

Article: “Women's Movements and Nonviolence”
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Issue: Jun. 2000
Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics*



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Women's Movements and Nonviolence*

The ties between women's rights movements and nonviolence have been deep and enduring. In the United States, they stretch from tactics employed by suffragists and proponents of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through core beliefs espoused by participants in these movements.

The American movement for women's suffrage emerged out of a historic meeting in upstate New York. Five Quaker women, including Lucretia Mott and fellow abolitionist and women's rights advocate, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, gathered in Waterloo, where they agreed to call together a convention in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss "the social, civil and religious rights of women" (quoted in Flexner 1973, 74). Held in

1848, this convention ended with the issuance of a "Declaration of Sentiments" and a

resolution supporting suffrage for women. These actions set the women's movement's agenda for the next seven decades.

The authors of the declaration cataloged the exclusion of women from higher education, professions, and the ministry and asked that women be accorded all the "rights and immunities of citizens" granted by the U.S. Constitution. Since much of the leadership of the new movement was provided by Quaker women, including Susan B. Anthony, who became the best known of all suffrage champions, and Quaker faith and practice hold as central tenets both the rejection of violent conflict and the use of nonviolent means to oppose inequality, it is not surprising that the suffrage movement was advanced using tactics of active resistance. Accordingly, suffragists picketed and chained themselves to the fence of the White House, held hunger strikes, and organized massive marches of supporters and sympathizers (DuBois 1998, 580).

American suffragists, particularly those led by Alice Paul, cofounder of the National Woman's Party and also a Quaker, patterned their political crusade on that of the British suffragists and, like them, served time in jail rather than paying fines to the state for their civil disobedience (Cott 1987, 53-62). Modern American women's rights activists have also employed many confrontational but nonviolent tactics, ranging from releasing mice at a bridal fair, holding mass marches in large cities (sometimes dressed in white, acknowledging the legacy of suffrage parades), disrupting congressional hearings, and initiating economic boycotts of states that failed to ratify ERA (Costain 1992, 44-78; Ryan 1992).

This reliance on nonviolent civil disobedience is undergirded by what scholars describe as the single largest difference in women's and men's public opinion: their general attitudes on use of force (Conover and Sapiro 1993; Flammang 1997, 124-31; Shapiro and Majahan 1986). Women, as a group, consistently and from the start of modern polling, have been far more likely to express negative emotions about violence than men—both when that violence is abstract and when it is a present reality.

More Than a Civil Rights Movement

American women's movements have been represented by most scholars as offshoots of civil rights struggles (see, e.g., Freeman 1975; Mansbridge 1986; McGlen and O'Connor 1998). In this article I argue for adjusting that frame to portray women's rights activists as also fundamentally concerned with the advocacy of nonviolence. Although this may, at first, seem to be no more than an academic exercise, since most successful twentieth-century civil rights activists used nonviolence as a primary tactic, I assert that women incorporated calls for peace into their demands for equal rights because the desire to reduce the role of force in society lay at the core of most

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women's hope for social transformation. I will use evidence from the contemporary women's movement to make this case.

First, however, I will review and acknowledge the civil rights antecedents of the U.S. movements for suffrage and women's rights. Women have long labored to achieve the rights resulting from democratic citizenship—not just the vote, but the opportunity to petition the government for redress of grievances, to seek employment, to run for public office, and to retain citizenship even when marrying foreign nationals. Ellen DuBois (1978) chided those who saw pursuit of the vote by U.S. women as a narrow and largely symbolic goal. She reminded critics of the full implications of voting. Women granted the vote were given power outside the home and domestic sphere and, once in the public realm, they could raise their voices and express their interests in effective ways

Likewise, women activists of the 1960s followed the lead of black civil rights advocates. They pointed to promises contained in the great documents of American democracy and demanded that these be fulfilled. Feminists, drawing from the "Declaration of Sentiments" passed at Seneca Falls declared that

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . . . (Quoted in Flexner 1973, 75)

They asked for equality with men to serve on juries, to be paid equally for their labor, and to have access to training and financial credit. Participants in this "second" women's movement also revived the great unfinished agenda of the suffrage movement, urging addition of an equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would guarantee that sex would not be used as a basis for depriving citizens of rights.

