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Sociology Professor Jennifer Solomon Reflects on Women's Equality Day

Winthrop University

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Sociology Professor Jennifer Solomon Reflects on Women's Equality Day

Quick Facts

- In 1971, Rep. Bella Abzug (D-NY) requested that the U.S. Congress designate the day of Aug. 26 as Women's Equality Day.
- Women's Equality Day not only commemorates the passage of the 19th Amendment, but also calls attention to women's continuing efforts toward full equality. Workplaces, libraries, organizations, and public facilities offer Women's Equality Day programs, displays, video showings, or other activities.



Jennifer Solomon

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA — Tuesday, Aug. 26 marks **Women's Equality Day**. More than 90 years ago, women earned the right to vote via passage of the **19th Amendment to the Constitution**.

Dr. Jennifer Solomon is a professor of sociology at Winthrop University. Part of her research has revolved around gender differences in retirement income. She reflected on the holiday, her research, and the issues women still face today.

Q: What is Women's Equality Day?

In 1971, Rep. Bella Abzug (D-NY) requested that the U.S. Congress designate the day as "Women's Equality Day." This was the culmination of a massive, peaceful civil rights movement by women that had its formal beginnings in 1848 at the world's first women's rights convention, in

Seneca Falls, New York. The observance of Women's Equality Day not only commemorates the passage of the 19th Amendment, but also calls attention to women's continuing efforts toward full equality. Workplaces, libraries, organizations, and public facilities offer Women's Equality Day programs, displays, video showings, or other activities.

Q: Winthrop was once an all-female school. Can you imagine what the sentiment on campus was like when the 19th Amendment passed?

A: I believe that the women at Winthrop College, both students and teachers, would have celebrated the passage of the 19th Amendment. There was already activism on campus. Winthrop had both male and female teachers. Men lived in houses; women lived in dorms. Male teachers were paid more than were female teachers. The female teachers sent a letter of protest to the administration. Female students were seeking an education and economic independence. They often had to choose between teaching and marriage. At that time, many people believed that education would make women unfit for marriage and motherhood.

In addition, Winthrop's president D.B. Johnson supported women's suffrage (Oral History Interview with Marguerite Tolbert, June 14, 1974. Interview G-0062. Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007). Tolbert remembers that when women gained the right to vote, D.B. Johnson, the president of Winthrop College, immediately started programs to train female students in public affairs. He also worked with adult education programs to help prepare women voters.

Q: Do you think all women were happy about the amendment and joined in the crusade?

A: One of the interesting things is that, at the time, not all women wanted the right to vote. They believed that men's role was in the public sphere and women's place was in the home as wives and mothers. At the same time, women's organizations had put in decades of effort to get women the right to vote. However, even women who supported women's suffrage didn't agree on how to achieve their goal. There were two strategies for achieving women's suffrage. The first was through an amendment to the national Constitution, but another group wanted to do it state-by-state.

Q: More than 90 years later, what have been some positive outcomes of the 19th amendment?

A: [According to U.S. Census Data] Women are taking advantage of the right to vote. In every presidential election since 1980, the proportion of eligible female adults who voted has exceeded the proportion of eligible male adults who voted. Moreover, the number of female voters has also exceeded the number of male voters in every presidential election since 1964. In non-presidential elections, the proportion of eligible female voters has also exceeded the proportion of eligible male voters. That's the good news.

Q: So what's the bad news?

A: In spite of women's voting participation, currently only 20 of 100 United States senators, 79 of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives, and five governors, one of them in South Carolina, are women. Even though women are voting, they don't have the political influence to determine which candidates end up on the ballot. Hopefully that will change, and more women will get involved in politics. Women tend to work their way up in politics from local to state to national offices. Men receive encouragement to run for office from party leaders, elected officials, and political activists and thus, tend to jump into the political arena more quickly.

Q: What are some other issues that women still face?

A: The gender pay gap just won't go away. Women make 77 percent of what men make. This pay gap is going to be an issue for today's female Winthrop graduates. They graduate with a similar debt burden as men but get paid less.

Q: Can you talk more about your research in your gender differences in retirement income study?

A: An analyses of data from Social Security beneficiaries revealed that even women who had the same education and years of work experience as did men still received less total retirement income. The single biggest factor affecting women's retirement income was marital status. Women who were currently and continuously married had higher levels of retirement income than never married women and women who had been divorced or widowed. It's a big issue and one I talk about with my female students. I tell them that once they get a job, they need to start planning for retirement.

Another issue that negatively affects women is that they are viewed as the caregivers, whether it's for children, the ill, or the elderly. My research with [Dr. Jonathan Marx](#) looked at grandparents (usually grandmothers) raising grandchildren. We found that women sometimes sacrifice their own financial well-being and health to care for others. When men take on caregiver roles, they may experience similar consequences. There are gendered jobs and roles in society, and people with female jobs and roles are disadvantaged. That's something voting hasn't changed.

Q: If the 19th Amendment hadn't passed, how do you think your life would be different?

A: I probably wouldn't be a professor if we hadn't gotten the right to vote and other legislation to prevent sexual discrimination in the workplace. It's hard to celebrate Women's Equality Day when there is still so much inequality. Women won't get equality unless men get equality. When we can celebrate human equality day, it will be a happy day.

If you would like to continue the conversation, e-mail Solomon at solomonj@winthrop.edu or call 803/323-4658.

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