

FEMINISM'S REAL DEBATE



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BY KATRIN BRIDGET SNOW

Judging from recent newspaper and magazine covers, it seems the season's hot feminist debate is whether women are overdoing their victim status and whether feminists hate sex. Not to diminish the possible worth of those questions, but there's a hotter, if less orgasmic, debate taking place in feminist circles nationwide about why there are so few women of color involved in feminist coalitions. At issue is not the success or failure of women's coalitions, but who are they serving and who is left out? As the women's legislative coalition in Oregon examines record success this year, its leaders admit the coalition is vulnerable to the classic fault lines of the women's movement: race and class.

With a few significant exceptions, the Year of the Woman turned out well for feminists in the Oregon legislature. The 1993 legislature enacted a record number of bills on the women's agenda. Lawmakers approved insurance mandates for mammograms and gynecological exams and ordered state agencies to equalize funding for girls and boys services. They criminalized stalking and banned sexual harassment in the capitol building. And, in a session driven to record length by the state's budget crisis, legislators nevertheless funded the Commissions for Women, Black Affairs and Hispanic Affairs. All told, the coalition navigated 20 bills into law and blocked 10 it considered detrimental to women.

The bill requiring insurance companies to cover mammograms exemplifies particularly well the strategies that drove women's legislative success this session: argue on economic grounds, never take no for an answer, and generate a large public outcry. Originally, the bill was destined to die in committee without a hearing. Believing that regulatory and other required costs were already breaking small business, and that most women could afford to pay for their own mammograms, House Commerce Committee chair Eldon Johnson (R-Medford), allowed the mammogram bill to languish in committee for months. In addition, the Republican leadership in the House has long had a basic policy against insurance mandates, according to Representative Mary Alice Ford (R-Portland). "It didn't matter if it was a good mandate or a bad mandate, the word mandate just set everybody's spine a tingle down there," Ford said.

But when the bill passed, it sailed through both chambers with unanimous bipartisan support. Lauren Moughon, lobbyist for the Women's Rights Coalition, credits the persistence of breast cancer activists who flooded the offices of Johnson and House Speaker Larry Campbell (R-Eugene) with applying enough pressure to break the dam and get a courtesy hearing scheduled.

"(The bill) was going to receive a hearing just so that people could come up and give their testimony, and to sort of shut these people up because they'd been tossed their bone,"

Moughon said. Johnson at the time confirmed that he did not intend to schedule a vote on the bill. In fact, he was absent for the hearing. But Johnson said after reading the testimony, he was moved to schedule a vote. At that point, say its proponents, the bill began to move on its merits, but they believe it would have died without the grassroots pressure that leveraged a courtesy hearing.

Grassroots politics buys access for organizations without the money to wine and dine. Women are said to be naturals at building coalitions and finding consensus, but that may be partly because they don't have the money to play insider politics.

"We can't play the games that the big boys play," said Moughon, who watched wealthier lobbyists threaten to yank their support when they didn't like how one of their bills was turning out. "I don't have a huge bank account to give money during the election years, and so it's a lot harder for me to walk away from the table. There's this expectation because I'm a woman lobbyist, and because I work for a non-profit, and because we don't give much money, I and my issues can just be walked all over."

A Democratic triad led the legislative coalition: Salem Senator Tricia Smith, and Portland Representatives Kate Brown and Gail Shibley. Conventional wisdom said that to move the bills they would have to back down stiff opposition from the Republican male leadership in the House. On occasion that wasn't the case. But in most cases the bills battled their way to the floor through the bitter partisanship that governed politics in 1993. "When we needed in-your-face people, and there were times when we did, we sent me," said Senator Smith, easily the most controversial architect of feminist hardball. "A peacemaker, or someone who is gentle and says please and thank you wouldn't have gotten anything but patronizing in leadership offices in the House. It took every bit of in-your-face before we were even listened to."

Smith's bad cop approach had its counterpart in Rep. Brown, who played good cop and believes the dynamic moved the agenda forward. "If we don't have people like her out there, then my position, or my compromise stuff, starts to look radical," Brown said, "and I think without our radicals we don't move anywhere. That's how we move forward — through the radical feminist movement. If we don't have them, we're not going anywhere."

But while some called Smith's confrontive style and uncompromising stance effective, her critics called it haranguing and made it an issue. House Speaker Campbell at one point told a House colleague that simply putting Tricia Smith's name on a bill would prevent its passage. But the issue is not only the Senator's style. Being an advocate of gender equality means something different to any two women. But for many, it threatens fundamental gender identities. During her campaign for the statehouse, Rep. Patty Milne (R-Woodburn) said some women colleagues urged her to tout feminism, and she refused. "I said, 'Why, does that legitimize me?' I couldn't understand that," she said. "I didn't see that I needed to prove to other women that I was a woman."

