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Maine Women's Changing Roles

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I wish to begin by describing some of the circumstances girls and women in Maine – and the nation – generally faced in 1960.

1960: Limited Options

Girls born in 1960 were wrapped in pink blankets. As they grew older, they were given dolls and easy-bake ovens to play with; usually, they were warned against running, jumping, climbing trees, and other varieties of rough-and-tumble play. For, if they did, they might get their dresses dirty. Girls in those days did not wear pants to school, to church, downtown, or many other places. Skirts fell to the knee or below. Physical play was considered unseemly, not part of the repertoire of appropriate behavior for young ladies, no matter what their class or background. The books from which they learned to read had Dick running, jumping, and otherwise doing things, while Jane and Sally watched.

A young woman in high school in 1960 was far more likely than her brother to be taught typing, shorthand, and other secretarial skills. She took classes in home economics and sewing, while he took shop; there was no possibility of crossing the gender line. While she would have been told in many different ways that it was her responsibility to save herself for marriage – with her "self" equated with her virginity – our young woman might well find herself facing pressure from her boyfriend to have sex (that is, to "go all the way") with him. Doing so would threaten her reputation; "nice girls" were presumed to be asexual, and told that it was their responsibility to curb male lust. If she did relent in spite of the risk to her reputation, she would find getting access to birth control difficult, unless the man were willing to ask the pharmacist for condoms. Few young men were so brave.

While the birth control pill was introduced in 1960, few doctors were willing to prescribe it for unmarried women, and few young women were brave enough to ask. In 1960, most doctors in Maine and the nation were men. Whether our young woman was married or not, should she find herself pregnant, obtaining an abortion would prove virtually impossible – unless she were very lucky, well-connected, *and* had access to a sizable amount of ready cash, because abortion was illegal except to save the woman's life. Even if she were able to find someone to perform one, it was usually a humiliating experience – and not necessarily safe. Unmarried women who were unwilling or unable to arrange abortions might find themselves suddenly at the altar or shuttled off to a home for unwed mothers, where they were likely to be pressured to give up the child for adoption, often without ever seeing it.

In 1960, women who were not heterosexual would have difficulty even finding a name for what they were, and just as much difficulty finding others like themselves. For a woman to reject marriage and motherhood was almost unthinkable; to be a lesbian meant rejecting both, and often brought stigma and shame..

When it came time for our young woman to look for a job, she would find the columns in the newspaper headed “Help Wanted – Male” and “Help Wanted – Female.” She would have known better than to apply for a job in the former category. Under Help Wanted – Female, she would find listings for jobs as a secretary, as a clerk in a store, as a hairdresser, at the telephone company, and in light industry. Nearly all would be in sales or service; few would pay well; few would offer much in the way of benefits; few would offer significant mobility. Hardly any of the jobs she might get was unionized; and even if she were a union member, the union was not likely to address women’s workplace concerns.

If she went to college, she might aspire to a job as a teacher or a social worker; if she did not go to college, she might become a nurse. In 1960, few young women were admitted to law or medical schools, few studied science, fewer still engineering. Whatever job she did get would pay wages that were significantly less than those paid for the jobs in the Help Wanted – Male columns. She might or might not work full-time, be given benefits like health insurance, accumulate a pension; if she did, she would not be encouraged to take her job seriously enough to consider it a career.

Women who became pregnant, married or not, were likely to face discrimination in the workplace. They were treated paternalistically by their doctors, who did not consider them capable of making decisions about their bodies. Women gave birth in hospitals with only medical staff present, while fathers paced in waiting rooms and older children remained at home. Women were discouraged from nursing their babies and those who did would never have dreamed of doing so in public. Few if any public rest rooms had changing tables. There were few child care centers and no financial support or tax credits for women who used them. Raising children was widely understood to be a mother’s responsibility, with little assistance from the father or anyone else.

A working woman with children in 1960 was likely to be in the same kinds of jobs as the young woman just starting out, and not likely to earn very much more money. The numbers vary a bit, depending on who is doing the counting; but the best estimates suggest that even when she worked year round and full time, she earned 59 cents for every dollar that men earned, mostly due to the kind of job she had and her lower level of education. Working year-round and full-time was extraordinarily difficult for her. It meant scrambling to find some kind of child care for her children. It meant doing a second day’s work – housework – when she finished her work for wages. In 1960, men generally did not do much cooking or cleaning or grocery shopping or laundry or taking care of children. Working outside her home meant dealing with social pressures that told her she was not a good wife, not a good mother, that she was neglecting her home and her family.

