

Women's Rights in the USA: On the Amazing Strides of American Women

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Global Research, November 22, 2010
22 November 2010

Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [Women's Rights](#)

photo above: Senator Margaret Chase Smith who pushed women's rights legislation through the Senate

That we take the concept of full equality for women today for granted shows how far women have progressed when only 50 years ago they constituted America's largest untapped human resource; when only 6% of all doctors, 3% of all lawyers, and fewer than 1% of all engineers were women; when no woman could compete in the Boston Marathon and when every woman needed her husband's permission even to get a credit card. In the comparatively short span since, American women have made astonishing progress, from legal secretaries to lawyers, from nurses to doctors; from kitchen menials to astronauts, and from USO hostesses to front-line warriors. Their dramatic story is charted in the new book by New York Times columnist Gail Collins in "When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present (Little Brown)." Back in the Sixties, "It was legal to say that women couldn't be in management, because it was bad for the men," Collins tells interviewer Diane Sullivan, a professor at the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, producers of "Educational Forum," on Comcast SportsNet to be aired at 11 A.M. Sunday, November 28th.

In the Sixties, popular TV westerns such as Bonanza spread the message that "Girls stayed at home and that girls do not have adventures," Collins recalled. There were a number of amazing women around and here and there women pioneers blazed new paths "but the idea in general was always that women were the mothers and the wives and they stayed in the house," she said. Some women after World War Two developed the first television shows, shows that featured women in important roles, but "when television became a very big deal, (the women) all went away, and you really had no shows in which women were the main characters." In Bonanza, for example, lead Ben Cartwright, (played by Lorne Greene), is a widower on a big ranch whose three wives all died and whose sons fell in love with girls who all died as well. "I mean, really, you walk near the Ponderosa (ranch) and you were dead. It was a toxic landmine for women," Collins said.

By 1970, however, the Mary Tyler Moore comedy series on CBS portrayed bachelorette "Mary Richards" as a single woman in her Thirties who was never married and was not looking for a man to support her. "This woman developed into a person who clearly not only had dates but clearly had sex with guys," Collins said, yet "who had a very full life with her work and her friends and never talked about getting married, and it wasn't a big deal" but "it was a huge first." The show took Emmy Awards from 1975 through 1977 as TV's "outstanding comedy series." One of the huge changes of the Sixties reflected in the Mary Tyler Moore show was the elimination of the double standard of sexual conduct, "that

women should be virgins and men were allowed to go out and get as much sex as they could," Collins said. This led to a situation where, to protect their virginity, women tended to get married very young. Those who planned to do so realized that if they didn't marry early on, by the time they were 24, "there (weren't) going to be any men left. So you had women from that big baby boom generation looking for husbands among the men who had been born during World War Two, when there was a much lower birth rate, so there were fewer guys anyway." Accordingly, women sought their husbands on the campus and "they had a good reason to be worried if they weren't married by the time they left college...and if you weren't married by your junior or senior year at the latest you were just dead meat. So the idea of getting married fast was really important," Collins recalled.

Among the developments that fueled the drive toward equality for women, Collins says, were the civil rights movement and the birth control pill. A booming, post-war economy also played a role. In 1964, when Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act, an opposition congressman from a southern state added as a joke and to slow its passage "gender to the things you could not discriminate against in employment," Collins said. Whereupon Martha Griffiths (D.-Mich.) pushed it through the House under Title VII of the Act and Senator Margaret Chase Smith (R.-Maine) steered it through the Senate. (Smith had been named to the Senate to fill her late husband's seat—a husband's death being the only way a woman in those days could achieve such a high post.) "At that point," Collins said, "there was virtually no woman in this country who thought there should be a law prohibiting discrimination in employment because of gender. That seemed so far out in the future. The women at the Commission on the Status of Women, the most radical women there, were hoping that some day there'd be a study commission on this," Collins said. "Then, suddenly, it was in the law, and once it was in the law and women realized that the government was not planning on enforcing that part of the law, they went crazy. And that's when the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded, and that's when women started to go to court to sue, and that was really the beginning...of all the changes."