As I have written elsewhere, civil rights/equality did not stand unchallenged as the major agenda of the modern women's movement (Costain 1988, 157-67; 1992, 79-99). In many respects, civil rights issues elicited more negative responses from the public and government institutions than did women's competing "special needs" agenda, which emphasized that women constituted a legitimate interest group in politics, much as teachers, members of ethnic groups, or union members did. Acknowledged as a group with articulated and achievable interests, women could more openly press for policies of special benefit to them, such as government support for child care, women's health, domestic violence legislation, and parental leaves. Following defeat of the ERA in 1982, the agenda of the women's movement became far more diverse, retaining civil rights issues while reemphasizing special needs concerns. Yet, just as the eagerness to claim full citizenship is a constant for participants in the movement, I believe that commitment to nonviolence as a value has also

been constant. If this is the case, it will complete a historical cycle. One of the arguments put forth by suffragists, which appears to have helped to carry the day for women's vote, was that women held uniquely moral opinions toward politics and, consequently,

allowing women to participate in elections would move government away from a politics that was so dependent on self-interest and power (Flexner 1973). Although, many advocates oversold this case—as when they argued that if women vote wars will end or political corruption will cease—the argument may have some validity. If, when women mobilize politically, they carry a message of democratic inclusion and of opposition to the use of force to accomplish social or political ends, that is significant for society as a whole.

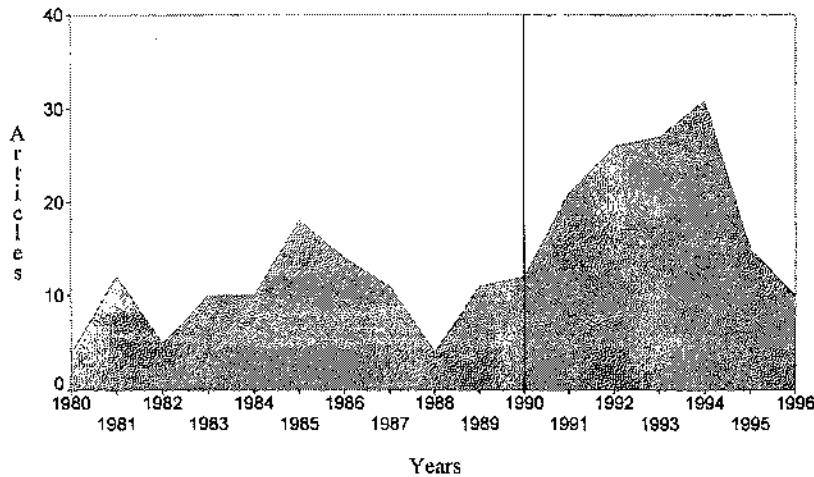


Data

I first began to awaken to the possibility that nonviolence may be a core idea of American women's movements in a rather tortuous and backhanded way. Several coders, including myself, used *The New York Times Annual Index* to build an events data set on the women's movement extending from 1950 to 1986 (see Costain 1992, app. A). Compiling such data is a method commonly used by social movement scholars to assess the levels of activism on behalf of particular causes across time. Using the headings "Women: General" and "Women: United States," the coders and I found and coded 1777 separate "women's" events. Patterning our codes on those used by Doug McAdam (1982) for his well-known study of the Civil Rights Movement, one of our events coding categories was whether the event was violent or nonviolent in character. After coding roughly five years worth of events, my graduate students mounted a rebellion and asked to stop coding for violence. They felt it was a wasted category since so few events could be characterized as violent. I capitulated, but could not help wondering why violence, including destruction of property, was such an infrequent component of women's rights activities.

In an effort to answer this question, I built a second data set on the women's movement using Nexis-Lexis. I was particularly interested in further investigating the relation of the movement to violence. I compiled this next batch of data by filtering every article published between 1980 and 1996 in *The New York Times* and selecting only those that referred specifically to one or more of nine nationally visible "second-wave" feminist groups. This yielded a total of 1772 articles.¹ I chose groups to represent a broad and diverse cross-section of participants in the contemporary women's movement.²

FIGURE 1
New York Times Articles Mentioning Women's Groups and Violence, by Year, 1980-96



Unlike with the earlier data set, when coders read only synopses of articles, my students and I downloaded complete texts of the articles and placed them into individual files. During the studied period, the number of articles in the *Times* mentioning the selected women's groups ranged from a low of 55 in 1996 to a high of 168 in 1984. We used QSR NUD*IST, a content analysis program that allows researchers to look for patterns of language within texts, to identify articles mentioning violence. Specifically, we screened the articles for references to *violence*, *violent*, *injury*, *destroy*, and *injure*. Because journalists sometimes use vivid language to characterize more mundane circumstances (e.g., "the presidential candidate vowed not to let his opponent's charges destroy his campaign"), I screened each identified article to determine the context of its references to violence.

