

A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Brief 4th 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, 1996. [13-]

[632-634]

THE REBIRTH OF FEMINISM

The Feminine Mystique

Another liberation movement gained momentum during the turbulence of the 1960s, at first quietly and then on the picket line. The women's rights movement had languished after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. But in the 1960s, feminism was reborn. Many women were dissatisfied with their lives, and in 1963 they found a voice with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. According to Friedan, women across the country were deeply troubled by "the problem that has no name." Most women had grown up believing that "all they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children." The problem was that this "mystique of feminine fulfillment" left many wives and mothers feeling empty and incomplete. Friedan quoted a young mother: "I've tried everything women are supposed to do -- hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, and being very social with my neighbors.... I love the kids and Bob and my home.... But I'm desperate. I begin to feel that I have no personality.... Who am I?"

The one woman President Kennedy had appointed to a policymaking post in his administration was an effective advocate of equal rights. As assistant secretary of labor and director of the Women's Bureau, Esther Peterson urged Kennedy to establish the first President's Commission on the Status of Women in the nation's history. Its report, *American Women* (1963), argued that every obstacle to women's full participation in society must be removed. By 1967, all fifty states had established commissions to promote women's equality. Still, little federal action had resulted from the release of *American Women*, and the government was failing to enforce the gender-equality provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The need for action inspired the founding in 1966 of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In the reform tradition, NOW battled for "equal rights in partnership with men" by lobbying for legislation and testing laws in the courts.

Radical Feminism

Not long after NOW's formation, a new generation of radical feminists emerged. Most radical feminists were white and well educated; many were the daughters of working mothers. Most had been raised in the era of sexual liberation, taking for granted liberation from unwanted pregnancy. The intellectual ferment of their movement produced a new feminist literature. Radical feminists focused not only on legal barriers but also on cultural assumptions and traditions. In the process they introduced the term sexism to signify a phenomenon far more pervasive than lack of legal equality, and they challenged everything from women's economic and political inequality to sexual double standards and sex-role stereotypes.

Unlike NOW, the radical feminists practiced direct action, such as picketing the 1968 Miss America contest in Atlantic City. One woman auctioned off an effigy of Miss America: "Gentlemen, I offer you the 1969 model.... She walks. She talks. She smiles on cue. And she does the housework." Into the "freedom trash can" the pickets dumped false eyelashes, curlers, girdles, and Playboy to protest the prevailing view of women as domestic servants and sex objects.

Many radical feminists had joined the struggles for black civil rights and against the Vietnam War. In these movements, they found that instead of making policy, they were expected to make coffee, take minutes, and even provide sexual favors. Many of these feminists organized consciousness-raising groups to discuss such wide-ranging and

sensitive matters as homosexuality, abortion, and power relationships in romance and marriage. The issue of homosexuality caused a split in the women's movement; in 1969 and 1970, NOW forced lesbians to resign from membership and offices in the organization. This rift was healed in 1971, largely because homosexuals had begun to fight back.

Occupational Segregation

For working women in the 1960s, the most pressing problems were sex discrimination in employment, meager professional opportunities, unequal pay for equal work, lack of adequate day care for children, and prohibitions against abortion. The main cause of the disparity in pay was "occupational segregation," which became even more pronounced in the 1960s as baby boomers and mothers of baby boomers flooded entry-level jobs in female-dominated fields like secretarial and clerical work. Because many women with college educations routinely earned less than men with eighth grade educations, it was natural that the two primary feminist goals of the 1960s were equal job opportunity and equal pay for equal work.

