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Steinem remains ever the feminist activist. (LOCAL NEWS)

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Newspaper

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WORCESTER - Gloria Steinem was in town yesterday, but the 73-year-old women's rights activist wasn't reliving glory days of the 1970s or pushing a new book. She was humbly, somewhat quietly, urging a roomful of women to work together, push boundaries and gird themselves for the long haul.

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"No movement really leaves a lasting mark, unless it goes on for a century," Ms. Steinem said. "I don't know how to break this to you, but I think we have about 60 years left."

Ms. Steinem, who was a founding editor of Ms. Magazine 35 years ago and is the women's rights movement's most recognized face, gave the keynote address at the inaugural luncheon of the Female Leadership Interest Council, a Westboro group created to help professional women. She spoke for about a half-hour at Mechanics Hall before turning it into a forum for questions, comments and "organizing announcements for any troublemaking events."

Society has changed, Ms. Steinem said, but the genders are not equal, even at home. "We are still faced with double roles," she said. "We still have not convinced ourselves, much less men, that men can do what women can do."

She railed against the country's lack of national childcare and healthcare systems, its lack of mandated flexible work time, and its failure to put a value on care giving at home. She mourned the loss of the historic

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coalition between suffragists and abolitionists and worried that that fragmentation might hurt both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama as they try to become president (Ms. Steinem supports both of them.). She told everyone at yesterday's event to get 10 new voters out for the next election and suggested FLIC include a box about voter information on its application materials.

"We have to take responsibility for what we have not done," she said.

Her overall goal is to eliminate

gender stereotypes that limit men and women, but her speech also included a detailed summary of how churches are built like women's bodies, how changes in child-raising led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and how women "should be able to go nude in the street and be safe."

Ms. Steinem didn't get anyone to announce a troublemaking event, but Pastor Judith Hanlon of the Hadwen Park Congregational Church issued a challenge to other attendees. "If you go to a church system where women are kept out of the pulpit and you continue to put money in the collection plate, you are contributing to injustice," Ms. Hanlon said; she invited any such person to drop by her church instead at 10 a.m. Sunday.

Ms. Steinem commended her and added: "It is critical that we are not in moments of sorrow or of celebration forced into places that do not honor us."

She also spoke about the next generation of women's activists, which includes Shelby Knox, a young Texan who works with Ms. Steinem and who pushed for comprehensive health education while still a teenager. (A 2005 documentary called "The Education of Shelby Knox" tells her story.) "She is doing now what I was doing when I was 40," Ms. Steinem said.

Ms. Steinem looks remarkably young. Squint at her on stage, and it isn't hard to imagine you're looking at the same woman decades earlier: highlighted, loose hair; plain black top and pants, black heels, and a belt that would be at home in the 1970s or 2007. She started out as a journalist, and when confronted by a notebook, she said she feels as if she should be on the other side.

She patiently stood for an endless number of photos and chats with admiring fans ranging from heads of organizations to college students.

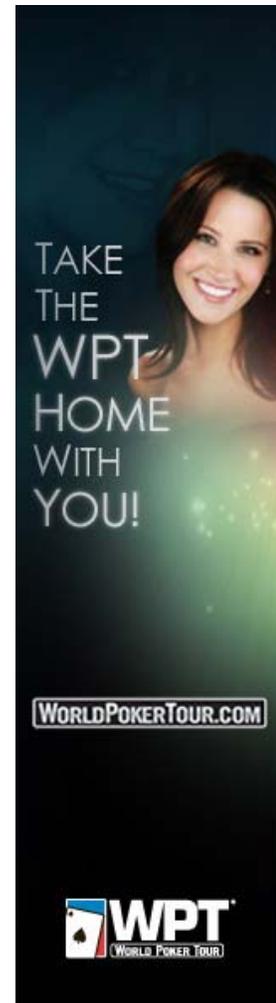
Diane Bradway, who was about 8 years old when Ms. Magazine was founded, was among them. "I think it's amazing that she still is there for the fight," Ms. Bradway said.

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PHOTOG: T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG

CUTLINE: Gloria Steinem speaks to the Female Leadership Interest Council at Mechanics Hall yesterday.



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