CULTURE / FEMINISM / HISTORY / POLICY 15 min

Mormon Feminism in 1977 and Today

BY APRIL YOUNG BENNETT · PUBLISHED MARCH 8, 2021 · UPDATED NOVEMBER 8, 2021

This week marks the 45th anniversary the National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, a continuation of the International Women's Year (IWY) celebrations in the 1970s. I recently went to Houston for the 40th anniversary celebration of this historic event and delivered this speech about how Mormons reacted to IWY back then and what Mormon feminism is like today.

Video: Mormon Feminism in 1977 and Today
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Mormon Feminism in the 1970s

International Women's Year in 1975 and the National Women's Conference in 1977 took place at a pivotal time for Mormon women. In the 1970s, Mormon women began new feminist organizations in response to the International Women's Year events. Meanwhile, Mormon officials fought the Equal Rights Amendment and then attempted to solidify traditional gender roles.

Founding of Exponent II

In 1976, Mormon women in Boston began a consciousness-raising group and published a newsletter for Mormon women. In 1977 their members launched a suffragist newspaper named after nineteenth-century Mormon women and brought copies to their meetings. It was called the Mormon Woman's Forum.

Mormon women have a fraught relationship with our foremothers. We want to claim them as our feminist ancestors, but we want to avoid polygamists, but within the pages of the Women's Exponent, we see another side to the story. We see a community of Mormon women women to achieve the right to vote and many were pioneers in fields such as medicine, journalism, and manufacturing.

The Boston women began their own feminist newspaper in 1976, and they published it for about a year. In 1977 the Salt Lake City feminist decided that Utahns needed a feminist voice to discuss the gay platforms of Mormonism and Feminism.[1] They aimed to show that feminism cooperate with Mormonism through both their mother and their lives. [2] They reached 4,000 subscribers within their first year.

Mormon Politics through the 70s

I happen to be both a Mormon and a Utahn, but I can assure you that the two demographics are not synonymous. 67% of Utahns are not Mormon.[3] and 67% of Mormons live outside of Utah.[4] However, as the largest religious group in the state, Mormons have an outsized influence on laws and how to how Mormon political opinions have shifted over time.

During the 1970s, Utah's Mormon Church was a force to be reckoned with. Mormon Church Apostles in Republican support in Utah were able to bend to weaker opinions to the church's political positions. For example, the Republican party was popular in Utah in the 1950s when Ezra Taft Benson, who was an apostle in the Mormon Church, simultaneously served on the cabinet of Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Within the Mormon Church, only fifteen men are called as apostles. They are the highest leaders in the church and are called and revered by Mormons as prophets, seers and revelators. All apostles are all men, and they are supposed to be the highest authority in the church on earth and they are all called to be married. Mormon men who divorce are banned from priesthood office.

When the Exponent II newspaper concluded in 1981, Benson's term on his cabinet came to a close and Utah politics returned to balance again, with women more likely to prefer a Republican support in response to Roe vs. Wade in 1973. [5]

Equal Rights Amendment

1977 was also the year the Utah Legislature began considering whether to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). It looked promising, polling showed over 63% of Utahns in favor of the ERA, including 63% of Mormons and 73% of other Utahns. [6]

Conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly came to Utah in 1978 to lobby against the ERA and contacted Barbara Smith, who was president of the Relief Society. The Mormon Church's organization of Relief Society Schlafly may have overestimated Smith's authority. Although all female Mormons belong to the Relief Society, Mormon women are led locally by women, who are chosen by male church leaders and serve at their pleasure and they receive permission from these male priesthood leaders for any initiatives.

