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[855-860]

3. Women seek 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 had 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 report issued by a Commission on the Status of Women--originally appointed by President Kennedy and headed by Eleanor Roosevelt -- had found discrimination against women in every part of 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 speak up for their 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 that the new feminists were trying to make. Why, the feminists asked, shouldn't women have the same right as men to speak up? It was considered manly for men to stand up for their rights -- so 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 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 were paid. Women with college degrees earned only half as much as men with similar educations. Because of increasing educational opportunities, because of the rising American standard of living, and because of inflation, more and more women were entering the labor force. Women made up 38 percent of the labor force in 1970 and 45 percent in 1990, which meant that 56 million women were working, many of them wives and mothers. Many women wanted jobs that would challenge and reward them, but few were in positions that their talents deserved. 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 physicians and only 3 percent of lawyers.

Women now demanded equal opportunity, and the American tradition of free speech and the right to organize ensured that they would be heard. 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.

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 from 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 divorced women.

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. 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.

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 1973, in one of its most controversial decisions, *Roe v. Wade*, the Court held that, except in the later stages of pregnancy, states could not make it illegal for women to have abortions. The new feminists hailed this decision 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. Efforts of the "right-to-lifers" bore fruit as a number of states began to limit the right to abortion -- by prohibiting poor people from using government medical aid to pay for abortions, by requiring waiting periods, by requiring all women to notify their husbands before obtaining abortions, and by requiring all minors to obtain parental consent. The Supreme Court upheld many of these limits, and abortion opponents hoped that it would overturn *Roe* itself. But in June 1992, in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, the Court, while upholding a Pennsylvania law that imposed strict limits, reaffirmed a woman's basic right to choose an abortion, calling it "a rule of law and a component of liberty we cannot renounce."

Women move ahead. In 1960, only 35 percent of American college students were women, but by 1978 that figure had risen to 48 percent; by 1990, to 55 percent. By the 1990s, 40 percent of American law and medical students were women. The avenues of choice were widening; women were moving into nearly every occupation. Women now worked as truck drivers, car mechanics, business leaders, architects, computer scientists, and even as astronauts.

In the early 1990s, 20 percent of all lawyers and doctors were women. In the other professions counted by the Department of Labor -- including scientists, teachers, librarians, engineers, psychiatrists, and social workers -- women held half of all the jobs compared to only one-third as recently as 1983. Now women were also governors, mayors, Cabinet officers, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, and justices of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Yet problems remained. The median working income of working women was just 71 percent of that of working men. 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."

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.
(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.
(photo) American women in 1977 joined in International Women's Day to demonstrate for their equal rights.
(photo) During the 1980s and early 1990s, women became more successful in seeking political office. In 1992 Carol Moseley Braun, from Illinois, became the first black woman to be elected to the United States Senate.
(photo) In the years after World War II women entered new and exciting fields that once would have been closed to them.