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Commemoration: “The National Women’s Conference: Taking 1977 into the 21st Century”

University of Houston, Houston, Texas, November 6-7 2017

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Commemoration: “The National Women’s Conference: Taking 1977 into the 21st Century”

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Introduction

- 1 On November 6-7 2017, the University of Houston welcomed a commemorative conference sponsored by the Center for Public History of the University of Houston to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the International Women’s Year (IWY) Conference of 1977: “The National Women’s Conference: Taking 1977 into the 21st Century”. Activists, artists, and researchers from all over the country gathered to foster a discussion on this pivotal 1977 event organized by American feminists at a time when the movement was in full force. Worldwide, the years 1975-1985 were designated as the United Nations Decade for the Women and an International Women’s Year Conference was held in Mexico City in 1975, leading to the adoption of a World Plan of Action in favor of women’s equality. Anxious to honor the US commitment to women’s rights, American feminists lobbied Congress for funding in order to organize a similar gathering in the United States. This triggered national discussion on the advancement of the status of women and debates were conducted in every state throughout 1977. That same year, the Southern state of Texas was chosen as the site of a state-sponsored conference that attracted more than 20,000 people (Spruill, 2017, 2). Both a political and a symbolic event, the Houston Conference brought together a wide range of attendees in terms of age, race, sexual orientation and political obedience, ready to debate on the meaning and purposes of womanhood and feminism. In aims and scope, it resembled the Seneca Fall Convention, where, in 1848, first-wave feminists publicly gathered for the first time to discuss the condition of women and to make political and social claims for their sex.

- 2 The 2017 conference intended to assess the feminist struggle since 1977 by remembering the symbolic outreach of the International Women's Year conference. This was all the more pressing that the Harvey Weinstein controversy had just become public. The Women's March in Washington D.C along with the Houston Conference of 2017 comforted women all over the United States that feminism was alive. In Houston, both activists and researchers assessed the 1977 event. The conference was perceived as a moment of collaboration and commemoration, during which the feminist legacy was to be appraised. Several themes emerged from the conference, as will be shown next.

An Invitation to Write Women's History

- 3 According to its organizers, one of the main goals of the 2017 conference was to arouse scientific interest in women's history. If they wished to reconvene the former actors of the 1977 IWY, they also intended to attract historians to encourage further history writing and rewriting about the 1977 conference and about women in general. Several activities were organized for that purpose. The first workshop of the convention offered an immersion into the events of 1977 thanks to a sound- and image- based retrospective. This insistence on making sense of the past also transpired through the recurring encouragements to visit the archival collections of the University of Houston. The conference also demonstrated an urge to write women's history, in light of a political context in which they appear to be more vulnerable. Thus, Professor Marjorie Spruill, the keynote speaker of the first plenary lunch, offered her vision of the 1970s feminist struggle and introduced her latest book *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (Bloomsbury, 2017). Spruill analyzed the confrontation between feminists and antifeminists and its culmination at the occasion of the 1977 IWY conference.

Conservative Alter-Egos

- 4 The 2017 conference had a surprising outcome in that it shed a new light on the activism of the opponents to IWY. In 1977, a group of conservative women led by activists Phyllis Schlafly and Lottie Beth Hobbs organized a counter-rally in Houston in order to express their disagreement with the federally-sponsored feminist conference. They managed to mobilize a wide variety of people with different interests but gathered around their similar vision of women. If many of them were part of single-issue groups, including prolife activists, religious traditionalists, and conservative lobbyists, they coalesced to give birth to the so-called family movement. Several presentations focused on these conservative women and an entire panel, "Feminism and Conservatism: Points of Convergence and Divergence" was dedicated to this subject. Panelists showed how the conservative counter-rally complexified the idea of female activism in the US. Indeed, in the 1970s, many women resisted the rise of the feminist movement and managed to win some battles, such as when they stopped the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have enshrined sex equality in the Constitution.

The Backlash and Reproductive Justice

The political and cultural opposition that the feminists faced from the late 1970s onwards endangered a lot of their gains, particularly concerning women's health and sexuality. No less than four panels focused on issues related to reproductive justice. While one group reflected on the implications of the link between welfare and poverty for women, others assessed the progress made in terms of access to contraception thanks to IWY. However, another panel examined the social regressions caused by conservative activism, and more particularly by the so-called prolife movement. Sexual politics has indeed become one of the favorite areas of warfare between liberals and cultural conservatives, to the point that feminist advancements need sometimes to be reassessed.

