

Control Over Our Own Organization :
Control Over Our Own Movement

A Rationale for the Bylaws of Pennsylvania NOW
by Beu Jones

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CONTROL OVER OUR OWN MOVEMENT

The gains made by the second wave of feminism have been minimal indeed and all are insecure. We have managed to get an Equal Rights Amendment through Congress but it has yet to be ratified by the requisite number of states so that we are still not considered persons under the law with constitutional guarantees equal to those of men. The Supreme Court has declared in our favor with regard to abortion but the Catholic church has mounted a multi-million dollar campaign to circumvent this decision and if possible have it rescinded by constitutional amendment. Simple, open, dignified access to safe medical abortion is still a thing of the future, particularly for poor and uneducated women.

In employment there has been a token advance of women into positions previously closed to us but the wage differential between full-time employed men and women continues to climb as does the differential in unemployment statistics. Agencies charged with obtaining equal employment opportunities for women are so understaffed that six years can elapse from the time a complaint is filed to its final processing, and by that time a good share of the complaints and even the complainants are "moot." Colleges and professional schools still fail to offer equal access to both sexes, and from nursery school up the substance of education is still sexist.

Playboy magazine is still considered a quality journal and recent polls show the American public quite complacent with regard to topless waitresses. In fact, we have failed so abysmally in our efforts to have women treated in this society with equal dignity that the President of the United States, faced with the possibility of impeachment and needing every friend he can get, still does not scruple to embarrass a female reporter and forbid her appearance at the White House until such time as she foregoes pants suits and returns to attire which permits him to ogle her legs.

The rate of our progress reflects in great measure the state of our movement. At the national level we have three large membership groups, NOW, WEAL, and the Woman's Political Caucus. But the Caucus is primarily a single-issue group and WEAL is limited in focus, tactics, and constituency. The State, so important to our progress, has suffered an almost total void of responsible organization. Here we have squandered our efforts on alliances and coalitions of diverse local groups.

And at the local level we are completely fractured, arrayed into a smorgasbord so extensive it can accommodate the most discriminating taste.

Professional women who look down on housewives and students can choose local professional or university caucuses to promote their own interests.

Students who consider themselves avant garde and anti-middle class can join "radical" feminist cells, bad-mouth their mothers and search for an all-inclusive, world-shaking ideology.

Women willing to take legislative and legal action in limited areas but who eschew "demonstrations" and "flamboyant publicity tactics" can join WEAL.

Women too "proper" to consider even lobbying and legal tactics can still join local action groups and counsel female delinquents about opportunities presumably available to them or draw up rosters of gynecologists for those unacquainted with the yellow pages.

Newcomers to feminism can join local consciousness raising groups.

Women interested in politics can join the Woman's Political Caucus.

Women interested in contraception and abortion can join local groups focused on these issues.

Women whose analysis of feminism has led them to believe that marriage is the root of all evil can join communes.

Women distrusting the medical profession and lacking a taste for dissident politics can join self-help clinics.

Women wishing to avoid being publicly labeled "feminist" may choose to work entirely "behind the scenes," promoting study groups or panels in traditional and, therefore, safe organizations like AAUW, PTA, and the League of Women Voters.

Others may, in their own eyes, completely fulfill their commitment to feminism by changing their attire, struggling at home, or giggling out some protest at a cocktail party.

Still others may feel quits when they accept a cushy job the movement opened to them.

And, of course, we have NOW chapters organized at local levels all struggling to come to grips with institutionalized sexism and with attitudes that extend beyond particular institutional arrangements. And, considering the resources available to these chapters, they are doing a remarkably good job.

But it is difficult to see how feminism as a movement can succeed if it can not pull all the threads together. In the Chambersburg paper I argued that to be effective or even to survive the woman's movement must unite in a single, comprehensive, multi-issue organization. Literally, I said, we need "one national organization which would enable feminists to work on national, state, and local levels, permit them to pool their ability, their numbers, and their finances, and enable them to bring all the resources at their command to bear on strategic targets at strategic times." I do not mean to back away from that analysis here but to elaborate on it, because it is essentially incomplete.

What we need more than a single organization is a single consensus. Indeed without a consensus as to what feminism is and what it is to accomplish we can not hope to join together in a single organization. With such an agreement the need for a single organization and the lure of separatism are both considerably lessened.

