

Revisiting the Gender Issues: *The Good Girls Revolt* by Lynn Povich

- Daisy

Abstract: The awakening of women to sex-discrimination has been on the rise since Renaissance resulting into revolutionary writings by them. Lynn Povich, who was the first ever female Senior Editor at "Newsweek" magazine of the United States, has come out with her new book *The Good Girls Revolt* in which she chronicles the story of how the women of "Newsweek" came together to sue the publication for gender discrimination in the 1970's. In this book, she documents how after months of secret plotting, she and 45 other women sued *Newsweek* for gender discrimination, the first lawsuit of its kind. My paper would elaborate in detail how the first sex-discrimination lawsuit in the history of media shaped the modern workplace at the 'Newsweek' and how the struggle must go on because the struggle is not just 'to get something' but to understand how something can be an institutional issue rather than a personal flaw keeping one from getting ahead.

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20th century has witnessed an extraordinary transformation of women's opportunities and outcomes both in and outside the household. By many measures, the status of women and girls has improved significantly over the last 50 years. They have achieved higher rates of literacy and education, increased their per capita income, and risen to prominent roles in professional and political spheres. Moreover, the networks of women at national and global level, have succeeded in putting women's concerns on the global agenda and catalyzed the creation of legal and institutional mechanisms to address these concerns. National institutions for the advancement of women have been established in nearly every country around the world. They include offices, commissions, agencies and ministries on the status of women. As a result, there has really been a boost in the status of women and the world has observed women rising in every field. If we consider 'writing', we come across eminent women writers right from Harlem Renaissance woman Jessie Fauset (literary editor of *The Crisis* and writer of many articles and novels), to Pulitzer Prize winners like - Gwendolyn Brooks (the African American poet) and Alice Walker; and Nobel Laureates Selma Lagerlof (the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature), and Toni Morrison (the African American woman writer). One wonders whether these world famous women writers had to face discrimination at any stage in their lives. But one such great writer exposes the truth about herself and her colleagues in a book which was released in September this year. Lynn Povich, the first ever female Senior Editor at weekly news

magazine *Newsweek* of the United States, has come out with her new book *The Good Girls Revolt* in which she chronicles the story of how the women of "Newsweek" came together to sue the publication for gender discrimination in the 1970's. The book opens and closes with the plight of several women working there 'today' who are astonished to find themselves facing obstacles such as the ones that were supposed to have been overcome forty years ago. Lynn Povich is an award-winning journalist who has spent more than 40 years in the news business. After graduating from Vassar, she began her career as a secretary in the Paris Bureau of *Newsweek* magazine, rising to become a reporter and writer in New York. In 1970, she was one of 46 women who sued the magazine for sex discrimination, the first women in the media to sue. Five years later, she was appointed the first woman Senior Editor in *Newsweek's* history. Lynn became Editor-in-Chief of *Working Woman* magazine in 1991, and in 1996, she joined MSNBC.com as East Coast Managing Editor, overseeing the internet content of NBC News and MSNBC Cable programs and personalities. A recipient of the Matrix Award for Magazines, Lynn serves on the Advisory Boards of the International Women's Media Foundation and the Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. In the 'meticulously reported and highly readable account of a pivotal time in the women's movement', Lynn not only gives a narrative account of how 46 young women at *Newsweek* filed an EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) complaint in 1970 charging the management with 'systematic discrimination' against them in hiring and promotion, but also tells the tale of young women working at *Newsweek* today, the kinds of obstacles they are facing and their confusion about why they're not getting ahead. 'Discrimination' is isolating or restricting one group from enjoying or using opportunities that exist for the other group. 'Sex discrimination' (or Sexism) refers to beliefs and attitudes in relation to an individual's gender. It is the adverse action that is performed against another human being. Women discrimination at the 'work place' is demonstrated in various forms. For instance, it starts with harassment sexually, to the exclusion of women from the old boys club where decisions concerning serious issues are made. Working in a universe that is mainly taken over by male decision makers and their developed activities, women experience a number of barriers impeding their surge to the top of their careers. These are exactly the barriers the three young women Jessica Bennett, Jesse Ellison, and Sarah Ball are experiencing in the year 2009, when the novel opens up.

