

SISTERS OF '77 Lesson Plan

Women's Issues Then and Now

pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77

Grade Levels: 9-12

Estimated time: Three class periods

Introduction:

The National Women's Conference of 1977 attracted 20,000 women and men to discuss and set an agenda for specific women's issues. The majority of conference attendees expressed support for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which had been written in 1923 and which would have provided constitutional protection against gender discrimination.

Many of the issues that were important in 1977 remain significant today. In this lesson, students will learn about the ERA and about some of the many issues discussed at the conference. They will investigate important women's issues of the present time and compare those issues to the ones that women fought for in the 1970s. They will conclude by writing brief essays about one contemporary women's issue.

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Read and discuss the text of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).
- Read additional background information about the ERA and answer questions about what they read.
- Watch and discuss excerpts from SISTERS OF '77 describing pro- and anti-ERA sentiments and some specific issues that women were concerned about at the National Women's Conference.
- Discuss the relevance of issues that were important in 1977 to today's women and men.
- Read about specific issues that the National Organization for Women (NOW) deems important today, and list how these issues might affect women, girls, men and boys today.
- Write essays describing a particular women's issue.

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Materials Needed:

- Computers with Internet access
- TV and VCR
- SISTERS OF '77 video

Standards (from <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>):

National Civics Standards:

Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics and government

Standard 13. Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity

Standard 18: Understands the role and importance of law in the American constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protection of individual rights

Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals

National United States History Standards:

Standard 29: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States

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Teaching Strategy:

1. Have students read the text of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77/era.html>). Ask if anyone has ever heard of this document, and ask students why they think such a document might have been drafted.
2. Have students read the rest of the ERA background page (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77/era.html>) and answer these questions:
 - When and why did Alice Paul write the ERA?
 - Who was opposed to the ERA, and why?
 - According to former NOW president Eleanor Smeal, how would passage of the ERA have helped women?
3. Show the following excerpts from the SISTERS OF '77 video that feature opposition to the ERA and the National Women's Conference. After students have viewed the excerpts, discuss these questions: "Why were some people opposed to the ERA and the National Women's Conference, and what reasons did they give for their opposition? How did this opposition contribute to the ERA's defeat?"
 - 6:41 – 7:14 (former TV anchor Ron Stone explaining how most of his male audience felt)
 - 7:14 – 7:44 (protest against the Women's Movement)
 - 25:01 – 28:09 (anti-ERA protest with Phyllis Schlafly)
4. Show students the following excerpts from SISTERS OF '77. As you show each excerpt, ask students to list specific issues that were discussed at conference.
 - 4:20–5:16 (overall reasons for holding the conference)
 - 11:47–12:35 (Bella Abzug speech)
 - 15:12–24:27 (resolutions and caucuses)
 - 28:10–37:52 (voting on resolutions)
 - 44:23–45:00 (how things would be different if the ERA had passed)

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5. Discuss the issues mentioned in these video excerpts as a class. What were the specific issues, and why did conference attendees feel they were so important?
6. Discuss whether students think the issues that were of great concern to attendees of the National Women's Conference in 1977 are still relevant and of concern to women today. Which of the 1977 issues do they think would be the most and the least important to modern women? Why do they think so? Do they think that these issues relate to the lives of men? In what ways might men be affected by these issues, and why should men care?
7. Have students go to the National Organization for Women (NOW) Issues page (<http://www.now.org/issues>) to see a list of issues that NOW feels are important to women today. How many of the issues on this list are also on the list students made from watching the video?
8. Divide the class into pairs or groups of three. Ask each group to choose three of the issues on the NOW list.
9. Have groups make charts on their own paper with the column headings "Women and Girls" and "Boys and Men." Ask them to brainstorm the ways in which women and girls would be affected by each of these issues and write their ideas in the left-hand column. Also ask them to think about how the issues would affect boys and men, and have them write their ideas on this question in the right-hand column.
10. Discuss students' charts as a class, and compare them to the issues they've learned were important in 1977. How similar are modern women's issues to those of the 1970s?

Assessment:

Ask each student to choose one of the modern women's issues they've studied. Have them write two- to three-page essays answering the following questions:

- How do you think the "sisters of '77" would have felt about this issue?
- How do you think opponents of the ERA would feel about this issue?
- Why is this issue relevant to today's society?
- How do you feel about this issue, and why?
- How do you think passage of the ERA would affect this issue?

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Extension Ideas:

- As students have read, not everyone supported the ERA, and many women actively protested its passage and the National Women's Conference in general.

For an example of the viewpoints of ERA opponents, have students read "Rejecting Gender-Free Equality, 1977": http://www.wadsworth.com/history_d/special_features/ext/ap/chapter30/30.2.schlafly.html. This is an excerpt from the book *The Power of the Positive Woman* by Phyllis Schlafly, the leader of the anti-ERA movement in 1977 and today. As they read, have students answer these questions, and then discuss their responses as a class.

- Why do you think Schlafly uses the term "Positive Woman?"
- What does she say is the most significant problem with the ERA?
- What adjectives, nouns, and terms does Schlafly use to refer to ERA supporters? Why do you think she uses this language?
- What does Schlafly say about "equal pay for equal work?"

Have students compare the Phyllis Schlafly document to this pro-ERA document: <http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/why.htm>. What reasons does this latter document give in favor of the ERA, and how do these arguments differ from the ones Schlafly makes? How do students feel about these two positions?

- Show the excerpt of the video concerning the numerous issues minority women raised at the National Women's Conference (17:22–25:07). Discuss the reasons that minority issues were controversial at the conference and the pros and cons of the conference addressing all of these issues. What do students think the priorities should have been at this particular conference?
- Remind students of the quote by Betty Friedan, "You look for women to be marching the way they were marching ten, twenty years ago, you won't see it because it's part of society now, and also we're in an era where nobody's marching...young women just take it all for granted" (52:45–53:10). Do students agree with this statement? What do they think it would take to get women and supportive men to march for equal rights today? Can they envision an issue or set of issues that would lead to a major protest or to another National Women's Conference?



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Online Resources

Independent Lens: SISTERS OF '77:

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77/>

National Organization for Women:

<http://www.now.org>

Equal Rights Amendment:

<http://www.equalrightsamendment.org>

Jo Freeman: Feminist Scholar and Author:

<http://jofreeman.com>

(in particular, see <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/IWY1977.html>)

PBS: Not For Ourselves Alone:

<http://www.pbs.org/stantonanthony/>

About the Author

Betsy Hedberg is a teacher and freelance curriculum writer who has published lesson plans on a variety of subjects. She received her secondary teaching credential in social studies from Loyola Marymount University and her master of arts in geography from UCLA. In addition to curriculum writing, she presents seminars and training sessions to help teachers incorporate the Internet into their classrooms.