A woman who did not have a husband was likely to experience some combination of pity and blame, as well as significant economic hardship. Women with children who could not make ends meet might qualify for welfare. Receiving welfare was usually a humiliating experience. Men could not be present in the household, which meant that women’s sexual activities were open to scrutiny by case workers, as were their abilities as mothers. Welfare did not pay enough for women and their children to live with any margin of safety, never mind a degree of comfort. Welfare payments came at the cost of stigma and shame, usually delivered by the very individuals who administered it, as well as by the larger culture.

Women who could not attract and keep a husband – and a husband able to support them – were widely perceived as inadequately feminine, as having something wrong with them. Even if a woman did not need welfare, to be divorced – no matter what the circumstances that led to it –

was to be suspect. Jokes about divorcees – like jokes about old maids, about mothers-in-law, about grasping career women, and about desperate singles – were heard everywhere.

All women, no matter what their age or marital status or their income, found getting loans or credit in their own names difficult, if not impossible. As a result, women often could not get loans to start small businesses, mortgages to buy their own homes, or even credit cards separate from their husbands. Women rarely had life insurance, either as a benefit of employment or on their own.

A woman of retirement age in 1960 was far less likely than the men in her neighborhood to have a pension of her own. If she had been married, she would have access to Social Security through her husband. Few women earned enough during their working lives to live decently off their own Social Security and few could accumulate significant savings of their own. Older women were invisible in the culture; hardly anyone paid attention to their needs, tried to sell them anything, or portrayed them in movies.

Women of any age who were raped first had to convince the police that a crime had occurred – that they had not been "asking for it." In 1960, most police in Maine and the nation were men; so were most lawyers and judges. A woman who was raped would be asked about her previous sexual experiences, by the police and in court. Few rape cases were brought to trial even if there were a witness, which many considered necessary to get a conviction. Should a rape case go to trial, the woman's sexual history was fair game for defense attorneys intent upon discrediting her story, as was her clothing. Judges did not think it necessary to instruct juries to disregard such testimony. In 1960, a husband could not be accused of raping his wife, because marital rape was not a crime. Nor was sexual harassment, at school or in the workplace, a crime; in fact, there was not yet even a term to describe it, nor was it a violation of civil employment laws.

Domestic violence was also not understood as a crime. Women who called the police for protection were most likely to find their complaints not taken seriously and the police siding with the men involved, both assuming that these women "were asking for it" – that they deserved what they got. The police did not consider domestic violence a serious problem, nor did they believe that what happened within families was their responsibility; to consider it so would be interfering. As in cases of rape, should a case of domestic assault be brought to court, the woman's behavior was open to scrutiny, with few restraints by judges either in allowing testimony or instructing juries. There were no domestic violence shelters in 1960, no rape crisis centers. Women who called on doctors (remember, doctors were men) or on clergy (also men) fared no better than women who called the police.

Of course, there were exceptions to this portrait of women in Maine in 1960. Throughout the state, some women defied the odds, did not conform, forged their own paths. Luck and determination had something to do with their success; so, often, did family support and money. Still, the women who in 1960 worked as doctors or lawyers, scientists or politicians, journalists or professors did so *despite* the dictates of their society, not with its blessing. Many of Maine's young women who aspired to these careers found that they had to leave the state for the opportunity – and anonymity – of Boston, New York, and beyond.

A Long, Hard Struggle for Autonomy

Clearly, many things have changed between 1960 and today even while some things have not. This picture of women's lives in 1960 certainly feels unfamiliar to us today. Before turning to Maine women's lives and roles today, I will spend some time exploring how we got from there to here. Part of the reason that the experiences of women 40 years ago seems so different from our lives today is, simply, that *women here and in the rest of the nation worked very hard and long to create these changes*, in an amorphous and complex set of activities collectively called the women's liberation movement at the time, and now more commonly referred to as "feminism."

Historians of women generally date the beginning of the modern feminist movement to the social change movements of the 1960s. That is certainly justified, although Maine (like the nation) has, in fact, a long tradition of activist women. This dates back at least to the mid-19th century, when women in the state became active in the abolitionist movement to end slavery and in other reform movements. Later, they worked together to support the Union effort in the Civil War. During the war and after it was over, a few traveled South to nurse the sick or teach the freed slaves.

Still later, Maine women joined together in a host of organizations dedicated to improving their own lives and those of their families and communities, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Maine and General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Maine and National American Women's Suffrage Associations. They campaigned for public health reform, worked for child welfare, became environmental activists. Their effort to convince male voters to extend suffrage to them was defeated in 1917. When they were granted the right to vote in 1920, however, they set to work to educate themselves politically. Today, Maine women share with men one of the highest voter participation rates in the nation. These voters have a long tradition of electing women to local, state, and national office, including Margaret Chase Smith and our two current United States Senators.

