A Baby Boomer’s Journey on the Path to Gender Equity

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My childhood began in a converted garage home, I kept to myself and was told not to roam. Grandma’s pots and pans were my toys, the balls and bats were for the boys. Grandfather was always shushing me, ‘don’t speak until spoken to’ was his decree. Grew up watching sitcoms like *Father Knows Best*, my Dad saw this fatherly rule as his quest. I was labeled in school as working-class poor, and dismissed as the ‘weaker sex’ in the folklore. They said girls didn’t need sports before Title IX, so twirling a baton occupied my time. Like many girls born in the baby boomer age, rigid gender roles kept me in a narrow cage.

The Sputnik moment gave my school a wakeup call, we were measured with IQ tests that sorted some from all. I was placed in the gifted education path, and split off from my friends of color in math. By ‘57 separate but equal schools were abolished, yet my school kept us tracked and divided. My young mind had no answer for this toxin, crossing the boundaries was not an option.

College was not expected by my Dad, ‘just marry and have kids’ was the current fad. There was no money to put me through college, but I wouldn’t let finances stop me from knowledge. When government subsidies for education were in my reach, off to college I went and prepared to teach. I hoped to be a first-generation college grad, even though few 60’s women were admitted on that launch pad.

I didn’t need college to see sexism in my life, but the collegiate sisterhood gave me the courage to resist the strife. Feminist studies had not arrived on the scene, so the women’s movement kept us keen. We read the Kinsey Report in our dorm room, we knew the sexual revolution was coming soon. We burned our bras and took the pill, sexual freedom was on our playbill. Suffragettes had made it possible for women to vote, I cast my first for Humphrey in the minority-blue coat. But access to the voting booth didn’t bring income equality, my first paycheck fell far below parity.
Married at 27 and expecting my first child, was let go from my teaching job and this got me riled
Incensed that pregnant women were excluded from teaching, I dared to defy the 70’s ‘old boy’ leeching
I freed my silenced voice and marched to the chief’s office, saying ‘sending me home will bring you no profit’
When Supreme Court ruled ‘pregnancy doesn’t disable women from work’, my boss had to take me back under this legal quirk
The arguments would continue to fester and foam, while the males sang their cheap refrain ‘a woman’s place is in the home’

I pushed to move up the ladder to school chief, even though jobs for ‘token females’ were far between and predictably brief
Advanced to Superintendent of Schools in ’94 and put a crack in the glass ceiling, but the male club kept up with their sexist squealing
Asked the commissioner to stop the harassment, and make sure we few women leaders were shown respect and fair judgment.

I stand on the shoulders of women who spoke out without kneeling, they gave me the resolve to press for justice and healing
My journey from childhood to college and career is still unfolding, with hope that modern feminists will end the sexism that seems so unyielding
Took a faculty job in 2013 to widen my impact and range, preparing the next generation of school leaders for change
While my life has been peppered by dominance and rule, I trust next-gen women to strive and refuel
My dream is they will eliminate the ‘isms of sex, class and race, and socially-just practices will appear in their place
I won’t give up working for equity and access, this is my pledge as a woman of persistence and praxis.

Author

Sheri Williams is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. Her teaching and scholarship is focused on preparing next-generation leaders for change. She collaborates with university scholars and community partners to address the complex issues of social justice leadership. Prior to coming to UNM, she served for 24 continuous years as a building principal and superintendent of schools in rural and urban districts in Colorado and New Mexico. She earned her doctorate in educational psychology at Oklahoma State University and holds a post-doctoral certificate in executive leadership from the University of Colorado.