To my surprise, 14% (240) of these articles mentioned violence. This was unexpected, first, because so few violent events were mentioned in the articles contained in the earlier data set. There did not seem to be a reason why this later period, when protest activity had diminished, should be characterized by violence. Second, in the eighties and nineties, women activists were widely recognized for transforming themselves into successful actors in the arenas of interest group and electoral politics (Costain 1983, 1992; Gelb and Palley 1987; Schlozman 1990; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995). It seems unlikely that the news media, which frequently does portray social movements as radical and threatening to public order, would have done so in this case. The most likely explanation for the increased reporting of violence in relation to the activities of women's organizations was that a

countermovement consisting of people opposed to the goals and achievements of women activists were increasingly resorting to force to attempt to reverse those gains. This pattern can be seen in the history of most successful movements.

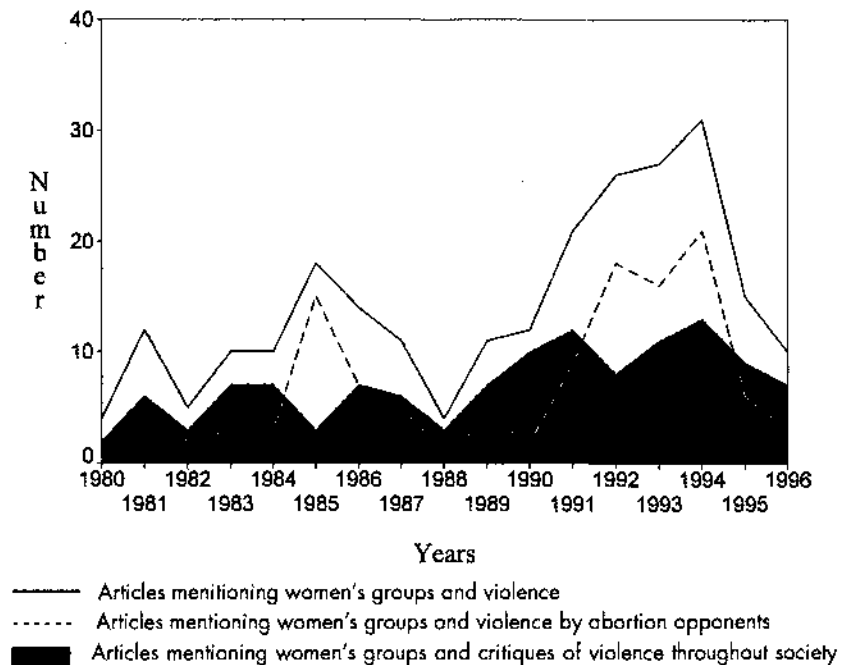
A Place for Nonviolence

As I read through the articles, I began to see what had happened. An active and sometimes violent countermovement arose among people seeking, primarily, to reverse policies that made abortions legal. Nineteen ninety-four was the high point of this politics of force, with 18 articles discussing bombings of clinics and attacks on abortion providers along with the responses to these acts by second-wave

women's groups. Advocates for change often face the threat or reality of violent opposition by defenders of the status quo seeking to raise the costs of pursuing change. However, more was going on than just efforts to reverse earlier movement gains.

As Figure 2 suggests, women's groups were hard at work opposing violence in sports, art, pornography, and domestic relations; protesting racism and homophobia; and fighting to strengthen laws against sexual coercion both inside the home and outside it. Sexual harassment surfaced as an important issue in 1991, when law professor Anita Hill revealed charges against Supreme

FIGURE 2
New York Times Articles Mentioning Women's Groups and Violence, by Year and Type, 1980-96



Court nominee Clarence Thomas in televised Senate confirmation hearings. Domestic violence had a similar public airing after the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson—the former wife of sports celebrity O.J. Simpson—and her male friend, Ron Goldman, in 1995, and Simpson’s subsequent arrest, trial, and acquittal for their murders. Although organized women’s groups played no more than a supporting role in these high-profile cases, it is not difficult to conclude that the more general discussion of violence against women by representatives of the National Organization for Women and similar groups had effectively prepared the soil so that these politically and socially explosive events could take root in the public consciousness and generate years of public debate and examination.

