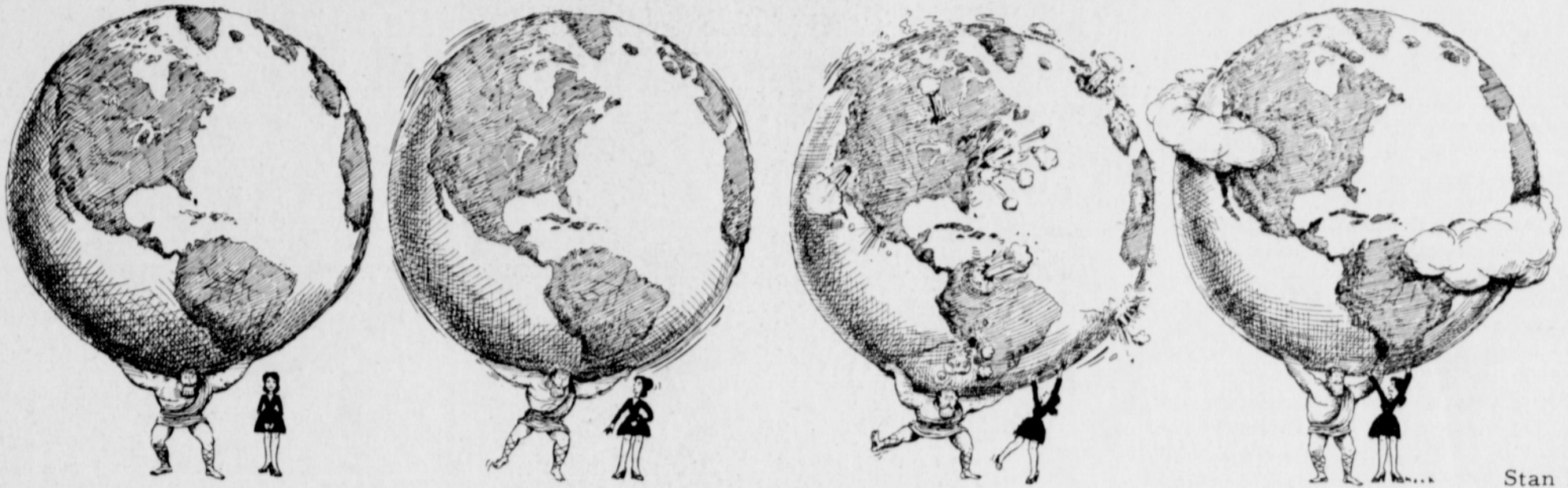


ADVOCACY NETWORKS

NEW STRENGTH FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT



Stan Mack

by Sarah Harder

What will happen to the women's movement after June 30, the deadline for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment? With or without ratification, plans must be in place to proceed toward the goal of full legal, economic and social equality for women. Right wing pronouncements of the failure of the movement are highly premature. And yet after a decade of progress, recent events have forced the movement into a largely reactive role. A vocal and visible minority has mounted effective challenges not only to the ERA, but to affirmative action, reproductive freedom, Title IX, and most other government efforts to support equity and advancement for women.

To reestablish an initiative, the women's movement must regroup its forces and reach out to those not now involved. It must demonstrate that issues affecting fifty-one percent of the population are central to this nation's vitality and growth. And it must come forth with pragmatic steps toward achieving its goals. The most effective vehicle available to the women's movement may well be the advocacy network — a mechanism that links diverse groups and targets their energies toward creating change.

Networking has become a byword for those concerned with the advancement of women in the 1980s. Across the country networks have sprung up connecting women who share a particular interest. Widely popularized in books and articles, networking has been seen as the encompassing solution to women's problems — from personal and professional isolation to institutional inequities.

Thus when women come together conscious of a shared concern, the all-purpose answer seems to be, "Let's form a network!" And another network is launched with confidence that this is the mechanism to make the difference, fill the gap, or right the wrong. Too often the promise is not fulfilled. The flurry of activity, the exchange of names and addresses, the monthly social gatherings do extend contacts. For the few who grab the initiative the contacts may achieve some goal. But for most the network remains a temporary linkage whose potential is never fully utilized.

