

***A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume II: Since 1865*, Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, and William M. Tuttle, Jr., MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982. [13-]**

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The rebirth of feminism

Following the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the women's rights movement had languished. But in the 1960s feminism was reborn. Just as in the nineteenth century the women's movement had grown out of antislavery, in the twentieth it grew out of the struggle for civil rights. Women discovered they were second-class citizens even in movements dedicated to equal rights. 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." For her, nothing could be more rewarding than getting rid of that, ring around the collar, having children with cavity-free teeth, and boasting the shiniest kitchen floor on the block. 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. 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. I'm a server of food and putter-on of pants and a bedmaker.... But who am I?"

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. In practical terms what this gender-based discrimination meant for many women was less food on the table and no new shoes for the kids.

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 feminist literature: Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*; Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*; Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Powerful*. Feminists challenged everything from women's economic, political, and legal inequality to sexual double standards and sex-role stereotypes.

Opposition to feminist goals was widespread and intense. In December 1971 President Nixon vetoed a bill that would have set up a national system of daycare facilities for the children of working mothers. The bill, Nixon asserted, would have committed government to "communal approaches to child-rearing over against the

family-centered approach," thus imperiling "the keystone of our civilization," the American family.

Educational and legal advances for women

Despite such 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 Rights 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. Friedan added, "There never has been a movement of social change that has affected so many people so quickly. The women's movement is everywhere." But though many new converts would join the movement in the next few years, the antifeminist forces would also grow. By the late 1970s feminism would be threatened with some major defeats.

(photo) Feminists picketed the Miss America pageant in 1968, condemning the contest for glorifying the "mindless-boob-girlie symbol." UPI.

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The divided women's movement

In the 1970s, while presidential politics were engaging the energies of party professionals, 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. Many states revised their statutes on rape, prohibiting lawyers from stressing the previous sexual experience of rape victims. Texas expunged from its books laws that defined a husband's murder of his wife's lover as justifiable homicide, a wife's murder of her husband's lover as murder. And Georgia repealed a statute that prevented a mother from acting as her child's legal guardian as long as the father was alive.

Women also made gains in education: between 1970 and 1975 the number of women enrolled in college rose 45 percent. And they campaigned for and were elected to various political offices. In 1976 Ella Grasso was elected governor of Connecticut, and two years later Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas was elected to the Senate. Perhaps most significant were women's gains, along with blacks and other minorities, 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 minorities had to receive the same consideration as white males when applying for a job. To take advantage of the new opportunities, many women delayed having children until they were in their thirties and had established themselves in their careers.

Antifeminist movement

Still, women continued to encounter barriers in their quest for equality. One of the most formidable was the antifeminist, or "pro family," movement, which contended that men should lead and women should follow, particularly within the family. Antifeminism became an increasingly powerful political force in the 1970s. In defense of the family -- especially the patriarchal, or father-led, family -- antifeminists campaigned against the Equal Rights 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.

For one thing, antifeminists blamed the women's movement for the country's spiraling divorce rate: from 1960 to 1976 the number of divorces almost tripled. Feminists, they charged, would jettison their husbands and even their children in their quest for job fulfillment and sexual equality. Undoubtedly there was some truth to their allegation. As a demographer with the Bureau of the Census observed, "Women who enter the marketplace gain greater confidence, expand their social circles independent of their husbands' friends, taste independence and are less easy to satisfy, and more likely to divorce later."

In the political arena antifeminists successfully stalled ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which after whizzing through thirty-five state legislatures fell three states short of success in the late 1970s. Schlafly's STOP ERA campaign falsely claimed that the ERA would abolish alimony, force women to fight in combat, and prohibit separate-sex restrooms. And 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 abortions (1976). In summer 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, it was difficult for most women -- as well as nonwhites and other outsiders -- to become insiders. Though affirmative action had certainly helped women to gain employment and receive promotions, jobs had to be available in the first place for women to benefit. "The economic environment," predicted one analyst, "may prove to be the major determinant of women's role in 1980.... Scarcity of jobs in the next decade [will] produce a greater competition in the labor market and a tremendous backlash against women."

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, instead of arguing for equal pay for equal work, 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, and there were few readily available marketplace substitutes for loving, caring, and responsiveness to emergencies. Predictions were that by 1990, only one in four wives would be a full-time housewife and mother. The rest would be trying to balance the more-than-full-time demands of work and homemaking.

It appeared, too, that the feminist ferment of the 1970s had dwindled by the early 1980s. 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 planning their lives so they could have both a career and a family without shortchanging either -- or themselves -- in the process. "Motherhood is important to me," explained Debbie Lewis, a freshman at Princeton, in late 1980. "A career is important, too. It's not a pleasant choice."

(photo) During the 1970s activist women agitated for equal rights, especially equal pay for equal work. But at the dose of the decade women still earned considerably less than men, and the Equal Rights Amendment had not been ratified. Arthur Tress/Magnum Photos.