



Encyclopedia: Women's Rights

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Legal, political, and social rights for women. Among rights commonly considered important are control of property, suffrage, equality of opportunity in education and employment, and sexual freedom. The women's rights movement, also known as feminism and women's liberation, arose in Europe in the late 18th century, with the aim of expanding recognition and according of women's rights. Today, women have made substantial gains along these lines in most parts of the world, but with notable exceptions, and they often do not have full political, economic, and social equality with men.

Traditional Status

In early societies, women bore and raised children, cared for the home, and helped maintain the family's economic production. Men hunted, made war, and, in settled agrarian societies, assumed primary responsibility for field crop production. Because of women's varied domestic activities, it is likely that they were responsible for the invention of weaving and potting. Some scholars argue that the discovery throughout the European continent and the Near East of thousands of stone figures of female goddesses dating from the Paleolithic period and later indicates that these were originally goddess-worshipping, matricentric civilizations. *See* Paleolithic Art.

Male dominance, however, was preeminent from the time of the earliest written historical records, probably as a result of men's discovery of their role in conception as well as the development of hunting and warfare as prestige activities. The traditional belief that women were naturally weaker, inferior, and properly subordinate to men was reflected in religions as they developed. In the Bible, God placed Eve under Adam's authority (*see* Adam and Eve), and St. Paul urged Christian wives to be obedient to their husbands. In Hinduism the reward of a virtuous woman is rebirth as a man.

Therefore, in most traditional societies and until recent times, women generally were at a disadvantage. Their education was typically limited to domestic skills and perhaps other pursuits considered appropriately feminine, and they had little or no access to positions of power. Marriage was almost a necessity as a means of support or protection. There often was pressure to produce children. A married woman usually took her husband's status and lived with his family, with little recourse in case of ill treatment or nonsupport. Under Roman law, which influenced later European and American law, husband and wife were one, with the woman the possession of the man. As such, a woman had no legal control over her person, her own land and money, or her children. According to a widely accepted double standard of morality, respectable women had to be chaste but men did not. In the Middle Ages, feudal law, in which landholding carried with it military obligations, encouraged the subordination of

women to men.

Some exceptions to women's dependence on men did exist. In ancient Babylonia and Egypt women had property rights, and in medieval Europe they were permitted to join craft guilds. Some women had religious authority, for example, as Siberian shamans, Roman priestesses. Occasionally women had political authority, such as Egyptian and Byzantine queens, heads of Christian female religious orders and convents, and Iroquois Indian women, who appointed men to clan and tribal councils. A few highly cultivated women flourished in ancient Rome, China, and Renaissance Europe.

Men of the lower classes often lacked rights as well but, struggling to preserve their own dignity in a harsh world, such men were unlikely to sympathize with the plight of women.

Beginnings of Feminism

The Enlightenment (*see* Enlightenment, Age of), with its egalitarian political emphasis, and the Industrial Revolution, which caused economic and social changes, provided a favorable climate for the rise of feminism, along with other reform movements in the late 18th and the 19th centuries.

During the French Revolution, women's republican clubs in France pleaded that the goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity should apply to all, regardless of sex. The subsequent adoption of the Code Napoléon, based on Roman law, however, obliterated any immediate realization of such hopes on the Continent. In England, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the first major modern feminist work. Its demands for equality and its revolutionary tone made it unacceptable at that time.

Of deeper significance for women was the Industrial Revolution. The transformation from handwork, which women had always carried on at home without pay, to machine-powered mass production meant that lower-class women could become wage earners in factories. This was the beginning of their independence, although factory conditions were hazardous and their pay, lower than men's, was legally controlled by their husbands. At the same time middle- and upper-class women were expected to stay at home to raise children and tend the house, acting to some extent as symbols of their husbands' economic success. If they did go to work their career options were limited. The main options for respectable women, other than factory work, were jobs as governesses, clerks, secretaries, workers in stores, and household servants. Such conditions encouraged the feminist movement.

On the Continent, feminist groups appeared sporadically but lacked strength. The Roman Catholic church opposed feminism on the grounds that it would destabilize the traditional family. Agrarian countries held to traditional ideas, and in industrial countries feminist demands tended to be absorbed by the socialist movement.

In largely Protestant, rapidly industrializing Great Britain and the U.S., feminism was more successful. The leaders were primarily educated, leisured women of the middle class. In 1848 more than 100 persons held the first women's rights convention, at Seneca Falls, N.Y. Led by the abolitionist Lucretia Mott and the feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, they demanded equal rights, including the right to vote, and an end to the double standard. British feminists first convened in 1855 behind the limited goal of property rights. *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by the British philosopher John Stuart Mill focused public attention on their cause.



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Lucretia Mott

Colleges were founded for women, such as Mount Holyoke (1837) in South Hadley, Mass., and Girton (1869) in Cambridge, England, but the right to admission to male-dominated universities took longer. Married women's property acts, passed in England in 1870 and at various times in the U.S., gave women control over their property. Later, provisions were made for divorce, alimony, and child support. Labor legislation improved hours and wages for women. Suffrage, which came to be a primary goal of British and American feminists, encountered substantial resistance, despite massive and sometimes violent campaigns. In both countries the right to vote was only granted after World War I, partly in recognition of women's war contributions as paid and volunteer workers. *See* Woman Suffrage.

