

Chapter 9. The Importance of Feminism

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A Historian of a Certain Age

S. Jay Kleinberg

Looking back over an academic career that spans nearly fifty years shows much consistency and some surprising by-roads in my life. I remain dedicated to the fundamentals of the feminist movement as I interpret and contribute to it, believing and hoping for a level playing field for all people, regardless of race, class, religion, gender or sexual orientation. At the same time, my life has moved in unexpected directions owing to various accidents and incidents. The chief among these have been marriage to an Englishman whom I met whilst stranded in Penn Station, NYC in a blizzard; the move from the United States to Great Britain where I rebuilt my professional livelihood as an historian despite a declining job market; the delights of being a mother to two wonderful children; and a serious car accident eight years ago that pretty much derailed my academic career.

My research focused on the impact of economic change on women's lives and family structures. I was one of the first historians to teach U.S. women's history and examine the experiences of women whom other historians thought unimportant or ignored, namely non-waged working-class women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and the experiences of middle-aged and older women as they have changed over time. Now, as an Emeritus Professor at Brunel University London I continue to research, write and teach, albeit at a slower pace than before I left full-time employment.

The brain injury and other problems resulting from the accident forced my premature retirement on medical grounds in 2011. They have not lessened my devotion to exploring the impact of economic, social and political changes on gender roles, nor my anguish that change proceeds at an uneven pace. Sometimes the battle for full equality appears to go into reverse, as with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. That much longed for level playing field has yet to emerge.

I believe senior scholars should mentor researchers at the beginning of their careers, particularly in the United Kingdom where there are relatively few senior women historians or researchers in

women's history. Part of my contribution to this was the founding of the Society for the History of Women in the Americas (SHAW), which brings together scholars at all stages of their careers. SHAW actively supports young scholars, hosting writing workshops in which senior figures critique the work of postgraduate students. It holds regular conferences and seminars that interrogate gender constructs throughout the Americas, not just the United States.

An entry in my high school yearbook might have predicted my devotion to history, even if I did not know, nor expect, to become a professional historian. No one in their wildest imagination – especially me – could have predicted that I would win prizes in an English horticultural society garden show for my fuchsias, roses, and peas. I live in rural Surrey, a county just south of London, on a three-acre garden in the woods. I grow a lot of our fruit and vegetables, processing and preserving the surplus, much as my grandmother would have done in rural Connecticut one hundred years ago. I have tried to pass on my passion for baking not only to my own and neighbours' children, but also to children in my village by teaching them how to make bread, cakes, and cookies at monthly activity days.

Second wave feminists, myself included, rebelled against what we perceived to be the domestic focus of our mothers' lives. However, the basic skills such as cooking, baking, gardening, sewing and quilting devalued by some because they were 'women's work,' are still important for health, wellbeing and enjoyment. They can free us from the food conglomerates that dominate global consumption, adulterate our food with salt, sugar, fat, and chemical additives and haul it from one end of the planet to the other. I will never forget when one of my children said of potatoes we grew ourselves, "Mummy, these potatoes are so 'potatoey.'" Despite their busy lives (my daughter is an architect and my son is a teacher and environmental studies student), they cook, bake and garden, and are the healthier and happier for it.

My health challenges notwithstanding, I try to be as active as possible- scuba diving, walking, cycling, swimming and dancing- emulating the example of my parents who played golf well into their eighties. I have taken up new pursuits including gospel singing, dancing, flower arranging and quilting. The delights of growing older include feeling settled in one's skin, having the time to explore new interests and to pass on traditional women's skills and feminist values to future generations. Although the second wave may have ebbed for the moment, it still flows.

Jay's journey from the baby-boom suburbs of New York City to rural England has included one very happy marriage to a British oceanographer, two fabulous children and seven books, including The Shadow of the Mills: Working-Class Families in Pittsburgh, 1870-1907; Women in the United States, 1830-1945; Widows and Orphans First: The Family Economy and Social Welfare Policy, 1880-1939, and co-edited with Eileen Boris and Vicki L. Ruiz, The Practice of U. S. Women's History: Narratives, Intersections, and Dialogues. Jay, her husband and children have travelled the world for work and for fun. In addition to her research, Jay sings in the Pirbright Gospel Choir and teaches American Women's History to engineering students on a study abroad

program. She founded SHAW (Society for the History of Women in the Americas) and co-founded the Institute of Historical Research (London) seminar, *Gender and History in the Americas*.