Maine women's tradition of activism extended to the economic realm as well, although perhaps as much by necessity as by choice. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, women did what was necessary to help their families survive. Sometimes this meant harnessing traditional Maine values of thrift ("use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without"), by growing and preserving food, or by sewing, knitting, and recycling clothing, for example. Sometimes it meant taking jobs in the seasonal or part-time economy, such as canning, making Christmas wreaths, or serving summer tourists. For generations of mostly young women, it meant working in the textile mills in Lewiston, Biddeford, and Westbrook; many of them were the daughters of French Canadian families. This work was often dangerous, offered little mobility, and was poorly paid.

Maine's traditional industries of fishing, lumbering, and paper making offered relatively few opportunities for women to gain the full-time, year-round, well-paying jobs that men had access to, although the wives and daughters of these men appreciated the stability and comforts these jobs could provide, despite their dangers. Maine women have long been more or less willing participants in the economy, if only to make ends meet, although the importance of their participation has scarcely been recognized.

Despite these generations of activism and economic participation by Maine women, their lives in 1960 remained circumscribed. Historians generally attribute more fundamental social change in the modern era to three concurrent and more or less interrelated movements: the civil rights movement, the New Left, and the counterculture. We credit the civil rights movement with creating an understanding and a vocabulary of oppression, helping even white women to understand that doctrines of fairness and equality of opportunity might be applied not just to African Americans, whose exclusion was overt, but to themselves, as well. The civil rights movement also offered women experience in organizing, which they would later apply to organizing themselves; and a vision of what was called the "beloved community," in which people theoretically worked together as equals, sharing the hardships and the excitements of day-to-day struggle. We credit the New Left, that conglomeration of anti-Vietnam War and social-change groups, with continuing the analysis of oppression and opening opportunities for women to develop the skills of grass-roots community organizing.

Men in both movements, however, relegated women to making coffee and running mimeograph machines most of the time. Women rarely were listened to when it came time to make policy and were denied the opportunity to make speeches. Women were often expected to be sexually available to male leaders and were castigated as "uptight" if they refused. At about the same time, the counterculture offered women encouragement to reject the morals and mores of middle class society, allowing them to "tune in, turn on, drop out" along with men. Here, too, however, women were expected to be sexually available to men, as well as to make the coffee.

The introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 contributed to what was at the time called "the sexual revolution," which simultaneously encouraged women to explore their own sexual pleasure, often outside of marriage or monogamy, and increased the pressure on them to be sexually available to men. All three movements encouraged women to view their lives in new ways: as being restricted by the limits placed on their self-definition and autonomy, as well as on their opportunity. Together, they inspired women to think about their own needs, their own circumstances – and to come together to change what they did not like about those circumstances – in the movement we now know as feminism.

In Maine, women came together in a number of different ways. Thirty years ago in Bangor, for example, a group of women concerned about domestic violence came together to form Spruce Run, the third-oldest domestic violence project in the nation. Spruce Run was founded not by professionals, social workers, or legal experts determined to help women out of their professional expertise; but by ordinary women, some of whose personal experiences with domestic violence and efforts to escape it helped them to perceive the need. In addition, some of the founders' backgrounds in social justice activities gave them the determination and skills to try to do something about that need.

In the early years, members of Spruce Run offered support and advice to women trying to leave their marriages. They helped women obtain pro se divorces, which did not require the assistance or expense of a lawyer. They set up a hot line that women in abusive situations could call for help, to strategize plans to leave, or just to talk about their options. They worked with the police, training them to respond to calls for aid with tact rather than ridicule, with help rather than neglect. They orchestrated testimony before the legislature, bringing carloads of battered women to describe their experiences, hoping to convince legislators to enact better laws and provide funds to support their work.

They established a shelter to house women and their children in a safe place until they could establish themselves on their own. They trained women, some of whom had themselves been battered, to speak in schools, to community groups, in churches, as well as to the legislature – to anyone who would listen. They worked with women in other parts of the state to establish similar projects, so that no woman would have to travel far for assistance.

In turn, these projects have created a statewide clearing house, now the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, to work together to lobby and raise awareness about domestic violence. Collectively, all of these activities helped save the lives and restore possibility and the spirits of large numbers of women and their children, who otherwise would have had few resources to escape dangerous situations. They also helped the people of Maine to understand domestic violence as a problem, which had not previously been the case, and to develop solutions to ameliorate it.

