

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....

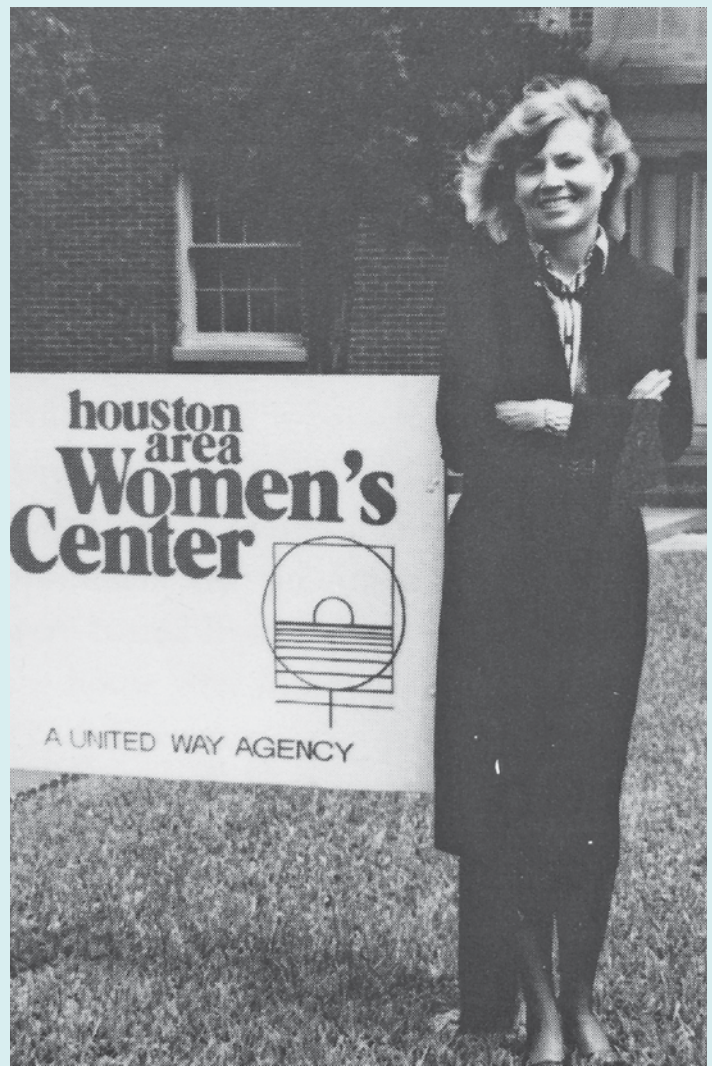
“State of the Women in Houston” is noteworthy for its enumeration of the broad range of issues that the feminist movement sought to address in the 1970s. The list of women’s organizations active in Houston at the time, many of which are now defunct, suggests the energy and optimism that characterized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

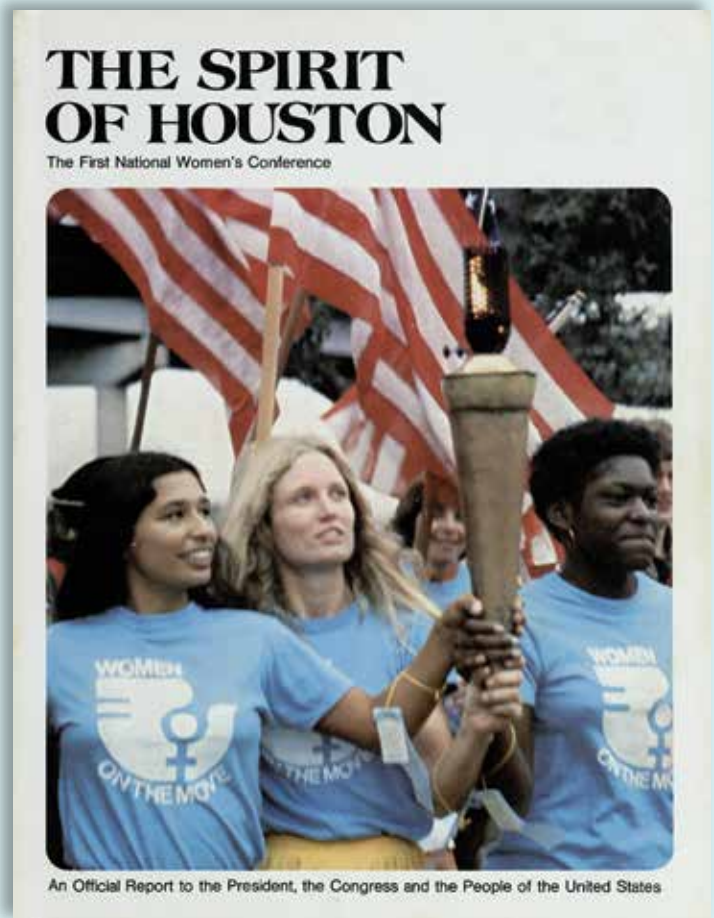
them their job. Makes one wonder why they should be there and we should be here.

