

## ESSAY

Feminism's Second Wave:  
The Opening Salvos

Flora Davis

The women's movement, as reincarnated in the 1960s, is often called the "second wave" of feminism, to distinguish it from the "first wave," which arose during the nineteenth century and won the vote for women in 1920. The wave analogy is helpful because it underscores the fact that the women's movement didn't die after 1920, though it did lose much of its momentum. The analogy also reminds us that major social changes tend to happen in waves. First, there's a lot of intense activity and some aspects of life are transformed; then, when the public has absorbed as much as it can stand, reaction sets in. Stability reigns for a while, and if there's a strong backlash, some of the changes may be undone. Eventually, if vital issues remain unresolved, another wave of activism arises. . . .

The turbulent, affluent, optimistic 1960s provided an unusually hospitable climate for feminism. The civil rights movement had broken new ground and a number of related social movements sprang up in its wake. One of them was the women's movement. Like a brush fire in a dry season, it ignited simultaneously in two different places: among older, liberal women and among the young radicals of the New Left.

Throughout the sixties, the women's movement grew steadily, but most Americans were barely aware of what was happening. Then in the early 1970s, feminism exploded across the national scene as groups of activists cropped up almost everywhere. Often, women coalesced around a single issue, pouring their efforts into a rape hotline, a battered women's shelter, or some other highly focused project.

At the same time, a broad-based right-wing backlash began to build, fueled by white male resentment at the challenges from feminists and from the civil rights movement. When conservatives won the White House in 1980, feminists were thrown on the defensive; for the next decade, they had to fight to hang onto the ground they'd already gained. They lost some battles and won others, and overall, progress for women stalled. Nevertheless, new feminist groups kept emerging, many of them now being formed by women of color. Going into the 1990s, the women's movement was bigger, stronger, and more diverse than ever.

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Between 1960 and 1990, feminists achieved half a revolution. Laws were passed, court decisions were handed down, and sex discrimination was officially prohibited; women were elected to office, grudgingly accepted into male occupations, and promoted to positions that women had never held before. New terms entered the nation's vocabulary: People spoke of "sexism" and "male chauvinism." Probably, the movement's single greatest achievement was that it transformed most people's assumptions about what women were capable of and had a right to expect from life.

**The Battle with the Airlines**

The story of how airline stewardesses forced American airlines to change unfair work rules is the perfect introduction to the second wave. By throwing into sharp relief the old attitudes to women and the impact those attitudes had on people's lives, it shows just how far women have come. The activists involved were few in number, and they challenged just one aspect of the pervasive problem of sex discrimination. That was typical of the second wave and illustrates the point that social transformations, like jigsaw puzzles, are put together one piece at a time.

The battle with the airlines spanned a crucial period in the history of the women's movement. Stewardesses fought to be treated as workers, rather than as sex objects, at a time when the term "sex object" hadn't yet been invented. The work rules they challenged decreed that to keep their jobs they must remain single, and they were fired the minute they married. Many airlines fired them, in any case, as soon as they turned thirty-two, while others set the limit at thirty-five. Women much over the age of thirty were no longer considered attractive enough to fly for an airline. It hadn't even occurred to most Americans that the system was unfair, and that made changing the rules an uphill fight in a way it wouldn't have been a few years later.

The stewardess unions actually began their campaign before the second wave, at a time when few people had any interest in women's rights. When the women's movement caught up with them, union leaders used its impetus, and as they did, they quickly came to identify themselves as feminists fighting sex discrimination, not just as unionists confronting management.

At one time or another, stewardess unions at most of the major airlines joined the struggle to change the work rules. There was some communication between union leaders, but they never really made a coordinated effort. Instead, the battle was fought simultaneously on many different fronts by different groups. The women who worked for American Airlines belonged to a union called ALSSA—the Air Line Stewards and Stewardesses Association—and their campaign was typical.

### *The Age and Marriage Issues*

In the hierarchy of “glamour” jobs open to white women in the early sixties, stewardesses ranked right after movie stars and models.\* In fact, for every woman hired as a stewardess, more than a hundred applicants were turned away. Those who were chosen embodied the American image of the wholesome girl-next-door.

As the airlines saw it, these “girls” would fly for a few years, then leave the job to marry and settle down. In the midsixties, stewardesses lasted 32.4 months, on the average, less than three years. “If that figure ever got up to thirty-five months, I’d know we’re getting the wrong kind of girl. She’s not getting married,” a personnel manager for United Airlines said solemnly in 1965.

