could not be answered.

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⁴⁹ Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States*, 108.