

Women's movement future uncertain after Houston

By Tam Lee

Events at the National Women's conference in Houston last month raised significant questions about the future of the women's movement in the United States.

What is the future of the women's movement?

It seems to be uncertain. The Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution has stalled three states short of passing. Even if three more states ratify it by the March 22, 1979 deadline, the courts will have to decide whether the three states that have voted to rescind their vote supporting the ERA acted legally.

analysis

The three states are Nebraska, Idaho and Tennessee. If the courts decide it was legal for the states to rescind their votes, the ERA still will be three states short of passage.

Congress has the power to extend the ratification time for passage of the ERA. Most supporters of the ERA are in favor of extending the deadline from the current seven years to 14, but some argue that it would give the opposition even more time to organize and work to defeat passage of the proposed amendment.

Anti-ERA persons argue that no other amendment to the Constitution has needed more than four years to pass, so if it takes longer, the ERA must have no serious merit.

Differing ideologies

The women's movement, split between two opposing groups, have differing factions within them which is the result of different political ideologies. It can be compared with the philosophical differences between the Republican and Democratic parties, even though members of both parties are represented on both sides of the women's movement.

The conservative side generally is made up of women who oppose abortion, passage of the ERA, protection of homosexuals from discrimination, and increased federal spending. They support the free enterprise system and oppose government restrictions on the free market system.

The feminist side supports passage of the ERA, freedom of choice in abortion and civil rights for homosexuals. They favor federal funding for programs to assist women in all areas, such as child care, displaced homemaker centers, rape centers, and spouse abuse centers.

All women want to end discrimination against them. The difference is in the way "discrimination" is defined and in how the differing factions think equality can best be achieved.

For example, feminists think the ERA is an important step in achieving equality. Women against the amendment think the ERA is not only unnecessary, but that it

will take away many of the protections now afforded to women under existing laws and traditions. The ultimate impact of the ERA, if passed, will be determined by the U.S. Supreme Court, which will have the responsibility of interpreting the amendment.

Women on both sides agreed with the concepts behind many of the resolutions passed at the conference, but disagreed on how they should be implemented. The National Plan of Action, voted on at the conference, called for federal funding on almost all resolutions. Many conservative women voted against those issues because they object to increased federal spending because they think it is inflationary. They also argue that if the federal government is given too much power, individual freedoms are lost. Some said they would have supported the resolutions if they had not called for federal funding.

Religious beliefs

The split on the abortion issue, however, is the result of different religious beliefs. Persons who are against abortion believe abortion is murder. Supporters of abortions believe a woman has the right to control her body, and ultimately, her life.

Most supporters of abortion don't think abortion is the best solution to overpopulation or even the best solution for avoiding unwanted pregnancies. They, along with most anti-abortion women, support increased availability, reliability and safety of contraceptives as being a better alternative than abortion.

The lesbian rights issue is hotly debated even among feminists. Fundamentalists who believe in a literal translation of the Bible believe homosexuality is a sin. Homosexuality also goes against their way of living and

they don't want their children exposed to lifestyles they consider deviant.

Within the women's movement, there are some who think the lesbian issue is splitting the women's movement and making passage of the ERA more difficult.

Betty Freidan, considered to be one of the founders of the women's movement, had resisted inclusion of lesbians in the fight for women's rights until she announced her change in position at the women's conference.

The key to success in the women's movement, just as in any other political movement, is compromise. Currently, the two opposing groups disagree on everything because there is no effort to make some proposals acceptable to all.

Compromise difficult

Obviously, both sides feel there are issues they cannot compromise on. Pro-life women can't compromise on abortion. Religious women cannot compromise on anything they feel the Bible prohibits. Feminists cannot compromise on the ERA or freedom of choice in abortion. Lesbians cannot compromise on laws to protect them from discrimination.

There are issues in which a compromise could be reached, however. Most of the resolutions passed at the conference were not objectionable to conservative women except that they called for federal funding.

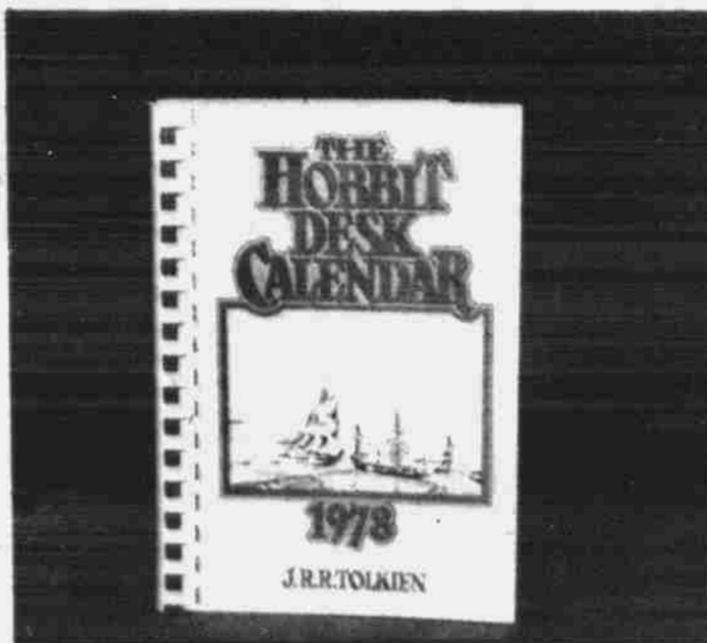
As more and more traditional, home-oriented women become involved, the feminist movement is in danger of losing the things it has worked so hard to achieve.

In order to reach their goals, both sides must work toward some sort of agreement on the issues and a better understanding or opposing views.

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