In the early 1960s, the social pressure to marry was relentless. The average woman became a wife at age twenty, younger than in any generation since the turn of the century. Seventy percent of American women made it safely to the altar before they were twenty-four, and a woman still unmarried at the advanced age of twenty-five was considered an “old maid.” She was pitied, and people wondered what was wrong with her that no man had asked her to be his wife. Most stewardesses themselves assumed when they were hired that they’d marry within a few years. In fact, at American Airlines the gold wings presented to a woman after five years of flying were known as “your failure pin,” because they signified that she had so far failed to marry.

By becoming a stewardess, an adventurous young woman had a chance to travel and meet interesting people in the time warp between the end of her schooling and the beginning of marriage. And the job was said to be good experience for marriage. At the airline training schools the women learned safety procedures, but also took classes in make-up, grooming, and social skills, “the perfect course for being a perfect hostess at home,” according to one stewardess. (At American, the school was known irreverently as “the charm farm.”)

Although most stewardesses seemed to love their jobs, they lived with more restrictions than the most overprotected teenager. They were told how long to wear their skirts and their hair and how high their heels could be. They could be fired for gaining too much weight. Girdles were generally required and supervisors did “touch checks” to make sure employees were wearing them. In addition, the women were paid so little that home was often a small apartment shared with as many as half a dozen other stewardesses.

Almost from the beginning, most airlines expected their stewardesses to resign when they married. Age didn’t become an issue until the early 1950s,

\*Stewardesses (also called air hostesses) became known as “flight attendants” during the 1970s, as men began to be hired for the job.

when American Airlines became the first company to retire the women as soon as they reached their midthirties. To get the union to agree to the age limit, management negotiators exempted those already working for the company. They stipulated that only women hired after November 1, 1953, would be forced to retire at thirty-two.

Dusty Roads got in under the wire. So did Nancy Collins, who would become the union’s master executive chairman (equivalent to being its president) in the early sixties. They led the long struggle to get the airline to lift the age restriction, because both felt a moral issue was involved.

As the 1950s wore on, more and more airlines routinely dismissed stewardesses for growing too old. By 1965, fifteen of the thirty-eight U.S. airlines were doing it. “I was twenty-eight when we fought the age issue, and I was absolutely hysterical,” said Lynda Oswald, who was with American Airlines. “I was trying to prepare myself for another job, but when I tried to get into a university, they wouldn’t accept me as a part-time student. The whole climate was catch-22.”

Yet many stewardesses saw nothing wrong with the airlines’ regulations, and union leaders found it hard to marshal support. Roads recalled that “some of our own flight attendants would say, ‘I don’t think you should fly when you’re fat or old.’” Younger women weren’t interested in the age issue. “When you’re twenty, you don’t believe you’re ever going to be thirty-two,” Roads observed drily. Older women, as their thirty-second birthday approached, often cast about desperately for a ground job with the company. Reluctant to antagonize management, most “retired” from flying without a protest. As for the marriage regulation, many women did marry and kept their marriage a secret. At one point, airline officials estimated that 30 to 40 percent of stewardesses were secretly married.

In short, the battle with the airlines was fought by a minority of activists who were willing to take risks. Most of the women who ultimately benefited from their efforts were initially too timid or indifferent to take part, or actually opposed any change in the status quo. That was the case with the first challenges to sex discrimination in many occupations.

In defending their regulations, the airlines talked a lot about the image of a stewardess as a young, single woman, and the importance of maintaining that image. However, the union’s leaders were well aware that, as Collins put it, “Ninety percent of this had to do with economics.” Money was usually the bottom line when employers discriminated against women. In their stewardesses, the airlines had the ideal work force. Few stayed long enough to earn more than beginners’ wages, and the savings on fringe benefits must have been considerable. What other company could guarantee health insurers a group of insurees who would never be older than thirty-two?

In the beginning, ALSSA’s leaders believed their problem was unique; they didn’t see it as part of a pattern of discrimination against women.

Dusty Roads's eyes were opened in the late fifties. She had a good friend, Ann Cooper Penning, who was administrative assistant to Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, a Michigan Democrat. Roads recalled that "I was telling Annie about things the airlines did, and she said, 'You've got to be kidding me. I can't wait to tell this to Martha.' Eventually, I met Martha." Before that, Roads had more or less accepted the way stewardesses were treated. "But Martha was so upset about it," she said. From conversations with Griffiths, Roads came to realize that sex discrimination was widespread.

