Participants at the NWC used their crafting skills to create buttons and pins, as well as other graphics, to visually communicate their ideas and beliefs.
Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.

FROM BUTTONS TO BANNERS: VISUAL MESSAGING AT THE NWC

By Mackenzie Vance

As more than 20,000 attendees flocked to the 1977 National Women's Conference (NWC), they did so with excitement and a desire to speak their minds.[1] In a crowd that large, the odds of spending any time at the microphone were slim; yet, the point of the conference was to be heard. So, conference participants did what anyone at a mass gathering would do. They made signs, buttons, and hats that expressed their views in a single phrase or picture. Participants used their skills with a sewing machine, paint, or permanent markers — practices they learned inside the domestic bubble — to break into the political sphere and bring their ideas to life. This visual cacophony of thoughts and ideas tells us just as much about the conference as the spirited debates and fiery speeches on the floor of the Sam Houston Coliseum.

Even before the conference's opening gavel, Houston women took the lead in setting the visual tone for the NWC. Marion Coleman, a local printshop owner who ran House of Coleman, gained a reputation in the 1970s for producing signs, posters, and other materials in support of local feminist causes. When it came time to design and print programs for the conference, House of Coleman was tapped for the project. Coleman and her team created a glossy 78-page program filled with schedules and event information for attendees alongside historical photographs of suffrage parades from the Smithsonian Institute. NWC presiding officer and peace advocate Bella Abzug became outraged by the program's back cover featuring a 1915 war poster aimed at women reading, "If you want to fight, join the Marines."[2] She demanded the covers be ripped off, but staff members talked Abzug down, and the delegates received the programs with the back cover intact. Though the process was not always smooth, Coleman left her mark on the conference through her expertise in design.

Before the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Roe v Wade *made abortion accessible across the country, many women resorted to self-induced abortions to end a pregnancy. The coat hanger, which was used by some women, symbolized those procedures and the resulting deaths.*

Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.

When the conference began on November 18, 1977, women from across the country brought their unique passions and ideals to display in front of television cameras and photographers. By visually representing their beliefs, conference participants sought support and community with likeminded feminists and antifeminists both in Houston and with the national audience watching at home. For some of these women, it was the first time they had expressed their ideas in a group that large. The excitement they felt not only in gathering but in taking a step forward as a movement is reflected in their protest and advocacy materials.

One of the biggest debates of the conference centered on passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). At the time of the conference, the ERA remained three states shy of ratification and a question lingered about whether efforts should continue to push it over the finish line. For some women, putting pressure on states to ratify the ERA was their most important message, and they carried signs with the phrase "ERA YES!" The delegates from Texas even attached an "ERA YES!" sticker to their section marker signs. While this simple slogan was popular, other participants expanded on the idea. One delegate from Maryland, Betty Hamburger, sported a hard hat with the message "Pro God, Pro Family, Pro ERA."[3] In creating and wearing this hat, Hamburger showed a desire to display her support for the ERA and to refute the idea that the ERA and family were antithetical.

Though the majority of NWC attendees backed the ERA, support for the amendment was not universal. Some women feared that the ERA was too radical, and passage would prevent any further progress. Photos of the conference show a number of women wearing ribbons attached to their name badges emblazoned with the word "Majority" to express their anti-ERA sentiment.[4] By utilizing the word "Majority," women pushed back against the assumption that all the delegates identified as feminists or favored the ERA. They also created an environment where those who were skeptical about the amendment could express concern or dissent without being ostracized by supporters.