Jessica Bennett, who grew up in the era of Girl Power in the 1980's was always told by everybody that there was no limit to what she could accomplish. Always a student of merit in the best institutions, she was accepted in the university of her first choice - University of Southern California. But when she heard that Boston University offered a stronger journalism programme, she joined it and became the recipient of the single internship offered by the Boston Globe. She got a job at the *Newsweek* and for the first time in life, encountered problems and obstacles she could not explain. Jesse Ellison, a graduate from the

Columbia University's School of Journalism also got an internship on the foreign language editions of *Newsweek* and was hired full time when she graduated with her master's degree in June 2008. But now, a year later, she too was struggling to move ahead at *Newsweek*. Their third friend Sarah Ball, a Culture reporter at *Newsweek*, also becomes infuriated after reading an article on how there were no women writers in the media offices. So, in the fall of 2009, the three girls share their experiences and find they aren't getting their articles published and they definitely aren't getting the promotions they think they deserve, after working for the *Newsweek* magazine so many years, whereas the guys with lesser experience were getting better assignments and faster promotions. This is 21st century and they are shocked because they grew up thinking they could do anything in the workforce in the present times. The common thing between them is that they never were 'feminists'. None had taken a women's studies course because 'gender wasn't really an issue.'^(x) They were so used to being equal that when they encounter sexism, they don't know what it is or what to do. They are confused because like many girls all over the world today, they cannot fathom that 'discrimination' is what they are facing. According to them, they are living in the post-feminist era and sex wars have ended long ago. So, when they were not given assignments according to their status, they thought that they were not 'good enough'. As Jessica says,

May be it's a female tendency to turn inward and blame yourself, but I never thought about sexism. We had gotten to the workforce and then something suddenly changed and we didn't know what it was. After all, we had always accomplished everything we had set out to do, so naturally we would think *we* were doing something wrong – not that there *was* something wrong. It was us, not it. (xii), *The Good Girls Revolt*)

But after discovering and identifying the struggle of their seniors four decades ago, everything becomes crystal clear and they have no objection in being called feminists, rather they are proud to be so. The 1940's and 1950's were a period of growing prosperity, incipient suburban sprawl and a baby boom that kept the ladies fully occupied. A woman's place was considered strictly at home especially after marriage. If the women were hired at all, they were given a lot less and often were treated as sexual fodder. So, in the 1960's, when this 'tail end of the old generation' entered the jobs, they were the polite, perfectionist 'good girls' who never showed their drive or their desires around men. Now they started 'becoming mad women, discovering and confronting their own ambitions, a quality praised in men but stigmatized – still – in women.' (11, *The Good Girls Revolt*) In the 1960s, the newsroom was purely a male dominated area that even the most obviously talented woman couldn't penetrate. Neither her degree from a reputed Institute of Journalism nor her stellar writing skills could save her from being passed up by a lesser qualifying man. This was the acceptable practice the author and her colleagues lived with. At both the reputed weekly magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, only men were hired as writers. Women were almost always hired on the mail desk or as fact checkers and rarely promoted to reporter or writer. This went on

until they realized that their problem that had no name was nothing but sexism. Just like women today discover that post-feminism isn't really 'post', they discovered that civil rights didn't include women's rights. So, the *Newsweek* women secretly made strategies for months, whispering behind closed doors, gathering together in the ladies' room and meeting at each other's apartments at night. Their number increased and they hired a lawyer. Now, it was just a question of 'when?' Suddenly they came to know that their own magazine was about to do a cover story on the women's liberation movement. And the editors wanting a woman to write that story surprised everybody with hiring Helen Dudar, a star writer not of the *Newsweek* but of the *New York Post* and wife of a top writer of the *Newsweek* to do the piece. The women at the *Newsweek* considered it the best time and decided to announce their lawsuit exactly on the day the *Newsweek's* cover story titled 'Women in Revolt' came on the stands. They knew that worse than being sued, the publicity would mortify the magazine's editors, who prided themselves on the progressive views and pro-civil rights coverage that put *Newsweek* on the map in the 1960's. As the issue with the cover story 'Women in Revolt' hit newsstands on the fateful Monday morning of March 16, 1970, forty six of *Newsweek's* female employees filed the complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under the charge that they had been 'systematically discriminated against in both hiring and promotion and forced to assume subsidiary role' due entirely to their gender. Their lawyer Eleanor Holmes Norton, the assistant legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union stated in the packed press conference waving a copy of the magazine:

It is ironic that while *Newsweek* considers women's grievances newsworthy enough for such major coverage, it continues to maintain a policy of discrimination against the women on its own staff.... She pointed out that although the women were graduates of top colleges, held advanced degrees, and published in major news journals, *Newsweek's* caste system relegates women with such credentials to research jobs almost exclusively and interminably. (3, *The Good Girls Revolt*)

This action had the desired effect. All the reputed newspapers *New York Times*, *London Times*, *London Daily Express*, and others were full of the news about *Newsweek's* women in revolt. Here's an example of the news which the *New York's Daily News* published with the title "News hens Sue Newsweek of 'Equal Rights'". It began like this:

Forty-six women on the staff of Newsweek magazine, most of them young and most of them pretty, announced today they were suing the magazine. (2, *The Good Girls Revolt*)