### "The Old Broads' Bill"

At that point, there seemed to be two possible strategies open to the stewardesses. They could try to persuade the airlines at the bargaining table to drop the age and marriage regulations, or they could push for legislation.

Stewardess leaders tried bargaining first. However, they got minimal support from male union colleagues. All the stewardess unions were actually subunits of huge, male-dominated unions, and the union men were mostly blue-collar males who had come up the hard way. In dealing with the stewardesses, they were protective but autocratic. They had traditional ideas about a woman's role and little sympathy for women's issues.

Without the support of male unionists, the stewardesses were unable to get rid of the age and marriage restrictions. It was also clear that no airline was likely to give up these money-saving measures as long as other airlines were still taking advantage of them. Thus, in the early sixties, Collins and Roads tried to solve the problem by getting Congress to pass a law.

By that time, Roads was ALSSA's official, if unpaid, lobbyist. She was chosen for the job in 1958 because she was flying in and out of Washington, D.C., regularly, was dating a congressman, and could count Congresswoman Griffiths as a friend. Roads did her lobbying on her own time between flights. She had no trouble getting appointments with male members of Congress; she was a stewardess, and the men simply assumed that she would be young and attractive. Once through the door, she could often interest them in her union's case against the airlines.

Roads's efforts resulted in one early attempt to pass a law against the airlines' restrictions, but it was a piece of legislation few were comfortable with. Was it fair for Congress to target one industry and forbid one or two specific practices? "They didn't know how to go about this," said Roads. "To introduce a bill that would keep a company from firing anybody at the age of thirty-two was kind of preposterous. It was a very narrow attack on a very broad issue, which was age discrimination or discrimination against women. Eventually, the bill became a joke—they called it 'the old broads' bill.'"

In 1963, Collins and Roads decided to go public with their problem. They held a press conference at the Commodore Hotel in New York City.

Collins wanted stewardesses there in significant numbers, to prove a lot of them cared about the age issue, but it wasn't easy to find women who were willing to take a public stand and risk their jobs.

Once again, the aura of glamour that came with the stewardess job paid off. Many newspapers sent reporters and photographers, and after Roads pointed out that four of the stewardesses in the room were actually over thirty-two—hired before November 1953, they couldn't be fired—one photographer seized the chance to set up a picture that ultimately appeared in papers across the country. It showed nearly a dozen uniformed women, shoulder to shoulder and displaying quite a lot of leg, over a caption that in many cases invited readers to guess which of the women were over thirty-two. Columnist Art Buchwald maintained that older stewardesses were better cooks and were just as attractive—missing the point, that the women had a right not to be fired arbitrarily. Collins and Roads were willing to be patronized as long as they got the story out. The press conference produced sheaves of clippings, but there was still no progress on the age issue.

In 1964, stewardess unions filed a complaint against American and TWA with the New York State Commission for Human Rights. New York and some other states had laws against discrimination because of age, but had nothing on the books as yet about sex discrimination.

Congress, too, was concerned about just treatment for older workers. On September 2, 1965, women from several airlines appeared before a House Labor subcommittee to talk about the age issue; other stewardesses, many in uniform, were in the audience to show support. One of the congressmen on the committee seemed to think it funny that attractive women in their thirties were talking of discrimination because of age. Representative James H. Scheuer, a Democrat from New York, turned to the stewardesses and asked them to "stand up, so we can see the dimensions of the problem."

Colleen Boland, then head of ALSSA, testified that an airlines executive had explained the age regulation this way: "It's the sex thing. Put a dog on an airplane and twenty businessmen are sore for a month." Representative Scheuer gallantly replied, "I would oppose with my dying breath the notion that a woman is less beautiful, less appealing, less sensitive after thirty. . . ." Nancy Collins said, "In those days, we felt we were being patted on our little heads about 90 percent of the time."

The congressional hearing brought no visible progress, and in New York the age discrimination case dragged on through hearings and appeals. It wasn't until early 1968 that the state's five-man Appellate Court ruled unanimously against the stewardesses on the grounds that the age law was intended to apply only to those between forty and sixty-five.

Though the stewardesses' glamour image gave them advantages in pressing their case, they were very much aware of the way society devalued

older women. Once a woman was no longer young and sexually appealing to men, she had lost whatever leverage she originally had.

