The Women's Rights Movement

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THE PUSH FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

CONTENTS

IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1848
Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton cohost the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

1650
Anne Bradstreet of the Massachusetts Bay Colony releases her first book of poetry, becoming the first woman to be published in the American colonies.

1890
The American Woman Suffrage Association and another major women's group combine, forming the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

1920
The law passed by Congress allowing women to vote is ratified by a majority of the states and goes into effect.

1650 / 1830 1860 1890 1920

1821
Vermont native Emma Willard opens the first private girl's high school in Troy, New York.

1862
Nurse Clara Barton distinguishes both herself and her gender by saving lives while under enemy fire during the Civil War's Battle of Antietam.

1869
Lucy Stone and some colleagues establish the American Woman Suffrage Association with the goal of bringing about female voting rights.

1911
One hundred and forty-six people, mostly women, die in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in New York City.

1918
The US Congress passes legislation allowing for women's suffrage.

1982
Having passed Congress several years before, the Equal Rights Amendment is not ratified by the number of states needed to become law.

2017
Hundreds of American women accuse male public figures of sexually harassing them, launching the enormous #MeToo social movement.

1972
Women's rights activist Gloria Steinem founds *Ms.*, a magazine dedicated to women and their social problems and aspirations.

1933
President Franklin D. Roosevelt appoints Frances Perkins secretary of labor, making her the first woman to serve in a US presidential cabinet.

2009
President Barack Obama signs into law the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act.

1930 1950 1970 1990 2010

1932
Arkansas's Hattie Caraway becomes the first woman to be elected to the US Senate.

1960
About 39 percent of American women work outside the home.

1992
In this so-called Year of the Woman, twenty-four women win seats in the House of Representatives and three women win seats in the Senate.

2018
For the second year in a row, hundreds of thousands of women march nationwide to protest government policies on a variety of issues; marchers focus on women's rights, human rights, and encouraging women to vote and run for office.

1941
With the US entry into World War II, some 18 million women take jobs outside the home in support of the war effort.

1963
President John F. Kennedy signs into law the Equal Pay Act, which helps women begin to close the wage inequality gap with men.

Striving for True Equality

Historians, female activists, and others who have closely followed the progress of the women's rights movement over time often speak of feminism's so-called second wave. The first wave, they agree, consisted of the many advancements of American women leading up to the achievement of female suffrage in 1920. The second wave is generally defined as beginning with the resurgence of the fight for women's rights during the 1960s and 1970s.

To the general public, however, those newer women's advancements were collectively better known as women's liberation, or women's lib for short. As had occurred during feminism's first wave, between the 1960s and the 1980s increasing numbers of women contributed some measure of time and/or energy to the cause. Some marched in the streets, picketed, or took part in sit-ins, in which they called attention to the cause by sitting down inside public buildings or private businesses and refusing to leave, forcing the police to remove them. Other women protested by writing to or phoning their representatives in Congress and demanding they support women's rights. Some wrote letters to their local newspapers. Still others more quietly, but no less importantly, made financial contributions to women's organizations like NOW.

Millions of American women were happy about the many strides the women's liberation movement made during these years. Yet not all women were pleased with their social and political progress. A minority of American women actually disapproved of feminism, the women's liberation movement, and most efforts to make women equal with men.

One of the leaders of this countermovement was conservative attorney and writer Phyllis Schlafly. She suggested that feminists were bitter, unhappy individuals with many personal problems who

Women march down New York City's Fifth Avenue in April 1970 as part of a nationwide demonstration for women's liberation.

protested and sought to change laws mainly to make themselves feel better. Those who fought for women's lib, Schlafly said, were sick people who saw their homes as jails and viewed wives and mothers, supposedly the bedrock of traditional society, as slaves. The women's liberation movement, she asserted, "is a total assault on the role of the American woman as wife and mother, and on the family as the basic unit of society." The female protesters "are promoting day care centers for babies instead of homes," she continued. "They are promoting abortions instead of families."[41]

