

Television's "Serious Sisters"

Experiments in Public and Regional Television for Women

When WBZ-TV, a local television station in Boston, produced and aired *Yes, We Can* on January 18, 1974, it proved an unprecedented televisual event. The program was dedicated to concerns of area women; was conceptualized and produced by women; and featured an all-woman cast of interviewers, interviewees, and talent. Preceded the previous night by a one-hour prime-time special, the *Yes, We Can Entertainment Special*, which showcased celebrity performances, *Yes, We Can* ran for a total of sixteen hours on a single day. Except for WBZ's *Eyewitness News*, the station aired no other programming that day. The program hybridized live performance with homemaking advice and domestic issues and infused it with feminist debate and government hearings on institutionalized sexism.¹

Yes, We Can was an experiment meant to address the fundamental shortcomings of television for women. First and most obviously, the sheer number of broadcast hours given over to *Yes, We Can* challenged traditional programming schedules, in which content that explicitly addressed women viewers was restricted to undervalued daytime time slots. Second, producers reimagined issues of interest to women beyond domestic labors and associated consumerist practices. Third, women played key roles in production as show hosts, interviewers, and participants. Fourth, the production drew together multiple and unlikely collaborators in state government, commercial television, civic institutions, businesses, and community groups to support, plan, and execute the program. Finally, the show expanded generic conventions of daytime television for women, which in its inception in the 1950s included "homemaking shows, shopping shows . . . and popular programs the broadcast industry broadly categorized as 'audience participation shows.'"²

While *Yes, We Can* was a one-of-a-kind television event, it shared common ground with other feminist-oriented programs designed for women in the 1970s.

These programs challenged prevailing understandings of television for women by reconceptualizing audience, production conventions, scheduling, format, and content. They featured women in front the camera as hosts, interviewees, talent, and expert guests while behind the camera women worked in significant numbers as producers, writers, researchers, editors, and camera operators. *In Her Own Right* (WGBH, 1970), *Everywoman* (WTOP, 1972–78), and *Woman Alive!* (KERA, 1974; WNET, 1975–77) aired in prime-time hours and envisioned women's viewership outside daytime schedules.³ Women were regarded as active participants by *In Her Own Right* (WGBH, 1970) and *Woman '75* (WBZ, 1975), which solicited and integrated input from at-home viewers. Except for a "sprinkling of men" in the production ranks, *For Women Today* (WBZ, 1970–72), *Everywoman*, *Woman Alive!*, and *Tomorrow's Woman* (unaired pilot, 1972) employed women in the majority of the programs' production team as producers, contributing editors, and directors.⁴

As this sampling of programs suggests, regional and public television productions led the way in revising women's television during the 1970s. In 1972, *Broadcasting* noted that the "serious sisters" of women's television that were emerging early in the decade were "done locally or syndicated."⁵ Without network television's inhibiting commercial imperatives and cultural traditions, local, syndicated, and public television enjoyed relative freedom to innovate. *Woman Alive!* producer Joan Shigekawa clarified the importance of alternatives to commercial television and the appeals of public television for feminist workers. She noted that although many of the women who worked on *Woman Alive!* had careers in commercial television, they made a "financial sacrifice" to work for public television.⁶ They were motivated to convey stories of "joyful changes" women across the country were creating that were not of interest to commercial television, even as advertisers spent millions of dollars "trying to reach these women."⁷ Commercial television's neglect and misunderstanding of women—both as workers who wanted to create different types of television for women and as viewers who would tune into such television—were, to Shigekawa, "their loss, and public television's gain."⁸

As Shigekawa and others like her migrated from commercial television, they brought with them innovative ideas and a hope that television could better meet the needs of women viewers. Their vision for regional and public programs, evinced by this chapter's exploration of *In Her Own Right*, *Woman Alive!*, and *Yes, We Can*, offered creative and varied solutions for the problems of women's television. All three programs, according to their respective production strategies, addressed long-standing, sexist ideas about television for women by redefining genre formulas, viewers' needs and interests, and the role of women behind and in front of the camera. The interventions of these "serious sisters" prompted an unprecedented period of growth and creativity in what Rachel Moseley, Helen Wheatley, and Helen Wood describe as "television *for* women."⁹ In their scholarship on the matter, Moseley, Wheatley, and Wood call for an expansion of the framework of "women's television" and analysis beyond genres assumed to be aimed at women.

The resulting, more expansive scope of television for women, versus women's television, creates a new canon for feminist analysis.

Representative of television's redress to the failings of women's television, the productions included in this chapter—*In Her Own Right*, *Woman Alive!*, and *Yes, We Can*—expand the boundaries of women's television and engage the concerns of "television for women" identified by Moseley, Wheatley, and Wood. Although they address women viewers, these programs fall outside typical genres, such as soap operas, game shows, and homemaking shows, that have served as the foci for foundational feminist scholarship on women's television.¹⁰ They also reorient analysis from "visible emphasis upon fictional programming over factual programming" in feminist television studies to informational, educational, and news programming.¹¹ Additionally, these productions foreground and value "feminine competencies" in both production and reception that depart from restrictive conventions and commercialized traditions. Finally, and perhaps most radically, these programs employ feminist production strategies to create progressive content and to address both avowed feminists and viewers who were curious about feminism.

This last point offers a qualification to the "television for women" paradigm. Rather than thinking only of "television *about* or *by* women," Moseley, Wheatley, and Wood argue that women have had investments and found pleasure in texts that were not made by and were not about women. This argument broadens and complicates what texts should count as appropriate objects of study for feminist analyses of women and television. Yet as useful a corrective as the "by *or* for women" paradigm is, it also potentially sidelines programming of value to women that features television productions by *and* for women.

To consider how programs like *In Her Own Right*, *Woman Alive!*, and *Yes, We Can* deepen and diversify the study of women's television as television for women, this chapter purposefully engages "slippage" between production, content, and audience, with women engaged in all three domains.¹² It does so not out of theoretical carelessness or strict canonical rules, against which Moseley, Wheatley, and Wood rightfully caution, but rather because these programs imagine the women's roles as on-screen authorities, at-home viewers, and behind-the-scenes workers as both central to the production and interdependent within production strategies. To explore the potentials of television for women in an age of US women's liberation, this chapter turns to short-lived, modestly funded, and regional television programs that involved women as subjects, audiences, *and* producers differently and with progressive political intentions.

REDEFINING TELEVISION FOR WOMEN IN THE 1970S

Television that targets women has long been the object of cultural disregard and disdain, yet women viewers figured centrally in profitability for the television industry from its beginnings. As early as 1948, *Variety* reported that daytime

television offered networks "their first opportunity to break even."¹³ In her work on women viewers and daytime programming of the 1950s, Marsha F. Cassidy finds that, in spite of the "curious assortment of programs calculated to attract the female spectator," "women spectators served as the industry's polestar" during television's early years.¹⁴ Although initially uncertain about how to best appeal to women, the industry quickly cemented a basic formula that privileged commercial viability and cost-effectiveness over quality and innovation. In 1954, NBC's vice president of TV sales reported that advertisers were increasingly aware of the "economy and efficiency of daytime television" and the "unequalled opportunity to demonstrate products to the housewife without having to pay the premium rates of evening time."¹⁵ By the beginning of the year, top-rated daytime programming was confined to soap operas (*Search for Tomorrow* [CBS, 1951–82; NBC, 1982–86] and *Guiding Light* [CBS, 1952–2009]) and game shows with male hosts (*Strike It Rich* [CBS, 1951–58], *The Big Pay-Off* [NBC, 1951–53; CBS, 1953–59], and *On Your Account* [NBC, 1953–54; CBS, 1955–56]), thereby further establishing the links between low-cost programming for women and effective commercialized outreach, a focus on domesticity, and male-helmed productions.¹⁶

Since television's early days, formulas for women's television were so entrenched that substantive reformulations were nearly impossible, even with evidence that women viewers might not desire what television imagined them to want. This meant that, on the whole, women's programming was mired in traditions of men acting as authorities in feminized television genres intended for women viewers. Much as it did in the 1950s, daytime programming of the 1970s assumed that confident yet non-threatening male talent appealed to women. Even with the visibility of the women's movement, commercial network programs persisted in featuring "charm boys," male hosts who "communicated a commanding but amiable deportment on air."¹⁷ By 1972, the daytime talk show *Dinah's Place* (NBC, 1970–74) was the only network television program on air to feature a woman, Dinah Shore, as host.¹⁸

Network television's drive for profit defined a successful program by commercial appeals and nationwide outreach, both of which the industry defined in sexist terms. Raysa Bonow, executive producer for WBZ's daytime television show *For Women Today*, commented on this situation in 1972. According to Bonow, the lack of women working in television was a result of conditions in commercial television that "indoctrinated" viewers "into only seeing men in authoritative roles" and were "determined by men who really believe that women are not a saleable item."¹⁹ This want of "salability" meant that, in spite of their desirability as a consumer market and in spite of the profitability of women's television, women were not viable as a part of the product. Instead, the industry's stubborn commitment to the idea that women lacked "salability" limited women's roles in production and held back gender-equitable hiring.

Concerns of salability extended to program content. Profitability depended upon ratings that produced "least objectionable programming," a staple of American

commercial television.²⁰ By the start of the 1970s, the industry was aware of the need to speak to women in different fashion, but it was reluctant to do so with explicitly political content, lest it alienate viewers. As Barbara Walters found in her experience hosting syndicated talk show *Not for Women Only* (1971–76), frank feminist expression could not happen on commercial television because of assumptions that it “would not draw a national response” and would therefore compromise the foremost priority of mass audience capture.²¹

Although least objectionable programming impeded significant and fast-acting changes to the traditions of television for women, some progressive movement started to happen by the early 1970s. Television’s address to women was shifting, albeit in constricted dayparts and channels. A 1972 *Broadcasting* report noted that despite the continued prominence of “diapers-and-recipes types of programming,” daytime game shows, and soap operas, television for women was expanding to include “serious sisters” in regional, syndicated, and public television. These innovative programs sidelined domestic issues of childcare and cooking in favor of “new program forms” with “a greater air of sophistication and intellectuality than their predecessors.” *Broadcasting* correlated these improvements in programming for women to the television industry’s growing awareness of the “woman of the 70’s” whose outlook was influenced by feminist politics.²² While feminist influence on television had measurable effects on television for women, these effects played out primarily—and with few exceptions—in local and public television rather than in commercial television.

