

Discussion Guide



Sisters of '77

SISTERS OF '77 chronicles an unprecedented moment in the U.S. women's movement: a weekend in November 1977 when 20,000 women and men from around the United States attended the first and only federally funded women's conference in Houston, Texas. The goal of the gathering was to end discrimination against women and further their rights.



Purpose of the Guide

The movement for women's rights has changed the shape of American life. In many ways, we experience this change through the filter of our age and experience. Some remember when women won the right to higher education (1972), or the appointment of the first woman to the Supreme Court (Sandra Day O'Connor, 1981) or the election of the first African American woman to the U.S. Senate (Carol Moseley Braun, 1992). Some focus on the successes of the women's movement. Others fear we are now in danger of losing rights women struggled to win.

This guide is designed as a companion to the documentary SISTERS OF '77, a film that invites us to reflect on how far women have come in the United States, acknowledge the work still to be done and become inspired to take action on behalf of women today.

Conversations about the status of women in America will likely differ depending upon the setting and participants. Whatever the setting, this guide will help frame a meaningful conversation about where we have been and where we are going.



Filmmaker Statement

When Allen and I began researching SISTERS OF '77, we saw it as an opportunity to capture an historic event that had taken place 25 years earlier, a time when women came together and thought it possible to make major changes in their status.

In 1977, I became one of the many relay runners who carried a symbolic torch from Seneca Falls, New York, site of America's first women's conference in 1848, to Houston, Texas. Before I started my run, I asked my sister Ann to follow me by car (with two screaming children in tow—my five-year-old and Ann's one-year-old). Ann had never driven a stick shift before. Ann and I—and the car—were never the same.

This was the most amazing conference. I saw First Ladies and mingled with women whose faces I had seen in the paper. There was so much energy. Those present felt we could change the world. And actually, we did.

Women and our society have come a long way. But many people don't know how we got here. We think this film is an important reminder of how exciting and critical it is to get involved in the democratic process. It's a reminder that change takes vision, commitment and hard work.

We hope SISTERS OF '77 will appeal to young people and inspire them. We hope it will re-energize the many women and men who took part in the pursuit of social changes in the 1960s and 1970s.

We have come a long way... and we have a long way to go.

—Cynthia Salzman Mondell

Before Viewing the Film (Suggested Time: 10 minutes)

Welcome the people who have gathered.

Describe the schedule and agenda for the event.

Briefly canvass the room to find out who is gathered and why they have chosen to come. Some questions you might ask include:

- How many have heard of the 1977 National Women's Conference prior to this event?
- How many were born in 1977?
- How many are now active in women's issues?
- How many would like to become more active?

After Viewing the Film

Writing Activity (Suggested Time: 10 minutes)

A writing activity can be an effective way to give participants a chance to clarify their thoughts before discussion begins.

The challenge set before the attendees at the 1977 conference was to define the issues of greatest importance to women in America. Ask those assembled: if a women's conference were to be held this year, what would be the three issues of greatest importance to you? What would you want to fight for?

Post-Viewing Discussion (Suggested Time: 30 minutes)

This guide has been designed to aid discussion on three topics:

The Women's Movement: How Far Have We Come?

Women and Leadership

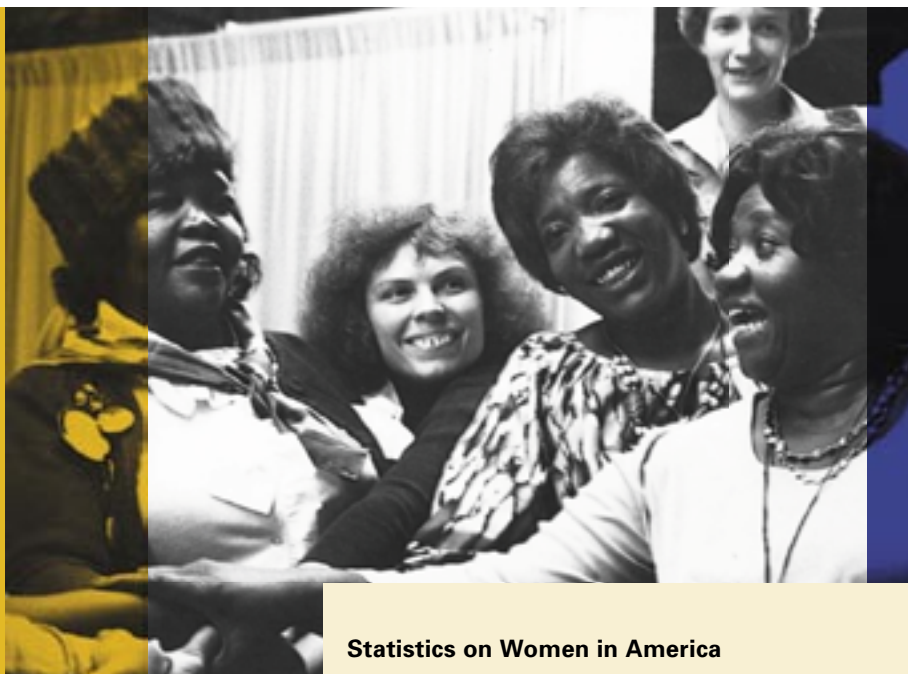
Next Steps: Where Are We Going?

