DR. BARBARA J. BERG

My life was shaped by the women of my family who struggled against the privations of their sex. As a child I'd heard the stories of my Great Aunt Rose's twelve year old passage across the Atlantic Ocean with her younger sister, (my Grandmother Gertrude), their faces turned away from Odessa and memories of the Easter Pogrom which killed their parents and every last vestige of childhood.

The sisters were taken in by cousins on Bayard Street in New York. Within a week they were working in a factory twelve hours a day, followed by night school to learn English. When classes became more demanding, they asked their foreman if they could leave an hour earlier one evening. He refused, but they left anyway, thinking they could make up the time. The next morning the factory door was shut in their faces.

They immediately began looking for jobs in the neighborhood. Later that afternoon they were swept up by a crowd shoving them towards the intersection of Green and Washington Streets. Thick plumes of smoke were billowing out of the eighth floor window of the Triangle Shirt Waist Company, the floor in the same factory where until that very morning they'd sat at sewing machines. People were yelling to the girls hanging out

the windows, "Get to the stairs." "Go up on the roof." But all the doors had been locked to prevent the workers from taking breaks. That day when my Great Aunt and Grandma stood in horror as 146 of their friends and co-workers perished hideously formed the master narrative of my family.

Aunt Rose became a factory inspector, focusing on the terrible conditions of female operatives, and later an officer of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. She trained as a social worker and joined the Jewish Board of Guardians helping young women acclimatize themselves to America. Gertrude married a young union rep, a fiery orator, who ran for Alderman on the Socialist Party ticket. His proudest memory was carrying Eugene V. Debs' suitcase. While other children learned Itsy-Bitsy Spider, I learned Union Maid and other songs of my mother's youth. And I understood why to look for the union label and why we needed Solidarity Forever.

My parents met in the library of Columbia University. My mom, a history major at Barnard College, worked nights at Macy's to supplement her scholarship, and my dad was getting his doctorate in psychology at Columbia. Their relationship was forged in the fiery caldron of progressive policies of the 1930s.

From my earliest days, I received the traditional 1950s-white-male-power-kind of education at public schools in Brooklyn, and the untraditional all-inclusive-struggles of the powerless-kind from my own family. Did my grandparents and parents use the term feminist? Probably not, but the injustices against women were an

ongoing theme of my informal lessons.

Every summer, with twelve other families, we vacationed in Vermont on the shores of Lake Champlain. College professors, school principals, teachers, created an idyllic equalitarian community. Families lived in small cabins with ice-chest- refrigerators, kerosene stoves, no telephones-and shared chores and much of the childcare. During those years I experienced a gender-blind world and saw first hand the artificiality of sex-linked roles.

Then illness upended our summer vacations and all else in our lives. I came home from school one day to dreadful news. My 46 year old father had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. "I wish it were me, I wish it were me," my mother kept sobbing.

I didn't understand. Why in the world did she want to be the sick one?"

"Because Daddy would be able to take care of you and Lucy (my older sister)," she explained. "What will I be able to do? I have no job, no income. How will I get him the best treatment? How will I support us?'

Then she looked at me gravely and said, "You must always be able to work? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

And I did.

My mom became a history teacher, then school librarian, taking care of my sister and me and getting my father

into the first clinical trials in the country for L-Dopa, the then new miracle drug which kept him mobile until his death at age 73.

Like my mother, I studied history in college and worked. I found a job as a waitress; most of my co-workers were older than I and their stories dramatized the cultural noose ghettoizing women into the low-level positions. I knew then that my future would be dedicated to trying to improve women's lives in any and everyway that I could.

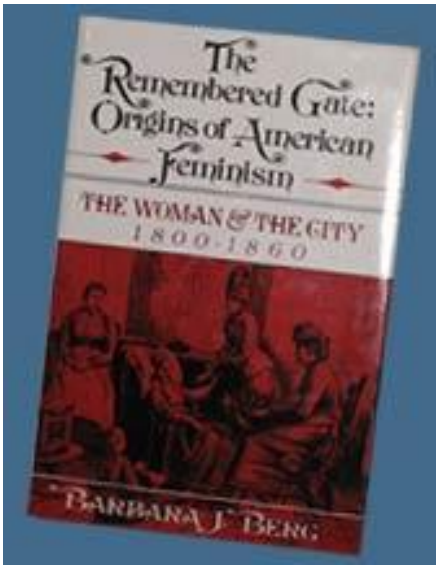
Before I'd graduated from the University of Rochester, I decided to go on for a doctorate in history, but I needed to save money first. Married to my college boyfriend, who was in dental school, I taught for two years at a junior high school in Brooklyn while doing my first 30 credits part time. What sad lives my students had! Not having enough food to eat on a routine basis, girls 15 years old and younger were taking care of 3 or 4 siblings and frequent "catting out " (riding the New York City subways all night). I set up small mentoring groups to help them and met my students during free periods several times a week.