Jay Kleinberg (2014) [Photo by permission]

Becoming Sheila

Sheila Goldmacher

From my teenage years, I remember lying in my bed on a humid summer's night gazing at the sky through the only window in my room. Dazzling bolts of lightning and fearsome cracks of thunder got me thinking there must be other places in the universe besides that small, hot room in Brooklyn, NY. Mind you, I was not scientific; my interests lay more in history and literature, the latest songs on the hit parade, and dance parties. However, at that moment, I wished I could be somewhere else, and, while I have yet to leave the planet, I have journeyed far from that hot, sweaty bedroom.

Though I attended college, trained as a history teacher and eventually a librarian, like most young women of my generation, I married and raised a family. Yet, I was the dissatisfied woman, the one depicted in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. My days and nights were filled with domestic duties and community activism, but inside, I was empty. When the women's movement began, I was living in Princeton, NJ and plunged right in. After I attended an all-day feminist conference in the early 1970s, with my 11-year-old daughter in tow, my life began to feel different. I began to think I could have "my life" separate and apart from being my husband's wife and my children's mother.

I eventually left my marriage, took two of my children with me and moved to Philadelphia, Pa., where I helped open a feminist political bookstore, Alexandria Books. Out of that store came a newspaper, HERA, and Philadelphia's first International Women's Day march. The city was a hotbed of feminist activity and I partook of it all. When Holly Near walked into the store with

her latest album and agreed to perform in a hastily-arranged concert, within hours it seemed everyone knew. The next night the place was packed. Those kinds of things seemed to happen regularly. What a glorious time!

In 1975, with my daughter and two other women, I moved heart, soul and whatever stuff could be packed into a U-Haul trailer hitched to a station wagon and drove cross-country. It was a sometimes magical, sometimes scary adventure to the Bay Area and the start of a journey I am still on. The rest of the family, former husband and sons, followed and continue to live nearby.

My life's journey has included much travel – Europe, Mexico, and Hawai'i and Kaua'i, where I learned I am a beach bum. Dipping into and staying with Buddhist thought through insight meditation. Coming out as a lesbian. And discovering late in life that I love jazz, music that has brought me such joy and beautiful experiences. When I am having a down day, I need only turn my radio dial to the local jazz station, and my mood changes.

What fills most of my days at age 81, is political activism, something I learned by watching my father and mother. My socialist dad, a Polish immigrant, was a union steward at his factory job, and my mom, when not working for money, gathered signatures for Democrats and worked the polls. I kick-started my political life during the Adlai Stevenson presidential campaign. I still work for the feminist, socialist vision of a society that I want to live in, based on cooperation, compassion and caring, in contrast to today's plutocratic awful, greedy state. Fortunately I have been living in a limited equity cooperative in Berkeley since 1991. A good start.

I support a progressive agenda and have become a street lady. Not the bag lady many of us feared becoming. I never leave my apartment without wearing a button dealing with an issue I care about, a t-shirt which carries a message like MEDICARE FOR ALL, or the hat that publicizes a documentary -- something to connect with people. I talk to people everywhere and work on and participate in demonstrations. Most importantly, I lobby my representatives by gathering signatures on petitions or visiting with groups of elders. It connects me to the community and that connection keeps me living longer.

I love it all. I am grateful to the feminist movement for giving me the courage to find myself and to believe that I have something to say. I love the woman I have been becoming since Feb. 19, 1934.

Sheila Goldmacher resides in Berkeley, Ca., just turned 81 this year, and is still celebrating getting there. She is a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. In her spare time she reads voraciously, loves watching movies, listening to almost any kind of music, but especially jazz, and hanging out with her family and friends. She is waiting to get the results of her DNA tests to find out where she really came from.