Feel free to use these questions selectively or tailor your questions to your specific group or interests. The sidebars may provide useful context for your discussion.

Group Discussion Questions

The Women's Movement: How Far Have We Come?

- Since 1977, what have been the most significant accomplishments of the U.S. women's movement?
- In what areas of society have women made the greatest strides? In what areas are women most limited?
- In 1977, three of the most heavily debated issues at the conference were reproductive rights, minority issues and lesbian issues. Has there been significant change on these fronts in the past 30 years? What do you consider the most important work that remains undone?
- A 1998 cover of *Time* magazine asked "Is feminism dead?" Do you consider yourself a feminist? If so, why? If not, why not?



"I once thought the women's movement belonged more to my daughter than to me. But I have come to know that it belongs to women of all ages."

—Lady Bird Johnson, former First Lady

Statistics on Women in America

	In 1977	In 2004
Women in Congress	20 (3.7 % of total)	74 (13.8 % of total)
Women in State Legislature	696 (9.2% of total)	1659 (22.4% of total)
Women Holding Corporate Offices of Fortune 500 Companies	Less than 5% of total	12.5% of total
Pay Gap Between Men and Women	58.9 cents for every dollar earned by a man	75.5 cents for every dollar earned by a man

Sources: Center for American Women in Politics, Femmx, Institute for Women's Policy Research

Women and Leadership

- How do you define “leadership”?
- What does it mean to call someone a leader?
- What qualities do you look for in a female leader? Are these qualities the same or different from what you look for in a male leader?
- Who do you consider a great female leader today? In the United States? In the world community?
- What steps might young women take to cultivate leadership skills?
- What steps might women in their 30s and older take to hone leadership skills?
- How can older women help cultivate leadership skills in young women?

“The cause of equal and human rights will reap what is sown.”

— Barbara Jordan,
Former Congresswoman (D-Texas)



Ways for women to cultivate leadership skills

- Investigate national organizations that offer programs and other resources cultivating leadership and networking among women such as Leadership America (www.leadershipamerica.com), Feminist Majority Foundation, Business and Professional Women/USA and Women’s Funding Network.
- Find out about opportunities in your area by contacting the local chapters of the YWCA, League of Women Voters or your local Planned Parenthood affiliate (www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/getinvolved/volunteer/).
- Become active in a student council or a committee at your school or place of worship.
- Join local political and professional organizations, particularly those devoted to women.
- Become more active in an organization you care about: a school, a place of worship, or other nonprofit organization. Seek out a leadership position like a position on the Board of Directors.
- Stay informed about local and national politics. Vote in every election. Contact your Congressional and local representatives about the issues you care about. You can find your Congressional representative by going to www.visi.com/juan/congress/.



Next Steps: Where Are We Going?

- What are major issues and obstacles women face today? (If your group did the writing activity on page 3, you might ask participants to read the statements they wrote).
- If a women's conference were to be held this year, what platforms would be likely to win consensus? What would the "hot" or highly debated issues be?
- Are there rights women gained through the women's movement in jeopardy now?
- Are there specific issues you would like to become more informed about and involved in personally or as a group?

"We in the United States think everything is like a ball game. That you win or lose. Change is not that. It's a process and there are a lot of battles and a lot of skirmishes and you got to just be in there for the long haul."

—Eleanor Smeal,
Feminist Majority Foundation

Current Women's Issues in the United States (March 2005):

Pay Gap: Women today earn only 75.5 cents for every dollar earned by men.

