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Keeping up the fight: a conversation with Our Bodies, Ourselves co-founder Norma Swenson

By **Alison Biggar**

Norma Swenson embodies values of the quintessential baby boomer—she’s steeped in activism, especially around women’s rights and equality—but, at age 85, she belongs to the Silent Generation. Her childhood years, set in a time when girls’ education was valued and of superior quality, formed what is a key part of her lifelong message and current belief: that education determines a person’s place in life and, through education, we can help break down walls of inequality.

Swenson is one of 12 women who, in 1972, began what was then known as the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, started at a 1969 “women’s liberation” conference in Boston. These women all had stories of how they had been mistreated by doctors, realized their ignorance about their own bodies and set about rectifying the situation. They spent a summer researching questions they had about their health, and quickly noticed their capability to understand and clearly distill medical information, and that their research data often counteracted information dispensed by the male-dominated medical field. They ultimately shared their findings that fall in a course for women, accompanied by a 193-page booklet called “Women and Their Bodies.”

Their research and personal experiences became the 1970 newsprint first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. “We were furious about how many men wrote about women’s bodies or sexuality without knowing much, and we weren’t going to write unless we knew what we were talking about,” Swenson said in a recent interview with **Aging Today**.

In addition to co-founding the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, working to disseminate the book and have it translated into more than 30 languages, serving as president of the Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS) nonprofit organization, Swenson taught for 20 years at the Harvard School of Public Health. An internationally recognized leader in the field of reproductive and sexual health and rights, as well as maternal and child health, Swenson also was married for 45 years until her husband’s death in 2002; she is the mother of one daughter.

On the Impact of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

Ever since the book's publication, Swenson and her cohorts have been working to get it into the hands of as many women and girls as possible. And they've succeeded. Although it's nearly impossible to tally how many people have read the book—due to the release of numerous editions, more than 30 translations and pass-along rates, Swenson says librarians have dubbed it the “most stolen” book of all time. The co-founders of OBOS fought and won a battle with the book's publisher to make unlimited copies available at a discount to clinics.

What is verifiable is that the second edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was selected in 1977 by the American Library Association as one of the all-time best books for young adults, and it spent almost three years on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Also, the Library of Congress identified *Our Bodies, Ourselves* as one of the 100 “Books that Shaped America,” a list that includes *Moby Dick* and *Native Son*.

The book's influence spurred the power to change the way the medical establishment viewed women, and fostered not only a better understanding of women's issues, rights and bodies, but also a desire in more women to pursue careers in health or medicine—women who, according to Swenson, “saw [the book] as an organizing tool to fight for people's rights and access to information.”

“This is the central fact of the importance of our book—we had enough power because we had a readership and constituency like nothing that had existed before,” says Swenson. “Because we had that constituency from millions of copies, in all those languages, our voice mattered.”

On the Changing Tides of Feminism

How has the book held up? Born into the second wave of feminism, what can *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and the organization tell us about where we now stand?

“My sense is that women's ways of learning how to be in the world have changed dramatically since that time,” says Swenson. First, the level of literacy in the United States has plummeted, Swenson says, citing her impression that high school graduates of her parents' generation had no trouble understanding *The New York Times*—a feat she believes is beyond the reach of many of today's high school graduates.

Second, says Swenson, “Modern women have a sense that we did all that [fighting for equality], and it's done and they're getting the best [treatment] there is ... which may be true for some. [But] to the extent that there has been backsliding since [on women's issues] ... lately, people have been coming back to the fight for equal pay for equal work, abortion [rights]; they're coming back to look at all that and now saying, ‘Yes, something more must be done now.’ ”

Later baby boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials “may have felt lulled by all of the daring things previous generations of women had done,” says Swenson. They thought they could lead equal lives, and most hadn't confronted many situations that would make them think otherwise. But once one or another parent began to need help with caregiving, and couples and women started to question where that help and money to pay for care might come from, that is when people began to realize more activism was needed, Swenson says.

“Caregiving cuts at the heart of how women are supposed to think of themselves as givers, that continuously sacrificing is something to be proud of,” says Swenson. “I know so many families who gave up opportunities so as to help their parents.” When Swenson was a caregiver to her mother, she says she began to see how the structure of the modern two-working-parent family disadvantages women.

Post-election, Swenson says it's not enough to “be good librarians, to collect the best stuff and steer people toward it. OBOS has always taken a stand, and people now need to take a stand and even testify, if necessary, in order to push forward many causes.”

As OBOS Development Associate Melanie Floyd, says, “She still has more fervor than a young person. ... I'm excited to see that a [long] life of activism is possible when I see Norma. Even when

she's going through loss of friends, loss of mobility, she'll still be at the Women's March." Swenson marched in Boston on Jan. 22, despite recent hip surgery.

On Aging and Ageism

At age 85, Swenson has formed multiple ideas about older adults' role in society, seeing that older people can be effective in teaching others about what lies ahead as we age: issues around caregiving, healthcare and long-term care.

Older adults can also be instrumental in creating and improving opportunities for aging in place. And they should be active in organizations committed to ensuring that employers can see elders are employable. Many older people "would benefit from the dignity of part-time work, even if they don't need the income," Swenson says, adding that a lot of older adults, especially women, have not earned enough in their lifetime for retirement.

Then there's the battle against ageism. "Ageism, sexism and frank misogyny are strongly interconnected in modern industrial society. The general public often has bizarre ideas about ... aging, some [coming] from religion and folklore, and some from inadequate health or medical [literacy]," says Swenson.

It all comes back to education. Because educated American women tend to live longer and in better health than men, "women need to continue to try to bond together in solidarity, despite increasingly competitive work environments," she says. "This solidarity might give more educated older women in future the opportunities to work productively at much later ages than they have been able to do until now.

"And obviously, if women are enabled to continue to become better educated, that in itself will help improve their chances of living longer, of not being institutionalized or not dying in poverty, as so many do today. We can change that." ■