For most of those middle-class ladies, standing up for their rights marked the first time they had done anything political or feminist. But it proved to be the radicalizing act that gave them confidence and courage to find themselves and stake their claim. It was the first sex-discrimination lawsuit in the history of media, and it gained prolific news coverage around the world — some of which was itself appallingly emblematic of

the sort of culturally overlooked sexism at the heart of the lawsuit. Though in the 1960s, the feminists had scored several important legal victories such as the Equal Pay Act (1963), the Civil Rights Act (1964) and an executive order prohibiting sex discrimination in hiring and promotion by federal contractors (1967); the *Newsweek* case proved to be path breaking in terms of impact on the law and the society. To quote Eleanor Holmes Norton:

It encouraged other women to come forward, it had an effect on journalism, and it had a wide-ranging effect on women. Journalists had to write about it, and because the women were so extraordinary, because the case was so clearly one of blatant, unmitigated discrimination, it made people understand discrimination against women in an important way. (9, *The Good Girls Revolt*)

This case proved to be all the more important by the following facts. Just two months after this case, 96 women at *Time Inc.* filed a sex discrimination complaint and in the next few years, women sued their employers at the *Reader's Digest*, *Newsday*, the *Washington Post* and other popular Newspapers/Magazines. Six women at the *New York Times* filed the similar charges on behalf of 550 women in 1974. In 1975, sixteen women at NBC initiated a class action lawsuit covering 2600 present and past employees. This was how the courageous actions of the good girls of *Newsweek* changed the face of journalism forever. And any working person can understand that this was not at all that easy. This book is not a sugar-coated tale of girl power. It is an honest account of the struggle before, during and after the lawsuit that did not have fairytale results either. After a less than successful settlement was reached, many of the women still could not get their writing into the pages of the paper and others could not handle the pressures of the job. And though the writers and reporters were supportive to them, but as it goes in many organizations the real discriminatory behavior resided with middle management—in their cases - the senior editors who were more than difficult, often subjecting the women's work to harsh rewrites and edits making it impossible to get their work published. The women also faced internal battles - as they fought their bosses, they were also fighting amongst themselves and within themselves. These women were pioneers, but even Povich admits in the book that a lawsuit could not instantly change an internal script that the women and their mothers had lived by all their lives. So, they had to sue again after overcoming the obstacles and got success in the end. Then they got everything they asked for: that one-third of the writers and editors be women and very importantly that one-third of the researchers be men, to show that it wasn't a woman's job. Their last demand was for a woman senior editor and they got that too. The author herself was appointed to that position in 1975. Much in the book can be a bit shocking for the modern day woman who in the worst of situations could never imagine what female journalists went through in those days: men openly harassing women sexually in the newsroom, qualified women being passed up for male

interns and women being sectioned off to the back of the books simply because men could not tolerate a female opinion. Though the *Newsweek* suit was groundbreaking, decades later it had all but disappeared from the magazine's institutional knowledge. In 2009, amid frustrations of their own, the aforesaid three young women started to investigate tales of the gender-based lawsuit against their employers some 40 years earlier. Two of these three women - Jesse Ellison (a *Newsweek* writer), and Jessica Bennett (now the executive editor of Tumblr), - find the author and talk to her about women, work, and feminism - then and now. Povich informs them that in the 70's, it was assumed that women neither have the capability nor talent to go beyond research and fact checking. This tradition of gender discrimination in news magazine actually started when the weekly news magazine *TIME* was launched in America by Henry Luce and Brit Hadden in 1923. From the very beginning, the editorial staff included girls known as checkers who verified names, dates and facts. This kind of group-journalism model separated all the editorial functions: the reporters sent in long files from the field; the writers compiled the information and wrote the story; and the researchers checked the facts. Only lady assistants were hired as fact checkers, which according to *Newsweek's* Editor-in-Chief Oz Elliott, "was a liberating thing for young fledgling women out of college because they could get into publishing without being stenographers or secretaries." (17, *The Good Girls Revolt*)

The Good Girls Revolt which is based on the real life experience of women in the 1970's becomes all the more important because this kind of history is not discussed enough with the girls of this generation. The young girls in most of the countries today are at liberty to do what they wish, but it never occurs to them how many struggles women had to go through to achieve this freedom. Also, such books can serve as a corrective to the frustrated young females who experience sexism. As said before, the girls didn't even think of themselves as feminist until they encountered discrimination themselves. That's how the said three women at the *Newsweek* today were successful in publishing the four page story titled "Are we there yet?" in the *Newsweek* issue of March 22, 2010. The article questions how much has actually changed for women since 1970, not only at the magazine, but at the workplace in general. Among other things, they cited statistics in their article to show how female employees were getting less salaries than their male counterparts even now. Despite the fact that the last century has witnessed a boost in the status of women, such discrimination still exists. Discrimination refers to any kind of prejudice, biasness or favoritism on the basis of disability, race, age, sex, sexuality, pregnancy and marital status in employment. No person should be treated less favorably than any other on the basis of the specified issues above. That's why many countries have already implemented Equal Opportunity Act, making it against the law to treat anybody unfairly. The *Newsweek* women filed their complaint under EEOC (i.e., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) of the U.S.A. which is the federal agency in charge of enforcing laws that are

