

## Grassroots Activism and Coalition Building

Many of the general histories of modern feminism focus on a small group of organizations and leaders, often based in New York and Washington, D.C., and then extrapolate a national story from those sources. The reasons are fairly obvious. Groups like the National Organization for Women, the National Women's Political Caucus, and the National Abortion Rights Action League received the most attention in the press, as did highly visible leaders such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Bella Abzug. In addition, it is often easier to point to specific accomplishments of national groups — laws passed, court cases won, demonstrations organized — as concrete evidence of what the movement has achieved. And yet that gives us only part of the story: a social movement from the top down, rather than the bottom up. How different would the history of feminist activism look from a grassroots perspective?

Examining how feminism played out in the heartland, as discussed in Judith Ezekiel's 2002 book, offers some intriguing perspectives. Starting in 1969, a small but active group of feminists in Dayton, Ohio, created a range of woman-focused institutions, such as childcare cooperatives, a women's center, and abortion referral services, all basically on their own and certainly not under the direction of any national organization. Instead, many of these initiatives grew out of consciousness-raising groups. Although historians often draw distinctions between the liberal and radical wings of the movement (i.e., NOW versus women's liberation), in Dayton the situation was far more fluid. The chronology was different too, with the local movement persevering longer into the 1970s and beyond at a time when the national momentum had supposedly stalled.

Local feminist action in Detroit, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Chicago also does not neatly fit into national categories or timetables. How feminism developed outside the big cities and beyond the East Coast depended on local conditions and concerns. An extremely important determinant in explaining how feminism took shape at the grassroots was geographic location. Space, especially contested space, affected how activists chose their issues and battles, which were as varied as challenging the exclusion of women's softball teams from publicly funded recreational parks, creating women-friendly spaces like lesbian bars and women's shelters, and founding women's bookstores, coffeehouses, and other businesses.

These women-friendly spaces, in turn, nurtured the emergence of national campaigns, such as the domestic violence and anti-rape movements. As they began to recognize the sexism at the root of male violence, feminists organized safe homes and helping services for victims of abuse and rape. Poorly funded and fraught with local controversy, these centers began the community education necessary to secure state and national funding by the mid-1980s for hotlines, shelters, police training, counseling, and advocacy. Local "Take Back the Night" marches alerted communities that women would resist acts of sexual violence. With the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, gender-based violence became a federal civil rights offense.

The diversity of feminist action was also evident in local NOW chapters, each of which had a unique history centered on issues germane to members' lives and communities. In Memphis, NOW was basically the only game in town, so it attracted any women who were drawn to



feminist ideas; they in turn used the local chapter to further their specific goals in ways that really didn't match what was going on in Washington. In Columbus, the NOW chapter prioritized local bread-and-butter concerns such as job equity and rape awareness over national issues like the ERA in an effort to make NOW reflect the interests and concerns of its local members — making it, as chapter organizers put it, “your NOW.” San Francisco already offered a much broader range of progressive organizations, so NOW members used the chapter as a way to build bridges and coalitions with other like-minded feminist activists on a variety of material rights, such as daycare, reproductive rights, and job discrimination.

Coalition building has always been important to the feminist movement. There was much crossover between the feminist movement and other social justice movements before, during, and after the 1960s and 1970s, especially concerning peace, the environment, consumer issues, and welfare rights. Just as feminist theory talks about the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, activists rarely limit themselves to just one issue. Instead, almost any item on the feminist agenda intersects with a range of other progressive causes, necessitating coalitions and bridges between them. In all these movements, women, primarily at the grassroots level, were often the driving forces for social change.

Try to imagine a multidimensional map of feminist activism in the 1970s and beyond. Instead of one-way lines of influence from the national to the state to the local, you would be likely to see lines going in the other direction, or multiple directions. Instead of illustrating a presumption that feminist ideas moved primarily from the East Coast westward and southward, it would highlight the groundswells of activism and connections that appeared spontaneously at widely dispersed spots across the country. And the graphic would show change over time, specifically how much of this local activism continued long after the national movement had supposedly stalled. If such a map could be created, it would show feminist activism in all its true complexity.

