

Boston (USA): Feminists Tell Their Own Stories

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Review of Inside the Second Wave of Feminism

Boston Female Liberation, 1968-1972

An Account by Participants

by Nancy Rosenstock

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022, 202 pages, hardback and paper.

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INSIDE THE SECOND Wave of Feminism is a small volume packed with big ideas and activities shared by a militant group of young feminists in Boston a half century ago. It was a time of explosive ferment, with millions of people protesting against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and on the heels of massive civil rights marches earlier in the decade. Women were part of those movements and beginning to organize around feminist issues.

Twelve of the 13 feminists interviewed in the book, including the author Nancy Rosenstock, were members of Boston Female Liberation (earlier known as Cell 16.) Their stories, woven together in interviews, read as a conversation over eight chapters. This rare account told in the words of actual participants, reveals how their consciousness raising led to collective action, and ultimately shaped history, and their own lives. The book is imbued with a sense of joy in the struggle that only such personal accounts can convey. Included are photographs, leaflets, articles, and position papers which document their broad range of activities from 1968 to 1972.

Taking us “inside” what became known as the “second wave of feminism,” we see these feminists build on the courage and commitment of the “first wave” suffragists, winning women’s right to vote 50 years earlier.

Feminists of all ages and supporters of women’s rights today should find something of compelling interest in this book. As Rosenstock states in the book’s introduction: “Being part of the women’s liberation movement during these momentous years forever changed our lives, as it did for millions of women. Understanding our history and learning from it — both successes and failures—is vital in confronting the challenges of today.” (3)

“The Personal is Political!”

Coming from a variety of backgrounds, these feminists all grappled with the limited educational and employment opportunities open to girls and women in that era. Society treated females as second-class citizens, as commodities to be manipulated by individual males and institutions, objectifying females’ bodies and lives.

Rejecting the notion that “biology is destiny,” these feminists read voraciously and discussed a broad range of issues. They embraced the idea that “the personal is political,” that challenges they faced were not individual “problems,” that society was responsible for the discrimination and harassment they faced.

Discussion led to plans for collective action to remove barriers, end restrictions, change laws! They learned karate and Tae Kwon Do and organized self-defense classes, addressing violence against women long before the #MeToo movement. They published a multi-paged, hand-assembled newsletter, soon distributed weekly to over a thousand.

In 1968 they launched a trailblazing feminist magazine *No More Fun and Games*, featuring theoretical analysis, poems, and drawings. Seeking to address every aspect of women’s rights, they eventually became a poll of attraction nationally.

A Turning Point

A turning point in second wave feminism was the Women’s Strike for Equality on August 26, 1970, the 50th anniversary of women’s suffrage. Fifty-thousand people joined a massive march down New York’s City’s Fifth Avenue, with simultaneous mobilizations in 90 other cities. Banners raised three basic demands: free abortion on demand — no forced sterilization; free community controlled, 24-hour child care centers; and equal opportunities in jobs and education.

Female Liberation members organized a march of 5000 in Boston and also sent a large contingent to New York. An interview with Ruthann Miller, the coordinator of the New York March, is featured in the book. Miller points out that being a young mother as well as an activist brought her to a new level of self-confidence and belief that she could do anything she set her mind to. This experience was true for many participants.

Following August, 26, 1970, these Boston Female Liberation members became convinced that a strong, mass-action oriented movement could be built. They got involved in several campus and community initiatives. They organized a presentation by diarist and writer Anais Nin, which drew an overflow crowd of over 1100 people. They joined with other feminist organizations including the New England Women’s Coalition. This led to a New England Congress to Unite Women in 1971, attended by 800.

Female Liberation’s The Second Wave: a magazine of the new feminism, was launched in 1971. Several articles appear in the book’s documents section.

Female Liberation members participated in the Cambridge Childcare Referendum Committee, which organized a major petition drive that put free, 24-hour community- controlled childcare centers on the ballot in a 1971 referendum. It won 76% of the vote in the then largely working-class community. The local government failed to fund the childcare and it was never implemented. But the campaign reinforced the idea that championing the needs of women of color and those with the lowest incomes is crucial to winning liberation for all.

Boston Female Liberation took an early and active position to add the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the federal constitution. They actively supported the gay and lesbian rights movement in its early days. These are just some of the activities they organized.

They were energized by possibilities to grow the movement, and bring about fundamental change! Working together night and day, they also knew how to have a good time, including dancing all night long to Aretha Franklin music.

Central to Winning Liberation

The right to control one's body is fundamental to winning full emancipation. With thousands of women dying every year from complications of illegal, back-alley abortions, and lives upended by carrying unwanted pregnancies to term, a national movement was shaping up in the early '70s to repeal all restrictive abortion laws.

Nancy Williamson states in "Abortion: A Feminist Perspective" (175) "We didn't choose the abortion issue. It chose us."

Female Liberation members helped plan the founding conference of the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition (WONAAC,) held in New York City in July, 1971, attended by over 1000 people. The conference called for nationally coordinated activities and mass mobilizations, demanding the repeal of all anti-abortion laws, repeal of restrictive contraception laws, and an end to forced sterilization. (Women of color were often sterilized without their knowledge or consent.)

