

# REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTENNIAL OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

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Gale A. Brewer | Borough President of Manhattan

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## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN 2020 | ELECTION SERIES

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

*President, Academy of Political Science*

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# Achieving the Right to Vote

COLINE JENKINS

THE FIRST PUBLIC DEMAND of elective franchise was in 1848. The 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified in 1920. It took 72 years for women to win the right to vote. Jenkins shared the importance of the work of her great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and her lasting legacy.

## EARLY LIFE OF ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

- Stanton was born in 1815 to Daniel Cady, a prominent lawyer, New York State Supreme Court judge, and congressman. At 10 years old she planned to cut out sections of her father's law books that were distressing to women, though her father explained that would not change the laws.
- At 25, she married an abolitionist, Henry Brewster Stanton. They honeymooned at the first World Anti-Slavery Convention. It was at the convention that she decided, along with delegate Lucretia Mott, that women's rights must be addressed.

## THE DECLARATION OF SENTIMENTS

- Stanton and Mott convened the first women's rights convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY.
- Modeled after the irrefutable arguments of the Declaration of Independence, Stanton drafted the Declaration of Sentiments. It listed grievances against the autocratic rule of men in the United States, including women becoming civilly dead after marriage and being denied a thorough education.
- Stanton demanded elective franchise for women, whereas Mott thought including this would undermine other issues presented in the document.
- Stanton introduced the resolution of elective franchise and viewed "the vote" as a primary right of citizenship. If not granted, women would remain as outsiders. Frederick Douglass supported the resolution, and it was finally adopted.
- The Seneca Falls Convention inspired other conventions across the country, such as in Rochester, NY; Worcester, MA; and Akron, OH—where Sojourner Truth delivered her famous speech.

## THE NEXT 50 YEARS

- Stanton, with a large number of men and women, employed every weapon in the arsenal of democracy *except* the gun.
- Stanton was 32 years old at the first convention, and she remained a radical throughout her life. On her deathbed in 1902, she wrote a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt, reminding him, "No just government can be founded without the consent of the governed."
- Stanton died 18 years before the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment granted women the right to vote.

## STANTON'S LASTING LEGACY

- Stanton's daughter, Harriot Stanton Blatch, was a New York State organizer and broadened the movement. She organized the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women.
- In October 1915, 25,000 suffragists marched up Fifth Avenue in New York City for the right to vote. The third and fourth generations of Jenkins's family marched in this parade. They later recounted, "We marched for the cause."

## THE NINETEENTH AMENDMENT

- Ratified 18 August 1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment states, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."
- Today we stand on the shoulders of the men and women who fought. Now it is time for us to defend that right to vote just as the suffragists did.

# A Brief History of the Equal Rights Amendment

JULIE SUK

THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT (ERA) was first drafted in 1923. The ERA passed both houses of Congress in 1972, and as of January 2020, 38 states have ratified it. Referencing her book, *We the Women*, Suk discussed the origins of the ERA and the mounting challenges that it continues to face.

## ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS HAS BEEN SLOW

- Progress has always been slow. The Declaration of Sentiments was written in 1848, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was not passed until 1920. Stanton and the other founding mothers did not get to see its ratification, though it was their life's work.
- Between 1920 and the 1970s, little progress was made. In August 1970, women leaders like Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug spoke at the Women's Strike for Equality. They demanded equal opportunities for women to work and for the conditions needed to support that, such as affordable childcare.
- In 1970, Bella Abzug was elected to Congress. She advocated for the ERA along with 11 other female colleagues in the House. She did not live to see the ERA ratified by the final state needed to amend the Constitution—this only occurred in January 2020.
- The ERA was first introduced almost a century ago, adopted 50 years ago, and is still a work in progress. It is hard to get equal rights *without* equal rights and equal power.

## CHALLENGES TO THE ERA

- In February 2020, the House voted to remove the ratification deadline on the ERA. This is also the year that a public health crisis has emphasized the nation's dependence on women's unpaid care work within the home, and underpaid essential work outside the home.
- The new Hulu miniseries, *Mrs. America*, dramatizes the ERA's death at the hands of conservative icon, Phyllis Schlafly, who rejected the ERA on behalf of mothers and homemakers. This narrative of women fighting each other and killing the fight for equal rights masks the pernicious dynamic that truly threatens democracy today.
- Before Schlafly, the ERA was already poisoned by powerful men in Congress who insisted on a seven-year limit. Today, the Trump administration and other opponents insist that the ERA is dead.

