Women’s Movement Legacy—Antidote to Despair

Interview with Dorothy Kidd
By B. Jesse Clarke

Dorothy Kidd’s work appears regularly in the academic, popular left, and social movement press. A professor at the department of Media Studies at the University of San Francisco, she has been organizing at the interface of the community and university for 13 years. A media and feminist activist since the early 1970s, she has been producing media, studying the role of the dominant corporate media, and circulating accounts about radical alternative media since that time. She was interviewed in the studios of Radio RP&E.

B. Jesse Clarke: Women’s rights to equal pay, health care, and even contraception were under attack in the 2012 election campaigns. What isn’t much discussed is where and when these rights were won. What were feminist activists struggling for in the ‘60s and ‘70s? What were the issues, and how were they pushing to bring equal rights to women?

Dorothy Kidd: The first thing to say is that there wasn’t a uniform feminist movement. The feminist movement that my students read about is the movement of professional and business women to get seats at the table with the ruling class and large corporations. To some degree they’ve succeeded, so we see more women in boardrooms, more women in politics. (Not as much here as in Europe, Canada, or Australia, but progress has been made.) That was not the aim of the women’s groups I was involved in in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

It was to get recognition for the work that women were already doing—in their homes [raising the next generation], in the community [making the community sustainable, livable], and in the political sphere.

We wanted people to recognize that not only was economic value created by people in waged jobs, but also by unwaged jobs, in what we called the larger “social factory.”

Clarke: Could you give us a summary of some of the major social institutions that were created in that period?

Kidd: Overall, we were making an argument for equal rights for all people, regardless of race and class. Some of the key points we were working toward: explaining that welfare was not something just for needy people but a recognition of the work that women did in the home raising the future generation; extending post secondary education to working class people and having bridging programs for mothers specifically so that they could go to university; expanding afterschool care programs—which women could no longer do at home when they were becoming a bulwark of the waged economy.

In fact, my mother and her generation had fought for daycare. At that time, women did this work for free and it was considered that they were doing it for individual families. My mother’s generation argued, “That’s not true. We’re contributing to the whole society by providing childcare and we should get proper wages and support, so that it is quality daycare, not just institutional warehousing of children.”

One of the other things we were organizing for was domestic workers to be considered as workers.

Clarke: To this day, domestic labor is still excluded from many labor law protections. Can you talk about the relationships between immigrant women doing domestic work and women’s subordination in the domestic and economic sphere?

Kidd: Women were expected to do all of the nurturing and educational work in the family for free, no matter what their class level. In the ‘60s and ‘70s,
another campaign was for nurses to be recognized as professional workers. Before that, they were just considered high society volunteers who did it on the side.

That affects immigrant women because a lot of them came from the Caribbean or the Philippines with nursing training, and they were not given proper wages. They were not considered trained people, just immigrants with domestic skills. So there’s been a whole campaign for nurses and health care workers that continues today. There are strikes every year in San Francisco of nurses and health care workers. (See story on page 73.)

In fact, for the last 30 to 40 years, nurses and health care workers have probably been some of the best organized workers in the United States. Nonetheless, they are still arguing with the false premise that women should do this work for free; or [that] immigrant women should do it for less money.

Clarke: In 2012, California Governor Jerry Brown refused to sign the Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights. When it came time to lay out the cuts to the California state budget, homecare services were at the top of the list.

Kidd: And to the degree that unions and other social movements are not supporting the campaigns of domestic workers and nurses as frontline campaigns, all of us are going to be affected.

Clarke: Do you see a way to make that clear so that women can advance their economic interests in that context?

Kidd: Yes. I would like to turn the debate right on its head and talk more about who’s creating value, and how society’s run, and how we are going to survive. If we started talking about the contribution not only of women but women and men in creating social relationships that are sustainable—an earth that is sustainable—then we can talk specifically about the historic struggles that women, whether they’re organized in women’s movements or within community organizations, have been waging to do just that.

That’s partly what we were trying to do in the ’70s and it’s still going on.

Clarke: Talk about the way in which domestic violence and social violence against women—for instance, calling some kinds of rape “legitimate”—have been submerged and made invisible. Can you take us back to the origins of women’s organizing against violence in the ’60s and ’70s?

Kidd: One way was talking about our experiences of harassment, our experiences of things that were not even recognized as violence against women.