against job discrimination. It was created to enforce provisions of the civil rights Acts of 1964. Therefore, through this commission, many women have had a chance to work freely and get promotions to any position as per their achievements. But we can very well understand that the commissions like EEOC can do nothing on their own if they are not approached for the reasons they are created. Let's take India, how many girls knock the doors of law for justice. Look at the following news of Feb. 2012, where the Director of 'Media Information and Communication Center' of India is admitting the truth herself:

“Many women journalists are deprived of top positions in organizations due to gender discrimination ... many women journalists are quitting because of various reasons, including gender inequality and less pay. A case study reveals women who go on maternity leave are likely to lose their jobs in 29% of media houses and are unlikely to get jobs again.” (Sahai)

But surely, women who struggle for their rights get victory in the end. Here's an example: 80 Women of Madhya Pradesh (India) were deprived from appearing in interviews in the civil services examinations held between 2003 and 2009, despite having scored higher marks than their male counterparts in their respective categories. (John) They showed courage and filed a suit against Public Service Commission and won their case. The commission not only recommended all eligible women candidates for fresh selection process but also cancelled the selection of all ineligible male candidates who got appointed for deputy collector's post due to this discrepancy. We have read and heard a lot about Feminism and Women Empowerment. It has become the favorite theme of the seminars, conferences and symposiums. But we must understand that it isn't all about delivering speeches. It's definitely not going against or fighting with our male counterparts. It's about asking for our due and getting it just as the *Newsweek* women and several of their followers did in USA. The Gender Officer of International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Pamela Moriniere rightly says:

“The failure over the years by media organizations and journalists' groups to properly focus on rights of women amounts to a scandal of neglect that cannot go on.” (Moriniere).

Of course walking on the less travelled path is never easy. Even the 'good girls' suffered many sleepless nights and saw nightmares of losing their jobs. But the women remained undeterred and moved forward with the suit. The rest is history and Wow! How fascinating and reverberating the history is! The special thing about the book is Povich's eloquent storytelling and intimate attention to detail. She thoughtfully weaves her colleagues' childhood anecdotes and family histories into the page so that these women are not just intangible characters of history, but everyday working people. The details help us to appreciate the sheer boldness of these women to go against one of the most prestigious papers in history. And though the effect of the lawsuit has been mixed on their lives, today, in their sixties and seventies, all those women who revolted in 1970, are proud of their historic role. For all of them, they say, 'It was an

experience that changed our perspectives about ourselves, about men and women – and womanhood – and about justice and ambition.' (201) For instance, Jane Bryant Quinn, one of the former employees of the magazine says that she loves and respects all those women who protested because,

It wouldn't have happened if the movement had been left to polite girls like me, who said 'please' and 'thank you' and imagined we could advance, in a man's world, on merit alone. We and our daughters and our granddaughters are all standing on the shoulders of those tough and insistent personalities who wouldn't be appeased. Equality is never given, it is taken – and they took it for all of us. (215, *The Good Girls Revolt*)

Lynn Povich's *The Good Girls Revolt* which informs us all about a landmark lawsuit, its bittersweet impact on the women involved and what has--and hasn't changed, encourages not only women but 'all' who face discrimination of any kind, anywhere and at any point of time. The novel can be said to be a provoking chronicle of the courage behind a change that we thoughtlessly live out without appreciation or regard. Of course, at times, we glance over the history makers, but *The Good Girls Revolt* beckons us to stop, remember and carry it on. Povich realizes that young women today are ignorant of the importance of the *Newsweek* story because they don't really understand the history. That's why she says that this is a book for our generation and for our sons and daughters. It is part history and part current events. Women have made a great deal of progress but equal rights, like civil rights, have yet to be won. She has put the story of three contemporary female journalists in order to not-so-gently remind us of the generation gap. One of the challenges before the new generation, even in the developed countries, is to recognize that sexism still exists and they have to challenge assumptions and fight more complicated battles at the workplace today. The book about the revolt of the good girls invokes a feminist awakening in all the girls of this generation. The message is quite clear in the concluding remarks of Povich herself,

In telling our history, I hope our daughters come to understand that sisterhood is powerful, that good girls can revolt, and that change can – and must – happen. (222, *The Good Girls Revolt*)

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