

Fasting for the ERA

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The Illinois legislature's handling of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment has not been an inspiring example of democracy in action. Over the years, the state's citizens have been treated to demagogic sloganeering, clever legislative evasions, arid procedural debates and even one attempted bribe.

The women now fasting or chaining themselves together in the state capitol building obviously feel deeply that their cause is right, and they have succeeded in focusing attention on the proposed amendment. But neither the fast nor the chains has elevated the moral level of the debate in Springfield.

From the beginning, the ERA has had both justice and precedent on its side. Women have been discriminated against, with the full support of the law, since this Republic was founded. Even today, President Reagan's belief to the contrary, there are state and federal laws that saddle women with an inferior status. Constitutional amendments were required to secure the rights of black Americans, and another was needed to admit women into the democratic process. One can hardly object to another constitutional amendment to confirm the nation's commitment to the legal equality of men and women. And one must sympathize with the frustration of ERA supporters when legislators profess their support of ERA and then vote to retain the three-fifths rule which in effect rules out ratification.

But supporters of women's equality should be

troubled by the methods adopted in this instance. Some legislators regard the fast as a form of blackmail. In effect, the fasters are saying, "If you don't vote our way, somebody is going to be hurt—namely ourselves and our families." They are holding their own health as hostage, and the ransom they demand is ratification.

This approach isn't likely to persuade the legislature to approve the amendment. Gov. Thompson, who supports ERA, says the fast "will not change a single mind" in the legislature. Actually it has changed one mind but in the wrong direction. Sen. Forest Etheredge (R., Aurora), hitherto an ERA supporter, says he won't vote for it until the fast ends.

The fast is an extreme tactic, which should be used only in extreme cases. It is one thing for people in the Soviet Union to go on hunger strikes in order to bring attention to their plight. They have no democratic means to force a change in policy. Their only hope is to rouse world opinion against Moscow, making it less embarrassing for the government to grant their wish than to deny it. The ERA supporters face no such obstacle.

In any event, the legislature should not let its decision be affected by the fast. The worthiness of a cause does not hinge on the behavior of a handful of its supporters. The amendment deserves ratification—but on its own merits, not because a few feminists think they can win by emotion and sympathy what they have been unable to win by reason.