> **"[The women's liberation movement] is a total assault on the role of the American woman as wife and mother."[41]**
>
> —Antifeminist activist Phyllis Schlafly

In 2016 Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first woman presidential nominee of either of America's major political parties.

begun before the Year of the Woman—when, in 1981, President Reagan had nominated the first female Supreme Court justice. Distinguished Stanford Law School graduate and Arizona judge Sandra Day O'Connor was confirmed for the position unanimously by the members of the Senate. More nominations of women to the high court followed. In 1993 President Bill Clinton named District of Columbia Court of Appeals judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In 2009, President Barack Obama nominated Second Circuit Court of Appeals judge Sonia Sotomayor; the following year, Obama

nominated Harvard Law School dean and US solicitor general Elena Kagan. When Kagan joined the high court, for the first time ever one-third of its justices were women.

Meanwhile, in 2007, two years before Sotomayor's nomination, a woman became part of the immediate line of succession to the US presidency. That year California congresswoman Nancy Pelosi became the sixtieth—and first female—Speaker of the House of Representatives. This elevation put her second in line, after the vice president, to become president if both the president and vice president were somehow unable to serve.

In 2008 former First Lady and US senator Hillary Rodham Clinton made history as well. In a bid for the presidency, she won the New Hampshire primary, becoming the first woman to win a presidential primary. Later that year, fellow Democrat Barack Obama narrowly defeated her for the party's nomination and went on to become the first African American to win the presidency. Almost immediately after his victory, Obama announced that Clinton would serve as his secretary of state, the most prestigious US cabinet post. She served in that office for the next four years.

In 2016 Clinton became the first woman ever to win a major party nomination for the presidency. In the election in early November, she won the popular vote by a commanding margin—65.8 million (48 percent) to 62.9 million (46 percent). However, because her opponent Donald Trump received roughly seventy thousand more votes than she did in three key states, he won the Electoral College vote and, with it, the presidency. Clinton's defeat saddened her many female supporters. Yet some of them managed to take heart, seeing her nearly successful campaign alone as a positive sign for the future of American women. "Maybe this election was the beginning of something new," suggested Lindy West, a columnist for the popular online newspaper the *Guardian*. Perhaps, she added, it was "not the death of sexism, but the birth of a world in which women's inferiority isn't a given."[51]

"Maybe this election was the beginning of something new."[51]

—*Guardian* columnist Lindy West on the 2016 presidential race

The Struggle for Equality Goes On

Over the course of more than a century and a half, the American women's rights movement has had a profound impact not only on women's lives and rights but also on society as a whole. What is sometimes called the feminist revolution has employed a wide range of tactics to effect this change. As scholar Estelle B. Freedman says, these have included grassroots protests, the flourishing of women's literature and art, female participation in athletics, and the election of women to public office both locally and nationally. Through these and other means, she remarks, "the past generation has expanded the reach of feminism enormously."[52]

Yet no feminist, historian, or other close observer of these trends has any illusion that women have managed to attain true equality with men. Indeed, women continue to struggle for equality in many social areas. Among the more publicized recent examples have been obstacles to female service in the American military, continued efforts by women to receive the same pay as men for the same work, and the upsurge of women of all social levels courageously going public with their harrowing experiences of sexual harassment.