Smith told Schlafly she didn't think priesthood leaders would take a stand on the Mormon Church's behalf, but they were interested in politics with regards to moral issues. However, after talking to Schlafly, Smith brought the question to her male leaders and they told her that should they did want to oppose the ERA. [7]

They pushed that sentiment by declaring the ERA a moral issue after all, but their stated reasons for opposing it focused mainly on homosexuality and a "language trap" that would "nullify the constitutional division of power." [7]

Mormon Women for Equal Rights (MWER) was a Mormon ERA group, which Church News published a statement in opposition to the ERA. Church News stated, "The ERA is a moral issue." Church publications dropped from 3 to 1 in 16. It was defeated by a margin of 2 votes. In the general public, the ratio of support for the ERA among Utah Mormons dropped to 21% in 1978, while Utahns of other faiths continued to support the ERA by a two to one margin. [8]

International Women's Year

1975 was declared International Women's Year by the United Nations and the United States Congress. The United States Congress passed a bill calling for Americans to continue the work by organizing a National Women's Conference, preceded by smaller conferences in each state, to "identify the barriers that prevent women from participating fully and equally in all aspects of national life, and develop recommendations for means by which such barriers can be removed." [9]

Jen Tyler chartel that's conference committee. She was a Mormon and a member of the Exponent II group. She was a Democrat and she was also a Mormon supporter of the ERA. About half of the women on her committee were also Mormon women. [10] [11] They wanted the Mormon Church leaders to be represented in the proceedings and they stunned when Ezra Taft Benson, the same Mormon apostle who had served on Eisenhower's cabinet, instructed Mormon clergy to assign 10 women to attend the convention from every Mormon congregation in Utah. [12] Tyler had to find room in her budget for an additional 12,000 women, a number that would certainly not allow every woman in attendance. [13] [14]

Thanks to Benson's directive, Utah's state conference had the highest attendance numbers of all states, with 14,000 attendees, overwhelming Tyler and her committee, who had expected between 300 and 2,000 people. The much more populated state of California had fewer than half as many attendees as Utah, and California had held one of the biggest women's conferences in the nation. [15]

Conservative Mormons, many of whom also had leadership roles within local Mormon clergy, invited the Mormon women who were assigned to attend the conference to perform planning meetings and tell them to "vote no on everything." The church didn't technically endorse these meetings, but many of the Mormons who came didn't know that. [16]

When the conference opened, some of these women stationed themselves outside the conference with petitions against women from donating funds to the event. [17] Mormon women called as delegates against every item on the national platform, even the most conservative resolutions—such as they had been called to vote and instructed to do so these planning meetings. [18] [19] [20] All of the delegates they elected to represent Utah at the national convention in Houston came from a list distributed by a conservative lobbying group. [21] At one point, an angry mob of Mormon women called for the abolishment of the National Organization for Women. [22] When the conference closed, Utah's state delegation voted against the National Women's Conference and against the National Women's Plan of Action.

Although Smith had become the church's spokesperson in opposition to the ERA, she was dismayed by the mob mentality that had characterized Mormon women's actions at the conference and regretted that she had not done more to reign in conservative lobbyists. [23]

Mormons for ERA

Even so, the Mormon church continued to align with conservative and anti-feminist lobbying groups as they embarked on campaigns to prevent ratification of the ERA in several states. [24] In Virginia, some Mormons pushed back, starting an organization called Mormons for ERA to support ratification of the amendment. [25]

Mormons for ERA lobbied and held marches in several states. [26] Sometimes, they hired airplanes to fly pro-ERA banners over Temple Square in Salt Lake City. [27]

One of the founders of Mormons for ERA, Sonia Johnson, appeared before the Senate Constitutional Rights Subcommittee in 1978. [28] Johnson was excommunicated from the Mormon church by the bishop about a year after her testimony to Congress. [29] A bishop cannot excommunicate a Mormon woman without a court of 3 men, the church's highest ecclesiastical authority. But bishops are allowed to excommunicate women.

