

Leslie Wolfe, Who Pursued Equality for Women, Dies at 74



Leslie R. Wolfe, right, in 1989 with Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, project director for a conference organized by the Center for Women Policy Studies, at the center's office in Washington. Credit...Jose R. Lopez/The New York Times

By Amisha Padnani Dec. 8, 2017

Leslie R. Wolfe, who pursued equality for women, particularly women of color, as a longtime leader of the Center for Women Policy Studies in Washington, died on Nov. 30 in Rockville, Md. She was 74.

The cause was complications of dementia, said Jennifer Tucker, who had been a vice president at the center.

Ms. Wolfe's work began in the thick of feminism's second wave. She sought to make sure the movement included issues unique to women of color, particularly those who were poor or disabled.

"Leslie always talked about double jeopardy and even triple jeopardy," Ms. Tucker said. "She said policy should adjust for differences and similarities, because there are no cookie-cutter women."

Her multiethnic approach stemmed from her experience in the 1970s when she worked at the National Welfare Rights Organization and two government agencies, the Commission on Civil Rights and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

In 1979 she became director of the Women's Educational Equity Act program, a government agency that funded career training for women. By then Congress had passed the Title IX law barring gender discrimination by institutions receiving federal funding. She looked for ways to nudge the initiative forward.

“There was a synergy between Title IX saying to schools, ‘It is against the law to deny women admission to medical school,’ and WEEA saying, ‘Here are ways to improve access to medical schools for women, here are ways to change the curriculum, here are ways to reduce sexism and racism’ and so on,” Ms. Wolfe said in an interview for the book [“More Than Title IX: How Equity in Education Has Shaped the Nation”](#) (2009),” by Katherine Hanson, Vivian Guilfooy and Sarita Pillai.

At the Center for Women Policy Studies, where she was president from 1987 until the organization closed its doors in 2015, Ms. Wolfe was among the first to draw attention to women who needed treatment for AIDS, which had until then been thought of as a man’s disease. Her organization established a national resource center for women with AIDS and put together education and counseling programs around the country.

Ms. Wolfe was also one of the authors of [a 1989 report](#) on gender and racial discrimination on the SAT college admissions exam. The test was supposed to predict how well students would perform in their first year of college, but the research found that girls consistently received higher grades in their freshman year than the test indicated.

The report found gender bias in the exams, for instance in questions that referred to sports. As a result of their lower scores, the report argued, girls were often shut out of merit scholarship funds or acceptance into quality universities.

In 1989, a federal judge in Manhattan [barred New York schools](#) from granting scholarships solely based on SAT scores. Hundreds of colleges now no longer require the SAT as part of the admission process — in part, Ms. Tucker said, because of Ms. Wolfe’s work.

Leslie Rosenberg was born on Nov. 24, 1943, in Washington and raised in Montgomery County, Md. Her father, Theodore, worked at the Pentagon; her mother, Isabelle, was a homemaker.

She graduated from the University of Illinois in 1965 and earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 1967 and a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Florida in 1970. She worked briefly as an assistant professor of English at Olivet College in Michigan.

Her marriage to Barry Wolfe ended in divorce. Her second husband, William Greene, died in 1998. She is survived by her brother, Stanley Rosenberg.

Throughout her efforts in the women’s movement, Ms. Wolfe found that government officials found words like “sexism” and “racism” too strong, preferring “gender” or “discrimination.” So she used the words even more.

“I resist the softer terms like ‘diversity,’ which is almost meaningless in the context of ending oppression and discrimination,” she was quoted as saying in [“Title IX,”](#) adding, “We must not diminish our mission by softening our language.”