Despite opposition, women made impressive gains. They entered professional schools in record numbers: from 1969 to 1973, the number of women law students almost quadrupled, and the number of women medical students more than doubled. Under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, female college athletes gained the right to the same financial support as male athletes. The same year, Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and sent it to the states for ratification. (The ERA 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.") *Roe v. Wade*

The Supreme Court also ruled on several issues essential to women. In 1973, the Court struck down state laws that made abortion a crime (*Roe v. Wade*). The Court also addressed sex discrimination. In a 1971 ruling (*Reed v. Reed*), it held that legislation differentiating between the sexes "must be reasonable, not arbitrary," and in 1973 (*Frontiero v. Richardson*) the justices went a step further in declaring that job-related classifications based on sex, like those based on race, were "inherently suspect." These victories gave the women's movement new confidence in the 1970s.

[655-656]

WOMEN AND CHILDREN LAST

Feminists scored some impressive legislative victories in the 1970s. 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 women's gains from affirmative action in hiring. As mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women and people of color applying for jobs had to receive the same consideration as white males. In the field of criminal law, many states revised their statutes on rape, prohibiting defense lawyers from discrediting rape victims by revealing their previous sexual experience.

Antifeminist Movement

Still, women continued to encounter opposition their quest for equality. Particularly formidable was the antifeminist or "pro family" movement, in which contended that men should lead and women should follow, especially within the family. The backlash against feminism became an increasingly powerful political force in the United States. In defense of the family -- especially the patriarchal, or father-led, family -- antifeminists campaigned against the Equal Rights Amendment, the gay rights movement, and abortion on demand.

Antifeminists blamed the women's movement for the country's spiraling divorce rate; they charged that feminists would jettison their husbands and even their children in their quests for job fulfillment and sexual equality. Although the number of divorces almost tripled from 1960 to 1976, the decision to divorce was often made by the

husbands. According to Barbara Ehrenreich, a feminist scholar, men started walking out on their families in large numbers in the 1950s, well before the rebirth of feminism. Tired of fulfilling the role of husband, father, and financial provider, many men came to see their wives as the agent of their entrapment; divorce was their escape.

Equal Rights Amendment

Antifeminists successfully stalled ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which after quickly passing thirty-five state legislatures fell three states short of success in the late 1970s. Phyllis Schlafly's "Stop ERA" campaign falsely claimed that the ERA would abolish alimony and legalize homosexual marriages. The debate was occasionally vicious. Refusing to acknowledge gender-based discrimination, Schlafly derided ERA advocates as "a bunch of bitter women seeking a constitutional cure for their personal problems."

Many antifeminists also participated in the anti-abortion or "prolife" movement, which sprang up almost overnight in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Along with Catholics, Mormons, and other religious opponents of abortion, the prolife movement supported the successful legislative effort of Representative Henry Hyde of Illinois in 1976 to cut off most Medicaid funds for abortions.

Women Opponents of Reagan's Conservatism

Feminists fought back. They assailed Reagan for failing to reverse "the feminization of poverty" and for approving cuts in food stamps and school meals. The Reagan administration's opposition to federally subsidized child care and the goal of "comparable worth" also drew feminists' ire. Because of persistent occupational segregation, 80 percent of all working women in 1985 were concentrated in such low-paying "female" occupations as clerking, selling, teaching, and waitressing. Recognizing this, feminists supplemented their earlier rallying cry of "equal pay for equal work" with a call for "equal pay for jobs of comparable worth." Why, women asked, should a grade school teacher earn less than an electrician, if the two jobs require comparable training and skills and involve comparable responsibilities? By the end of the 1980s, female workers still took home only 70 cents to every male worker's dollar.

Increased Burdens on Women

Activists in the women's struggle had to acknowledge certain harsh realities. One was the tight job market created by the economic recessions of the 1970s and 1980s. Other problems included a rising divorce rate that left increasing numbers of women and their children with lower standards of living and a high teenage pregnancy rate. The tandem of divorce and teenage pregnancy meant that a progressively smaller proportion of America's children lived with two parents. Another disturbing trend was "the Superwoman Squeeze." According to a report by the Worldwatch Institute, most working wives and mothers, even those with full-time jobs, "retained an unwilling monopoly on unpaid labor at home."