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.

Marching On: “The Rise of Houston Women = The Rise of the Nation”¹

By Regina Elizabeth Vitolo



The day after President Donald Trump's inauguration, women protested worldwide, advocating for human rights and other issues, including women's rights. Those attending the Houston Women's March had the opportunity to participate in the Free Speech March and Free Speech Rally at Houston City Hall. Photo courtesy of author.

At the close of the 1977 National Women's Conference (NWC) in Houston, reporter Susan Caudill reflected on the historic event that attracted over 33,000 participants and protestors from around the country, including 20,000 women, to the first and only federally funded meeting of its kind, placing Houston front and center in the battle for women's rights. Held November 18th to 21st at the Sam Houston Coliseum, the energy of female agency and sisterhood was still palpable as Caudill reported from the vacated venue. Looking intently at the camera, she remarked, “Tonight the National Women's Conference is History—a footnote, a chapter, or volumes—we don't yet know.”²

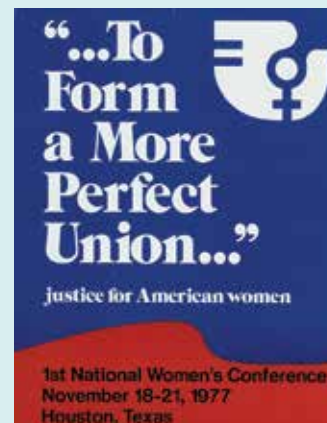
Appointed by President Jimmy Carter, Congresswoman Bella Abzug chaired the conference, acting as the spokesperson for gender equality, bringing polarizing topics such as reproductive rights, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and gay rights into the national spotlight. Outraged conservatives lambasted the use of taxpayer money for a liberal assault on family values, and right-wing activist Phyllis Schlafly organized a counter-conference across town. The NWC produced a National Plan of Action demanding the federal government address twenty-six gender equality issues, most of which still remain points of contention after the conservative backlash proved malignant. Historian Marjorie Spruill explains that “two distinct women's movements emerged, pitting liberal and conservative women against each other, amplifying an ideological and political divide that still exists today.”³

In 1976, the City of Houston created one of the nation's first city offices to address gender discrimination after Houston feminists became fed up with the men in power paying lip service to—or demonstrating outright hostility towards—women's issues. Mayor Fred Hofheinz appointed feminist activist Dr. Nikki Van Hightower to lead the Women's Advocate Office, positioning himself as a women's movement ally. Creation of the Women's Advocate Office was pivotal to the NWC choosing Houston to host the meeting.

Van Hightower used her platform to bring male city officials to task. Harnessing the momentum from Houston's women's movement and the national zeitgeist over gender inequality, Van Hightower delivered a frank yet hopeful report titled, “State of the Women in Houston,” during her first year as women's advocate.⁴ After she spoke in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, however, the all-male city council responded by trying to reduce her salary to one dollar per year. When that proved to be illegal, the council led by then mayor Jim McConn abolished the Women's Advocate Office altogether. This scenario of silencing women's voices epitomized the struggle that feminists nationwide faced in securing gender equality. Nevertheless, Van Hightower persisted and continued advocating for local women in the role of affirmative action specialist and as a city liaison for the NWC. The convictions of Houston women and Van Hightower spoke louder than city council.

In closing her report, Van Hightower reflected on the women's movement in the previous decade, acknowledging, to some degree, critics who said that little “real progress” had been made. But she countered by praising Houston women for creating a “climate for change,” adding that “real progress” could not be far behind with the new, “broad based women's movement” she saw before her.⁵

Assessing the state of women in Houston today reveals two things: Houston women are not as far along as they should be, but they are stronger and more determined than ever. Just as the 1977 NWC mobilized a counter-women's movement, the 2016 presidential election mobilized a new generation of feminists intent on advocating for their human rights. Perhaps



Exhibitor brochure for the 1977 National Women's Conference. Photo courtesy of the Marjorie Randall National Women's Conference Collection, Courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.