Reviewing the pattern in which specific issues were linked to the women’s movement reveals some interesting shifts over time. First, there has been a sharp increase in the numbers of articles mentioning women and violence in the 1990s. These articles describe actions taken by those wishing to undo gains by women and by women protesting violence in all facets of life (see Figure 2). Even as references in *The New York Times* to second-wave women’s groups have declined overall, the proportion of articles mentioning both women’s groups and violence has increased (Figures 3 and 5). Comparing the numbers of articles referring to violence or civil rights with those that mention key “women’s issues”—namely, abortion, economy/jobs, and education—shows that civil rights advocacy is the main activity of those in the women’s movement but also that opposition to violence in all its forms has become increasingly important to them (Figure 4).

Citizenship and Nonviolence as Identity

Nonviolence and opposition to use of coercive means to achieve goals by women’s rights activists may be seen either as a tactical choice or as a framing element of that movement. I believe it is both and, as such, is an important component of their collective identity. A great deal has been

FIGURE 3
New York Times Articles Mentioning Women’s Groups, by Year, 1980-96

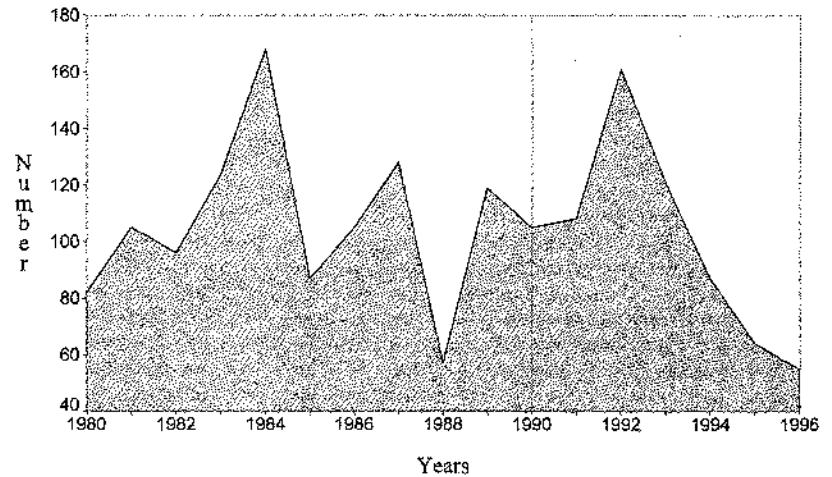
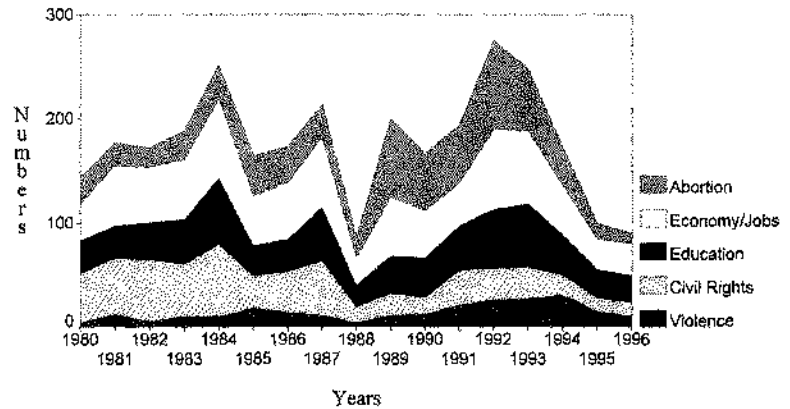
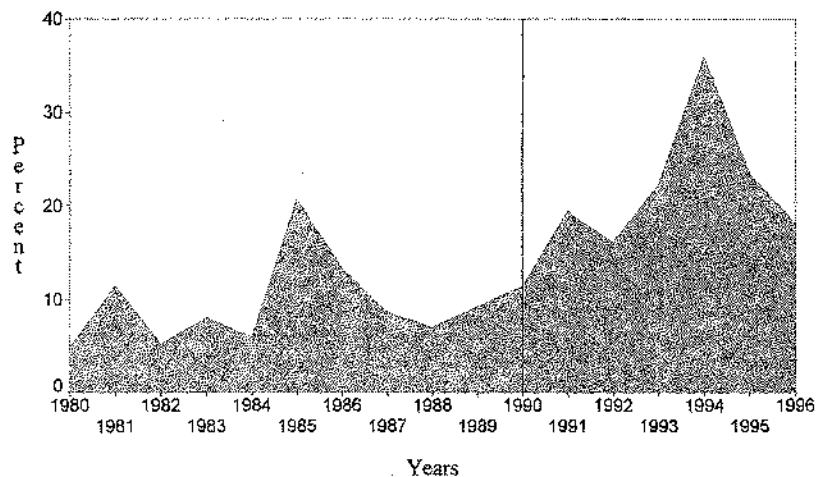