Women and Employment

After wars and revolutions in Russia (1917) and China (1949), new Communist governments, while totalitarian and lacking in observance of individual rights in general, discouraged the patriarchal family system, supported the concept of sexual equality, and sanctioned birth control. At the same time, working women in the former Soviet Union tended to hold low-paying jobs and were minimally represented in party and government councils. Birth-control techniques were primitive, day-care centers were few, and working wives were responsible for keeping house and tending children. China more fully supported women's equality in practice, but some job discrimination against women persisted. Socialist governments in Sweden in the 1930s established wide-ranging programs of equal rights for women, which included extensive child-care arrangements.

In Britain and the U.S., movement in this direction was slower. The number of working women increased substantially after the two world wars, but they generally had low-paying, female-dominated occupations, such as schoolteaching and clerical work. Little opportunity existed in high-paying, male-dominated professions and major government posts. Advocates of birth control agitated for decades before women's right to family planning was recognized. An Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution, seeking to remove at one stroke legal, economic, and social restrictions on women, was introduced into Congress in 1923 but made no headway.

In the 1960s, however, changing demographic, economic, and social patterns encouraged a resurgence of feminism. Lower infant mortality rates, soaring adult life expectancy, and the availability of the birth-control pill gave women greater freedom from child-care responsibilities. These aspects, combined with inflation--which meant that many families needed two incomes--and a rising divorce rate, propelled more women into the job market and, increasingly, in career-oriented directions, despite continuing discrimination in some areas. *See*

Advances and Setbacks

As working women encountered discrimination in many forms, the women's movement in the U.S. gained momentum. A presidential commission was established in 1960 to consider equal opportunities for women. Acts of Congress entitled them to equality in education, employment, and legal rights. In 1964 the Civil Rights Act, initially intended only for blacks, was extended to women.

In the late 1960s and early '70s active feminists organized numerous women's rights groups. Notable among these is the National Organization for Women founded by Betty Friedan and others in 1966 (which in the early 2000s claimed about 500,000 members), and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, founded three years later.

In 1972, in a decision widely hailed by feminists, the Supreme Court ruled that abortion could not for the most part be proscribed or regulated by law. The same year, a proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was approved by a wide margin, in Congress and was sent to the states for ratification. It provided that "equal rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." But the amendment encountered grass-roots opposition. By the extended June 1982 deadline it still had been ratified by only 35 states, falling 3 states short of the required three-fourths majority. A campaign to revive the measure was begun in the early 2000s.

The women's movement questioned certain social institutions and traditional values, basing many of its arguments on studies suggesting that key differences between men and women result not from biology but from culture. Many women objected that the English language itself, by reflecting traditional male dominance in its word forms, perpetuated a skewed viewpoint. Successful efforts to reform the language included the introduction of the title *Ms.* as an alternative to *Miss* or *Mrs.*; the substitution of gender-neutral for gender-based terms, such as *firefighter* for *fireman* and *flight attendant* for *stewardess*; and avoidance of the personal pronoun *he-his-him* when referring to persons who may be either male or female. The women's movement also sought to foster changes in male-female relationships within the family, including the sharing of domestic roles and the avoidance of gender stereotyping in the choice of children's toys and books, television programs, and other media. A number of women adopted the practice of retaining their maiden name after marriage, either in place of, or in conjunction with, their husband's name. Much attention was given to so-called consciousness raising, to make women more aware of their shared abilities, experiences, and problems.

Typical feminist objectives today include, federal support for day-care centers; "comparable pay" between men and women holding similar jobs; recognition of lesbian rights; concerted action against rape, and wife and child abuse; and prevention of discrimination against older and minority women, as well as preservation of abortion and reproductive rights. While most such objectives enjoy widespread support in the U.S., some remain highly controversial.

Feminists have made significant gains since the 1960s and 70s, while continuing to work for goals that have remained partly unrealized. Women's groups have campaigned effectively for the creation of rape hotlines and crisis centers, "date rape" prevention programs, and shelters for battered women. Many women have risen to prominence in the private sector, in business and in professions where they once were barely represented. In

many, but not all, religious denominations, women can exercise ministries previously reserved for men. Strides women have made in the public sector were exemplified in the U.S. by the 1984 nomination of Geraldine Ferraro as the Democratic candidate for vice-president and more recently by the presidential campaign of Senator and former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. Other women who rose to high political positions in recent decades include Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Women's Rights and the UN

Elsewhere in the world the women's rights movement has also made progress in achieving its goals. In nearly every nation, women have the right to vote and hold public office. Aided by the UN Commission on the Status of Women (1946), women in many nations have gained legal rights and fuller access to education and the professions, along with respect as being equal to men in dignity and importance. At the same time, the idea of female equality remains in conflict with some traditional values and concepts of gender roles, and in many traditional societies, conspicuously in many Muslim nations, the role of women has remained subordinate, with their rights much more limited than those of men. Moreover the growth of industrialization in non-Western nations has destroyed some traditional economic arrangements that favored women and has made underpaid factory labor often the only work available to them

In 1975, in recognition of International Women's Year, the UN launched the Decade for Women program. The UN Development Fund for Women was founded in 1976 as the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women, and it became a permanent organization in autonomous association with the UN Development Program in 1985. In 1979 the UN General Assembly adopted a women's bill of rights, called the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Major UN-sponsored conferences on women were held in 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1995.

For further information on this topic, see the Bibliography, sections Women's rights, Woman suffrage, Working women, American labor unions, Jurisprudence, U.S. Congress, Warfare.

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