

They're Fighting for Women's Equality

These Massachusetts teens were shocked to learn that the U.S. Constitution doesn't guarantee equal rights for women—so they decided to take action **BY REBECCA ZISSOU**

LIKE MANY MIDDLE SCHOOL students, Grace Akkara had never thought too much about the U.S. Constitution. But last year, her seventh-grade English class found out that the historic document doesn't explicitly guarantee women's equality. Grace, now 13, couldn't believe it. "I was shocked," she says. "It really bothered us."

That's when the students learned about the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a proposed addition to the Constitution that calls for equal treatment of both men and women. The ERA was originally drafted by **suffragist** Alice Paul in 1923. But nearly 100 years later, the amendment still hasn't been **ratified**.

Inspired by Paul, Grace and five of her classmates decided to take up the fight. The students at Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy, Massachusetts, started discussing how they could promote the ERA. In the past year, they've created a petition on change.org urging states to ratify the amendment. They've also met with local politicians, including Mayor Marty Walsh of Boston.



Alice Paul and other suffragists campaign for women's rights in New York in 1919.

The girls call themselves the Yellow Roses, after a symbol of the women's rights movement of the 1920s. They say they're inspired by previous generations of activists who stood up for what they believed in.

"We want to make a difference," says Grace. "It's crazy that women don't have equal rights in 2017."

A Long Struggle

The fight for women's rights in the U.S. goes back to the nation's beginnings. In 1776, Abigail Adams, wife

of Founding Father John Adams, urged her husband to "remember the ladies" as he and other colonial leaders debated independence from Great Britain—or face "a rebellion."

But it wasn't until passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 that women were guaranteed the right to vote. Three years later, Paul and other women's rights leaders turned their attention to the ERA. "We shall not be safe until the principle of equal rights is written into the framework of our government," Paul said.

PAGE 14: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES (SUFFRAGISTS); PAGE 15: GREG DERRY/THE PATRIOT LEDGER (THE YELLOW ROSES)



Six Massachusetts teens known as the Yellow Roses are fighting for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. *From left to right: Ilkim Gumus, Alessia Mochi, Julianne Sheehan, Veronica Bentley, Grace Akkara, and Eleanor Anderson*

In the decades that followed, a fierce national debate played out over the ERA. Supporters said the amendment was necessary to prevent discrimination against women and guarantee equal opportunities. Opponents said the ERA would do more harm than good. They worried that the amendment would lead to the elimination of laws designed to protect women and even force them to register for the military draft.

After much discussion, the ERA passed both chambers of Congress in 1972. But for an amendment to be added to the Constitution, it must be ratified by at least three-quarters of the states—38 out of 50 (*see sidebar*). That proved to be the ERA's downfall: Only 35 states ratified the amendment by the 1982 deadline.

Major Steps Forward

Despite the ERA's defeat, women have made significant advances in society. Today, they make up more than half of America's college undergraduates. In addition, women increasingly hold high-powered jobs in law, medicine, business, and other areas. A pay gap still exists, however, with women earning on average just 79 percent of what men make for similar work.

Earlier this year, U.S. Representative Carolyn Maloney, a Democrat from New York, reintroduced the ERA in the House of Representatives in part to help eliminate the pay gap.

"The ERA is the only way to... ensure women are paid the same as men," says Maloney. "It's that simple."

Present-Day Battle

For their part, the Yellow Roses of Broad Meadows Middle School are calling U.S. lawmakers to encourage them to pass the ERA. So far, the girls are encouraged by the response: Several legislators have said they'd support the amendment. Public opinion seems to be on the teens' side as well. According to a 2016 poll by the ERA Coalition, 94 percent of Americans back the amendment.

But some U.S. lawmakers continue to be critical of the ERA. They say an amendment is unnecessary because state and federal laws already protect women's rights.

Still, Grace is hopeful that the ERA will eventually be ratified. She says its passage would prove once and for all that females are just as capable as males.

"It's so important that the ERA is passed," says Grace. "It would show girls that we can do anything." ♦

How Amendments Are Ratified

It isn't easy to amend the Constitution. The process is so difficult that it's only happened 27 times. Here's the most common way it's done:

STEP 1 Proposal

Two-thirds of both chambers of Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate) must agree to propose an amendment.

STEP 2 Vote

Each state legislature votes on whether to pass the amendment.

STEP 3 Ratification

The amendment becomes part of the Constitution as soon as three-quarters of the states (38 out of 50) vote to ratify it.

CORE QUESTION Why might the Framers have made it so difficult to amend the Constitution?