

The Importance of Women's Rights Issues in the League of Women Voters of the
Williamsport Area/Lycoming County and the Williamsport National Organization for
Women

Tracey Clayworth

Lycoming College

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The fundamental differences between the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWV) and the National Organization for Women (NOW) illustrate two divergent ideologies within women's organizations. Women constitute the primary membership of both groups; however, the LWV and NOW cannot be classified in the same manner. Naomi Black defines the League as "social feminist."¹ The group supports women's rights; however, its principle goal is to work for government reforms that will improve the general society. NOW is an equity feminist organization, one that works to improve the legal, political, economic, and social status of women as individuals. A study of the Williamsport, Pennsylvania chapters of the League of Women Voters and the National Organization for Women during the period 1970 to 1990 reveals that the organizations remained true to their definitions on the local, as well as national, levels.

The League of Women Voters of the United States was an outgrowth of the increasing involvement of women in politics, a result of the women's suffrage movement. In June 1919, Congress approved the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, enfranchising all American women and successfully concluding the campaign for women's suffrage. By August 1920, 36 states had ratified the amendment, making it national law. Carrie Chapman Catt, a leading suffragist and former president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), believed that women needed an organization that would educate them about their new political responsibilities. Catt stated, "Winning the vote is only an opening wedge...to learn to use it is a bigger task."² At the 1920 NAWSA Jubilee Convention in Chicago, the organization disbanded

and became the National League of Women Voters; 200,000 former NAWSA members joined the League.³ Leagues of Women Voters were established throughout the United States, providing voter education designed to encourage women to become full participants in the political process.

The early activities of local chapters mirrored those of the national LWV. As an organization, the LWV publicly supported specific positions on various political issues. The League, however, worked to achieve its goals by encouraging participation in the political process; it remained strictly nonpartisan. In the years immediately following its founding, the LWV increased its lobbying efforts without supporting a specific political party or candidate. The League's policy of nonpartisanship enabled the organization to increase its strength by accepting the support of members of all political parties.⁴

The League of Women Voters of the 1920s used the organizational abilities that its leaders had gained during the battle for women's suffrage to work for the passage of legislation. The LWV primarily supported protective legislation, laws based on the belief that fundamental biological differences between the sexes make women physically weaker than men. The League lobbied for laws that would protect women in their roles as mothers, workers and consumers. The Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act of 1921, which provided federal funds for pre- and post-natal education programs, is an example of protective legislation.⁵

The League's support of protective legislation was a key factor in distinguishing it from the group of women's political organizations, exemplified by the National Woman's Party (NWP), that supported the abolition of all legal distinctions between women and men. The League criticized the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the

Constitution, first introduced in Congress in 1923 by the NWP, because it repudiated the belief in significant biological differences between the sexes.⁶ To the LWV, the ERA was a serious threat to necessary protective legislation.⁷

The League of Women Voters of the United States defines itself as “a nonpartisan political organization...[that] encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.”⁸ The organization describes its purpose as

[empowering] American citizens to: have a voice in government; bring about constructive change; and build grassroots citizen action...And to register thousands to vote...defend voting rights...open government to citizens...protect our environment...take action for privacy in reproductive choice...support violence prevention...and train tomorrow’s civic leaders.⁹

The LWV is a grassroots organization; it relies upon the support of individual members at the local level to advance its positions successfully. The League takes active stances on many political issues, including increasing voter registration, maintaining an open political process, preserving communication between the voting public and elected officials, environmental conservation, reproductive freedom, and creating a less violent society. The League’s advocacy of reproductive rights is shared by many feminist groups, including the National Organization for Women; however, women’s rights, although supported by the LWV, are not the organization’s primary concern.¹⁰ The League of Women Voters’ fundamental goal is to “bring about constructive change”, improving society in its entirety.¹¹ The electoral process, environmental issues and violent crime affect all citizens, female and male.

The League advocates a variety of progressive measures designed to create a better society through government intervention. The League backs government reform measures designed to improve the lives of individual Americans. The LWV states that it works to “promote an open government system that is representative, accountable and responsive...that assures opportunities for citizen participation in government decision making...and that preserves public health and safety through gun control legislation.”¹² To the League, environmental conservation is an essential component of promoting a healthy quality of life and a safe society; therefore, the group advocates “an environment beneficial to life through the protection and wise management of natural resources in the public interest by recognizing the interrelationships of air quality, energy, land use, waste management, and water resources.”¹³ The League supports equality between all elements of American society, regardless of gender, age, race, or economic class. The organization describes the process of “Creating a Just Society,” stating that its goals are to “promote social and economic justice, secure equal rights for all, achieve universal health care coverage at reasonable cost, promote the well-being of children, and combat discrimination, poverty and violence.”¹⁴ The League supports women’s rights, as it does those of all under-represented groups in American society. Women’s rights, however, are only one part of a multifaceted agenda.

The League of Women Voters monitors American foreign policy, advocating international cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts between nations. The LWV proposes “strengthening international organizations, fostering long-term development, negotiating arms control measures and encouraging the successful resolution of conflict through nonmilitary means.”¹⁵ The LWV further states that, “The

goal...is to empower citizens to shape better communities worldwide.”¹⁶ The League derives its international agenda from its domestic interests; the organization remains focused on supporting the growth of safe and equitable societies.

