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How barriers came down for women at Newsweek

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By [Jill Vejniska](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

In the news biz, it's known as a "peg": a fortuitous twinning of topic and timeliness that makes a story awfully hard to ignore. As Lynn Povich's absorbing book, "*The Good Girls Revolt*," demonstrates, there are pegs. And then there are *pegs*.



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Christian Steiner

Lynn Povich wrote "*The Good Girls Revolt*," about a groundbreaking lawsuit that 46 female employees filed against Newsweek magazine in 1970. ... [read more](#)
On March 16, 1970, Newsweek magazine published a cover story about the stirrings of the women's liberation movement. Little did its all-male editorship know when it titled the article "Women in Revolt" – and assigned it to an outside writer rather than a woman on its staff – that a revolution was happening inside its own building. That same day, 46 female employees filed a groundbreaking class action lawsuit, charging the magazine with discrimination in hiring and promotion.

"We knew that the real impact would come from the surprise publicity it (created)," Povich, a key member of the group, said by phone from New York. She'll discuss her book Sunday at the MJCCA Book Festival.

Indeed, a news conference at the ACLU's headquarters that day was "packed," Povich writes. The resulting coverage – the professional women were called "newshens" in the *New York Daily News* – likely seems as unbelievable now as the situation then: Despite having the same skills and education as their male counterparts in many cases, women were almost exclusively hired as researchers and fact checkers and rarely promoted to the much-higher-profile reporting and writing jobs.

Lynn Povich, who wrote "*The Good Girls Revolt*," about a groundbreaking lawsuit that 46 female employees filed against Newsweek magazine in ... [read more](#)
Far from apologizing, Newsweek's leadership initially seemed hurt by the suit's implied criticism.

"(It) stems from a newsmagazine tradition going back almost fifty years," Newsweek's "fearsome" editor-in-chief Osborn Elliott responded in a statement about a practice that had already led the likes of Nora Ephron and Ellen Goodman to leave in frustration.

"I was trying to re-create the feeling of the time, what it was like to be a woman at work in the 1960s and '70s," Povich said of the engaging book, which at times reads like a real-world version of "Mad Men." Along with descriptions of office place flirting and drinking, there's the story of why one well-respected female journalist wasn't hired despite a recommendation from Newsweek owner Katharine Graham: The "physical demands" of writing on deadline for the magazine would be too tough on a woman, it was thought.

Yet Povich never loses sight of the seriousness of the issue, nor does she simply dump blame on the opposite sex. It took several years and the filing of a second lawsuit in 1972 before significant change came to Newsweek, but Povich names names when it comes to male supporters – including those who predated the legal action, or, like Elliott, took a little longer to come around.

"In the 'old days,' there were a lot of men in the women's movement," Povich said. "We were all mentored by men back then."

In fact, her father, longtime *Washington Post* sports columnist Shirley Povich, was already a journalism legend at the time. That put him and his only daughter in a potentially uncomfortable position, as the Washington Post Co. also owned Newsweek ("Which side am I supposed to be on," Graham, the Post Co. president, wondered aloud about the lawsuit). Lynn Povich (Maury's her brother) became Newsweek's first female senior editor in 1975, and later assumed major editing roles at MSNBC.com and Working Woman magazine.

But in some ways, she finds herself agreeing with a former Newsweek co-worker who described the lawsuit as "the most concrete thing" she'd ever done.

"Oz Elliott said, 'Not only did you make Newsweek a better magazine, because of more diverse story ideas and abilities,'" Povich recalled of later conversations the two had about the group's prolonged legal effort. "He said, 'You also made it a better place for everyone to work.'"

EVENT PREVIEW

Lynn Povich will discuss "*The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace*," 1 p.m. Sunday, Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, 5342 Tilly Mill Road, Dunwoody. Tickets: \$14; \$9 for members. Information: 678-812-4005, [www.atlantajcc.org](#).