

Chamberlain, Mariam K.

(24 Apr. 1918–2 Apr. 2013,) feminist economist, foundation officer, and women's studies advocate, was born Mariam Kenosian in Chelsea, Massachusetts, the second child and only daughter of Avack Kenosian, a factory worker, and Zabel Kenosian, a homemaker. Her parents immigrated to the United States in 1912 and 1913 in the midst of ongoing Turkish violence against the Armenian community. Despite her parents' poverty and lack of support for women's higher education, Mariam was the valedictorian of her class at Chelsea High School. She was accepted to Radcliffe College in 1936, paying her deposit with a \$50 prize she had won as the first girl marbles champion of Chelsea. Living at home, Mariam won scholarships, borrowed, and worked as a secretary, completing a B.A. in economics in June 1940. In 1941 she was accepted for the Ph.D. program in economics at Harvard University.

During World War II Mariam accompanied Edward Mason, her doctoral advisor, to Washington, DC and a post at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) crunching military data gleaned from public sources and comparing it to intelligence received from spies in Nazi-occupied Europe. She met and married fellow economist Neil Chamberlain, a cryptographer, in 1942. In 1946 the couple returned to their academic careers, moving to New Haven, Connecticut, where Neil took a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale University, then joined the faculty. Mariam returned to graduate school, becoming one of two women to complete a Ph.D. in economics at Harvard in 1950. In these years she taught at Albertus Magnus College and Connecticut College, two women's schools, and worked at the Economic Growth Center at Yale. They had no children.

Chamberlain joined the Ford Foundation in 1956, at a time when it was investing heavily in restructuring higher education to serve the postwar economy. Throughout the 1960s, Chamberlain helped to implement \$40 million of Ford grants devoted to professionalizing academic business degrees, work that contributed to the rise of the masters in business administration. She and Neil Chamberlain divorced in 1967.

Mariam Chamberlain realized that she was a feminist on 12 December 1970, when she saw almost three hundred women and men organized by the Women's Strike Coalition marching up Fifth Avenue. She soon understood that the work she had done for business curricula could be used for the emerging fields of feminist and women's studies as well. Armed with a \$10 million grant from the foundation, Chamberlain gathered a group of prominent feminist administrators, academics, and women's studies pioneers at Ford on 17 November 1971 to begin the work.

The Ford initiative led by Chamberlain is best known for her leadership in coordinating multiple groups of feminist faculty around the country, many of whom were meeting informally or teaching courses on women under the radar, and linking them together in a women's studies network. Women's studies swiftly emerged as an academic field in colleges and universities through Ford funding aimed at program development, research institutes, journals, professional organizations, and archives. Chamberlain's initiative created this intellectual infrastructure across twenty institutions, including Stanford, Radcliffe, Wellesley, and Michigan. She also believed that the networks emerging in United States women's studies programs required a multiracial approach and a global vision, tenets that would become hallmarks of the field.

Through Ford funding, Chamberlain had helped to document the courses and programs that were emerging on campuses across the country. In 1974 the Feminist Press published *Who's Who and Where in Women's Studies*, making faculty visible to each other across the nation for the first time. By the 1970s women's studies also needed a national coordinating body. In 1975 Chamberlain attended a series of meetings at the University of Pennsylvania, in San Francisco, and in New York, out of which the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) was born as an international organization in 1977.

In 1982 Chamberlain began an active retirement, leaving Ford to become a resident scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation, where she established a three-year task force to assess the status of women in higher education. This effort resulted in an edited collection, *Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects* (1988). While at Russell Sage Chamberlain persuaded the Ford Foundation to fund the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW), and she became its founding president.

In these years Chamberlain turned to reforming economics, her own discipline, where women were still struggling to be recognized. In 1987 she joined fellow economist Heidi Hartmann to found the Washington, DC–based Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). In 1990, after a panel discussion at the American Economic Association, Chamberlain also used her foundation connections to help fund and cofound the International Association of Feminist Economists (IAFFE), incorporated in 1992.

Chamberlain worked into a vigorous old age as the director emerita of the NCRW, helping to promote women's intellectual work through mentoring, publication, and

project funding. On the morning of 11 September 2001, at the age of eighty-three, Chamberlain was in her office when two commercial airliners crashed into the World Trade Center, only a few blocks away. Following the crisis Chamberlain returned to work; in 2003, when the organization instituted “casual Fridays,” she purchased her first pair of blue jeans. For another decade she sat on boards, attended feminist conferences, wrote, mentored young scholars (including several nephews), and enjoyed attending cultural events in New York City with a robust network of woman friends. She died in New York City just weeks shy of her ninety-fifth birthday.

Mariam Chamberlain was instrumental in establishing feminist scholarship as an internationally recognized academic field. Her leadership within academic feminism resulted in hundreds of women’s studies programs, curricular transformation projects, feminist archives, and academic centers. For her efforts she was recognized, jocularly but with deep respect, as “the fairy godmother of women’s studies.”

Bibliography

A substantial archive of Chamberlain’s work as a program officer for Ford, as well as her work at The Russell Sage Foundation, is held at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Writing by Chamberlain includes *Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects* (1988); *Women of Color and the Multicultural Curriculum: Transforming the College Classroom* (1994); articles in *Women’s Studies Quarterly*; and numerous foundation reports. Chamberlain also gave an interview to Talia bat Pessi: “In Memoriam: Star of Davida Interviews Mariam Chamberlain,” *Star of Davida* blog, 23 May 2013, (<http://starofdavida.blogspot.com/2013/05/in-memoriam-star-of-davida-interviews.html>; accessed 24 June 2015). Her friend Florence Howe wrote about their

work together in *A Life in Motion* (2011); see also “Speeches and Pictures from Mariam Chamberlain’s Memorial,” [florencehowe.com](http://www.florencehowe.com) (<http://www.florencehowe.com/blog.htm?post=906477>; accessed August 3 2015). A history of the women’s studies movement that provides context for Chamberlain’s career is Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (2002). An obituary appeared in the *New York Times* on 7 Apr. 2013. A second, without author listed, can be found online: “WREI Salutes Dr. Mariam Chamberlain, 1918–2013,” Women’s Research and Education Institute (http://www.wrei.org/Mariam_Chamberlain.htm; accessed March 3 2015).

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