The League views education as the most successful manner of raising the average citizen’s level of awareness of public policy issues the organization considers important. Members established the League of Women Voters Education Fund “to encourage the informed and active participation of citizens in government and to increase understanding of major public policy issues.”¹⁷ The Education Fund is designed to sponsor educational programs that present citizens with reliable information, enabling them to determine their individual opinions on political issues. The League’s intention is not to present one position as superior to another, but to encourage individuals to study the facts and, based on their new knowledge, to develop personal and educated points of view.¹⁸

The League of Women Voters’ policy of nonpartisanship is a fundamental component of the organization. The LWV carefully defines its nonpartisan status,

The League is a nonpartisan organization; we don’t support parties or candidates...Nonpartisan does not mean nonpolitical, however. After studying and debating issues, the League develops consensus positions which we then actively support through grassroots lobbying.¹⁹

The League publicly discusses and supports specific viewpoints on a variety of public policy issues; however, the organization refuses to endorse political candidates. For example, the LWV may lobby Congress for stricter environmental conservation laws, but the group will not campaign for political candidates who support similar legislation. The League organizes voter registration drives to ensure a high turnout on Election Day; however, the LWV will not attempt to influence an individual’s choice of candidates.

Louise M. Young writes, “The compass guiding the League was the public interest...The League was a female organization but not an explicitly feminist one...Its agenda was far broader than overcoming the disfiguring legacy of patriarchy.”²⁰ The LWV *did* argue on behalf of women’s rights; however, the group was involved with other issues. Although the majority of League members are women, the group’s goal is to improve all aspects of American society, not only those that pertain to women. Black defines the League of Women Voters as a “social feminist” organization, writing, “I focus on the ‘social feminism’ that derives from women’s specificity an argument for wider public action on the part of women.”²¹ The League is a women’s organization working for the benefit of the general public.

League members do not focus specifically on women’s rights or issues; they have initiated lobbying efforts on behalf of a variety of causes. William H. Chafe writes, “The league went out of its way to avoid being identified as a lobbying agent for one group only. Repeatedly, league representatives declared that their organization was devoted to the good of the whole nation and not to any special interest.”²² The League constantly reiterates that its mission is to improve all aspects of American society. The League’s increased interest in women’s rights throughout the 1970s, exemplified by the organization’s move to a pro-ERA position, is explained as being a result of the League’s support of civil rights for African Americans during the 1960s. The LWV states, “The League’s push for civil rights led to a parallel move for women’s rights.”²³ Support of the women’s rights movement is an extension of the League’s desire to create an equitable society; it is not the organization’s defining principle.

Scholars of the League describe its importance as an educating force. Black writes, "Voter education programs such as those the League developed might...carry out part of the activity for busy individuals, supplying study material as a basis for intelligent decision."²⁴ Although the League is nonpartisan, Chafe argues that the organization's civic education programs enabled its members to be knowledgeable and active participants in their political parties. He states, "[The League] determined to mobilize public opinion behind reform programs and to instruct women in the tasks of citizenship so that they could work more effectively within existing political organizations."²⁵ The League's programs provided its members with a strong political background, allowing them to function as educated voters.

Williamsport, Pennsylvania women established a local chapter of the LWV, the Lycoming County League of Women Voters, in the early 1920s.²⁶ The Lycoming County League focused on civic education, its 1924 program lists six educational classes, including, "Know Your Own City Government", "The Organization of the Political Parties", "The Courts", and "The Problems of Congress."²⁷ The group relied on politically astute women to present the classes, which focused on the need to provide women with a basic political education.²⁸ Participation in women's organizations decreased dramatically during the Great Depression; few women possessed spare funds for membership dues or donations. The Lycoming County LWV was dissolved during this period, a victim of financial hardship.²⁹

American women demonstrated renewed interest in women's organizations during the 1950s, after the nation's victory in World War II initiated a period of economic prosperity. On May 15, 1952, 75 Williamsport women met at The Lycoming, a local

hotel, to organize the League of Women Voters of Williamsport, Pennsylvania.³⁰ The revived chapter quickly received community support. An editorial appearing in the May 16, 1952 edition of the *Williamsport Sun* states, "We do not need more political clubs [in Williamsport] but we need persons with political awareness acting on political issues above the level of partisanship. A League of Women Voters could conceivably accomplish this."³¹ The League would be actively involved in the community's civic life for the next 38 years.

The LWV of Williamsport initiated studies of a variety of political issues throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Prominent programs included a study of constitutional civil liberties, a survey analyzing the effects of foreign trade on Lycoming County businesses, United Nations Week, designed to educate Williamsport residents about the international organization, and an examination of US economic aid to developing nations. The League did not explore women's rights issues. Like the national organization, the League of Women Voters of Williamsport demonstrated an interest in protecting individual freedoms and developing a US foreign policy based on international cooperation. As the Williamsport chapter entered the 1970s, it carried with it an established record of involvement with progressive reform measures.

