



National Organization for Women (NOW)

by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

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The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966 with the goal of bringing about political, social, and legal equality for all women. Among its twenty-four founders were such notable women as Betty Friedan and Betty Furness, as well as four male leaders. Other past leaders of NOW include bisexual Patricia Ireland, lesbian Rosemary Dempsey, and heterosexual feminist Gloria Steinem.

The largest women's rights group in the United States, NOW is structured like a federation, with a national organization coordinating the efforts of state chapters. Within states, there are local chapters for regions, counties, towns, and institutions of higher education. Current areas in which NOW works are discrimination and harassment in employment, education, and the justice system; reproductive rights; violence against women; racism; ensuring electoral equality for female candidates; and homophobia.

NOW was founded at the Third National Conference of the Commission on the Status of Women in Washington, D. C. Some of NOW's best-known actions have been mass marches and demonstrations in Washington, D. C., which have focused on such issues as the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion rights, and violence against women. NOW also publishes a newsletter and funds internships for young women looking to become involved in feminist politics and activism.

The original members of NOW tended to be white, middle-class women with careers. In the 1990s, NOW attempted to become a more diverse organization. It reached out to women of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, and also attempted to represent women who did not pursue careers.

NOW and Lesbianism

In 1971, NOW became the first major national women's organization to support lesbian rights, though this issue did not become a priority for the organization until 1975. Before that time, lesbians had few opportunities to make their voices heard, as their agenda was often suppressed by that of gay men in the gay rights movement and by heterosexual women in the feminist movement.

In NOW's early years, lesbians in the organization were asked to remain closeted so as to allow the organization to focus on other issues--issues considered to be important for all women--instead of on issues important to one (marginalized) group. The refusal of lesbians to accept second-class citizenship in the organization threatened to create a schism within the group.

In 1968, Ti-Grace Atkinson, president of the New York City chapter, left NOW in protest of the organization's unwillingness to address lesbian issues. The next year Rita Mae Brown, after attempting to force a dialogue on the issue, also resigned in protest. The situation became worse when Betty Friedan spoke of a "lavender menace" that threatened the credibility of the women's movement. In response, other women left NOW to form the group Radicalesbians.

NOW's position on lesbian issues changed when the leadership came to see that the marginalization of one

group of women based on their sexual and romantic proclivities ran counter to the organization's mission of equality for all women.

Currently, NOW is involved in the fight for equal marriage rights, funding for lesbian health services, the prosecution of bias crimes, lesbian custody cases, and employment discrimination protections.

Despite NOW's progressive stance on lesbian rights, there continues to be a certain tension in the organization around the question of lesbianism. Antifeminists continue to attack NOW by alleging that all feminists are lesbians, and some feminists react defensively to such allegations.

NOW and Other Sexual Issues

While NOW steadfastly supports individuals' rights to engage in consensual sex in private, the organization continues to distance itself from certain kinds of sexual activity, particularly pornography and sadomasochistic sex. Despite the fact that many women, both lesbian and heterosexual alike, enjoy these activities, NOW considers them to be inherently degrading to women. For lesbians who consider themselves part of the S&M/leather community or for lesbians engaged in making women-positive pornography, NOW is not an inclusive organization.

NOW's record on transgender rights is also somewhat spotty. While NOW supports bias crime and employment non-discrimination for transgender individuals, some factions within the organization consider sex reassignment surgery to be a feature of a sexually oppressive society and, thus, think that individuals should fight the system rather than undergo surgery. These factions of NOW also consider male-to-female transsexuals not quite female, while female-to-male transsexuals are seen as traitors.

Gay men's issues are not part of NOW's agenda, because NOW focuses exclusively on women's rights and women's issues.

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