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The Problems that had No Names

By Ruth Rosen

For me, the story of the women's movement—as well as its greatest accomplishments—was that we freed ourselves from silence. We learned to name injuries and grievances for which there had been no language.

I could start anywhere in the history of feminism, but I'll begin with Betty Friedan who, in her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, revealed the “problem that had no name,” by which she meant the sense of meaningless experienced by women who had been educated, become housewives, and felt a lack of purpose in their lives. But in that book, Friedan addressed largely middle class, white, women. Still, it was an important beginning.

At the same time, younger members of the movement discovered and named other problems. Our intellectual history, in my opinion, gave us language around which we could create a movement. Language, accompanied by activism, set us free to speak about injustices and injuries for which there had been no language. Once named, we could act; once named, we could create a national debate. Once debated, our issues could be changed by law, by Supreme Court decisions, or by changing socially acceptable customs.

We redefined rape as an assault, not a sexual act. We changed the work place by redefining predatory behavior as sexual harassment. We transformed domestic life by arguing that wife beating, once viewed as a custom, was domestic violence, a felonious assault. We did the same with marital rape and date rape. We criticized the “sexual revolution” for sexual exploitation, and demanded that abortion be legal. We demanded child care and equal pay as preconditions for women’s equality. Today, many of the injuries we named in 1979, are still resisted, but we

succeeded in changing the terms of debate and made them part of national political agenda for forty years.

At the same time, women of different backgrounds simultaneously-- or later in the 70's---named the hidden injuries of sex experienced by women in unions, by domestic workers, by poor working mothers, and by women in minority groups who experienced both racism and sexism in their lives.

And the naming spread across the globe. By 1980, feminists in other countries had identified new and different women's issues, including the need for water, fuel, education, and the elimination of genital mutilation, honor killings and dowry deaths.

By the mid-1990's, rape--as a spoil of war-- had been declared a war crime, and violence against women and girls was redefined as a violation of their human rights. By 1995, at the U.N. Conference in Beijing, Hillary Clinton declared that women's rights had become human rights and that human rights were women's rights.

The naming of injuries and the redefinition of customs as crimes is an important part of our history. This list is far from complete. But without naming our injuries and grievances, we would never have ended some of them and we certainly wouldn't be here today.