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## Chapter 2

### The Swells between the “Waves” American Women’s Activism, 1920–1965

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#### Abstract

American women’s history is often understood as unfolding in two movement “waves”: the movement for political equality (suffrage) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the movement for social and economic equality a half-century later. In the period between these two waves, women supposedly retreated from the public sphere.

This chapter argues that the inter-wave era was actually a politically vibrant time for American women. Millions of middle-class White women joined membership organizations to lobby for a wide array of foreign and domestic policy changes. Working-class women built up unions and labor auxiliaries and gained political experience that would feed the feminist movement of the 1960s–1970s. Women of color created thriving advocacy organizations that simultaneously represented intersectional perspectives and connected local service organizations to nation-spanning political movements.

Conservative women formed their own organizations to push back against the progressive, internationalist bent of their more liberal counterparts.

Keywords: women’s history, political movements, feminism, suffrage, labor, union

The story of twentieth-century American women is defined by iconic images from popular culture. The 1920s woman was a carefree flapper in a fringed dress who sipped gin in an illegal speakeasy. The 1940s woman was “Rosie the Riveter,” the patriotic helpmate who temporarily stepped out of the home to support the war effort while the men were away. The 1950s woman was Betty Crocker or June Cleaver, a White, middle-class homemaker caring for her breadwinner husband and the children of suburbia. In many people’s minds, these three images define American women between the “first wave” women’s movement, which delivered the constitutional right to vote in 1920, and the “second wave” movement, which transformed culture and policy from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s.

No doubt some women’s lives approximated these popular images, but most women’s did not. Even though they are spread across different eras, and portray very different images of womanhood, these narratives are united by two common and very misleading themes. The first theme is that women’s natural domain is the private sphere of home and leisure, not the public sphere of politics and policy influence. The second theme is that when women do move into public roles, they do so out of temporary necessity, not by choice.

Historians and social scientists have spent at least three decades scrutinizing these narratives and systematically dismantling them. In the era “between the waves,” American women were not exclusively focused on the private sphere, nor were they reluctant activists. On the contrary, as the studies reviewed in this chapter show, the inter-wave era was a vibrant and exciting time for American women’s collective action. Women of diverse classes, races, and ideologies created organizations, forged coalitions,

and sought social and policy change through a wide range of strategies on a dizzying array of issues. Virtually every issue was a “women’s issue.” In the decades after suffrage, women of all stations embraced their new civic status and used it as a platform for grand policy ambitions.

Scholarship on women’s activism in the middle decades of the twentieth century is developing rapidly. This chapter provides a brief and necessarily incomplete overview of some of the most interesting research. It is organized around two perspectives that characterize scholarship on the inter-wave period. The first perspective involves “correcting the record” on privileged women. These studies challenge the caricature of White, middle-class homemakers as consumed with wifely and motherly duties and divorced from public activism. The second perspective might be termed “filling out the record.” Looking beyond well-known White, progressive women’s associations, these studies document the activism of women of color, working-class women, and right-wing women.

This chapter reviews women’s collective political engagement from 1920 until the mid-1960s. The inquiry focuses on women’s participation through women’s mass membership associations, women’s labor organizations, mixed-gender movements and unions, political parties, and even the bureaucracy. As research shows, women were far more politically active and consequential *as a group* than the historical arc of flappers, riveters, and homemakers would suggest. To be sure, women in the inter-wave period faced formidable obstacles, including discriminatory laws and patriarchal social norms that limited women’s opportunities to lead change. For many women, gender-based marginalization was compounded by race- and class-based oppression. However, women

found ways to leverage their roles as voters, consumers, mothers, workers, and skill-bearing citizens to press their concerns.

## Correcting the Record: Activism by Middle-Class White Women

In the modern imagination, privileged White women between the waves were focused on the private sphere. The 1920s flappers dated and danced, while 1950s mothers cooked, cleaned, and cared for the family. Although these iconic female figures engaged in different lifestyles, they seemed to share a desire to be removed from the public sphere of politics and policy. In this account neither newly enfranchised women nor mid-century homemakers appeared interested in challenging the social order through collective action. These women might do charity work, but they were not geared toward broad-scale change. However, scholarly work conducted in recent decades has put these narratives to rest. Here, I review what research reveals about the serious, robust civic action conducted by women in the “roaring” 1920s, as well as in the “placid” 1950s.

## Suffrage as a Platform: Women’s Public Engagement in the 1920s

The Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920 and guaranteed American women not otherwise disqualified the right to vote in local, state, and federal elections. Although other avenues of participatory citizenship remained largely closed to women, gaining the right to cast a ballot constituted a momentous turning point in women’s history. Women had a rich tradition of organizing for community betterment and banging on lawmakers’ doors for policy change. Now they had electoral clout to support their agendas.

Yet, early accounts of the post-suffrage era held that women’s groups failed to take advantage of their newfound political power and build upon the “woman movement”

already in place. As the story went, women simply declared victory and went home. Nancy Cott (1992: 154), an early critic of this narrative, summarizes its key tenets:

After the achievement of the vote, the large coalition movement among women disintegrated; now insiders rather than outsiders, women (ironically) lost influence within the political process. Suffragists' predictions of transformation in politics through women's contributions were not realized. No longer operating from strong women-only voluntary organizations nor avidly showing their strength as unified voices, women were not as aggressive as men in pursuing political advantage in a still highly male-dominated system.