On the surface, these and similar areas of contention between women and a still partly sexist society may appear daunting and disheartening. Yet as Freedman and some other feminists point out, they have a positive side as well. Namely, they show that large numbers of women refuse to give up their battle for equality. In the future, she predicts, the women's rights movement "will continue to redefine its politics and broaden its reach." This fight "to recognize all women as fully human and fully citizens, to value women's labors as much as men's, [continues] to expand."[53]

Changing the Military Forever

The courage displayed by women who refused to knuckle under to long-entrenched male social dominance is nowhere more impressive than in the experiences of young women trying to enter the military. Scholar Nancy MacLean calls it "the most avidly masculine institution in American life." During the 1990s and the decade that followed, the various branches of the US military were flooded with thousands of female applicants. Joining up during this period was "especially important to African American women and Latinas," MacLean points out. They enlisted "in the military in large numbers in hopes of education funding and social mobility."[54]

This influx of young women joining the military changed that institution forever. The effects of the change became evident almost

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen increasing numbers of American women joining the military. Starting in 2015, the US military allowed women to serve in most combat roles.

right away. In 1970 only around 2 percent of US military personnel were female. By the advent of the Persian Gulf War of the early 1990s, however, that percentage had more than tripled to 7 percent. More than forty thousand women served in combat support in that conflict, and sixteen of them were killed in the line of duty. Moreover, the number of women serving their country continued to grow.

Between 2001 and 2010, more than 235,000 women served in US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, some of them in combat roles. The latter cases were unofficial because women were still legally prohibited from fighting on the front lines at the time. That barrier also fell, however, when, in 2015, the US military officially began allowing women to take part in most combat roles.

Women at the Military Academies

All of those women who eagerly served—whether in combat or noncombat jobs—had to be trained, of course. Some simply enlisted and received regular training in one military branch or another. However, increasing numbers of women opted to attend one of the several esteemed military academies that produce young officers—for instance, the army's US Military Academy in West Point, New York, and the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

South Carolina's Citadel—one of the six leading military academies in the country—became the focus of much attention in 1995. That year a young woman named Shannon Faulkner became the first female to attend the school. She had been turned down when she first applied, specifically because of her gender, and had resorted to going to court to gain admission. In part because of severe harassment by male cadets, Faulkner left the Citadel after only a week. But she had in a real sense opened the door there to other women. In 1996 the school regularly started admitting women. The first of them to graduate, in 1999, was Nancy Mace. When asked how she and other female cadets had changed the Citadel, she proudly replied, "for the better."[55]

A Black Woman's Success at West Point

Founded in 1802, the US Military Academy at West Point is America's oldest service academy. White women began to be accepted there in small numbers during the 1970s. Later in that decade African American women started to gain admission there as well. In 1980 Pat Locke was one of the first two African American women to graduate from the academy. Both white and minority women applied to West Point in even larger numbers during the 1980s, 1990s, and the decades that followed. At first, most male cadets assumed that only men would be able to rise to the prestigious position of first captain of the entire corps of cadets—a person commanding all forty-four hundred of them. But those who made this assumption were proved wrong. In 1989 Kristin Baker became the first woman to attain that coveted rank. Later, in 2017, twenty-one-year-old Simone Askew was the first African American woman to become West Point's first captain. In an interview for CBS News, Askew said, "My focus now is really to be the best first captain I can be regardless of gender or race, and [that] I'm remembered as a good leader and not necessarily as a good African-American female leader." In a 2017 interview, Locke remarked about Askew, "You see so much of our nation in her. The way that she thinks, the way that she carries herself. She knows she wants to be a leader because she wants to make a difference."

Quoted in CBS News, "Profiles in Service: West Point Cadet Simone Askew on Making History and Leadership," December 25, 2017. www.cbsnews.com.

A few other military academies, including the US Air Force Academy in Colorado, which first admitted female cadets in 1976, experienced a similar sequence of events. At first there was some harassment of the female cadets, but it was soon followed by their general acceptance. To the dismay of many Americans, however, resentment against women entering a traditionally male domain did not disappear completely. Between 2015 and 2017 harassment of female cadets resurfaced at the US Air Force Academy. In late 2017 CBS and other news outlets broke the story of sexual assaults against some of the academy's female cadets, including Emily Hazen and Melissa Hildremyr. The two said that they reported their sexual assaults to academy officials, but those leaders blamed the victims and did nothing to stop the abuse. Hildremyr told the media how those who ran the school took the side of the

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FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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