When the girls told me that riding the subways was a way to avoid physical and sexual abuse at home I sprang into action, notifying the school administration, the Board of Education, social services. The only way I could protect some of my students from abuse was to have them sleep on the pull-out in my living room for weeks at a time. Domestic violence wasn't acknowledged as a problem then, and only later, when I became involved in the Women's Movement, did I learn that there were others who had also set up shelters for

the abused women.

I started graduate school at the City University of New York in 1971. The Vietnam War was raging and I joined the CUNY anti- war group. Working on my doctorate was the fulfillment of a long time dream, but it was a tough time personally. My marriage was unhappy and I experienced a hefty dose of gender discrimination at school. My contributions weren't taken as seriously in seminars and I had to put up with comments from male colleagues who'd say things like:" What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" It was the same attitude in the Anti-War Movement; no matter how much women contributed, no matter what risks women endured, we were still "chicks and babes."

In 1970 a woman I'd worked with asked me to join a Consciousness Raising Group, Supported by other women, I finally had the courage to leave my husband and although it meant taking on more teaching assignments, I had greater emotional energy to devote to my studies.



Researching and writing my doctoral dissertation in those heady first years of the Women's Movement joyfully directed my attention to the lives of nineteenth century women. My dissertation and first book, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism*

established a nascent, but vibrant feminism in the earliest years of the New Republic among urban women who banded together to help the downtrodden of their sex. Signing their letters, "Thine in the Bonds of Sisterhood," they advocated for female prisoners and prostitutes at a time when these women were considered barely human. . My book documented a feminist consciousness in America years before it was thought to have originated, among groups of women who didn't yet have any connection to abolitionism. It stirred controversy, but became a standard text of women's history courses.

In 1971, I married Arnold Schlanger, an attorney and a wonderful man, who shared my passion for social justice and women's rights, and had a delightful 3 year old daughter. I started teaching women's history at Sarah Lawrence College with Gerda Lerner, a pioneer in the field. Sarah Lawrence was the first school to offer an MA in Women's History. Our days were filled with teaching, conferences, mentoring students, working on policy papers. I threw myself headlong into the Women's Movement, joining just about every women's organization I could find.

Then a personal loss.

Before I'd started at SLC I'd suffered a miscarriage (a baby girl) in my fifth month of pregnancy. I became pregnant again, but learned in the seventh month I'd have to stay in bed until I delivered. The school bused my students to my house twice a week until the end of the year. My husband carried me from the bed to the sofa (I felt like a nineteenth century invalid); the

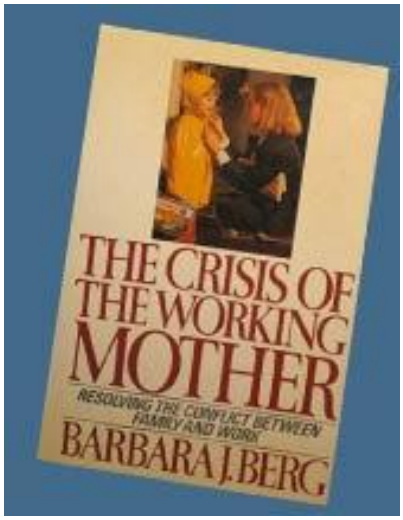
experience bonded me even closer with my students who made the baby a patchwork quilt of women's history.

Then, without warning I went into labor at the end of my eighth month and delivered a baby girl, stillborn. I was devastated and disturbed by the callous treatment of the male-medical establishment. As for the hospitals, they were in the Dark Ages in dealing with women who lost babies. I took a leave from SLC and began to research medical textbooks to see if I could understand what had gone wrong, but also to get a sense of what doctors were learning. And I got it, all right. The books contained egregious sexist language and sentiment, mortifying and dismissive to women about what went on in our own bodies.

Now I had two projects: Having a family and trying to change the medical culture. My approach to the latter was through writing, speaking and teaching: My second book Nothing to Cry About, (the title taken from the insensitive comment my doctor made when I burst into tears during my miscarriage at the news it was a girl and she was perfectly normal) was an indictment of the medical profession's treatment of women. I was invited to talk about the subject on television talk shows, radio, and at perinatal bereavement conferences. We adopted an infant girl when I was pregnant again (seven months in bed, the last three in a hospital this time), and with the birth of a healthy baby boy we now had two children less than seven months apart!

