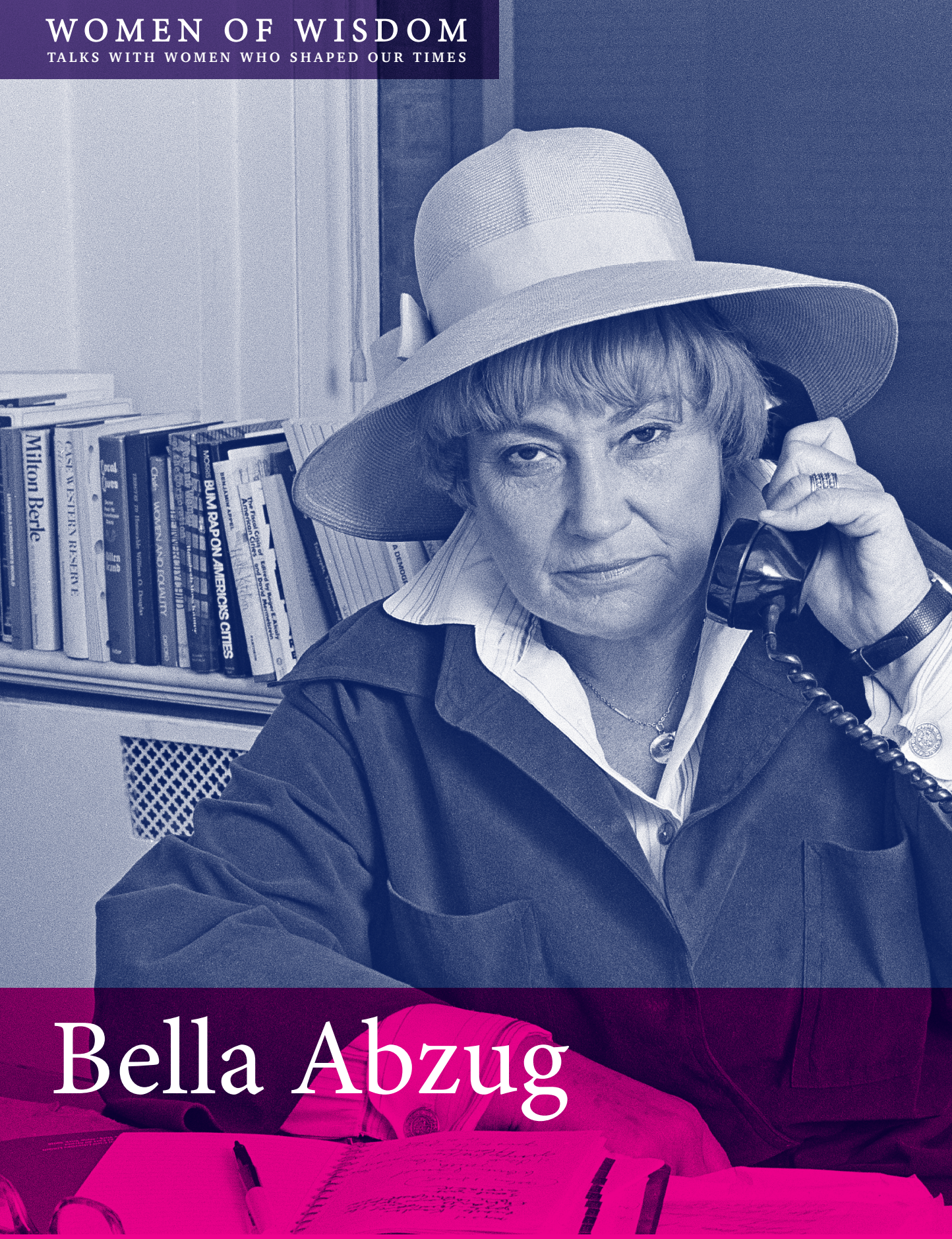
WOMEN OF WISDOM

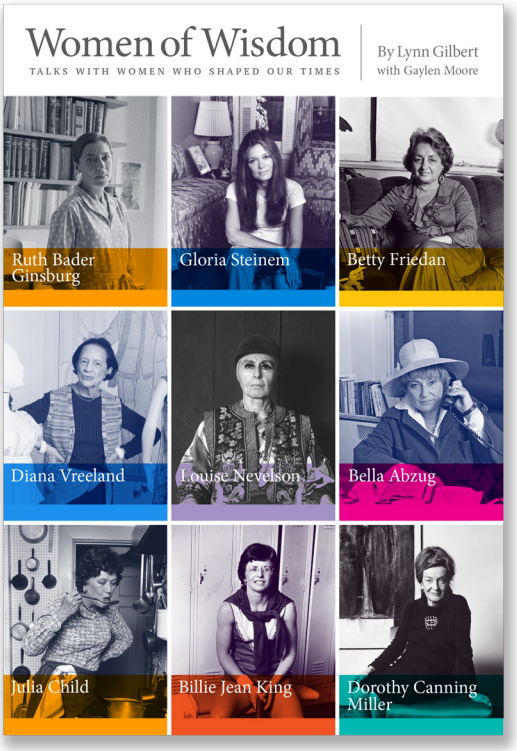
TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES



Bella Abzug

By Lynn Gilbert

with Gaylen Moore



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Dedication

To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.

— Lynn Gilbert

Bella Abzug in her office, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

Bella Abzug

(born 1920, Bronx, New York—died 1998, New York City) was a lawyer and politician who has been an outspoken crusader for peace and human rights, a leader in the political struggle for equal rights and opportunities for women, and an advocate of responsive and open government. She was a United States representative from New York from 1971 until 1977, the first representative to run with a strong feminist plank. She founded the National Women's Political Caucus, Women's Strike for Peace, and the New Democratic Coalition.

WHEN I FIRST RAN for Congress, people said to me, “How long have you been a feminist?” And I said, “I suppose from the day I was born.” I was born in 1920, the year that women got the vote. I come from a home of immigrants and like many other immigrants, my parents came to this country because they were either persecuted religiously or they needed economic opportunity or had no political freedom. So my parents raised us to feel for the right of all people and imbued in us a deep sense of social justice.

I grew up during the Depression and my life was very much affected by it. No matter what the hardships, my parents believed deeply in America and in their lives and the lives of their children. As children we believed we had to influence our own lives, not only by making something of ourselves, but also by making sure that society would make for us and do for us as a result of our influencing and affecting it. So for all these reasons, I have been a socially conscious human being from the day I can remember.

