

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Serene Bennett Williams, co-founder of Women's History in High School, to talk about Catholic nuns as activists. Now for context, I was raised Catholic and Serene teaches at a Catholic school, so I feel pretty confident in saying that we are both reasonably well immersed in the topic that we are speaking of, other than obviously neither of us is a nun.

SBW: So I'm a lifelong Catholic, was raised by a devoutly Catholic mother, identify as a Catholic feminist, have always been really interested in the intersection of Catholicism and women's history, women's political history in particular. I work at a Catholic school that's run by an order of nuns called the RSCJ, the Religious of the Sacred Heart. They are comparable in many ways to the Jesuits, and I have been working at Sacred Heart schools, three different Sacred Heart schools for the last 20 years. So I've met lots and lots of RSCJ and I've been endlessly inspired by them. The RSCJ are a really interesting order of nuns. They're a vocational order, which means that the RSCJ, in addition to working in schools, they also have a separate employment, a job. So I've worked with RSCJ who are lawyers. I'm going to speak today about one of my personal mentors, Sister Fran Tobin, who works as an immigration lawyer. They've run schools, they have been architects, they have done all kinds of amazing work. The Sacred Heart schools, there's about 22 schools nationwide. They are in the heart of major cities, so they were absolutely brilliant with real estate. So I think that they dispel a lot of the myths that people think about Catholic nuns.

AT: I think it's also important to note the larger history when we're looking at convents and nuns as an entity. For a lot of history, this was one of the few alternatives available to women if they didn't want to or weren't able to marry for whatever reason. And so a lot of these historical nuns were not necessarily activists, but they were educated, they were scholars, they were artists, they were artisans, they were Hildegard von Bingen, who is such a badass that she deserves her own episode. But, a lot of these women were actually quite influential. And convents were frequently this space for women who didn't necessarily want to conform to wifedom and motherhood.

SBW: That's right. Yeah. And I've been very blessed that, so the school that I work at is in a town called Atherton. We're very close to Stanford. And on our campus is a retirement center for RSCJ called Oakwood. So if you were a nun in the RSCJ order, you retire on our campus. So I've been very blessed to know so many incredible women who are in retirement. And every time I go over to Oakwood, I'm just blown away about how impressive their stories are. So I've had this firsthand look at all of this amazing work that they've done. The other thing that's interesting is they're very humble. And so I know many of them personally. And they've told me things anecdotally. One of the nuns at Oakwood told me that, "in the '70s, we were really active working towards the Equal Rights Amendment." And she said it very casually. And I said, "I'm sorry, what? I've never heard anybody say that." If you ever hear about Catholic women and the Equal Rights Amendment, you almost always hear about Phyllis Schlafly, who was opposed to the ERA. And interestingly, Phyllis Schlafly went to Sacred Heart. She went to our sister school in Missouri. And so as a lifelong Catholic, that was the only story I knew about Catholic women and the Equal Rights Amendment. So hearing firsthand about these women being pro-ERA in the '70s, which was really shocking to me, really got me curious. And I've gone down many a rabbit hole researching original documents and things because what's so amazing about these women is they do not like to brag about themselves. They're very humble. And so you really have to go digging to find a lot of these gems of work that they did for the Equal Rights Amendment.

AT: And I should note that we will frequently refer to nuns. We are only referring to Catholic nuns, but we do acknowledge there are other kinds of nuns. It's just, there's only so many times we can say Catholic. (laughter) But specifically in the context of the Catholic Church, I think a lot of people have this perception of nuns as

figures that obey and enforce the rules, possibly because a lot of us, if we interacted with nuns, for many people, it was in a Catholic school setting. So you see them very much as that sort of authoritarian figure from when you were a child. And also in the context of, it feels like some of these women would certainly have been in opposition to the official stance that the Catholic Church was taking, because I think we can agree the Church is not best known for being progressive and fighting for social change, as an entity.