Careful scholarship, including Cott's, has documented the many faults with this conventional narrative. Rather than "declaring victory and going home," women's leaders of the 1920s used the suffrage amendment as a rhetorical and organizational springboard for the next stage of feminist activism and policy reform generally. By almost any metric, the post-suffrage decades were boom years for women's organizations: the number of groups grew, memberships increased, policy coalitions continued to form, and Congress increasingly sought out women's point of view (Cott 1992; Goss 2013). Even when one women's group faded from view, another took its place (Cott 1992).

Elsewhere I have argued that the Nineteenth Amendment evoked two different understandings of women's citizenship and thereby offered a broad platform for their public engagement:

The amendment embodied the duality of American citizenship, which encompasses both rights (to ballot access) and responsibilities (to take part

in collective decision making). In incorporating rights and responsibilities, the amendment also embodied the parallel constructs in women's political history: the rights derived from doctrines of human equality and the caregiving responsibilities derived from patterns of gender difference.

(Goss 2013: 169)

By simultaneously honoring women's equality claims and inviting women's public engagement, the amendment gave new legitimacy to both the feminist and reformist strains of female activism. Women could do either, or both. In the 1920s and beyond, they did both.

Feminist activists recognized that the Nineteenth Amendment was an important step toward political equality, but just a first step. Women's political equality involved more than the right to vote. The National Woman's Party, which had dominated the confrontational wing of the suffrage movement, immediately took up the cause of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which was introduced in nearly every Congress during the 1920s. The party also worked with other groups, including the newly formed National League of Women Voters, to push for women's right to serve on juries (Kerber 1998; McCammon 2012). Nine states and territories acceded between 1921 and 1929 (McCammon 2012: 38). Another focus of women's rights advocates was the Cable Act (1922), which allowed American women to keep their citizenship upon marriage to a foreign national. The act excluded women who married foreigners not eligible for U.S. citizenship, but women's groups kept up the pressure until Congress eliminated the provision a decade later. Thus, by the early 1930s, women's groups had persuaded

lawmakers to decouple American women's citizenship from that of their husband (Cott 1987: 99).

The main driver behind the Cable Act was the Women's Joint Congressional Committee (WJCC). The committee belies the conventional wisdom that the women's movement splintered after suffrage. Emerging three months after the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification, the Committee was formed by ten national women's organizations and more than doubled in size within five years. At its zenith, the WJCC spoke for 12 million women and "was recognized by critics and supporters alike as 'the most powerful lobby in Washington'" (Wilson 2007: 1, citing Selden 1922: 5, 93–96). Although it had largely dissolved by 1930, it left a significant policy legacy. Beyond the Cable Act, the WJCC secured passage of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act of 1921, which provided federal funds to states to reduce mortality among mothers and children. WJCC member organizations also successfully lobbied for consumer legislation and civil service laws at the national level (Wilson 2007: 66). At the state level, the WJCC supported passage of more than 400 state and local laws in the realms of child welfare, women's rights, "social hygiene," education, and good government, among other issues (Andersen 1996: 154).

As the WJCC's experience suggests, women's reformism flourished in the 1920s. The National American Woman Suffrage Association successfully birthed the National League of Women Voters in 1920. The League quickly assumed a central role in women's policy coalitions and would become the dominant women's group on Capitol Hill throughout much of the twentieth century (Goss 2013). The National Congress of Parents and Teachers Associations, founded as the National Congress of Mothers in

1897, also became a mighty force for female reformism, quintupling its membership to 1.5 million in the decade after suffrage (Cott 1992: 162). In addition, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, formed in 1919, grew to 1,100 clubs by 1931 (Cott 1992: 163). Meanwhile, at least two other federations of working women's clubs, Zonta International and Quota International, were founded during this period (Cott 1992: 163). After suffrage, these and many other women's groups continued to descend on Capitol Hill to press their policy claims. During the 1920s, women's group appearances before congressional committees increased slowly, in both absolute terms and after adjusting for the number of hearings, then took off in the 1930s and 1940s (Goss 2013: 35). Clearly, these trends are inconsistent with a crumbling "woman movement."

Most women's activism was channeled through independent voluntary organizations. Even after winning the right to vote, many women hesitated to pursue their goals through political parties, which continued to carry a taint of self-interest and impurity at odds with norms of female virtue. However, women did make inroads through the party structures. Women constituted 6%–10% of Republican delegates and 10%–15% of Democratic delegates at the national party conventions from 1924 to 1948 (Andersen 1996: 83). As early as 1928, women also had changed the image of parties as all-male bastions: "the idea of women as canvassers, telephoners, campaign aides, convention speakers, poll watchers and election officials was now an accepted part of American politics" (Andersen 1996: 109).

Nancy Cott (1987) was among the first to question the puzzling orthodoxy that the expansion of women's political rights in 1920 had doomed women's collective



action. To the contrary, she suggested, “nothing is further from the truth” (1992: 161). Accumulating evidence lends considerable weight to this verdict. No doubt some suffragist leaders rested on the movement’s laurels and retreated from public life, and certainly some young women—caricatured as ditzy “flappers”—didn’t bother to take up the movement mantle bequeathed to them by their mothers. But as demonstrated earlier, the record shows that women’s organizations were buoyed by suffrage. They and their leaders took women’s enhanced citizenship status and made the most of it. The Nineteenth Amendment served as a launch pad for an even more expansive form of female activism, rather than as the culmination of women’s political aspirations.