FIGURE 4
New York Times Articles Mentioning Women’s Groups, by Year and Issue, 1980-96



Note: The totals in this chart sum to more than the totals reported in Figure 3 because single articles dealing with multiple subjects were counted more than once

FIGURE 5
New York Times Articles Mentioning Women’s Groups That Also Mention Violence, by Year, 1980-96



written about collective identity and participation in social movements (see, e.g., Friedman and McAdam 1992; Melucci 1995, 1996; Tarrow 1998, 118-20). In simple terms, a collective identity is a public claim to a certain status and to ties, connections, or relationships with others who make the same claim. Examination of collective identities has become important to social movement scholars as they have come to recognize that the messages advocacy groups share with the public and the actions they can be seen taking are frequently critical in determining which opportunities group members can exploit and which resources and networks of supporters they can access. Any particular cause will not necessarily succeed. Its message, membership, and means must all be appropriate to the desired ends and socio-political milieu if a group is to reach its goals.

For these reasons, groups that promote democratic citizenship and nonviolence may be attractive outlets for women seeking to give voice to their displeasure with the status quo, because they encourage creation of a desirable collective identity: citizen and peacemaker. The importance of this linkage becomes especially evident when considering who and what existing networks and communities are most likely to form such groups. As I mentioned earlier, a greater number of women than men oppose use of force to achieve political ends. Also, when one considers as a whole women's groups' social critique, which holds society accountable for problems ranging from domestic violence to a

criminal justice system that makes convictions for rape and other sexually exploitive crimes hard to obtain, a strong pattern of appeals to women's core concerns emerges. Even the acceptance of calls from feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon (1987) to define violence against women in sufficiently broad terms to encompass pornography and violence in the popular culture, as well as sexual harassment, become easier to understand. Acknowledging that violence reduction is a core feature of the political agenda of women's rights advocates also makes their movement's cross-cultural appeal and its frequent cyclic reappearance easier to understand.

Conclusions

Women's movements, even as they represent democratization and the opening of political spheres to previously excluded groups, contain a broad social critique of violence as well. This reinforces the tactical decision of nearly all women's advocacy groups to employ exclusively nonviolent methods. Use of nonviolent tactics stems from activists' attachment to the core value of opposition to coercive means. This nonviolent identity, along with the civil rights vision of participants in the women's movement, helps to account for both the appeal and the impact that the suffrage and women's rights movement have had on American society and politics.

Notes

* I would like to thank Christopher Braider, department of French and Italian, University of Colorado, Boulder, for his very helpful comments on nonviolence. I also greatly appreciate the assistance of Heather Fraizer, department of political science, University of Colorado, Boulder, in constructing the data set on activist women's groups.

1. "First-wave" feminist groups are those formed as part of the movement for women's suffrage, which is generally recognized as the first women's movement in the United States. Examples of first-wave groups active today include the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, and the National Woman's Party. My sample of second-wave groups consisted of the

National Organization for Women; National Women's Political Caucus, Women's Equity Action League, Federally Employed Women, Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues, Society to Cut Up Men, Redstockings, Older Women's League, and National Abortion Rights Action League.

2. My sample includes the largest national women's organizations and spans a wide range of feminist interests, issues, and styles. Scholarship on the women's movement identifies each as politically active (Carden 1974; Costain 1980, 1981, 1992; Gelb 1995; Gelb and Palley 1977, 1982, 1987; Katzenstein 1987, 1990, 1995; Schlozman 1990; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995).

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