

## Women's Movement

The cultural meanings we give to gender and sexuality constitute a complex web connecting male and female power, status, and identity; women's rights; birth control and abortion; homosexuality; family policy; and population policy. All these elements are bound up in the emergence of the women's movement, the related movement and countermovement for reproductive rights including abortion, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and the backlash on the Right which emphasizes traditional family values.

**The Woman Suffrage Movement and its Heritage.** Among the U.S. delegation to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 were two women, Quaker minister Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wife of a prominent abolitionist. The Convention refused to seat women as delegates, so Mott and Stanton had to watch from the gallery. Resolving to improve the status of women, Mott and Stanton called a Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The meeting, attended by some 300 women and men, produced a "Declaration of Principles" including a resolution calling for the franchise for women. National woman's rights conventions were held throughout the 1850s, drawing Susan B. Anthony with her exceptional organizational skills into the leadership.

After the Civil War, abolitionists pushed at all costs to pass the 14th and 15th Amendments granting rights and the vote to the slaves freed by the 13th Amendment. The woman's rights movement split in 1869 into two groups: the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), led by Lucy Stone, which backed the 15th Amendment giving black males the vote; and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), led by "irreconcilables" Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, which opposed the 15th Amendment because it did not also grant women the vote. The two groups also split on strategy, with the AWSA undertaking "realistic" efforts for state laws enfranchising women, while the NWSA directed its activity toward a national constitutional amendment. Victories in Western states -- women won the vote in Wyoming in 1869 and Utah in 1870 -- paved the way for wider suffrage gains.

Women's organizations were beginning to flourish generally -- Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) groups were organized in several Eastern cities in the 1860s, and the formidable Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), led by Frances Willard, was founded in 1874. The forerunner of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) was launched in 1882. The General Federation of Women's Clubs was organized in 1890, and the National Association of Colored Women was founded in 1896 under the leadership of Mary Church Terrell. Unity between the AWSA and the NWSA was finally forged with the encouragement of Alice Stone Blackwell, and the two groups merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was chosen as its first president. Susan Anthony and the first generation of feminist leaders were aging, and she arranged to pass the NAWSA presidency on Carrie Chapman Catt in 1900. When Catt resigned to deal with family matters and lecture internationally, Anna Howard Shaw -- another younger representative of second generation feminists -- stepped in as NAWSA president.

Although there were additional state victories during the first decade of the century, little was happening on the federal front -- no floor debate on woman suffrage had been held in Congress since 1887. That began to change with the arrival of Alice Paul, a young Quaker who had gone to study in England and became involved with Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union -- jailed for protest activity, she had gone on a hunger strike and been force-fed. Paul chaired the Congressional Committee of NAWSA and created fresh momentum for a federal suffrage amendment. In 1913 she and Lucy Burns created a separate national organization, the Congressional Union, to press an all-out campaign for the federal suffrage amendment -- a goal the NAWSA felt was premature. Carrie Catt returned as NAWSA president in 1915, and began a campaign to convince Woodrow Wilson to support the woman suffrage amendment. Alice Paul and the Congressional Union, on the other hand, formed the National Women's Party to contest the 1916 election in the twelve states where women could vote for president.

Following the end of World War I, woman suffrage bills were passed in England and most Canadian provinces. The NAWSA mounted an all-out campaign for the federal woman suffrage amendment in 1918. Carrie Catt had been granted a bequest in 1914 of over \$1 million to be used to further the cause of woman suffrage from Mrs. Frank Leslie, publisher of *Leslie's Weekly*. After considerable litigation and a settlement, Catt finally received the money in 1917, in time to employ some 200 women organizers for the final campaign. The NAWSA had to fight opposition from political machines, the brewing and liquor industries (who feared temperance), the Catholic hierarchy, and corporate interests who were alarmed by the progressive implications of the new federal income tax (authorized by the 16th Amendment in 1913) and direct popular election of U.S. senators (as provided by the 17th Amendment in 1913). After the 1918 elections, the 19th Amendment granting women the vote finally received the required two-thirds majority in the House and Senate in May 1919, and ratification by three-fourths of the states (36 of 48) was completed in August 1920.