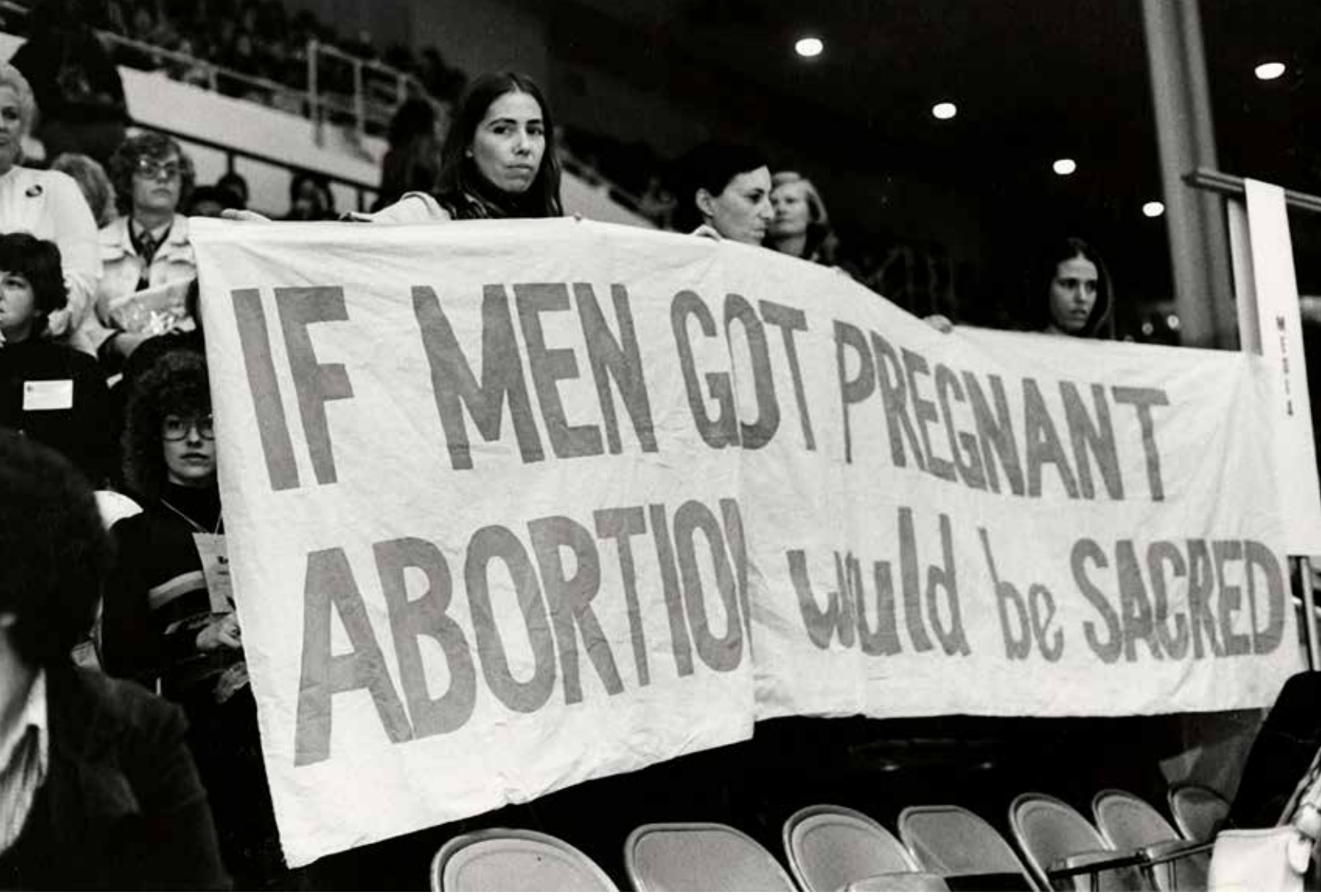
Another controversial topic at the conference was abortion. With *Roe v. Wade* decided only four years before the conference, the majority of the delegates possessed recent memory of a time when abortion access lacked legal protection. This living memory still haunted many delegates. Photos of the conference show a multitude of small posters bearing the image of a crossed out coat hanger, a visceral image expressing the desire for women to have access to safe abortions rather than resorting to dangerous, homespun procedures. Another photo shows a group of three women in the balcony holding up a large, handwritten banner reading, "If men got pregnant abortion would be sacred."[5] There is no doubt that even from the balcony, the entirety of the arena could see the sign, which appears to span roughly twelve feet across a railing. It is easy enough to throw a small poster and few buttons into your suitcase, but these three women took time and effort to bring this message to the convention.