While the limitations of network television are obvious, it is important to note that characterizing public, local, and syndicated television productions as an unproblematic feminist haven is inaccurate. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) launched an internal investigation in 1975 and found “pervasive underrepresentation of women, both in employment and in program content.”²³ According to the CPB report, fewer than 30 percent of public television jobs were filled by women; in children’s programs, 69 percent of characters were male; in public affairs, news, and panel programs, 85 percent of participants with speaking roles were men.²⁴ Local productions failed to deliver on their promise of representing community interests and tried to minimize the impact of advocacy groups on equal air time given to concerns of women and minorities. Faced with threats to FCC license renewals, stations often subverted the system by meeting demands for improved and wider-ranging programming through low-cost programming. Instead of carrying out a thorough overhaul of programming practices, stations often provided underrepresented groups only with “access to cheaply produced public affairs programs scheduled in the late-night and early-morning slots.”²⁵ Even productions helmed by women with feminist aims were not immune from the commercialized and commodifying influence of television, according to some feminist activists. *Yes, We Can*, for example, was disrupted by representatives from thirty-eight organizations who protested WBZ’s cultivation of women’s liberation

"to make a media-thing for commercial uses" and its inclusion of corporations at the women's fair.²⁶

Even with the limitations of public and local television, there were genuine opportunities for enlightened change in both arenas. As the 1970s progressed, public television demonstrated measurable improvement in employment. An internal investigation instituted in 1976 and congressional action in 1977 threatened cuts in federal funding to the Center for Public Broadcasting if employment of women and minorities did not improve by 1980; this measure resulted in improved hiring practices. In January 1977, public television reported a 10.1 percent gain in employment for women in public television from the previous year.²⁷ As for local commercial television, it made improvements throughout the 1970s with regard to women television viewers and workers, "particularly on local schedules."²⁸ A 1977 *New York Times* article, "Programming for Women—Time for Reevaluation," noted that local programming, in spite of its "relatively low-keyed and unthreatening" tenor, was "often surprisingly successful" in its politically progressive articulation of women's issues.²⁹

Despite its marginalization within the larger television landscape and its lack of financial support, the politically conscious, community-oriented local television that emerged in the late 1960s and into the 1970s mattered. It was both innovative in its production and meaningful in its reception. In *Black Power TV*, Devorah Heitner argues for the value of local public affairs programs such as New York's *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* (WNEW, 1968–71) and Boston's *Say Brother* (WGBH, 1968–97), which were experimental local television made by Black media workers for Black viewers. Heitner's multifaceted production history involving oral histories of production staff, viewer feedback, reviews in industry publications, and government findings and policies demonstrates that these programs "represented new cultural practices and legitimized activism."³⁰ Viewers regarded the shows as a "transformative experience" and keenly felt the importance of such programming in a white-dominated medium.³¹ Gayle Wald's analysis of the public television program *Soul!* (WNBT, 1968–73) identifies the impact a modestly funded program could have on audiences. Wald argues that "despite competition from the three major networks and technological challenges associated with public television, which tended to broadcast on UHF channels inaccessible to all but state-of-the-art television sets, [Ellis] Haizlip's show attracted a substantial and loyal audience."³² Wald's focused attention to *Soul!* reveals the significance of production strategies and the ways producers, creative staff, and technicians transformed television for makers and consumers. As the program's producer, Haizlip envisioned unique content and production principles to bring expressions of Black Power to television that "explicitly blurred the boundary between producers and consumers," built collectivity through performance, and "called on embodied memories of past performances while anticipating new feelings and states of being."³³

Public and regional broadcasting offered unique possibilities to introduce a feminist ethos to television for women. As compromised and short-lived as some

of these programs were, each one discussed in this chapter exemplifies indisputably self-aware experiments in television for women. Television's "serious sisters" shared common concerns of revising, according to feminist ideals, content, audience outreach, on-set labor practices, and the composition of production staff and crews. These shows were designed to address women viewers while correcting television's consumerist and—in feminist producers' minds—demeaning conceptualizations of these viewers. They redefined who their viewers were, what they needed from television, and how they would interact and influence on-screen content. They employed majority to exclusively female production teams and, in doing so, challenged the authority and marketability of male-helmed television. Finally, these programs made room for more women at all levels of production and fostered collaborative decision-making that involved all production workers.

IN HER OWN RIGHT: HOW TO MAKE A WOMAN'S SHOW

One of the first feminist interventions in television for women, *In Her Own Right*, was produced by Katharine Kinderman for Boston public television station WGBH-TV. It ran as a series in the summer of 1970 and served as a template for the "serious sisters" that followed, particularly in its public orientation, political-mindedness, and inclusion of women viewers. The station's program order for *In Her Own Right* made clear that television for women should be not only "for women" but "about them as well."³⁴ From its first episode, "How to Make a Woman's Show," the producers prioritized new ways of reaching women and opening up the processes of television production to viewer intervention and understanding. The entirety of this inaugural episode tended to educating viewers about how a new type of television program for women could be made. Therefore, the program was an exercise in television literacy for audiences and in democratic opportunities for audiences to shape the program through their input. The episode included a panel meant to represent a cross section of viewers—a housewife; a high schooler; an unmarried man; and a member of a radical feminist group, Bread and Roses—who discussed what they would like to see happen on the program.

Kinderman conceptualized *In Her Own Right* as a cooperative effort with the viewing public. The first episode solicited input from audience members about the program's title, its content, and which guests to book. Host Karen Klein assured viewers that the production would continually be "experimenting" with elements of the program "with [their] help." As a result, episodes addressed issues ranging from class dynamics to public and private sphere politics to women's history. Guests included a lobbyist, members of Congress and state governments, psychologists, educators, a childcare worker and nursery school director, and small business owners. An array of women activists frequently appeared on the show: a "radical political activist" on the first episode; suffragette Florence Luscomb on an episode that celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the women's suffrage movement;

members of Boston-area women's liberation groups, including the Boston Women's Health Collective and creators of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, for an episode on "Women's Liberation"; and a cab driver who was the sole female board member of the Boston Taxi Drivers Association, along with a factory worker who was the founder of the labor group Boston Women United for an episode entitled "Blue Collar Women."³⁵

Although *In Her Own Right* was a formative influence in television for women, its time on the air was short. After just seven episodes, WGBH canceled the show. Michael Rice, WGBH program director, defended the decision by claiming that the show was intentionally transitory. He regarded the program as a "summer test series, which was never intended to continue into the fall."³⁶ Rice also indicated that the show was dropped to make way for other news and discussion programs designed to meet the station's public broadcasting obligations. The women who worked on the program assumed that the show would have a typical season run, so the cancellation took them by surprise. Feminist newsletter *The Spokeswoman* characterized the cancellation as unjust; it cited the program's "good" ratings that "continue[d] to climb" and argued that WGBH "overlooked" the quality of the program and the work of its women.³⁷ According to Mary Blau, a production assistant, Rice and the team met after each show, and the shows they "particularly liked" were ones that Rice "liked too."³⁸ Given the show's promise and accounts of Rice's positive reactions, the seemingly abrupt, unexpected cancellation raised suspicions and drew criticism.

Contrary to Rice's public statement as to why *In Her Own Right* was canceled, producers, production assistants, and moderators reported that Rice's personal politics were to blame. *In Her Own Right* was defined by the control these women had over the show's production and the authority they wielded on set. These qualities, in the opinion of the show's production team, disturbed Rice so much that he canceled the program. In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, production staff related details from the meeting during which the show's cancellation was announced. In this meeting, management told them that the show "had been a failure" and "didn't have a warm atmosphere," and Rice criticized them for their "chip-on-the-shoulder attitude."³⁹ Such comments suggest that the show itself was not at issue but that the workplace and production workers for the program were.

The women who worked on the show countered the implication that they did not meet the needs of the public in ways that the news and discussion programs proposed to replace *In Her Own Right* would. They insisted that they had designed the program for "all women" and "denied any bias" that would alienate viewers.⁴⁰ *The Spokeswoman* confirmed the show's audience appeal, describing the show as one that "points up the wide-ranging interests of women at home."⁴¹ Within a week of announcing the cancellation of *In Her Own Right*, Rice promised that the station would develop "a new show devoted to 'contemporary women's concerns,'" something that *In Her Own Right* production staff felt they already had accomplished.⁴²

The troubled circumstances surrounding the cancellation of *In Her Own Right*, to some critics, reflected WGBH's ideological trajectory. *Newsweek* voiced concerns that the station, which "by liberal lights" was a "model of admirable aspirations," was dismantling its politically progressive content and equitable employment practices.⁴³ With *Say, Brother* in 1968, WGBH was the first station in the US to air a show "produced and directed by blacks for blacks," and, in spite of one-third of Black families in Boston watching the program, WGBH canceled the show in July 1970.⁴⁴ The cancellation of *In Her Own Right* followed in a month's time. While protests against the station successfully reversed the cancellation of *Say, Brother*, similar actions did not save *In Her Own Right*. Instead of reinstating the show, WGBH promised only to consider future programming about women and to meet with women's groups to guide this decision.

