Social Justice Feminism

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For the past three years, women leaders from national groups, grassroots organizations, academia, and beyond have gathered to examine the state of the women’s movement. Spurred by a concern about the continued vitality and relevance of the women’s movement, philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Ms. Foundation, and Astrea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, brought together women leaders and asked them to confront and transcend their differences to carve out a new agenda for change. This effort, dubbed the New Women’s Movement Initiative (or “NWMI”), forced participants to examine critically the cause that many had made their life’s work. Participants were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, economic status, sexuality, geographic locale, and age, among other things. Not surprisingly, they came with myriad perspectives on feminism: indeed, deep divisions caused many to question whether they were part of the same movement and whether they could or should trust one another enough to collaborate in this endeavor. Ultimately, the participants reached some consensus about what might revitalize the women’s movement: basing its work on principles of social justice feminism.

My colleague Professor Verna Williams and I were intrigued by this conclusion. As feminist law professors, we puzzled over the significance and implications of putting “social justice” and “feminism” together. We also were intrigued by a documentary that the NWMI participants viewed at one of their gatherings, “The Sisters of ’77.” This film tells the story of the National Women’s Conference, a federally-funded gathering of over 20,000 women that was held in Houston, Texas in 1977 and that resulted in a 26-plank National Plan of Action to improve the lives of the nation’s women. Participants at that 1977 conference confronted and struggled with many of the same issues that the NWMI was addressing thirty years later.

In this paper, we explore aspects of the history of “feminism” and “social justice,” analyzing their differences and similarities and the possibilities that might emerge from their joinder—offering some initial thoughts on defining aspects of “social justice feminism.” We also historicize the National Women’s Conference, exploring what we argue are the seeds of social justice feminism that were sown there. Our analysis of the Conference includes identification of what, going forward, might be done differently so as not to repeat a history that has led so many women to feel that the feminist movement does not support what they
really want. Finally, we suggest some methodological tools that might be employed in analyzing the law from a social justice feminist perspective.