Business Credit: According to a study by the Center for Women's Business Research, nearly half (47 percent) of African American women business owners report they have had obstacles or difficulties when trying to obtain business financing in the past.

Contraception: Many private health insurance plans do not cover contraceptives. The U.S. government has not made a ruling on nonprescription sales of the "morning-after pill."

Women's Health: The Prevention First Act, a new Senate bill, would help expand access to family planning services, sex education and emergency contraception (especially for sexual assault survivors) in an effort to reduce teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and the need for abortion among women of all ages. Learn more at www.populationconnection.org/Action_Alerts/alert448.html.



Classroom and Community Activities

Select an Issue/Get Involved

One of the most challenging tasks that women faced at the conference in 1977 was defining the issues. Invite your group to define the most important issue to them today. Suggested steps include:

- Brainstorm. Take down all suggested issues on a chalkboard or butcher-block paper.
- Divide into groups of four to eight people. Give each group the task of identifying the one or two issues of greatest importance to them.
- Reconvene. Compile the list of top issues from each group.
- Vote. Give each person in attendance the chance to vote for just one issue. The vote will reveal the top issue for your group.
- Create an action team. Recruit volunteers to research how your group can get involved on this issue. You might start by investigating the websites of the partners listed on page 8 in this guide.

Find a Mentor

One of the largest aspects of the conference was the chance for people to meet and hear the views of female leaders. Identify a woman in your community who is a champion for women's rights—perhaps an activist, a city council member, a union leader or a businesswoman—and invite her to speak to your group or school.

Resources

National Partners:

AFL-CIO

www.aflcio.org

(202) 637-5000

The AFL-CIO's mission is to bring social and economic justice to our nation by enabling working people to have a voice on the job, in government, in a changing global economy and in their communities. The AFL-CIO has 58 affiliate unions and represents 13 million working women and men in the U.S.

The Association for Women in Communications

www.womcom.org

(410) 544-7442

The Association for Women in Communications is a professional organization that champions the advancement of women across all communications disciplines by recognizing excellence, promoting leadership and positioning its members at the forefront of the evolving communications era.

Business and Professional Women/USA

www.bpwusa.org

(202) 293-1100

Business and Professional Women/USA, founded in 1919, promotes equity for women in the workplace through advocacy, education and information. With 1,300 local organizations across the country, BPW/USA is the leading advocate for millions of working women on work-life balance and workplace equity issues. 700 BPW/USA members attended the 1977 IWY National Conference in Houston.

Feminist Majority Foundation

www.feminist.org

(703) 522-2214

The Feminist Majority Foundation is a cutting edge organization dedicated to women's equality, reproductive health and non-violence.

Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America

www.hadassah.org

(800) 664-5646

Founded in 1912, Hadassah is the largest women's and largest Jewish organization in the United States. In Israel, it supports pacesetting medical care and research, education and youth programs, and reforestation and parks projects. In the U.S., Hadassah promotes health education, social action and advocacy, volunteerism, Jewish education and research.

Lambda Legal

www.lambdalegal.org

(212) 809-8585

Lambda Legal is the oldest and largest legal organization in the nation dedicated to the full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those with HIV. Through impact litigation, education and public policy work on behalf of LGBT people and those with HIV, Lambda Legal is helping to create a truly diverse and accepting society where everyone can live freely, equally and with dignity.

Leadership America**www.leadershipamerica.com****(214) 397-0900**

Leadership America is the nation's longest running leadership program for executive women. Through contacts with national leaders operating at the forefront of America's political, social and economic arenas, participants are able to interact and develop a deepened understanding of how the leading issues of the day impact their respective organizations, communities and lives.

National Council of Women's Organizations**www.womensorganizations.org****(202) 293-4505**

The National Council of Women's Organizations is a nonpartisan, nonprofit umbrella organization of more than 200 groups that collaborate through substantive policy work and grass roots activism to address issues of concern to women, including workplace and economic equity, education and job training, affirmative action, Social Security, child care, reproductive freedom, health, and global progress for women's equality.

National Women's Studies Association**www.nwsa.org****(301) 403-0525**

The National Women's Studies Association supports and promotes feminist teaching, research and professional and community service at the pre-K through post-secondary levels.

Planned Parenthood Federation of America**www.ppfa.org****(800) 230-PLAN**

Planned Parenthood Federation of America is the nation's largest and most trusted voluntary reproductive health organization, and believes that everyone has the right to choose whether to have a child, and that every child should be wanted and loved. Planned Parenthood affiliates operate nearly 850 health centers nationwide, providing medical services and sexuality education for millions of women, men, and teenagers.