Sheila Goldmacher (2014)
[Photo credit: Nancy Rubin]

Not Your Grandmother's Feminism

Gloria J. Sandoval

I am a sixty-two -year-old woman living in the San Francisco Bay Area. I grew up in American Canyon and attended Catholic schools.

I was always very close to my mother and grandmother. Their strength of character made them role models for me.

My father used to say I was born a feminist. I remember being fairly young and declaring that I wanted to be the first woman president. My mom and dad told me I could do anything I set my mind to. I believed it.

In high school, I was into politics. I was on the student council every year, was an editor for the teen page of the newspaper, sat on the leadership team of the Robert F. Kennedy Young Democrats and walked precincts and had doors slammed in my face many times, mostly when advocating for gun control.

My college years were a whirlwind. Keeping up my grades at UC Berkeley wasn't easy. I worked; my parents didn't have the means to pay tuition. I took more units than required and went to school in the summer because I wanted to graduate in three years and save money. Then there were the hippies and the anti-war protests. Berkeley gave me the opportunity to participate in both, and I did. Tear-gassed on several occasions, I somehow managed to avoid being arrested.

And I was in love. Rick and I grew up as neighbors: he, the neighborhood "hoodlum," I the "goody two shoes." But, I saw his potential. I told everyone who was concerned (including my parents) that deep down, Rick was a really nice guy, bruised by hard knocks. With a girlfriend like me, I said, he would surely change for the better.

Our relationship was always abusive. During our courtship it was verbal and emotional abuse. He called me names, taunted me about working so hard and controlled who my friends were and how I spent my time. Although these should have been big red flags for me, they weren't. I chalked up his behavior to how much he loved me. After all, in those days, domestic violence was silenced; it was still a hidden family issue.

I married Rick the summer after graduation. Although I had been admitted to U.C. Berkeley School of Law, I decided to take a year off to work.

In my job as a counselor for a diversion program, I worked with many attorneys and decided law school wasn't for me. I figured I was such a bleeding heart I would probably spend years (and lots of money) in school and turn out to be a poor public defender. Besides, I really enjoyed the social work aspect of my job.

During those years the abuse increased and became physical as well. Rick would threaten my life if I ever talked about ending the relationship. And I was pregnant.

After our son was born, I found a new job at a rape crisis center, working part-time so I could spend more time with my baby.

The center was a small, fledgling nonprofit with only three part-time employees. Within a year, our executive director was recruited to another agency, and the board of directors hired me to replace her.

So here I was, the executive director of a feminist rape crisis center, spending my days talking about violence against women and children and going home to an abusive partner. It became clear that either my marriage or my profession had to change.

I decided to leave my relationship. My son was four years old. I had left many times previously, only to be found or be convinced that it would never happen again. I was the typical battered woman.

My work to end violence against women and children intensified, and I stayed at the rape crisis center for fifteen years. I then spent five years as executive director of Shanti, which provides volunteer-based emotional and practical support for people living with life-threatening or chronic illnesses. For the last seventeen years, I have been CEO of an agency dedicated to ending family violence.

My adult son is a wonderful, feminist man, married to a strong and beautiful woman, and they have blessed me with an incredible granddaughter who is the love of my life.

I often think about how different my life is from my grandmother's, how many opportunities I had that she and my mother didn't. Even so, I am struck by how their strength of character, their determination and their feminism were instilled in me.

Someday, I hope my granddaughter will say the same about me.

When she is not working her "day" job, Gloria Sandoval enjoys consulting on organizational development, spending time with her granddaughter, reading, and camping with family.



Gloria Sandoval (2012)
[Photo by permission]

How Feminism Changed My Life

Ruth Rosen

Later, I would look back and realize how much I was learning, even as a little girl, about why I should become an independent woman. My father had all the money and I watched my mother beg, with tears streaming down her face, for new jackets and snow boots for her children. But it hadn't always been that way. She had run away from a strict family and become an executive secretary of Helen Rubenstein. When she married, my father demanded she stop working. The message she gave me, in a thousand different ways, was never to be dependent on a man.