### The Not-So-Homebound Homemaker: Elite Women’s Engagement in the 1950s

Besides debunking the notion that women got the vote and then went home, scholars have uncovered deep flaws in a second narrative, namely that there wasn’t much going on with women in the placid 1950s—a period that Rupp and Taylor (1987) term “the doldrums” of women’s activism. Challenges to this narrative take two forms. First, scholars have demonstrated that the narrative conflates womanhood with *middle-class, White, suburban* womanhood and in so doing neglects not only the experiences of working-class women and women of color, but also their activism. This activism is discussed in the section on “filling out the record” later in this chapter. The second challenge, discussed here, is that even White, middle-class, suburban women were considerably more politically engaged than popular imagery suggests. As the title of Joanne Meyerowitz’s (1994) groundbreaking volume reminds us, most women were “not June Cleaver.”

Indeed, White women's activism flourished in the middle decades through scores of federated, mass membership organizations, as well as smaller, single-issue groups and campaigns. In his famous study of interest groups at mid-century, David Truman found that women's groups were "both influential and numerous," the dominant players in the citizen group sector (1951: 58, 100). Robert Putnam's influential study of social capital identifies the 1950s as a high point for American civic engagement, with women's activism at the center (Putnam 2000). These were good years for mass membership groups in particular. The General Federation of Women's Clubs counted 800,000 dues-paying members in 1955 (Meltzer 2009: 57). The League of Women Voters grew by 44% between 1950 and 1958 (Ware 1992; Young 1989). Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) identified middle-class women's malaise as "the problem that has no name," noted in a separate article that the real source of these women's frustration was an overload of volunteer activities (Ware 1992: 290).

My own study of women's advocacy on Capitol Hill found that by one important measure, testimony at congressional hearings, women's organizations were actually more prominent in the late 1940s and 1950s than they were in the 1980s and 1990s (Goss 2013: 70). Throughout the middle decades, the number of women's groups appearing before Congress rose, as did the range of issues on which they spoke. These issues included education, environmental conservation, consumer protection, military readiness, foreign trade, and women's equality.

In the years after World War I and through the Cold War, women's groups were an especially formidable presence on questions of foreign policy (Goss 2009). They advocated for some of the most important proposals on Congress's agenda, including the

reconstruction of Europe after World War II and the creation of the United Nations. In the 1950s, roughly 30%–45% of women’s group appearances in any given Congress concerned foreign policy (Goss 2013: 94). Most of the better-known women’s groups—the League of Women Voters, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and Women Strike for Peace—shared an internationalist outlook. They saw the United States’ engagement in the world and the development of international organizations as the best mechanisms for preventing global conflict. However, two world wars and the rise of communism provided fertile ground for the creation of right-wing nationalist and isolationist women’s groups, described later in the chapter. Their approach challenged the dominant female traditions of pacifism and cooperative engagement.

Beyond the global context, many factors help explain women’s activism in the middle decades. Women were more educated than ever, and they had developed leadership skills and confidence during the war. Congress was expanding the reach of the federal government. The explosion of specialized interest groups had yet to occur, so lawmakers looked to multi-issue women’s groups for policy input and political cues across a wide range of issue domains. Equally important, the suffrage amendment—and female leaders’ interpretations thereof—bequeathed to women’s groups a wide array of resonant discursive frameworks to use in recruiting women and orienting their collective action. Three frameworks dominated the era: the maternal framework, the egalitarian-feminist framework, and the “good citizen” framework (Goss 2013). Because each framework resonated with *some* subpopulation of mid-century women, women’s groups as a whole could have broad appeal. The diverse menu of available frameworks also allowed women’s groups to speak to policymakers across the ideological spectrum.

## The Maternal Framework of Civic Action

The June Cleaver narrative holds that privileged White women chose a private life of domestic caregiving over a public life of civic action. In reality, the opposite was just as likely to be true: women used their identity as homemakers as the foundation for their political engagement. Representing this type of activism was the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC). The GFWC, which emerged in 1890, believed that women “were first and foremost wives and mothers and therefore homemakers,” an identity that the organization's “American Home” department sought to reinforce and professionalize (Meltzer 2009: 63). At the same time, the GFWC proudly noted that one-quarter of its national leaders held important positions in political parties and thus were “not women of leisure” (Chapman and Galvin 1955, cited in Meltzer 2009: 58).

Clubwomen's “gendered notion of citizenship deftly forged a consensus of maternalist politics that defied easy left-right political distinctions and brought women together as mothers defending America's liberty and future” (Meltzer 2009: 52). These predominantly White, middle-class women “accepted responsibility for preventing another world war and making the country safe for democracy” (Meltzer 2009: 52). In the Cold War era, these efforts focused on buttressing traditional American values, defined as self-reliance, private enterprise, and democracy.

Clubwomen's activism took many forms. On the educational front, they hosted naturalization ceremonies for immigrants, helped restore Independence Hall in Philadelphia, held “What America Means to Me” essay contests in high schools, and sponsored cultural exchange projects (Meltzer 2009). Clubwomen's work was also charitable, including providing food and other goods to Korea, Germany, and Greece to

promote peace, and encouraging members to develop community improvement projects (Meltzer 2009).

Importantly, women's clubs were political. They advocated for a U.S. history requirement in American high schools (Meltzer 2009). They urged members to run for public office (Meltzer 2009). And they lobbied Congress on a wide range of issues, testifying more than 250 times in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Although Meltzer (2009: 54) argues that the GFWC veered right in the New Deal era and abandoned the state as a reform ally, my data suggest that women's clubs remained very much engaged with federal policymakers. All told, the GFWC and its affiliates appeared more times before Congress in the twentieth century than any other women's group except the League of Women Voters.<sup>2</sup>

### The Egalitarian-Feminist Framework of Civic Action

The two decades following the end of World War II were challenging ones for feminist organizations. They faced an environment in which opinion writers and scholarly theorists, some of them female, portrayed non-traditional women as angry, neurotic, and a threat to the American family (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 12–20). Although numerous tracts put forward a pro-feminist point of view, the drumbeat of anti-feminism combined with the “atmosphere of conformity and consensus to discourage women from voicing protests about gender inequality in American society” (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 23). Even liberal female leaders, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, and progressive women's groups, such as the League of Women Voters, took pains to distance themselves from feminism (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 49).