In the late 1960s, the League of Women Voters of Williamsport expanded to become the League of Women Voters of the Williamsport Area, comprised of Williamsport and its outlying communities. The League expanded again in 1977, incorporating all of Lycoming County. The organization continued to study traditional League-supported topics. Foreign relations remained a priority throughout the decade and into the 1980s. In the March 31, 1970 issue of *The Bulletin*, the newsletter of the

LWV of the Williamsport Area, chapter president Anne A. Dieffenderfer criticizes Congress' slowness in ratifying the Geneva Protocol, which would place restrictions on chemical and biological warfare.³² Dieffenderfer's concern highlights the League's desire to promote the resolution of international conflicts through humanitarian and nonviolent means. In 1983, the League studied US defense policy. In February 1983, the group polled Lycoming College students, to determine the level of concern over the issue among young voters. An article appearing in the February 26, 1983 edition of the *Williamsport Sun-Gazette* states,

As part of the League of Women Voters current national study on national security and defense, the Lycoming County League is polling students on the issues and has scheduled a discussion on arms control...at Lycoming College...

Leslye Hermann, league president, said the local league is concentrating on the views of the youth today, since "they will have to live with the decisions our government is making."³³

Later in the year, the LWV dedicated a series of meetings to the study's findings. The August 15, 1983 executive board meeting minutes announce, "Judy Ryder presented a general outline of upcoming meetings...September, Arms Control and Criteria...October, Military Policy and Defense Spending...November, a summing up, discussion and consensus of military policy and defense spending."³⁴ Following the November meeting, the executive board sent the results of the League consensus to the national organization.

The League also maintained an interest in foreign trade. The January 14, 1974 executive board meeting minutes note, "Nancy Neuman reported that it is time to take action concerning the Trade Act...It was noted that the LWV still favors 'free and open trade'...Neuman wanted the local League to contact Congressman Schneebeli concerning

the Trade Act.”³⁵ The LWV of the Williamsport Area, however, had remained current on the issue. “Busey noted that [contacting Schneebeli] would not be necessary since the Congressman is already sponsoring the Bill and he knows where the LWV stands on this particular issue.”³⁶ The League consistently studied new developments in topics the group considered important to society.

The Williamsport Area/Lycoming County chapter of the League of Women Voters devoted considerable attention to environmental conservation throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1970, the membership determined that Air Pollution and Solid Waste Management would be the subject of study for the group’s local agenda.³⁷ Mrs. Kretschmann, chairperson of the League’s environmental action committee, organized a letter writing campaign, informing city, county, state, and national elected officials of the group’s support of legislation regulating air quality.³⁸ Kretschmann also fulfilled speaking engagements at schools and civic clubs throughout Williamsport, lecturing on the effects of air pollution.³⁹ In addition, Kretschmann attended several state conventions addressing the state of the Susquehanna River; she then disseminated new information to the League and the local community.⁴⁰ The League believed that pollution, whether in the air or the waterways, impacted Lycoming County life and should be controlled. In March 1971, the executive board proposed extending the environmental conservation study for another year.⁴¹

League members continued to educate the community about environmental conservation. At the September 13, 1971 executive board meeting,

Kretschmann and...Somerville told the Board about a conservation booklet which is being produced by the Lycoming County Soil and Water

Conservation District. League members Somerville and Berkley have helped to collect material for the book which is to be mailed to every housewife in Lycoming County.⁴²

At the same meeting, Kretschmann called for further political activism on the part of League members, "Kretschmann asked for support of House Bill 963 PR, which would promote the free-flowing and recreational aspects of the rivers system. Letters can be written to Representative Wise or others on the [congressional] committee."⁴³ In 1972, "Smith suggested the possibility of starting a recycling project in the community...Somerville thought she might be able to interest some group in such a project."⁴⁴ The discussion of recycling, like the organization's work in other environmental areas, demonstrates the League's interest in improving the quality of life in the local community.

After the completion of its study, the League continued to monitor environmental conservation issues in the county. At the May 12, 1975 meeting of the executive board, "Kretschmann informed us of a request for permission to strip mine in the area near High Knob...An official letter from the League was considered to be necessary and many members wished to write personally."⁴⁵ Reliance on the League tradition of community education is evident; the June 15, 1983 executive board meeting minutes state,

Local Leagues can apply to the [League of Women Voters] Education Fund for a grant to provide public education and services concerning hazardous wastes. It was decided to write to Leagues that have used this service and request information about the use of the grant money. Locally, we will attend a slide presentation of sites in our area and Board approved sending a representative to the conference at Bucknell [University], Citizens Involvement in Hazardous Waste.⁴⁶

The League remained focused on supporting the development of environmental policies that would improve the quality of life of Lycoming County residents.