A strange proto-feminism overcame me during my college years. For a course in European history, we had to read all the work of a major intellectual and I chose Simone de Beauvoir. My professor told me she was verbose and inconsequential. I did it anyway. In a seminar on Russian intellectual history, four women, nudged by me, asked our professor if we could spend the year thinking and writing about all the women in 19th century Russian literature.

I arrived at U.C. Berkeley for graduate school just as the women's movement began. A small group went around the room describing how their lives would have been different if they had been sons, instead of daughters. That was the moment when memories flooded me. Why hadn't

I been allowed to shoot my brother's BB gun? Play with his trains? Why was I so much smarter but got so little attention? Why had my brother been given a car, a down payment for a house, while I worked twenty hours a week and lived on a five year fellowship from U.C. Berkeley

What killed my mother?

The women's movement and my graduate training intersected during the same month. Fortunately, I had several wonderful professors who took pride in my pioneer efforts to study the lives of women, during all periods of American history. For the doctoral exams, one also had to study a comparative field, which for me, included, medieval European history, Russian history and American history. We also had to learn another discipline, and I chose the sociology of gender. Arlie Hochschild in sociology and Natalie Davis in European medieval history supported me, taught me and soon, I was teaching the first research courses in women's history. In the early years, I was treated as a pariah; then I became a star. It was a good lesson for me. I hadn't changed; faculty were just gradually catching up with my passion.

While I was in graduate school, I wrote for the school newspaper, became a "movement" photojournalist and was often chosen to be the token radical woman who spoke against the war and said a few words about the growing women's movement.

Meanwhile, my mother tried to kill herself. Three years passed and she was finally successful. When asked why she killed herself, I had no answer during those years. But after I read the 400 page memoir that she wrote while I was trying to finish my dissertation, I realized that her lack of independence, the loss of herself in marriage, had killed her.

That was when I knew I had to write a history of the women's movement. It had changed-but not saved-many women's lives. I spent twelve years working on it, in between bouts of cancer. When it was finished, I knew it was the most important book of my life.

That's why I accepted the invitation to become a journalist at the Los Angeles Times and San Francisco Chronicle and later, OpenDemocracy.com. As an historian, as a movement activist, I was equipped to write about women, the anti-war movement, and the threat of climate change. And, I had the confidence. I had reinvented myself and felt a new level of competence.

Lest this sound too easy, please remember that I was the only woman in all my graduate seminar courses, the first woman in my department, the only woman on the editorial board. Those of us who occupied these niches understood we were tokens and felt a great responsibility to the future women who would come after us. Mentoring, in fact, became one of the joys of my life. I watched young woman do things that I never dared consider at their age.

And so, now I am seventy, fortunately in good health, and all that I've done has come out of feminism. Feminism gave me the courage to backpack, to hike hills and mountains, to rid myself of men who could not respect an opinionated and strong woman, to try new things. Now I have five grandchildren, the girls all dressed in pink dresses, with pink hand bags. I wonder if this pink girly world is part of the backlash, or whether they will just take for granted their right to do what's important to them. I see women in their forties convene large festivals, but ignore the relentless assault on contraception and abortion and in my darkest moments, I ask: Don't they know better?

I'm glad they take their rights for granted; I, after all, was never thrilled that I could vote. But will they care about other women? Will they see the male gaze of women in the movies? Will they understand why women care more about their appearance than their abilities?

Had my mother lived, she would be proud of me and jealous that she and many others in her generation didn't have the opportunities that opened up to women in the 1970's.

In a film made about the women's movement, an elderly feminist activist says "You're not allowed to retire from women's issues." I agree – and I won't.

This is dedicated to my mother, Ida Rosen, who during her last year discovered NOW and told me that if she were my age, she, too, would be a feminist. Amen.

Ruth Rosen is retired Professor of History, University of California, Davis, who taught women's history and immigration, a journalist who worked as a columnist for the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle, and a lifelong activist for human rights and climate change. In her late fifties Ruth started learning the flute and is now playing Hayden's "London Trios" with a trio. Her website is www.ruthrosen.org.



Ruth Rosen in 2008. [Photo by permission]