The NAWSA created the National League of Women Voters in 1920 to carry on the work of educating women and the public on civic issues. Unsatisfied by the suffrage victory, Alice Paul maintained the National Women's Party to promote an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which she believed was essential to attaining equality for women. Paul's small, elite, sectarian, and divisive organization sustained the idea of the ERA for the several decades when feminism was in abeyance -- and when most influential women and women's organizations opposed the ERA in favor of protective labor legislation for women, and an alliance with the labor movement and, later, the civil rights movement.

The absence of an explicitly feminist movement did not mean that women were not making gains during the 1920s and 1930s. The Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW) was organized in 1919, grew into a powerful force for women's rights, and became an early supporter of the ERA. Women worked on the unsuccessful campaign for a child labor amendment, but did succeed in obtaining passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act in 1921, providing matching federal funds for state maternal and child health programs. The Children's Bureau was established in 1912, and the Women's Bureau in

1920, both housed in the Department of Labor and providing footholds for women in the federal bureaucracy (Mary Anderson was chief of the Women's Bureau from 1920 to 1944; Julia Lathrop was chief of the Children's Bureau from 1912 to 1921; Grace Abbott from 1921 to 1934, followed by Katherine Lenroot from 1934 to 1949). During the New Deal administration of Franklin Roosevelt, over two dozen women were appointed or elected to influential positions in Washington agencies or the Democratic Party structure, and formed a loose network fostered by Eleanor Roosevelt. Frances Perkins became the first woman in a president's cabinet as Secretary of Labor from 1933 to 1945, and Mary Dewson became an important leader of the Democratic National Committee's Women's Division. The women's network had substantial influence over social welfare policy in the New Deal agencies -- Jane Hoey, for example, served as director of the Bureau of Public Assistance from 1936 to 1953 -- and established an impressive record of government service.

**The New Women's Movement.** During World War II women were called upon to replace men in factories, as "Rosie the Riveter" became the model of the patriotic woman working a defense plant. As men were demobilized after the war, women were expected to give up their jobs and take up homemaking -- as many did, raising the children of the baby boom generation through the 1940s and 1950s. Women continued to move into the workforce, but in traditional occupations: as secretaries in the expanding "pink collar" office force, and in such helping professions as teaching, nursing, and social work. At the same time women were achieving a higher level of education that prepared them for positions beyond the traditional job roles. The availability of "the pill" resulted in a decline in fertility after 1964, as women planned children around education and work (it also opened up potential for greater sexual freedom). In this context Betty Friedan's best-seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, caught fire in 1963.

Not that there hadn't been progress for women in the early 1960s. In 1961 Esther Peterson, a former lobbyist for the AFL-CIO and then director of the Women's Bureau, successfully lobbied President Kennedy to set up the President's Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The Commission published *American Women* in 1963, making mild recommendations to improve women's situation. With support from the Department of Labor and the AFL-CIO, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act of 1963, requiring equal pay for equal work. And in 1964 sex discrimination was made an illegal practice under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Rep. Howard Smith (D-VA) sponsored the amendment adding "sex" as a conservative tactic to reduce support for the bill -- although as a long-time Alice Paul ally and supporter of the ERA, Smith didn't want black men to have an advantage over white women if the civil rights bill were to pass. The amendment was opposed by the Women's Bureau coalition but supported by ERA backers, and the Civil Rights Act passed as amended. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission remained a strong supporter of protective legislation for women, and made little effort to enforce the prohibition against sex discrimination.