Spruce Run has helped to shift public understanding of domestic violence away from the situation in 1960, when the subject was rarely discussed in public, and, women had no resources to speak of and were widely assumed to be "asking for it." Today, too many women and children are still battered, too many killed, and resources are still inadequate compared to the need; but there *are* resources and, just as important, understanding of domestic violence as an issue of public concern and not the fault of the individual woman.

Another example of how Maine women have come together to create change is women's health. In 1983, again in Bangor, a group of people connected with the local family planning program became increasingly concerned about the Reagan administration's plans to restrict discussion of abortion in facilities that accepted federal funding; this was known as the "gag rule."

These women recognized that all women's access to legal abortions, made possible by the U.S. Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision, was being seriously undermined by an administration not sympathetic to choice in family planning. They worried about a political climate that might well limit discussion of other issues, especially lesbian health care needs in the early years of AIDS. They wanted, in the words of one of the founders, "a platform to stand on, to talk about health rights for all people" – a way to provide clinical health care services that paid attention to *all* women's needs, without fear of government intervention.

In 1984, the group incorporated as the Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center, with three key goals: to educate women about their bodies and their health; to provide medical services; and to engage in political advocacy for women's health issues. In the early years, they engaged primarily in education, offering talks on lesbian health, on abortion, on menopause, and the like to community groups, colleges, and at day-long conferences. In 1992 they opened a clinic, at first with a paid coordinator and volunteer providers.

The Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center today offers a full range of women's health services, including pre-natal care and abortion. Women from all parts of the state use its services, in part because it is one of the few providers of abortion aside from private doctors. Organized as a private non-profit entity, the Center still does not accept government funding. It continues to work to educate women about their bodies and their health. It continues to advocate, providing an important voice at the state level and beyond, especially for lesbians whose health care needs are too often neglected. Today, it is perceived as a community resource in Bangor, working with physicians, with Eastern Maine Medical Center, with the city council, to provide training for doctors, training in lesbian health care, and reacting to threats to women's health care. It also continues to be a resource for women themselves.

The Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center is the only private, free-standing, non-profit women's health center in Maine, one of fewer than 20 in the nation. Like Spruce Run, it has helped to shift the circumstances of women in Maine from what they were in 1960. Today, not all the doctors are men; women providers of all sorts are available to care for other women. Now, women do not have to summon their courage to address their health concerns, no matter what those concerns might be.

A third organization that has helped to create change for Maine women is the Maine Women's Lobby, based in Augusta. Founded 25 years ago, the Maine Women's Lobby was inspired by the experiences of the state's delegation to the1977 National Women's Conference in Houston. This conference brought activists of all beliefs together, to share ideas and strategies for change, and inspired many participants to renewed efforts to improve the quality of women's lives through attention to difference, coalition building, and a wide range of public policy initiatives.

Looking for ways to implement what they learned, Maine women who had been to Houston focused first on domestic violence. They worked on a bill to fund shelters for battered women and received an array of assurances of support as they guided it through the legislature, only to find that the legislation was killed on the appropriations table after they had gone home. They were told that this had happened because women were not represented as an interest group. As a result, they decided that women needed a full-time lobbyist to monitor legislation affecting them. They raised money, founded a non-profit organization, gathered supporters, and hired a lobbyist for the 1979 legislative session. (I make this and the other work that women did sound easy, but this kind of work is never easy.) In that session, the bill to fund shelters for battered women passed and was funded.

The Maine Women's Lobby worked for many years with the lobbyist as its single paid staff person; it continues today to work to increase social, political, and economic opportunities for Maine women and girls through public policy and leadership development. It focuses on issues in four areas: health care, including reproductive rights; violence prevention; non-discrimination; and economic security. Over the years, it has successfully lobbied not only for funds for domestic violence shelters, but also for legislation to make marital rape a crime (1985 and 87); to create employment and training programs for women on welfare; to ensure implementation of federal Title IX opportunities; and to ensure that women have access to choice regarding abortions.

More recently, it has lobbied for civil rights for gay men and lesbians, to remove derogatory terms for Native American women, and to remove fire arms in certain cases of protection from abuse orders. It focuses on increasing women's economic opportunities and security, including for part-time workers; on jobs creation; and on allowing women family medical leave when necessary.

Increasingly, the Maine Women's Lobby has also focused on women's leadership development, through an internship program for a student at the University of Maine School of Law and through the Girls' Day at the State House program, which each year brings one hundred 7th and 8th graders to Augusta to meet the governor and learn about lawmaking. The Maine Women's Lobby works with other groups to develop strategic partnerships and coalitions to advance the women of the state. The organization has had and continues to have tremendous impact on the lives of women in Maine.

