

A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume B: Since 1865, Brief Ed., Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, William M. Tuttle, Jr., and William J. Brophy, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984. [13-]

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The rebirth of feminism

The New Left and the counterculture were not the only by-products of the civil rights movement. After a long period of quiescence, feminism was reborn in the 1960s. As they had in the nineteenth century when fighting slavery, women discovered that even in movements dedicated to equal rights, they were second-class citizens. Instead of making policy, they were expected to make the coffee, take the minutes, and sometimes even provide sexual favors. As Stokely Carmichael put it, "the position of women in our movement should be prone."

The Feminine Mystique. When women examined their place in society as a whole, they were no more encouraged. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan wrote that the American home had become a "comfortable concentration camp." TV advertisers, magazine writers, beauticians, and psychiatrists had conspired to create the image of a woman "gaily content in a world of bedroom, kitchen, sex, babies and home." Any woman who was dissatisfied with such a role was considered neurotic. But as Friedan pointed out, the wife-mother who spent her life in a world of children sacrificed her adult frame of reference and sometimes her very identity.

For the working woman, the outlook was just as bleak. Her problems were sex discrimination in employment, lack of professional opportunities, unequal pay for equal work, the lack of adequate day care for children, and prohibitions against abortion. In 1963 the average woman earned 63 cents for every dollar a man earned. Ten years later the figure had fallen to 57 cents.

Radical feminism. Friedan's book inspired the founding in 1966 of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which battled for "equal rights in partnership with men" in courts and in Congress. Not long after its formation a new generation of radical feminists emerged -- once again, the baby boom was making an impact on American life. Most of these new feminists were white, economically secure, and well educated; many were the daughters of working mothers. Most had been raised in the era of sexual liberation, in which birth-control pills and other contraceptives were taken for granted. The intellectual ferment of their movement produced a new literature in which feminists challenged everything from women's economic, political, and legal inequality to sexual double standards and sex-role stereotypes.

Educational and legal advances for women. Despite significant opposition, women made impressive gains in the early 1970s. They entered professional schools in record numbers: from 1969 to 1973, the numbers of women law students almost quadrupled and of women medical students more than doubled. Under Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, female college athletes gained the right to the same financial support as male athletes. In the same year Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to the states for ratification. (The Equal Right Amendment states, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.") Two years later the Supreme Court ruled that a woman desiring an abortion had the right to control her own body (*Doe v. Bolton* and *Roe v. Wade*).

As a result of these victories the women's movement gained new confidence. "If the 1960s belonged to the blacks, the next ten years are ours," remarked one feminist.

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The divided women's movement

In the 1970s, while Nixon, Ford, and Carter wrestled with the economy, increasing

numbers of women were committing themselves to the struggle for equality with men. Feminists had scored some impressive legislative victories. In 1974 Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which enabled women to get bank loans and obtain credit cards on the same terms as men. Even more significant were the gains women made along with blacks and other minorities as a result of affirmative action in hiring. As mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women and minorities had to receive the same consideration as white males when applying for a job. In the field of criminal law, many states revised their statutes on rape, prohibiting lawyers from stressing the previous sexual experience of rape victims.

Antifeminist movement. Still, women continued to encounter barriers in their quest for equality. One of the most formidable was the antifeminist, or "profamily," movement, which contended that men should lead and women should follow, particularly within the traditional family. Antifeminism became an increasingly powerful political force in the 1970s. In defense of the family, antifeminists campaigned against the Equal Right Amendment (ERA), the gay rights movement, and abortion on demand. A number of them, such as Anita Bryant and Phyllis Schlafly, gained fame by arguing that all these issues were interrelated, and that they endangered traditional American values.

Antifeminists successfully blocked ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which whizzed through thirty-five state legislatures in the late 1970s and then faltered three votes short of the required three-fourths. Schlafly's STOP ERA campaign had falsely claimed that the ERA would abolish alimony, force women to fight in combat, and prohibit separate-sex restrooms. Shortly after the deadline for ratification (June 1982) the ERA was reintroduced in Congress, and the long process of amendment began again.

Along with Catholics and other religious opponents of abortion, antifeminists supported the efforts of Representative Henry Hyde of Illinois to cut off most Medicaid funds for abortion (1976). In 1980 the Supreme Court upheld the Hyde Amendment, deciding that the government had no obligation to make even medically necessary abortions available to the poor (*Harris v. McRae*).

Effects of a shrinking job market. As activists in the women's struggle looked to the future, they had to acknowledge certain harsh realities. One was the impact of the economic recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s. In a contracted job market, many women found affirmative action meaningless. Before they could receive promotions or even jobs, economic conditions would have to improve. But in the early 1980s, experts were predicting a protracted period of high unemployment.

Another harsh reality women encountered was "occupational segregation," which became even more pronounced as women flooded into low-paying entry-level jobs in female-dominated fields like secretarial and clerical work. Women complained of "occupational ghettos": half of all working women in 1980 were in jobs that were at least 70 percent female. Some women with college educations earned less than men with eighth-grade educations. As a consequence, feminists began to argue for "equal pay for work of equal value." Why should a secretary earn considerably less than a carpenter, they reasoned, if the two jobs required comparable skills and involved comparable responsibilities?

Increased burdens on women. Perhaps the most disturbing trend was what Newsweek called "the Superwoman Squeeze." According to a report by the Worldwatch Institute in 1980, most working wives and mothers, even those with full-time jobs, "retained an unwilling monopoly on unpaid labor at home." Husbands were generally less than eager to do household tasks.

By the early 1980s it appeared that the feminist ferment of the 1970s had waned. Some women seemed to take for granted the gains of that decade, believing that equality of opportunity had been secured for all time. Others were concentrating on

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planning their lives so they could have both a career and a family without shortchanging either -- or themselves -- in the process.