The LWV of the Williamsport Area/Lycoming County advocated a society free of racial discrimination. The February 1, 1971 executive board meeting minutes state, "The new school proposed for the Walnut Street housing area came under discussion because of its being in a segregated section of town."⁴⁷ League members fervently debated the issue of segregation in Williamsport, questioning whether or not their own organization was truly open to all interested persons. At the March 8, 1971 executive board meeting,

[President Dieffenderfer] read a survey sheet...concerning membership of minority groups in the local League. This started a discussion as to whether or not we ought to make specific efforts to include more members from the minority groups but ended as a discussion of just what we mean by minority groups. Members had varying opinions...Dieffenderfer stated that she has sent a copy of the survey sheet to Mr. P.D. Mitchell [of the Williamsport NAACP] and that she had tried to get more active participation from our Negro members.⁴⁸

The League's internal concern over developing a more inclusive organization turned outward to encourage integration in the Williamsport community. The May 24, 1971 executive board meeting minutes state, "Discrimination in real estate was discussed briefly."⁴⁹ The LWV of the Williamsport Area, like the national organization, expressed concern over the lack of equality in society.

In the 1970s, the League's discussions of inequality in the community led to an examination of the place of women in society. The first mention of an increased interest in women's rights appears in the February 7, 1972 executive board meeting minutes: "[Mrs. Pope] read a letter from the Berkley League requesting our support in influencing National to change the wording of their position concerning women's rights...Mrs. Jones advised us to present the letter at our unit meetings and get a consensus."⁵⁰ The group's involvement with women's rights issues would increase throughout the decade.

The LWV studied the needs of working women. League members participated in conferences designed to provide resources to women employed outside of the home. The March 11, 1974 executive board meeting minutes announce, "The Labor Council has scheduled an all day meeting on March 16, 1974. The topic of discussion will be 'The Working Woman's Role in Society.' Anne Dieffenderfer will attend. Other members are encouraged to do so too."⁵¹ The League also struggled to determine the proper way in which to address its members. Many women argued that traditional titles, such as Mrs. and Miss, focused entirely on a woman's marital status, ignoring her value as an individual. League members debated the issue and "to avoid ill-feeling over the substitution of Ms. for Mrs. or Miss, Sally Craig and Elizabeth Byers proposed that a survey question be included in the next newsletter to determine each member's preference of title."⁵² The LWV's support of working women and its examination of the effect of social titles suggest a fledgling belief in a woman's individual autonomy.

The group expanded its interest in feminist issues to include studies of controversial topics, such as domestic violence and abortion, previously tackled by organizations concerned primarily with women's rights. The LWV, however, stopped short of public activism in support of women's rights issues. The January 5, 1976 executive board meeting minutes state,

[NOW] sent a communication requesting LWV support and/or co-sponsorship of a conference on Violence Against Women to be held this spring. Board agreed to inform NOW that we would publicize the conference to our membership but would not publicly support or co-sponsor the program.⁵³

The League discussed abortion at the November 6, 1978 executive board meeting.

“Board discussed a memorandum from the Bethlehem LWV dealing with the National League Board’s decision to lobby in favor of Medicaid payments for abortion, using the equal access position as justification.”⁵⁴ The LWV of Lycoming County shared the national organization’s belief in violence prevention and reproductive freedom; however, the group did not plan any public programs to address these issues.

The League of Women Voters’ move to support the ERA dramatically increased its involvement with women’s rights issues. The LWV of Lycoming County began to express a desire to work for the ERA ratification effort in 1977. The September 7, 1977 executive board meeting minutes announce, “Board discussed ways our local LWV could support financially [the ERA] movement (speakers, dinners, selling items, etc.) obtaining their financial support.”⁵⁵ At the October 3, 1977 executive board meeting, the group determined to raise funds through a speaker.⁵⁶ The League planned to contact other women’s organizations to raise public awareness of the program.

Blair McKelvey has contacted a speaker on ERA, Dr. Norma Raffel of the Penn State faculty, who would be available to speak in the late fall or early spring...Blair moved that...Dr. Raffel be asked to speak to the community. Afterwards a donation will be requested...Each LWV member will be contacted by letter and requested to donate \$10 for ERA, prior to Dr. Raffel’s speech...All other interested women’s organizations will be invited to attend the meeting.⁵⁷

The LWV of Lycoming County contacted local radio stations, NOW and the Williamsport Teachers Association in an effort to ensure good attendance at the program.⁵⁸ League members participated in ERA programs sponsored by other women’s organizations, including a NOW ERA meeting held at the James V. Brown Library on

January 10, 1978.⁵⁹ The November 6, 1978 executive board meeting minutes announce, “The [Pennsylvania] State NOW Conference will be held on November 10, 11, and 12 at the Genetti-Lycoming Hotel in Williamsport...Kathy Waters will attend the Saturday workshop on ERA as a representative of the LWV.”⁶⁰ The League viewed the ERA as essential legislation in gaining equal legal status for women, thereby “creating a just society.”⁶¹ The group worked with other organizations to lobby for ratification of the amendment.

An interview with Maria Gustafson, the last president of the League of Women Voters of Lycoming County, provided an insider’s perspective of the organization during the 1970s and 1980s. Gustafson believed that the League’s voter education programs were its greatest contribution to the local community during this period.⁶² Gustafson described League-sponsored Candidates Nights, designed to allow voters to meet political candidates and learn their views on important issues. In addition, Gustafson discussed Voters Guides, pamphlets created by League members, which listed the names of political candidates on the local, state and national levels, the offices they were seeking, their political affiliations, and their positions on various issues. League members distributed Voters Guides at no charge in public institutions, for example, local banks.⁶³ Candidates Nights and Voters Guides fulfilled what Gustafson described as the LWV of Lycoming County’s primary mission, “To have an informed citizenry.”⁶⁴ Gustafson’s description of the League’s voter education programs supports the national organization’s goals: to enable citizens to make educated political choices and to effect political change.⁶⁵

Gustafson stated that the League initiated positive reforms in Lycoming County. Gustafson described the League’s role in gaining increased funding for the James V.

