

Even our own Ms. Pratt thought **the ERA** was a dated subject. Which is why Jennifer Baumgardner wanted to write this.

In an era in which more women get graduate degrees than men, Elizabeth Dole is a contender for president and ladies have a World Cup soccer team that is way better than the guys', I often find myself thinking, "Hey! How about the goddamn ERA, while we're at it?"

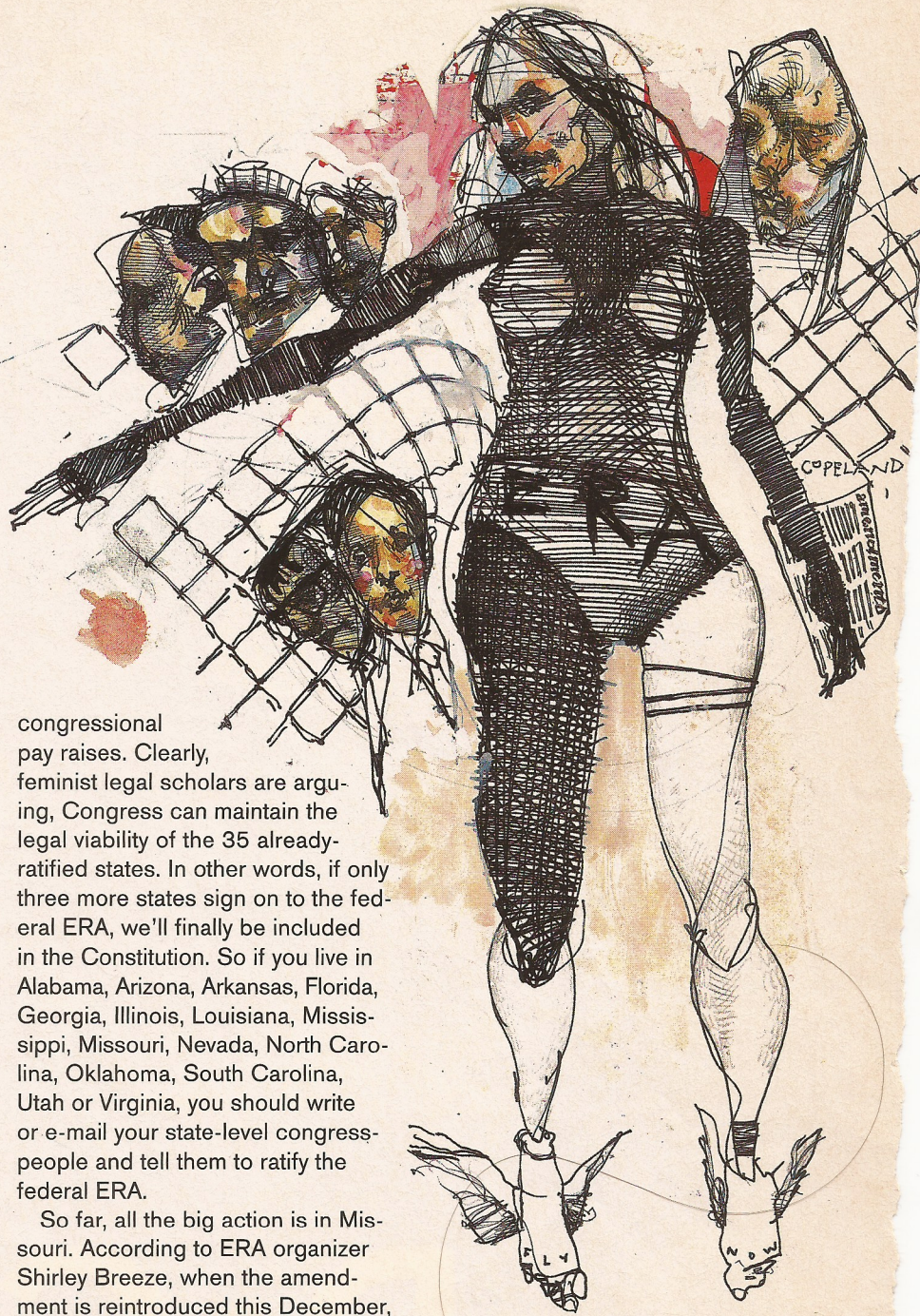
On June 30, 1982—doomsday for the Equal Rights Amendment—I was just a metal-mouthed junior high school girl who didn't know my rights from a hole in my leg-warmers. The fact that an amendment stating "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged . . . on account of sex" had failed to pass didn't affect me, as far as I could tell. I was still told that I could be whatever I wanted and that girls were equal to boys. Sure, we females weren't mentioned in the United States Constitution, but we were all over *Free to Be . . . You and Me*.

I was an adult before I realized that for all of the accoutrements of liberation—*Ms.* magazine, birth control, female doctors, astronaut Sally Ride and, bringing us to the present, GIRLS KICK ASS! panties—women have never achieved formal equality with men. Simply put: We might feel equal, but we aren't, in the eyes of the law.

