

Twentieth century feminism and womens rights



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Feminism is defined as “ the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes”. Although there were many protests, discussions, writings, and advancements of women’s rights dating back to the third century B. C., what is known as the women’s movement or feminist movement did not become an organized movement until the mid to late 1800’s (11).

Three Waves of Feminism

A “ wave” metaphor is commonly used to differentiate the three main eras in feminism history. However, the metaphor did not come about until the beginning of the second era. The term ‘ Second Wave Feminism’ was first contrived by Marsha Lear (11) in the late 1960s when women of the Women’s Liberation Movement were looking to separate their cause from the movements associated with the first era (1), so the terms “ first-wave” and “ second-wave” were created at the same time. The use of this new terminology also seemed to revive the movement in the public eye after lying dormant for some time. Reference to the third wave began to appear in the mid-1980s as discussions and writings on the relationship of racism to feminism began to appear (11).

First Wave Feminism, Mid-1800s to 1920

The First Wave of feminism was the era spanning from the mid-1800’s to 1920, mostly in the United States and the United Kingdom. Focus was mainly on legal rights for women, primarily the right to vote.

Legalities in the United States and United Kingdom

In the United States, the federal constitution originally had no provision for voting rights, so the decision was left to the individual states. (3) Initially, suffrage was granted in some states to tax payers or property owners only. Women did become property owners in some states as early as 1939 (3). However, in the mid-nineteenth century, provisions were also being put in place in most states which expanded enfranchisement to all “ free” adult males only. This left American women with two options to appeal for their rights. They could either appeal to the individual voters in each state to approve legislation, or they could appeal for an amendment to the federal constitution.

In Great Britain, women saw three Reform Acts between 1832 and 1884 pass through parliament which all granted suffrage only to men or men’s households. (3). The Reform Act of 1832 provided the right to vote to property holding middle class men where it had previously been reserved for aristocracy. The Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 expanded these rights to the male voter within urban and rural households (2) and (5). With these reforms, the British parliament was satisfied that the majority of citizens was represented. British women were now faced with a complex parliamentary process which required that all legislation pass through Parliament three times before it would be considered. Given the contentment of Parliament that the majority was now represented, this would not be an easy task.

Industrial Revolution Brings Change

Up to the early nineteenth century, women were in the workplace but primarily as teachers and other such roles that were considered appropriate

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for women. The onset of the Industrial Revolution gave rise to jobs in factories, mines, and shops from which work related issues also sprang. In the US, various independent issues of women's rights had arisen around the nation but not enough to give a voice to all women. It wasn't until the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 that women would have that voice.

Seneca Falls Convention – 1848

The five women who called for a meeting on July 19th and 20th, 1848 in the small town of Seneca Falls, NY did so out of the frustration of their own experiences. Much to their surprise, they would find the support of 300 people, including at least 40 men, who had come from a 50 mile radius to hear what they had to say. On that first day of the convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to read the Declaration of Independence aloud to the audience from which the Declaration of Principles was born. (6) The Declaration of Sentiments or Declaration of Principles would become the foundation of the Women's Movement for decades to come, and from this moment in history, the Women's Movement began to grow.

Organizations Born Out of Division

The end of the U. S. Civil War brought division among suffrage supporters. In 1869, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was formed by those who supported enfranchising black males (15th Amendment) and worked at the state level to gain the right to vote. In the same year, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and stood on the platform that all women should be allowed to vote along with black men. This group focused on federal constitutional changes, the message of equality in general, and <https://assignbuster.com/twentieth-century-feminism-and-womens-rights/>

primarily a feminist agenda. In 1890, these two groups were combined to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) with Stanton as its leader. (3)

The British movement started around the time of the Second Reform Act. Parliament Member John Stuart Mill made two attempts to ratify the voting rights. In the first attempt, he brought a petition signed by 1500 women to the House of Commons. In the second attempt, he proposed that the wording of the Reform Bill of 1867 be changed to include “ people” instead of “ men”. Although both attempts failed, these acts became the catalyst for the creation of several women’s committees. As was the case in America, British women were divided on how best to approach the issue of enfranchisement. Northern suffragists were more interested in getting back to basics and campaigning for the cause where London-based suffragists were more interested in strategies of parliament. Some believed in a more gradual approach by suggesting, for example, to start by allowing only unmarried women to vote. While others believed that this type of approach only served to punish those women who were not included. By the end of the century, most of these organizations became part of the umbrella group known as the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) centralized under the leadership of Millicent Garrett Fawcett who was also one of the originators of the first women’s organization in Manchester.(3)

End of a Century to the Start of WWI

The period between the end of the nineteenth century and the start of World War I saw limited movement in women’s rights. This gave women on both sides of the ocean the opportunity to form a kinship in their cause through <https://assignbuster.com/twentieth-century-feminism-and-womens-rights/>

visiting and writing one another about their disappointments and setbacks. The frustration that ensued from the continued delays also gave rise to a more extreme group that would later be known as the Suffragettes.