While using excommunication to silence reformers hurts everyone, Mormon feminists have been particularly vulnerable because they disciplined by people made up entirely of the couples sex, are not permitted to read the rules and procedures by which they may be punished, and are not afforded the same protections that male members enjoy. [30]

Ironically, church leaders claimed that favoring the ERA was not grounds for excommunication.[31] Johnson's bishop argued that he had not technically excommunicated her for her support of the ERA, but rather, for diminishing "support of church leaders." However, the way she had supported the ERA was by testifying against the church's stance against ratification. The ERA is not a religious issue, and the church's opposition was purely political. [32] When Mormon leaders say that they do not punish people for their opinions, they claim that they don't punish anyone for their private thoughts—and perhaps they would, if they could only read minds. Several Mormon feminists, including me, have been warned by our church leaders that sharing our opinions is a punishable offense.

However, it would be infeasible to excommunicate every racist Mormon. Instead, the church's strategy has been to make an example of just a few of the most influential Mormons. [33] Ironically, Mormons who were excommunicated for their political opposition to their ideas, Mormonship to Mormons for ERA doubled during the weeks following Johnson's excommunication. [34]

Mormon Feminism today

Mormon Politics Shift to the Right

The 1970s were the last decade in which Democrats were competitive in Utah. Prominent Republican Ezra Taft Benson became president of the Mormon church in 1985, ushering in a new spike in Republicans in Utah. He would serve for nine years and after Benson's presidency, Mormon apostles never returned to Utah as Democrat candidates. [35] Mormon feminists like myself, who were raised in the eighties and beyond, have never known our faith as the battle ground for liberal issues that it is today.

Blogs and Facebook Communities

Some wonder how feminism can exist within such a patriarchal environment. Actually, Mormon feminism is alive and well. Mormonism is fertile ground for a feminist movement. The Mormon feminist organization Exponent II has continued to inspire Mormon women since its inception in 1976. Many of its original members from Boston continue to mentor younger Mormon feminists through the Exponent II organization and online blogs, communities and today, new generations of Mormon feminists have taken leadership roles in the organization. No longer limited to Boston, the Exponent community has expanded to serve a worldwide network of Mormon women.

The Exponent is now joined by several other Mormon feminist communities, most centered around blogs and Facebook groups. Mormon feminists use these blogs and Facebook groups to connect, meet each other and discuss women's issues. You don't have to be a progressive haven the Boston to be active in today's Mormon feminist movement; online communities are the consciousness-raising groups of our era.

Retreats

But in-person interaction is important too. Within the United States, at least, Mormon feminists learn from each other and support each other at retreats. Mormon feminists have held retreats in several different parts of the country. Most of these retreats are limited to women, but one of my favorites, Feminist Mormon Girls Camp, welcomes whole families, including men and children. At this annual camp, our kids can earn merit badges for learning about feminism while grown-ups take turns leading feminist workshops or less serious crafts and games.

Activism

The scriptures teach that faith without works is dead [36] and I would argue that the same is true for feminism without activism. In recent years, Mormon feminists have organized around the ERA and reproductive choice through several activist events. For Mormon women, wearing pants to church is much more conspicuous than wearing an awareness ribbon. Although it's a pretty tame act, when Mormon feminists decided to demonstrate by all of us wearing pants instead of dresses on the same day, at least one Mormon man was so upset that he threatened violence. [37] Mormon feminist Nikki Hunter created a Facebook group for people who wanted to wear pants to church on that day.

Shortly thereafter, we campaigned to let women pray in General Conference, our most important Mormon church meeting of the year. Sister Joan A. Stevens did offer the first prayer by a woman at the next General Conference. [38] [39]

However, as long as Mormon women are banned from the priesthood, prevailing men in power to change what the church teaches or what the church one by one is an uphill battle for Mormon women. That is why I would argue that Utah Mormon feminism has most prominent activist initiative of this decade. Orders Mormon has sponsored several actions, but the most well-known was the Ordain Women campaign. Ordain Women has made only presidential sessions of Mormon General Conference. Hundreds of us marched to Temple Square, where we politely requested entry. We were met admitted, but we got noticed. [40]

Unfortunately, church leaders retaliated in a familiar way—making an example of one influential Mormon woman. They excommunicated Kate Kelly, one of Ordain Women's founders. [41] And history repeated itself in more than one way, just as Mormons for ERA membership roles spiked following the excommunication of Sonia Johnson, after Kate was excommunicated, Ordain Women received an influx of new website profiles from Mormons who wanted women to be ordained.

