Working Women: Finding Common Ground

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- Is *common ground* possible to find?
- Do we want to be on *common ground*?
- Should *common ground* even be an objective?

In 1848, America witnessed the initial articulation of "Women's Rights." Just over twenty years later the movement had already become divided between the different agendas of the National Woman's Suffrage Association – which advocated not only for suffrage, but the much more radical issues of divorce reform and licensing prostitutes, and the more conservative American Women's Suffrage Association – supporting state-by-state suffrage campaigns. Although the two groups eventually united and agreed on a fresh strategy that excluded the devisive radical issues, the new organization alienated future alliances when it argued that the vote of white, American women could protect the status quo of our political system from the threats of immigrants and the newly freed slaves.

With the vote secured in 1920, it appeared that the battle had been won – women had a voice, career-oriented women could now begin to compete with men for jobs outside the home, and total equality would soon be realized. However, during the first half of the 20th century, working women were caught in the fight among women over protective legislation – limiting hours, improving work conditions and increasing pay. Considered to be progressive by the majority of the women's movement, the legislation was opposed by the National Woman's Party because it reinforced gender differences and encouraged discrimination in hiring practices. The sacrifices required for national unity during the Depression and WWII further accelerated the decline in cohesiveness of the movement - initially in the 30s with a decrease in jobs open to women, only to be reversed by the overwhelming need for women in the workforce during the 40s. Ultimately, the new opportunities and independence provided by the war dissipated quickly. Within twelve months after the war, 3.25 million women were let go or quit those wartime jobs – some happy to return to the home, others resentful.

It was not until the 1960s that the movement regained momentum in what many historians claim to be the most radical political and social movement of the mid-20th century -- "Women's Liberation." The early years of this second wave were generally divided between the "politicos" wanting to focus on systemic problems of the nation's political system, and radicals who called for the eradication of male supremacy in all walks of life. Both approaches attracted large numbers of women, many who began challenging the movement by their diversity and unique perspectives regarding specific issues – Gay Rights, Abortion, and Civil Rights. Top leaders of the National Organization for Women (formed in 1966) feared that the new and unexpected voice of lesbians jeopardized the movement, and these leaders actively purged the "Lavender

Menace," portraying the public face of feminism as firmly heterosexual. The pivotal 1973 Roe v. Wade decision further divided women between pro-choice and pro-life, with many women fearing that a woman's choice regarding the unborn fetus let men off-the-hook in sharing responsibility for a born child. In addition, women remembering the false promises of support following the abolition movement, were reluctant to be overshadowed by the Civil Rights Movement – the quintessential cause for black women. The passions and tensions of the highly charged early years of the second wave could not be sustained, and by the mid-70s little philosophical unity remained from the early women's liberation groups.

The eclectic movement of the mid-70s generated numerous groups which focused on specific issues such as family, health, rape crisis, educational equity, and pension reform. Working women were split over the approach to dealing with family issues – particularly child-care. Difference-feminists felt that mothers needed special treatment and protections in the workplace; equality- feminists insisted that total equality was gender-neutral. For black feminists the glaring hypocrisy of white feminists exploiting black women as their housekeepers and childcare givers could no longer proceed unchecked. Male supremacy had simply been replaced by White supremacy. Even the Equal Rights Amendment – the most dramatic legislative campaign since suffrage – was fraught with dissent. Women on both sides distrusted the stability of marriage – supporters of the ERA saw it as the way to allow women to break out and support themselves; those opposed feared that dependent women would lose financial support for themselves and their children. Others argued that women who strive only for equal rights with men, often fight just as vehemently to protect for themselves their newly won power. These diverse perspectives on issues continued to factionalize the movement, creating numerous identities and perceptions, allowing opponents and outsiders to use stereotypes as they pleased.

With the failure of the ERA came disillusionment and blame. Some early feminists rejected the movement outright, others blamed diversity and issue driven causes for the failures, and, more recently, others have attributed the failure of the movement to its basis in utopian ideology, calling for a move to the "higher ground" of realism by deconstructing the concept of gender differences, and arguing that "sisterhood," like any community, is "inherently unstable, contentious and diverse." Lines continue to be drawn between working women and stay-at-home moms. Women with families and super-moms struggle with different issues than single, career-focused women. The privileges and prestige of academic women are criticized by blue-collar women. Debate continues to thrive between gender feminists and equity feminists. Some women consider themselves part of the "post-feminist" generation, and for others the term "feminism" itself causes anxiety. For over a century and a half we have been, and quite clearly continue to be, on very Uncommon ground based on

differences in ethnic background, sexual orientation, national identity, religious affiliation, economic resources, educational achievements, and social mobility.

Can we claim to be a post-feminist generation when women who have attained equity with men, use their "rights" to patronize those below them in the hierarchy? Have utopian ideals really let us down, or has realism naturally corrected our course? Is it necessary to agree on a definition of feminism? Can "Women's Rights," "Voice," "Choice," "Equity" hold different meanings for individual women and groups of women, and still keep us united in a cause? Can we accept a feminist movement with the most inclusionary of visions? Do we possess enough imagination to broaden our understanding, compassion, and empathy for people with different struggles and issues? Can we use our differences to construct a dialectical discourse that will encourage feminist causes to evolve and flourish?

We face enormous challenges in continuing the struggle our forebearers began in the mid-19th century. There is still work to be done, the movement must continue to evolve, and difficult questions must be answered.

Additional Resources:

Women's Movements in America – Their Successes, Disappointments, and Aspirations Rita J. Simon and Gloria Danziger, Praeger Publishers, NY, 1991

Moving the Mountain – The Women's Movement in America Since 1960
Flora Davis, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1991

Major Problems in American Women's History
Edited by Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1996

Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women
Christina Hoff Sommers, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1994

Higher Ground – From Utopianism to Realism in American Feminist Thought and Theory Sally L. Kitch, The University of Chicago Press, 2000