The cancellation of *In Her Own Right* demonstrates the precarity of a television production helmed by women for women. By working in roles typically reserved for men, women challenged the gendered segregation of production and threatened an industry that had long depended on male authority and conventionally gendered behaviors in the workplace. In the case of *In Her Own Right*, these women seemed to provoke anxiety and hostility on the part of male management, and their perceived lack of femininity became justifiable grounds by which to cancel their program. Yet in other instances—as exemplified by programs that followed *In Her Own Right*—women working on innovative television for women challenged gendered standards of behavior in the industry with positive results. They exerted masculinized control over decision-making, technically and creatively, within the production of their programs. But instead of abandoning femininity altogether, they reconstructed their television workplaces as woman-friendly and collaborative and, in doing so, expressed self-determined femininity as an asset in how television could be made.

WOMAN ALIVE!'S REGIONAL FOCUS AND NATIONAL OUTREACH

Described as a program "for, by and about women," public television program *Woman Alive!* began with a one-hour pilot special in 1974, continued in 1975 with a first season consisting of ten half-hour programs, and finished in 1977 with a second season comprising five one-hour specials. The program clearly declared its feminist politics, not just through audience address, production, and content, but also through its funding and institutional backing. Supported by a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the program was coproduced by public television station KERA-TV in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, and *Ms.* magazine. The unlikely pairing of an East Coast feminist media institution and a Texas public television station resulted in a unique regional sensibility, a relatively high-quality program meant for a nationwide

audience, and strategic outreach to women who felt overlooked by or alienated from well-known feminist organizations and leadership.

In their proposal submitted to the CPB, KERA and *Ms.* announced their goals for the program: to make the subject of feminism a serious and long-standing one, to define the movement through its diversity, and to correct misperceptions about the coastal elitism and white exclusivity of the movement. According to *Woman Alive!* producers, it was time for feminists to take over television's treatment of the women's movement and to emphasize what more there was to be said about it beyond television's existing, shortsighted analysis. By making their own TV show, *Ms.* enacted the next logical step in feminist-controlled media. With their journalistic expertise, they could coproduce a program that effectively circumvented news outlets external to feminist organizations. With public television's help, they would be the ones to relay messages about feminism to viewers.

The direct involvement of feminist organizations in production solved a number of problems, not least of which was accuracy and complexity in coverage of feminist politics. This involvement also helped ensure the women's movement as an ongoing newsworthy presence on television, which was a priority, given the ways that mainstream news coverage treated feminism as yet another fad with a short news cycle. *Woman Alive!*'s producers pitched the show based on the need to provide sustained and serious coverage of a growing, legitimate political movement. With *Ms.* "on sale at the Safeway," the mainstreaming of feminism fostered perceptions that feminist outreach was wholly successful and that nothing more needed to be done to present feminist ideas to the American public.⁴⁵ The producers countered these notions by arguing that the movement continued to change and had been neither fairly nor correctly covered.

The question of utility defined *Woman Alive!*⁴⁶ The producers wondered, "Now that copies of most of the manifestos are safely in the files of ten metropolitan news dailies; now that every network and local news show has done a five-minute take-out asking, 'Whither women's lib?,' what can a women's show on public television do to make itself useful?"⁴⁷ The answer lay in nuanced explorations of feminism and its next stages of development, something the program promised to deliver.⁴⁸ Producers argued that, by looking deeper into the issues of the women's movement and reflecting its "more various and more inclusive" aspects, *Woman Alive!* could offer underexplored ideas about feminism to a national audience.⁴⁹ In 1976, producers boasted that the show's first season "broke the media stereotype of the women's movement as a small group of radicals defined by narrow perimeters of class and race" and helped its audience see that "their feelings were shared by others throughout the country," thereby achieving its primary goals.⁵⁰

The noncommercial aspects of *Woman Alive!* and their control over production meant that feminists could more accurately represent their movement as they themselves experienced it and wanted others to see it. Producers were particularly invested in foregrounding feminism's diversity and inclusivity, an agenda that



FIGURE 15. The pilot episode of *Woman Alive!* offers multiple visions of feminism, including a consciousness-raising group in Des Moines. (Schlesinger Library, Vt-30)

informed the show from the start and defined it throughout its three-year run. Publicity for the pilot episode emphasized its corrective stand on existing (mis) representation of feminism. Such misrepresentation “ignore[d] black and other third-world women” and the “great changes being made by blue-collar women as well.”⁵¹ Media coverage rather than feminism itself, according to this argument, was the force that rendered certain women invisible and defined the movement according to hegemonic categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

To counter media representations of feminists as exclusionary, *Woman Alive!* featured profiles on women that highlighted class, race, sexual, and age differences and a variety of women’s relationships to feminism. The series’ premiere episode included a story about Crystal Lee Jordan, a North Carolina mill worker and union organizer whose life was used as the basis for the 1979 film *Norma Rae*. This same episode reported on feminist organizations and included a consciousness-raising group in Des Moines, Iowa, and the National Black Feminist Organization. Other episodes further diversified depictions of feminists and women’s relationships to feminism. They included Elaine Noble, elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1974, who “freely admitted” her lesbian identity during her campaign, the first elected representative to do so, and the first female roustabout at the Atlantic Richfield Company, who, “like other black women across the country,” was fighting for “personal economic independence,” even though she “[didn’t] think of herself as a feminist by definition.” Gloria Steinem was interviewed about her own experiences with feminism, with the same episode covering the “feminist realization of an eight year old girl.”⁵²

Woman Alive! offered feminist identification to viewers across disparate spaces, populations, and political practices. In offering its audience encounters with

previously unknown sights, the program delivered on television's promise of what Ernest Pascucci identifies as an "intimate relationship, a visual relationship, more-over a televisual relationship" with such locations and corresponding identities. Pascucci's theory comes from his own queer engagement with television, about which he writes, "Intimate (tele)visions were not inhibiting of proper interpersonal relations, but *enabling* of a subjectivity that I could barely recognize, a subjectivity that had no recognizable place in the 'spaces of appearance' available to me."⁵³ Pascucci's perspective acknowledges television's political potential and challenges alarmist assessments of television as addictive, detrimental to the public sphere, and harmful to viewers' abilities to take action and to connect with others.

To many involved in the women's movement, representations mattered a great deal, and with good reason. Images "function politically," according to Bonnie J. Dow, because they "offer visions of what feminism 'means'" and indicate different phases of feminism operating in the culture, which are then reflected by televisual worlds.⁵⁴ Given the ubiquity and influence of television in American culture, some feminist activists sought to reform televisual images. Once appropriately revised according to feminist standards or placed under feminist control, television could then serve the needs of feminist politics. This idea took hold in several feminist organizations. In 1972, the radical feminist news journal *off our backs* enjoined readers to "turn on, tune in, and take over."⁵⁵ Liberal feminist group NOW also regarded itself as an agent active in shaping on-screen images and using them to further their political goals. With the establishment of a committee for media relations and the publication of its first Communications Kit in 1970, the organization advised members to evaluate each political action for its "*visual interest*" and to think strategically about how to produce images that could withstand postproduction manipulations beyond their control.⁵⁶

Despite the power of representation, television did not always prove as effective in reaching women as feminists may have hoped. Even though televised images held profound and persuasive meaning for some viewers, others faced difficulties in assimilating the lessons provided by those images, particularly when material conditions limited the impact of any given representation. No matter how appropriately feminist, visually interesting, or progressive an image was, other dynamics could contravene in the conversion process. This proved true even when women were not antagonistic to or apathetic about feminism.

As journalistic state-of-feminism reports emerged in the early 1970s, they frequently looked to "Middle America" to identify the effects of feminism in areas presumed to be outside the reach of women's liberation groups. While not their primary intention, some of these reports reveal the role television played in conveying images of feminism to women beyond the urban, coastal enclaves of movement headquarters and help explain impediments to image-based feminist outreach.⁵⁷ A woman in a small Illinois town interviewed for *Time's* 1972 article "The New Feminism on Main Street" described the limited abilities of television

to deliver a sustainable version of feminism, not because of a lack of interest or antifeminist sentiment, but because of competing demands on her labor and attention. "I identify with Women's Lib.," she stated. "I watch one of those women on Johnny Carson and I think, 'That's me.'"⁵⁸ But although *The Tonight Show* motivated feminist identification for the housewife, its effects were short-lived. "I get up the next day, feed the kids and clean house," she says, "and it wears off."⁵⁹ Such vacillation between identification and disidentification signaled obstacles to mediated feminism, no matter if feminists themselves articulated the politics of their movement.

