

Audrey Denecke on Activism for Women

As a 10-year-old girl on vacation with my grandparents at a Porter county Wisconsin farm during harvest time, I had an early awakening on how women received less than equal treatment. Rising at sunset, the women spent hours tending to their household and farm-based chores. Later in the morning all the women gathered in the large kitchen to prepare the traditional midday farm meal. It felt to me like a holiday, with a huge quantity of meats, potatoes, several vegetable options, and homemade breads. I assisted my grandmother with small tasks, while she and her friends laughed together as they cooked and baked. A rough wooden dining table is quickly crowded with food platters as the noon hour arrived. All the men washed in basins just outside the dining hall. Their heavy footsteps entering caused a quiet hush to fill the kitchen. I went to sit down at the table and my grandmother pulled me back and told me no. We must wait. Then, a few moments later, came the clinking of spoons on cups to call for refills from the women who scurried to serve the men. This clinking of spoons disturbed me. When the men left, all the platters were empty. The women had to pull together a lesser meal for all the children present and themselves. It further disturbed me, at how we, my grandmother, her friends and my new younger friends from the farm are treated. When I returned home from vacation, I retold this troubling tale many times. This experience was an early clarion wake-up call that if any group did not have a place at the table, inequality sits there.

In 1972, around the time that MS. Magazine was first published, I joined a small Consciousness-Raising Group. C.R. groups were often transformational experiences where “the personal became political.” We explored and discussed women’s health issues using a book by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, entitled, *Our Bodies Our Selves*. Almost all gynecologists, at the time, were men. We also learned about how the women in our group faced workplace discrimination, being paid lower wages than men and passed over for promotions despite equal experience and advanced degrees. I also learned about women’s inability to access credit in their own name. It shocked me to discover that when my father facilitated my first car loan as a teenager, my gender as well as my age were requirements for his signature. I listened as the married women in my group expressed dissatisfaction on other life opportunities. The support of my small cadre of C.R. women sensitized me and educated me on limitations on my life as a woman.

Early Actions

I began attending meetings of the Lake County (Illinois) Chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1971-72. I quickly took on leadership roles, primarily because “someone” was needed to fill them. I volunteered.

My first issue interest areas were employment equity, equal pay and the E.R.A. (equal rights amendment). But my first solo action on behalf of N.O.W. was for infant health.

As an officer of Lake County N.O.W., I was asked to participate in what was called a stockholder action (using stock proxies to raise social justice and other issues) at a major pharma corporation annual stockholder meeting. Lake County N.O.W. was invited to join the Adrian Dominican Sisters, on their proxy. The issue was the unethical marketing of infant formula in third world countries. This marketing influenced women in these countries to turn from their breast milk (with its vital antibodies for babies) to infant formula. Strategies included, posting giant billboards with fat, healthy babies shown. The implicit promise of billboards and other marketing efforts was similar healthy outcomes for local babies. The infant formula itself was the same as products sold in the United States. However, pharma companies with infant formula products, did not ensure their formula was introduced with proper instruction on the use of the formula. And Instructions were in English. Many people in the targeted third world countries, at this time, were not literate in the written word even in their own languages. As a result of this and other unconscionable marketing practices, infant formula adopters were left unadvised on safe use of the

product. Because the cost of the formula was high for third world country families, insufficient amounts of formula were sometimes used, resulting in malnutrition of babies. And, another major problem was the quality of water available in some areas. Sadly, then, unsanitary water was at times used to prepare the formula resulting in babies becoming sick and, in some cases, dying.

I was asked by my Lake County N.O.W. Chapter President to accompany the Adrian Sister, adding our organizational clout. Instead, as we sat waiting for the meeting to start, Sister Marilyn suggested I review the statement prior to the stockholder comment period. I looked at her, hoping she was joking. I had never even attended a stockholder meeting. Finally, at the smaller stockholder comment period I secured a microphone and stood to introduce both of us and to read the Adrian's well-crafted statement in front of corporate officers and stockholders (large and small). My voice was initially shaky, it became stronger as I thought of the women and children impacted by economic greed.

Ultimately, the years long related national campaign backed by a large coalition of church justice groups, women's groups, legal groups, was successful. The dangerous pharma marketing practices were changed. Baby lives saved and quality of their lives improved. I lent my small voice, but it was backed by the entire N.O.W. organization. I was convinced then, every voice counts.

My way of connecting to and appreciating the women's movement, was from the beginning rooted in my working middle class/lower middle-class perspective. I knew the challenges of economic equality first within the post-WWII social/economic class realities. My courage, to fight for work equity and against other barriers to women's equality, was bolstered by the diverse and high caliber women I met in the women's movement.

Social movements offer opportunities to stretch out of early world-views and see wider realities and possibilities. The women's movement was a transformational time in my life. I developed many new competencies and capacities. and was successful in numerous situations and roles beyond my early life expectations. I also learned how to become an effective leader through the movement. And, eventually It led me to an entire future career path as an organizational change consultant and now as a leader coach.

I believe too in the often-invisible value of women who lead from the middle of movements. They implement the goals of the movement. And more than that, they so often bring a different perspective which identify or influence new ways of moving forward.