Brown Library. The League was a key supporter of a resolution that provided county funding for the library.⁶⁶ Before the county legislature passed the resolution, the library's funding was entirely dependent on individual and corporate donations.⁶⁷ The League organized a series of Library Forums to raise public awareness of the issue.⁶⁸ An article appearing in the August 13, 1981 edition of the *Williamsport Sun-Gazette* quotes League members' views on library funding, "We feel that since the libraries benefit the entire county, it should be the county's responsibility to fund the libraries instead of relying on voluntary local, municipal and school district funding which results in uncertain revenues."⁶⁹ The League's efforts to ensure sufficient funding for the James V. Brown Library reflect the organization's desire to initiate reforms benefiting all members of the local community.

Gustafson reiterates the fact that the League's agenda focused on more than women's rights issues. She stated that the majority of League members supported a woman's right to choose in the matter of abortion and advocated "equality in the workplace and government help in child care."⁷⁰ She notes, however, that the League opened its membership to men in the 1970s, a decision she viewed as a natural result of the League's principle mission, encouraging all members of society to be "good citizen[s]."⁷¹ Gustafson's interview defines the League as a social feminist organization, comprised primarily of women determined to work for changes benefiting the whole of society.

The increasing number of women working outside of the home led to the League of Women Voters of Lycoming County's disintegration.⁷² Gustafson stated that when she joined the League in 1971, the majority of members were homemakers raising small

children.⁷³ She notes that the league had approximately 50 to 70 active members, numbers it had maintained since its reactivation in 1952.⁷⁴ Starting in the mid 1970s, however, more League members, the majority of whom were college educated, joined the workforce.⁷⁵ During the last five years of the chapter's existence, the League had an active membership of 25 to 30.⁷⁶ Gustafson states that this number was insufficient to conduct the League's detailed studies of public policy issues.⁷⁷ The membership resolved the Lycoming County chapter of the League of Women Voters on June 18, 1990.

The National Organization for Women was founded on June 30, 1966 in Washington, DC. Betty Friedan and the Reverend Pauli Murray drafted NOW's statement of purpose, which reads, "The purpose of NOW is to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."⁷⁸ NOW's founding can be traced to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an amendment proposed by Howard W. Smith, a Virginia congressman. Title VII prohibited job discrimination on the basis of sex; when the Civil Rights Act was passed "the new law provided that employment discrimination complaints could be sent to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission [EEOC], which was soon besieged with women's grievances about sex discrimination."⁷⁹ Many women's rights supporters, however, argued that the EEOC did little to investigate sex discrimination claims. Nancy Woloch writes, "Unequal treatment at the EEOC soon spurred the rudiments of feminist organization...A core of activist women tried to press the commission into action...Rebuffed, the new feminist nucleus felt compelled to create a civil rights organization for women."⁸⁰ NOW was the activists' response.

NOW states that it

strives to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for *all* women; end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism and homophobia; promote equality and justice in our society.⁸¹

NOW supports equal rights for all victims of discrimination, including ethnic minorities and gays and lesbians. Achieving equal rights for women, however, remains NOW's driving focus. NOW works to eradicate sex discrimination and sexual harassment "in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society."⁸² Reproductive freedom of choice is another major goal. NOW's interest in the status of other traditionally oppressed groups stems from the organization's work to achieve full legal, political, economic, and social rights for women.

NOW believes that ratification of the ERA is necessary to guarantee equal rights for women. NOW states,

Equality in pay, job opportunities, insurance, social security, and education will remain an elusive dream without an ERA in the US Constitution, and we are committed to its passage and ratification. The progress we have made for women's rights...can be lost at any time without the strength of a Constitutional foundation.⁸³

NOW continued to back the ERA after it failed to be ratified by the 1982 deadline; at that point, the amendment had been passed by 35 of the required 38 state legislatures. NOW argues that the battle for equality between the sexes will not be successful until the US Constitution legally protects women's rights.

NOW is a politically activist organization. NOW developed a system of Political Action Committees (PACs), which work for the election of candidates who support the organization's agenda. Political Action Committees are defined as belonging to either NOW/PAC or NOW Equality PAC (NEP). "NOW/PAC is the only part of the national organization that can endorse federal political candidates. [NEP] supports candidates for state, county and city offices, from governors to school board members."⁸⁴ NOW states that it is a nonpartisan organization; it does not support a specific political party.⁸⁶ NOW PACs, however, will endorse political candidates. "NOW PACs endorse all candidates who take uncompromising stands on our issues- women and men of any political affiliation."⁸⁷ NOW PACs are particularly dedicated to campaigning for the election of feminist women. "We must have a Feminization of Power. We must move more feminist women into policy making positions in government."⁶⁰ NOW views the election of pro-women's rights candidates as an essential component in gaining equal rights for women. NOW states,

NOW will hold itself independent of any political party in order to mobilize the political power of all men and women intent on our goals. We will strive to ensure that no party, candidate, president, senator, governor, congressman, or any public official who betrays or ignores the principle of full equality between the sexes is elected or appointed to office. If it is necessary to mobilize the votes of men and women who believe in our cause, in order to win for women the final right to be fully free and equal human beings, we so commit ourselves.⁸⁸

The organization's willingness to publicly support political candidates is a defining difference between NOW and the LWV, which will support positions on issues but not individual political candidates.