### *The EEOC: Reluctant Enforcer*

In 1964, as part of a landmark civil rights bill, Congress banned sex discrimination by employers and created a new federal agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), to enforce the law. The stewardess unions were quick to seize the chance it offered them, and when the EEOC officially opened its doors in the summer of 1965, two American Airlines stewardesses were among the first people through them.

"We got there so early, we had to help unpack the typewriters; they were still in boxes," said Dusty Roads.

With Roads that day, ready to sign a sex discrimination complaint, was Jean Montague, who was due to be fired by American because she would soon turn thirty-two. The women assumed that, thanks to the section of the new civil rights law known as Title VII, the airlines would have to mend their ways. "We were naive," Roads admitted later.

The EEOC staffer who handled their complaint that day was an African-American woman. At first she couldn't see how young, educated, white women could possibly be victims of discrimination, but she soon got into the spirit of the thing. "Do they fire pilots at thirty-two?" she asked Roads. "Do they fire flight engineers?" When Roads assured her the airlines didn't, she said with relish, "Go get 'em." That's just what Roads and her union did.

However, it took almost a year before the EEOC finally held a hearing on the women's charges in May 1966. Afterward, Roads couldn't be certain how the session had gone, but it was clear that at least one of the five commissioners, Aileen Hernandez, was sympathetic. In an unexpected way, Hernandez played a key role in the stewardess story. She resigned from the EEOC in October that year, disillusioned because the Commission was so reluctant to act on women's issues. Later, she recalled that "Commission meetings produced a sea of male faces, nearly all of which reflected attitudes that ranged from boredom to virulent hostility whenever the issue of sex discrimination was raised." Hernandez noted that the EEOC's priority was race discrimination—but apparently only as it affected black *men*. She was particularly frustrated by the long delay in ruling on complaints brought by stewardesses. At the time she resigned, there were ninety-two such cases pending, and some were more than a year old.

Hernandez resigned on October 10, giving a month's notice. On the last weekend in October, a brand-new feminist organization, NOW (the National Organization for Women), held its founding conference. Afterward, the women issued a press release. Among other things, it backed the stewardesses; it also announced that Hernandez had been elected executive vice-president of NOW, subject to her consent. According to Hernandez, her

election was "a charitable, but unauthorized gesture," apparently intended to express support for her decision to resign from the EEOC.\*

On November 9, the day before Hernandez's resignation was to take effect, the Commission finally ruled that company policies setting age limits for stewardesses amounted to sex discrimination. Just two weeks later, the airlines won a temporary court order which blocked the ruling on the grounds that Hernandez had a conflict of interests, because presumably she was a member of NOW. In an effort to prove she was, they had a federal court subpoena Betty Friedan, NOW's newly elected president, and Muriel Fox, who was in charge of public relations, and dragged them into court in New York City on Christmas Eve, while on the West Coast Hernandez was subpoenaed in the same way. A lawyer for the airlines demanded that Friedan produce a list of NOW's members; she declined. "We had all agreed to keep the membership list of NOW secret," Friedan wrote later, "for in those early days no one was sure she wouldn't be fired or otherwise excommunicated for belonging to an organization to overthrow sex discrimination."

In February 1967, a federal district court judge issued an injunction that, in effect, erased the EEOC decision on the age question because of Hernandez's supposed conflict of interests. The Commission and the stewardesses had to begin all over again with hearings.\*\*

Meanwhile, the unions were trying to end the marriage restriction, working on it as a separate issue from the age limit. The airlines resisted, maintaining that married women would miss work too often and would gain weight. (Some supervisors apparently believed that with marriage a woman inevitably became plump and docile.) Eventually, the unions brought marriage-regulation complaints, too, to the EEOC. In June 1968, the agency finally announced in a case involving an American Airlines stewardess that the marriage restriction violated Title VII. In the meantime, unions at other airlines had been able to resolve the marriage issue at the bargaining table.

There was still no word from the EEOC about the age restriction, and ALSSA was soon deep in contract negotiations with American with the age limit a key issue. "We were ready to roll on a strike then," said Roads. "I called Martha and said, 'If you know anyone on the Commission, call them and tell them that if they would just make a decision, there wouldn't have to be a strike.'"

Griffiths made the phone call, and on August 10, 1968, the EEOC finally released new guidelines that barred the airlines from dismissing stewardesses for being overage. The following day, ALSSA reached agreement

\*In 1970, Hernandez succeeded Betty Friedan as president of NOW.