While identification with televised images was not guaranteed, viewer letters to *Woman Alive!* indicate the success of the program's address and expression of televisual intimacy akin to the relationship between audience and "(tele)visions" that Pascucci describes. A former factory worker from Olivia, Minnesota, wrote in to express her thanks for the show's coverage of the overlooked topic of women's sweatshop labor and for its "wide range of programming."⁶⁰ Mrs. Phyllis Spisto from Brooklyn, New York, was a working mother whose job in her family's ice cream distribution business meant that she did "not come in contact with too many free thinking women."⁶¹ She described the effect the program had on her as a "ray of light communicating directly with my consciousness."⁶² "I feel very close to you in your efforts to change social awareness," wrote a twenty-two-year-old married college student from Salt Lake City, Utah, who assured producers, "Your program is encouraging to me in my own struggles to break dead end patterns."⁶³ A social worker from Terre Haute, Indiana, expressed a "growing enthusiasm" for the program over the course of viewing its first four episodes.⁶⁴ Georgia O'Donnell from Mesa, Arizona, enthused, "I feel more an individual today after watching your show!"⁶⁵ One viewer, an unmarried secretary, wrote to producers about the show's affective impact. "You have given me a half-hour of dignity once a week," she wrote. "Dignity, hope, and the feeling of not being alone."⁶⁶

The outpouring of appreciation from viewers was remarkable, not least because of the show's impact in a variety of locations across America. Responses from Utah to Brooklyn, from urban areas and small towns, demonstrated the success of *Woman Alive!*'s sensitivity to regionalism, a foundational part of the show's production plans. "We are familiar with what's happening on the island of Manhattan," producers wrote in their proposal for the program. But with a production team in Texas, they were also "aware of lives and manners West of the Hudson River."⁶⁷ *Woman Alive!* expressed diversity in feminism through profiles of women rooted in regional specificity, particularly those located in areas that were assumed to be uninterested in feminist politics. The series reported on women's lives across America. From the aforementioned consciousness-raising group in Des Moines, Iowa, and Crystal Lee Jordan's attempts to unionize a factory in her small North Carolina town to a Massachusetts woman trying to create an equitable marriage with her husband, the pilot episode placed feminist concerns squarely

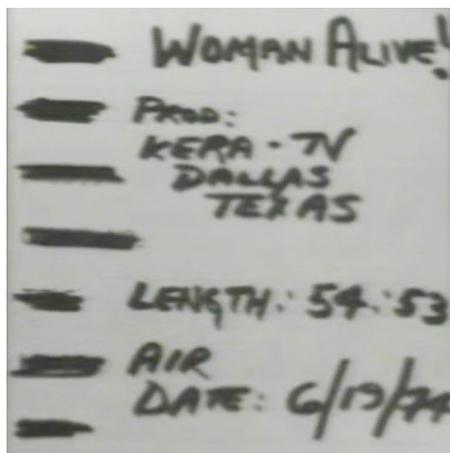


FIGURE 16. Slate for *Woman Alive!*'s pilot episode indicates central role of Dallas-Fort Worth's KERA in production. PBS, June 19, 1974. (Schlesinger Library, Vt-30)

within regions that were assumed, in typical media representations, not to have been affected by feminism.

Locating feminism in unexpected places shaped production efforts for *Woman Alive!* Producer Joan Shigekawa emphasized the type of work she undertook as she “filmed the world” in which feminists lived, both in their homes and in “the broad, flat stretches of midwestern countryside with freight trains moving regularly across the horizon, passing the endless fields of corn and soybeans.”⁶⁸ In telling women’s stories that “reflected the changes going on in the middle of the country,” Shigekawa took particular care in conveying the particular landscapes of these areas, as her extended and detailed description of the Illinois countryside indicates.⁶⁹ Awareness of location also affected decisions about where to locate *Woman Alive!*’s production. The choice of Dallas–Fort Worth’s KERA as initial coproducers underscored regard for regions that were not proximate to sites of major feminist organizations. With “facilities and personnel in Dallas capable of matching (at least) the television production standards of either coast,” working in the major Texas city offered the *Woman Alive!* production team benefits, both pragmatic and experiential: lower production costs and “the Dallas ways of producing,” which were deemed “less crazy-making than elsewhere.”⁷⁰

The combined resources of *Ms.* magazine and a Texas public television station promised to deliver a high-impact program, to safeguard against accusations of elitism within the women’s movement, and to protect the show from ideologically suspect agendas of commercial television. The proposal to the CPB for *Woman Alive!* emphasized the professional skills that *Ms.* and KERA, respectively, would bring to television production. *Ms.* had already proven its ability to reach a “target audience” of women, while KERA employed “staff capable of producing a quality national product.” KERA’s obligation to the public meant that it was “free from

commercial pressure that would water down content."⁷¹ The trustworthiness of the station overtly referenced the commercial drives of the television industry and indirectly signaled the commercialization that critics felt *Ms.* had introduced into the women's movement. As the two media institutions worked in tandem to ensure different modes of media acumen, KERA operated as a counterbalance to the stigma attached to *Ms.* and its leadership, even as the production benefited from the magazine's expertise as a feminist enterprise.

Although *Ms.* and cofounder Gloria Steinem's involvement in the production of *Woman Alive!* provided all-important feminist credentials, their relationship to capitalism was a potential liability that required careful management. Steinem's celebrity status in the women's movement was perceived by some as alienating to so-called Middle American women and radical feminists alike. At best, Steinem and *Ms.* proved simply ineffective in connecting to some women. At worst, they functioned as corrupting forces within the women's movement. To understand *Woman Alive!*'s unusual decision to minimize the media-savvy resources it had in Steinem and *Ms.*, a brief contextualization is in order.

To radical feminists, Gloria Steinem's media-friendly version of feminist politics was troubling, if not downright dangerous for the women's movement. In 1975, Redstockings accused Steinem of connections with the CIA and intimated that her prominence in popular media coverage of feminism was tied to this relationship. Charging that Steinem had been "meteorically installed into her current position as leader of the women's liberation movement through the efforts of the mass media" and that her past activities had been covered up, Redstockings declared Steinem a serious threat to the integrity of the movement.⁷² In less extreme criticism, other feminist critics understood the media's characterization of Steinem as the singular leader of the movement to be a necessary evil. *off our backs* identified mainstream media as the force that had installed Steinem as the celebrity face of feminism, yet acknowledged the strategic usefulness of this position. A recognizable feminist offered women a figure to emulate and the media a compelling story to represent. In its pragmatic assessment of Steinem's value to the movement, *off our backs* proclaimed, "With superstardom there is the realization of what a woman can do (NOW THERE'S A WOMAN THE PRESS CAN'T IGNORE)."⁷³

Regardless of the concerns feminists had about Steinem's celebrity, Steinem's influence over a national audience was not guaranteed. Paradoxically, despite its much-vaunted media appeal, Steinem's impact was often lost in translation for women who did not identify with Steinem precisely *because of* her mediated presence. The numerous state-of-feminism reports published in women's magazines in the early 1970s reveal women's complex reception of Steinem and help explain the lack of a unified political alliance with feminism. Women who lived in regions beyond major urban coastal regions had meaningful and valid reasons, beyond simple internalized sexism, for rejecting the tenets of feminist leadership conveyed from afar through popular media.

In a 1975 article, "Women's Lib Plays in Peoria," *Saturday Review* reporter Susan Jacoby found that televised images of feminists did not always operate as a lifesaver that connected women to the movement. In their geographic isolation from centers of the women's liberation movement, Peorian women forged their own state of feminism predicated on their own particular realities and the material conditions of day-to-day living. Just as they clipped coupons, they sought improved economic conditions in their hourly wage jobs. Just as they exchanged casserole recipes, they banded together to change conditions in their workplaces. When, for example, a local company who employed an all-female workforce to answer customer service calls failed to heed health and safety complaints, the workers took action. Wearing earphones on the job led to perpetual ear infections, but both the union and the company's management did nothing to change these conditions for customer service workers. In response, the women organized an in-house Women's Group to represent their interests collectively and to agitate more effectively for improved labor conditions.

Feminist role models for these Peorian women came from within their community. Jacoby interviewed a young woman who had overcome her resistance to feminism through the influence of her female coworkers. The young woman recounted how she had supported a feminist union representative in a recent election once she realized the candidate was "just like us."⁷⁴ Part of being "like us" was a matter of a conventional white femininity and heteronormativity, as the union representative possessed "beautiful silvery-blond hair" and could "get a man."⁷⁵ These qualities were ones that Gloria Steinem herself famously possessed, yet Steinem was a figure of failed identification for the Peorian women who supported their feminist union representative. Even with her heterosexual appeals and conventional beauty (down to her very own signature blonde hair), Steinem was not an agent of feminist conversion for them. If Steinem was "'only a streaky mane of hair on a network television program,'" and "doesn't seem like a real person," then her appeal, for some, did not transmit across the remove of celebrity and the mediation of television.⁷⁶

Given the potential liabilities Steinem brought with her to *Woman Alive!*, her appearances on the program were carefully managed. In a promotional interview that was published in WNET-13's magazine for station members, Joan Shigekawa noted that Jordan, the labor organizer from North Carolina who was profiled in the pilot episode, "didn't even know what Gloria Steinem looked like before we brought her to New York."⁷⁷ Much like the feminism of the women profiled in journalistic accounts of Middle America, Jordan's feminism stood apart from Steinem's influence. Jordan's unconventional path to feminist consciousness aligned with the ways *Woman Alive!* wished to convey feminism: as intuitive and commonsensical, complexly expressed and experienced, and adaptable to suit the conditions of any woman's life. Despite—or perhaps because of—Jordan's ignorance of women's movement leaders, she personified

Woman Alive!'s mission, which, according to Shigekawa, was to illustrate "how much more powerful and appealing 'woman alive' and in action can be rather than in mere self-contemplation."⁷⁸

Steinem did appear in *Woman Alive!*'s first episode, but in ways that minimized her own celebrity persona in favor of emphasizing the collective aspects of the women's movement. In three, relatively brief segments scattered throughout the episode, Steinem relates her own experiences with internalized sexism, expresses her racial and class solidarity with others, positions herself as but one member of a larger group, and acknowledges the effective political activism of other women. In the first segment, Steinem describes her struggles with male authority and the need for women to define themselves apart from male approval in personal and professional relationships. The show then cuts to a group discussion about a three-day conference for Black feminists in New York City. Steinem participates in the group, which includes Margaret Sloan-Hunter and Jane Galvin-Lewis, both of the National Black Feminist Organization. Sloan-Hunter and Galvin-Lewis are more central to the discussion than Steinem and provide critical assessments of feminism and racism. Sloan-Hunter and Galvin-Lewis recount the painful experience of witnessing racist media representations of Black women or the "lack of it" altogether. This long-standing marginalization shaped representations that were beginning to emerge with the women's movement; according to Sloan-Hunter, "a lot of Black feminists were very dissatisfied with the press image of the women's movement and their relationship to the women's movement." During this discussion, Steinem is sidelined in favor of Black feminists who tell their own stories. Steinem's final appearance comes with the journalistic duty of providing a brief, contextual setup for a story of Jordan's unionization efforts in Rock Rapids, Virginia.