SBW: It's really interesting because I have found out through my research that there was a time, especially in the early 1970s, that there were a lot of Catholic bishops, priests that did support the Equal Rights Amendment. And that was really surprising to me. The movement for the ERA coexists at a similar time to the women's ordination movement. And in my research, I found there were a lot of RSCJ from our order that attended meetings on the women's ordination movement that were really interested in getting women the right to become priests. What's fascinating to me is, I've met many of these women and have asked them straight up, in the last few years, "would you have wanted to be a priest?" And they have told me no. And I just find that fascinating because in the 1970s, there was all this activism around women's ordination. And that coexisted at the same time as a push for the Equal Rights Amendment. The Equal Rights Amendment from when it was introduced in the '20s all the way to the early '70s had bipartisan support. So Democrats, Republicans supported the Equal Rights Amendment. In the '70s, many Catholic bishops, many Catholic priests supported the ERA. Many Catholic nuns supported the ERA. So the ERA expired in 1982. And then the final fight was in Illinois. Really interesting story about that with Catholic nuns is in the summer of 1982, there was a group of women, about seven or eight women that went on a fast, that refused to eat, in the Capitol building, wanting to ratify the ERA. And one of them was Sister Maureen Fiedler, who was a Catholic nun. So that story got me really interested in what are the ways in which nuns put their body on the line for the Equal Rights Amendment. The ERA failed in 1982, three states short. And then by 1984, when Ronald Reagan was running for re-election and Geraldine Ferraro ran for vice president, she was a pro-choice Catholic woman running for vice president in 1984. A group of Catholic nuns and laypeople wrote a statement in The New York Times called *A Pluralist Position on Abortion*, which said that there is a variety of opinions on abortion and women's issues and these things within the Catholic Church. It launched a firestorm and the women were told they had to recant that statement. And a couple of nuns refused to and had to leave their order. So there's this very much before 1984 and after 1984. And it's interesting because I'm an AP Government teacher and I find testimony in Congress and something that very interesting. Through my research, I found in the 1970s, there were nuns that testified in Congress for the Equal Rights Amendment. And one of the most fascinating women to me is a woman named Sister Margaret Traxler. And Sister Margaret Traxler was a radical feminist. And she had this line that I just absolutely find so fascinating. She said to Congress, "well, we accept your good faith only when the Constitution declares women free." Like, "you can talk as much as you want. Until you actually put us in the Constitution. We don't believe you." And so I just find her absolutely fascinating. And another thing. So a couple of summers ago, I spent some time at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard. And they have papers on Sister Margaret Traxler and the woman who mentored her, who is named Elizabeth Farians. And Elizabeth Farians was Catholic. She was a theology professor and she was one of the early founders of the National Organization for Women. And when students hear about National Organization for Women, they almost always hear the early years about Betty Friedan. So I'm always finding it fascinating about how many people were involved in the founding of NOW. And this woman, Elizabeth Farians, who created to help form NOW in the early years, created a religious committee within NOW about Catholics and people who are devoutly religious, who are supportive of women's rights. So these are stories that I had never heard before. I found them absolutely fascinating. And Farians mentored Sister Margaret Traxler.

AT: Well, it's interesting that you mention Betty Friedan, because to me, she's very emblematic of the kind of differences of opinions that you often get in movements, just like as you've explained, the Catholic Church is

not a monolith, not every Catholic has the same opinions, even though technically, I think everybody's supposed to agree with the Pope. That's not how things actually work. Whereas within the feminist movement, you do have, Betty Friedan was a homophobe and was very lesbian exclusionary because she really resented the assumption that all feminists were lesbians. And so this idea that any movement or any group all shares the same opinions all the time just never actually happens.

SBW: Right. And it's interesting, one of the things that I realized in this research is, with some of these women religious, like Sister Margaret Traxler, Sister Marjorie Tuite, they were really bullied by men. And especially Marjorie Tuite, there's a really tragic story about her funeral and signing on to that pluralist statement in the New York Times, how that affected her personally. And it really affected them in their life. And back to the fact that women went to in the 1980s, another devoutly religious woman who was participating in that was Sonia Johnson. Sonia Johnson, who created Mormons for the ERA, who was excommunicated from her religion, estranged from her family. So just the personal cost that I saw from these women who took this public political stand was really tragic, but also very inspiring about how deeply they believed in the cause.