I can remember my first political struggle. As a kid I was a very active Zionist and I used to go on the subways of New York City and collect money for the Jewish National Fund and make little speeches when the train stopped at the station, to explain to people why there should be a homeland or a state for the Jewish people.

It was hard. A lot of things were not available to us. We had a modest life, a humble life, and also there was a difference between what boys got and what girls got. I didn’t accept that. I wanted to ride a bike. But my folks thought I should not have a bike, it wasn’t safe for girls, and so I used to ride other people’s bikes. I wanted to play all the games that I wanted to play—ccheckers in the streets of New York—and I did. I went to Hebrew school. Fewer young girls went than boys.

My folks were very good to me. My father died when I was thirteen. My mother was fantastic. She always backed me up and thought everything I did was great, and that’s probably responsible for much of my confidence and sense of self. When she came to this country she was very young. She was studying and doing well in elementary school. She wanted to be a teacher, but her father took her out

of school and she became a bookkeeper in his store. When my father died, she always felt that had she had a profession as a teacher, she would have been much better off financially. So she was very strong for educating my sister and myself. We went to public schools and then we went to Hunter College, which had no tuition. We would never have been able to go to college if we couldn't get a free education. Then I wanted to go to law school and my mother was very supportive.

I decided I was going to be a lawyer when I was eleven years old. I can't tell you that I had a role model of a woman lawyer because I really didn't. There were some, a few, but I didn't really know who they were. I made up my mind that you could fight for social justice more effectively as a lawyer and so I became a lawyer.