Steinem and *Ms.*'s director of special projects, Ronnie Eldridge, "were most closely involved in the production," yet Steinem's presence on the program was restricted.⁷⁹ This may have sidestepped the controversy Steinem brought with her, yet her minimized presence had negative consequences. While *Variety* felt *Woman Alive!* was "blessed" with a lack of a host or spokesperson, the *New York Times* noted that the "fear of elitism" and the management of a "superstar" feminist "translates as careless production."⁸⁰

Much like Steinem's, *Ms.*'s involvement in *Woman Alive!* was a mixed blessing. While the magazine offered professional media resources and name recognition, it was also beset by criticism and mistrust from some feminist quarters. *The Lesbian Tide* charged *Ms.* with heterosexism and "gross neglect" of lesbians as well as with "perpetuating anti-feminist attitudes and politics" of "elitism, professionalism, classism, superstardom, and dollarism."⁸¹ Redstockings was concerned that the "creation of *Ms.* magazine ha[d] put Steinem in a strategic position in the women's movement—a position from which feminist politics can be influenced, but also a position from which information can be and is being gathered on the personal and political activities of women all over the world."⁸²



FIGURES 17, 18 & 19. A group discussion of the first conference of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) involved Jane Galvin-Lewis (top) and Margaret Sloan-Hunter (middle) and decentered Gloria Steinem (bottom). PBS, June 19, 1974. (Schlesinger Library, Vt-30)

Ms.'s ties to commercial interests also raised suspicion. Katherine Graham, president of the Washington Post company—whose holdings included the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and Warner Communications—was a stockholder in the magazine. Warner's ownership of Wonder Woman, who famously appeared on the cover of magazine's first issue, Graham's appearance on a 1974 cover of *Ms.* as "the most powerful woman in America," and *Newsweek*'s supportive coverage of Steinem led Redstockings to identify *Ms.* as "an area in which commercial interests and politics coincide."⁸³ *Ms.*'s involvement with public television further created "confusion" about the magazine's business and about whether *Ms.* was a "political

or commercial venture."⁸⁴ This confusion, according to Redstockings, "led women to submit political information about themselves which they would not have sent a magazine publishing simply for profit" and "led women writers to expect better treatment from *Ms.* than from other magazines, when in fact the treatment has often been worse."⁸⁵ Amid such speculation, *Woman Alive!* downplayed the contributions of *Ms.* Although *Ms.* supplied the pilot episode with "information, provided contacts and debated ideas," the program's affiliation with *Ms.* merited just a single mention in a credit.⁸⁶

Even though the magazine's commercial ties threatened to discredit *Woman Alive!*, *Ms.*'s "heavy involvement," as the *New York Times* noted, was "central to the program's success." *Woman Alive!* producer Joan Shigekawa credited the magazine as "the best resource center" for women's issues and as the site of all the program's preproduction work. In addition to its material resources, *Ms.* provided a template for a feminist workplace. The practice of "anti-hierarchical" relationships among workers was something *Ms.* adapted from the women's movement, which Shigekawa then adopted for *Woman Alive!* Every woman involved in a meeting for the show could contribute, which created a "network of women constantly exchanging information."⁸⁷

The composition of *Woman Alive!*'s production team made a public-facing feminist statement. Women were employed as the show's executive producer, associate producer, writers and reporters, editor, assistant editor, field producer, film crew, title design, sounds, research, and production assistant. While their employment helped correct the industry-wide underemployment of women working in television, it did more than serve as statistical correction to gender imbalances in employment. Women working in such large numbers introduced meaningful changes to the organization and dynamics of the television workplace. "There's nothing like it—when the producer is a woman and the decisions are made by women," enthused Shigekawa, who noted that everyone was permitted to provide input, regardless of job title. This arrangement created an "open forum" for pitching ideas as well as "camaraderie and rapport within the crew."⁸⁸ Regardless of job title, women who worked on *Woman Alive!* were authorized by their gendered knowledge to contribute to a television program about and for women.

Working in such an environment and on such a project alleviated the alienating effects of wage labor. As writer and associate producer Susan Lester said, "To all of us, it was not just a job, but a project integrated into our lives." The blurred boundaries between workers' lives and their jobs attested to both the political and personal importance of the production. Film editor Sarah Stein found that working on the program fulfilled "a real desire to finally work on something meaningful to us as women."⁸⁹ The hiring of women for the program thus not only challenged the imbalance of women working in production but also transformed the work of making television for women in front of and behind the cameras.



FIGURE 20. Promotional photo for *Woman Alive!* features producer Joan Shigekawa and union organizer Crystal Lee Jordan (later known as Crystal Lee Sutton) in “a light moment.” (PBS/Schlesinger Library MC 421)

For all the positive effects women brought to and experienced at *Woman Alive!*, the production team also faced uniquely gendered pressures while making the program. As a producer, Shigekawa felt obligated to refute sexist assumptions about women's inabilities to work in television. To do so, she pushed herself to exceed expectations for a successful production. Shigekawa was compelled to finish work ahead of schedule and to come in under her \$500,000 budget to prove that, despite cultural biases to the contrary, women could get work done efficiently and manage the business side of production appropriately. “We felt it was especially important for us to do so,” Shigekawa noted, “because men in television have held the myth too long that ‘women don’t know how to handle money.’”⁹⁰

Although Shigekawa and her team successfully managed the logistical issues involved in making *Woman Alive!*, the realities of limited resources constrained them. Transforming women's television required “the total concentration of creative energy,” which was impossible to sustain. But rather than mystifying the creative process and positioning herself as an artist whose artistic inspiration alone would see her through, Shigekawa emphasized the material support that focused creativity required. Creating revolutionary television required “time to think, and time to rest,” a condition that necessitated financial backing. “Money makes that possible,” Shigekawa argued. “Money buys you an extra day or two to rejuvenate, the time to confront the next creative problem with fresh eyes.”⁹¹ Without the necessary resources, *Woman Alive!* suffered, as did its workers. In Shigekawa's

assessment, the compromised vision of the ambitious production was brought about by the realities of budgets and scheduling rather than the abilities of the production team.

Shigekawa used the thwarted potential of *Woman Alive!* and her platform as the show's producer to illustrate the problems of television work for women. To her, problems with the show originated with the industry's shortchanging of women. *Woman Alive!* was hampered by a modest budget, as expected for a public television production. As a feminist-oriented, woman-centered and woman-run program—atypical within the television industry, commercial or public—*Woman Alive!* faced additional issues of a male-dominated industry in which women were not afforded respect, power, or autonomy. From her experience working on *Woman Alive!*, Shigekawa concluded that women who wanted to work in television at any level and on any program faced additional labor that hampered their productivity and innovation. Nothing short of ending structural inequality would reform this problem. "Until women in television are totally integrated into the decision making process," Shigekawa argued, "responsible women, at whatever level they exist, must bear the additional burden of disproving a deeply ingrained set of attitudes and prejudices held by a primarily male administration."⁹² Nonetheless, she held out hope for women who persisted in these inequitable circumstances and stressful labor conditions. Women succeeded in making *Woman Alive!* because, according to Shigekawa, they could rely upon their "professional best" to see them through.⁹³

Notwithstanding the difficulties Shigekawa and her crew faced in making *Woman Alive!*, the program proved a significant contribution to public television and to television for women. Notable as a "full-blown vid tape and film production," *Woman Alive!* offered a rare exception to what *Variety* considered the "bleak" PBS lineup of fall 1974.⁹⁴ Its quality, measured by its "true national tv production values," set *Woman Alive!* apart from its public television contemporaries.⁹⁵ Other assessments proved equally positive and hailed the program as, among other things, "technically flawless."⁹⁶ The cultural value of the program was validated by the inclusion of three of its episodes in the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Public Library's 1976 series on "new social documentary film."⁹⁷

After its initial pilot episode made at Dallas-Fort Worth station KERA-TV, *Woman Alive!*'s production relocated to New York City's WNET. This move marked the end of the program's regional experimentation in production location and staffing, but its dedication to diverse stories of women across the country remained a priority. An episode from season 2 titled "A Time of Change," for example, explored how the women's movement "permeated the everyday lives of women throughout the United States," even for women "who did not think of themselves as feminists in the activist sense." Program topics for the second season included reproductive freedom and the unequal terms of sterilization for women, the ERA, the impact of the women's liberation movement, and "Women and

Work," all of which promised to build on the program's initial investment in telling women's stories across regions that reflected diverse political outlooks, relationships to feminism, and identities. By the end of the season, producers guaranteed that the program would "have visited many different parts of the country" and that the ten-episode series would "present a view of women in all of their diversity."⁹⁸

On the basis of audience research conducted by the CPB's Qualitative Research Survey, *Woman Alive!* expanded its half-hour format to an hourlong program in 1977, its second and final season. The program also moved from a magazine format with short segments to a single theme for an entire program. This shift allowed the program to develop a "documentary film around an investigation of a single topic," which afforded viewers a "deeper understanding of the issues."⁹⁹ At their March 1976 meeting, the CPB earmarked up to \$554,000 for continued support of the series, but with the CPB's rejection of proposed sponsorship from Ortho Pharmaceutical, the maker of women's contraception, the program continued to lack external funding necessary to sustain it.¹⁰⁰

When *Woman Alive!* was canceled in 1977, viewers wrote in to protest the cancellation. Their letters cited the program's consciousness-raising effect and the ongoing need for feminist media programming, particularly with the ongoing fight to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. Just as they had throughout the series run, letters from viewers attested to the political impact and educational outreach of the program, particularly for women who might not otherwise have connection to feminist organizations and to other feminists. Some viewers understood the cancellation as symptomatic of structural problems within the television industry. As one viewer wrote in January 1976, "Please don't cancel it because of lack of interest. Men, who run things, aren't interested in women, as whites who run things aren't interested in blacks, generally. But education is necessary."¹⁰¹

YES, WE CAN: THE DAY WOMEN TOOK OVER TELEVISION

Yes, We Can, the local Boston television production described at the top of this chapter, proved a unique experiment in television for women. Its daylong format, funding from state government and local commercial television, and volunteer efforts on the part of local women's groups and businesses resulted in a day of television for women with connections to public outreach and civic issues and a robust reimagining of the generic parameters of women's television. The production validated the importance of challenging typical commercial programming. It also raised concerns about who should be responsible for expressing feminist ideas on commercial television; the sources of labor, financial support, and creative input for a community-oriented but commercially operated event; and the political ramifications of translating feminism to a commercial television venue.