However, our desire for unity must not be so desperate that we accept any old consensus reached any old way. I can not emphasize strongly enough that what we need is an institutionalized, rational, and responsible means for defining feminism, its goals, its tactics, and its program. And I say with all humility that I believe the proposed bylaws of Pennsylvania NOW provide the means we seek. They do so by placing thoughtful decision making at the center of our organization, by redefining responsible leadership and by making it possible for members to influence decision-making and share responsibility in a way and to an extent not hitherto afforded them.

1. Placing thoughtful decision-making at the center of our organization. In forcing the Executive Committee to run as a slate on a platform the proposed bylaws for Pennsylvania NOW change the whole character of elections. The contest is elevated from people and personalities to ideas, conceptions, and reasoned analysis. Those running on a slate are expected to appraise the condition of women at the time they run and put forward a program to improve that condition during their term of office.

The platform requires a slate to do all the weighing of possible projects we spoke of earlier in this paper. It forces them to discard

some projects as tangential, irrelevant, less important, or less possible and to defend the choice of program arrived at. The platform is enormously important for it places theoretical analysis and direction of the movement in the hands of the movement itself -- and for the first time.

Up until now theoretical analysis, such as it is, has come to us from the outside -- from underground journals, slick magazines, newspaper articles, television shows, anthologies and other books published by standard presses, from women's study courses, commissions on the status of women, successful female politicians, and other assorted sources. Almost without exception the people who write or present these analyses are not themselves part of organized feminism. That being the case they can not know what is best for organized feminism or what is possible in it. Not being responsible for carrying out the programs they propose, their imagination is often untempered by reality or by a humanitarian concern for those who may take them seriously.

For that matter, there is no question that some of this analysis is written by outright sexists, by those unwittingly coopted into and identified with the sexist establishment, by those who would turn feminist energies to other noble but nonfeminist endeavors, and by simple charlatans and opportunists.

NOW, in relinquishing theoretical analysis to these outside sources, bares to some extent responsibility for confusion about the movement, for confusion in the movement, and for confusion even within our own organization. I do not mean to be unduly harsh. I know as well as the next person how weak NOW was in the beginning, how important all this material, no matter how biased, has been in developing our constituency. I know how comforting it was to have the media talk of "women's liberation" as though it were a single gigantic organization, with members, elected leaders, and a voice in national affairs. It made us feel proud and perhaps gave us the strength to persevere.

That which is valuable at one juncture, however, can be disastrous at another. The media, by giving new movements publicity, nurtures them all in embryo. To live and grow, however, the cord must be cut. The time has come for us to take control, to shatter the illusion of unity, to make distinctions between our elected responsible leaders and media puppets and playthings. NOW must define for itself feminism, its goals, and its programs and openly reject analysis not in the best interest of the woman's movement as NOW sees it.

2. Redefining responsible leadership. As I pointed out in the previous section, recognized leaders of the feminist movement have been chosen by the media, not by members of organized feminism. That we have acquiesced in this selection, in this usurpation of our rights and prerogatives, however, is quite evident. Large fund-raising events sponsored by local NOW chapters import media personalities, "leaders of the movement," who are not even members of NOW and, for that matter, may not be affiliated with any feminist organization subject to member control. The affiliation of our "leaders" is not even a subject of interest or concern to us. Any person who can draw a crowd, whom the public finds appealing, and who hammers home the point that women need power exercises, in our minds, "responsible leadership."

Our lack of concern with regard to the organizational affiliation of this media elect is matched only by our lack of concern with regard to program and tactics advocated by them. To my knowledge, only one "feminist" author has ever been openly repudiated by the feminist movement, and I sometimes feel she achieved this distinction only because she advocated a program repugnant to all media sources, namely, the annihilation of all men who refuse to relinquish their sexist prerogatives. For that matter, Solanas might still be with us had she not moved from analysis to action.

To this point I have lumped NOW members with members of all other groups and even with the unaffiliated, a procedure which is both unfair and confusing. NOW is the only comprehensive feminist group in existence, in the sense that it addresses itself to all feminist concerns and appeals to all women. It is the largest and best organized membership group in feminism. We have elections and elected leaders. The question we should ask ourselves, then, is why even NOW members view as "responsible leaders of the woman's movement" outside personalities not elected by or responsible to organized feminism.

