

# The Progressive Forum

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Historic photos from the National Women's Conference are available from Diana Mara Henry, the official photographer, at [www.dianamarahenry.com](http://www.dianamarahenry.com), 413-736-6414.

Gloria Steinem,  
Houston and History: The First National Women's Conference in 1977. Background to "An Evening With Gloria Steinem" on September 17, 2007.

Our "Evening with Gloria Steinem" marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic National Women's Conference which took place in Houston November 18 to 21, 1977. It was attended by over 20,000 women, including Gloria Steinem. Feminist scholars compare its importance to the Women's Rights Convention held by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and suffragists in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. In fact, *Time* magazine's edition of November 28, 1977, reported that the Houston conference started with a torch relay from Seneca Falls, the final leg run by conference leader Bella Abzug, Billie Jean King, and others in a driving rain. *Time* said, "Nothing like it has been seen in the U.S. in at least 129 years – or ever...[It's] the largest political conference of women ever assembled."

Gloria Steinem, in her essay entitled "Houston and History," from her book, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983), says, "For myself, Houston and all the events surrounding it have become a landmark in personal history.... Figuring out the date of any other event now means remembering: Was it before or after Houston?" Bella

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Abzug's report of the conference recommendations, called the National Plan of Action, was delivered to President Carter on March 22, 1978, in a White House ceremony, it was entitled "The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference." The conference took place in the Sam Houston Coliseum, now demolished, The Hobby Center was constructed in its place.

The conference was organized after a 1975 United Nations conference in Mexico City celebrating the "International Year of the Woman." In the U.S., President Gerald R. Ford established a National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year to recommend ways to promote equality between men and women. At the same time, Bella Abzug and Patsy Mink passed legislation calling for a commission to convene a national women's conference in 1977 supported by \$5 million in federal funds. According to the Handbook of Texas Online, the commission was influenced to select Houston because Mayor Fred Hofheinz had named Nikki Van Hightower as Houston Women's Advocate, one of the first such positions in the country. Liz Carpenter of Austin, Ladybird Johnson's press secretary, and Gloria Scott of Houston were on the planning commission. The state conventions leading up to this conference were attended by 150,000 women and interested men. They elected 2,000 voting delegates to attend the Houston conference which was attended by another eighteen thousand observers, including the wives of three U.S. Presidents, Rosalyn Carter, Betty Ford, and Ladybird Johnson, as well as Coretta Scott King. Texas Congresswomen and Houston native Barbara Jordan delivered the keynote address.

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The Houston conference was the first national women's conference financed and authorized by the federal government. And it was the first to feature elected representatives from every state and territory. In her book, Gloria Steinem called it "...a kind of Constitutional Convention for women – a remedy for the founding fathers who had excluded all women from the first one..." For the first time on that scale, women from all over the country validated their shared obstacles and struggles.

The conference also drew about 15,000 antifeminists who held a counter-conference and rallies downtown. When their leader, Phyllis Schlafly from Illinois charged that the gathering was unrepresentative of women in general, according to *Time*, "That drew a stinging rejoinder from Steinem: 'The people here are infinitely more representative than the legislatures of New York or Utah or Florida.'"

The conference helped establish the women's equality agenda, as well as a national women's political organizational base, for the next 30 years. The conference's National Action Plan identified barriers for women and measures to overcome them, with the Equal Rights Amendment as its centerpiece. The plan included measures such as ending sexual discrimination in employment and education, marital property relations, lesbian and gay rights, abortion rights, women's health, child care, battered women, a cabinet level women's department, and many others.