Yes, We Can ran on WBZ from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. on Thursday, January 18, 1974, with a one-hour prime-time special that had aired the previous night. Both days' programming blended entertainment and celebrity with viewer education and civic concerns. The prime-time special featured musical performances by Liza Minnelli, Helen Reddy, and Ann Murray, between which members of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women previewed the next day's events. The guests on the daylong show included high-profile feminist leaders (Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Florynce "Flo" Kennedy), authors (Phyllis Chesler, who wrote *Women and Madness*), and politicians (Representative Margaret Heckler), who appeared alongside entertainers and television personalities (celebrity chef Julia Child and actor and singer Kitty Carlisle) and leaders of nonprofit organizations (Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers).

The program was tied to a women's fair, which provided content for the live broadcast and operated as a public service to women in the Boston area. The fair was free and provided attendees with resources and information about "all aspects of womanhood from education, health, and child care to exercise" from local government groups, women's organizations, and businesses. WBZ interviewed fair sponsors and attendees alike, with panel discussions and demonstrations rounding out the program. The live broadcast of January 18 concluded with portions of multiday state hearings on sex discrimination commissioned by the governor of Massachusetts. This final segment featured "televised documentation of sex discrimination" that highlighted structural inequalities facing women in the workplace, government, and society. The segment intercut taped excerpts from the January 10 hearings instigated by the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women with live on-set discussions by women experts on the matters of concern raised in the hearings.

Yes, We Can originated with the formation of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women in June 1971. The Commission was a fact-finding and advisory committee initially comprising thirty-five women whose goal was twofold: (1) to "survey and evaluate all statutes" of the state and "all governmental programs and practices" that involved the "employment, health, education and welfare" of women; and (2) to "investigate the need for new and expanded services that may be required for women as wives, mothers and workers."¹⁰² The Commission was empowered to make recommendations to the governor based on their investigations, which they did in their annual report. These wide-ranging recommendations included abortion rights, sex education, availability of childcare, job opportunities, the ERA, state restrictions on women performing jury duty, and prison reform.

Over the course of seven days throughout late 1973 and early 1974, the Commission conducted a series of hearings on sex discrimination in three of Massachusetts's major cities.¹⁰³ These hearings were intended to provide women an opportunity to consider and act on the question "What can and should be done

regarding needed legislation in the above areas?" Designed to set the agenda for the Commission in the following year, the hearings and their media coverage, which included *Yes, We Can*, were meant to inform viewers and prompt them to political action. Broadcasting the hearings situated *Yes, We Can* in liberal activist principles and a public service framework, but the use of commercial television to do so complicated matters. Airing the hearings on WBZ promised greater exposure to problems facing Massachusetts women, and the Commission's retrospective assessment of the event found that this strategy was "quite successful in arousing the interest of the people of the Commonwealth on women's issues."¹⁰⁴ The event, however, was seen by some feminists as unhelpful to women. Its relationship to commercialized media watered down feminist politics that could affect real change in women's lives and appropriated women's talent and labor for capitalist ends.

With its goal "of examining women in today's society and television programming," *Yes, We Can* was as much of a reform of women's television as it was of anything else.¹⁰⁵ Producers operated under the assumption that women viewers were a public underserved by commercial television. The daylong program expanded women's television to include issues beyond those designed for the imagined consumerist-housewife-mother viewer. *Yes, We Can* challenged traditions of women's television with program content debating a range of feminist issues, including financial planning, reproductive health care and abortion, and instructions on running for political office. When domestic tasks, so typically part of the consumerist cultivation of viewers of women's television, were part of the agenda, they were redefined in accordance with feminist principles: "Ms. Fix-It" encouraged women's self-sufficiency in appliance repair, plumbing, and electrician work; childcare concerns expanded to include adoption and foster care as well as guidance for raising a child in nonsexist fashion; and "Body Tone" included judo and karate demonstrations.

Yes, We Can acknowledged numerous facets of women's concerns and intersectional identities of gender, class, age, and race. The day started with "Programming for the Working Woman" from 7:00 to 9:00 a.m. Topics included discrimination and employment, day care, "women working with women," finance and money management, and "the plight of being poor and a woman." The next segment, "Programming for the Woman-at-Home," featured Elizabeth Hubbard, the current Miss Black America; Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women and a "forerunner of the black women's liberation movement"; and various feminist authors. Topics in this segment included "examination of roles played in marriage," pregnancy, and "the changing role of women today."¹⁰⁶ The 4:00–6:00 p.m. time slot, "Programming for the Younger Woman," focused on abortion, birth control, consciousness-raising, and careers for young women.

To support such a large-scale production, WBZ solicited sponsorship from area businesses (Cabinet Lumber & Supply, Inc. and Westinghouse Electronic Co.)

YES, WE CAN! / WBZ-TV 4

In partnership with the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women

YES, WE CAN — is a unique opportunity for all of us to explore together the roles and concerns of women in today's society. Yes, we have accomplished much . . . Yes, we will accomplish more. Consult the following program to determine which

booths you would be most interested in visiting. Each one reflects an area of concern to today's woman. Information and experts will be available in all of them from 7 am to 11 pm. Enjoy your visit, and thank you for joining with us in saying YES, WE CAN!

PLEASE NOTE: YES, WE CAN is both an all day fair open to the public and a live television program being produced by WBZ-TV 4. We assume by your entering the auditorium that you are aware of the possibility of your being included in our telecast and have no objections to such inclusion of either you or your child.

ENTRANCE WAY — WOMEN ARTISTS
An exhibit of the work of outstanding Massachusetts Women artists.

1

JUSTICE IS A WOMAN (Mass. Assoc. of Women Lawyers) Questions on Divorce, Name Change, Wills and Estates (to mention a few) should be directed here.

2

CULINARY ARTS (Mass. Assoc. of Home Economists, Market Cabinet Lumber and Supply Inc., Westinghouse Electric Company) Questions on protein sources, costs, meal planning, food labeling.

3

HOUSE HUNT (Mass. Dept. of Community Affairs) Want to know more about buying a house, getting a mortgage, reading a lease, finding decent housing if you're on a fixed income? Please, stop by.

4

DAY CARE CENTER (Living and Learning Schools) We will mind your child (over 2½ years) **DAY CARE (Day Care Coalition)** If you have any questions about day care . . . in general, please stop by.

5

WOMEN IN BUSINESS (Mass. Fed. of Business and Professional Women) Interested in getting into (or ahead in) the business world, finding out about scholarships for working women. Please, stop by.

6

CRAFTS (Boston YWCA) Want to learn weaving, pottery, decoupage, how to make jewelry or do blue jean embroidery? Come on over.

7

PIGEONHOLED? (Mass. Comm. Against Discrimination) Have you been denied a job (or an education), are you underpaid or under-promoted? or do something about it? Stop here.

8

HOME, SAFE HOME (Greater Boston Chapter, American Red Cross) Want to learn more about how to keep your home accident free, or how to administer first aid? Visit here.

9

HEALTHY BODIES (Mass. Gen. Hosp. School of Nursing) Free lead poisoning tests for children. Questions about how to do a self-examination for breast cancer, or any health related questions — Visit us.

10

CRISIS COUNSELING (Family Service Assoc. of Greater Boston) Faced with a crisis situation? We have trained counselors for you to talk with and can also tell you about other resources in Boston as well.

11

BE YOURSELF (National Organization for Women) (NOW) Want to learn about consciousness raising? Talk to a Group Leader and view video tapes of current CR Groups. Lots of reading material

12

CONSUMER; Q & A (Boston Consumer Protection Comm.) Consumers: Bring us your questions and complaints . . . and sign up for one of the consumer quizzes we will be holding during the day.

13

MS-FIX-IT (Cambridge Center for Adult Ed.) Do it yourself and save money. Visit us and learn how to fix electrical appliances, plumbing, repair furniture, replace windows, paint and hang paper.

14

SEX (Planned Parenthood) If you have any questions about pregnancy, birth control, abortion, alternatives to abortion, VD . . . etc. — Visit us.

FIGURE 21. Directory for the booths at *Yes, We Can* women's fair, which include legal advice on divorce, birth control, mortgages and home ownership, and career planning. (Schlesinger Library 77-M13—96-M48)

and the state government (Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination), as well as from nonprofit and educational organizations that participated in the women's fair (Boston YWCA, Red Cross, Simmons College, and Massachusetts General Hospital Nursing School). Some organizations struggled to assume this financial burden. The Eastern Massachusetts NOW chapter wrote to WBZ after the fair to voice its concerns about smaller, underfunded groups. It was "unrealistic to expect," they wrote, that a nonprofit organization like theirs with little financial latitude could "pay for and find labor to construct a booth."¹⁰⁷ They suggested that it would be better if the station would "provide space for non-profit groups which serve women and advocate women's rights at such an event" instead of charging these groups the same rate as for-profit participants.¹⁰⁸

Other feminist criticisms of *Yes, We Can's* commercialization of the women's movement were more pointed. A group of around fifty women, in *Variety's* report, "described as 'left-wing militants,'" arrived at the fair at 12:30 p.m. to disrupt the fair and its televised coverage.¹⁰⁹ They distributed flyers critiquing

15 **IN FASHION (DuPont)** Five fashion shows will be presented during the day. Personal consultation also available, courtesy Mildred L. Albert, Dean, Academie Moderne, Modeling and Finishing School.