Since there were only a few women lawyers, I knew that it was going to be very rough. I applied to Harvard Law School because I heard it was the best law school. Harvard wrote back and said they didn't accept women. I was outraged. I always tell this story because it's so cute about my mother. I turned to my mother and I said, "Can you believe this?" I always say "I turned to my mother," because in those days there was no women's movement so you always turned to your mother. Now I always say, my two daughters have the best of both worlds. They're able to turn to me and the women's movement at the same time. But anyway, I turned to my mother and said, "This is an outrage." (I always had a decent sense of outrage.) My mother said, "What do you want to go to Harvard for? It's far away. You haven't got the carfare anyhow. Go to Columbia. It's near home. They'll probably give you a scholarship and it only costs five cents on the subway." And I did that. I got a scholarship and it only cost five cents on the subway. I always say that's when I became an advocate of low-cost public mass transportation.

But I became a lawyer, too. I was interested in the labor field. I graduated from law school at the top of my class and I was on *Law Review,* which meant that I was supposed to have my pick of the top law jobs on the market, but when I went for a job, law firms asked me questions like could I type and they offered me

salaries that were lower than the salaries of the clients they represented. It was dreadful. And in the court, it was more dreadful. Judges behaved outrageously toward women. Lawyers and clients were similarly disposed. The labor field was full of male union leaders. My firm sent me to a big labor board hearing and everybody figured I was some secretary. After the negotiations were over they came up and told me what they'd been saying behind my back. When they got to know me they realized I was a hardheaded and competent person but it was a struggle all the way. I practiced law every day from the day I got out of law school until the day I ran for public office.

When I first came on the political scene, many people thought I just stepped out of the kitchen right into Congress. They thought I just decided to run for Congress and won by a fluke or something. I didn't. I had a long history before I came to Congress. I was an activist, active as a lawyer and as a citizen in the civil liberties, civil rights, peace, and women's movements. Politics was my extracurricular work.

I worked in a lot of campaigns and I did a lot of issue building and tried to pressure candidates to take positions on issues I was committed to. Then when they did, I would help mobilize large numbers of people and support for them. I helped in the campaigns of a lot of politicians who promised change, yet I saw little change.

I was very fed up with the war in Vietnam, very anguished. We were making some progress but it wasn't going anywhere. There was the invasion of Cambodia. Here we were working . . . My mother used to say, "I can't understand it. You work every day and night for peace and we still have war." She had such confidence in me that she figured if I was working at it, it should have been ended. But that's it, we were working day and night and day and night and it was getting worse. The movement was getting bigger, but our representatives were not doing enough in Congress.

I never expected to run for Congress. It was not part of my game plan or anything like that. My decision came from years of frustration and disappointment and will,

I guess. Finally one of the politicians I had helped to elect said to me, “Well, you always criticize. Why don’t you do it yourself?” I said, “You know, you’ve got a point there. I think I’ll do it.”

I ran for Congress as a representative from New York City in 1970. Everyone was startled by my platform. I said, “I’m going to Congress because I think Congress needs women. There’s no diversity there, and I’m going to fight for women’s rights.” My campaign slogan was “This woman’s place is in the House—the House of Representatives.” That’s where that slogan came from, from my campaign. Well, Congress, the media, they all went bananas. That was a shock. Nobody had ever run on a women’s rights plank in their platform. Other women in Congress were for women’s programs but they didn’t run on them. I was the first organized feminist to run for political office, and although my platform dealt with such issues as the needs of the cities and ending the war in Vietnam, women’s issues were prominently emphasized.

So when I went to Congress in 1971, I fought for equal rights for women, yes, but I fought to end the war in Vietnam and for my city to get its share of the tax dollar and for open government and against the seniority system. I’ve been fighting that male seniority system all my life. I was also the first to call for the impeachment of Mr. Nixon. I didn’t worry about taking risks. I believed in things and went to Congress to change the things I believed in, even though it was difficult until these views became more popular.

