



Feminism In Philadelphia: The Glory Years: Philadelphia NOW, 1968-1982

Karen Bojar

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FEMINISM IN PHILADELPHIA: THE GLORY YEARS, 1968-1982 interweaves the history of feminism in Philadelphia with the broad themes and trajectory of the “second wave” feminist movement. Although second wave feminism is largely remembered in terms of its national leaders, it would never have changed so many hearts and minds, would never have transformed our society without the efforts of so many women in local communities working tirelessly for gender justice. Recently, much of the original research (rather than analysis and critique of existing narratives) has been found primarily in regional and local histories, such as FEMINISM IN PHILADELPHIA which focuses on the major player, Philadelphia NOW. Although there were other feminist organizations active in Philadelphia in the 1970’s, there were none with the influence and staying power of NOW. An analysis of local NOW chapters reveals a more complex, nuanced picture than that found in the national histories of NOW. NOW chapters around the country varied depending upon the style and priorities of their members with the chapter unit serving as a safety valve for defusing political and personal conflicts. In Philadelphia the ease of forming a new chapter (only ten dues paying members were required) functioned as a vehicle for handling political disagreements as well as personal and racial tensions. African-American women unhappy with Philadelphia NOW’s failure to address the interconnections of sexism and racism formed a neighborhood chapter, Germantown NOW in 1980. Although the stereotype of NOW as primarily a white woman’s organization contained more than a grain of truth, many of the stereotypes held about NOW both among the general public and within the feminist movement do not stand up to close scrutiny of the history of many local NOW chapters. Although national NOW was embroiled in conflicts over the degree to which the organization should be a supporter of lesbian rights, the Philadelphia chapter from the very beginning was a staunch, unwavering supporter of lesbian rights and the first NOW chapter to elect an out lesbian as its president. Another stereotype belied by the historical record is the notion that NOW did not care about opening job opportunities for working class women. A major priority for Philadelphia NOW in the middle 1970’s was the struggle to desegregate “non-traditional jobs”— those well paid blue collar jobs traditionally held by men. Philadelphia NOW provided strong, sustained support for NOW member Penelope Brace’s long struggle against discrimination in the Philadelphia Police Department. In addition to documenting and contextualizing the history of Philadelphia NOW, FEMINISM IN PHILADELPHIA explores why NOW in many places was the only feminist advocacy organization remaining in the early 1980’s. NOW’s emphasis on building a structure which operated on all levels of government contributed to a string of major legislative victories that transformed our society. and clearly played a role in the organization’s staying power. By virtue of its geographical proximity to the national NOW office and the personal relationships between Philadelphia activists and the national and state leaders, the history of Philadelphia NOW is very much intertwined with that of the national and state organizations. In the late 1970’s, virtually all sub-units of NOW were focused on the battle for the ERA. As a consequence of the struggle to ratify the ERA and to protect abortion rights, Philadelphia NOW shed its earlier reluctance to get directly involved in electoral politics. The ERA campaign itself became a training ground in the basics of the political process and many NOW members, including several from Philadelphia NOW, considered running for office. After the defeat of the ERA, the heady social movement phase of the feminist movement came to an end, but organized feminism, despite the media predictions of its demise, emerged stronger than ever.

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