Let me just remind people: “date rape” did not exist as a concept. Nor did rape in marriage. Or the fact that women are systematically violated as an act of war.

It took women talking with one another and recognizing that we share these experiences—they were not just individual violations and we needed to speak about them. We needed to pressure institutions to support women who have been violated, with battered women’s services and rape relief services. We needed to push lawyers, particularly feminist lawyers, because [they were] the only ones who would take on the cases.

We needed to work with teachers to be able to talk to children about this, so that students grew up knowing that they didn’t need to deal with that kind of harassment. We needed to go to the international court, as some women did in the early 1990s, and argue that violence against women at war was a crime.

So we were shifting not only the laws and regulations, we were shifting very fundamental concepts about what it meant to be safe and without violence against you, and we were creating institutions that supported that.
Clarke: To bring it back to economic justice and women, can you talk about where you see hope for that?

Kidd: To me, one of the most important struggles at this point is around domestic workers, for several reasons.

One, they make clear the relationship that is still superimposed, not just on women, but on immigrants, which is that your work supporting society and your community is part of your love, or part of your culture, and therefore, you do it for free. We don’t have to recognize it. And domestic workers, who are overwhelmingly from immigrant backgrounds, say, “That’s a lie! We make society function. If it wasn’t for us, you with the bigger incomes wouldn’t be able to go to work and make the big bucks. We make it possible for you to do that.” That’s one of the most important campaigns going on.

Secondly, to the degree that domestic workers do not have proper wages and are not recognized, it becomes even more possible for ideologues, whether they’re liberal or rightwing, to say, “Oh well, the rest of you can just share austerity. We’re going through fiscal cutbacks and all of us are going to have to tighten our belts,” which is the argument that’s been made for the last 30 or 40 years to make our society work.

So, to the degree that there’s a class of people systematically being told that, the rest of us are subject to that kind of blackmail.

Thirdly, the organizing networks the domestic workers have established are exemplary. [They are working collaboratively] with unionized workers, who don’t necessarily work very well with people fighting around almost unwaged situations. That kind of alliance is important, especially in a period when trade unions represent only 10 percent of the workforce.

Also, they are drawing on the diaspora and getting support from organizations throughout Central America. For me, who’s done communications all my life, it’s also exemplary because they’re using every form of communication: testimonials, storytelling, video analyses, all of those kinds of things. They’re appealing to people not just through their head, but their heart.

Yes, they’ve been turned back at the Sacramento legislature by the governor’s veto but that’s not stopping the campaign because it’s going on from individual homes, where domestics work, to different state legislatures, to Washington, D.C., to considerations with domestic workers in other countries.

It’s a political and an economic campaign; also a social one. I’m sure we’ll find that the connections individual domestic workers make with other domestic workers is probably one of the most profound lessons. As Silvia Federici has said, it is domestic workers who are modeling how to occupy the streets. If you go out during the day to a public park or a cafe, you will see women, mostly brown women with white babies, hanging out together. They’ve provided the visual image of how we can take back the street, the park. So there’s a lot to be learned.

Clarke: Memory and imagination. Amnesia and despair. It seems to me that the antidote to despair about the future is not to forget the past because then you really are isolated in a present where you seem to be powerless. It’s important to remember the powerful moments of the past as a guide towards imagining a positive future. In closing, any lessons you can share?

Kidd: I learned how important it was to get into experiences that were uncomfortable—to deal with power differences between me as a white, middle class person and other people I was working with. I learned that some differences could be bridged, at least temporarily, through working together and that was a profound hopefulness.

The second thing I learned was, I was lucky to have parents with another generation of experience before me who could say, “Why do you think you are unique? We were doing that in the ’30s.” And I remind myself not to say it in the same tone when I’m speaking with my students, but this voice is there saying, “Speak to them about the antecedents, about the experiences that you know were successful, and the important lessons. And that progress is not linear. We go through waves.” Failure experiences are probably as important as successes but we continually need to rehearse our past.

The thing that I think is much more profound now—that we didn’t have in the ’70s, ’80s, or ’90s, is this idea that all of us have stories we need to share with one another. One of the advantages of the Occupy movement is that they got that. They weren’t trying to spin the best story to the media. They were saying, “We’re not going to have an NGO spokesperson or a movement spokesperson tell you about it. You have to talk to each of us.”
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