When my children were babies I wrote about health, women's in particular, for The New York Times'

Magazine; M.; Parents, and many other publications. I started the course Medicine and Literature at Mount Sinai Hospital to teach medical students to become more sensitive to their patients. A large part of the curriculum focused on women. I ultimately taught the course at Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, Yale Medical School and The Academy of Medicine. One of my most enduring connections-going on now for thirty years- was to become a member of the Mount Sinai Community Board whose mission is to bring quality health care to the East Harlem community. We've held conferences on domestic violence and parenting skills, sponsored women's health days, and raised awareness about breast cancer, diabetes, hypertension and obesity.



As a working mother with two young children at home, I was experiencing some of the difficulties confronting other women: lack of affordable quality childcare, bosses (in my case editors and department chairs) who made no allowance for sick children, workplace harassment and lower pay than my male colleagues. Still I was one of the fortunate ones. What about women across the nation? What were their difficulties and struggles? I sent out a questionnaire, received nearly 1,000 responses, then interviewed several hundred more women. The results formed the basis of my book,

The Crisis of the Working Mother. I traveled across the country speaking and holding workshops on the difficulties women, especially mothers, faced in the workplace and how to tackle them, and I began to push for reformed government and corporate policies. I used my writing as a platform for my views, my articles appearing in magazines like Working Mother, Working Woman and Savvy-in one piece (1986) I called for an end to the "Mommy Wars."

In the late 80s, my husband lost his position as General Counsel to a corporation, and, like many Americans then was having difficulty getting a new one. I took a fulltime job at The Horace Mann School in Riverdale New York, in 1991 and started a women's history program. The school had been coed for twenty years but in many ways it retained the feel of an all boys' school. My second year there I became a dean of students in addition to my teaching. The first thing I did was have male language "as we men go forth etc…" in the school Alma Mater changed, then I took on sexual harassment which had been going on unchecked for years. Convincing the rest of the administration that we needed a policy was no easy matter; but finally I prevailed as long as I was willing to write it. I did and served as a point person for eight years, successfully overseeing several complicated cases.

At many high schools, young women suffer from lack of self-esteem, eating disorders, risky behaviors, and subtle forms of discrimination. Horace Mann was no different. I started a Women's Issues Club where we could address these issues and founded periodical Folio 51 (which has won several national awards) to remedy

the male bias of the school newspaper. Every year the Women's Issue Club sponsored a Christmas Party for Sanctuary for Families' domestic violence shelter.

My revelations of discrimination at HM led to my appointment as Director of Co-Education K - 12 for three years. I looked at everything from the kindergarten play area to elementary school readers to the songs at commencement to the number of times girls were called on in classrooms compared to boys; my report was used as a model by other high schools. During that time I was the recipient of numerous grants to make high school curricula more gender neutral and wrote The Women's Movement and Young Women Today to remedy the lack of books on this topic for middle schoolers. In 1995 I received The Distinguished Teacher Award (one of 50 nationwide) from President Bill Clinton.

I left HM , with regret, to spend more time with my mom who was becoming physically frail and to dedicate myself to writing, but I was asked by the school to devise Leader Training Seminars for young women, so I had an opportunity to continue some of my work with the female students.

In 2009 I wrote Sexism in America: Alive, Well and Ruining Our Future to debunk the myth that we are a post-feminist society. Starting a with an account of the second wave women's movement, the book draws on medical research, legislation, movies, television shows, advertisements, and hundreds of interviews to reveal the extent to which misogyny is the new Come-Back-Kid, even considered cool and camp in many quarters. It tells the stories of women who faced discrimination in school

and at work, thinking they were the only ones. The success of a few women seduce us into thinking that all the battles have been won. In reality, sexism insidiously, but pervasively has short-circuited the legacy of the women's movement in every aspect of our lives. My book also provides a blueprint of what we can do to secure our rights.

In addition to my work at Mount Sinai as co-chair of the program committee, I'm a vice president of the New York Correctional Association, the oldest prisoner-rights organization in the nation and one of two with a mission of prison-oversight. My work is largely around issues concerning incarcerated women, visiting them, holding focus groups to ascertain their needs and advocating for policy change. For example, when it became apparent that the healthcare books in the prison libraries were woefully out of date, we organized a book drive and added to the collections of all seven female correctional institutions in New York. I am also on the board of the National Women's History Project which is responsible, not only for Women's History Month, but for keeping women's history a vital part of the curriculum at schools across the nation.

I wrote Sexism in America as a wake up call. We all can envision a more equitable world for our daughters and sons than the one we are living in. Now we have to make it happen!

Back To Index