From 1964 to 1972, during that tiny period, they abolished discrimination in jobs, Title IX was passed abolishing discrimination in education, bringing women into sports, they abolished discrimination in credit and Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment, Collins noted. Until then, becoming a housewife was a reasonable, if not necessarily an inspiring, choice for women. Women who did work back then found employment in factories, reporting to male supervisors, or as domestics, reporting to female supervisors "and there were no vision for most women of this great job on the outside where they were going to become a brain surgeon or something," Collins said.

As for the birth-control pill, this was approved for contraceptive use in the U.S. in 1960, and quickly became popular. (Today, they are used by about 12 million American women, among 100 million women world-wide, Wikipedia informs.) Until it caught on, Collins said few women applied to law school or medical school or applied for any kind of job that required long-term commitment for preparation because "they all believed you should marry very young...(as) once you got married there was not much you could do, really, to prevent pregnancy." "The pill" made it possible for women to concentrate on careers as never before. The Sixties was the first generation whose families could afford to send them to college, "even if they weren't planning a super career," Collins said, and their families "figured their girls would marry guys who had college degrees, the better for them. So a lot of women went to college, took the same courses as the guys, learned the same stuff, were interested in the same things and then once they were out everything turned around and

they're supposed to be home hanging up the laundry while their husbands are out, and a lot of (women) were shocked to find they were not happy. It was a surprise to them as well as the country when it turned out that they were really not thrilled."

Women also got a boost when "no fault" divorces began to liberate them from dysfunctional marriages from which they had previously been unable to escape. "It was only in the Sixties and Seventies that you really started to confront this and in the name of fairness you had to move toward easier divorce laws because it had been very, very difficult to get a divorce. The presumption of divorce was that somebody was at fault...that somebody had to be bad, and that person had to be identified and punished in some way." Pointing out that the divorce rate "went up a lot," Collins nevertheless said she suspected that "it was (the) women who were relieved to be getting out of divorces...and the new divorce laws presumed that the goal should be to have the woman support herself, which makes perfect sense if the woman is another professional. But if the woman's been at home for thirty years, and the husband, meanwhile, has been running his dental practice or something, it was totally unfair to some of these women and it didn't take into account daycare and child care" so women experienced a "sense of dislocation."

While millions of women found happiness as homemakers in the Sixties, recognizing that they were doing better than their mothers, "you had a combination that the economy's booming, people are moving up, everybody's happy, women are used to the kind of lives they had" when a small group of women, whom Collins terms the "Betty Friedan Generation," "had this problem they couldn't identify and suddenly realized, 'Oh, yeah, it's because I'd like to have a job.'" (Friedan wrote "The Feminine Mystique" in 1963 and three years later co-founded the National Organization for Women and was NOW's first president.) Getting that job, much less working it on equal terms with men, was usually well nigh impossible, causing women to turn to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) created to enforce the new civil rights law and which "everybody presumed (complainants) would be some black steelworker coming in waiting to get justice." To the contrary, Collins said, the first people in the door were stewardesses enduring gross discrimination on the job. "Once they got the job, they realized that they were going to be fired as soon as they got married, and that most (employers) also laid them off when they turned thirty... Basically, the whole job was an invitation to sexual harassment on a daily basis. They were all about being attractive and cute, and serving men in the planes...lighting their cigars...It drove working women completely nuts at the time, so they knew better than anybody exactly how deep discrimination ran. They were the first ones in the door (at EEOC)."

A key suit was filed in Georgia on behalf of Lorena Weeks, a woman employed by Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Co., whose application to become a router (an officer worker that made sure all the equipment was working) was denied on grounds that the position was only for men and, besides, the law said women couldn't lift anything heavier than 30 pounds and the job required the employee at times to lift 31 pounds. After her union proved unsympathetic, Weeks turned to NOW and got Sylvia Roberts as her lawyer. (Ironically, Roberts couldn't find work in her native Louisiana as no employer there would hire a woman.) After three years of litigation, an Atlanta judge in 1969 handed down a landmark decision that banned laws that applied only to one sex. "It was a huge, huge decision," Collins emphasized, and the court said "it's very romantic to say that women can't lift 30 pounds, but it's not the real world." How the Civil Rights Act advanced the cause of women was spelled out in the words of the Court:

“Turning to the merits we observe that there is no dispute that Mrs. Weeks was denied the switchman’s job because she was a woman, not because she lacked any qualifications as an individual. The job was awarded to the only other bidder for the job, a man who had less seniority than Mrs. Weeks. Under the terms of the contract between Mrs. Weeks’ Union and Southern Bell, the senior bidder is to be awarded the job if other qualifications are met. Southern Bell, in effect, admits a prima facie violation of Section 703(a) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. Sec. 2000e-2(a)...”