Like the League of Women Voters, NOW is a grassroots organization. Gayle Forman states, "Most of NOW's politicking and organizing is carried out by more than 600 local chapters that do everything from staging protest marches and pickets to coordinating educational programs."⁸⁹ An involved membership on the local level is necessary to organize NOW activities. NOW states that it "achieves its goals through direct mass actions...intensive lobbying, grassroots political organizing and litigation."⁹⁰ In order to achieve success, these activities require the direct participation of many members; the work of a small core group would not be sufficient to reach the organization's goals.⁹¹

The National Organization for Women is defined as an equity feminist organization; its principle goal is to achieve complete legal, political, economic, and social equality for women. Black writes, "I suggest the term 'equity feminism' for all those many belief systems which focus on women's similarity to men and demand equality for women on that basis."⁹² NOW argues that individuals cannot be judged on the basis of sex because there are no significant differences in the abilities of women and men.⁹³ Chafe uses the term "liberal feminism" to describe NOW, writing, "Associated primarily with...organizations like NOW, liberal feminism sought to work politically within the existing social and economic framework to secure reforms for women and progress toward full equality between the sexes."⁹⁴ Chafe's definition provides a more complete understanding of NOW; he states that, although the organization wished to radically alter society's perception of women, it did not wish to overthrow existing institutions. NOW works for change within the system, which has enabled the organization to gain considerable support. Chafe writes,

Liberal feminists wanted access for women to decent jobs, prestigious clubs, high-powered meetings; they wanted to abolish “male only” or “female only” job classifications; they sought the kind of self-determination for women as individuals that men had always had as individuals...It was possible for those in power to respond to the...demands because these were familiar requests, with compelling morality and logic behind them, and *they could be accepted without changing the rules of the game*, except in terms of defining who could play.⁹⁵

NOW’s focus on achieving equal rights for women as individuals explains the organization’s successes.

Williamsport women organized a local chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1973. Known as Williamsport NOW, the group planned to combat sex discrimination in the local community.⁹⁶ The bylaws of Williamsport NOW list the chapter’s statement of purpose, “The purpose of Williamsport NOW, congruent with that of the National Organization for Women and Pennsylvania NOW, is to eliminate sexism and to create a society in which each individual can live with dignity, security and pleasure.”⁹⁷ Like the national organization, Williamsport NOW focused on achieving equal rights for women as individuals. Williamsport NOW received a provisional charter from Judy Lightfoot, a representative of the national organization, on April 12, 1974, making the group an official local chapter of NOW.⁹⁸

Williamsport NOW’s earliest activities centered on ensuring equal athletic and educational opportunities for girls in the Williamsport area. Williamsport NOW’s first campaign was an attack on Little League’s policy of excluding girls. Responding to a complaint from a Williamsport girl who was not allowed to join a Little League team, Williamsport NOW organized a demonstration at Little League Stadium in South

Williamsport on August 25, 1973, during the internationally publicized Little League World Series.⁹⁹ Little League officials met with Carol Atkins, Gloria Sackman-Reed and Martha Sutton, representatives of Williamsport NOW.¹⁰⁰ The November 1973 edition of the *Williamsport NOW Newsletter* describes the results of the meeting,

We cannot help but feel that our demonstration last summer and a recent meeting Gloria Sackman-Reed, Carol Atkins and Martha Sutton had with McGovern and Hale had some influence in [Little League's] announcement this week that a parallel program for girls has been approved. We view this with some apprehension as separate is never equal.¹⁰¹

Although girls would be allowed to participate in the Little League program, they would be required to play on girls-only teams. These nonintegrated teams were contrary to NOW's belief that women should be equal participants with men in every aspect of life.

Little League officials continued to challenge girls when they attempted to register for play. The *Sentinel Star* of Orlando, Florida detailed Williamsport NOW's struggle to gain equal opportunities for young women to participate in Little League. "The local chapter of...NOW threatened ...to take legal action if an 11-year-old South Williamsport girl is not permitted to play Little League baseball."¹⁰² Williamsport NOW continued to challenge Little League's policy, arguing that it denied girls the same athletic opportunities as boys.