That said, the women's rights agenda did not disappear in the postwar era. The National Woman's Party, which had played an especially public role in the suffrage campaign, continued to carry the torch for the ERA, as it had since the early 1920s. To be sure, the party's membership had dwindled to perhaps 4,000–5,000 members and only a handful of state affiliates in the immediate postwar period (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 26). However, it had an outsized influence thanks to deep bonds among members, strong feminist commitments, and a shared space in Washington, D.C. (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 38, 45). The Republican Party put the ERA in its platform in 1940, and the Democrats followed in 1944 (Mansbridge 1986: 9).

The equal rights agenda between the waves extended beyond the ERA. Women's coalitions worked state by state to change policies that barred or discouraged women from serving on juries. The coalitions brought together local and state affiliates of the League of Women Voters, state women's parties, business and professional women's clubs, and women's bar associations. And they were successful: between the 1930s and the mid-1950s, roughly half of the states expanded jury service to women (McCammon 2012: 38). The jury service movement proved that women's activists of the inter-wave era were shrewd tacticians, learning from failed approaches and adjusting their strategies accordingly (McCammon 2012). Beyond jury laws at the state level, women's groups worked at the federal level on issues such as equal pay, employment non-discrimination, and opportunities for women in the military.

However, many organizations associated with feminism of the 1940s and 1950s had ideological positions that prevented them from expanding their base beyond privileged White women. The groups were typically segregated by race, and Black

women's attempts to join often caused internal turmoil and resulted in rejection (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 155–156). Support for the ERA also isolated feminist groups from women's labor organizations and many mainstream female-led advocacy groups, which feared that the amendment would undermine laws that protected women from harm. As I show later, however, women pursued feminist goals through labor unions and worker activism in ways that scholars are just now bringing to light.

### The Good-Citizen Framework of Civic Action

Perhaps the most politically active middle-class women's group of the middle decades—and the one that most defied the “quiet homemaker” narrative—was the League of Women Voters. Formed in 1920 as the successor to the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the League dedicated itself to preparing newly enfranchised women for good citizenship. The organization promoted democratic practices: careful study of the issues, consensus-based deliberation, nonpartisanship, clean elections, and robust citizen engagement. The League and its state and local affiliates developed an expansive issue agenda and testified before Congress more often than any other women's group in the twentieth century (Goss 2013: 100). Although it had the suffrage movement winds at its back, the League really hit its stride in the immediate postwar era. Membership rose sharply between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s, and its presence on Capitol Hill rose accordingly. In these years the League served as an important springboard for women interested in running for public office.

The League's appeal arose in part from the niche it could fill in an age of residential mobility. Educated women arriving in a new community could plug into the local League to gain a quick education on local issues and a means of influencing

decision-makers. The League's appeal also was rooted in its ability to be all things to all women. Besides welcoming women of all partisan stripes, the League was, interestingly, both a women's organization and not a women's organization. "Women" was in its name, and its membership was all female, but members "do not think of their organization as a 'woman's organization,' but rather, as a citizen organization whose work is carried on by women simply because they happen to be able to organize their time and energies in a convenient working pattern" (Stone 1946: 16). Even as it distanced itself from a gender-based identity, the League nevertheless subtly drew upon and creatively combined the caregiving-woman orientation of the maternal framework and the empowered-woman orientation of the egalitarian-feminist framework. These ideas combined to form a "good citizen" identity for the League, denying women's difference from men but simultaneously signaling that women were superior to them—more conscientious, less brazenly political, and more public-interest oriented (Goss 2013: 117). Groups like the League conveyed the notion that women were better caretakers of the polity and had at least an equal claim to influence public policy.

## Filling the Gaps: Workers, Women of Color, and Conservatives

Besides dismantling the "June Cleaver" narrative about White middle-class reformist women, historians and social scientists have filled out women's history between the waves by documenting the robust activism of labor women, women of color, and conservative women. Early research acknowledged these women's work, while more recent studies have provided a fuller and more textured picture.

## Workers Unite: Union Women, Working-Class Homemakers, and Their Allies



Scholars of the feminist movement have long noted an interesting historical puzzle. Three landmark federal policies advancing women's rights—establishment of the President's Commission on the Status of Women (1961) and enactment of the Equal Pay Act (1963) and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964)—came into being *before* the second-wave movement, not in response to it. Dorothy Sue Cobble (2004) argues that labor women's unrelenting activism "between the waves" helps us reconcile this paradox. These federal efforts "were the culmination of some twenty-five years of political activism, made possible in part by the political ascendancy of labor liberalism and the increasing assertiveness of women within that movement" (Cobble 2004: 145).

The women's labor movement consisted of four sets of actors: women's unions, women's divisions within predominantly male unions, women's auxiliaries of male unions, and the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, which served as both a coordinator of and an advocate for women's labor organizations. These actors frequently worked together, but they occupied different niches within the broader labor movement.

In the early twentieth century, working women had a collective voice through the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Women's Trade Union League. The National Consumers' League, led by the legendary Florence Kelley, also fought for working-class women's interests. Although the 1920s were not kind to these groups or unions generally, they continued to agitate and enjoyed the company of new allies.