- For good reason, no other amendment that expanded "We the people" had deadlines (e.g., the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, or 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments). Getting included when you are not included means persuading people who benefit from your exclusion. This issue has persisted for decades.
- In 1970, there were only 10 women in the House and one in the Senate. For over 10 years, House Judiciary Committee Chairman, Emanuel Celler blocked the ERA from reaching the House floor.
- Representative Martha Griffiths used a discharge petition to get the ERA debated by the full House. Once on the floor, a 96 percent majority voted to adopt with no ratification deadline (1970).
- The ERA proceeded to the Senate, where Sam Ervin proposed the seven-year deadline. This, along with other minor and unnecessary changes, effectively killed the bill on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage.
- In March 1972, the ERA was approved by the Senate and sent to states to ratify. This prompted Schlafly's campaigns against the ERA.
- Griffiths argued the ERA would benefit wives and mothers. Representative Florence Dwyer (R) said the ERA would bring new dignity to these roles.
- The ERA stayed in committee in many of the state legislatures, preventing floor debates and votes. In 49 states, men hold the majority of seats in legislatures, and have deployed every institutional lever to stop the ERA for 50 years.
- The ERA is the only amendment to be ratified by three-fourths of the states without being added to the constitution on the basis that it is too late. This deadline could be easily removed—though unlikely under Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who opposes the ERA.
- The best way to achieve the ERA is to change who exerts the power. Instead of "Votes for Women" in 1920, it is time to vote *for* women in the 2020s.

# Training the Next Generation of Women Leaders

LIZ ABZUG

THE 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS brought women their largest electoral victory in history. Over 100 women of all backgrounds were elected to Congress. Through her work with young women at the Bella Abzug Leadership Institute (BALI), Liz Abzug is training the next generation of women leaders.

## THE BELLA ABZUG LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

- BALI trains young women in leadership, debate, public discourse, and contemporary public issues and policy. BALI passes the mantle to the next generation of leaders for them to finish unfinished business—like the ERA.
- BALI works with middle school, high school, and college women to build their leadership skills, body confidence, critical thinking, and writing skills. They also develop the ability to frame an evidentiary argument. BALI works with women, many of color, who go to underserved schools in all five New York City boroughs and the metropolitan area.
- Young women today are eager to understand the context of how we got to where we are today, and what we need to do to move forward. With knowledge of contemporary issues, they will know what to fight for and have the skills to do so.
- Abzug is optimistic that with the tools learnt through BALI, these women will become the leaders to achieve gender equality and break final barriers.
- Ideally, these women can help get social justice bills from the 1970s—written by Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Yvonne Berkeley Frank, and Barbara Jordan—passed.

## WOMEN'S ISSUES IN LIGHT OF COVID-19

- One-third of people currently in the workforce are women. Women are serving on the frontline in every way, ranging from the healthcare industry to the food industry.
- This could be the perfect time in history to achieve a lot of what we have yet to accomplish. This pandemic may highlight the need for the ERA, national childcare, national parental leave, and even universal basic income.

## BELLA ABZUG'S WORK TOWARDS EQUALITY

- Bella Abzug was a strategist, legislator, lawyer, and organizer. She pulled together events that have brought us to where we are today, despite opposition from figures like Phyllis Schlafly who opposed efforts toward women's equality.
- 20,000 women from all states and territories attended the National Women's Conference in Houston, TX in 1977. Bella Abzug managed to get \$5,000,000 appropriated to hold the conference.
  - At this conference, they developed a 25-point platform on everything across the board affecting the lives of women, families, LGBTQ individuals, Native Americans, and women of color. Today, this plan is still relevant in terms of what we need to do.
- Bella Abzug used to say that men and women have been doing things in pairs since Noah's ark. So, why is it so difficult now?

## EQUALITY IN LEADERSHIP GOING FORWARD

- There are plenty of countries around the world that have elected female presidents or prime ministers. The United States has yet to break down that barrier and elect a female president or vice president. Though, we are now closer than ever to pushing that needle towards gender equality.
- We need to change the cultural norm. There need not be a distinction between what boys can do and what girls can do. Men and women should share the power.
- It is time for us to allow women to take their rightful seats at the table and to demand leadership equality.
- There will always be a resistance, but the day is not far away when we will achieve the ERA, national daycare, parental leave, and equal pay.
- To push the women's agenda forward, we need to elect not only more women, but feminist men—at all levels.

# Women Leadership in the Twenty-First Century

GALE A. BREWER

WOMEN TODAY do not have full parity at the political table. However, women do generally vote for women candidates at the local level. Brewer is optimistic about women's leadership opportunities in the future, especially given Joe Biden's plan to choose a female running mate.

## LOCAL LEGISLATION AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- There has been success in passing legislation that benefit women at local levels—such as the Family and Medical Leave Act. Establishing ways for women to manage family and work in a way that they deserve is still a goal of the Women's National Political Caucus.
- Thanks to Coline Jenkins and her organization, Monumental Women, Central Park will finally have a statue of real women (women's rights pioneers Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton). This five-year fight is a prime example of women "making it happen".