Like the feminism of our foremothers, modern Mormon feminism looks beyond our own church. A few Mormons for ERA seeks to undo the damage done by the ERA in the seventies by getting the amendment passed now. [42]

And Mormon feminists have been active participants and organizers in nondenominational feminist events such as the Women's March. [43]

As we work with other feminists, Mormon feminists sometimes encounter scorn from those who don't understand why we don't leave our church behind. Mormon feminists are not the only people who are more feminist and than combatting patriarchy. I learned from that religious women doesn't only affect religious people. The success of the Mormon church at squashing the ERA is only one example of how religious patriarchy spills over into all areas of society, affecting the way people vote, work, and even how they think about the women that surround them on a day-to-day basis. Other feminists need the Mormon feminist movement because our success affects everyone's success: the women people learn to tolerate at their places of worship. We're making our own community and culture better, and that's the first step to changing the world.

Resources to Learn More

Makers: Voices of Utah Women
Nancy Green, producer

Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, and Equal Rights
Martha Sonntag Bradley, author

Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings
Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Hannah Wheatwright, editors

The Birth of Ordain Women: The Personal Becomes Political
Lisa Butler and Strawberry, author
Available on Kindle, Issues for Equality: Ordain Women and Beyond
Mormon Feminism: Essays on Gender Shaped, Laurie Fielding Hallman and Gary Shepherd

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2. https://archive.org/details/exponentii1.pam
3. Mormon Feminism Essential Writings, Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Hannah Wheatwright, editors. Oxford University Press, 2019
4. https://www.deseret.com/religion/religion-dividends-of-the-tradition/mormon
5. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/ & http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/united-states (accessed October 2017)
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8. http://www.ordainwomen.org/1979/11/26/archives/news-mormon-women-feel-torn-between-equal-rights-proposal-and.html?utm_source=feed
9. http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-89/pdf/STATUTE-89-Pg1060.pdf
10. https://www.autoinnovegame.com/ah/ah.php?id=1
11. https://www.deseretnews.com/article/705000001/Tyler-Ann-Bennett-Mormon-Democrat-Utah-Democrat.html
12. http://www.ordainwomen.org/1977/12/01/archives/general-conference-overwhelming-response-conference-in-utah.html
13. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/utah/history/makers-voices-utah-women/
14. https://pedestals.uu.edu/exhibits/show/mormonfeminismessentialwrit/ethics
15. Most Mormons church discipline policies differentiate between men and women with the Melchizedek priesthood and other church members. Virtually all men who have been active Mormons could testimonies for any portion of their adult lives are ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood. Women are not. Men who have been excommunicated fence, with a few exceptions, these policies discriminate against the basis of sex. The policies are written in Church Handbook of Instructions Volume 1. Access to this volume is restricted to Mormons relating through certain lay clergy positions, nearly all of which include women. The author accessed the policies from a friend. **[illegible]** copy of the printed volume.
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17. https://www.ldsscriptures.com/search/search/2/0/0/0/1/Mormon+women+supporters+ERA
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April Young Bennett is the author of the Ask a Suffragist book series and host of the Religious Feminism Podcast. Learn more about April at aprilyoungb.com.

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11 RESPONSES

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Tim Rollins November 13, 2017 at 11:51 am
It should be noted that Sonia Johnson was excommunicated for apostasy, specifically putting out the word to others (in a television interview) to NOT let missionaries in the door if they come knocking.

That action — actively impeding the missionary program — constituted apostasy on her part sufficient for her disciplinary council (then-called a 'church court').