In the decade after suffrage, women's labor auxiliaries advocated for health and social welfare programs for women and children (Abramovitz 2001). The United Council of Working-Class Women protested the high cost of food, fuel, housing, and education,

and the Brooklyn Tenants Union led rent strikes in New York (Abramovitz 2001). Of enduring significance, in 1920 the Women's Trade Union League and other women's groups were instrumental in persuading Congress to create the Women's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Labor. The Bureau's mission was to improve the welfare, working conditions, and opportunities of wage-earning women. The Bureau would go on to support women's labor activism by supplying authoritative research, by serving as a convening force for women's labor groups to network and establish priorities, and by advocating for policies to benefit women. By the 1940s, the Women's Bureau's served as a hub for labor women's organizations (Cobble 2004: 51).

During the Depression, poor and working-class women united in a homemakers' movement that protested high prices and low benefits in cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Seattle. Many of the leaders of these movements had been tradeswomen before they married, so they brought a labor consciousness to their work (Orleck 2000: 379). These militant homemakers benefited from the fact that older groups, such as the Women's Trade Union League and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, were looking to organize women as consumers (Orleck 2000: 380).

The homemakers' tactics included staging sit-ins at relief centers, blocking evictions, and staffing Communist Party-led Unemployed Councils (Abramovitz 2001: 123; Stein 1975). In 1935, homemakers' groups held meat strikes, shutting down butchers in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, and engineered boycotts in at least six other cities (Orleck 2000: 384). Congress called hearings on the meat industry's structure, and activists visited Capitol Hill each year from 1935 to 1941 to press for lower food

prices (Orleck 2000: 387–388). Homemakers staged another round of nationwide meat strikes in 1948 and 1951, also garnering congressional attention (Orleck 2000: 387). As Annelise Orleck (2000: 382) notes, the Depression-era homemakers “moved quickly from self-help to lobbying in state capitals and Washington, D.C.” and distinguished themselves from their predecessors “by the sophistication and longevity of the organizations [they] generated.” Indeed, homemaker movement activists in Michigan and Washington state went on to win public office (Orleck 2000: 386).

The female labor movement gained strength during World War II, when working-class women assumed jobs and leadership roles that men otherwise would have occupied. The iconic woman of the 1940s, Rosie the Riveter, captures this shift; the famous poster’s slogan, “We can do it,” conveys a sense of women’s collective purpose. But as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Rosie simultaneously conjures an image of women as helpmates, pressed into patriotic service when needed but ready to return to their traditional roles. Americans viewing the poster in the 1940s could not have imagined how the movement of women into the wartime labor force would change unions, public policy, and women themselves.

After the United States’ entry into the war, women’s union membership nearly quadrupled, reaching 3 million by 1944 (Dickason 1947: 71). In the mid-1940s, women constituted 28% of United Auto Workers members and 40% of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (Dickason 1947: 72). Nearly every union became gender-integrated during this era (Dickason 1947: 72).

During the war, many women went into union jobs, and male workers often greeted their arrival with resentment (Milkman 1987: 170–171). Yet the unions needed

these new female recruits to maintain their memberships, meaning union leaders had strong incentives to pay attention to women's successful integration and acculturation. Unions such as the United Electrical Workers and the United Auto Workers hired female staff members and encouraged local tradeswomen to strive for leadership positions (Milkman 1987: 172). Unless the unions developed female leaders, the United Electrical Workers president said in 1943, "the men of this union are going to find themselves in a position where the structure of the union will be weakened" (Milkman 1987: 173, citing *Proceedings of UE Convention, 1943: 228*).

Biases held firm, however, and women did not occupy the top leadership positions. Unions also hesitated to develop programs focused on women's concerns for fear of seeming divisive (Milkman 1987: 176–180). Nevertheless, women often held second-tier posts and managed women's divisions, giving them leverage in deliberations over institutional priorities and practices (Cobble 2004: 26). The influx of women into union jobs, coupled with the National War Labor Board's endorsement of equal pay for equal work, resulted in the proliferation of contracts guaranteeing women's pay equity and other protections from discrimination (Dickason 1947: 73). Although women's union membership dropped immediately after the war, it had strongly rebounded by the early 1950s (Cobble 2004: 17).

Women's wartime experiences had profound effects on their civic capacity. Participation in the higher-status world of unionized male work gave women new confidence in their abilities and taught them political skills—both of which would prove valuable for future activism. Women also became intimately aware of community problems and, at the unions' behest, had the opportunity to join service organizations that

were normally the province of elite women (Dickason 1947: 75–76). Such collaborative engagement promoted cross-class understanding and respect.

Women's divisions within male-dominated unions constituted another key player in the labor movement. These units were instrumental in securing resolutions on behalf of women's interests—for example, directing locals to reject contracts that allowed married women to be laid off first and investigating and redressing discrimination against African-American women in hiring (Cobble 2004: 73, 80). Labor feminists were also active in the 1940s and 1950s on the issue of child care. In 1954, they succeeded in securing a modest federal tax deduction to benefit low-income employed women.

Women's auxiliaries, which were female support organizations for male unions, constituted a third important set of actors. In the 1940s and 1950s, they had nearly as many female members as did unions themselves (Cobble 2004: 23). Their advocacy included union label campaigns; boycotts of goods produced in non-union shops; organization of strikes, lockouts, and picket lines; and provision of charitable and support services to laborers (Cobble 2004: 23). Conventions of these auxiliaries took policy stances favoring equal pay, national health insurance, free day care for working mothers, maternity leave, an end to race discrimination, abolition of poll taxes, and a federal statute outlawing lynching (Cobble 2004: 24–25). The CIO Auxiliary considered congressional testimony to be a priority (Cobble 2004: 25).

