

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS: AMERICAN WOMEN GEOGRAPHERS IN THE 1970S

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ABSTRACT. In 1973 Wilbur Zelinsky lamented and documented the low representation of women in American academic geography. His attention reflected the climate of the times—the challenges of the women’s movement, affirmative action, and feminist activism in the professions. Drawing on archives and personal narratives, this article addresses the paradoxes and politics of women’s place in American academic geography in the 1970s. As increasing numbers developed new aspirations for graduate education and professional work, stereotyping, discrimination, the lack of mentoring, and the challenges of a job market whose peak had passed presented difficulties. Yet persistence, resistance, and feminist political activism worked to advance women’s professional standing and visibility, especially at the national level within the Association of American Geographers and in the development of new research and teaching on the geography of women. *Keywords:* academic politics, employment in geography, geographical education, women geographers.

In 1973, during his presidency of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), Wilbur Zelinsky broke new ground for the leadership in addressing the status of women in academic geography. In “The Strange Case of the Missing Female Geographer,” his views-and-opinions article in the *Professional Geographer*, he opened with “I bear evil tidings . . . [:] the lot of the female geographer is, and has been, a discouraging one, and there is little assurance of substantial improvement during the foreseeable future” (1973a, 101). His companion article, “Women in Geography: A Brief Factual Account” (1973b), analyzed the AAG’s membership and the composition of faculties in U.S. and Canadian departments of geography. He reported that women accounted for only 12.3 percent of more than 6,000 AAG members and 6.3 percent of more than 2,000 members holding college faculty appointments. He wrote with “a sense of outrage that is difficult to control, and strong dismay over the wastage of the great quantity of unused and underdeveloped talent so sorely needed by the world of learning and by society as a whole” (1973a, 102). His articles reflect the tenor of the times—women’s growing restiveness and politicization, pressures for affirmative action from courts and governments, and modest efforts in the AAG represented by the appointment of a Committee on the Status of Women in Geography (CSWG) in 1971 in response to activism by women members and their supporters.

A decade later Zelinsky returned to the situation of women in geography, this time including not only a discussion of status but also an extensive review of geographical research in the emerging field of feminist geography that he agreed to coauthor with two then-junior women geographers, thereby enhancing their vis-

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