There are several answers to that question, one being that many members of NOW misjudge the state of feminist development and underestimate NOW's political potential. You have all heard people describe the job of piloting a plane as hours and hours of boredom interspersed with moments of stark terror. At the time NOW began it would not have been inaccurate to describe the life of an average woman in similar terms -- a dreary, steady run of stupefying, semiconscious activity interspersed with moments of great pain: the pain almost always occasioned by collision with important males -- husband, lover, brother, father, son, teacher, advisor, employer -- each collision rising suddenly and wreaking

havoc like some uncontrollable natural disaster, never understood, never fully anticipated. Faced with a world that appeared irrational, women attempted to maintain sanity and dignity by assuming a certain stoicism, by yielding with a certain grace.

The first job of NOW had to be consciousness-raising. To free each woman from her individual cell, from self-blame, self-hate, and personal chastisement NOW had to put women in touch with their own history, it had to marshall all the facts of institutionalized discrimination into neat undeniable charts, and it had to draw from those facts their justifiable conclusions. The first job of the movement was to penetrate the protective covering each woman erected in self-defense and move her from personal to political analysis.

Consciousness-raising is a necessary phase of every woman's radicalization. No one can be a true feminist who has not experienced the sickening realization that she has been duped, and tricked, and exploited -- and the anger that follows it. Every political movement is psychological at bottom, a matter of understanding that we are not just individuals but members of one sex or another, one race or another, one class or another, and that other people relate to us primarily in these terms. It is a terrible, ego-stripping experience which, when it doesn't cripple us, changes us altogether.

Consciousness raising, however, though a necessary first act of movement, is almost prepolitical. It has to do with self-discovery, spiritual reawakening, and a renewal of faith and desire. In this phase of the movement great leaders are preachers, sceptics, healers, believers, shakers, and oracles. In this phase of the movement the whole notion of responsible leadership, defined politically, is premature. Nothing has jelled. There is no solid constituency willing and able to begin the long political struggle necessary for a true redress of grievances.

That we suffer some confusion in NOW with regard to responsible leadership, that we are so quick to grant the title to persons outside organized feminism, reflects, I feel, a belief on the part of many NOW members that we are still at this first prepolitical stage of development. I would argue, however, that this belief is based less on evidence than on a last-minute hesitation to face political realities. Even at this relatively late stage of the game, we continue to denigrate ourselves, to display a lack of confidence in our own organization, and in our ability to mount successful political action. Sometimes, to our amazement, society takes us more seriously than we take ourselves.

It is time to move on. There are thousands, perhaps millions of women who realize that the problems of women can not be attributed to the motivation and behavior of women as individuals or even to the motivation and behavior of men as individuals. Sexism is beyond the reach of voluntary renunciation. It is part of every institution of America. To rid ourselves of sexism each institution must be changed, reshaped. That is an awesome political task. It can not be accomplished by an independent, free-wheeling leadership competing for prominence, media coverage, and following.

If we are serious about controlling our own future, we must first control our own movement. We must progress to a form of political organization which permits and requires leadership to be responsible in political as well as moral terms. At the national level, NOW is not presently organized in this manner. Members can not elect leaders to accurately represent them on the basis of one-minute campaign speeches. And those elected have no way of knowing what it is their constituents would have them do. They are, therefore, unable to exercise responsible political leadership.

Consciousness-raising is of necessity a continuing function of every movement. By forcing our leadership to a position of political responsibility we do not impede consciousness-raising but create the mechanism for advancing beyond it. We make possible a strong, democratic, and effective politic presently denied us. Whether we like it or not, movement is subject to many of the same principles which govern other aspects of our existence. It is an up-or-out system. Either we progress or we fail. If we refuse to undertake the rather awesome task of formulating our own program and reining in leadership so that it is accountable to us, we forfeit all claim to the woman's movement and with it our future.