16 **IT'S TO OUR CREDIT (Amer. Assoc. of Women Actcs.)** How to: Get a loan, credit, insurance, invest or manage money, collect benefits.

17 **BODY TONE (Cambridge YWCA)** Want to learn some exercises, or how to protect yourself? Want to know more about women in sports? Stop by.

18 **NATURE'S OWN (Erewhon)** Want to learn more about natural foods, or talk about their costs, or pick up some recipes? Come on over.

19 **WHO NEEDS A \$20 TOY! (Children's Museum)** We'll show you how to make your own. Demonstrations include: How to make stuffed toys, how to recycle foam and plastic and make toys out of them.

20 **VOLUNTEERING? (Civic Center Clearing House, ucpc-VAC)** If you think you'd like to be a volunteer but don't know the wheres, hows or pitfalls, . . . Please come and talk with us.

21 **GOING BACK TO SCHOOL (Simmons College)** If you are interested in finding out more about adult and continuing education programs or in talking to some women involved with them, please stop by.

22 **PLANT LIFE (Mass. Horticultural Soc.)** Green Thumb . . . or all thumbs. We have information and experts here for you to talk to.

23 **BEAUTIFUL (Breck, I Natural)** Make-up tips, make-over demonstrations, skin care treatments you can make at home . . . for all women, all colors, all ages.

24 **SENIOR WOMEN (Council of Elders)** Over 62 and want to know more about what you are entitled to . . . and how to get it? Come visit us.

25 **CAREER DESIGN (Mass. Assoc. of Women Deans, Administrators and Women Counselors)** For all women: Under 20, over 40, over 65. Need help in picking the right school, getting job training, we can help.

26 **MEDIA WOMEN (Women in Communications, Inc.)** Stop by and meet some of Boston's Media Women . . . Whether you are interested in becoming one yourself or just want to chat.

27 **CULTURAL EVENTS IN BOSTON (American Assoc. of Univ. Women)** We have information on all the cultural events going on in Boston.

28 **. . . AND MAY THE BEST MAN WOMAN WIN! (League of Woman Voters)** Interested in getting involved in a political campaign, or starting your own . . . Would you like information on pending legislation?

29 **WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT (Women's Oppor. Comm. Bost. Fed. Exec. Board)** Interested in a career in Government . . . Federal, State or Local . . . Come and talk to us about it.

30 **CALL FOR ACTION (WBZ)** Have a complaint about anything and want some action? Come here.

31 **BREAKING BARRIERS THROUGH SPEECH (Women's Training and Resources Corp.)** Interested in career promotion and mobility? Visit our communications workshop. Videotaping throughout the day.

32 **WOMEN'S YELLOW PAGES (W. Y. P., Boston Women's Collective)** Want more information about people, organizations and agencies who can help you meet your needs. We can help.

33 **LOVE A CHILD (Boston Children's Services)** Interested in adoption or foster care? Please stop by. The children will love you for it.

34 **BEYOND EVE (Middlesex College Div. of Cont. Ed.)** Want to learn more about women in U.S. History? Who they were, when they were, what they did . . . and where you can learn even more? This is the place.

35 **THE FILM BOX (Polaroid Corp)** An excellent selection of films by Women Filmmakers of Massachusetts will be shown throughout the day. Admission is free. Check the listing which follows for titles and times.

the commercial aspects of the event and advocating for collective action and anticapitalist politics as a viable alternative. The protest generated a spontaneous exercise in feminist praxis. The program manager came over to host Sonya Hamlin during the broadcast to tell her that protesters were outside and were threatening to come in and destroy the cameras, which amounted to all the cameras WBZ owned and were worth millions of dollars. In Hamlin's recollection of the event, the manager threatened to call the riot squad, but Hamlin created another, less confrontational situation. Hamlin told the manager, "Wait, wait, wait. If this is a day for women, why don't we look at one option: why don't you tell them to elect two people to come in and talk to me? And I will put them on the stage with me and I'll find out what this is about. And give them full voice and hear and try to answer or discuss at least. . . . Just give us a chance."¹¹⁰ The women came en masse and sat on and surrounded the stage for a while but ultimately chose a few women for Hamlin to interview.

The exchange that ensued was televised live as an impromptu addition to the scheduled panel discussion. The liveness of the broadcast and the feminist ethos of inclusivity and open exchange of ideas afforded at-home viewers vigorous debate among feminists and complex and conflicting perspectives within the movement.



FIGURE 22. Feminist protesters interrupt the broadcast and fair of *Yes, We Can* before being invited to join the program. (Photo by Jack Connolly/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

The protesters objected to, among other things, a fashion show segment, which they saw as perpetuating stereotypical notions about women's interests. Hamlin explained that the inspiration for the show came from viewer mail. Women with sewing skills wrote to her expressing their interest in starting their own business. The fashion show featured clothing they made for an audience of local business owners and fashion critics who could help the women to transform their home sewing into a business. Attorney and activist Flo Kennedy, who was one of the guests on the program, responded to the protesters by invoking the notion of "horizontal hostility," a concept that feminist historian Rebecca J. Sheehan describes as "violence enacted by one oppressed group against another, an effect of a system that divides and conquers groups who might otherwise be allied."¹¹¹ Kennedy suggested that the protesters empathize with the burgeoning awareness of some women and consider the chilling impact of the protest on other potential feminists attending the event and watching at home. Hamlin recalls a productive outcome to the exchange: "And of course we went into a large discussion after that, the essence of which was to recognize where women really are, and recognize, if you are ahead of them, open doors, show them how, be a helper not a fighter. And it was enormously successful."¹¹²

Invited participants also offered critical assessments about *Yes, We Can*, particularly about its awareness of racism. Sarah-Ann Shaw of WBZ's *Eyewitness*

News, and the first Black woman hired as a television news reporter on Boston television, hosted a panel to discuss the relationship between Black women and feminism. The panel, which included guests Miss Black America, Arniece Russell; Dr. Dorothy Hyde of the National Council of Negro Women; and Kennedy, quickly turned to an appraisal of the day. When Russell voiced concerns about the exhibitions and the "standpoint" they represented, Shaw asked her, "What would be of more interest. Say if you were planning a fair like this. What kinds of things would you include?"

Shaw's solicitation of feedback and critique provided an opportunity for the panel to debate how Black feminist perspectives were and could have been included in *Yes, We Can*. Both Russell and Hyde spoke about the interconnectedness of racism and sexism and cautioned against universalizing women's experiences and needs. Russell pointed out that something as generalized as childcare, a major concern of the fair, was also a racially specific experience. Hyde framed the moment as an "opportunity for white women, women of all races to be concerned with racial discrimination." She also called attention to the achievements of the day by acknowledging the government's changing stance on women's issues and noted that the Commission seemed to "take seriously those problems." Kennedy weighed in positively, if not pragmatically, on the progress the day made toward Black feminist consciousness. "It's true that there may be a basis for criticism of this event in terms of its lack of sensitivity to Black people," she acknowledged, but went on to point out the presence of Black businesswomen and "at least three booths that deal with racism as well as sexism" at the fair. Kennedy went on to voice her stance on critiquing other women, saying, "I always think before I criticize my friends I want to confront my enemies."

Of all the panelists, Kennedy focused most clearly on *Yes, We Can* as a television event. The significance of the day, to Kennedy, could best be understood within the broader cultural and economic context of commercial television. While acknowledging the value of criticizing the production, Kennedy tempered wholesale dismissal of WBZ's efforts with its relative progressiveness in comparison to television's typical endeavors. Producing an all-day event for women and undergoing "all the necessary preparation for doing what they never do except for frivolous concerns like sports or some octogenarian's funeral or the astronauts or something that's totally irrelevant to all oppressed people" was laudable. Unlike the "total waste of money" spent on large-scale spectacles, *Yes, We Can*, to Kennedy, seemed "such a large step away from that tendency to ignore women and Black people" that she pronounced that she was "delighted" by television production.

The producers of *Yes, We Can* understood that the contributions the program could make to the state of television were as much about women's roles in making the show as about its content. In a December 31, 1973, press release, executive producer Stephanie Meagher foregrounded the labor and skills that women—including television professionals, activists, business owners, and community

members—brought to the planning and execution of the fair and television program. Meagher claimed the event as a victory for women as a collective labor force: "For one thing, a myth has been put to rest . . . the myth that women can't work together. The dedication and selflessness, the level of professionalism and creativity, displayed not only by the women at WBZ-TV and the women on the Governor's commission on the Status of Women, but also by the women representing the various sponsors of our booths has made our theme even more meaningful."¹¹³

However ideal the notion of disparate groups of women working together to create *Yes, We Can* was, it was also potentially exploitative. Feminist critic and journalist Janet Stone wrote to WBZ to voice a complaint along these lines. In her letter, Stone established her multiple credentials as a lesbian feminist with memberships in NOW, the Women's Equity Action League, and the Daughters of Bilitis, and as a working journalist and consultant for fair employment practices for racial minorities and women. Stone also self-identified as a "private citizen and viewer."¹¹⁴ By calling attention to these identities, Stone asserted the authority of her feedback to WBZ in several ways: as a part of the public to whom the station was responsible, as a political activist well versed in media reform tactics of the groups to which she belonged, and as an industry worker who understood the labor logistics of media productions and the need for worker protections.