AT: I think there's an aspect that maybe doesn't necessarily occur to people, but the fact that many of these nuns, including the ones that you were telling us about who have professional careers beyond necessarily working in a Catholic school, for example. But generally speaking, nuns are on the front lines of people needing help. They are the ones working directly with kids. They are the ones working directly with people who are experiencing poverty. They are working with people who may be suffering illnesses. So to me, that seems like it is priming them to be more likely to be activists because they are seeing these people who do need help often, and they are probably also seeing the ways that people are not getting the help that they need.

SBW: Yeah, there's a statement that you hear all the time on my own campus about, women do 80% of work in the Catholic Church. When you think about how much work is being done in the Catholic Church, the bulk of it is being done by women. But the magisterium, the Catholic Church is controlled by men. Even on our campus, we bring in a male priest to say Mass, women don't say Mass. So there's a lot of visual symbols of that. But it's interesting, when I ask the RSCJ over at Oakwood, our retirement center, they say, "we were really happy being nuns. And we've found genuine fulfillment in this vocational work, and didn't need to be priests." So it's a fascinating conversation. As a historian, this has been interesting to me because I've tried to publish about this. And the journey of publication towards this is really interesting. So when you write about Catholic nuns, you don't fit in nicely into history or political science or religious studies. I submitted a paper that I wrote that's now on our website to the Women and Religion Journal. And they rejected it in part because I didn't write enough about Phyllis Schlafly. And for my part, I feel like everybody knows Schlafly. She's really well documented. She's really well studied. And particularly my students, I teach AP US History, AP US Government. If you hear anything about the Equal Rights Amendment, it usually has to do with the EagleForum, Stop ERA, the Phyllis Schlafly campaign that is credited with bringing it down in the 1980s. So as a historian, I like to tell stories that are lesser known. So I don't write about Schlafly.

I also am a Wikipedia. And I tried to write a Wikipedia page about one of the really interesting interest groups that was organized by nuns called Catholics Act for ERA. And my page got rejected because for Wikipedia, you have to have secondary sources and additional primary sources. And people really haven't written about this. So I did a lot of original research. I went to the University of Notre Dame, looked at the papers for a lot of these women. I went to the National Archives in DC. And so I've done a lot of original research, but not enough people have written about them. So I couldn't even get a Wikipedia page about Catholics Act for ERA. And an interesting story about that, that's just so historically significant, I think is, a relative of Susan B. Anthony, she was also named Susan B. Anthony, who was Catholic, and she helped organize that group. So to me, this is a continuous throughline from suffrage into the Equal Rights Amendment in a lot of ways. And the archives have

fabulous flyers. A lot of these things were done by hand, Sharpie. And so hopefully in the future, we'll get some more academic scholarship around these important organizations.

AT: I just want to go back to what you were saying about an organization where most of the work is done by women, but it's run by men, because I think there's a lot of institutions like that. But as a social studies teacher specifically, I would think that that would have echoes of no taxation without representation, meaning that the people making the decision, the people voting for Pope, women literally aren't allowed to even be in the room, to be considered for the important decision making. So it does make sense that you would have particularly women rebelling.

SBW: Yeah, and the way they rebel is so respectful. That's what I think is so interesting, is that their tactics are so respectful, and they're doing things like going on a hunger strike on their own and, using civil disobedience. And when you think about those tactics, they are usually credited with men. If people know about civil disobedience, political activism, they often think about, Thoreau or Martin Luther King. Women don't often get a lot of credit for those kinds of tactics. But in my research, I found lots and lots of women did do those tactics. The other big issue here is that Catholic women themselves are very divided. So one other event I haven't spoke to yet that really highlights this is the 1977 Houston Women's Conference, because in the 1977 Houston Women's Conference, the U.S. government, shocking to think about today, the U.S. government put all this money into funding this federal meeting for women to study and write a national plan of action. And all these Catholic women descended to Houston for this conference. And there were multiple groups. So you had the feminist nuns who were pro-ERA were there. And then you had the National Council of Catholic Women, which was the biggest lobbying group for Catholic women that was opposed to the ERA. And there's this one woman from, I believe she's from Minnesota, Bette Hillemeier, who was the new president of the National Catholic Council of Catholic Women, who had to navigate these two factions. And you hear a lot on our campus, you hear people say things like, "well, I'm a cafeteria Catholic. I pick and choose the pieces of Catholicism" because Catholicism is such a big tent that not everybody interprets it the same way. And that's true with modern day issues like Catholic social teaching. A lot of people who support Catholic social teaching, but not reproductive justice, all of that, because reproductive justice can include abortion. So it just shows you how complicated this can be. And there isn't one size fits all for Catholicism. Whereas before, when I started this research, I just assumed Catholic women were opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment, largely because of abortion. And after researching all of these nuns, I realized actually they disentangled it. They said the ERA is separate from abortion, and supported it.

