

# OPINION

## 50 years after 1st ERA debate, women still lack equal pay and representation

By Rachel Shteir

Betty Friedan was just a fiery radical with a bad temper.

It's convenient to believe this, but at a moment when many of the rights for women she gained are being overturned, it's time to reconsider common wisdom about her character.

Friedan, a towering figure in the women's movement who died in 2006, wrote the 1963 groundbreaking book "The Feminine Mystique" and co-founded the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus.

Fifty years ago, on May 1, 1973, Friedan participated in the first public airing of the pros and cons of the Equal Rights Amendment at Capen Auditorium in Normal, Illinois, with Phyllis Schlafly, founder of the STOP ERA movement. Schlafly wanted to destroy the amendment. Friedan worried that without it passing, women's rights — and the movement itself — would wither.

The stakes were high. In 1973, 30 states had already ratified the ERA; eight more were needed to enshrine it in the Constitution.

As we all know, Schlafly would play on women's fears to slow the amendment's momentum; by 1982, in part thanks to her efforts in convincing several states to rescind ratification, the ERA did not ratify.

It also did not die. Thirty-five years later, after #MeToo, several states, including Illinois, began ratifying it. However, procedural complications and blocks from the right continue.

On April 27 a vote in the U.S. Senate did not secure enough support to end the filibuster to start a debate on it. (Every Republican voted against it except Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Susan Collins.)

If you're trying to figure out why it's so hard to protect women's rights in the Constitution, one answer can be found in this half-century-old debate in Illinois and the derision aimed at Friedan, especially since her death.

The popular 2020 Hulu show "Mrs. America" in part focuses on Schlafly, as played by the elegant Cate Blanchett. In an article published last week, a Politico writer blames Friedan's slurs, which in 1973 were reprinted in The New York Times, for tanking the amendment.

"The comments didn't help the cause of the ERA, which has yet to become a constitutional amendment," Shia Kapos writes.

Sure, in the 1973 debate Friedan called Schlafly "a traitor to your sex" and an "Aunt Tom" and said she would "like to burn (Schlafly) at the stake."

Today, those words would get you canceled. But at a moment when the rights that Friedan helped secure are in jeopardy, it's time to tell the full story of this debate.

The two adversaries share more than is commonly thought. Both had



Equal Rights Amendment supporters rally in Springfield in May 1980. DAVID NYSTROM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE FILE

Illinois connections — Schlafly lived in Alton, and Friedan was born in Peoria. Both were mothers, and both believed the women's movement had gone too far.

But in Normal on May 1, 1973, their differences were most in evidence.

Friedan reminded her audience that a broad coalition of women supported the ERA — "the League of Women Voters, YWCA, church grandmothers, granddaughters, black and white" — in an effort to distance the amendment from radical feminists whom the media associated with the women's movement.

Turning to a protectionist argument, Schlafly claimed the amendment would hurt women's status as mothers and force them into the draft and to manual labor.

Initially, Friedan owned the room. Hecklers interrupted Schlafly, swearing and jeering, and objected to her calling them "girls." Friedan plowed on. She aimed to strike down Schlafly's characterization of the ERA as radical, which she knew would alienate many moderates and Midwesterners needed to sway politicians on the fence.

So she pointed out that Toni Adams, an ERA supporter and a Democratic candidate for the Illinois General Assembly the previous year, had nearly beaten incumbent Gerald Baker.

Friedan, who had spent a decade

working on reforming laws to support women in every arena, was a liberal who did not want to blame men for inequality but rather sex roles. She later chastised Schlafly for criticizing the women's movement, since she had benefited from its gains by, for example, attending law school.

But in Normal, Schlafly continued to use scare tactics to defeat the ERA, telling the audience the amendment would force them to lose status.

"The women of this country don't want to be lowered to equality," she said.

Friedan, who believed that a good way to galvanize a movement in danger of losing its force was to create an enemy, accused STOP ERA of receiving funding from members of the ultraconservative group the John Birch Society, a charge Schlafly always denied. (A few months later, Friedan would tell a Boston Globe reporter: "You can't tell me these women earned so much money by holding cake sales.")

Schlafly countered by arguing that women had won so many rights that the ERA was no longer necessary. She ridiculed NOW's overturning of protective labor laws, which had prohibited women from certain jobs, and she warned that the ERA would create a female draft.

Friedan replied that she did not want anyone to fight a war. She turned the debate to how, despite

the enormous strides the women's movement had made since she had published "The Feminine Mystique" 10 years earlier — many spearheaded by NOW — women still didn't have equal pay or political representation.

"We can't value responsibility too highly," she said, especially at a time when Watergate was unfolding.

When Schlafly did not back down, Friedan began lobbing slurs, which The New York Times reprinted in its "Notes on People" column, as if the debate about the ERA were merely a squabble between two broads.

Schlafly kept her cool, using Friedan's temper to argue that the women's movement was so weak it had to resort to insulting opponents.

At a time when the fate of the amendment has become entangled with the U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 ruling to overturn Roe v. Wade, we need reformers to speak up more than ever.

What Friedan should be remembered for is not her temper but her tireless efforts to secure women's rights in the Constitution.