Extremist Movements

The term Suffragette was first used as a derogatory term to describe a radical splinter group within the British women's suffrage movement, lead by Emmeline Pankhurst, called the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) (7). Theirs was a group which had resorted to breaking windows and harassment to gain attention for the cause. They would later resort to more militant style acts such as bombings and arson. As these women were imprisoned for their law breaking tactics, many of the suffragettes would participate in self-imposed hunger strikes. Initially, the government chose to force-feed the women, but this only served to gain public support for the WSPU. In 1913, Parliament implemented the Cat and Mouse Act which allowed for temporary release of the hunger strikers who would then be jailed again upon their recovery. (7) However, reincarcerating these women proved to be difficult and again raised further public support for the cause. One of the most famous acts by a Suffragette occurred at the Epsom Derby in 1913. Emily Davison stepped in front of King George V's horse and was trampled in the middle of the race. She would die from her injuries four days later. (7)

American supporters of the women's suffrage movement chose not to use the term Suffragette primarily because of the negative connotation that came with the term. Alternatively, they chose to use the term suffragists

which was more generic and also could be used by male and female supporters of the women's suffrage movement.

After World War I

The onset of World War I delayed the women's suffrage movement in both nations as supporters turned their attention to the war efforts. However, this short term concession would lead to long term rewards. In 1917, six states in the U. S. granted women the right to vote in primaries and in municipal and presidential elections. (8) The momentum was building. In 1920, Tennessee would be the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment that gives American women the voting rights that we invoke today.

Second Wave Feminism, 1960s through late 1970s

In the United States, women began to become concern about the issue of women's liberation which occurred in the late 1960s. They were disappointed with the secondary status given to women's issues on the left and emboldened by the black power rhetoric that had emerged from the civil rights movement; these women decided that it's the time for them to take care of their own issues and goals to be heard and show their political concerns. For many of women involved in this movement, the idea those women could work together in the name of women seemed new, exciting, and without much historical precedent. From their perspective, the earlier women's movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed removed and without much relevance to the lives and politics of the new breed of feminists. While many women were certainly aware that a women's movement had existed in the previous century, they looked instead towards

the New Left and civil rights movements of the 1960s as the forerunners to their feminism (m).

Second Wave Feminism began in 1960's through 1990's which actually started with the protest against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969. Compared with the First Wave, the Second Wave was more focused in the anti-war and civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world. The New Left was on the rise, and the voice of the second wave was increasingly radical. During this period, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues, and much of the movement's energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex (a).

Second Wave Movement in the USA emphasized on three different movements: Women's movement, Feminist movement, Women's Liberation Movement. Feminists viewed the second wave era as ending with the intra-feminism dispute Feminist Sex War over issues such as sexuality and pornography. The " Second-Wave Feminism" title was coined by Marsha Lear when women of the 1960s sought to connect their ideas to those as reasonable, and by then noncontroversial, as the right to vote; " second wave" implied that the first wave of feminism ended in the 1920s. The labels " first wave" and " second wave," then, were created at the same time as a way of negotiating feminist space. These terms gave activist women of the late '60s the double-rhetorical advantage of cultivating new ideas while simultaneously rooting them in older, more established ground. Identifying itself as the second wave revived the movement for the public after seeming <https://assignbuster.com/twentieth-century-feminism-and-womens-rights/>

to lie dormant for some time. Second wavers are often applauded for paying homage to and drawing from the work of “ first-wave” women, as well they should be. But they did so for reasons far beyond a sense of patriotic duty to honor their fore sisters. The second-wave attention to women’s rights, and more importantly, to women’s liberation, emerged seemingly out of nowhere and needed to reestablish itself as neither particularly new nor fleeting. The labeling that linked the two periods of feminist movement was a rhetorical strategy that helped give clout to “ 60s women’s activism and positioned it as a further evolution of earlier and larger movement.

In 1963, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* spoke volumes about the lives that middle-and upper middle-class women were leading. Her arguments affirmed their malaise and motivated them to cure it by moving out of private and into public space, where no such malaise plagued men (n).

Women’s Liberation Movement

Also known as “ Second-Wave Feminism,” the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) was a grassroots movement that lasted from approximately 1960 through the early 1980’s, seeking for economic, political, and social equality for women in the Americas and Britain. The WLM in Britain is generally considered to have begun in 1969, when a confederation of local groups formed the Women’s Liberation Workshop, followed in 1970 by the establishment of the National Women’s Coordinating Committee.

Feminists articulated four main areas of concerns: equal pay, access to birth controls and abortion, expanding educational opportunity, childcare.

The United Nations declared 1975 as the International Year of the Woman and the beginning of a decade for Women (3).

Gender Inequality in Laws, Culture, and Politics

Industrial feminism doesn't fit into the established categories of American feminist history. There was a popular misconception that feminism was reserved for the middle and upper classes. The four working class women activists, Shavelson, Cohn, Newman and Schneiderman pursued the dream through four strategies that became the blue print for working-class women's activism in 20th century USA (b). By 1960, the size of the female labor force had nearly doubled, now enrolling almost one in three women. The majority of women workers, fully 60 percent, were married, over 40 percent of them were mothers of school-age children, and they most often had secured white-collar rather than industrial jobs. (f).