AT: And so because there are many, many, many Catholic schools around the world, a lot of nuns have also been particularly well placed to inspire others. And this is something that you've personally experienced. You mentioned Sister Fran Tobin. So do you want to tell us about her and any other nuns that have inspired you personally?

SBW: So I've been on my campus since 2008. And she has had many jobs since I've worked here. She worked in the library. She was an informal mentor to lots of faculty and students on campus. She's very beloved on our campus. She's now retired at Oakwood. And I have been active since I started here with our women's group. And we have a multi-generational women's group on campus of teachers, students, RSCJ, parents. It's very diverse, very active. It's a wonderful organization. And so Sister Tobin, I would see her at the women's group. And she clearly picked up that I'm interested in women's history. And she would always chat with me. And sometimes in the back of the room, she would sneak up to me and say, "hey, here's the latest Ms. Magazine." And I would say, "wow, you read Ms. Magazine? That's so great." And so we sparked up a conversation. And she's the one that casually said to me, because she said, "what are you interested in? What

do you like to research?" And I told her, "oh, I've always been fascinated by the Equal Rights Amendment." And she's the one that told me when she lived in Michigan that there were many Catholic nuns that worked for the Equal Rights Amendment. And I asked her, I said, "can you send me any articles or anything that kind of proves that that's true?" She also told me her grandmother, Augusta Travers, was a suffragist from New York. And so we started talking about all these great stories. And I was just so impressed, obviously, with her interests and her knowledge. But she also worked as an immigration lawyer. And because the RSCJ or vocational order, the RSCJ put her through law school. And she trained as an immigration lawyer. And she lived in Redwood City, an area very close to our campus. And she worked with trafficked women. And this was when she was in her 70s or early 80s. And she would be out on the street protesting and make a public statement of support to end human trafficking. And I thought that was so inspiring to me. I know many of the students on our campus who know her personally, very inspired by her. So she's really the reason for the spark that I have for researching the political work of Catholic nuns.

AT; And you mentioned Sister Marjorie Tuite, who you've actually written about for the National Women's History Museum. I know this because I was allowed to share that bio on Infinite Women as well. So thank you for writing it. (laughter) So would you like to tell us about her?

SBW: Sure. Yeah. So my school two years ago sent me on a sabbatical, which was amazing. And they sent me on a couple of weeks sabbatical to go research Catholic nuns. And my original focus was to find RSCJ who supported the Equal Rights Amendment. I found a couple. They weren't at the forefront of it, which I thought was really interesting. So we're more of a conservative, politically, order. I didn't find a lot of radical feminist RSCJ. But I did come across Sister Margaret Traxler and Sister Marjorie Tuite a lot in the documents that I was researching. I was really just amazed at first her background. She was highly educated. She had a doctorate in ministry and she was a lifelong nun and also came of age in the aftermath of Vatican II, which had a massive impact on the political actions of women and also encouraged more public facing work for nuns. She also would just totally call out the sexism in the Catholic church in a very unapologetic way. And it's very, very well documented. So on the bio I wrote, she had a couple of quotes, things like, "the church is totally sexist." And when I read things like that, I thought, "wow, that's something people think, but they don't say." And for a Catholic nun and when you think about these women, the church pays their housing, their healthcare, their food, the church provides for them. And I was thinking about what a risk that is for them personally to call out the institution that's taking care of them. So I was really just amazed at how also intersectional her approach was. People would credit her with being at the forefront of a lot of these pro-ERA Catholic groups. And she would say, "well, I can do nothing by myself. It's not just changing a little piece of legislation here or there. We're talking about developing a movement of folks, from one end of this country to the other. So talking about really big, very significant political change. She was involved in the women's ordination movement, which I talked about. She was also involved in the founding of Network. And I've heard on my campus quite a bit about NETWORK. And what's interesting is when you usually hear about NETWORK, you hear about increasing access to health care, addressing poverty, things like that. You don't hear about women's issues in particular. So I thought it was fascinating to find the history of NETWORK actually came out of feminist activism. And the pieces that I had heard about had watered down the feminist side of Network. And that's still a very powerful, important organization today. So after the 1982 extension of the Equal Rights Amendment, she turned a lot of her attention to addressing poverty and violence in Central America. In the Notre Dame archives, I found a lot of information about that. It's pretty well documented. She also just became this lightning rod in the story that I mentioned about the 1984 pluralist statement on abortion that was issued in the New York Times. She doubled down on that. And in the documents that I read, there was a lot of connections to that having a negative impact on her health, which ultimately led to her passing away. So, she paid the ultimate price for supporting women's issues in a very public forum.