3. Controlling our movement by making it possible for members to influence decision-making and share responsibility in a way and to an extent not hitherto afforded them. Almost all oppressed people attempt at some point in their individual lives to strengthen themselves and their position by latching on to some strong person, some mentor, who promises to run interference for them. The oppressed in these circumstances happily suspend individual judgment and submit to the intelligence and direction of their protectors. Foregoing thought and responsibility, however, undermines the confidence of the oppressed even further. It stunts their real abilities and leaves them more helpless than they were before.

We all understand the debilitating effects of passive submission to male authority. The relationship, however, transcends sex. Women are equally debilitated by passive submission to female authority. There is a contradiction involved in attempting to accomplish the goals of feminism through a woman's movement that does not permit members to share responsibility and influence decisions. If we are to succeed, that contradiction must be resolved.

Pennsylvania NOW bylaws mitigate against authoritarian leader-follower relations by imposing a structure of mutual responsibility. Leaders are forced to a position of accountability because they are elected to do something not just be something (a president or what have you). Members likewise are forced to assume responsibility in the sense that it is they who must decide what is to be done.

This mutual relationship, this sharing of responsibility, is absolutely essential to the movement. Without it there can be no real bond between leader and member and, equally important, no real bond between members. If leaders remain unaccountable, if they are permitted to continue to define feminism and its program, women will continue to feel alienated from feminist organizations and feminism. Factionalism will increase and eventually give way to indifference and defeat. If women in general refuse to assume the task and the burden of developing a feminist consensus, there can be no unity or strength in the movement.

Without such a consensus each group will continue to follow its own prejudices, pursue its own interests, and cater to its own narrow constituency. For a time we will have more of the same, student groups, faculty groups, professional caucuses, older women's liberation, radical women's liberation, and a multitude of organizations each focused on single issues, sports, sexuality, politics, contraception and abortion, etc., to say nothing of unaffiliated groups each attempting to protect itself by nurturing a certain geographic provincialism. Eventually, splintered in this fashion, we will have no movement.

There is no question that women experience sexism differently depending upon their age, their marital status, their relation to the market economy, and other factors. Women located differently with regard to these variables tend to place different priorities on feminist programs. They hope to gain some relief for themselves or their children in a limited period of time. But sexism is a unified force, and our relations to it are constantly changing. Female students become workers and sometimes professionals, both generally marry, any woman may need an abortion,

and we all grow old if we do not die first. Eventually, we all experience almost the full gamut of sexual oppression, manifested differently at different times. To combat it we must each forego our personal priorities and begin to think as a class. What is best for women? What is best for the movement? Divided into our separate constituencies we are not only blinded to the whole we are cut too fine, too weak to effect any meaningful, lasting change.

We live in a real world and sexist power in that world is very tangible, very concrete. At any particular movement its hard armament is arrayed against us in a particular configuration. To defeat it we must make a distinct series of moves each based on an accurate analysis of the previous exchange. Most games allow for some margin of error, at least early on, but at any particular juncture there is a best move, sometimes there is only one move that can bring victory or prevent defeat.

We must try to arrive at the correct consensus and stick with it as long as it is applicable. That is enormously difficult. It is so much easier to enter upon a project simply because it presents itself, because it seems easy, because it's the kind of thing we like to do or feel competent to do, because it is popular, or because we want to even a particular score. It is so tempting to rationalize our impulses by saying that if each of us will only do that which we can and want to do, we will nibble away at the giant and eventually destroy him.

Unfortunately, he is a good deal more adept at that game than we are and better positioned for it. By inviting us to testify at congressional hearings, to appear on TV shows, to present evidence to regulatory agencies, to submit grant proposals, to participate on commissions, and so forth, our sexist giant can distract us from thought and keep us running in circles until all of us are exhausted and the movement moribund.

The proposed bylaws of Pennsylvania NOW, by necessitating platforms, two-year and five-year plans, lay the basis for our arriving at a correct consensus in Pennsylvania NOW. Of course, these mechanisms will not work automatically. If those who have provided leadership in the past withdraw in a pique so that members who wish to share responsibility must assume it totally, we will not be in good shape. If members leave to prospective Executive Committees all the work of thoughtful consideration and choose between platforms on the basis of impulse, we will not advance very far. What is required is greater effort on everyone's part and not just physical effort, mental effort. We must all think, study, read, discuss, and educate, ourselves and each other.