

# State of the Women in Houston

By Dr. Nikki Van Hightower

“State of the Women in Houston” is the transcript of a speech by Nikki Van Hightower, who at the time was the women’s advocate for the City of Houston. The speech is not dated in the archive, but events referred to in the speech suggest that it was presented in late 1976 or early 1977, Van Hightower’s first year in her role as the women’s advocate.

Starting in the early 1970s, Van Hightower was an activist in the women’s movement. In 1976, Mayor Fred Hofheinz appointed her women’s advocate for the City of Houston in response to the demand by Houston activists for a pro-active approach to addressing women’s issues in Houston. Though strongly supported by Mayor Hofheinz, advocacy for women was not a popular issue with the Houston City Council, and Hofheinz’s successor, Jim McConn, fired Van Hightower.

The position of women’s advocate for the City of Houston was the beginning of Nikki Van Hightower’s career as a community activist. She was instrumental in the founding of the Houston Area Women’s Center and served as its executive director from 1979 to 1986. In 1983 she made her first bid for public office, running unsuccessfully for an at-large position on the city council. In 1986, she won the election for Harris County treasurer and served until 1990....

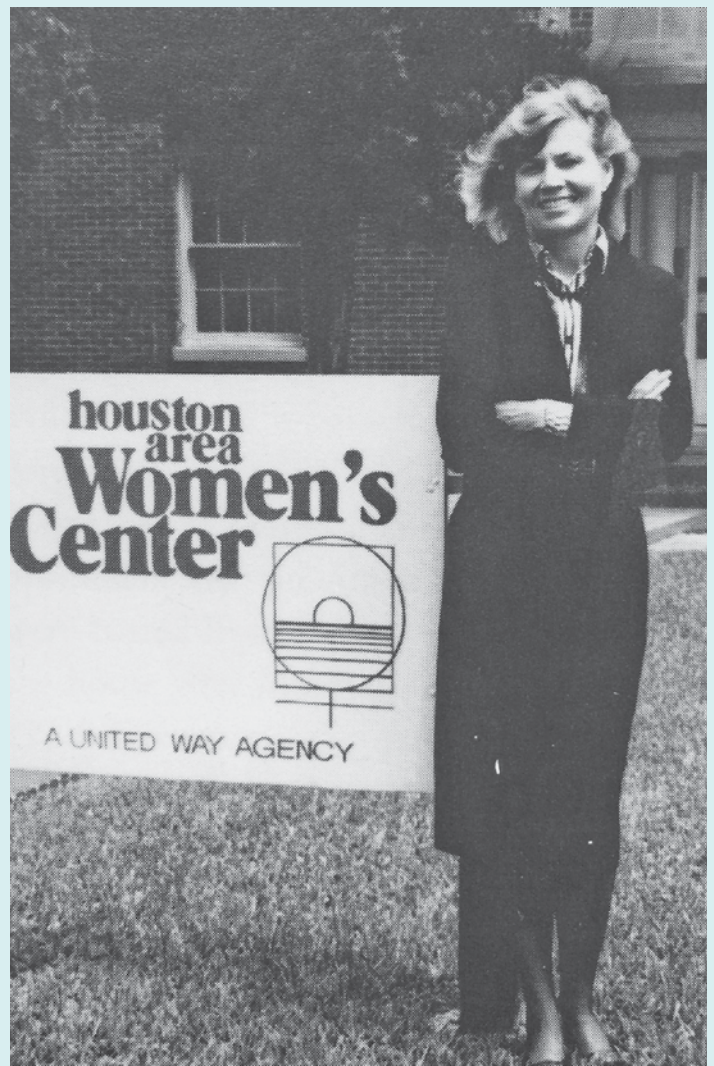
“State of the Women in Houston” is noteworthy for its enumeration of the broad range of issues that the feminist movement sought to address in the 1970s. The list of women’s organizations active in Houston at the time, many of which are now defunct, suggests the energy and optimism that characterized the feminist movement in that era. This speech also reflects the candor that characterized Van Hightower’s approach to issues that affected women in the city.

I would like to welcome all of you here this morning. I am Dr. Nikki Van Hightower, Women’s Advocate for the City of Houston. I was asked to compile this report on the state of the women in Houston by the Women’s Rights Coordinating Council. The Women’s Rights Coordinating Council is a coalition of women’s groups who are in some way concerned with women’s rights and who wish to combine their efforts with other groups for the purpose of achieving equality for women in Houston. Over 40 groups have been participating and have expressed an interest in sending a representative to the Council.

This report on the status of women in Houston is just the beginning of what we hope will be an annual evaluation by women of our progress, or lack thereof. This being the first such evaluation of the status of women in the city of Houston, it is suffering from information gaps. In some cases we do not have “hard” data (translated, that means numbers) to verify our experiences. In most cases we searched in vain for such data and found it to be either non-existent, at least for the local community, or not available to us. Whatever is lacking in this one we will make up for in the following years.

