

Remarks at the NOW: NYC Awards¹
“Change the Mainstream!”
June 20, 2007

Thank you to the National Organization for Women, the Board of Directors, the Advisors and Executive Committee, and Executive Director, Sonia Ossorio, for the pleasure of receiving this distinctive award, and to my family, friends, and colleagues for joining me on this wonderful occasion. The National Organization for Women. Isn't this a persistent, beautifully stubborn, and needed organization? I thank you for constancy and resilience when so many events throughout the years have continued to distract.

Betty Friedan is oft quoted as having started the National Organization for Women in 1966 to “bring women into the mainstream of American society.” Certainly in the 1960s Betty Friedan had cause to bring women into the mainstream of that wonderful culture, a counter-culture in a time when a true democracy and equality for all was within reach. A progressive militancy and revolutionary mind was sweeping the country, then. Alongside nonviolent protests, passive resistances, anti-war protests, and conscientious objectors were strikes for women's equality—equal access, equal pay.

Forty years later, even with the headway we have made in equal access and equal pay, there is still a ceiling—higher it is true, but a ceiling nonetheless. But now I'm not sure that I want to be in the mainstream of this current society, where the disparity for disenfranchised or marginalized women, and men, is a huge gulf and for whom the ceiling is higher than ever. And yet again we are fighting to keep control of decisions regarding our own bodies, our own futures. It is the mainstream that must be changed! Principles of feminism, equality, equity, and justice must become mainstream.

With this honor I feel as though I am in some sort of alignment with women who were leading the charge during my adolescence and young adulthood. My work during the last twenty years as an American Indian activist, founding the AIRORF, and my recent success as an arts activist, with the opening of the EASCFA at the Brooklyn Museum, makes me take pause, however, and ask what is it that makes an activist?

¹ Remarks made upon receipt of the “Women of Power and Influence Award” NOW-NYC, June 20, 2007

Is it from an experience or insight, or simple observation that one notices that the world around us does not look the way we are told it would? Is it genetic, cultural, or an “aha” moment? Historically, activists, be they in science, politics, art, civil rights, or gender equality, have been vilified, excommunicated, burned at the stake, jailed, ostracized, assassinated. But there is power in seeing a goal, a power that pushes fears aside. It is not courage. It simply must be. What is at the core is perhaps the overwhelming, unimpeded, unstoppable desire to straighten the crooked, to clear the fog, to right the wrong, to make conscious the unconscious.

Indeed, I have observed that it is women, here and abroad, who have been the leaders in the move towards a civil society—protecting the unprotected, protecting the path that paves the way for our children, our grandchildren, and those not yet born. It is the mother tiger in all her glory in each of us.

So, even though I haven’t been effective enough to be assassinated or even disappeared, it is with deep pleasure and gratitude that I accept this award for that which has been accomplished and I thank all of those who have worked with me on the path to help realize the vision.

I have spent most of my life marching and speaking out for justice and peace, and I will probably spend the rest of my life doing the same, searching for a planet where women do not walk in fear, but side by side with sisters and brothers in a free, just world of abundance—abundance of peace, abundance of education, abundance of joy.

Thank you.