

This Great Nation: A History of the United States, Henry F. Graff, II: Riverside Publishing Company, 1985. [10-12]

[631-633]

Women and Discrimination

During the 1960s many Americans recognized that women, too, suffered from discrimination. These feelings prompted a rebirth of feminism. Feminism had been part of American society for more than one hundred years. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, the movement took on a new name. It came to be known as the Women's Liberation Movement.

Spokespersons for the Women's Liberation Movement, such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, pointed out that women, on the average, earned about half as much as men, often for doing the same jobs. They rarely held high-level jobs in business. Women also held little political power, compared with their numbers. By the mid-1960s, the United States Senate still had only one elected woman member. She was Margaret Chase Smith of Maine. Up to the mid-1960s, no woman had ever been elected governor of any state or mayor of any large American city. Only two women had ever been appointed to a President's Cabinet (Frances Perkins by FDR and Oveta Culp Hobby by Dwight Eisenhower). No woman had ever been elected President.

The National Organization for Women. In 1966 about three hundred women and men formed the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW became the largest organization in the feminist movement in the United States. In addition to hundreds of other activities meant to educate people to feminist ideas and protest against discrimination, NOW helped organize a nation wide Women's Strike for Equality. On the day of the strike women picketed, marched, and made speeches on behalf of equal rights.

Some changes were made during the 1970s. In 1972 federal officials began enforcing Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This section of the act outlawed job discrimination based on race or sex. The federal government ordered companies working on government contracts to set up plans for hiring women and minorities. Congress also passed the Equal Opportunity Act of 1972. This law required employers to pay equal wages for equal work. It also forbade discrimination against women who applied for credit.

Feminists had some influence in increasing the political power of women. Between the late 1960s and the 1980s, many women took public office. Ella Grasso in Connecticut and Dixy Lee Ray in Washington became governors; Jane Byrne in Chicago and Dianne Feinstein in San Francisco became mayors of large cities; Patricia Harris and Juanita Kreps became Cabinet members under President Carter. President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor to be the first woman justice of the Supreme Court (see *People in America*, page 745).

The Equal Rights Amendment. Feminist groups worked for the passage of an amendment to the Constitution that would outlaw discrimination based on sex. They argued that there would not be complete equality until all people stood equally before the law. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) passed Congress in 1972. Its declaration was: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex." After passage in Congress, the proposed amendment was sent to the states to be ratified.

At first, many states quickly ratified it. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the ERA met with opposition. Some said that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 already protected women's rights. They also feared that the ERA might require women to be subject to the military draft in case of a national emergency.

In 1972 Phyllis Schlafly of Illinois founded and became the national chairperson for Stop ERA. She saw the ERA as likely to be damaging to family life. By 1982 the ERA had still not been ratified by the required number of states.

Not all the hopes of minorities and women were fulfilled by the new laws and changed atmosphere of the years since World War II. Still, most Americans could more comfortably speak of the United States as a leader in the worldwide movement for greater human freedom.

(photo) Governors Dixy Lee Ray of Washing Con (left) and Ella Grasso of Connecticut were among the first women elected to high political office.

(photo) Phyllis Schlafly and feminists disagreed strongly about the ERA during the 1970s. The amendment was first introduced in Congress in 1923 but was not passed until forty-nine years later.

[DISCUSSION. Have the students discuss to what extent discrimination against women is based on stereotypes. Have them focus on these questions: What are some of the stereotypes about women, and how did they get started? How do stereotypes about a group harm individuals in the group? The last question can be broadened to compare the experiences of women to those of blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and other minorities.]

[634-635]

Working with Skills: READING SKILLS

Comparing Points of View

Throughout history, certain issues have aroused strong and conflicting viewpoints. Often the written word has been used as a powerful tool in the fight for or against a controversial measure. It is important for readers to be able to compare different points of view on one subject, in order to clearly understand all the issues and come to a sensible conclusion for themselves.

One controversial issue in recent years was the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Both supporters and opponents of ERA worked hard to influence public opinion and state legislatures. Here is the point of view of Melissa Thompson of the National Organization of Women:

What does the Equal Rights Amendment really mean? Money! Money in the pockets of women. The heart of all discrimination against women is money, whether it is state marriage property laws giving ownership... to the male spouse or federal laws limiting a woman's access to the military and its training and jobs....

The only right constitutionally guaranteed women is the right to vote! Other constitutional rights have been allowed to cover women but [they have] been limited to a case-by-case judicial ruling....

The [ERA] would also act to reinforce all the antidiscrimination statutes [laws] that feminists have gotten enacted in the last fifteen years -- statutes that can easily be legislated away by the whim of Congress or state legislatures otherwise.

The ERA will mean that both spouses will have the same legal rights and responsibilities. This does not mean that both spouses will or can be required to pay fifty percent of the marital expense. It does mean that either spouse could be held liable for the support of the other based on individual ability.

Now read the point of view of Phyllis Schlafly of Stop ERA:

The Equal Rights Amendment pretends to be an advance for women, but actually it will do nothing at all for women. It will not give women equal pay for equal work or any new employment advantages, rights or benefits. There is no way it can extend the rights already guaranteed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972. Under this act... women have already won multi-million-dollar back-pay settlements against the largest companies in our land.

... There is no law that discriminates against women. What ERA will do is to require us to "neuterize" all federal and state laws, removing the "sexist" words such as male, female, man, woman, husband and wife, and replacing them with sex-neutral words such as person and spouse....

At the federal level the most obvious result would be on the draft and military combat. ERA will take away a young girl's exemption from the draft in all future wars.... The Selective Service Act would have to read "all persons" instead of "all male citizens."

When the laws pertaining to family support are neutered, this will void [eliminate] the husband's obligation to support his wife, to provide her with a home, and to support their minor children.

In comparing these two points of view, you will find total disagreement on the benefits of the ERA. Yet both Schlafly and Thompson raise the same issues. For instance, Thompson believes that discrimination against women is built into all laws except where courts have ruled otherwise. Schlafly believes that no law discriminates against women.

Your job as a careful reader is to separate the issues one by one and see what each writer thinks about each issue. Compare the two quotes and answer the following questions.

1. Thompson identifies money -- more money for women -- as the real meaning of ERA. In Schlafly's view, what is the real meaning of ERA?
2. Thompson says that ERA would equalize rights and responsibilities in marriage, so that a husband and wife each contribute to the partnership what they can afford. Schlafly sees ERA's effect on marriage differently. What is her view?
3. Schlafly is worried that ERA would force women to register for the draft and fight in wars. How does Thompson view ERA's impact on women in the military?
4. How do Schlafly and Thompson disagree about which rights are guaranteed to women?

[ANSWERS

1. It would "neuterize" all laws.
2. that a husband's obligation to support his wife and children would be eliminated.
3. It would allow women equal access to opportunity -- training and jobs -- in the military.
4. Schlafly says that job rights are guaranteed by Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972. Thompson says that the only right constitutionally guaranteed is the right to vote, whereas other rights could be legislated away by Congress.

[Objective: Once the students have completed these pages, they will know how to compare points of view.]

[ACTIVITY. Objective: To compare points of view Explain to the students that the rights movements discussed in this chapter were possible only after the decline of McCarthyism (which they read about in Chapter 24). Find and make available to the students statements by Senator Joseph McCarthy and one of his opponents -- for example, special counsel to the army Joseph N. Welch or Senator William Benton of Connecticut. (This material should be available in Vital Speeches or history texts.) After they read these passages, ask the students questions to bring out the particulars of each point of view.