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5. Women redouble efforts to win equal rights and opportunities

American women make up 53 percent of the population. They are the largest group struggling against discrimination. During the 1960's the struggle came to be known as women's liberation or the women's rights movement.

Reasons for early successes. In part the movement gained strength because of the growing number of American women who were now employed. By the mid-1970's women made up about 50 percent of the nation's labor force. Their average wages, however, were only 60 percent of those paid to men doing comparable work. Even more revealing, only a small percentage of women held higher-paying and more responsible positions. Among the directors of large corporations, for example, only 3 percent were women.

Another factor in the rise of the women's rights movement was the civil rights movement. Many women had been actively involved in the civil rights movement and had gained ability and confidence for their own struggle.

Their struggle was also aided by a clause in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This clause outlawed discrimination based on sex in employment. Using this clause, women battled to secure equal treatment in business, education, and the other professions.

Growing numbers of women agreed with movement leaders that sex discrimination kept many women from realizing their full potential. According to public opinion polls, a majority of American women did not feel that taking care of a home and rearing children were restrictive or frustrating roles. By the mid-1970's, however, a majority of American women did approve of equal opportunities for their sex in all areas of life.

Women's rights organizations. One of the first and most prominent groups within the women's rights movement was the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW and other feminist groups shared a number of goals. They demanded equal treatment of women in educational programs, including faculty appointments in universities. They worked for publicly financed day-care centers for children. They attempted to get state laws forbidding abortion repealed. They strongly opposed the treatment of women as sex objects. Some of the groups also insisted that men should share in the tasks of homemaking and childrearing.

The ERA. Most of the women's rights organizations pressed for a Constitutional amendment to guarantee women equal rights. By 1978 the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) that had been passed by Congress in 1972 had been ratified by 35 of the required 38 states. By 1980, however, no additional states had ratified the amendment.

The ERA failed because many American women believed that the ERA would deprive them of more than it gave them. Some feared it might make them subject to the military draft. Others feared it would end alimony payments to women. Still others thought it would put an end to laws protecting women in the workplace. Many women also believed that the ERA would help to destroy the traditional bonds of the family.

Opponents of ERA organized their own counter-movement. They put pressure on state legislatures and succeeded in preventing ratification in key states. By the early 1980's, the hope for passage of any Equal Rights Amendment was dead.

New freedoms for women. Despite the failure of the ERA, steps were being made toward meeting some goals of the women's rights movement. Legal suits were filed against businesses, colleges, and other institutions. Such suits charged the institutions with sex discrimination in hiring, pay, and promotion practices.

Women also entered careers in fields formerly dominated by men. Women enlisted in the armed forces in growing numbers. Women became police officers and ministers. Sally Ride became the first female astronaut, and Kathryn Sullivan was the first woman to walk in space. Women won new recognition in such sports as tennis and golf.

Dress and social customs were less strictly categorized as masculine and feminine.

The question of abortion became a major issue in the 1984 Presidential race. Ronald Reagan firmly opposed abortion and backed a Constitutional ban on abortion. His opponent, Walter Mondale, felt that abortion was a personal and religious matter.

Political gains. In political affairs women were still underrepresented. However, change was in the air.

Several women in Congress became nationally known. Among them were Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Elizabeth Holtzman, and Nancy Kassebaum. With the start of the new Congress in 1985 there were 24 women serving in Congress, 22 in the House of Representatives and 2 in the Senate.

Perhaps the most impressive gains for women in politics came at the state and local levels. In 1974 no women served as governors, 519 were state representatives, and 91 were state senators. Ten years later 816 women were representatives and 177 were senators. Martha Layne Collins of Kentucky and Madeleine Kunin of Vermont were the only women serving as governor. Also in 1984, 86 cities with populations greater than 30,000 had women as mayors. Dianne Feinstein of San Francisco was the most widely known.

Other women in government included Carla Hills, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President Ford. In 1980 President Carter appointed two women, Juanita Kreps and Patricia Harris, to his Cabinet. President Reagan named Elizabeth Dole as Secretary of Transportation and Margaret Heckler as Secretary of Health and Human Services. He also chose Jeanne Kirkpatrick as United States Ambassador to the United Nations. (Shortly after Reagan's 1984 election, Kirkpatrick announced she would resign in 1985.) His most widely noted appointment, however, was that of Sandra Day O'Connor to a seat on the Supreme Court.

Walter Mondale, Democratic candidate for President in 1984, made history when he selected Geraldine Ferraro as his Vice-Presidential running mate. Ferraro had served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. A mother of three children, Ferraro had earned a law degree in night school. She later served as a prosecutor for the District Attorney in New York City. The selection of Ferraro marked the first time a major party had chosen a woman as a candidate for the Vice Presidency.

The balance sheet. The list of advances that women have made in the struggle for equal rights is an impressive one. Yet some women feared that further movement toward equality would be harder to achieve as the 1980's neared an end.

The failure to win ratification of the ERA and the growing opposition to legal abortions were just two of the more obvious signs of resistance to the women's rights movement. President Reagan had appointed a task force to wipe out state and federal laws that discriminate against women. After two years the task force had found many such laws, but had taken no action to have them repealed. President Reagan's opposition to affirmative action programs affected women as well as minority groups, cutting chances for jobs and promotions. Reagan's budget cuts also hurt women in such areas as welfare, day care, family planning, and legal aid.

Economic issues remained a vital concern to women in the 1980's. They still earned, on the average, only 60 percent of what men did for comparable work. This figure had not changed significantly for 30 years.

The economic slump was another source of pain for some women. In the mid-1980's, one of every seven families was headed by a woman; almost 40 percent of those families had incomes below the poverty line.

What was the outlook for women? Transportation Secretary Dole may have summed it up when she said, "Women have not reached the golden age as far as opportunities go, but we've made a lot of progress."

(photo) This 1985 portrait of the Supreme Court justices illustrates the move toward equal rights for all Americans. The first black justice, Thurgood Marshall (lower left),

was appointed by President Johnson in 1967. The first female justice, Sandra Day O'Connor (upper right), was appointed by President Reagan in 1981.
(photo) In 1984 the Democratic party made political history with the nomination of New York Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro for Vice President.