I’m not a believer in utopia. I think change will take place, but not without tremendous conflict. Women cannot secure their economic or political needs under our present priorities. There’s no room for us in the system as presently organized. This is one of the critical problems. There wasn’t any plan for us and there’s still no plan for women in this country.

Most government policies were developed when women had different lives and families had different lives than they do now. If you have a huge military budget and a synthetic fuel program, you can’t provide the services that women require,

even equal pay for equal work. There's no room for that in the budget. The money has gone into other things. That's why President Carter fired me in 1979 as head of the Women's Commission, because our committee said to him, "You can't cut the little that women have in the budget. The majority of women in this country are suffering. They are the majority of the poor, the majority of the unemployed, the majority of the old; they can hardly survive in this period of economic crisis." Carter's answer was that economic policies were not women's issues.

Culturally and sociologically, the women's movement has made an enormous impact. Men and women accept the equality of women as an ideal. We're on the threshold of enormous change but we've made little progress economically or politically, and until we do, we're going to be nowhere.

This country unfortunately is a fragile democracy. Our sovereign control is wrested from us if the people withdraw from participation, and many have withdrawn at this point. The women's movement is out there but it has to get mobilized on a political and economic level. It has to get very stubburn and say, "All right, we gave you a chance. We've begged, we've pleaded, we've prayed for our rights. We've supported men for office who made promises and then broke them. We now have to make up our minds not to do that anymore." Women have to promote their own interests. We must develop our own independent political power to show our clout. We must be able to develop a women's political machine that can deliver a vote or withhold one when it counts.

The American women's movement is no longer one organization or one ideology or one lifestyle. It's affected every home, every life. Women should not feel guilty about being wives and mothers. If they love it, that's what they should be doing, that's where they should stay. I'm all for it. One of the first bills I introduced in Congress was Social Security for homemakers. I knew there would always be women who were going to stay in their homes. They should get some protection for their old age. Everybody said, "Oh, she's crazy again." It was a nonsubject when I introduced it, but now Congress is talking about it seriously.

If women work, either because they must earn a living or because they want to, then they should be able to do that, too. That's what it's all about, the right of choice. I want everybody to have the right to do what they want to.

My private life is a conventional one. I have a conventional nuclear family, I'm married thirty-six years, I have two daughters, I'm a monogamous type, stuff like that. But it is unconventional in other respects. I was married when I was in law school and I had my kids and I continued working.

Everybody in politics has to make sacrifices, but first of all, I didn't run for office until I was fifty. My kids were grown, my older daughter was twenty, my younger was seventeen, they were in school. My husband was alone a lot. That was a little hard, but it's hard, I think, for every political family. I hated living in Washington alone. There was no one to talk to.

I have been a working mother all my life. That has never changed. I wanted everything. I wanted to be a wife, a mother, a lawyer, an active citizen. And all the things I wanted to do, I became. I never intended to become a politician but I became one and I want to be one.

Recently I've been traveling around the country. I've been in most every state and people listen if someone leads them toward the truth. But they need the leadership. I tell them that this is their country, it belongs to them, it's their institutions, their taxes, and they have to participate and exercise their sovereign rights to find the vehicles of pressure and to influence the course of this country. No change ever took place in this country without pressure from grassroots movements, nothing; whether it's ending the war in Vietnam, or sexual discrimination, it always comes from outside of government institutions.

It isn't enough for individual groups to organize only around their own needs. They must also coalesce with others who share the same ideas or have similar needs. Women's issues are not separate from the interests of everyone in this country. You cannot eliminate sexism unless you also eliminate racism, poverty,

and institutional violence at home and abroad—all go together. The women's movement is therefore a humanist movement.

I think women are the most dynamic, moving force today. They have enormous needs, they have a majority, and they can't make it in society as it's now moving. They therefore have to be a force for changing priorities. It's absolutely critical. They will come to see that, little by little. They are beginning to see that now.