A fourth key advocate for working women was the Women's Bureau, housed within the U.S. Department of Labor. Congress created the Bureau in 1920 to “formulate standards and policies which shall promote the welfare of wage-earning women, improve their working conditions, increase their efficiency, and advance their opportunities for

profitable employment” and to “investigate and report to the U.S. Department of Labor upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of women in industry” (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Under the leadership of Mary Anderson in the 1920s and 1930s, the Bureau conducted wide-ranging studies on women in fifteen industries, including private household employment, canning, office work, and shoemaking. The Bureau also studied working conditions for Black women in the 1920s (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

The Bureau played a key convening and advocacy role in securing the first feminist victories of the 1960s. In 1961, President Kennedy named Esther Peterson, a former AFL-CIO lobbyist, to head the Bureau. She immediately set out to champion the creation of a women’s commission, an idea that had germinated for two decades. Peterson commissioned a draft proposal from female labor leaders and then persuaded the Labor secretary to take the proposal to the president, who signed an executive order during his first year in office to create the commission. The Bureau was also the central node in the women’s coalition that secured the Equal Pay Act, and Bureau staff members forged the compromises necessary for the legislation to pass (Harrison 1988: 91, 104). Although the act was a watered-down version of what women had sought, it constituted a significant first step by enshrining the principle of gender non-discrimination into law (Cobble 2004: 167). As I argue, these and other early federal policies helped to channel women’s organizational energies toward issues of gender inequality for decades to come (Goss 2013).

From her position at the Bureau, Peterson also advanced civil rights for Black women. She recruited Dorothy Height, head of the National Council of Negro Women, to serve on the president’s commission. They then set up a project on the “Problems of

Negro Women,” which laid bare systems of oppression that White women had failed to appreciate (Cobble 2004: 174). Peterson then convened some 200 women’s organization leaders at the White House to found the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights, in which labor women were quite active. Peterson and Height later created a National Committee for Household Employment to champion the interests of domestic workers (Cobble 2004: 174).

Working women and their organizational allies constituted a potent force from the 1920s through the 1960s. World War II marked an especially important turning point. Women who enjoyed relatively good wages, union protections, and status while filling traditionally male jobs during the war were jolted upon their return to the “blue- and pink-collar ghetto of women’s work” after the war (Cobble 2004: 13). This new self-confidence, experience with institution building, and rising feminist consciousness “gave wage-earning women a new vocabulary and an ideological framework within which to justify their demands” (Cobble 2004: 15). In that way, the transformed labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s helped lay the groundwork for the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Cobble 2004).

At the same time, as Cobble notes, the labor-feminist network splintered in the mid-1960s. Some labor leaders joined Betty Friedan and the torchbearers of the second wave women’s movement, while other labor women remained skeptical of the new feminism’s tactics and goals. At this time many leaders of the labor women’s movement were reaching retirement. Younger women did not rush to take their place, instead gravitating toward the newly emerging movement for women’s liberation.

**Women of Color: Bridging Gender, Labor, and Minority Causes**

Women of color were intersectionally disadvantaged by gender and race and often by class, as well. Much of their organizational history between the waves remains to be documented, but a growing body of work reveals that women of color pressed their claims and policy goals via their own intersectional organizations and in male-dominated institutions and movements. Here I discuss activism by two groups, African-American women and Mexican-American women.

### African-American Women

Racial segregation was either an official policy or a de facto practice among most White women's associations for at least the first half of the twentieth century. To be sure, a handful of White women's groups, namely the Young Women's Christian Association and the Women's Trade Union League, had been forward looking on racial integration (Scott 1991: 180). But even as the civil rights movement was shattering legal barriers and shifting public opinion, civil society organizations, including women's groups, remained organized along racial lines.

Early on, African-American women had developed their own organizations to parallel those of White women. White women had the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (founded in 1881), which became the American Association of University Women in 1921; three years later, Black women founded the National Association of College Women, which grew to eight branches and nearly 300 members by the early 1930s (Cott 1992: 164). The National Colored Parent-Teacher Association was founded in 1926 in response to an effective ban on race mixing within the PTA (Cott 1992: 162). Black sororities became fixtures on college campuses in the 1920s and ensuing decades, and



these organizations continued to engage women in policy advocacy long after their graduation.

Perhaps the best-known women-of-color organization was the National Council of Negro Women, founded by Mary McLeod Bethune in 1935 to bring African-American women's groups together around common agendas. In my study of women's organizations, the Council accounts for 43% of all appearances by women-of-color groups at congressional hearings through 2000. For most of its history, the Council was led by Dorothy Height, whose activist career took her from leadership roles at YWCAs in Harlem and Washington, D.C., in the 1930s to the national YWCA from the 1940s through the late 1970s. In 1955, she became president of the Council, shored up its finances, and built it into an activist powerhouse. Often working in coalition with women's and civil rights groups—and bridging these different sets of interests—the Council worked on issues ranging from the struggle for freedom in the South to poverty and inequality (Height 2003).

During the Depression and postwar eras, African-American women also worked through less-known organizations and movements to advance social justice. As part of a wider homemakers' movement, Black women staged protests against the high price of meat and closed 4,500 butcher shops in New York City (Abramovitz 2001: 122). Meanwhile, Black homemakers in at least four cities organized “Don't Buy Where You Can't Work” boycotts to protest unemployment among African-Americans (Abramovitz 2001, citing Hine 1994).

