

**A History of the United States, Daniel J. Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992. [10-12]**

[855-860]

### 3. Women seek equality

But blacks were not the only Americans who had not enjoyed full equality. Since women were more than half the American population, technically they were not a minority. During these years of awakening conscience, new voices called women the forgotten majority.

Women were among the earliest champions for all the suffering and disadvantaged. Dorothea Dix, as we have seen, took the side of the mentally ill who had been treated as criminals and prisoners. The pioneer American abolitionists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott had been refused seats in the antislavery convention in London because they were women. Then, in 1848, they assembled their own convention in Seneca Falls, New York. If it was unjust to discriminate against people because of the color of their skin, was it any better to discriminate against them because of their sex? They demanded the right to vote and equal rights for women to education and to jobs. In 1869 the National Woman Suffrage Association was founded, and in that year Wyoming Territory was the first to grant women the right to vote. Utah, Colorado, and Idaho -- other western states that pioneer women had helped to build -- gave women the vote by 1896.

The women's rights movement in the new century was based on the hope that if women only had the right to vote, they could then remove their other inequalities. This was the belief of Progressive leaders, too. Still, even after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920 insuring women the right to vote, they stayed unequal in countless other ways. Then, along with the civil rights movement for blacks, a new women's movement gained momentum in the 1960s.

**The women's rights movement reawakens.** The new feminist movement, too, showed the power of a book. Betty Friedan, who had been born in Peoria, Illinois, and graduated from Smith College, wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published in 1963. She denied the popular notion that women could be fulfilled only by bearing children and doing housework. Women, she said, were just as able as men (maybe more able) to do every kind of job. They, too, should be allowed to lead the world in science, politics, and business. Modern advertising, in newspapers and magazines and on television, had reinforced the old-fashioned idea that women were the "weaker sex." This mistaken notion she called "the Feminine Mystique." It had kept women frustrated and unfulfilled, confined at home in their "comfortable concentration camp." In that same year a Commission on the Status of Women, appointed by President Kennedy and headed by Eleanor Roosevelt, had found discrimination against women in every part of American life. In 1966 eloquent Betty Friedan founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) and in 1970 she organized a nationwide Women's Strike for Equality. She urged women to march, to picket, and to speak up for their equal rights.

Many conservative Americans -- men and women -- were irritated by these demands and by the ideas in *The Feminine Mystique*. They found the new feminists, to be raucous, unladylike, and "unfeminine." In a way their objections proved the point the new feminists were trying to make. Why, the feminists asked, shouldn't women have the same rights as men to speak up? It was considered manly for men to stand up for their rights -- and why shouldn't that also be womanly?

Others were puzzled because it seemed that in the United States women already had more freedom to go where they pleased and do what they pleased than women anywhere else. In fact, there were few formal or legal barriers. Instead, the style of American life stood in the way. Women (unlike men) were always expected to put home and family first. This kept them from reaching the top in business and the professions. It also discouraged employers from giving women the high positions for which they

really were qualified. If a woman had another child, or if her husband's job was moved to another city, then she was expected to give up her own job -- in order to care for her child or go with her husband. Even if a woman was single, employers feared she might marry and then they would lose her. As famed anthropologist Margaret Mead observed, "The very fact that the formal barriers are down reduces women to battling with feather-soft barriers that never really yield but instead smother the attacker."

**The status of women.** Statistics confirmed the arguments of the new feminists. In 1971, for example, full-time working women were paid only 59 percent as much as men. Women with college degrees earned only half as much as men with similar education. Women made up 38 percent of the labor force in 1970 and by 1990 they had increased to 45 percent -- 56 million working, many of them wives and mothers. Among the reasons for this were inflation, the better education of women, and the rising American standard of living. Many women wanted jobs that gave them new challenges. Still, one-third of all female workers were employed in clerical tasks -- as secretaries, file clerks, and telephone operators. Few were executives or managers. In the early 1970s women accounted for only 7 percent of the physicians and only 3 percent of the lawyers. But during these years the number of women in medical and law schools increased rapidly. By 1980 they made up one-fifth of the medical students and one-third of the law students.

Still many women were not yet in the positions that their talents deserved. But the American tradition of free speech and the right to organize made sure that they would be heard. The rising level of education helped. In 1960 only 35 percent of American college students were women, but by 1978 that figure had risen to 48 percent. And in the late 1960s some formerly all-male colleges like Yale and Princeton began to admit women.

Women now demanded their full share of the American tradition of equal opportunity. The pioneer and the immigrant traditions also played a part. When a family first came to America or moved into the unfamiliar West, women had to make important decisions. They had to find new ways to keep the family well fed, well schooled, and happy together. Ever since colonial times, foreign visitors to this country had noticed the power of American women and sometimes made fun of it. But the opportunities for women had not yet been brought into an urban age of technology and large industry.

(photo) Western states granted women the right to vote much earlier than did eastern states or the Constitution. These women were photographed at the polls in Colorado.

[**More from Boorstin:** "The most potent of the myths that had prevented coeducation was that woman, 'the weaker vessel,' could not survive the rigors of academic discipline. It was expected that women might faint from the strain, and that while losing 'the delicate bloom of womanhood,' they would inevitably lower the academic standards for men.... But it was found that the female physique could survive, and even thrive, in a college atmosphere." (From *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*)]

**The drive for equal rights.** The new feminist movement took many forms. Betty Friedan's National Organization for Women demanded changes to bring women into "the mainstream of American society... in fully equal partnership with men." Small militant groups even called for female separation, the end of the family, and the end of separate masculine and feminine roles.