One of the reasons the description of life in 1960 seems so unfamiliar to us today is the work women in these three organizations – three among many – have done to create change. One organization out of the many others in Maine is the Maine Women's Fund. Founded in 1990 as a non-profit corporation, the Maine Women's Fund "supports programs, policies, and practices that empower Maine women and girls." It has awarded $900,000 in grants since 1990, mostly in relatively small amounts. It created a New Girls' Network of women leaders in their 20s and 30s. It works with other groups to help make the state a place where women of all ages can be “full participants in every area of society.” If money makes a difference, the Maine Women’s Fund is helping to enhance opportunity for Maine women by making it available.

These are just a very few of the multitude of women’s organizations in Maine, nearly all of which were created or reinvigorated in the past three decades. Organizations like the YWCA, the League of Women Voters, the National Organization for Women, the American Association of University Women, the Maine Centers for Women, Work & Community, the Maine Lesbian/Gay Political Alliance, Women Unlimited, which trains women to do construction work – a whole host of organizations for girls, for displaced homemakers, for victims of rape, for disabled women, for lesbians, for working women, for working women in specific occupations, for working women in male-dominated trades, for business women – *all these and many more have been forces for change for women of the state.*

Together and separately, they have worked for women’s issues including access to education, to jobs, to health care, to child care, to business opportunity, to rights and opportunities of all sorts. The good will and commitment with which women have approached working on them has been overwhelming; they have had a significant impact on women’s lives in the state, helping to account for the changes from 1960 to today.

Significant Changes in the Policy Realm

Other changes were legislated by the federal or state government, most often because women pushed hard for them, or were the result of decisions by various courts. In 1964 Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, Title VII of which prohibited discrimination in employment for people with a variety of characteristics, and established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce the law.

One of those characteristics was sex (others were race, color, religion, and national origin), which opened the door for women to demand access to jobs and to seek redress if denied. Sex was added as a category at the suggestion of a conservative Virginia congressman, who intended it to discredit the bill and the civil rights assumptions behind it; to his chagrin the bill passed. The law applied in Maine as well as the rest of the nation, offering women access to jobs from which they had previously been excluded, and putting employers on notice that they could not continue to discriminate.

Congress also passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited discrimination in any educational institution that received federal funding. Not only did this force previously all-male schools to open their doors to women, it transformed the nation’s athletics program as well. For the first time, schools and colleges were required to provide equivalent (although not identical) benefits to male and female athletes; as a result, the numbers of women athletes in high schools and colleges in Maine and elsewhere soared, as did the amounts of money available to them in athletic scholarships.

Still other changes to laws affecting women were made at the federal and state level in these decades. During Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency, the executive branch explicitly extended civil rights provisions to women and began issuing guidelines for affirmative action, so that hiring by federal contractors, including universities, would not discriminate against women. Marital rape was defined as a crime; later, in the 1994 Violence Against Women Act, so was rape within cohabiting relationships. This act also recognized that people had “the right to be free from crimes of violence motivated by gender" and established domestic violence and sexual assault as potential violations of the victim's civil rights.

Other changes affecting women's lives were the result of court decisions. The Supreme Court declared unconstitutional laws (found mostly in southern states) that prohibited interracial marriage (Loving v. Virginia) and a Connecticut law that made it illegal for physicians to prescribe birth control, even to married couples (Griswold v. Connecticut.) A lower court prohibited references to sex in employment want-ads. In 1973, the Supreme Court prohibited unequal benefits for male and female members of the armed services (Frontiero v. Richardson); in the same year, it struck down laws prohibiting abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy (Roe v. Wade.) In 1975, the Court declared that women had to be automatically included in jury pools (Taylor v. Louisiana), overturning a 1961 decision that had accepted a Florida law requiring them actively to put their names onto jury lists. Together, these cases and others like them ensured that women would have more freedom in their daily lives and greater opportunity to participate in civic life.

Not all changes proposed in public policy or law in the decades since 1960 have become a reality, most notably, the Equal Rights Amendment. First proposed in Congress in 1923 and regularly reintroduced thereafter, it was again introduced in 1970 and passed by Congress two years later. Although 35 of the necessary 38 states had ratified it by 1978, no additional states joined them and the deadline for passage lapsed. It would have guaranteed that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

In addition, some changes enacted by laws or made possible by court decisions have subsequently been eroded. Nowhere is this more evident than in women's access to abortion, as many states, including Maine, and the federal government have passed restrictions on these rights, restrictions that have been upheld by the courts. Congress has refused to pay for abortions for women receiving Medicaid, even when medically necessary and in cases of rape or incest. The Supreme Court, in the 1989 Webster decision, said that states could prevent public funds and facilities from being used for abortions; it has also upheld waiting periods and parental consent laws. Congress recently banned late-term (so-called "partial birth") abortions, even when the woman's life or health is at stake.