A third divisive topic came in the form of the sexual preference plank that called for legal rights for lesbian women. A photo from the conference shows a woman holding a homemade and perhaps hastily drawn sign expressing her desire to keep gay rights out of the conference planks. The sign — drawn on a poster the size of a standard piece of paper — features a simple image of a door. Under the drawing are the words "Keep 'em in the Closet."[6]

Yet, other images reveal strong support for the sexual preference plank. Signs with phrases like "Lesbian Rights, Lesbian Mothers, Lesbian Sisters" drew visibility to the lives of lesbians and their fight to be treated equally as parents, activists, and citizens. In the end, the sexual preference plank passed to an eruption of applause. Gay rights advocate and Texas delegate Pokey Anderson released 1,000 balloons printed with the phrase "We are everywhere." She

Betty Hamburger, a delegate from Maryland, wears a a hard hat proclaiming her belief that one can support both the ERA and the ideals of God and family, although some thought they were mutually exclusive.

Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.



A sign proclaims abortion would be "sacred" if men could get pregnant, highlighting the gender discrepancies in how laws were applied to women and their bodies compared to men. Photo courtesy of National Archives and Record Administration.

Although many women at the NWC supported the Equal Rights Amendment, others did not. Women who opposed the ERA wore ribbons with the word "Majority" on them to argue that not all woman favored the amendment. Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.

later described the scene as "pandemonium." "Women were crying," she recalled. "Women were dancing on chairs."[7] This outburst of celebration at the end of three days of tireless work solidified the visibility of lesbians in the women's rights movement.

As demonstrated by the balloons, not all the objects brought for display to the conference were obvious choices like banners, posters, or hats. Some of the delegates were more creative. One of the labels often used to mark feminists of this period was "bra burner," a myth that came about when a newspaper article on the 1968 Miss America protest labeled the event as a "bra burning" for an attention-grabbing headline. Organizers of the protest affirmed no bras were burned, but it was too late. The title stuck. Two conference delegates wanted to erase this misinformation, so they came to the conference ready to correct the record. During discussion of the Equal Rights Amendment, they held up bras with the phrase "We Didn't Burn Them" written on them.[8] Unfortunately, these creative and compelling signs did not do much to dispel the myth of the bra burners and the label still exists today, but this photographic evidence speaks to their desire to clear the record.

The University of Houston archive holds a piece of the NWC's handmade history. The archive contains two homemade aprons, which feature the words "Houston Texas" inside the Venus symbol representing women and the phrase "Feminist Capitol of the World" below it.[9] On one apron, the letters are in a dark orange and the other in a vibrant red, perhaps as a nod to the school colors of the University of Texas and the University of Houston. It appears the creators deployed a personal sewing machine to stitch the body of the canvas aprons and used fabric markers and ribbon to accessorize them. All of the materials for these aprons could have been purchased at any local sewing store. Unfortunately, the identities of the aprons' creators are unknown, but they had some working knowledge of Texas lore, appeared happy to see feminism in Texas, and wanted to signal its success in the state to the rest of the country.

This sampling of items represents just a fraction of the materials brought into the conference during those four days. While a wealth of information is stored in the visual archive, the pieces examined here demonstrate that women in the convention hall were determined to be heard in whatever form they could muster. Anyone who has ever practiced handy crafts like sewing will tell you that it is a labor of love. By making these items, women expressed their deeply held positions on the issues up for discussion in Houston. Attendees who saw and read these signs, buttons, and apparel took those messages back with them as they continued their activism in their own homes and communities.

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After much debate, conference delegates passed a plank calling for an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation and laws that prohibited same-sex relationships. Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.

Women used many different items to convey their messages and stories, including textiles. This apron celebrated Houston's success as the convention host and its role in the feminist movement.

Photo courtesy of *Houston History*.