NOW's attack on Little League led to a correlating examination of athletic discrimination in Williamsport public schools. Williamsport NOW defined its position on scholastic sports, stating, "NOW demand[s] immediate integration of all publicly supported play, sports and physical education activities from pre-school, nursery school, kindergarten ages, [and] moving upward."¹⁰³

Williamsport NOW argued that schools should provided girls with the same chance to play interscholastic sports as boys. The November 1973 edition of the *Williamsport NOW Newsletter* states, “We need to do two things- contact the...school districts, and get students and parents to start making noises about girls teams.”¹⁰⁴ NOW members worked within the environment of the school systems to increase the number of girls’ sports programs. In December 1973, NOW announced that members would begin attending various local school board meetings to lobby for increased athletic opportunities for girls.¹⁰⁵ Four members volunteered to attend Williamsport High School board meetings; another four members agreed to observe school board meetings at Loyalsock High School.¹⁰⁶ By April 1974, five NOW members attended Jersey Shore school board meetings, three attended Lockport meetings, four attended Loyalsock meetings, three attended South Williamsport meetings, and nine attended those at Williamsport High School.¹⁰⁷

NOW’s presence in local schools elicited both positive and negative reactions from school officials. NOW members delivered a presentation about the lack of equality in public schools, focusing on athletic programs and vocational education, at the April 10, 1974 meeting of the Loyalsock school board.¹⁰⁸ School officials expressed interest in the presentation; the May 1974 edition of the *Williamsport NOW Newsletter* states, “In a fruitful meeting with Superintendent George Smith and Donald Byerly, instructional coordinator...they agreed to let NOW speak to teachers during in-service training sessions next fall.”¹⁰⁹ Jersey Shore officials, however, criticized a similar presentation. The school board and members of the administration responded to NOW’s allegations of sexism within the district with a letter, stating, “The Jersey Shore Area School District as

a public institution complies explicitly with the basic and fundamental belief that no pupil in this district shall, on the ground of sex...be... subjected to discrimination.”¹¹⁰

Although NOW responded with a rebuttal letter, Jersey Shore officials refused to accept the organization’s position.¹¹¹

NOW continued to monitor sex discrimination within local school districts.

NOW member Martha Sutton created a slide presentation, “Educating Girls: Instilling Inferiority,” to demonstrate the pervasive use of sexist language in textbooks.¹¹² In

February 1979, members of the South Williamsport High School Girls Track Team turned to NOW for assistance in maintaining their team. The NOW meeting minutes for February 2, 1979 state, “[The team] was about to be disbanded due to ‘not finding a coach and not having facilities for both teams.’”¹¹³ Sex discrimination in the

Williamsport School District was noted at the March 1, 1979 meeting, “Anna [Weitz] and Gloria [Sackman-Reed] will follow up with the Williamsport School District on its ‘boys only’ after school basketball program for 4th-6th graders.”¹¹⁴ Williamsport NOW continued to observe local school board meetings to ensure the development of equal athletic and educational opportunities for young women.

Williamsport NOW worked to eliminate sexist references in print and electronic media. NOW lobbied the *Williamsport Sun-Gazette* to eliminate the use of the husband’s name or titles like Mrs. and Miss when identifying women. NOW members met with the newspaper’s publishers; results of the meeting were printed in the November 1973 edition of the *Williamsport NOW Newsletter*; “[The publishers] are taking under consideration allowing (?) us to use our own names instead of being identified by husband’s name and/or title; such as Miss or Mrs., which denotes marital status.”¹¹⁵ NOW supported the

elimination of all titles or the use of Ms., which enabled a woman to maintain her status as an individual. At the December 10, 1973 meeting, NOW members discussed possible ways of pressuring newspapers into printing women's names in more equitable manners. The meeting minutes state, "Discussion was held as to appropriate action (barring tarring and feathering) against local newspapers that refuse to print a woman's own name. In the future, NOW members are encouraged to address all male editors as Mr. JANE DOE."¹¹⁶ The group also challenged sex discrimination in advertisements; Gloria Sackman-Reed wrote a protest letter to Altair Airlines Inc. in May 1974, criticizing the company's use of sexist language, such as "businessman" instead of the more inclusive "businessperson."¹¹⁷ NOW argued that language should not distinguish between the sexes and that women possessed personal identities independent of their relationships with men.

Members of Williamsport NOW expressed concern over the ways in which local radio stations represented women. They described their consternation in a letter to the president of Pennsylvania NOW, writing, "We have found that the electronic media does not adequately reflect the needs of the community. Women (who make up 53% of the population are minimally considered, and when they are it is largely as sex object, frivolous or as household drudge."¹¹⁸ NOW approached WYLC-WILQ and WMPT about producing more stories about women's issues and women's sports; in addition, NOW lobbied for more women broadcasters and the creation of public service announcements addressing women's rights.¹¹⁹ WMPT agreed to establish a Women's Advisory Council "made up of representatives of organizations, groups and individuals concerned with improving the status of women" to ensure that the station reflected the

needs of women in its broadcasts.¹²⁰ NOW remained involved with local stations, sending representatives to speak to the new management of WRAK after it was sold in 1979, in order to explain NOW's position on women in radio.¹²¹ Williamsport NOW lobbied local radio stations to ensure nondiscriminatory representations of women in stories and announcements equal in numbers to those concerning men.

