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## Women in History--Bella Stavisky Abzug (1920-1998)

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# Women in History

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## Bella Stavisky Abzug (1920-1998)

Meg Blair

Bella Stavisky was born in New York City on July 24, 1920. She was born to activism: her father's butcher shop was called the Live and Let Live Meat Market, in protest of WW I. Her parents were Russian Jewish immigrants, and when her father died there was no son to say Kaddish for him, so 13-year old Bella marched into Temple each day for a year to offer the prayers, a role traditionally forbidden to women.

After graduating from high school, Bella attended Hunter College in New York. Her dream was to be a lawyer. Harvard, her first choice of law schools, did not accept women, so she went instead to Columbia, where she met her husband, Martin (Maurice) Abzug. It is notable that in that day, Martin put aside his dreams of becoming a writer, and in order to support Bella's ambitions, he worked as a stockbroker.

Her first claim to fame as a lawyer came when she traveled to Mississippi while eight months pregnant to defend Willy McGee, a black man accused of raping a white woman. Local motels would not allow her to stay, so she slept in the bus station for the entire trial. Her other cases were typically labor disputes or civil rights cases, often done for free or for very little money.

Another early highlight of her life was founding the first modern women's mass peace movement, Women Strike for Peace in 1961. This group fought for a nuclear weapons test ban.

In 1970, Bella won her first term to Congress. She ran on the slogan "A woman's place is in the house: the House of Representatives!" Her campaign buttons replied: "Abzug-lutely!" Her support of liberal causes and flamboyant, often confrontational manner, did not endear her to the old-fashioned men with whom she mainly worked. She was universally recognized as being a workhorse, often recording 18-hour days. She became an expert at getting through Washington red tape and was always well prepared for whatever business was before her.

She was an ardent opponent of the Vietnam War and was the first member of Congress to support impeaching President Nixon. As chair of the

## About the Author

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subcommittee on government information and individual rights, Bella co-wrote three influential laws: the Freedom of Information Act, the Sunshine Law, and the Right to Privacy Act

In 1976, instead of running again for her seat in the House, Bella campaigned for the Senate and lost. During the next few years, she ran for Senate again and for the Mayor of New York. She lost each time, but this did not deter her spirit of activism. Instead, she turned to women's and environmental rights. She worked hard supporting the Equal Rights Amendment and was appointed special advisor to the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. She co-founded the Women's Environment and Development Organization, a worldwide group focusing on greater access for women to political power.

Another example of her outspokenness came in 1977. She was appointed by President Carter to head the National Advisory Committee on Women. But, the group issued a report critical of his increased military spending at the expense of women's issues. President Carter fired her after the report was made public. Bella Abzug continued to work for women's rights until ill health forced her to have heart surgery in March, 1998. She died the day afterwards.

Although not normally connected with educational issues, Bella Abzug was a passionate supporter of women's rights, and often education went hand-in-hand with improving the economic conditions in which women lived worldwide, and education was vital to women becoming more involved in the political process. From the time she defied Jewish tradition to learn to read the Torah, Bella Abzug fought for equality of women in education. She was student body president at Hunter College where she was active in political causes with other students. During this time she opposed the Rapp-Coudert committee, that was attempting to "crush public education" and

whose agenda also included reigning in “subversive faculty” (Hyman & Moore, as cited in Cook, 2005). Some of her other notable achievements in the area of education included her work with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the Beijing Platform for Action, that included strong wording regarding education of women, and work to pass both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Educational Amendments, which called for equality in all areas of education for women and girls.

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\*Note there is discrepancy in the literature on the spelling of the maiden name. It is referenced as both Savitsky and Stavitsky