I continue to be active on a range of women's issues, primarily as an individual. In 2017 though, I joyfully joined numerous friends at a huge turnout for the Women's March in Chicago.

As a leader coach, I have offered coaching for non-profit female organizational leaders at reduced or free price levels to support their leadership development.

Most recently, I was part of a small group which worked to establish a bi-state (Illinois-Wisconsin) national wildlife refuge since 2009. A huge coalition of groups from both states supported that effort. The Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge was established by the Department of Interior in 2012. Since 2012 when this group incorporated, I have served on the Friends of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge board. I will be retiring from this board in December 2019.

I am in the process of writing my memoir, my working title is: Ripples of Change: Woman, Movement, and Society. It will cover the dates of activism included in this document.

I am also in the process of identifying the appropriate locations for my papers.

1971-1973 LAKE COUNTY (ILLINOIS) N.O.W. CHAPTER (Waukegan, Illinois)

Roles: Officer: Secretary. Officer: Treasurer. Chairperson: Rape Task Force. Member: Task Force on (Employment) Compliance and Enforcement.

Issue Involvement: Employment Rights; Rape; E.R.A.; Woman and Children's Health

11/1973–12/1975 NATIONAL N.O.W., NATIONAL OFFICE STAFF Bookkeeper–Chicago, Illinois

- Bookkeeper responsibilities: audit deposits from major membership and fundraising drives; review and deposit all other income for the National Organization for Women; maintaining related organizational books and other responsibilities including initiating and responding to correspondence with organizational financial officers and other members.

08.1975 - 12/1975 N.O.W. NATIONAL STAFF UNIONIZES (National and Legislative Offices)

Context: National N.O.W. Factional Fight; Staff Jobs Threatened

Union: Organization of Social Change Employees (O.S.C.E.)

Role: President of O.S.C.E. (elected September 1975)

Union Purpose: Collective Bargaining on Wages, Hours, Terms and Conditions of Employment for both National N.O.W. offices staff

1974–1978/78 CHICAGO N.O.W. CHAPTER (Chicago, Illinois)-Activist

Roles: Chair Legal Advocate Corps; Chair Employment Committee.

Issue Involvement (not a comprehensive list)

- Active in the following Chapter Initiatives:
 - N.O.W. vs. City of Chicago;
 - N.O.W. vs. Sears, Roebuck
 - N.O.W. vs Standard Oil of Indiana
 - E.R.A.... Illinois and National Action (s)
 - Led Legal Advocate Corps, which assisted women in understanding their employment rights and directed to related Federal and/or State Agencies for filing employment charges, as appropriate; and collected first person case information to support Chicago N.O.W. advocacy efforts.
 - Participated in Hearings/ U.S. Civil Rights Commission/Women in Poverty on Employment Agencies discriminatory practices on behalf of Chicago N.O.W. Chapter (November 1974).
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1976-1977 EIGHTH DAY CENTER FOR JUSTICE (Chicago, Illinois)

[8th Day Center is a formalized organization for a coalition of women and men's Catholic Religious Congregational Justice Coordinators; Hired here as lay staff person for a special program.]

SPECIAL CENTER PROGRAM—HUNGER PROJECT

Coalition of individuals, businesses, churches, and community organizations sponsored by 8th Day Center.

CONNECTION TO WOMEN:

Poverty Rates for Women Higher than Men; Women and their Children Majority of the Poor

- Focused on hunger in Chicago and the plight of the relatively new food stamp program.
- Initial program purpose is outreach to eligible poor populations on availability of food stamps.

1977–1979 FOOD JUSTICE PROGRAMS/Hunger Program Spin Off from 8th Day Center for Justice **Phase II Role: Network Coordinator**

Focus of Role:

- Strengthening of Hunger Coalition in Chicago
- Addressing Food Lunch Program Issues
- Legislative Actions with National Groups such as FRAC (Food Research Action Center)
- Advocating with and on behalf of Chicago Food Banks serving hungry.

1979–1983 MIDWEST WOMEN'S CENTER (Chicago, Illinois)

MY ADVOCACY ROLES UMBRELLA HERE: Non-Traditional Employment for Women

Opening Non-Traditional Skills Craft/Professional Employment Roles for Women

Midwest Women's Center in Coalition numerous governmental, civil rights, community-based, and sister organizations (Chicago, + Illinois, + Regional, + National levels).

TRANSITION NOTE: Funds for Non-Traditional Employment for Women is waning. Doors Opening for Women (some gain; more needed). And, personally, ready to consider my professional next steps.

1983–1984 INDEPENDENT / EXTERNAL CONSULTANT

Role: Conference Coordinator

Conference: Teenage Pregnancy: A Community Responsibility, A Statewide Leadership

Conference, October 19, 1984

Sponsoring Group: Illinois Caucus on Teenage Pregnancy (grass roots advocacy group) and Ounce of Prevention Fund (state funded services organization);

Both sponsoring agencies found my consulting while balancing their distinct approaches to teenage pregnancy valuable. Conference participation and outcomes exceeded expectations.

END OF THIS DECADE OF ACTIVE ADVOCACY FOR WOMEN