Williamsport NOW engaged in various activities on behalf of the ERA. A Pennsylvania NOW press release, written by Williamsport NOW member Gloria Sackman-Reed, describes "I Gave My Blood for the ERA", a pro-ERA program. Sackman-Reed writes, "NOW members across the state will sell their blood and donate the money to efforts on behalf of the ratification of the federal [ERA]...Final passage of the ERA is the number one priority of Pennsylvania NOW."¹²² Williamsport NOW members sponsored several programs supporting the ratification effort; in 1979, they organized a fund raising campaign.¹²³ NOW members understood that ratification would require serious lobbying efforts; the March 1, 1979 NOW meeting minutes state, "[The] ERA is in big trouble...The 'right' (especially of the Republican party) has redoubled their efforts...Discussion was a new drive to get ERA permission cards/lists which would OK letters, public opinion telegrams, etc."¹²⁴ Like the national organization, Williamsport NOW viewed the ERA as a crucial step in ensuring complete legal equality for women.

Reproductive rights were a major concern of Williamsport NOW. At the February 1, 1979 meeting, members planned "public outreach methods", including "programs on motherhood by choice and preventing [sexually transmitted disease] with teenage pregnancy...[pro-choice] demonstration on May 12...revising brochure on

reproductive rights.”¹²⁵ NOW’s activities reflected the organization’s belief that one’s choice of contraception method should be a private decision; not one be controlled by government regulations.

The organization’s abortion rights position was a deciding factor in its support of political candidates on the local, state and national levels. The May 3, 1979 NOW meeting minutes announce, “Klementovich, one of two candidates [for mayor of Williamsport] in the Republican primary, is an active member of Pennsylvanians for Human Life, an anti-choice organization in the matter of abortion.”¹²⁶ NOW activities expanded beyond informing its membership about political candidates’ positions on abortion. A 1980 letter to Williamsport NOW members states,

Anthony Cimini, incumbent assemblyman from our area is a well-known advocate against a woman’s right to choose in the matter of abortion. Last year in Williamsport, NOW held a demonstration in front of his Williamsport office denouncing his anti-choice position and his vote in favor of calling for a constitutional convention to add fetus rights to the US Constitution. Needless to say feminists in the Williamsport area would like to see...Cimini defeated in the upcoming election...

Since the issues seem to be not getting public attention it is strongly suggested that people write letters to the editors of our two newspapers and call in to radio “call-in” shows telling about the anti-woman position of Cimini.¹²⁷

Williamsport NOW’s work to prevent the election of anti-abortion candidates supports the national organization’s statement of purpose, which states, “We will strive to ensure that no...candidate...who...ignores the principle of full equality between the sexes is appointed to office.”¹²⁸ NOW’s activities on behalf of reproductive rights reflects its fundamental goal: to gain equal rights and autonomy for women as individuals.

Williamsport NOW entered a period of inactivity in the early 1980s, after several active members left the Williamsport area.¹²⁹ By 1989, a revived chapter emerged, spurred into action by threats to abortion rights. The October 1989 meeting minutes state, “Williamsport Chapter of the National Organization for Women activated because of concern for reproductive rights.”¹³⁰ Sally Lifland Butterfield, a current NOW member, states that the group “serve[s] as a rallying point for pro-choice people”, describing NOW activities such as “[opposing] the human life chain” and providing “small loans for abortion.”¹³¹ Reproductive rights programs were a major focus of NOW’s agenda in the late 1980s and 1990. At the February 1990 meeting Butterfield, then president of the organization, “announced her candidacy for the 83rd district seat in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives as a pro-choice advocate.”¹³² NOW’s belief in reproductive freedom continues to be a major part of its agenda.¹³³

There were few connections between the LWV of the Williamsport Area/Lycoming County and Williamsport NOW. Gustafson stated that few women belonged to both organizations.¹³⁴ The League did demonstrate interest in some NOW programs; however, public co-sponsorship of activities was almost nonexistent. Butterfield recalled one joint program during the late 1980s, in which LWV and NOW members distributed food in low income sections of Williamsport in an attempt to encourage increased voter registration.¹³⁵ Although both groups were interested in the problems of Williamsport’s underprivileged, LWV members criticized Butterfield when she attempted to spark voter registration by criticizing the Republican administration’s treatment of the poor.¹³⁶ LWV tradition did not condone the support or criticism of politicians; NOW policy encouraged actively monitoring the women’s rights records of

public officials. The debate between Butterfield and LWV members highlighted another basic difference between the two organizations.

Women's rights issues occupy different levels of importance in the Williamsport, Pennsylvania chapters of the League of Women Voters and the National Organization for Women. Although League members supported women's rights, they were only one part of a diverse agenda focused on a variety of progressive reforms. As a social feminist organization, the LWV's principle goal was to improve the quality of life of the general society. The League of Women Voters of the Williamsport Area/Lycoming County developed programs for all Williamsport residents, regardless of gender or other classification. In contrast, Williamsport NOW's central purpose was gaining complete equality for women. An equity feminist organization, NOW worked to eliminate all sex-based differences in the legal, political, economic, and social treatment of women. Separated by their differences, the groups engaged in few joint programs. Both local chapters remained focused on the goals developed by their respective national organizations, representing two distinct types of women's organizations.

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