The outcome of these restrictions, along with the polarization of public opinion on the subject, has in practical terms limited doctors' willingness to perform abortions and women's access to them. The Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center in Bangor is regularly picketed by anti-abortion protestors. In the spirit of making lemonade out of lemons, it has used this to inspire a fund-raising campaign, asking donors to pledge money for every day the picketers appear.

In spite of the limits of policy change and a changing political climate, the women's movement has had a dramatic impact on the state, as well as on the individuals within it. Sometimes, women who began activist careers as volunteers in social change organizations have moved into paid staff positions within them; others have gone on to positions in state government or other public agencies. Laura Fortman, for example, became the first staff person of the Maine Women's Lobby, and is today Maine's Commissioner of Labor. Other activists became attorneys, state legislators, and public administrators. These women have helped to institutionalize the changing attitudes about women and their place in society that their activism both represented and encouraged.

Assessing the Effects of Change

It remains, however, to assess the impact of these changes, to explore the ways in which women's lives today are similar to and different from those of the women of 1960. To do so, I want first to look at Maine women's lives in the aggregate, and in the process compare them to men and to women in the rest of the nation. Then, I will attempt to put the present into context – not an easy task for an historian, but one in keeping with the spirit of this book.

Maine women have come a long way from 1960, according to most measures of change. Educational opportunities are no longer rigidly gender-based; young women (and men) now take classes in school according to their interests, not their gender. Bowdoin College and Maine Maritime Academy opened their doors to women, and women may now major in forestry at the University of Maine. The curriculum in many respects has been broadened to include the accomplishments of women and Jane and Sally no longer watch Dick do things. Almost all the state's institutions of higher learning offer degrees or programs in women's studies.

Maine women have roughly the same educational accomplishments as the state's men, with roughly equal percentages completing high school and college; women lag behind men only in the percentage holding post-graduate degrees, although the numbers are relatively small for both sexes. Maine women compare favorably to those in the rest of the nation in terms of educational achievement, with more of them completing high school and roughly the same percentages attending and completing college. Even so, in higher education, women are still under-represented as both faculty and students in science and engineering, as they are in programs that teach the traditionally-male skilled trades.

Economic opportunities and earnings tell a more complex story. Women still earn less than men do, even when we compare full-time and year-round workers – although the gap has narrowed from the 59 cents for every dollar that men earned in 1960. In 1995, Maine women still earned just under 69 cents for every dollar that men did, very close to the national figure.[2] The increase is partly because women's educational level is today more similar to men's, and partly because women have been in the workforce for longer periods of time, allowing them to increase their wages. More women than ever before are employed in the better-paying occupations, as well. Sixty-nine cents is certainly better than 59, but women in Maine and the nation still have a long way to go to achieve economic parity with men.

In 1990, Maine women stood 31st in the nation in terms of their median annual earnings. Maine women continue to be over-represented among part-time and seasonal employees, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not, and under-represented in unionized jobs. Seasonal jobs especially revolve around tourism and tend not to offer high wages, although they do offer women more time with their children. More Maine women than ever before own their own businesses, although a slightly smaller percentage of businesses are owned by women in Maine than in the rest of the nation, and the businesses themselves tend to be smaller in scale. The vast majority of these businesses is in services and retail trade.

Although women's overall earnings compared with men's have improved since 1960, women continue to be over-represented in the sales and service sectors of the economy, in jobs referred to as "pink-collar," and under-represented in heavy industry, in forestry, and in production – in blue-collar jobs. They are also under-represented in high-status professional and technical occupations. Women's jobs are less likely than men's to offer what the Institute for Women's Policy Research calls "economic autonomy" – that cluster of factors that offer women "the ability to act independently, exercise choice, and control their lives." Too many Maine women work in jobs that do not pay enough to allow them to cover the costs of a "basic needs budget."

According to Stephanie Seguino, who studied Maine women's economic circumstances and their ability to provide for their families, in 1993 "on average, Maine women earned less than three quarters of the average hourly wage required to meet a basic needs budget."[3] This means that many Maine women and their children live in poverty. Poverty can mean homelessness and hunger, no health care, no dental care, no transportation, and no security. Too many Maine women still do not have health insurance, although that is changing. Too many women do not have access to adequate and affordable child care, one of the key factors that makes their participation in the labor force so problematic. Many women still rely on public assistance, now called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, to help them to make ends meet; but life continues to be a struggle for such women.