Collins points out that after World War Two there just weren’t enough men to fill all the jobs in an exploding economy so employers “started hiring women in droves” and placed them in many non-factory positions working in offices and stores, so that by the Sixties as large a percentage of women were working as they had been during the war. “They were part of this huge economic boom that established a middle-class lifestyle in this country in the Sixties that we had never seen on the planet before,(when) average families would own a home, that they’d have a car, maybe two cars, that they would expect to send their kids, if they could, to college, that that was a hope and an expectation, that they would go on vacations—all this stuff was totally new after World War Two.” In recent years women “are whipping men in every aspect of higher education,” Collins says, noting that “way more girls go to college, finish college, and do better in college and are becoming the majority in professional schools. There are some entire careers that they used to be barred from, like pharmacy and veterinary medicine” where “huge proportions” of the work force is made up of women.

During the late Sixties as housing costs climbed, and particularly after the Arab oil embargo in 1973 pushed up prices, it became difficult to support an average family on one salary so the answer became, “in droves, women will work,” Collins said, adding, “To me, that’s the real crux of this book. Once you get to a point where young women, going through their childhood and their young adulthood, presume as a matter of course that they’re going to work...to help support their families....just as the guys are expecting to do...then everything has really changed. And it can’t go back, because the economy is structured in a way that it can’t go back.”

Today, Collins notes, 50 percent of the workforce is female and “We rely more on women’s labor than any other developed country in the world, and yet we have not figured out who’s supposed to be taking care of the kids while everybody’s at work. It’s just amazing.” However, she says, many of the get-ahead women have paid a price for their success. “If you look at the women who do really make it to the top, particularly in law and business, most of them don’t have kids. They’re married, often, but they don’t have kids and the ones who do are, God bless them, incredible.” The tough kinds of jobs they are filling, Collins says, often require large commitments of time which is hard to find when women also have the primary responsibility for raising children. “And I think that explains most of the things that we look out there and see. Why do women still make, on average, less than men per hour? Why are there still not even a third of the House and Senate female? Women start political careers later than men do and that’s primarily because they wait until their kids are older because it’s such a time commitment.”

Collins goes on to point out that the Army “has been very slow in dealing with what happens to the kids when their mother’s suddenly shipped overseas” even while it has integrated them into combat positions. The changes in the military occurred “when it had to change for practical reasons.” She noted that the public had been generally accepting of the idea that women could serve as nurses “but they were very uncomfortable with the idea of women

being in combat and there were lots of fights about what women's role would be." Women "were really discriminated against as to what they could do within the military," she continues. "And even as we went into this period of huge change, after the changes there were still rules that said women could not serve in combat positions, which most people in the country really supported...And it was hard on the women in the military, in the sense that most of the jobs...are combat positions...and, for heaven's sake, that's what they're there for." The big change occurred during the Gulf War when it became hard to define what a front-line position was. "Suddenly, you're in Iraq driving a truck (and it) is a combat position, and suddenly you have all these women being killed, women being taken prisoner, (and) all the things that happen to guys tend to happen to women now, and the country has just sort of rolled with it. I've not seen one uprising of, 'Oh, my God, a woman was killed in combat, how could it happen?'"

Collins said those in the women's movement would really know they won on the day when a woman occupied the White House. "and they were so sure it was going to be Hillary Clinton and when it wasn't—when suddenly, this guy came along out of nowhere and took it all, they were shocked and angry...but Obama won fair and square." Nevertheless, Collins pointed out, Clinton made the public "get used to the idea that a woman could be the Commander-in-Chief, and that's an incredible triumph and some other woman is going to get to be President because of her." Asked what most impressed her doing research for her book, Collins replied, "The women who knock me out are the ones who just stand up and say, 'This is what I'm going to do when there is nobody around them who thinks it's a good idea. Now we're really used to 'You go, girl' and you get support no matter what you want to do." But the women who stood up alone and said it early on were the real pioneers, never to be forgotten, at least, not by Gail Collins.

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