AT: Obviously, we've talked a lot about feminism, which is no surprise for anyone who's listened to this podcast ever. (laughter) But I think it's important to note that a lot of these nuns were also fighting for other causes as well. And so you mentioned Sister Margaret Traxler, who was a feminist, but she was also a civil rights activist who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in the Selma to Montgomery march. So the idea that, it's only women fighting for women's rights is not accurate.

SBW: Yeah, it's interesting. And I didn't know the story. The reason I got into that particular story is, there's a Sacred Heart school called Manhattanville that's a college in New York. And I knew some of the Kennedys went there, like Eunice Shriver went to Manhattanville. And I had heard on my campus that the president of Manhattanville, Grace Dammann, in the '40s, who was an RSCJ from the order of my school, desegregated the school in a very public way. So I kind of went down this rabbit hole of researching. And I came across these pictures of nuns in the early '60s in their habit, getting students on the bus, to go to the March on Washington. And so that was just shocking to me. Like, I couldn't believe these images that I was seeing. And that led me to Sister Margaret Traxler, who very much worked at the intersection of civil rights and women's rights, so marching in Selma. And she had such an amazing way of speaking truth to power. And especially, I've just been so fascinated by her testimony to Congress about the Equal Rights Amendment in 1970. I'm just going to read just a little bit here of what she said. She said, "I should like to remind the committee that further delay and subterfuge are simply intolerable. We accept your good faith only when the Constitution declares women free. Only when we are assured by our Constitution there will be no discrimination based on race or creed or sex can we believe in the good faith of men in America. Until that day, we are forced to doubt." And I think about that work with my students. We talk in my AP government class all the time about the Equal Protection Clause and how there's so much work ongoing about the Equal Protection Clause. Women are still not in the Constitution. LGBT rights have rational basis review, lowest level of review in terms of protection against discrimination. And I think about these things that she said, almost 50 years ago at this point, which is just really ahead of her time.

AT: And to give a shout out to someone here in Australia, Sister Bridget Arthur started working with asylum seekers when she was in her mid-60s. So again, this is someone who had been a teacher for a long time. And what's interesting is, this could just be my perception, but I do think a lot of these women were being activists in their older years. So Sister Bridget Arthur is well into her 80s. So she's been doing this as a second mission, so to speak, for over 20 years. And she's also working with young people on climate activism. And so again, just this idea that people who go into this, I don't want to say line of work, I know it's a calling, but they feel the call because they want to help people and to make a difference. That to me seems like exactly the kind of person who would be an activist. And not to say that every person who becomes a nun has that mindset, obviously. But again, to me, that just seems like a pretty big overlap. That makes a lot of sense.

SBW: Yeah, and if I can just give a shout-out to a couple of books that I have found really interesting about this. So Mary Henold has a book, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of American Catholic Feminist Movement*. Patricia Miller wrote a really interesting book about *Good Catholics: The Battle Over the Abortion in the Catholic Church* that touches upon a lot of women's issues and Equal Rights Amendment issues. And then two Catholic nuns who were kicked out of the church for signing that pluralist statement on abortion in 1984. Patricia Hussey and Barbara Ferraro wrote a book called *No Turning Back* about their experiences going through that. And it's just fascinating. It gives you a really full idea of this vocation, the work these women did.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.