Women's Funding Network**www.wfnet.org****(415) 441-0706**

Founded in 1985, the Women's Funding Network (WFN) is a growing international association of over 100 women's and girls' funds and philanthropic organizations that are committed to improving the status of women and girls by changing the society in which we live. The Network aims to bring the vision of equity for all women and girls to reality.

The Women's Museum: An Institute for the Future**www.thewomensmuseum.org****(214) 915-0860**

A Smithsonian affiliate, The Women's Museum: An Institute for the Future makes visible the unique, textured, and diverse stories of American women. Using the latest technology and interactive media, the Museum's exhibits and programs expand our understanding of women's participation in shaping our nation's history and create a lively environment for dialogue and discovery.

The 1977 Plan of Action

The primary work of the conference delegates in 1977 was to vote on a National Plan of Action, a 26-plank program presented as a series of recommendations to the president and the government of the United States.

Plank: Key Recommendations

Arts and Humanities: Provide equal opportunities for women as managers in key federal posts and as grant recipients

Battered Women: Create a national clearinghouse to support local organizations working towards prevention and increase public awareness through the media

Business: Increase government contracts to women-owned businesses (less than one percent in 1977)

Child Abuse: Fund prevention and treatment; support protective services on a 24-hour basis

Child Care: Support low-cost, high-quality care

Credit: Enforce Federal Equal Credit Opportunity Act and ensure that women are no longer denied credit on the basis of sex

Disabled Women: Prevent discrimination; support equal access to education, training, employment and right to keep children

Education: Increase women in positions of leadership (two percent of high school principals were women in 1975); increase references to women in textbooks; enforce Title IX; expand bilingual vocational training

Elective and Appointive Office: Increase representation of women

Employment: Increase opportunity; eliminate discrimination

Equal Rights Amendment: Ratify this amendment to the Constitution, which would guarantee that equality of rights cannot be denied on the basis of sex

Health: Create a national health security program; expand health insurance benefits to include family planning and other issues of concern to women

Homemakers: Cover homemakers under social security; provide greater economic security for homemakers especially in the event of divorce or death of spouse

Insurance: Prevent practices that deny women coverage on the basis of sex

International Affairs: Increase representation of women in departments of state and defense; aid women in developing nations; promote nuclear disarmament

Media: Employ women in all job categories especially leadership; prohibit employment discrimination against women working in mass media

Minority Women: Eliminate discrimination; guarantee tribal rights, support affirmative action; prevent deportation of mothers of American-born children

Offenders: Improve health services, educational and vocational training

Older Women: Help older women live with dignity and security

Rape: Expand definition of rape to include married men who abuse their wives; reduce legal burdens on victims

Reproductive Freedom: Support the Roe v. Wade decision; allow Medicaid payments for abortion; promote family planning

Rural Women: Create a federal rural education policy to meet needs of rural America; support ownership rights for farm wives

Sexual Preference: Support legislation to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual preference; repeal state laws restricting private sexual behavior between consenting adults

Statistics: Ensure that federal agencies collect and analyze data in ways that assess impact on women; eliminate undercounts of minority women in U.S. Census

Women, Welfare and Poverty: Focus on welfare and poverty as major women's issues; improve social security and retirement systems; raise minimum wage; provide quality childcare

Continuing Committee of the Conference: Establish a committee to follow-up on recommendations and take steps to convene a Second National Women's Conference

Evaluation Form (Suggested Time: 10 Minutes)

We appreciate hearing about your community and classroom activities. In order to better understand how individuals and communities are using our program and outreach resources, please take time to submit an event evaluation form online at www.itvs.org/outreach/events/evaluation.htm.

Acknowledgements and Credits

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SISTERS OF '77 will be broadcast on the acclaimed PBS series *Independent Lens* March 1, 2005 at 10:00 pm (check local listings). Check out the companion website at www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77.

To purchase a copy of the film, contact Media Projects, Inc. at 214/826-3863; visit www.mediaprojects.org. or contact mail@mediaprojects.org.

To download FREE outreach and educational materials for this film, go to www.itvs.org/outreach/sistersof77. For more information about ITVS's Community Connections Project, go to www.itvs.org/outreach or contact outreach@itvs.org.

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