Milne cites her votes on the mammogram bill, on a similar bill requiring gynecological exam coverage, and on the girls' equity bill as support for the women's agenda. Milne opposed the Commission for Women budget and legislation guaranteeing safe access to abortion clinics. She insists she pounded her fist in Republican caucus meetings to generate caucus support and said women who consider themselves feminists shouldn't be leery of women who don't categorize themselves that way.

Even as strong a supporter of feminism as Rep. Ford admits her uneasiness. "I guess sometimes with the women's agenda I get a little leery myself," she said. "Because, I want the women's agenda without question. But I also want an agenda for men. I want everybody to have the same opportunities. I don't want one side up over the other."

While its adherents may be skittish about feminism, lobbyists have to appeal to a number of its outright detractors.

"Feminism is the 'F' word of the 1990s," said Laurie Wimmer, director of the Coalition for Women. "Most of us who have any savvy at all describe ourselves as women's rights advocates. I've often joked that the reason I take my children to (legislative) hearings is to show that we don't eat our young, and I'm only half kidding."

On the record of its achievements, the feminist coalition won far more than it lost, at least of the issues it set out to win. But critics and even members of the coalition say it is vulnerable in its homogeneity.

Some Republican women fault the coalition for being too narrow, lacking in men and Republicans. "We acted as women alone, it seemed, without the partnership of male colleagues," said Senator Jeanette Hamby (R-Hillsboro). Hamby blames part of the isolation on partisanship — it was a session lacking in trust and, at times, overflowing with vitriol.

But Republicans and men weren't the only ones absent from the coalition. "We are being too narrow, we are being too elitist," said Rep. Shibley, who is a lesbian. "We're too white, we're too straight, we're too middle class, we're too urban-centric, we're too Democratic, we're too lots of things."

Reaching across those divisions means women are taking a look at why they exist, an uncomfortable quest. Moughon said one of the most difficult and painful things she learned during the legislative session was about herself. "There is an *Old Girls* network, and I'm part of it," she said. "I'm so used to complaining about *Old Boys* networks which I'm not a part of, but I'm part of an *Old Girls* network that doesn't reach out, often, to women of color and to women who are economically disadvantaged."

When the outreach does happen, say some, it may not go far enough. Representative Avel Gordly is a Portland Democrat and African-American. Gordly says she is frequently asked to serve as the voice of diversity on task forces that have only one diverse voice: hers. She refuses those kinds of invitations. "It's a burdensome role to be seen as speaking for a whole community, or the race, which is ridiculous," she said. "Would I expect one of the white persons in a given group to represent their whole race? It's strange, it's crazy."

Some believe the biggest unexamined political rift on women's issues is the state's urban/rural split. Rep. Ford, for example, says she knows women legislators from rural districts who share her views, but won't vote them. "Their constituency does not favor those votes, and they're representing their districts," Ford said. "They really struggle within themselves, but they don't do it. Men don't do it, either, but I think this has been a real problem for some of the women."

Lobbyists and legislators who worked on the women's agenda in 1993 realize that the people who attended meetings, testified, and drafted policy were largely white and middle class. One reason task forces don't become more multiracial, according to many Black leaders, is that racism is often more painful to women of color than sexism is, so the tasks that get top priority may be different. But, ultimately, many say the reason is that the priorities are different. In health care, for example, abortion is the reigning woman's issue. But Rep. Gordly says that in her district and for African-American women, access to basic care is far more important. And for farmworker women, pesticide regulation and documentation is more important.

Bridging race, class and gender divisions requires changing the methods by which women achieve their goals, according to feminist leaders. Susan Jeffords directs the women's studies program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Jeffords points out that as women moved closer to the center of American political life, the women's movement pushed aside the concerns of women of color and working class women. Now, she says, the movement must challenge itself to put their concerns at the top of the agenda. Not simply to establish diversity, she says, "but to fundamentally challenge the whole principle on which that notion of power was originally constructed and to change the idea of what power is, finally. So that perhaps we might produce a notion of power that would not depend on exclusion and oppression of someone else, but would depend more on self-empowerment...that didn't depend on someone else getting less in order for one person to get more."

Broadening the movement for equality in Oregon, say some women, will mean allowing groups with less power to work from the beginning in drafting policy. In the same way that women once challenged men in power, women of color are challenging leaders of the mainstream women's movement. If its leaders can't bridge their internal divisions, women's coalitions will remain vulnerable to criticism and opposition from some of the very groups feminists say they most want to serve.

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