During and after World War II, African-American women formed radical organizations to promote causes that mainstream labor, civil rights, and women's groups

neglected. Radical Black women, whose ranks included investigative journalists publishing through leftist and Black publications, foreshadowed the discussion of intersectional oppression taken up within parts of the academy in recent years (Gore 2011). These women worked through mixed-gender groups, including Communist Party organizations, but they also formed their own organizations, including Negro Women Incorporated (1942) and Sojourners for Truth and Justice (1951) (Gore 2011). Sojourners forged a cross-racial alliance with the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Clubs, founded in 1951. Believing that Jews and African Americans shared a common enemy in the reactionary right, the “Emmas” provided financial assistance to women-of-color groups and became activists against segregated housing and schooling (Antler 2000: 528).

African-American women were also leaders in groups such as the National Negro Labor Council (1951), through which women successfully advocated for Sears Roebuck to open sales clerk positions to Black women (Gore 2011: 121). As radicals operating amid the Red Scare to advocate for the most marginalized of the marginalized, these groups remained small and often had a short-lived existence. But these leaders enjoyed occasional victories and succeeded in calling attention to issues, including through investigative journalism, that otherwise would have remained off mainstream organizations’ agendas.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, African-American women played important roles in the civil rights movement, though not in top leadership positions. Probably the best-known female civil rights figure, Rosa Parks, was a trained, seasoned activist and secretary of her local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People (Morris 1984). Mrs. Parks's orchestrated refusal to give up her bus seat provided the basis for the successful bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. She became a household name and celebrated historical figure, but she never led either a civil rights or a women's organization in the movement years.

Scholars of feminism and the civil rights movement have noted that the movement's male leaders, including revered figures such as Julian Bond and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., opposed handing the reins of power to women: "there was a general belief that women were capable of doing the job but that they should not do it" (Robnett 1996: 1675). Denied formal leadership positions at the top of organizations, women dominated "bridge leader" roles at the intermediate level, connecting the Black community to movement organizations and linking these groups to rural and isolated regions (Robnett 1996). These women included Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Victoria Gray Adams (Robnett 1997).

### **Mexican-American Women**

From 1910 to 1930, more than one million Mexicans arrived in the United States and settled mostly in the Southwest. World War II heightened minority groups' awareness of systemic inequalities in the United States (Rose 2000). These developments laid the groundwork for the beginnings of Latina organizing and leadership (Ruiz 2008: 4). As was the case with African-American women, Latinas didn't often occupy the top positions in Mexican-American organizations or movements, but women did bring distinctive skill sets and policy agendas to these groups' advocacy efforts (Rose 2000: 179).

Much like White women, Latinas formed auxiliaries within male-dominated associations (*mutualistas*) to arrange public forums and provide food and other support to the men (Ruiz 2008: 100). Mexican-American women also worked through mixed-gender groups, such as the Community Service Organization (CSO) in Los Angeles. During the 1940s and 1950s, the CSO worked on issues traditionally associated with women's caregiving, such as health, education, and neighborhood improvement (Rose 2000: 179). Increasingly politicized, women in the organization came to lead voter registration drives and citizenship-education initiatives. Two female leaders of the 1960s movement of California farmworkers, Dolores Huerta and Helen Chávez, cut their teeth in the CSO (Rose 2000: 195).

Indeed, as was the case with African-American women, Latina engagement spanned community-betterment work and union activism. A labor-activist woman, Luisa Moreno, was the driving force behind the first national conference of Latinos in the United States, El Congreso de Pueblos de Hablan Española, which brought together more than 1,000 delegates, representing at least 120 organizations, in 1939 (Ruiz 2008: 109). The congress focused on jobs, housing, education, health, and immigrant rights. Another woman, Josefina Fierro de Bright, later assumed a co-leadership role (Ruiz 2008: 109). Mexican-American women engaged in labor strikes in New Mexico (1951) and San Antonio (1937, 1938, and 1959–1963), among other places. A Mexican-American woman, Sophie Gonzalez, organized the four-year “Tex-Son” garment workers’ action in San Antonio. She and her fellow leaders activated “Cold War ideologies of femininity and domesticity” to soften opposition and gained support from Anglo women, male union members, and the Catholic Church (Flores 2009: 371–372).

The leadership of Moreno, Bright, Huerta, and Chávez was exceptional in the context of the times. Organizing around worker rights was difficult enough during the Red Scare of the 1950s, when conservative forces cast such efforts as “un-American.” Organizing workers who were also Latino and Latina immigrants multiplied the challenges: Latinos had no electoral clout and were constantly at risk of deportation. Indeed, by one estimate, 3 million Mexicans were deported in the early 1950s (Rose 2000: 1987). The oppressive political context makes the work of Latina activists all the more remarkable.

### Conservative Women: Organizing Against the “-isms”

Women’s activism during this period was not limited to progressive causes. Conservative women were also active throughout the twentieth century, including in the 1920–1960 period. These women drew on diverse ideologies that were sometimes in tension with each other: isolationism and anti-communism, patriotism and anti-Semitism, nationalism and anti-statism. Conservative women’s groups included support organizations of male veterans’ organizations (e.g., the American Legion Auxiliary) and traditional women carrying on the patriotic legacy of male ancestors (e.g., Daughters of the American Revolution). But the conservative women’s movement of the inter-wave period also featured many right-wing upstarts that grounded their activism in maternal watchfulness: the Mothers of Sons Forum; the National Legion of Mothers of America; We, the Mothers Mobilize for America; and Mothers of the USA; to name a few (Goss 2013; Nickerson 2012).

