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Columnist shares history of American women

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New York Times columnist Gail Collins put her pen down to give a Monday night crowd at the Douglass Campus Center a tour through the history of American women, as part of Eagleton Institute of Politics' lecture series "It's ALL Politics."

In her lecture, Collins discussed the progress of women throughout American history, focusing especially on the era covered by her new book, "When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present."

Collins kicked off her lecture with Jamestown, laughing as she described the initially all-male colony.

"Nothing had happened. It was one long fraternity party in the woods," she said. "Throughout American history, it has been seen as the duty of women to make the men behave."

The story of American women is that they went for the challenge, Collins said. At the time of Jamestown, the challenge was becoming a full-time farm housewife in the colonies.

As housewives in that era, women were in control, she said. They created wealth and the things the family needed for survival. It was a position of respect.

The image of the housewife as a position of power and respect changed with urbanization, Collins said. Their status dropped with the loss of their economic role, and instead they replaced it with a moral role.

"They created the idea of the cult of the true woman," she said. "They became in charge of goodness. Without moving from the living room, they would improve the world by radiating goodness."

Collins said the progression of the suffrage movement was long and slow. Even when American women finally won the ability to vote, they did not get their agendas accomplished the way they wanted.

"Having political power through the ballot is not enough. You have to have economic power as well," she said. Collins explained that between 1964 and 1967, there were four major happenings that advanced women.

"One of the most important was the birth control pill," she said.

With the introduction of the pill, women's applications to law and medical school went through the roof, Collins said.

The second was the Civil Rights Movement, which drew a social consciousness to ideas of fairness, she said.



Jing You

New York Times columnist Gail Collins speaks on the progress of American women Monday night in the Douglass Campus Center as part of the Eagleton Institute of Politics lecture series "It's ALL Politics."

A downward shift in the economy between the 1960's and 1970's marked the third happening, Collins said. Families were forced to either adapt their lifestyle or both parents had to work.

"It was no longer possible to support a middle-class lifestyle on one salary," she said.

Collins said at this moment, everything truly changed for women.

The final factor was a convergence of policy between the Republican and Democratic parties, she said.

"There was a little window when they came together, and that's when stuff happened [for women]," Collins said.

Ultimately, Collins discussed today's challenges that face younger women.

"I think it's much harder for younger women. The problems they deal with are much more diffuse," she said.

Before Collins took the floor, Eagleton Institute of Politics Director Ruth Mandel praised Collins' ability to observe humanity.

"She is a dead-on observer of human behavior and folly," Mandel said. "[In her writing,] she uses a blend of humor and irony that cuts through the crap and makes us all smile."

For the lecture series, Eagleton aims to bring some of the best and brightest observers in so students and audience members can have the opportunity to engage with them, Mandel said.

She also mentioned Collins' use of Eagleton research in her work.

"I am very proud that Rutgers and the Center for American Women and Politics are seen as a valuable resource for someone as insightful as Gail Collins," Mandel said.

Highland Park resident Ron Steinwehr, who attended the lecture, enjoyed the stories that peppered Collins' lecture as well as her sense of humor.

"I can see why people want to live so close to universities," he said. "There are lots of opportunities."

Marion Munk, a University alumna, reads Collins' articles and said she enjoyed the lecture.

"She talks like she writes. She's very enjoyable, very available ... she is delightful and has no airs," Munk said.

