

# AAPA Women's Interest Caucus and the Equal Rights Amendment

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All of us witness history every day – our personal and family history, our PA professional history, our community's history and our country's history. On January 15, 2020, we witnessed an important day in the history of our country's history. The Commonwealth of Virginia became the 38<sup>th</sup> state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, meeting the constitutional requirement for ratification of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

**Background:** U.S. women won the \*right to vote\* a century ago in 1920. The fight for \*equal rights regardless of sex\* is nearly as old. The original ERA was written in 1923 by members of the National Woman's Party. "The amendment failed to gain much widespread support in the 1920s partly because it divided members of the women's movement along class lines. Working women at the time were focused on gaining workplace protections for women and children and some were concerned that an Equal Rights Amendment would endanger laws that made factories safer and limited the number of hours women could work."

The ERA was finally passed March 22, 1972 by the 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress due to the persistent work of Michigan Congresswoman Martha Griffiths. She had been working on the issue since her election to the House of Representatives in 1955.

The ERA reads as follows: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Sex meaning women AND men.

Because Constitutional amendments must be ratified by three-fourths of the states (38), state voting on ratification began. Within months of the Congressional passage, 30 states had ratified the ERA. When Congress passed the ERA, they also added a 1979 deadline (later extended to 1982) by

which 38 states would have to ratify the amendment. Cultural wars and groups like Stop ERA (founded by Phyllis Schlafly) slowed the ratification momentum. By 1982, 35 states had ratified the ERA – three states short of the required 38.

Despite the deadline, activism on the ERA continued; 26 states adopted their own state ERAs. ERA activists continued to focus attention to the need for a Constitutional amendment. Nevada ratified the ERA in 2017. Illinois ratified the ERA in 2018. Virginia ratified the ERA on January 15, 2020.

Because Congress added and extended the deadline, they also have the authority to remove that deadline (Article V, U.S. Constitution). There is a bill (H.J.Res. 79) in the U.S. House of Representatives (sponsored by Rep. Jackie Speirer) to eliminate the deadline and there is a bill (S.J.Res. 6) in the U.S. Senate (sponsored by Senators Ben Cardin and Lisa Murkowski) to eliminate the deadline.

There are also questions about a few states that have rescinded or attempted to rescind their ERA ratification. The courts will decide whether rescission is legal. So, the jury is still out on whether the ERA (even though ratified by the required 38 states) will ever be part of the U.S. Constitution.

**PA History Related to the ERA:** The following article from the July 1980 edition of AAPA News, the official newsletter of the American Academy of Physician Assistants at the time, shows PA attention to the ERA. The Women's Interest Caucus, an officially recognized AAPA caucus at the time, worked within the House of Delegates to adopt policy related to boycotting non-ERA ratified states as Annual Conference sites.

At the Seventh annual conference in Florida, a small group of women interested in women's issues within and outside of the Academy met and formed the Women's Interest Caucus (WIC). Two meetings of the Caucus were scheduled at the Eighth Annual Conference and the turnout of interested PAs showed that concern for issues affecting women and health providers was growing.

The first meeting of the WIC in New Orleans brought about 50 attendees. The tone of the meeting was friendly but earnest. Attendees introduced themselves and spoke briefly about issues pertinent to women in the Academy and in the health care field. Many common concerns emerged: the lack of women in leadership positions in the Academy, the purported salary inequities between male and female PAs, and the importance of studying women as healthcare providers and consumers.



The attendees agreed to postpone discussion of other issues and concentrated on the issue which had concerned a number of people for many years -- the planning of annual conferences to be held repeatedly in non-ERA ratified States. A resolution brought before the 1979 House of Delegates to boycott non-ERA-ratified states for future annual conferences had been defeated.

At the May 25, 1980, House of Delegates session, a resolution that the Academy endorse the ERA was defeated. Members of the WIC were concerned that a resolution yet to be considered by the HOD, again suggesting the boycott of non- ERA-ratified states as annual conference sites, would also be defeated. It was decided at the first WIC meeting that intense lobbying of delegates might influence the outcome of the upcoming vote.

This lobbying/education campaign seemed to have paid off because on May 26 the House of Delegates passed the resolution to not plan conferences in non-ERA ratified States after present contracts (through 1984) had been fulfilled. The states which had not ratified the ERA were Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, and Virginia.

The second meeting of the WIC was considerably more upbeat than the first. Over and over again, attendees stated that they had seen the power they could wield when working through formal channels such as educating

members and delegates. Small discussion groups then met and focused their discussion and comments on the other areas of concern. With the new awareness of the machinations of working within the Academy structure, the women focused on ways to involve more women in the structure, i.e., becoming involved in constituent chapter committees. The WIC maintains a mailing list of interested PAs. Please address correspondence and questions to Liza Solomon, 8272 Lark Brown Road, Ellicott City, Maryland 21043."

If any readers have additional information on the history of the AAPA Women's Interest Caucus, we encourage you to share it with the PA History Society at [contactus@pahx.org](mailto:contactus@pahx.org).