Plans promoted campus and community chapters, speak-outs, teach-ins, caravans, and a national demonstration in Washington, DC that November. The author joined the national staff of WONAAC in New York, spending three months in Washington, DC organizing the national march. This movement helped to forge ties with women fighting for abortion rights across the globe.

Women of Color Were There!

A major misconception about second wave feminism is that it was entirely white, and "middle class." Not true!

Female Liberation member Maryanne Weathers was also a member of the Black and Third World Women's Alliance. Two of her several articles on Black Women's Liberation appear in the documents section: "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force," from 1969, which has been widely circulated since, and "Black Women and Abortion." from 1971.

Rosenstock also points to an excellent companion book to her own, Patricia Romney's *We Were There: The Third World Women's Alliance and the Second Wave* (Feminist Press, 2021,) which describes how women of color (Black, Latinas, Asian and Middle Eastern) were active in the same period, bringing their own powerful contingent to the August 26, 1970 march.

Other Black feminist leaders, then and since, have written extensively about the "triple jeopardy" faced by most women of color due to their sex, race, and class.

Later, passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976 dealt a crippling blow to poor women and women of color, eliminating federal funding for abortion. Currently only 17 states override the amendment by contributing state Medicaid funding for abortions.

Feminism and Socialism

As their individual commitments deepened, these feminists concluded that only a society based on human need, not private/corporate profits, can enable the full liberation of women. Quite a few joined the Socialist Workers Party or the Young Socialist Alliance, its youth organization. Reinvigorated by these members, the SWP-YSA were among the first socialist organizations to embrace the women's liberation movement as revolutionary, supporting the August 1970 women's rights demonstrations, as well as the campaign to ratify the ERA.

For these feminists, socialism and feminism were totally compatible. However, tensions arose within the women's movement as differences in strategy emerged. Some accused socialists of "taking over" feminist projects and organizations.

The book deals frankly with the pitfalls of attacking others when differences arise. Red-baiting is an example. The author explains how this led to major speakers withdrawing before the November 1971 march. Years later it became clear that FBI infiltration was responsible for much of the redbaiting (as in the civil rights, anti-war, and labor movements).

Rosenstock reinforces the point that second wave feminism as a whole was not a monolith. In contrast to many mainstream feminist groups of this era, the feminists in this book stand out for understanding the need to act in solidarity with other movements (the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Black Liberation struggle are two examples.)

They saw mass actions as the way to build coalitions and unite the greatest number of people around common goals, focusing on what we agree on now, even if we don't share agreement on everything in the future.

What Was Won?

Despite divergent strategies, a burgeoning feminist movement that included teach-ins, testimonies, class action suits, marches and rallies, along with the broader atmosphere of protest by millions during the 1960s and early '70s, combined to win a major concession: the historic 1973 U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* ruling which legalized abortion through 24 weeks of pregnancy. Millions of lives were saved.

Following this victory other reforms were won, including affirmative action and women's studies programs. Women, including the feminists in this book, made inroads into new occupations, trailblazing into factory and technical jobs not previously open to women.

Many of these feminists remained politically active, including marching for the ERA, in support of gay and lesbian rights, in labor struggles, against other U.S. imperialist wars, and for expanding abortion access. They participated in the historic Women's March of millions in January 2017 after the election of the misogynist, racist and xenophobic Trump.

Within weeks of the 1973 *Roe* ruling and following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, many in the broader movement were demobilized and demoralized. Most of the mainstream feminist organizations pursued a strategy of relying on elected officials and courts to defend what was gained. Meanwhile feminists in this book continued to advocate for relying on the power of a collective movement.

The electoral strategy has not advanced women's rights. Years of mounting restrictions led us to

today, dealing major blows to abortion rights and reproductive justice.

Inspiration for Today!

Inside the Second Wave of Feminism arrives at a pivotal moment, when much that these feminists fought for is in peril. January 2023 should have been a celebration of 50 years of constitutionally protected legal abortion. Instead, the June 2022 U.S. Supreme Court's Dobbs decision and overturn of Roe are part of intensifying assaults on women and all working people.

LGBTQ rights, the rights of Black, Indigenous and all people of color, are threatened in the context of deepening inequality in health care, education, housing, and the impact of environmental devastation. Young women today grew up expecting the right to choose if and when to have children and what a family should look like, not bound by new restrictions on bodily autonomy.

Young people are not giving up without a fight to restore what was lost and win more. We see evidence of their anger with the overwhelming turnout in favor of preserving abortion rights in the November 2022 elections, in Kansas last August, and with many also taking to the streets.

The feminists in *Inside the Second Wave* shook up the world AND their own lives. I was excited to read the book, reviving memories of my own participation in the second wave, and inspired by its rich lessons being shared with young activists today. We need a sustained and fighting movement that mirrors the dynamic energy, creativity, commitment, and comprehensive reach of the feminist voices in this book.

Linda Loew

P.S.

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