



# Founding

## Setting the Stage

In 1880, Mrs. H. Griswold wrote in a letter to Susan B. Anthony: “Words fail to convey the bitter hatred I have for the foul demagogues who would take from me the freedom they claim for themselves.” In 1909, Emma Goldman wrote “A New Declaration of Independence,” in which she declared the self-evident truth that all human beings “irrespective of race, color, or sex” are born with equal rights. About a decade later, Margaret Sanger explained the “morality of birth control” in a speech so titled.

By the post-World War II era, such strong feminist voices were dwindling in number and volume; the momentum of the feminist movement that won suffrage and expanded women’s rights in the early 20th century had waned. A negative media blitz proclaimed the death of feminism and celebrated the happy, suburban housewife.

But with the rise of the civil rights movement, feminists again made their place in the political arena. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 came to Congress, and feminists lobbied hard for the addition of an amendment prohibiting sex discrimination in employment. After much debate, the Act was passed with just such a prohibition in Title VII—added by a congressman who hoped to defeat the Act by including sex. But Title VII was still a shallow protection for women in the workforce.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was formed in 1965 to implement Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Though future NOW president Aileen Hernandez and founder Richard Graham fought hard as EEO commissioners to enforce Title VII’s prohibition on sex discrimination, they were ultimately outnumbered 3-2, and the EEOC decided in September of 1965 that sex segregation in job advertising was permissible.

A month later, at a conference on Title VII and the EEOC, Dr. Pauli Murray—a law professor at Yale and a member of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women—denounced the EEOC and its stance permitting Help Wanted Male and Help Wanted Female segregated job advertising. Betty Friedan, author of the eye-opening book *The Feminine Mystique*, immediately contacted Dr. Murray—one of many historic linkups that led to a reemergence of the feminist movement in the U.S.

### The Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women

Friedan and Murray were among hundreds of representatives at this conference in Washington, D.C., on June 28-30, 1966. The theme was “Targets for Action,” and many of the delegates wanted to pass a resolution demanding that the EEOC carry out its legal mandate to end sex

discrimination in employment. They were told that they had no authority, not even to pass a resolution, but they were determined to take action.

Betty Friedan attended the conference as a writer and observer and had been closely watching the efforts of Graham and Hernandez to enforce Title VII. Friedan has said that both commissioners and EEOC attorney Sonia Pressman Fuentes were “privately suggesting the need for an organization to speak on behalf of women in the way civil rights groups had done for Blacks.”

Determined to put the theme of the conference into practice, Friedan and others invited frustrated conference participants to discuss alternative strategies. Friedan wrote the acronym N O W on a paper napkin. Some 15-20 women assembled in Friedan’s hotel room that night. Among them were: Catherine Conroy, Inka O’Hanrahan, Rosalind Loring, Mary Eastwood, Dorothy Haener, Pauli Murray, and Kay Clarenbach. Loring recalled the group’s anger over what was happening at the conference, and how they could change it: “There was a lot of feeling building in a lot of women then, and . . . they were more-or-less ready.” With time running out, more of the “dissidents” gathered during the final conference luncheon and began planning the formation of the new organization.

Gene Boyer, recalling the hurried meeting over lunch, said, “Catherine Conroy pulled out a five-dollar bill from her wallet and, in her usual terse style, invited us to ‘put your money down and sign your name.’ NOW was a reality and I think we all felt somehow we had participated in a significant beginning.”

Analoyce Clapp wrote, “28 women met to set up a temporary organization for this purpose: To take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.”

## A New Civil Rights Organization Is Born

Click on photo for names of attendees pictured here at 1966 NOW Organizing Conference

By October, some 300 women and men had become charter members. The organizing conference was October 29-30 in Washington, D.C., but only 30 of the 300 charter members participated. NOW’s flair for making a few seem like many may have begun with this first formal meeting.

The slate of officers was elected as nominated, including Kathryn (Kay) Clarenbach as Chair of the Board, Betty Friedan as President, Aileen Hernandez—who had announced her impending resignation from the EEOC—in absentia as Executive Vice President, Richard Graham as Vice President, and Caroline Davis as Secretary/Treasurer.

They adopted a Statement of Purpose with broad concerns, addressing all women and all facets of a woman’s life. It rings with a passionate commitment to “the worldwide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders,” and remains in many ways a timeless document. “We debated virtually every comma of our Statement of Purpose, but were

not divided on any of its substance nor on the targets for action to which we committed ourselves in setting up the task forces,” said Friedan, who had drafted the document.

The conference decided on a structure that “gives the basic power to the membership as a whole, in annual national conferences... [and] between such conferences, the national board of 35, including the five national officers, will be free to act, meeting every three months; between its meetings, the five officers will be free to execute agreed policy.” Virtually the same structure continues today.



Left to Right: Karen de Crow, former president; Muriel Fox, founder;  
Aileen Hernandez, former president; Judith Lightfoot, former chair of the National Board;  
Patricia Ireland, former president; Ellie Smeal, former president; Molly Yard, former president

The conference approved immediate action on Title VII enforcement efforts and authorized a legal committee to take action on behalf of flight attendants and to challenge so-called protective labor legislation. They formed task forces on issue after issue, and those task forces carried out much of the early NOW agenda and activities.

In a 1966 report on the conference, Friedan wrote: “We wasted no time on ceremonials or speeches, gave ourselves barely an hour for lunch and dinner...At times we got very tired and impatient, but there was always a sense that what we were deciding was not just for now ‘but for a century...’ We shared a moving moment of realization that we had now indeed entered history.”

Published July 2006; last updated July 2011