Now, about the state of the women report. Some of it I am sure you can anticipate. A few years ago Clare Booth Luce commented that, “All of our social institutions that guide the actions and opinions of society are male dominated.” I figured she must have been living in Houston, because that remark pretty much tells the story.

I think the 1970’s could accurately be labeled the Age of Tokenism. We have a woman or a few women holding down almost every type of job, and I refuse to go into the tiresome listing of first woman here and first woman there. In the majority of employment categories women remain the exception, not the rule. Sex segregation is the name of the employment game, and women continue to find themselves trapped in the “clerical ghettos.”



Nikki Van Hightower in front of the Houston Area Women’s Center at 4 Chelsea Place, ca. 1982. Photo courtesy of Nikki Van Hightower.



*Nikki Van Hightower speaking at the YMCA membership campaign in 1978.*

Photo courtesy of the Nikki Van Hightower Papers, Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive and Research Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

I still continue to hear the male management theme song entitled "Qualified Women Just Cannot Be Found." The same thing is commonly said about finding minorities, but I have noticed since being in the city that when members of minority groups have been appointed to management positions, the representation of that group rapidly increases. They don't seem to have the same problem in finding qualified minority people. I am inclined to think that the problem is not lack of qualified people, but rather lack of communication. It makes life much easier to lay the blame on the inadequacies of the "out" group than to admit that women, in this particular case, are just not included in the "good old boy network," and therefore get left out.

The need for childcare facilities is steadily growing as the population of Houston grows, and the lack of facilities has the greatest impact on women, limiting their employment opportunities. A preliminary analysis of the Childcare Needs Assessment Study conducted in the city shows that women account for 71 percent of city employees reporting some degree of conflict between childcare arrangements and work schedules. Of these persons, some 64 percent are also members of racial minority groups, particularly black women.

Although the idea of women's equality is slowly filtering into our school systems, males still prevail as the administrators; they hold the vast majority of the top faculty positions in our institutions of higher learning. Equality of sports opportunities is far from achieved, and sex-role stereotypes are still prevalent in our textbooks.

Rape continues to be on the increase, although it is not increasing as fast as the population, as a police officer proudly

told me, and I later statistically confirmed. Mind you, both are on the increase, but rape is a fraction slower than the population. I guess it just takes people a while to get settled.

Women in trouble with the law, women alcoholics and drug addicts, and women in other forms of crisis still fail to gain society's recognition as men with the same problems have done. Thus, women's problems become even greater because there are so few facilities for shelter and treatment that cater to women. I guess the troubled woman just does not square with the myth of the pampered American woman, and so, to maintain our distorted perceptions of reality, we must act as if she doesn't exist.

Although we have a new federal credit law, women are still having enormous difficulty in getting credit. I probably receive more calls about credit than any other single issue. Most of the problems come from married, divorced, or separated women and widowed women — those who, in other words, have once shared their lives with a man, thus resulting in a loss of legal identity, and are now no longer doing so. Married women often have difficulty getting credit in their own names and are humiliated by having to get their husband's signature for even a small loan, just as if they were irresponsible juveniles — when, in fact, they have been managing the family's financial affairs for years.

Separated and divorced women starting out to get credit on their own for the first time often find themselves saddled with the bad credit record of a divorced spouse, or find themselves fulfilling all the financial obligations that were incurred when they were married, while the credit continues to go to him because everything is still in his name. And the credit institutions refuse to transfer it over because she has no credit. Or, there is the widowed woman who has relied on family credit all her life, who finds, when she goes to apply for credit on her own as a widow, that she has absolutely none. The so-called family credit was really all in the husband's name, and, when he died, that file was pulled, and she gets credit for nothing.

Women are voicing more and more complaints about the insensitivity of a male-dominated health establishment to women's health needs. The exclusively female health problems centered around pregnancy and childbirth are frequently selected for exclusion from health insurance policies and company leave policies, and this practice recently received endorsement from our all-male Supreme Court.

Although civil rights for the homosexual is not an exclusively female problem, it is still a female problem. Depriving people of their civil rights because of their sexual preference is a way of reaffirming sex roles, sex stereotypes, and, in general, identifiable sex distinctions. It is a threat used against all women and all men that if they do not stay "in their places," which means sex roles, they will be branded as misfits and will be subject to ostracism and ridicule for being "odd."

Progress for women in Houston during the last decade has been somewhat illusory. There has been more talk than action, and, in some areas such as employment, we seem to have actually lost ground rather than gained it. You might think that this fact would throw someone like me into a catatonic state of depression, and it would if this were the whole story, but it is not. The other half of the story is told

in what women are doing about this state of affairs. Women are taking many forms of action on behalf of themselves as individuals and on behalf of other women.

In the area of employment, women are taking the offensive by filing complaints and suits against employers who continue to discriminate. There are several women's organizations that help counsel women on actions to be taken against sex discrimination.

Women are lobbying for more Title XX funds to be channeled into childcare facilities and other human care services that will affect the lives of women.

The Harris County National Organization for Women Continuing Task Force on Education for Women, for the fifth year, mounted a massive effort to eliminate those textbooks documented as sexist from adoption in 1976. The Texas Education Agency adopted only three deemed inappropriate.

