

## **THE NEXT AMERICAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT**

### **Comments for Symposium on “The Women Effect”**

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Preparing for this symposium prompted me to confront the paradoxes of late-twentieth century feminism. After hard-fought struggles that breached many previous barriers, American women have made huge strides since the 1960s in higher education and workforce involvement. Many, including the remarkable women leaders assembled here today, have ascended to previously unattainable professional and managerial positions in civic organizations, universities, philanthropy, business and government.

But in a bitter irony, during broadly the same era, the United States has become starkly more economically unequal, with women in non-elite and professional ranks the biggest losers. Most of the recent fruits of U.S. economic growth and improved productivity – including the new productive energies women injected into the economy – have been pocketed by hyper-wealthy corporate chieftains and plutocrats who, in turn, promote harsh public policies that undercut the wages and benefits of most U.S. workers. Above all, ever more punitive workplace practices and public policies are harming wage-earning women who find themselves flat-out not just at work but also in attempting to care for children and other loved ones who depend on them. A few key facts highlight the contradictions:

- U.S. economic productivity rose fourfold from 1947 to the present; in real dollars, typical family incomes kept pace until the mid-1970s, but have barely risen since. Incomes stalled and families lost their share of rising productivity even though female labor force participation shot up – including work for wages by, currently, 71% of American mothers.
- Even though increased female market work has greatly boosted the U.S. gross national product, women's wages stubbornly lag men's – and poorly paid women and their children crowd the growing ranks of the U.S. poor.
- Women still do most housework and family caregiving, yet the jobs they hold, including many of the nation's part-time jobs, are the ones least likely to

include employer health insurance benefits, paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, or predictable hours.

- Women need public social benefits, but powerful forces are pushing to gut Social Security and Medicare, block minimum wage increases, prevent the institution of universal paid family leave and pre-school programs, and stall or roll-back the Affordable Care Act.

### *The Next American Women's Movement*

Clearly, boosting the fortunes of working women and families, especially those at the middle and bottom of the income distribution, is THE overriding women's issue for our time. But U.S. feminism as it has been organized and practiced since the 1960s is not going to be enough get the job done. Several ideas for fresh goals and strategies have emerged on this panel – and I have thoughts of my own:

- A reinvigorated U.S. women's movement must recapture the bold ambition and cross-class inclusiveness of its forerunners a century ago. Especially back around 1900, vast voluntary membership federations uniting vast numbers of women from elite, farm, white collar, and blue collar backgrounds teamed up with higher-educated civic advocates like Jane Addams to push for new local, state, and national policies. Women's organizations and alliances spoke up politically on every major issue – in their view, women's issues included war and peace, education, health care, environmental protection, you name it. In tracking testimony from women's associations before Congress throughout U.S. history, Kristin Goss found that organized women claimed authority on all national issues, ceding none – until the late twentieth century when, somehow, “women's issues “ got pigeonholed into narrower concerns of lifestyle and professional affirmative action. Now, a reinvigorated American women's movement has to push back against agenda marginalization – by claiming centrality in the new fight for economic equality and by fashioning the broadest possible civic and political alliances. As our fore-great-grandmothers did, we need to claim campaigns for political and civic reforms as our own, including fights for voting rights and efforts to rescue U.S. politics and governance from the chase after big money donations.

- In our own campaigns, we must avoid adding up every sliver's concerns into long laundry lists of narrow policy prescriptions. A broad alliance of women's organizations and other groups should work to fashion an easily comprehensible SCORECARD OF MAJOR STEPS TO BOOST AMERICA'S WORKING WOMEN AND FAMILIES. Scorecards can be powerful political tools, because they build movements, further public understanding, and can be used to track and publicize the relevant votes taken every year by every state legislator and member of Congress. Policymakers can be put on notice that, over time, voters will find out who is, and who is not, acting on behalf of working women and families. Speeches alone will not count.
- In recent times, Democrats and many progressive groups have placed far too much faith in static polling and thin media campaigns, which cost a lot and do not work very well to shift attitudes or behavior. Research shows that person to person contacting through networks is what inspires people to push for civic and policy improvements. Attitude changes often follow, not precede, actions. The next women's movement must forge wide-ranging ties far beyond avowed feminist ranks – reaching into communities, churches, youth and old people's groups, unions, and so forth.
- Effective movements must target the right enemies. In this era, our major enemies are plutocratic and right-wing forces pushing to block or roll back voting rights, mass organizations, and policies to improve wages, benefits, and family supports. Men are not as such our opponents. And for that matter, not all women will be our allies either – opponents will increasingly put feminine and minority faces on their retrograde politics.
- Finally, we should stop undercutting ourselves by debating “who is a real feminist” or obsessing about whether each event, project, group, or alliance we organize looks like a Benetton billboard. Fighting for the right goals and values is what counts most – and all effective social movements have an imperfectly standardized variety of contributors who use different words and do not all look the same. What is more, major movement leaders and participants always include privileged people who are motivated by value commitments as well as people acting out of self-interest and material needs.