Stone cautioned that television should not expect women to continue to offer their labor, energies, and creativity for free, as they had done for *Yes, We Can*, particularly when a production was a commercial enterprise. Stone's critique, grounded in a radical feminist perspective on capitalism, argued that women's "volunteerism" was something that should be utilized only for "the political arena"; otherwise it was "antithetical to the aims of the women's movement." Stone asserted that "women, who are at the bottom of the economic ladder, are not responsible for providing free expertise, and/or manual labor for Westinghouse," even if they had done so on this one-time production. For the company to expect otherwise "deprive[d] women of jobs," reduced their volunteer efforts in other service capacities, and "reinforce[d] the myth that women's work isn't worth much."¹¹⁵

Despite her concerns, Stone lauded how *Yes, We Can* involved women behind and in front of the cameras. In her letter to WBZ, Stone commended "the most positive aspects" of the program, which were the "extraordinary talent, time, dedication and high level of professionalism" of the women working on the production. The show's success "prov[ed] that women are fully capable of pulling off a major media coup," and, given this this success, "the experiment should be repeated."¹¹⁶ Stone's assessment of *Yes, We Can*'s strengths aligned with WBZ's hopes for the production. Employing women in extraordinary numbers in the production of *Yes, We Can*, helped the station demonstrate its accountability to women workers and viewers. With "virtually all the women working at WBZ-TV" coordinating to produce the special, WBZ hoped that their valuation of women would translate in public relations.¹¹⁷ Program manager Paul Coss

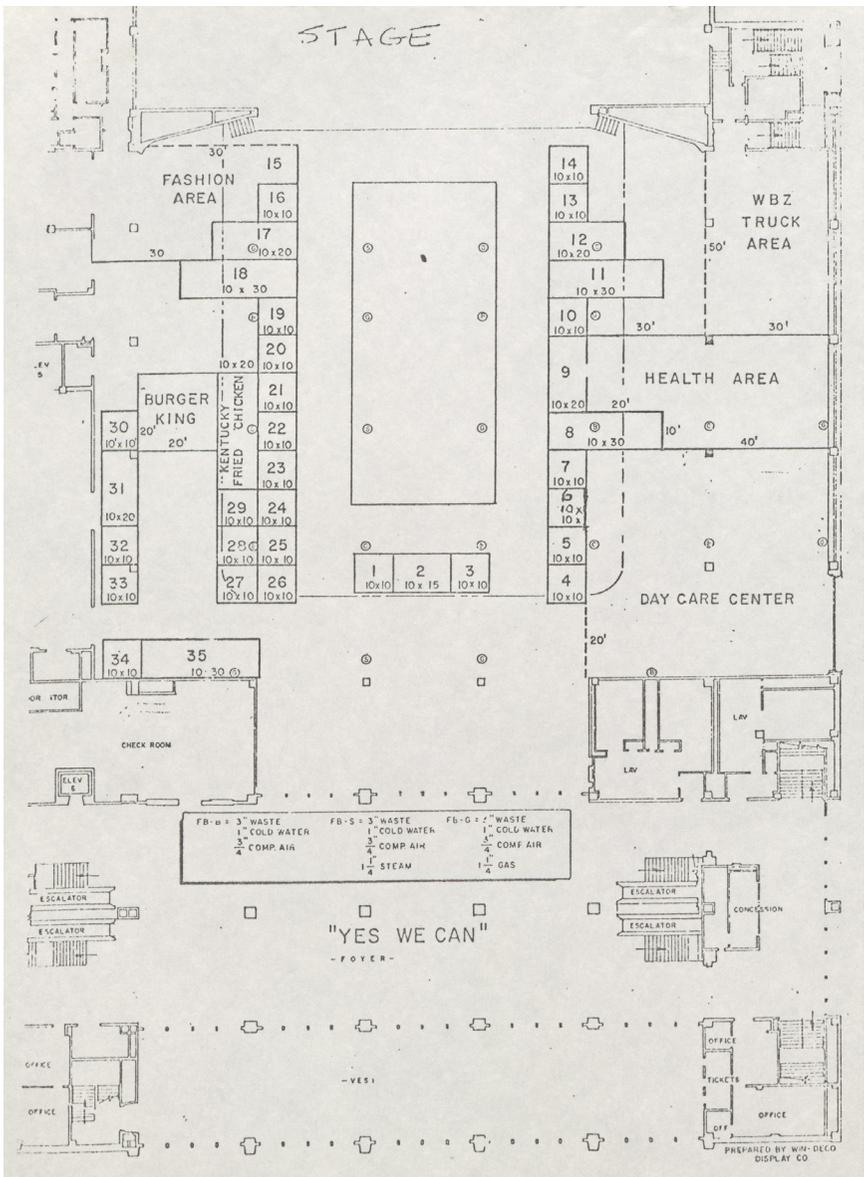


FIGURE 23. The floor plan for Yes, We Can fair and television production includes the main stage, areas for health and fashion, and free childcare facilities available to fair attendees. (Schlesinger Library 77-M13—96-M48)

boasted, "There will be no doubt at the completion of this complex programming commitment that WBZ-TV is intimately and significantly concerned with the role of women in contemporary society."¹¹⁸

While WBZ used *Yes, We Can* as a public relations tool, feminists seized upon its promotional value to advocate for further progress for women at the station. Instead of using the widely touted number of women working on the production to sing WBZ's praises, as Coss did, feminists used the event to leverage equal employment and promotion of women. Feminist critics and activists asserted that this one-time event should demonstrate to WBZ that, in Janet Stone's words, "women in non-professional capacities at the station have abilities that have been underutilized in day-to-day operations."¹¹⁹ They converted WBZ's self-promoting, positive assessment of *Yes, We Can* to proof of women's underemployment in the television industry as a result of the industry's sexism rather than a reflection of women's talent.

In their annual report, the Governor's Commission on Women judged *Yes, We Can* and the Women's Fair to be unevenly successful. Citing strong turnout to the fair as a clear positive, Commission members still felt that they had failed to "reach all the people that we wanted to—people with the real needs for day care services, part-time jobs, better health care and credit."¹²⁰ Yet some of the day's shortcomings, ironically, were due to the tremendous interest women had in fair. Women overwhelmed the fair, and Sonya Hamlin remembers that the mayor of Boston had to come on the air at noon to ask that no more women come into Boston because there was no room to park and no more room inside the auditorium. With an estimated sixty thousand women attending the fair, the Commission concluded that "there were very real problems at the fair, none of which we could account for because of the numbers of women attending. In all, it must be judged a success on many counts."¹²¹

Yes, We Can called into question commercial television's programming, funding structure, and relationship to government. Unfortunately, it proved to be an exception rather than a rule in television for women. Although there were plans to recreate and to incorporate the lessons of the broadcast and to produce a series of similar programs across the nation, there are no records of such productions.¹²² This single production did, however, create other outcomes: it introduced viewers to feminist ideas in welcoming and accessible ways, connected women across local organizations and government bodies, created a community of female media makers, and furthered women's careers in television.

THE FEMINIST LEGACIES OF THE "SERIOUS SISTERS"

Although each of the programs discussed in this chapter ended before their production staff and viewers wished them to, they bore lasting effects. Workers involved in the programs found communities of like-minded women trained in media production. They learned lessons about the pitfalls of public and regional television leadership, funding, and infrastructure. They experienced a different

way of creating television that redefined their labor and their relationship to it. They successfully oversaw lean budgets and challenging logistical conditions. Creating television's "serious sisters" was stressful, underfunded, and largely unsustainable, but it furthered women's abilities to progress in the industry.

As they worked on *Yes, We Can*, women realized just how many of them were skilled in media production and what their potential was if they pooled talent and resources. After participating in the show's production and on the Governor's Commission on Women, these women "contacted each other and realized [they] had common problems." As a result, they formed the Women Filmmakers Cooperative of Boston. Forty-five members strong, the group worked collectively to acquire filmmaking equipment, share existing production equipment, and organize film festivals to showcase their work. They also applied for grant money to strengthen their resources, including "information, skills, equipment and job information," and sought control of media-making at multiple stages, including "distribution, editing, and video."¹²³

Other women who were central to the production of experimental local and public television for women continued working in television into and beyond the late 1970s. Their ongoing careers reflected the feminist practices and ethics they helped establish on those productions. After the end of *Woman Alive!*, Joan Shigekawa continued to work in the public sphere in a number of arts-oriented, philanthropic organizations, most notably as the deputy chair of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2009 to 2012 and as its acting chair from 2012 to 2014. Flo Kennedy, who was a frequent guest on local programs like *For Women Today* and a panelist on *Yes, We Can*, went on to host a cable access show, *The Flo Kennedy Show*, from 1978 to 1995, which covered activist concerns ranging from apartheid to affordable housing to LGBT organizations and movements. After leaving WBZ in 1976, Sonya Hamlin helped train hundreds of speakers to travel throughout Massachusetts to raise public awareness of the Equal Rights Amendment. Patricia Mitchell identifies her role as a host for *Yes, We Can* and women's involvement in the production of the program as a turning point in her career and her feminist outlook on television. After realizing the "transformative" nature of television, Mitchell "became committed to using every media platform [she] could access to tell stories with impact," with a focus on women's stories.¹²⁴ "Frustrated with the limitations of network programs at the time," Mitchell went on to found her own production company that would enable her to control stories made for women, which manifested in her Emmy Award-winning syndicated daytime talk program *Woman to Woman* (1983–85).¹²⁵ In 2000, Mitchell strengthened her commitment to television outside network programming when she became the first woman president and CEO of PBS.

Women's interventions in local and public television in the 1970s led to communal work with other women, public service outreach, and control over media

production. The legacy of television's "serious sisters," then, suggests that the impact of feminism on television exceeds a single, often short-lived, production. In addition to the innovative content it provided women viewers, these productions proved a feminist training ground for women who would go on to influence broader and longer-reaching realms of television the institutions that support them, and the culture that surrounds them.