It's important to remember that no bishop can convene a disciplinary council without consent of the stake president. This is for three reasons:

1. It lets the SP know things have reached a point in the member's life, that despite working with the member, no alternative remains in helping them remain focused on God and Christ as the center of their lives;

2. It serves as a check and balance on a power-tripping bishop who has run amok with power and out-of-control ego; and

3. It protects the Church from potential liability because proper procedures designed to protect both member, leader AND the Church wasn't followed.

Sonia (her case only) simply used it as her reason to leave, which she wanted to do anyway, as it turned out some years later.

Last I heard, she and her partner were running a bed-and-breakfast somewhere in the Southwest.

I hope she finds her peace. ***

Reply

April Young Bennett November 13, 2017 at 12:38 pm
Tim:

1. Johnson made it very clear in numerous interviews that she did not instruct nonmembers to bar the missionaries, but rather made the prediction that a natural consequence of the church's political stance would be that nonmembers would be less likely to speak with missionaries.

2. Johnson also made it clear that she did not want to leave the church at the time she was excommunicated. If she found happiness afterward in the life that was forced on her, I am happy for her, but that doesn't change the facts of the case at the time it happened.

Reply

Emily U November 13, 2017 at 1:51 pm
This is fantastic, April. I learned a lot, as I always do from your research on church history and feminist history. I didn't know about Phyllis Schlafly's role in getting Mormons on board with her anti-ERA politicking. It's kind of heartbreaking to see women being tools to their own disadvantage like that.

Reply

Becky Palmer November 13, 2017 at 2:13 pm
Great article – Sonia Johnson was made my great aunt, and you definitely did her justice. Thank you.

Reply

el oso November 13, 2017 at 5:06 pm
The political shift to the right by mormons predates the sustaining of President Benson. It started with the election of President Reagan in 1980 after abysmal leadership by democrats on the national level. The general prosperity of the nation and the ascension of President Benson worked together to solidify mormon politics with the GOP.
There is a major opening now for non-GOP politicians to make in roads with mormons since the questionable Donald Trump is now the party leader. Nominating the well known and equally loathsome Hillary Clinton was not the step to start breaking down the GOP leanings of most church members.

Keep up the good history articles.

Most of the rights that women connected with the ERA seem to have been realized in society. There were many fewer barriers by 1980 than there had been 20 years earlier, and today there are virtually no real barriers that require new laws, let alone a constitutional amendment to address.

Reply

Lorie Winder Stromberg November 14, 2017 at 9:29 pm
Alice Paul noted in 1923, "We shall not be safe until the principle of equal rights is written into the framework of our government." She knew, like others who have researched the issue, that "Unless we put into the Constitution the bedrock principle that equality of rights cannot be denied or abridged on account of sex, the political and judicial victories women have achieved … for over two centuries [equal pay for equal work, for example] are vulnerable to erosion or reversal at any time — now or in the future."
(See http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/why.htm)

Reply

TopHat November 15, 2017 at 4:53 pm
Yes- if there is little to no change that the ERA will make, why not add it in even if it is only for formality?

Reply

Heather November 13, 2017 at 7:27 pm
April this is wonderful. As always, great research. So glad you're part of Exponent.

Reply

Ziff November 14, 2017 at 7:17 am
This is great, April. This line in particular made me chuckle with how spot on it is: " When Mormon leaders say that they do not be punish people for their opinions, they only mean that they don't punish anyone for their private thoughts—and perhaps they would, if they could only read minds."

Doubtless you are correct. They would if they could.

Reply

Lorie Winder Stromberg November 14, 2017 at 9:34 pm
Good piece, April. Thanks for being a consistent, reasoned and articulate voice for gender equity in the Mormon community and beyond.

Reply

Moss November 19, 2017 at 8:13 am
"vote no on everything."

Reading this breaks my heart this morning. These men did not care about what was going on. There were surely some initiatives- I would guess the vast majority of them, that these men would agree were good things. They didn't even care enough to educate themselves about these initiatives, but still took it upon themselves to tell the women what to do.

Reply

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