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The Hidden Women's Movement

Lee Ann Banaszak, The Pennsylvania State University

doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000105

It is important to take the time and look both backward and forward at the women's movement: how it has influenced the past and how it is likely to be important in the future. But why do we ask this question in the first place?

About every 10 years an article appears in a major news outlet about the death of feminism — see, for example, the June 29, 1998, cover of *Time* magazine. And yet after each death, we see women's movement activism alive and well, as evidenced by newspaper stories of women's movement activity. In the past 30 years since the failure of the ERA, we see women's movement mobilization resulting in a number of very important successes, including passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in 2009 and the approval of over-the-counter emergency contraception. There have been significant setbacks, too, including passage of antiabortion laws in many states. These events are the ones that catch the public eye; they are the events that are recorded in public media.

While these events are really important, the reason we need a vibrant women's movement is because of developments that happen under the radar every day. The women's movement has played and continues to play an important role in shaping and responding to such out-of-view events. Consider an example from 2008. That year, *The New York Times* reported that the Department of Health and Human Services had issued a draft regulation that would have required recipients of federal health program aid to certify that they would not discriminate against people who were morally opposed to abortion or contraception (Pear 2008). A regulation is not a law, and most regulations never get reported by major newspapers; this particular article was buried on page 17. Moreover, the

regulation had not even been published in the *Federal Register* but had simply circulated within the department, which means that the *Times* likely learned of it through a leak from a government employee. But the article and the leakage of the report caused an immediate uproar among advocates for youth health and women's health because it would have had a chilling effect on family planning clinics if they were required to not discriminate against people who were opposed to contraception. The result of that leak was that the regulation disappeared and was never implemented.

These sorts of regulations occur every day in great number throughout the federal bureaucracy. The *Federal Register* consists of 200 pages a day of proposed, draft, and final regulations. And those are just from the federal government. We live in a federal system where there are 50 state governments and thousands and thousands of local governments, all implementing laws that they have already adopted. These regulations are important to women's interests.

Let me take a moment to consider what we mean by "women's interests." Empirical gender studies often define the term as related to particular policy areas. I want to advocate for a wider definition of these interests as not confined to traditional understandings of the "feminine."¹ I'm concerned that categorizing issues into either women's interests or not women's interests both reifies what are historically contingent gender roles and ignores the role that intersectional identities play in women's lives. Women have interests in all parts of the state and even in parts that scholars have typically ignored. So the Treasury Department is very important to women's interests; we just don't tend to talk about it that way.

So where does the women's movement come into this? I argue in *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State* (2010, Cambridge University Press) that women's movement activists make important contributions throughout the state but that we tend to overlook these contributions for several reasons. When we talk about women's movements, we tend to think about feminist organizations or highly visible women leaders. The interviews I conducted with feminist activists suggest that we need to have a different perspective. Feminist activists, even those whose names we don't know, may have a huge impact on our experiences as women, particularly on the way that states implement policy, which really plays back into normative conceptions about what policy *should* look like (see McDonagh, this volume).

1. My definition draws from scholars including Baldez (2011), Molyneux (1985), and Sapiro (1981).

Let me give just a few examples from my research of the actions of feminists inside the state and how they illustrate the relevance of the women's movement. In some cases, as in the 2008 *New York Times* article, feminist activists inside the state did nothing more than communicate with networks of feminist activists outside the state and say, "You need to know that this is going on in terms of draft regulations." And that's important because women's organizations outside the state can only act if they know what issues are on the agenda. In this case, the connection between feminist activists in civil society and feminist activists inside the state — the network of women activists, which defines the women movement — may have important consequences for policies and for the influence of the women's movement.

Women's activists inside the state also play a huge role in framing what those regulations look like. It makes a difference how laws are implemented through regulations. My interviews with feminist activists revealed that, even when you were a feminist activist in an administration that was very antifeminist, there were still ways you could contribute to the framing of regulations, no matter how small. One feminist activist I interviewed said that she was under a lot of scrutiny in the Reagan years. Ronald Reagan was very vigilant in rooting out feminists from the federal government, so she couldn't really do much. But she said she could change the language in every draft regulation so it appeared as gender-neutral, which she considered a small but significant achievement. Thus, feminist activists inside the state also focus on different aspects of the agenda, allowing for small progress during periods that seem otherwise hostile to the goals of the women's movement.

Finally, individual activists can sometimes take stands that have a large impact. Think of Susan Wood, who served under George W. Bush in the Office of Women's Health at the Department of Health and Human Services. She resigned when the head of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration overruled the FDA panel that said that emergency contraception should be widely available. That event was really the start of a process that led to emergency contraception's being available today.

In summary, let me highlight two points in answer to the question of whether we still need a women's movement in the United States. First, we need to remember that what we see of the women's movement and what we study is really only a very small portion of what the women's movement is. Our scholarship and our understanding of the importance of the women's movement is colored by the information we have available, and there is more to the women's movement than we detect in

our focus on movements and organizations within them. My research suggests that what goes on “under the radar” — that we don’t know about — is as important as what we see. Secondly, an important characteristic of the women’s movement is also the network of activists who connect to one another. That network has changed over time. It started in the 60s as a very small dense network, and over time it has grown more diverse and more specialized. When I think about the policies that are on the agenda, such as implementation of the Affordable Care Act, those networks are going to continue to be important. So, that is why the United States still needs a women’s movement.

Lee Ann Banaszak is Professor of Political Science and Women’s Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA: lab14@psu.edu

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Making the Political Personal: A Challenge for Young Women

Shauna Shames, Harvard University

doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000117

There are many good reasons why we still need a women’s movement in this country. Here I shall focus on just one: I argue that we need a women’s movement to recruit and support women as candidates for public office.

We are in an era of the decline of women’s civic voice (Goss 2013). The broad-based women’s and feminist groups of yesteryear have given way to a multitude of smaller, Washington- or New York-based single-issue groups scrambling competitively for dollars. Skocpol (1999) calls such groups