\*\*NOW ultimately did help the stewardess unions a great deal by persistently lobbying the EEOC on their behalf.

with American on a new contract, and, as Nancy Collins put it, “The age and marriage issues just faded into the woodwork.”

From the time the women filed their complaint with the EEOC in July 1965, more than three years had passed; it had been five years since Roads and Collins staged their press conference. However, the struggle wasn’t over yet. Some stewardesses took the airlines to court, because they not only wanted to return to their jobs but they wanted back pay and accumulated seniority. There were many individual suits as well as class-action suits. The stewardess unions also challenged the airlines successfully on the question of whether a woman should be allowed to return to her job after having a baby.

Throughout the sixties, class and race were invisible elements in the struggle between women and the airlines, for the unions never addressed the fact that women of color and white women from working-class backgrounds were seldom hired as stewardesses. At the time, most white feminists saw “women’s issues” solely in terms of white women’s issues—and were unaware that that was what they were doing. The second wave’s size and scope were limited as a result.

### The Aftereffects

In tackling the age and marriage restrictions, stewardesses assaulted some of society’s ingrained assumptions: that marriage was all women really wanted; that it was perfectly natural to judge a woman solely on her looks; and that men somehow had a right to the services of women—and if it could be arranged that the women doing the serving were young, single, and attractive, so much the better.

Lynda Oswald said, “I think many of us who were stewardesses during the 1960s suffered deep psychological scars. We still have a terror of age and of being discarded because our skin isn’t quite smooth enough any more.”

Roads, Collins, and other activists improved the lot of most women and men who were subsequently hired as (gender-neutral) “cabin crew.” In 1985, flight attendants kept their job, on the average, for ten years; they were now required to retire at age seventy; and some long-term employees were making more than \$40,000 a year.

There were other, less tangible gains as well. As they stood up for their rights, the stewardesses found that their image of women and of themselves changed profoundly. A story Roads liked to tell summed up the difference. A male passenger once complained to her, “I don’t know why you girls should object to being called ‘girls.’”

“That’s because you don’t know the difference between a girl and a woman,” she told him. “A ‘girl’ is somebody who rents an apartment. A ‘woman’ owns a house.”

In 1991, Dusty Roads and Nancy Collins were still flying. Their names weren’t likely to be the first to pop into anyone’s mind during a discussion of the women’s movement, but their victory was typical of the second wave.

American women owed the progress they made largely to thousands of unknown activists like Roads and Collins, who tackled a small piece of the overall problem of sex discrimination. Social change advanced like an incoming tide at many different points simultaneously.

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## DOCUMENTS

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### *In Support of ERA, 1970*

My name is Gloria Steinem. I am a writer and editor. I have worked in several political campaigns, and am currently a member of the Policy Council of the Democratic National Committee.

During twelve years of working for a living, I’ve experienced much of the legal and social discrimination reserved for women in this country. I have been refused service in public restaurants, ordered out of public gathering places, and turned away from apartment rentals; all for the clearly-stated sole reason that I am a woman. And all without the legal remedies available to blacks and other minorities. I have been excluded from professional groups, writing assignments on so-called “unfeminine” subjects such as politics, full participation in the Democratic Party, jury duty, and even from such small male privileges as discounts on airline fares. Most important to me, I have been denied a society in which women are encouraged, or even allowed, to think of themselves as first-class citizens and responsible human beings.

However, after two years of researching the status of American women, I have discovered that I am very, very lucky. Most women, both wage-earners and housewives, routinely suffer more humiliation and injustice than I do.

As a freelance writer, I don’t work in the male-dominated hierarchy of an office. (Women, like blacks and other visibly-different minorities, do better in individual professions such as the arts, sports, or domestic work; anything in which they don’t have authority over white males.) I am not one of the millions of women who must support a family. Therefore, I haven’t had to go on welfare because there are no day care centers for my children while I work, and I haven’t had to submit to the humiliating welfare inquiries about my private and sexual life, inquiries from which men are exempt. I haven’t had to brave the sex bias of labor unions and employers, only to see my family subsist on a median salary 40 percent less than the male median salary.

SOURCE: Testimony of Gloria Steinem, U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, Hearings, *The “Equal Rights” Amendment*, 91st Cong., 2d sess., 1970, 335–337.