The first national success of the women's rights movement came by accident. When the House of Representatives was debating the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congressman Howard Smith of Virginia offered an amendment to Title VII to bar job discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race. He did this not to assist women, but because he thought this would help defeat the entire measure. Instead, the bill with his amendment became law. This ban against sexual discrimination would be used in businesses, schools, and colleges.

As the movement gained momentum, Congress added its support. In 1972, two-thirds of the members of both houses of Congress approved an "Equal Rights" Amendment and sent it to the states. A similar amendment had been proposed in 1923 but had repeatedly failed to get approval by Congress. The proposed amendment now read: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex." It was quickly ratified by 22 states. Then it ran into strong opposition.

The feminist movement and the Equal Rights Amendment were opposed by critics such as forceful, articulate Phyllis Schlafly and others. They valued the privileges more than the rights of women. They believed in the old tradition. There was no more important work, they insisted, than bearing and raising children. They thought that nature intended women for different roles than men. Reformers in the Progressive Era had demanded special laws to protect women in factories. "Equal rights" might mean the end of such special protection for women. It might also mean the end of "alimony," the money awarded by courts to support mothers and their children in case of divorce.

To adopt the Equal Rights Amendment, the Constitution required ratification by three-quarters of the states. In 1979, when the amendment was still three states short of the needed number, Congress extended the deadline for ratification to June 30, 1982. Still even that was not enough. The amendment failed to receive enough votes and died. Many believed that because of Supreme Court decisions and new laws the amendment was unnecessary. Still a number of states included its principles in their own constitutions.

(photo) American women in 1977 joined in International Women's Day to demonstrate for their equal rights.

[**Continuity and Change:** Social Change Point out to students that one of the long-standing arguments against civil rights for women has been that it is unnatural for women to be equal to men. When the women's movement began in the mid-1800s with women seeking voting rights, Harper's New Monthly Magazine proclaimed that giving women the right to vote was "opposed to nature and the established order of society." Today as women seek economic equality in equal pay for equal work and an end to discrimination in hiring practices, some of these same attitudes exist as they did during the struggle for women's suffrage. (See p. 285.)]

**Aid from the government and the courts.** Meanwhile the federal government found new ways to use its power to end discrimination. In 1972, President Nixon's Secretary of Labor ordered companies that contracted with the government to set goals and timetables for hiring women and minorities. The Justice Department started suits under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to force large business firms to end job discrimination. Colleges and universities that received federal aid were investigated to see if they discriminated against women. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act passed in 1972 required employers to pay equal wages for equal work. Other laws barred discrimination against women when they applied for credit.

And again the Supreme Court played a role. In 1971 the Court ruled that unequal treatment based only on sex violated the Fourteenth Amendment. In one of its most controversial decisions, *Roe v. Wade* the Court held in 1973 that, except in the later stages of pregnancy, states could not make it illegal for women to have abortions. The new feminists hailed this as a victory. They said that a woman's most important right was to control her own body. But their passionate "Right-to-Life" opponents said that the unborn child had rights of its own and that abortion was murder.

**Women move ahead.** By the 1980s, women were beginning to be active in nearly every occupation. The avenues of choice were widening. Women now worked as truck drivers, car mechanics, business leaders, architects, computer scientists, and even as astronauts. By the end of the decade, 20 percent of all lawyers and doctors were women. In the other professions counted by the Department of Labor -- scientists, teachers,

librarians, engineers, psychiatrists, social workers, and many others -- women held half of all the jobs compared to only one-third as recently as 1983. Now women were also governors, mayors, and Cabinet officers, as well as members of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Women now took a full 50 percent of all the bachelors degrees given by colleges and universities. Yet a woman college graduate was paid only slightly better than a male high school dropout. If a woman wanted to work after having a baby, she needed a good child-care center. Many unions made child care an issue, because one-third of all union members were women. Some large companies like Ford and General Motors now agreed to help with child care.

Although they had come a long way, women still had a long way to go. In 1979, for the first time an American silver dollar had appeared with the likeness of a real woman -- Susan B. Anthony (p. 285), the courageous leader who fought all her long life for women's rights. Her face on the coin bore an important new message. "For the first time in modern history," a woman journalist observed, "a woman is born into a society which has acknowledged her right to the freedom to choose the role she wants."

(photo) During the 1980s women became more successful in seeking political office. Nancy Landon Kassebaum was reelected to a third Senate term in 1990.

(photo) In the years after World War II women entered new and exciting fields that once would have been closed to them.

### **Section 3 Review**

1. Identify or explain: Betty Friedan, NOW, Equal Rights Amendment, Roe v. Wade.
2. If there were few legal barriers to the advancement of women by the 1960s, what factors held back their efforts to achieve equality?
3. Critical Thinking: Distinguishing Fact from Opinion. Cite evidence showing (a) gains by women by the 1970s and 1980s and (b) continued male-female inequality.

[**Critical Thinking Activity:** Checking Consistency How has the image of women's work changed over the past thirty years? Have students find magazine and newspaper advertisements that depict women in a variety of roles. Ask students to share their findings and to keep a list of the roles portrayed. Have students describe how the same advertisements would be different if they had appeared thirty years earlier. Ask: Why do these differences exist? Ask students to evaluate the impact of the women's movement on the way women and their work are portrayed.]