University of Houston history professor Nancy Beck Young (center) moderates the panel on “Women, Politics, and Law” at the fortieth anniversary of the 1977 National Women’s Conference. Roundtable discussions included former members of the Texas House of Representatives: Houston activist and attorney Frances Tarlton “Sissy” Farenthold (right), and Sarah Weddington (left), the attorney who represented “Jane Roe” in the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*. Photo courtesy of Alan Nguyen.

still haunted—or still motivated—by the subdued optimism in Van Hightower’s 1976 report, second wave Houston feminists have risen to the occasion as well.

Forty years after the NWC, 2017 proved to be another historic year for Houston women. For two years, local women of all generations, ethnicities, and backgrounds and people of all genders laid the groundwork for meaningful change in Houston culture and in state and federal politics.⁶ A prime example is the first Houston Women’s March held on January 21, 2017, a day after President Donald Trump’s inauguration. About 22,000 Houstonians peacefully gathered at City Hall to protest the anti-women and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, proposed legislation, and explicit racism demonstrated by the incoming administration.⁷ An army of women and their allies—clad to the teeth with protest signs, pink-knit beanies, verifiable facts, and feminist ferocity—stood up for their rights. Houstonians reflected the tone and fervor felt across the nation as women mobilized in defense of their bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. For many, this was their first public demonstration of moral outrage and political discontent. For most, the historic 2017 Women’s March was only the beginning.

The “euphoric rage” that characterized the history-making 2017 women’s marches was intensified by the cadre of second wave feminists who understood that the current administration was (and is) an imminent threat to their hard-earned legacy.⁸ This ferocity carried over into a multitude of local events in 2017 and 2018, diverging from the original Houston Women’s March to represent the city’s diversity. The inaugural Houston Black Women’s March of 2018 drew more than one thousand people to celebrate the contributions black Houston women have made towards gender equality.⁹ March for Our Lives and the Houston Pride Parade of 2018 also showed the diverse issues Houstonians of all colors, genders, and ages mobilized to advance politically, emotionally, and intellectually. In June 2018, Houston hosted #MeToo founder Tarana Burke to discuss the positive impact that sexual assault survivors and sexual harassment victims are generating by courageously breaking their silence.

Women speaking out about abuse are helping to change a culture riddled with everyday sexism and gender disparities, such as sex trafficking. In 2016 Houston led the nation

in sex trafficking victims, most of whom were women. Local activists are tackling this by keeping their eyes open, speaking up, and teaching others how to identify trafficking victims.¹⁰ Houston female business owners are also being proactive. Yellow Cab Houston general manager Melissa McGee is using her business to help identify and rescue trafficking victims that find themselves in one of her taxis. McGee provides drivers with information needed to spot red flags and report suspicious behavior, including passengers who avoid eye contact, show signs of physical abuse, appear malnourished, lack identifying documents, or seem withdrawn.¹¹

Mayor Sylvester Turner and the Houston Police Department (HPD) are enlisting the work of activists to crackdown on sex trafficking. Houstonian Rebecca Beavers, who has worked to rescue sex trafficking victims on her own for years, is now working with families and HPD to track down victims and bust their pimps. Beavers’s dedication and expertise has led her and other activists to establish the Anti-Trafficking Alliance of Houston (ATA HTX). The City of Houston Anti-Human Trafficking website offers a list of resources as well.¹²



On March 3, 2018, more than 1,000 people met at Emancipation Park to celebrate black empowerment and sisterhood. Black Lives Matter and Houston Rising sponsored the event. Attendees included Representative Sheila Jackson Lee and City Council Member Amanda Edwards. Photo courtesy of Matthew Barrett, Flickr.

Houston educators also lead the way towards a more equitable future by raising historical consciousness, teaching students and the public about intersectional feminism, and arming people with knowledge to affect change through political activism. In November 2017, women from across the country gathered at the University of Houston (UH) to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the 1977 National Women’s Conference. Organized by UH History Department faculty and Friends of Women’s Studies board members Drs. Leandra Zarnow and Nancy Beck Young, the 2017 conference endeavored to recreate the energy, optimism, and diversity of its predecessor, while addressing the assault on women’s rights and the disturbing national rhetoric.