In 1979, a group of smart, strong-willed women, fiercely independent, but recognizing the need for collective action, forged a new organization in New York City, United Tradeswomen (UT). White and black, Hispanic and Asian, UT was also occupationally diverse: Entenmann bakery truck drivers, bridge painters, utility workers, firefighters, and hundreds of skilled trades' apprentices. From its inception, UT succeeded in providing a space for women to meet and to talk. The majority of women participating in the organization were experiencing significant hardships at work and meeting up with the resistance within their unions. UT fell apart in 1985 as internal divisions grew and the commitment of the original organizers waned (g).

Women's Rights

In the US, women have adorned American money since the founding of a new nation. Until 1979, though all women depicted were allegorical representations of republican ideals, such as liberty. The US government created the coin to honor Susan B. Anthony and her efforts to guarantee that American women had the right to vote. The US Mint first released the Anthony dollar on July 2, 1979 in the city in which Anthony resided during her politically active years: Rochester, New York (j).

Gender Role and Feminism

Historically, gender relations have rarely been linked to war and peace, and sexuality has seldom been a component of national security. But in the global War of Ideas, women's oppression and ideological marginalization are ingredients not to be ignored. Women's particular position with children and overseeing the very first steps of education gives them an incredible potential power to initiate and impact massive intellectual change. Taboos about sexual relations are crumbling worldwide, the vivid contrast between mindsets in free societies and the "Taliban-like" attitude toward sexual freedom on part of jihadists is playing a part in the psychological conditioning of jihadi violence (h).

Reproductive and Abortion Rights (Roe v. Wade)

Reproductive rights became one of the biggest concerns besides the unofficial inequalities, official legal inequalities, sexuality, family and the work place.

Abortion rights were legalized by the US Supreme Court in 1973 following the case of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* where the Court affirmed the abortion right granted in *Roe v. Wade* while permitting further restrictions (d). The practice of abortion is legal in the United States. This seems simple enough, but just like everything about the abortion conflict, there is no easy way to describe abortion law. The law has many sources - constitutions, legislative statutes, administrative regulations, court's decisions - and to become an expert on abortion law one would have to become familiar with all of them. The foundation of abortion law is the US Constitution as interpreted by The Supreme Court. Constitutional law does not directly regulate abortion. Rather, it sets limits on the powers of the states and the federal government to regulate abortion. The Court has established this constitutional law of abortion through a series of decisions, called case law, especially *Roe v. Wade*, *Doe v. Bolton*, and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.

Roe v. Wade was a challenge to the constitutionality of the criminal law that Texas enacted in the 1850s. The law prohibited anyone to "procure" or "attempt" an abortion except, based on medical advice, "for the purpose of saving the life of the mother".

Doe v. Bolton was a challenge to Georgia's 1968 reform that criminalized abortion except when the pregnancy endangered the life of the mother, there was a rare fetal deformity, or the pregnancy was the result of rape. The Georgia reform was very restrictive. In this case the Georgia legislature had added stringent and cumbersome rules including a requirement that the abortion decision must be approved by a committee and the medical judgment must be confirmed by two doctors in addition to the woman's own

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physician. The justices treated the two cases as a single decision, but it is Roe v. Wade that has become the most famous, the symbol for what is right and wrong (depending on your point of view) with abortion law in the United States (o).

Discrimination Against Women

From international perspective, in the context of a highly authoritarian and theocratic state in Iran, women's rights have been framed within an Islamist normative discourse, not only by religious and state authorities, but also by some advocates of women's rights. Such strategies have attracted considerable controversy, almost since the immediate aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979 (i).

In honoring the women's right throughout the world, The United Nation has formed a commission to watch the inequality treatments against women. International Women's Day has become an official day on March 8, 2010 (e).

Third Wave Feminism, 1990 to Present

Third Wave Feminism began around 1990 and continues into today. It arose " primarily out of the experiences of Americans born after 1960 who grew up enjoying many of the advantages second wave feminists had to fight to achieve".(9) It is believed that the third wave picks up where the second wave left off and addresses issues such as racism, oppression, body image, gender categories, and sexuality. In 2004, Unilever PLC with its Dove brand soap launched the Campaign for Real Beauty aimed at beauty stereotypes and self-esteem (10).

Emphasis on racism during the third-wave can be seen in the Thomas-Hill hearings in 1991 where a white male running for Supreme Court Justice is accused of sexual harassment by a young black woman. The hearings are credited with bringing public awareness to gender discrimination, and Anita Hill is often referred to as the mother of a new wave of gender discrimination awareness by several feminist groups (12).

Issues of the third-wave era can have different meaning for different people around the world. Oppression for a business woman in the United States might mean hitting the glass ceiling for that long awaited promotion. In Afghanistan, it would mean gender apartheid; being stripped of basic human rights and even killed simply because they are women. There are many organization available to address feminist issues on local and global levels.

<http://feministmajority.org/about/index.asp>

<http://www.feministing.com/about.html#aboutFem>

<http://www.now.org/>