When I go around the country talking like this to people, I get a terrific response. I feel a responsibility to speak out and organize and activate because I believe every individual can make some difference. I believe I can make a little difference in the atmosphere needed for change. I've

seen that through pressure and education, people came to understand and they have changed, and have changed government policy.

Over the years I've become very sensitive to an audience and a mood and I sense if I'm reaching them. I watch them carefully and I see what they're interested in and what they're reacting to. It's like playing different chords. I always try to get my message across, but in different ways, with reason, with emotion, with humor—it depends. That's something that people who lecture develop. With me, much is instinctive, but a great deal is also from experience. Don't forget, I've been making speeches since I was a little kid. To do the work of a member of Congress or to be a public figure takes skill. You also should know what you're doing, it helps to be smart, to be knowledgeable, to be a hard worker, and to be determined. You have to get up every morning as I did when I was in the Congress, for example, and say, "What am I going to do today or otherwise they're going to do it to me?"

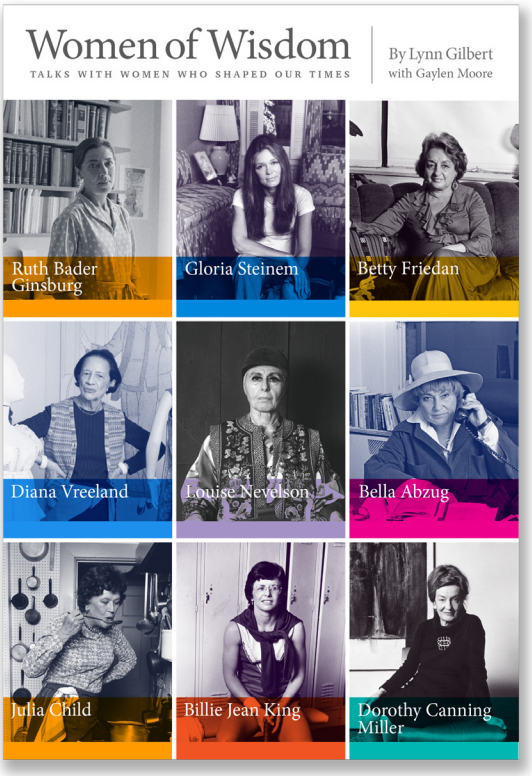
It's very hard to get yourself to do that every day. It's like being a Spartan. I believe that what keeps me going is my idealism, my belief that this country belongs to the people and that no power structure should block our rights. I don't do things for my own satisfaction alone. I want to see change in my lifetime, yes, but I want to see my daughters have a chance to flower without having to battle

every inch of the way.

It hurts to be attacked the way I've been for taking forward positions or speaking more strongly than some. To give some leadership, you have to take positions on the issues that are ahead of the moment. You feel pain and you feel rejected, but you go on because you believe you're right. People tell me that my caring comes through. I hope so. You have to have a lot of ego and believe in yourself, too, in what you think and what you are.

You see, it is important to point out that although the women in this book may appear to have had easy success, actually these are women who have conducted some kind of struggle around their lives. And most women are conducting a struggle of one kind or another, whether it's a homemaker who wants some value and dignity for her work, or whether it's a widow embarking on a new career, or a working woman pursuing a career, seeking equal pay, or a student pioneering in a field formerly closed to women, or a poor woman seeking to survive and so many seeking control and choice over their bodies and their lives. The only difference is that the women in the book are women who conduct their struggle on more visible and public levels. But everybody is engaged in a struggle today; everybody is examining the human condition, women in particular. That's why there's so much potential strength in this movement, because it touches so many places.

What I try to do is make women feel that there isn't anything they can't do if they want to. And when I speak to them or meet with them, I try to give them that feeling, that this is their right. Whatever they want to do, they have a right to be and a right to expect support from institutions which affect their lives. I also try to awaken young people. This is their future. They're going to be in charge in the year 2000. I tell them that they are the major force for change in this country and that they can change their own lives and the lives of others by acting on that together with other people. When I've finished, I like to think they believe it.



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