The conference drew veterans of the NWC and those who fought on the frontlines of the women’s movement in the sixties and seventies. Attendees shared their legacies and conveyed the significance of the 1977 conference to a new generation of activists. Prominent feminist leaders such

as Sissy Farenthold, Sarah Weddington, Annise Parker, Martha Cotera, and Melba Tolliver imparted wisdom from their years of activism. Latina history maker Yolanda Alvarado was celebrated for her work with Planned Parenthood and at-risk youth, and Commissioner Sylvia Garcia was recognized for her service to the community. Dr. Nikki Van Hightower also participated in the 2017 conference and was celebrated for her passionate leadership of Houston feminists during the 1970s. Conference attendees were imbued with a renewed sense of hope and stamina for the ongoing struggle for gender equality.



On Election Day 2018, Houstonians elected Sylvia Garcia as one of the first two Latinas to represent Texas in the U.S. Congress. Prior to earning this position, she served as a Texas state senator, Houston controller, and was the first Hispanic and first woman elected to the Harris County Commissioner's Court.

Photo courtesy of U.S. House of Representatives.

The 2018 Houston History Alliance conference, “Houston Women: Agitating, Educating, and Advocating,” is another example of the passion and persistence of Houston educators, historians, and feminists. Keynote speaker Dr. Laura G. Murillo, president and CEO of the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; former Houston mayor Annise Parker; Municipal Judge Phyllis Frye; Dr. Elizabeth Gregory, director of UH Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies; Gracie Saenz, the first Latina Houston City Council member; Behavioral and Social Sciences Department Chair at San Jacinto College, Yvonne Freer; and Dr. Nikki Van Hightower are just a few of the educators and women’s movement veterans who shared their stories and keen insight on today’s turbulent political climate.¹³

As of 2018, data on the state of women paints a bleak picture in contrast to the diverse Houston women taking social issues to the streets and voting booths. A recent Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality study revealed that national progress towards gender equality has stalled. Areas such as occupational integration and the gender pay gap remain major issues preventing progress towards gender equality.¹⁴ Texas has approximately 14 million women, with 3.4 million of them living in the Houston area. Despite making up over half of the population, local women earn approximately 80 cents on the dollar compared to their male counterparts. Latina women suffer the widest wage gap, earning only 35 percent of what white males earn in Houston on average.¹⁵ While the number of women-owned and women-run businesses is growing, it is at a glacial rate.

One of the most startling trends uncovered by recent studies is the rise of uninsured women and maternal mortality rates in Houston caused largely by a lack of adequate and continued healthcare after pregnancy, especially for women of color. Even women who receive quality care while carrying a child are often neglected postpartum.¹⁶ Humans, regardless of gender, at all stages of life, deserve the best health care available, but Houston women find themselves at the bottom of the barrel. These issues, and many more



Judge Phyllis Frye speaks with Hannah Cohen-Fuentes a participant at the fortieth anniversary National Women’s Conference. In 2010 Mayor Annise Parker appointed Frye as an associate judge for the City of Houston Municipal Courts, making her the nation’s first transgender judge. Frye continues to maintain her law practice and advocacy for the LGBTQ community. Photo courtesy of Alan Nguyen.

not covered here, indicate that the current state of Houston women is still fraught with inequalities.

United by righteous anger following numerous public allegations of sexual harassment against women across the nation, a new generation of women have taken up the mantle for a new era of women’s movements, and they are making waves in the quest for equality. The 2017 Houston Women’s March is an example of that. It and other events have inspired people to brush up on their rights, stay abreast of current events, exercise their right to vote, and elect more women to office at every level of government.

Former Texas governor Ann Richards observed, “The here and now is all we have, and if we play it right it’s all we’ll need.”¹⁷ Reflecting on the current state of Houston women, Dr. Nikki Van Hightower’s 1976 report, and the experiences of our mothers and grandmothers, it is tempting to think, “So much has happened, yet so little has changed.” But Houston women have broken glass ceilings in education, business, the arts, and politics. Most recently, Houston made political history by electing nineteen black women to judicial seats in Harris County, and one of the first two Latinas from Texas to the U.S. House of Representatives.¹⁸

Observing Houston women today with the same clarity as Van Hightower did in 1976, a trend comes into focus. Even with the unpredictable nature of daily circumstances, national politics, the economy—and the weather—they persevere with a steel resolve, embracing each other across differences. As residents of the nation’s fourth largest city, Houston women are uniquely positioned to affect change and shift the culture towards a more equitable society for all genders. Over the past decades, Houston women have risen to the challenges they faced, and, when Houston women rise, the nation rises with them.¹⁹

Regina Elizabeth Vitolo is a native Houstonian. She earned her B.A. in history at the University of Houston and her M.S. in library science from the University of North Texas. While at UH, she volunteered for the 2017 National Women’s Conference and received a History and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies scholarship.