

Sonia Pressman Fuentes

and the foundation of the National Organization for Women



Sonia Pressman Fuentes is a co-founder of the US National Organization for Women (NOW) and was the first woman attorney in the Office of the General Counsel at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Her involvement in feminism can be traced back to 1963 when she testified for the American Civil Liberties Union, Washington, DC, chapter, on behalf of the Equal Pay Act. In 1965, she joined the staff of the EEOC and in

1966 became a co-founder of NOW: an organisation that demonstrates the impact a grassroots movement can have on a government's agenda.

Today, NOW is the largest feminist organisation in the US, with more than 500,000 contributing members and over 500 local and campus affiliates in all 50 states. This profile takes a look at Sonia's introduction to women's rights and how NOW's founding came about.

After the victory of suffrage extension in the US in 1920, many believed the battle for women's rights had been won. It would take a new generation of feminists, whose activity began in the early 1960s, to argue that the Women's Movement must not end with franchise equality. Sonia was a key member of this new generation.

The civil rights movement, which began in 1955, saw a new wave of mass and direct action and grassroots activism that encouraged feminists to become politically vocal once more. In March of 1963 Sonia, as a volunteer attorney for the Washington, DC, chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, testified before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor in favour of the Equal Pay Act, which was subsequently passed, requiring equal pay for equal or substantially equal work.

In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was passed, to become effective in 1965, prohibiting discrimination in all terms and conditions of employment based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin by covered employers, employment agencies and labour unions. Subsequently, discrimination based on physical or mental handicap was also prohibited. This second act provided for the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which was given the authority to process charges of employment discrimination.

In October 1965, three months after it had opened its offices, Sonia joined the EEOC as the first woman attorney in its Office of the General Counsel. Her experience at the EEOC led her to conclude that the agency was failing in its obligation to implement the sex discrimination prohibitions of Title VII.

There were three principal reasons for this. First, most of the employees at the agency had come there to fight discrimination based on race or colour and they did not want the Commission's time and

resources diverted to issues of sex discrimination. Second, the issues involved in cases of sex discrimination were more complicated than those

involved in cases of race or colour. (These were issues such as whether employers

had to hire women for traditionally-male jobs; whether employers could continue

to place classified advertising in sex-segregated advertising columns headed "Help Wanted - Male" and "Help Wanted - Female"; whether employers had to hire pregnant women;

whether employers had to provide equal retirement and pension benefits to men and women; and whether Title VII superseded state protective legislation, which limited the jobs women could hold, the hours they could work and the weight they could lift, and required certain benefits for women, like benches and rest periods.) Third, there had not been a movement for women's rights immediately preceding the passage of Title VII as there had been for rights for African Americans, which would have given the Commission guidance on how to interpret the act.

Sonia's boss, the General Counsel, called her a "sex maniac" because she consistently raised the issue of sex discrimination. Sonia realised that an activist movement was needed to mobilise women nationally and bring about change.

In a meeting with author Betty Friedan, author of the groundbreaking book 'The Feminine Mystique', who had come to the EEOC for research on her next book, Sonia stated that what the US needed was an organisation to fight for women like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) fought for African Americans. It was this conversation, plus other events, that led to the formation of NOW.

In June of 1966, the 3rd National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women was held in Washington, DC.

Frustrated at the failings of the EEOC, some of the delegates wanted to pass resolutions to force the agency to carry out its legal mandates with regard to sex discrimination. They became enraged when they were told that since the Conference was being conducted under the aegis of the Women's Bureau of the US Department of Labor and since one federal agency could not pass resolutions affecting another, they did not have the authority to pass resolutions involving the EEOC.

"State protective legislation limited the hours women could work and the weight that they could lift"

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As a result, at a luncheon at the Conference, Betty Friedan and a small group planned an organisation that subsequently became NOW: an organisation to “to take the actions needed to bring women into the mainstream of American society, now, full equality for women, in fully equal partnership with men.”

Sonia became a founder of NOW that autumn at an organising conference in Washington, DC, where the group met in the basement of the ‘Washington Post’ building to adopt a statement of purpose and bylaws. On 11th November, 1966, representatives of NOW sent a letter to the EEOC commissioners with a list of eight demands, including revision of the EEOC sex-segregated advertising policy, issuance of an EEOC statement prohibiting the airlines’ policies of mandatory retirement of stewardesses on marriage or on reaching the age of 32, and a limit on EEOC appointments to those who “recognize the legal mandate to fight sex discrimination.”

Sonia discusses the issues decided by the Commission in her memoir, ‘Eat First — You Don’t Know What They’ll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter’, available in the UK from www.amazon.co.uk, as follows:

“The Commission ruled that employers could no longer advertise in sex-segregated advertising columns. With narrow exceptions, all jobs had to be open to men and women alike, and members of both sexes were entitled to equality in all terms and conditions of employment. I had the great pleasure and privilege of drafting the lead decision finding that the airlines’ policies towards stewardesses were unlawful.

“The Commission ruled that a woman could not be refused employment or terminated because of the preferences of her employer, coworkers, clients, or customers or because she was pregnant or had children. State laws that restricted women’s employment were superseded by Title VII; those that required benefits for women were equally applicable to men...”

“A little-known law, a relatively small organization, and developments that followed in this country and similar movements worldwide completely changed the face of this country and are well on their way to changing the face of the world.”

Sonia answers our questions...

Did you ever expect NOW to grow in influence and membership as it did?

SPF: No. We were mainly interested in having women hired and promoted in the workplace on an equal basis with men and having women admitted to colleges and universities on an equal basis with men. We had no idea that the spillover from changes in the workplace would affect every other area of American life.

What do you think is the most important feminist battle not yet won?

SPF: I can’t pick just one. Outstanding problems are: violence against women; the lack of affordable, competent child care; and the horrific treatment of women in third-world countries around the world.

Do you think that legal changes forced changes in attitudes or the other way around?

SPF: It’s hard to say since laws affect attitudes and attitudes influence the passage of laws. I would have to say that the passage of Title VII and its implementation by the EEOC and the courts and the formation of NOW were to me the two largest influences that led to the legal revolution in the rights of women in the US, with consequent changes taking place in other parts of the world.

Many thanks to Sonia and Ben Cornish for their time and help with this profile.



Foundation of NOW:
Sonia Fuentes, front row,
third from the right,
two seats to the right
of Betty Friedan
Washington, DC,
October 1966

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