Betty Friedan and women's rights supporters used the occasion of the Third National Conference of the Commissions on the Status of Women in June 1966 to propose a new civil rights group, the National Organization for Women (NOW) to fight for enforcement

of the sex provision of Title VII. NOW held its founding convention in October 1966, electing Friedan as president and a board of directors including professionals who worked in federal and state government, universities, business, and labor unions. With encouragement from the National Women's Party, NOW endorsed the ERA in 1967 and soon became its leading advocate (although that meant leaving an office provided by the United Auto Workers). NOW also supported abortion rights and federally funded child care, and divisions over these positions and priorities led to individuals leaving to form the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) to focus on economic issues, and the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) to focus on electoral activity. While remaining part of the progressive women's rights coalition, traditional women's groups -- LWV, AAUW, and BPW -- were being overshadowed by the new wave of feminist organizations.

Much as the abolition movement helped inspire woman suffrage supporters in the Nineteenth Century, the civil rights struggle of the late 1950s and 1960s helped inspire a younger, more radical generation of women activists, many of whom were associated with the emerging New Left. Women who were resisting the sexism of male leadership in the civil rights work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the community organizing projects of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began meeting in 1967 in small groups to discuss their experiences. Out of these "consciousness-raising" groups emerged a decentralized women's liberation movement, using the insight "the personal is political" to examine and explore the grounds of oppression in their personal as well as organizational power relationships. Even as the "sisterhood is powerful" message was taking hold, the movement was fragmenting into a variety of competing perspectives, including radical feminism and socialist feminism. After 1970, lesbian separatists helped foster the development of women's services and cultural activities. Over the next decade feminists created a range of local women's institutions which flourish to this date: rape crisis hotlines and counseling centers, battered women's shelters, women's health clinics, and other women's projects -- newspapers, bookstores, coffeehouses, and entertainment.

#### THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.
2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.
3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

**The ERA Battle.** Support for the ERA had been growing with little controversy. The Republican Party platform had endorsed ERA since 1940, and the Democratic Party since 1944, despite labor opposition. The ERA had been endorsed by Presidents Johnson and Nixon, and the Presidential Task Force on the Status of Women. The Women's Bureau and several unions reversed their opposition and supported ERA. Beginning in 1970 hearings were held in the Senate and House, and the ERA passed the House in 1971 and the Senate in March 1972. Supporters of the ERA had seven years to persuade the

legislatures of 38 states to ratify, but little concerted effort was mounted at first because it looked like clear sailing -- in 1972 alone 22 states ratified.

Then the opponents emerged, the most effective of which was Phyllis Schlafly's Stop ERA, formed in 1972 (incorporated in 1975 as Eagle Forum). By the end of 1975, 34 states had ratified, but then none in 1976 and only one in 1977. Meanwhile three states had voted to rescind ratification, an action with unclear constitutional impact. When it was evident in 1978 that ERA supporters could not get 38 state ratifications by 1979, they got Congress to pass a three-year extension to 1982. All the opponents had to do was deny ratification in 13 states -- and Illinois and Utah proved decisive, with opposition from Schlafly influential in Illinois, and the Mormon Church in Utah. The ERA drive was defeated.

What went wrong? Schlafly and other opponents argued that the ERA would result in drafting women for combat, require federal funds to be used for abortions, mandate equal rights for homosexuals, remove powers from the states, and even establish unisex toilets. Sympathetic analysts like Jane Mansbridge conclude that ERA would have little direct impact on women's rights and economic position, given the liberal interpretations the courts have given to the Equal Pay Act, Title VII, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and state ERA laws. ERA's impact would be largely symbolic, and would probably have some influence on court and legislative actions over time. Consequently both ERA's backers and opponents had reason to exaggerate its effects to mobilize their constituencies.

Mansbridge notes that ERA supporters emphasized its impact when they should have minimized it to build a broad consensus. Public opinion supported protection of women's equal rights, but not an upheaval in family life. Opponents simply had to raise enough doubts about ERA's impact to doom support in a quarter of the states. Mary Frances Berry emphasizes in her analysis that not enough groundwork was done in the states to assure solid support for ERA.

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