I know—you thought that the horse had been dead since 1982, when the 10-year deadline passed with

64

only 35 of the necessary 38 states ratifying the amendment. Actually, the ERA is not only still viable, it's reintroduced every time a new Congress convenes. In fact, as you read this, a "three-state strategy" is in full swing. The three-state strategy is based on the fact that while the ERA had only 10 years in which to be passed, a 203-year ratification period was recently accepted as valid for an amendment regarding



congressional pay raises. Clearly, feminist legal scholars are arguing, Congress can maintain the legal viability of the 35 already-ratified states. In other words, if only three more states sign on to the federal ERA, we'll finally be included in the Constitution. So if you live in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah or Virginia, you should write or e-mail your state-level congresspeople and tell them to ratify the federal ERA.

So far, all the big action is in Missouri. According to ERA organizer Shirley Breeze, when the amendment is reintroduced this December, it is likely to pass. If Missouri is successful, chances are that other states will move back into the ERA fray.

Fray is the word. Ever since the ERA was created by radical suffragist Alice Paul, just after feminists won the vote in 1920, the amendment has been the center of ferocious controversy. Having the same

access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that men have is infinitely more revolutionary than the right to cast a ballot in an unequal system. The men in power grasped this concept, which explains why the ERA wasn't ratified by a single state until 1972. By the time I was 7 years old, in 1977, feminists had organized. ►

But so had right-wing women—especially Phyllis Schlafly. They baked and delivered bread to the anti-ERA congressmen (“To the bread-winners from the bread-bakers,” they liked to say), and mounted huge campaigns to spread the rumor that the ERA meant women would have to monetarily support the family (um, single mothers always have) and pee in urinals. Their Donna Reed-meets-Pat Buchanan tactics worked: By the deadline, women were still the same three states short.

“In order to get the ERA back on track, people have to understand what they’re missing,” says Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, who spearheaded the drive for the ERA 20 years ago. For example, in order to

66

make damn sure that impotence wouldn’t be a strain on a man or his wallet, Viagra was instantly covered by health insurance plans. Nearly all contraception and abortions are not—meaning women are shelling out both for his souped-up action and controlling our own fertility. Women have 68 percent more out-of-pocket health-care expenses than men, and we pay for our hard-won birth control with the \$.56 to \$.76 (depending on race) that we make to a man’s dollar.

Over her lifetime, an

average woman loses \$523,000 to her discount rate in the job market. In women’s sports, the wage gap is even more surreal: When the U.S. took the Women’s World Cup, the U.S. Soccer Federation Fund paid each winner a \$12,500 bonus—compared with the \$380,000 bonus each member of the men’s team would receive if they ever won. A WNBA player makes \$.0000007 to her

for poor men), thus making an end-run around the sexist and classist Hyde Amendment, which bans federal funding for abortions. Priscilla Smith, a staff attorney at the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, postulates that a federal amendment could render encroachments on *Roe vs. Wade* unconstitutional. She’s talking about restrictions like waiting periods and spousal consent for

When John Adams’ wife asked him to “remember the ladies” in the Declaration of Independence, he wrote to her, “I cannot but laugh.”

male counterpart’s dollar—a discrepancy so great, I don’t really understand it.

Outraged yet? Equal pay for comparable work, contraceptive coverage and reproductive freedom are the basic rights women always cite as being what they’re “for,” even if they’re “not feminists, but . . .” The ERA provides a legal base for actually attaining these bare-minimum rights. State-level ERAs in New Mexico and Connecticut, for example, were responsible for making Medicaid pay for abortions for poor women (the state was already paying for any medically necessary procedures

abortions, which wouldn’t exist if there were an ERA. Meanwhile, all manner of economic disparities could be challenged on the basis of the ERA.

By the time the ERA flat-lined in the beginning of the Reagan era, even feminists were ambivalent about spending so much time on this fight, fearful that it wouldn’t turn out to be the Prozac of equality that women had imagined. The long battles, raised hopes and dashed dreams wore our mamas down. But that’s why we are critical to creating momentum on this issue. The original call for women’s suffrage was made in 1848 (see Dish, page 48), but women didn’t win the vote until a wave of fiery young women invigorated the movement. The whole enterprise took 72 years.

Having grown up with many of the gains that our mothers fought for, we girlies have a sense of entitlement that may be annoying to some but translates into confidence. Therefore, we must ask our bad-ass girl-power selves: Why is it that women, a majority, are willing to go without constitutionally granted equality? Is it a leftover martyr-mom complex? A dietetic mind-set gone too far? S&M without the S? “No, no, *you* take all the basic human rights. No, *really*, I don’t need any, I’m happy with having been jokingly included in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.”

Screw that. I want my ERA. ■