As Glen Jeansonne has documented, the right-wing mothers’ movement arose in 1939 to oppose the United States’ entry into World War II. Motivated by “an ironic mix

of maternal love and fanatical prejudice,” the mothers’ movement may have encompassed 5 to 6 million members organized in fifty to one hundred groups spanning the country (Jeansonne 1996: 1). Among the most prominent was the National Legion of Mothers of America, whose cause was championed by William Randolph Hearst and his newspapers (Nickerson 2012: 53). Mid-century mothers’ groups were populated by Christian women leveraging limited funds to produce large quantities of educational materials, testify before Congress, picket the White House, and collect petitions (Jeansonne 1996: 1).

Glen Jeansonne (1996: 6) also has noted that reactionary women’s “solutions to social ills bespoke a gender consciousness, although the mothers owed their primary allegiance to their ideology, not to their gender.” Their most notorious tract was Elizabeth Dilling’s *The Octopus* (1940), remembered decades later for its wildly anti-Semitic charge that B’nai B’rith and the Anti-Defamation League were communist fronts conspiring to overthrow the government (Nickerson 2012: 48–49). After the United States entered the war, isolationist women’s groups redirected their advocacy toward opposition to international cooperation and the United Nations (Nickerson 2012: 57). Many women also became “Cold Warriors,” organized through patriotic religious groups such as Minute Women of the U.S.A. (Nickerson 2012: 79–80).

Conservative women did not limit their activities to international affairs. Indeed, many started their political careers campaigning against the New Deal in the 1930s (Nickerson 2012: 49). One such organization—National Association Pro-America, National Organization of Republican Women—arose in Western states to buttress the GOP in its opposition to Franklin Roosevelt’s policies (Nickerson 2012: 45–46).

Members found support from a national network of Republican women's clubs.

Women's anti-internationalist populism planted the seed for a new wave of conservative women's advocacy in the 1950s. As Michelle Nickerson (2012) documents in a study of postwar Los Angeles, suburban women mobilized around the conviction that elites were forcing internationalism and integration on the public schools. Among Pro-America's most high-profile victories was the 1950 ouster of the Pasadena public school system's racially progressive superintendent and the removal of all UNESCO publications from the Los Angeles schools (Nickerson 2012). Finally, right-wing women also fought mental health legislation on the grounds that it would allow the government to commit political enemies to institutions and encourage brainwashing (Nickerson 2012).

## The Swells between the Waves

The wave metaphor, which holds that American women were politically quiet between suffrage and the women's liberation movement, is both historically inaccurate and normatively worrisome. The "sea" of women's organizing from 1920 to 1965 was far from calm; rather, it was full of different waves of collective action that sometimes joined in swells of protest. The iconic figures that supposedly characterize the inter-wave period—the flapper, the riveter, the homemaker—fail to convey women's roles as collectively engaged citizens constantly challenging the existing order.

The mid-twentieth century featured collective organizing by women from different classes, races, and ideologies. Suffrage provided a springboard for middle-class, White women's associations to broaden their policy agendas and step up their presence before lawmakers. Far from going their separate ways after 1920, progressive mass membership groups created new coalitions at the state and federal levels to continue

advancing women's equality, such as the right to serve on juries, and social reforms, such as federal funding for maternal and child health. African-American women created parallel mass membership groups to hone their civic skills and advance issues that White women neglected.

The Depression provided a spur to women's labor and consumer activism, which crossed racial lines. World War II brought millions of women into unions, which gave them civic skills, leadership training, and heightened awareness of gender inequities. The labor movement provided an organizational foundation and leadership cadre that helped secure federal action on equal rights for women in the early 1960s. Those policies had a feedback effect, helping to galvanize and direct the energies of the women's movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s.

During the supposedly placid 1950s, the Cold War and the growth of global governance fired up conservative women, who agitated against communism, internationalism, and government intervention in the domestic sphere. At the same time, progressive women—educated and looking for a meaningful alternative to paid work—gravitated to multipurpose civic organizations like the League of Women Voters to work on issues as wide ranging as civil rights, foreign policy, and environmental conservation. African-American women formed organizations to spotlight the struggles of working-class Black women and served as bridge leaders connecting different parts of the civil rights movement. Latinas championed the cause of immigrant women and developed activist credentials that would propel them to leadership roles in the farmworker movement of the 1960s.



This chapter offers a necessarily cursory narrative of the rich organizing work conducted by women's organizations and individual activists in the middle decades. Where does this review leave us? For one, it challenges us to think more carefully about identity movements. Activism for group rights may not be synonymous with group-based activism. For example, the case of American women tells us that *women's movements*, those envisioned by the wave metaphor, were not coterminous with *movements of women*, which advanced a broader range of goals, encompassed a more diverse set of organizational actors, and continued without interruption after suffrage. The review also challenges us to pay greater attention to movements of women that occur within or alongside other movements organized along identity lines. Women are a large and diverse group, and gender is but one of many identities through which women interpret their social and political environment. Scholars of intersectionality have made this point, and it is worth heeding as we continue to locate and theorize about women's collective action. Finally, this chapter reminds us, as both scholars and citizens, to think critically about narratives that use metaphors and iconic images to generalize about the historical evolution of large, diverse populations. This review suggests that women's history is both more continuous and more complex than is commonly understood and that this history remains wide open to scholarly inquiry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These figures are derived from original data collected for my study of the evolution of U.S. women's organizations <IBT>(Goss 2013).</IBT>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.