

*Does the United States Still Need a Women's Movement?*

*Introduction*

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In his sixth State of the Union address, President Barack Obama quipped that America's policies toward women in the workplace at times were reminiscent of a *Mad Men* episode — 1964, not 2014. The cultural reference got a chuckle, but it also spoke to growing concerns about how far women in America really have come since the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s and about the backlash those accomplishments continue to face. Consider what had happened in the days running up to the president's speech:

A female candidate in a high-profile gubernatorial campaign had found herself under attack for a decision two decades earlier to pursue a law degree out of state while her young children remained home with their father. Her children, now grown women, had felt compelled to write an open letter defending their mother's parenting and celebrating her career pursuits as inspirational (Henderson 2014).

The dean of one of the nation's top business schools had issued a public apology for decades of institutionalized sexism that had caused women to feel "disrespected, left out, and unloved by the school" (Waldman 2014). The comments had followed a two-year experiment, engineered by the university's first female president, fundamentally to reshape the school's curriculum, classroom dynamics, and social rituals to encourage gender equality (Kantor 2013).

In anticipation of the congressional midterm elections, one of America's two major political parties had summoned dozens of House and Senate candidates to Washington for intensive two-day training focusing in part on how to talk to and about women. The party had deemed these sessions necessary after watching two candidates go down to defeat from ill-considered comments about what seemed to excuse or downplay the trauma of rape (Beaumont 2014).

These events, capped by President Obama's headline-grabbing *Mad Men* reference, called the nation's attention to the unfinished business of the U.S. women's movement. Of course, women's advocates within and outside the academy for decades have been concerned with this unfinished business. They have identified the most pressing agenda items; conducted research and reconnaissance with an eye toward changing culture and policy; forged coalitions with allies; mobilized, messaged, lobbied, and litigated; and all the while worried about the capacity of the women's movement to deliver on its promise of a just and inclusive society. Recent events in U.S. politics, the academy, and society at large underscore the continuing importance of such research and action.

This forum — which grew out of a panel at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association — takes stock of the U.S. women's movement and its various strains. The authors are all engaged scholars, and their pieces offer insights into where advocates for women, within and outside the academy, might direct their efforts. The pieces cover a wide terrain befitting both the multifarious pathways for women's influence and the richness of the scholars' work. The pieces explore challenging, often uncomfortable questions facing the modern women's movement in its sixth decade.

Some questions are theoretical questions with practical importance. For example, is it time to embrace gender differences as a means of advancing gender equality? Why is it important for feminist theory to inform feminist practice? Are gendered collective action frameworks necessary to mitigate gendered problems, such as violence against women?

Some questions bear on generational dynamics. Why do young women, especially young women of color, see little merit in exercising power through elective office — which to political scientists is arguably the most influential way to make change? How might activists, especially young globally minded women, create cross-movement and cross-national solidarity through the simultaneous appreciation of privilege and disadvantage?

Still other questions revolve around “under the radar” pathways for addressing women's concerns. For example, how do feminist bureaucrats shape policy out of the media spotlight, and how might we understand the impact of these and other hard-to-monitor activities? In a polarized America, can conservative women and liberal feminist women find common ground?

The contributors explore these questions in a context that makes them as relevant as ever. Signs of disregard for women's rights and well-being are all around, yet women in the United States have continued, albeit slowly, to ascend to positions of leadership. As the nation's first speaker of the House, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi oversaw a burst of lawmaking, including a major health-care reform bill and equal pay legislation that will have real consequences for women's lives. Former First Lady, U.S. Senator, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is the odds-on favorite to become the first female nominated by a major party for president. Women run General Motors, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Lockheed-Martin, and a host of other Fortune 500 companies. The educational pipeline is filled with talented young women seeking college and professional degrees.

And yet, gender parity remains elusive. The pay gap sits at 23 percentage points and has narrowed only slightly since 1990 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2011, 12). Women make up 18% of the U.S. House of Representatives and 20% of the U.S. Senate — meaning that, relative to the population, women are underrepresented in Congress by 30 percentage points. The hollowing out of the middle class and reduction in social mobility has hit single-parent households especially hard, and restrictive social legislation on everything from abortion to voting rights is disproportionately affecting low-income women.

Finally, there is the question of the U.S. women's movement. Its eulogy has been read many times over the decades — including in the 1970s when by any metric the movement remained a vibrant force, particularly as judged with the benefit of time. Measuring movement vitality is a tricky endeavor: Movements don't necessarily produce systematic, publicly accessible records of their activities; their tactics shift over time; and much of what they do remains out of view (see Banaszak, this volume). Yet recent work, including my own, has raised real questions about the state of the movement.