Two-parent homes are less the norm today than they were in 1960. In 1990, 59% of Maine households consisted of married couples, with or without children, somewhat more than in the rest of the nation; somewhat fewer Maine families lived in female-headed or single-person households.[4] Not surprisingly, the members of those female-headed households, especially those with children, are more likely to live in poverty than those with men present. Women who do not live with men – whether single by choice, divorced, widowed, or lesbian, as well as those who are raising children on their own – are subject to less social stigma than they were in 1960, although this stigma has not disappeared. Maine's repeated refusal to pass legislation to ensure the civil rights of gay men and lesbians suggests that discrimination has not disappeared, although in many cases it may be less overt than before.

The Glass: Half Empty or Half Full?

We are left to make sense of all of this change. A girl born today is still likely to be wrapped in a pink blanket, although it may also be yellow, green, or blue. Like her brother, she may be dressed in overalls; like him, she will be encouraged to jump, run, and play, without worrying too much about getting dirty. In school, her textbooks show men and women, boys and girls taking active roles in society. She will be more likely than the girl of 1960 to be encouraged to raise her aspirations, to study math and science, to participate in politics. She can be inspired by many women in positions of power and influence, including two senators and many state legislators.

Our young woman today is more likely than the woman of 1960 to be encouraged to go to college, to follow her interests no matter what these might be, to think about developing a career. She has more choices about what that career might be. Even so, she is still not likely to study science or engineering, to gain training in the trades, to go to some kinds of professional schools.

A young woman today may still feel pressure to have sex with her boyfriend, as her mother did in 1960. She is much more likely than her mother, however, to understand herself as a sexual being, and able to make choices about her body. She will not be valued primarily for her virginity, or for her ability to be a good wife and mother, rather than for her self. She is likely to be informed about the consequences of the choices she makes about her body, and able to protect herself against sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancy – although she may not always act on this information.

When she seeks medical care, she may have access to information about contraception and abortion, offered by a provider who may well be a woman. Young women today tend to take this access for granted; they are sometimes surprised to learn that access to abortion was not always legal, is still not always available, and continues to be under threat.

If a woman today is attracted to women, she will be more likely than in the past to name herself lesbian, more likely to find others like herself, less likely to be stigmatized. Her high school may well have a civil rights team to address the discrimination and hate she may experience as a lesbian – or as a member of any other minority group, for that matter. Some Maine cities and towns have passed ordinances extending civil rights protection to gay men and lesbians, and some employers offer domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples. Maine has passed legislation restricting marriage to one man and one woman, however; and the federal Defense of Marriage Act allows a state to refuse to recognize marriages performed in another.

Young women today face pressures that those of 1960 rarely experienced, and they sometimes respond to these pressures in new ways. Messages from the mass media about how to look and behave are more relentless than ever. While the climate in classrooms may be less overtly hostile to young women’s intelligence and aspirations, peer pressure may be worse. The term for date rape did not exist in 1960, but knowing the language today does not protect young women from the experience. Too often, young women today respond to these pressures by developing eating disorders or depression, or by cutting themselves, all of which are sometimes considered to occur in epidemic numbers.

Young women looking for jobs today, no matter how much education they have acquired, may have a difficult time finding one, though not necessarily more difficult than their brothers; the problem today is the economy, not necessarily job discrimination. Sex discrimination in employment is now illegal, and women who think they have been discriminated against can seek redress. Many young women today recognize that they will need to work to support themselves, and possibly their children, for much of their lives. Many recognize that combining work and family remains challenging, sometimes from watching their own mothers struggle to do so. Still, they are committed to finding ways to “have it all,” in spite of the difficulties, where “it” refers to work, marriage, motherhood -- whatever they believe necessary for self-definition and autonomy.

Women in the middle of their work lives today are still likely to be found in pink-collar jobs, in service and sales. They still earn less than men do, even when they work year-round and full-time. Their jobs are less likely than those of men to carry benefits, including health care and pensions. They are still under-represented in the trades, in unionized jobs, and in many professions. Women who do have professional jobs find themselves hitting their heads against the glass ceiling, unable to rise into the highest levels of authority. Even today, women are under-represented at the highest levels of government and business in Maine and the nation.

Women still struggle to combine work and care for children, with the double day. However, women who support themselves and their children without the presence of men are less likely than before to be criticized for their failures or stigmatized by their neighbors. Temporary Aid for Needy Families may not be as demeaning as welfare, but women who depend on it find arranging for nearly every aspect of life difficult: housing, transportation, food, medical care, and clothing.