Fifty years after this debate, we still don't have equal pay or equal representation.

Without the ERA, we will not.

Rachel Shteir is the author of "Magnificent Disrupter," a biography of Betty Friedan set to be published Sept. 12. She lives in Chicago.

## Unions can help reduce city's violence with apprenticeships, jobs



Willie Wilson

It was A. Philip Randolph, a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, who said: "Equality is the heart and essence of democracy, freedom, and justice, equality of opportunity in industry, in labor unions, schools and colleges, government, politics, and before the law. There must be no dual standards of justice, no dual rights, privileges, duties, or responsibilities of citizenship. No dual forms of freedom."

The irony of Randolph's quote is that in 2023, African Americans and women still are not treated equal when it comes labor unions. Where is the progressive outcry from elected officials and civil rights organizations? It breaks my heart when I drive by a construction site, and there are no African Americans or women working. That strikes at the heart of equity and inclusion. This is a nationwide problem.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics issued a report in April 2022 with employment demographics from the construction industry for 2003 to 2020. The report indicates African Americans and women are significantly underperforming with construction trade unions. In

2020, Latinos accounted for 36% of construction laborers; African Americans, 5.1%; Asians, 1.8%; and whites, 60.9%. African Americans were 4.5% of carpenters; Latinos, 35.9%; and whites, 56.3%.

Unions profess a devotion to racial equity, yet it is clear the rung on the ladder to the middle class remains elusive for African Americans and women in the building and construction trades.

Chicago's labor movement dates to 1864, and labor's influence now dominates the Illinois political landscape. Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former union organizer, could use his influence to get trade unions to open up apprenticeship opportunities for those mired in poverty and hopelessness.

Historically, the Chicago Federation of Labor's constituent unions shut out African Americans entirely or segregated them into Jim Crow locals. Many of the trade unions were forced to integrate through pressure from the federal government, court orders, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and other groups.

The recently released 2022 Illinois State Construction Minority and Female Building Trades Annual Report reveals that women accounted for 5% of apprenticeships in 2021 and 2022. African Americans accounted for 9% of apprenticeships for the same period. While Latinos improved their numbers from 17% in 2021 to 20% in 2022, white

men continue to dominate the apprenticeships in trade unions.

The state has required the building and trade unions to provide data annually on ethnicity of union apprenticeships. Labor unions continue to underperform in training African American workers. According to a 2020 Illinois Department of Labor report, contractors revealed employing even fewer African American workers. For example, in June 2020, contractors reported a workforce of 1% African American, 32% Latino and 76% white.

The state recognizes that this is a major issue. Last year, the governor provided \$9.6 million to support pre-apprenticeship programs and increase diversity in construction trades.

Studies have consistently shown that unemployment drives violence. A new study by the University of Illinois at Chicago shows a dramatic increase in unemployment among African American youths. The survey suggests the unemployment rate for African American youths in Chicago ages 20 to 24 was 57% in 2021, up from 44% in 2019. The rate for African American women in the age group nearly doubled from 32% to 59% between 2019 and 2021. Also, the unemployment rate among African American Chicagoans 16 to 19 years old remains very high at 87%.

There is a direct correlation between violence and unem-

ployment. The communities in Chicago with the highest levels of violence include Englewood, South Shore, Austin, Garfield Park, North Lawndale, Chatham and Roseland. In West Garfield Park, it is estimated that nearly 80% of male African Americans ages 17 to 34 are unemployed.

The trade unions could have a major impact on reducing violence in these areas. It has been said that nothing stops a bullet like a job. The best and most effective violence prevention strategy is a job that propels a person into the middle class. A job gives a person a sense of purpose, self-worth, hope and financial support.

Elected officials have an obligation to ensure neighborhoods are safe and to pass budgets that improve the quality of life for all citizens. This means they must hold unions accountable for meeting equity and inclusion goals. Failure to do so would be a continuation of Jim Crow policies from the South.

I recommend the following solutions to lift disadvantaged communities:

1. Congress and the Department of Labor must insist that building and trade unions open apprenticeship opportunities for African Americans and women, especially in disadvantaged communities.

2. The state of Illinois, city of Chicago and Cook County must use their contracting leverage to

insist on equity and inclusion of African Americans and women in trade unions.

3. The Illinois Department of Labor's annual reporting should include apprenticeship opportunities provided in communities with the highest unemployment, poverty and violence.

4. Construction job sites should reflect the diversity of the neighborhoods where work is taking place.

5. Elected officials should pass legislation prioritizing African Americans, women and veterans for trade union opportunities as laborers, carpenters, electricians, painters, welders, plumbers and construction managers.

6. Enforce the flagging law on construction sites.

7. Disadvantaged community members and women should be prioritized for lead pipe removal in homes.

8. Trade unions should work closely with Chicago Public Schools to expand vocational education and have a natural pipeline of talent.

Our city is in crisis with a school system that is not working for most African Americans or Latinos, soaring violence, corruption and high taxes. Labor unions have a major role to play in stabilizing disadvantaged communities.

Willie Wilson is a Chicago business owner and a former 2023 mayoral candidate.