

1970s civil rights legislation, of interviewing with a man who was attuned to the value of women professionals and, therefore, willing to hire them. Senator Dole provided advice and opportunities for Sheila Bair, as did Texas attorney general John Hill for Elizabeth Lacy, and Jim Thompson for Ilana Rovner. Yet Bair acknowledges that in these earlier days, gender bias often resulted in an “only one girl spot” on government commissions and agencies, leading to the temptation for all the women to compete for that one slot.

Conclusion

A number of Trailblazers consciously set out to establish careers in government. Others hit the hard wall of private firm discrimination and turned to government employment as an early career alternative. Schroeder, fresh out of law school, interviewed with private firms, where it was made clear that there was no interest in hiring women. She was constantly asked if she could type. Schroeder found a welcome at a regional National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) office. The NLRB had a reputation both as one of the best agencies in Washington and as an agency that would hire women. Trailblazer Betty Murphy received friendly advice from a Washington law firm partner to go to the NLRB: “They have the best supervisors in town. . . . Labor law is not the reason. You don’t care about labor law but go to the NLRB and you’ll learn how to write a brief and you’ll learn about government. Both are very important no matter where you live.”

Murphy found the NLRB experience was “terrific.” Four months after being hired she was arguing her first case at the U.S. court of appeals.

The NLRB of the late 1950s and 1960s hired women lawyers, often forty or fifty a year, but there was discrimination in pay grade and in promotions, with few women getting to be supervisors. Until 1975 no woman had risen above GS-15 status (GS-18 was the highest).

Washington is a political town and, according to Murphy, new hiring usually sorted out at half Democratic and half Republican lawyers. Murphy, a Republican, stayed at the NLRB for eighteen months and then went into private practice. When she returned as NLRB chair in 1975, fifteen years after leaving, she was surprised to find that among her earlier “class” of hires, 90 percent of the Democrats were still there. “They made

government a career and the Republicans did not. There was only one Republican . . . who remained.” Her young Democratic friends liked the idea of a good pension, and were perhaps, she thought, more idealistic while Republicans were more entrepreneurial.

New agencies also provided an early workplace for Trailblazers. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), created by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, became operational by 1965. **Sonia Pressman Fuentes**, a cofounder of the National Organization for Women, fresh from positions at the Labor Department and DOJ, joined the EEOC in its earliest months. In her eight years there, Fuentes educated male superiors about the unfolding issue of sex discrimination at a time when most of them were at the EEOC to fight for the rights of African Americans. She pushed them to commit commission resources to challenge employment practices that were illegal after 1964, such as airlines hiring women only for stewardess positions, and then firing these employees when they reached a certain age. She later wrote the EEOC’s lead opinion in the airline stewardesses’ case.

In 1969 Patricia King also started her legal career at the EEOC. She had been asked by William Brown, chair of the commission, to be his special assistant. She stayed two years. She attended EEOC industry hearings in New York, where she heard powerful testimony from African American women speaking about racial and sex discrimination at various telephone companies. This experience reinforced the belief of King, an African American woman, “that a black woman needed to be interested in feminism as well as race.” During her time at the EEOC, King watched as the first Title VII sex discrimination case, *Phillips v. Martin Marietta Corporation*, reached the Supreme Court. (The company had a policy that mothers with pre-school-aged children could not be hired.) She also viewed the process by which the new agency, in part influenced by Fuentes, began to draft the sex discrimination guidelines that would guide the EEOC’s subsequent work. In 1971 the director of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare recruited King to the position of deputy director at the OCR.

In her oral history **Sonia Fuentes** argued the critical importance of congressional legislation in creating greater opportunity for women wanting to work in government positions—the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the

1964 Civil Rights Act, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972. Certainly, before the enactment, and enforcement, of these laws women lawyers found few opportunities in government. As antidiscrimination legislation began to have an impact, as more women used the legislation to break down law school quotas, as the public came to see the placement of women in senior positions as acceptable, and desirable, as the background and norms of the men responsible for hiring became less patriarchal, the meaningful presence of women in government became a reality. And in this period, in 1976, James Earl Carter was elected president. In the four years of his presidency, Carter brought several hundred high-ranking woman lawyers into the executive and judicial branches of the U.S. government. In particular, he changed the face of the federal judiciary.