

GRADE 12 HISTORY**IF. WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT (Summary)**

Until recently, despite the fact that women make up half the world's population, the place and role that women have been assigned to in society has been one of subservience and inferiority. Women's role in society began to change with industrialization and the development of a middle and urban working class. Whilst liberal capitalism created the middle and urban working class, socialism challenged the age-old structures and roles played by men and women. It stressed the equality of all people and the contribution that women could play in economic production.

In the United States, the first women's movement was created in 1848. This was later followed by the suffragette movement which agitated for equal political rights for women. It began before the outbreak of the First World War and was strengthened as women became the backbone of the economy during both wars. This movement was known as the First Wave.

The 1960s brought radical change to the position of women. Even though they had fought for, and gained, political independence, women were still considered minors under the law! In effect, it meant that their parents or their husbands had more decision making rights about their bodies and lifestyles than they did. During the 1960s women were concerned with a fight for social and economic rights. This movement was known as the Second Wave.

Women were committed to winning the battle against discrimination in the workplace, in universities, colleges and about their bodies. This included the right to contraception and birth control, as well as to having an abortion. Women also fought to change the perception of their sexual behavior. A great degree of sexual freedom was advocated – the right to have more than one sexual partner, the right to marry or to remain single, to have children or not, and to choose their sexual orientation. Issues that we take for granted today, were hotly debated and fought for by this generation.

In 1961, a Commission on the Status of Women was set up to investigate discrimination against women in American society. The first chairperson was Eleanor Roosevelt. As the women's movement strove for equality in society it became increasingly woven together with the quest of African American women for the same things. As a result of this commission, in 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, which granted civil rights to African Americans. It also prevented discrimination in the work place based on gender, race, religion and national origin.

A lot of women involved in the struggles for women's rights were also involved in the protest against nuclear warfare and other social issues, such as America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Undoubtedly, the hippie movement did a lot to liberate women within society.

THE FIRST WAVE (before 1920)

How women were marginalized:

Married women were legally dead in the eyes of the law

Women were not allowed to vote

Women had to submit to laws when they had no voice in their formation

Married women had no property rights

Husbands had legal power over and responsibility for their wives to the extent that they could imprison or beat them with impunity

Divorce and child custody laws favored men, giving no rights to women

Women had to pay property taxes although they had no representation in the levying of these taxes

Most occupations were closed to women and when women did work they were paid only a fraction of what men earned

Women were not allowed to enter professions such as medicine or law

Women had no means to gain an education since no college or university would accept women students

With only a few exceptions, women were not allowed to participate in the affairs of the church

Women were robbed of their self-confidence and self-respect, and were made totally dependent on men

After the Vote was Won

After the vote was finally won in 1920, the organized Women's Rights Movement continued on in several directions. While the majority of women who had marched, petitioned and lobbied for woman suffrage looked no further, a minority - like Alice Paul - understood that the quest for women's rights would be an ongoing struggle that was only advanced, not satisfied, by the vote.

In 1919, as the suffrage victory drew near, the National American Woman Suffrage Association reconfigured itself into the League of Women Voters to ensure that women would take their hard-won vote seriously and use it wisely.

In 1920, the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor was established to gather information about the situation of women at work, and to advocate for changes it found were needed. Many suffragists became actively involved with lobbying for legislation to protect women workers from abuse and unsafe conditions.

In 1923, Alice Paul, the leader of the National Woman's Party, took the next obvious step. She drafted an Equal Rights Amendment for the United States Constitution. Such a federal law, it was argued, would ensure that "Men and women have equal rights throughout the United States." A constitutional amendment would apply uniformly, regardless of where a person lived.

the birth control movement, initiated by a public health nurse, Margaret Sanger, was the next battle fought by women. The idea of woman's right to control her own body, and especially to control her own reproduction and sexuality, added a visionary new dimension to the ideas of women's emancipation. This movement not only endorsed educating women about existing birth control methods. It also spread the conviction that meaningful freedom for modern women meant they must be able to decide for

themselves whether they would become mothers, and when. For decades, Margaret Sanger and her supporters faced down at every turn the zealously enforced laws denying women this right. In 1936, a Supreme Court decision declassified birth control information as obscene. Still, it was not until 1965 that married couples in all states could obtain contraceptives legally.