Those who are married are more likely to negotiate with their husbands about important decisions, once the sole purview of men, including such matters as where to live and what car to buy. They are also more likely to negotiate about sharing housework and child care, although it is difficult to assess the results. Most of the time, women still assume primary responsibility for domestic life.

Women of retirement age today are still less likely than men to have pensions of their own, or sufficient Social Security on which to live comfortably, in part because of their more traditional career trajectories. Elderly women live disproportionately in poverty, even as they live longer than men. They remain largely invisible in society.

Women today who are raped or battered have far more resources available to them than they did in 1960. They are more likely to be taken seriously by the police, some of whom are women. Their rapists and abusers are more likely to be prosecuted and convicted, although women who have been raped still find their sexual behavior and even their clothing subject to public scrutiny. Convicting men accused of rape remains difficult. Women who have been raped can call rape response hotlines and other resources for assistance, however, including support in dealing with hospitals and the police.

Similarly, battered women can now obtain protection from abuse orders, although that does not guarantee their safety, and can seek assistance and shelter in any one of a number of locations throughout the state. Violence against women, in the form of domestic violence and sexual harassment, as well as rape, is now clearly against the law and women have access to both criminal and civil courts for protection and redress.

Women subject to sexual harassment – like those who believe they have been discriminated against in the workplace, in employment, in housing, in education, in credit, or in access – can also call for help, including help from the Maine Human Rights Commission.

Learning from the Past, for the Future

So, we are left to decide whether the glass is half empty or half full. Clearly, a great deal has changed since 1960. Whether enough has changed remains open for discussion, as does the direction of change in recent years. Is the situation for Maine women now getting better or worse? Are our circumstances becoming more like those of 1960 than they once were? As an historian, I am far better equipped to look at the past than to make predictions about the future. Nevertheless, I want to take a stab at some guesses, taking comfort in the fact that only time will tell whether I am right or wrong.

Women in Maine today, particularly young women, have little sense of how much has changed in what historians can only describe as a very short period of time. Even those of us who remember 1960 do not often step back and reflect on how different it is from today. This breeds complacency. *We tend to think, if we think about such things at all, that the rights we enjoy today will always be there – have always been there – without recognizing the dedication, the hard work, and the commitment that made them possible. We do not want to see these rights as vulnerable, as alienable.*

We take for granted that there will be help available if we are raped, battered, harassed, or discriminated against. We prefer to see ourselves as equal to men, in terms of access to education, jobs, credit, housing, benefits. We like to think that Maine and the nation are becoming ever more fair, ever more open; that, as women, we are ever more equal.

This is the side that sees the glass half-full, if not more than half-full. Yet another side warrants attention, one that worries about slippage and loss of hard won rights and opportunities. Here, we need to recognize that some of the most fundamental problems facing women – particularly how to combine work and family life – remain perplexing, that we still fall far short of solutions. Women and their children still too often live in poverty; women still work the double day. Careers and children are hard to attend to simultaneously. Discrimination in every aspect of life still exists, although it is usually far more subtle than ever before, and this makes it more difficult to pinpoint and combat.

The consequences of discrimination remain powerful. Rights that we have taken for granted are today threatened by a federal administration determined to limit women's access to reproductive choice; to define marriage and the social and economic benefits it conveys in strictly heterosexual terms; to support only the most traditional rather than broader definitions of the family. Public policies are being written that define family in ways that impose penalties on women's choice of any but conventional, heterosexual behaviors.

I cannot tell you which view of the present is more convincing; no one can, because we do not yet have a vantage point from which to decide. I will end, however, by making a case for history, for understanding the past as a way of understanding – and changing – the present.

It is only when we have a clear sense of where we have been, where we have come from, and how we arrived here, that we may understand who we are today – as individuals, as a state, and as a nation.

Only when we understand the limits of women's opportunity and autonomy in the past may we treasure what we have available to us today.

Only when we know how hard women have worked, individually and collectively, to change their lives may we appreciate their accomplishments, and value the impact they have had on us and on our society.

Only when we understand the past and the fragility of progress, itself, may we change Maine and make it a better place for girls and women.

When we understand the problems, and the ways in which women have worked to solve them, only then may we build the kind of society in which *all* will be able to thrive.

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Notes

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2. Institute for Women's Policy Research, The Status of Women in Maine: Politics, Economics, Health, Demographics (Portland, ME: Women's Development Institute and the Young Women's Christian Association of Greater Portland, 1996), 11.

3. Stephanie Seguino, Living on the Edge: Women Working and Providing for Families in the Maine Economy, 1979-1993 (Orono, ME: Margaret Chase Smith Center for Public Policy, 1995), x.

4. Status of Women in Maine, op.cit. p.34.