Through the Rape Crisis Coalition, women are aiding other women who are victims of this crime. Linda Cryer, Director of the city's Rape Prevention, Detection, and Control Program, is changing city policies to more humane treatment of the rape victim.

Women are visiting other women in our county and city jails, helping the prisoners, who are often the most underprivileged women in society; making demands on our penal system for better conditions; and generating more community involvement with the female prisoner and ex-offender.

Women working together in an ad hoc committee under the YWCA are taking steps to open a shelter for women in crisis, particularly the battered woman. They have just received a planning grant from the Hogg foundation.

In response to exclusion from male-dominated financial institutions, women have formed their own credit union, called the Houston Area Feminist Federal Credit Union. They grant loans to women who cannot qualify in the traditional institutions. They have just declared their first dividend, and I understand that their bad debts have been negligible.

The Houston Women's Health Collective was formed to educate women so that they can play a greater role in maintaining their own health and to draw attention to problems women face in dealing with a health establishment in which women and women's health problems are low in status.

Female homosexuals are now publishing a monthly magazine, *The Pointblank Times*, to help end their isolation from each other and to break down the myths and stereotypes surrounding them.

Women In Action, a loosely structured coalition of numerous groups has formed a special committee to establish an information and referral system, called Women's Information, Referral and Exchange System, or WIRES. In a few months, women throughout Houston will be able to call one number for help or information. On the other hand, it will provide vital information about unmet needs of women in Houston.

In November 1977, we will have a national women's conference here in Houston. Out of the International Women's Year conference will come proposals that will be presented to Congress to end the barriers to full participation of women in American life. Interesting that we women have to tell

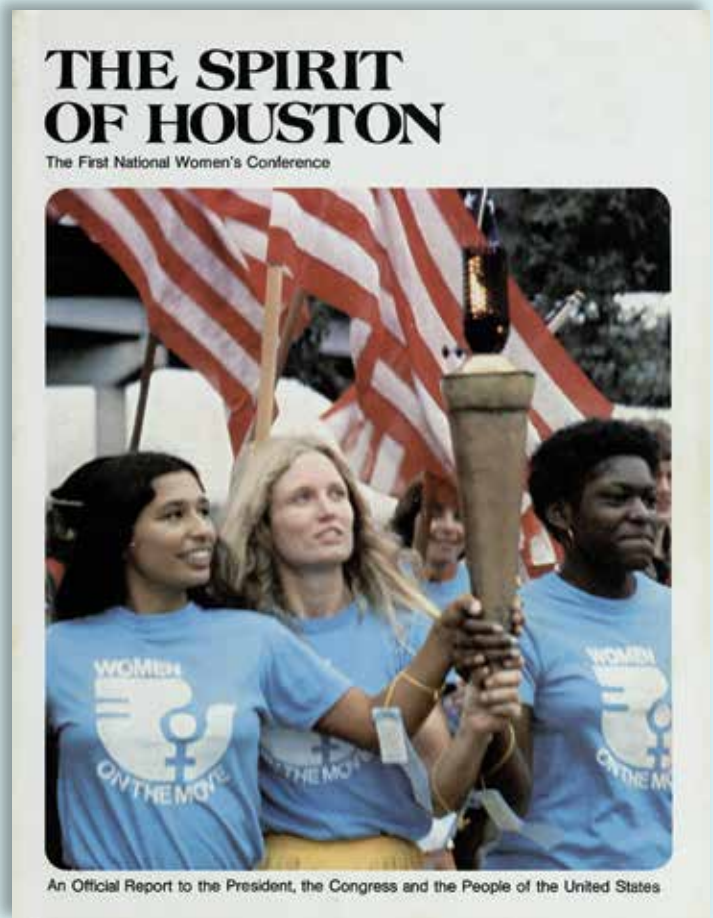
them their job. Makes one wonder why they should be there and we should be here.

I have often heard in the last year or so that the woman's movement was dead. Well, it is not dead, only slightly comatose for a short while. But the pause in the momentum of the feminist groups gave other women's groups a chance to reflect on what had been said and what had been done, and I personally feel that we are moving into a new period in the history of the women's movement in which a much wider, more diverse group of women are uniting in the struggle for equal rights. The Women's Rights Coordinating Council is a splendid example of this new unity.

We may not have much "real" progress in the last decade, but the signs strongly point to the fact that we were quite effective in creating a climate for change. And tokenism is not all bad. You get enough tokens, and they can create so many holes in the dike that the whole thing, in this case, the sexist establishment, will give way. With the new life and vitality I see in the present broad based women's movement, real progress cannot be far behind.

So, sexist in Houston, we are putting you on notice, we are on your case!

Thank you for listening.



*A first of its kind meeting, the National Women's Conference met in Houston in November 1977 to discuss a host of issues pertaining to women's lives in this country and recommend a plan of action for the future. This report was provided to the President of the United States, Congress, and the people following the conference.*

Photo courtesy of the Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference Collection, Courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.