## COVID-19 REALIZATIONS

- The coronavirus has made some things evident:
  - There is a clear split between women on the front lines and those who can stay home. Though not exclusively, many of the women on the front lines are women of color.
  - While spending this period at home, unanticipated duties crop up. People are needing to balance work, homeschooling, and chores simultaneously. Who is handling what responsibilities? This crisis may increase support for legislation that has been hard to achieve thus far at the national level.
- The virus has made the world become even smaller. It is times like this that remind us that we *all* flourish when *all* perspectives come together.

## CHALLENGES TO WOMEN LEADERSHIP

- People need to hold politicians responsible for their lousy votes. Some men think they can get away with being anti-everything, including opposition toward women or people of color having power. It is their poor voting that helps women get elected, like in the case of Elizabeth Holtzman beating incumbent Emanuel Celler.

- We have a challenge in explaining the past 100 years. People do not know the history and how it will impact us in the future. However, once it becomes personal, that inspires leadership.
- If men do not experience the challenges women face, whether in raising children or in healthcare issues, we will not achieve meaningful legislation in such areas.
- Civics in schools need to be improved. Young people are energized to get involved, and there needs to be adequate opportunity for that to happen.
- Where are women on the boards of the major companies that have great influence on American lives?

## WOMEN IN OFFICE

- It makes a huge difference when women make up close to 50 percent of a legislature. There are only a handful of these legislatures across the country.
- Across the country we need women in office who have a personal understanding of women's concerns. Unfortunately, women in office do not always get along. However, they do bring key issues to the forefront *because* they have experienced them.
- It is a major step forward when women are appointed to leadership positions. This can help get agendas across the finish line. It also allows for addressing problems that might not otherwise be addressed.

## Question and Answer Takeaways

ATTENDEES HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to ask the panelists questions following the panel discussion.

### HOW CAN CITIZENS HELP GET THE ERA PASSED IN CONGRESS?

- Jenkins highlighted that “We the people” have spoken—38 states have ratified the ERA. It is time to use the court system. Jenkins is currently working with a judge on an amicus brief that the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Trust will cosign.
- Suk said that it is imperative for the Senate to remove the seven-year deadline, but litigation is also a possibility.

### WHY ARE WOMEN ELECTED OFFICIALS SO UNDERREPRESENTED ON THE NYC COUNCIL?

- Brewer stated that only 11 out of 51 councilmembers are female. There are organizations trying to increase that number to 21 in 2021. If counties are not supporting women candidates, it is hard to get elected. As of now, counties do not always support candidates with minds of their own (i.e., women), but this could be changing.

### HOW DO WE DEAL WITH SUBTLE SEXISM ON THE PROGRESSIVE LEFT—FOR EXAMPLE, BERNIE BROS WHO ATTACKED ELIZABETH WARREN?

- Abzug agreed that this is an important issue. Bernie Sanders has a responsibility to speak directly to his followers that they must support the Democratic nominee and whoever the female vice presidential candidate will be. Sanders must work towards creating a coalition of progressive women and deal with this problem head on.

### HOW CAN WE LEAVE ALICE PAUL OUT OF THIS HISTORY?

- Jenkins shared that there is no way to leave Paul out. She bridges two amendments, the 19<sup>th</sup> and the ERA.
- Suk added that she is of course an important part of this history, but she is also a complicated figure with a mixed legacy. She is often credited with drafting the ERA, when it was really the National Women's Party. Some attention has been brought to her racial politics, but it is important to keep in mind that all heroes of history live in a particular time period. We must acknowledge her contributions, while also understanding there are multitudes of other voices.

### WOMEN MUST BE ONE HALF OF BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS. HOW DO WE ACHIEVE THIS?

- Brewer thinks that the pipeline is the best mode of accomplishing this. We need to elect women to county positions, then to the state, and then to Congress. Men often do not need to work their way up like this, but at this point this is how it works for women. Brewer also noted that in doing this, it is imperative that we elect a *diverse* group of women.
- Abzug added that we need campaign finance reform. Finances are often barriers to many progressive, insurgent, and female candidates. She also agreed that the pipeline is key, but that she is getting impatient with this system. She mentioned gender quotas as some countries in Europe have.
- Jenkins concurred that the pipeline is crucial. She would like to see more women become governors—the President has to administer, and administering a state is good training for administering a nation.

### SHOULD WE UTILIZE GENDER QUOTAS LIKE IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

- Suk noted that many countries have effectively used quotas to reach parity, though there were constitutional struggles to achieve it. These countries passed equality amendments, which stated that promoting equal representation and overcoming women's underrepresentation was to be permitted by the constitution. The United States should look to France, Germany, and Italy as models for understanding the ERA in the twenty-first century.