In *The Paradox of Gender Equality: How American Women's Groups Gained and Lost Their Public Voice* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), I examine the role of women's organizations in national public policy debates from the late 1870s through 2000. The primary measure of engagement is testimony at Congressional hearings, which I use to examine both the volume of women's policy input (for example, how often they testified in any given Congress and how many different groups appeared) and the breadth of the issues on

which their counsel was sought and provided. The book has some surprising findings. Women's groups were at their most active in the middle decades of the twentieth century, when popular wisdom tells us women were home baking cookies. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, however, women's groups were far less active, even though women's educational, economic, and political status had never been higher. The data show a parallel trend in issue agendas: the range of issues on which women's groups testified grew throughout the first half of the twentieth century and then narrowed dramatically during and after the "second wave" movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the book, I suggest that these trends are linked: the broader women's organizational agendas were, the more often women's groups participated in national policy debates. Thus, at midcentury, women's groups were advocating not only for women's rights, but also for policies relating to the environment, housing, the elderly, juvenile justice, foreign aid, education, and national defense, among other issues. By the latter years of the twentieth century, women's groups had largely abandoned their public-oriented advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged groups or diffuse interests. Instead, women's groups were focused on women's rights, status, and well-being.

The observed "rise and fall, broadening and narrowing" pattern of women's organizational engagement had much to do with the decline of women's multipurpose, mass-membership organizations. A prime example would be the League of Women Voters, which was responsible for about 10% of all hearing appearances by women's groups and in its heyday spoke out on a dizzying array of domestic and international issues. Newer organizations, which were smaller and focused on narrow policy niches, never came close to reaching the prominence of the League and similar mass-membership groups.

Women's national policy voice evolved as it did, I suggest, because of three mutually reinforcing dynamics. First, the larger interest group universe in which women's groups operated changed (Berry 1997, 1999; Skocpol 2003). With the help of patronage, (Walker 1991) and policy (Goss 2013), thousands of new single-interest groups arose and moved into policy niches previously occupied by multipurpose women's groups with the effect that women's groups themselves were encouraged to specialize. Next, with the second-wave movement came discourse and policy statements questioning the notion that women were, or needed to be, different from men. Such difference rationales, rooted in an ethic of care, had formed the basis for much of women's

organizing throughout history: women “mothered” families, so it was natural for them to extend such caregiving to the larger society through charitable service and political advocacy. Influential second-wave feminists were concerned that other-oriented rationales consigned women to second-class citizenship, and as a result it became harder to ground women’s collective action credibly in such understandings. Finally, a proliferation of public policies — some enacted before the second wave movement — created incentives for women’s groups to make gender-based equality and equity claims against the state. In a sense, the state helped to create “women” as a rights-oriented interest group, and the state and other patrons reinforced this identity through financial and other incentives.

Of course, women’s organizations and their work on Capitol Hill represent only a slice of women’s movement activity. My findings, therefore, are suggestive of a worrisome trend but are not necessarily proof of a movement’s demise. The findings signal concern because women’s organizations traditionally have served as the main vehicle by which women’s collective voices have been projected into issue politics. These organizations have cultivated women’s civic skills and served as pipelines to positions of political leadership; they have constituted the backbone of the two great “wave” movements; and they have framed and articulated perspectives and issue agendas neglected by other types of organizations (Goss 2013). To be sure, as the contributors in this forum demonstrate, women’s groups are not the only vehicle through which women’s interests can be advanced. However, these organizations have been especially important both in their own right and in concert with other actors, such as female government officials and nongendered interest groups and movement organizations. Indeed, female office holding rose in concert with the women’s movement.

The upshot of my findings and those of the contributors to this forum are the same. It is incumbent upon scholars, advocates, policymakers, and everyday citizens to think more creatively and expansively about the role of women’s political action. What does it mean to be a woman or to be concerned about “women’s issues” in a highly networked, globalized, yet increasingly unequal order? How might women maximize their impact on daunting challenges, such as human trafficking and climate change, that require organized, politically savvy issue publics?

In the essays that follow, many of the nation's leading scholars of gender draw on their recent books and other major studies to take stock of the U.S. women's movement. The essays document the creative ways that women's advocates are working often outside the media spotlight. Consistent with the opening anecdotes, the contributors also point to ongoing challenges. These challenges include how to broaden the appeal and applicability of feminist analysis and consciousness, how to elevate women's individual and collective voices in policy debates, and how to connect women's movements and the understandings they inspire to other movements both within the United States and globally. This forum offers a timely take on these timeless questions.

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