The Second Wave – 1960s (Feminist Movement)

So it's clear that, contrary to common misconception, the Women's Rights Movement did not begin in the 1960s. What occurred in the 1960s was actually a second wave of activism that washed into the public consciousness, fueled by several seemingly independent events of that turbulent decade. Each of these events brought a different segment of the population into the movement.

First: Esther Peterson was the director of the Women's Bureau of the Dept. of Labor in 1961. She considered it to be the government's responsibility to take an active role in addressing discrimination against women. With her encouragement, President Kennedy convened a Commission on the Status of Women, naming Eleanor Roosevelt as its chair. The report issued by that commission in 1963 documented discrimination against women in virtually every area of American life. State and local governments quickly followed suit and established their own commissions for women, to research conditions and recommend changes that could be initiated.

Then: In 1963, Betty Friedan published a landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*. *The Feminine Mystique* evolved out of a survey she had conducted for her 20-year college reunion. In it she documented the emotional and intellectual oppression that middle-class educated women were experiencing because of limited life options. The book became an immediate bestseller, and inspired thousands of women to look for fulfillment beyond the role of homemaker.

Next: Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race, religion, and national origin. The category "sex" was included as a last-ditch effort to kill the bill. But it passed, nevertheless. With its passage, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established to investigate discrimination complaints. Within the commission's first five years, it received 50,000 sex discrimination complaints. But it was quickly obvious that the commission was not very interested in pursuing these complaints. Betty Friedan, the chairs of the various state Commissions on the Status of Women, and other feminists agreed to form a civil rights organization for women similar to the NAACP. In 1966, the National Organization for Women was organized, soon to be followed by an array of other mass-membership organizations addressing the needs of specific groups of women, including Blacks, Latinas, Asians-Americans, lesbians, welfare recipients, business owners, aspiring politicians, and tradeswomen and professional women of every sort.

During this same time, thousands of young women on college campuses were playing active roles within the anti-war and civil rights movement. At least that was their intention. Many were finding their efforts blocked by men who felt leadership of these movements was their own province, and that women's roles should be limited

to fixing food and running mimeograph machines. It wasn't long before these young women began forming their own "women's liberation" organizations to address their role and status within these progressive movements and within society at large.

How women were marginalized after the 1960s:

Women's reproductive rights. Whether or not women can terminate pregnancies is still controversial twenty-five years after the Supreme Court ruling in Roe v. Wade affirmed women's choice during the first two trimesters.

Women's enrollment in military academies and service in active combat. Are these desirable?

Women in leadership roles in religious worship. Controversial for some, natural for others.

Affirmative action. Is aid and benefits in making up for past discrimination appropriate? Do qualified women now face a level playing field?

The mommy track. Should businesses accommodate women's family responsibilities, or should women compete evenly for advancement with men, most of whom still assume fewer family obligations?

Pornography. Is it degrading, even dangerous, to women, or is it simply a free speech issue?

Sexual harassment. Just where does flirting leave off and harassment begin?

Surrogate motherhood. Is it simply the free right of a woman to hire out her womb for this service?

Social Security benefits allocated equally for homemakers and their working spouses, to keep surviving wives from poverty as widows.

Today, young women proudly calling themselves "the third wave" are confronting these and other thorny issues. While many women may still be hesitant to call themselves "feminist" because of the ever-present backlash, few would give up the legacy of personal freedoms and expanded opportunities women have won over the last 150 years. Whatever choices we make for our own lives, most of us envision a world for our daughters, nieces and granddaughters where all girls and women will have the opportunity to develop their unique skills and talents and pursue their dreams.

Interesting webpage:

<http://sites.moca.org/wack/>

