

Women Studies Program
Lecture Series

“Building a Grassroots Movement: NOW in the Women’s Movement in Pittsburgh”

Patricia Ulbrich

Women Studies Visiting Scholar &

Suzanne Staggenborg

Professor of Sociology

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How do activists go about building a social movement? In the late 1960s, feminists across America began local women’s movements from scratch. The formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 provided the impetus for the women’s movement, but it really took shape at the grassroots level and then expanded into a major social movement. Theories about the processes involved in constructing social movements require detailed studies of how local movements are built up from the grass roots level. In this paper, we contribute to social movement theory with a study of the origins of the women’s movement in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh is an excellent site for a case study because the region was home to influential leaders of the women’s movement, including national NOW presidents Wilma Scott Heide, Eleanor Smeal and Molly Yard, and several pioneering feminist organizations, and because grassroots activists developed successful strategies that had a significant impact on the women’s movement nationally. Moreover, the Pittsburgh women’s movement has received little attention from social movement scholars. Our study is based on documentary analysis and oral histories with 25 leading feminist activists in Pittsburgh.