The sheer proliferation of networks has contributed to a blurring of their function and purpose. There are many reasons for women to connect. They may do so solely for support in crisis, as in the American Association of University Women's Widows Network Project. Networks may operate exclusively, as do growing numbers that limit membership based on professional title or salary. Or they may operate inclusively, extending broadly to encompass diverse women sharing a concern. Some networks exist solely to address the advance-

ment of their own members. Others have ambitious agendas for equity reaching beyond issues directly affecting individuals to collaboration for change on broad legislative and social fronts. But many networks exist without a defined purpose or goal — paper linkages with the benefits of connection and contacts but with nothing to direct the energies of participants.

The most effective networks spring up in response to compelling need. The 1977 National Women's Conference became the catalyst for a short-lived but extremely functional political network for women. Spurred by predictions that the conference would disintegrate into a "cat-fight," organizations such as AAUW moved into action. The challenge was formidable: Come up with a process whereby twelve hundred delegates (apart from gender, the most diverse elected body ever assembled) could come to consensus on Plan of Action for women within three days.

The process of defining the National Plan of Action tested the collective strength and experience of American women. And despite political inexperience, delegates more than met the test. A Pro-Plan Caucus network was established to reach out to all the groups involved — feminist, main-line, traditional, and non-traditional. Relying on the range of expertise represented, the participants reached beyond organizational bounds to define and articulate specific issues. A strategy was forged stressing the interrelationship of women's issues and the responsibility each woman bears to all women. Differences, born of distinctive focuses and backgrounds, seemed less significant that what was shared. That pluralistic vision is the strength and vitality of the Plan of Action.

But because the Houston network's goals were linked to a particular event, the connections were not sustained. There was a sense of fulfillment in completing the Plan of Action. With its handing over to the U.S. president, too many women and organizations relaxed. In many there was an unconscious sense that having put the words on paper, they could expect the simple justice of the proposals to be carried forward. They moved back to business-as-usual as organizations, pushing separate agendas, avoiding the pressures of collaboration.

Events of the past year make it plain, however, that women must now find better ways to participate in the decisions that affect them, their country, and the world. The purpose of this article is to explore the potential of networks to assist in ongoing advocacy for women's issues. Its premise is that active support for women's issues is a basic responsibility of women's groups.

There is no universal agreement on that premise. It has become a fashionable mark of "maturity," of "credibility" for women's groups to embrace broad platforms of issues, proving they have moved beyond a "single-issue" agenda. But the particular needs of women are related to virtually every issue now facing this society. And if women's groups fail to present themselves as advocates for these needs, emphasizing their legitimacy, what groups will? If there was ever doubt that money talks, one needs only to look at the federal budget and what it says about the national priority of programs affecting women, children, minorities, the elderly, and the poor.

Advocacy networks offer the most promising route to demonstrate the legitimacy of women's issues and to translate that into broad ongoing action on their behalf. The purpose of advocacy networks is unabashedly political. They connect women and organizations with the purpose of multiplying resources and focusing them to achieve meaningful change. By seeking out and establishing contacts, these networks extend the information, skills, and resources of women. But for progress, all these capacities must be targeted effectively toward change.

The problem that often paralyzes women's groups is where to begin. The agenda of needs is so encompassing as to be overwhelming. Huge variations exist in levels of consciousness and willingness to be involved. Effective advocacy networks must acknowledge those realities as they move simultaneously toward three broad goals; the first is to involve the uninvolved; the second to activate the involved; the third to collaborate in effective action. Those goals also can be seen as stages in the growth of individuals and organizations in their sense of responsibility for women's issues.

For the first stage, educational outreach must be ongoing. It must help the majority to identify with the inequities affecting women both personally and collectively. Before their resources can be brought to efforts for change, individuals and organizations must be convinced of the validity of women's issues. Inequity is the norm in many spheres of human society. Women have learned the habit of living with it, of accommodating it like a hairpin curve on the

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Flight

An eager grip secures the string harness.

Trailing in the wind, a paper diamond.

Dipping, swaying, diving.

Its walls waver under stress.

Determined feet pound the earth. The sphere of twine dwindles. Slowly it climbs.

Suspended in a mass of blue, the doily dangles. Tugging for its freedom, gracefully it plays.

—Bronwyn Cosgrove

ONCE UPON A BREEZE

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