Assessing the Achievements of IWY

- 5 Taking into account the incredible force of resistance at work in American society today, organizers felt that it was important to reflect on the impact of the IWY conference and its significance for the feminist movement, as was demonstrated during several workshops. The opening of the conference consisted in a roundtable of former activists (among them two former officials of the National Organization for Women and feminist Jo Freeman). They discussed the mixed outcomes of the IWY conference. In another panel entitled "The Historical is Political" (in reference to the well-known feminist slogan "The Personal is Political"), scholars attempted to draw lessons from the 1977 conference and identified the weaknesses of second-wave feminism. Former activists and historians provided their expertise on issues such as the feminists' capacity of inclusion and their positioning towards dissent. This led to a final conversation on the legacy and influence of the Houston conference during which members of civil society discussed where to go from 1977 so as to provide a new impetus for the contemporary feminist movement. In that regard, one panel also presented a series of conclusions pertaining to the current evolution of feminism in the face of the recent political developments. Through a focus on leadership and the persistence of the glass ceiling, one study of sexism in the 2016 elections attracted a lot of attention (<https://news.uark.edu/articles/38918/modern-sexism-and-2016-election-are-focus-of-report-from-blair-center-poll>). It made it clear that feminism still has much to do.

Diversity and Sisterhood

- 6 One of the most obvious obstacles that the feminists had to deal with during the IWY conference was the question of inclusiveness. Numerous media commentators in 1977 had predicted that the conference would collapse under the weight of dissensions due to racial and sexual diversity. The 2017 symposium intended to demonstrate that minorities fully participated in the democratic process at work at the conference and that the adoption of the entire Plan of Action signaled the open-mindedness of the movement. Numerous panels were thus dedicated to underlining the activism of a wide range of militants, including discussions on the experience of Latina and Chicana women, Black women, Asian-American women and lesbians. The focus on the diversification of women's voices by historians reinforced the impression of female solidarity that the organizers of

IWY wanted to put forward. The notion of sisterhood was hence put in the spotlight, with the intention of rehabilitating the term and its meaning. There was also one panel on intersectionality, the concept according to which discussing women's position requires paying attention to different axes of identity and to different modes of oppression. The notion of intersectionality was applied to the study of the 2017 Women's March and it re-updated questions about the existence of an all-encompassing feminist identity.

Collective Identity and Memory

- 7 Second-wave feminism was able to make claims for women in the 1970s thanks to the reunion of activists under the umbrella of the feminist movement. This collective identity was built throughout the years and the commemorative conference of 2017 was but another contribution to this constant construction. A wide range of feminist activities, among which a women's march, were organized during the weekend before the convention and were designed to strengthen togetherness. Group awareness and cohesion were also reinforced by the participation of famous leaders of the movement. The first evening, a roundtable with Chicana feminist Martha Cotera, writer Gloria Steinem and Professor Charlotte Bunch took place. They discussed the aftermath of the 1977 conference and voiced their concerns for the future, in view of the state of the feminist movement.
- 8 One original effort towards the reinforcement of a feminist collective identity deserves a special mention: the collection of memories through interviews. Indeed, one purpose of the 2017 conference was to gather former activists and IWY delegates in order to remember the events of 1977; this anniversary worked as a collective ritual of memorialization. The organizers paid tribute to former participants by setting up an oral history workshop during which they were asked to record their individual narratives of the Women's Conference. This initiative called "A Sharing Stories Challenge" was sponsored by Gloria Steinem, who stressed the importance of collecting testimonies of the event in order to assess the impact of the conference.
- 9 Transmission was identified as a key purpose of the conference. If an entire panel was devoted to the intergenerational stakes of female activism, numerous "open conversation spaces" were also provided for informal exchanges. Fostering dialog was seen as a good way to reinforce ties between veterans of 1977 and to cultivate the feminist spirit. Group identity was also celebrated thanks to the screening of the award-winning film *Sisters of '77*, followed by a discussion with the filmmakers (Cynthia Salzman Mondell and Allen Mondell). This moment provided an opportunity to visualize the event and start a reflexive analysis of its proceedings.

Art and the Visual Celebration of Womanhood

- 10 Representation as both a source of power and oppression for women was a major aspect of the discussions on feminism and womanhood. Three panels were devoted to this issue. "Image and Activism: Exploring Representational and Body Politics in the 1970s and Today" focused on the use of images in relation to women's issues. An iconographic reflection was also developed in two other panels dedicated to art and activism, in which female artists presented their work.

- 11 The promotion of local artists from Houston was also an integral part of the conference; attendees were indeed invited to visit the exhibitions presenting the artworks of prominent women of the area or to listen to poetry readings. Artistic achievements by women were also given some prominence, as shown by the closing celebration which consisted in public performances.

Conclusion

- 12 The anniversary event celebrating the 1977 IWY conference gathered a wide variety of participants underlining the breadth of the project. Encompassing both political and academic objectives, it aimed at encouraging a renewed discussion on women, gender issues and the American feminist movement. It provided an opportunity to hear the voices of earlier actors while also listening to the analyses of professional researchers who contributed to a focus on memorial stakes and who shed a new light on female activism. They uncovered previously invisible experiences and dissonant stories, which had been relegated to the margins of history until now. Events like the 2017 Houston conference help preserve the legacy of the feminist movement, the transmission of its ideals, and the spirit of sisterhood.
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