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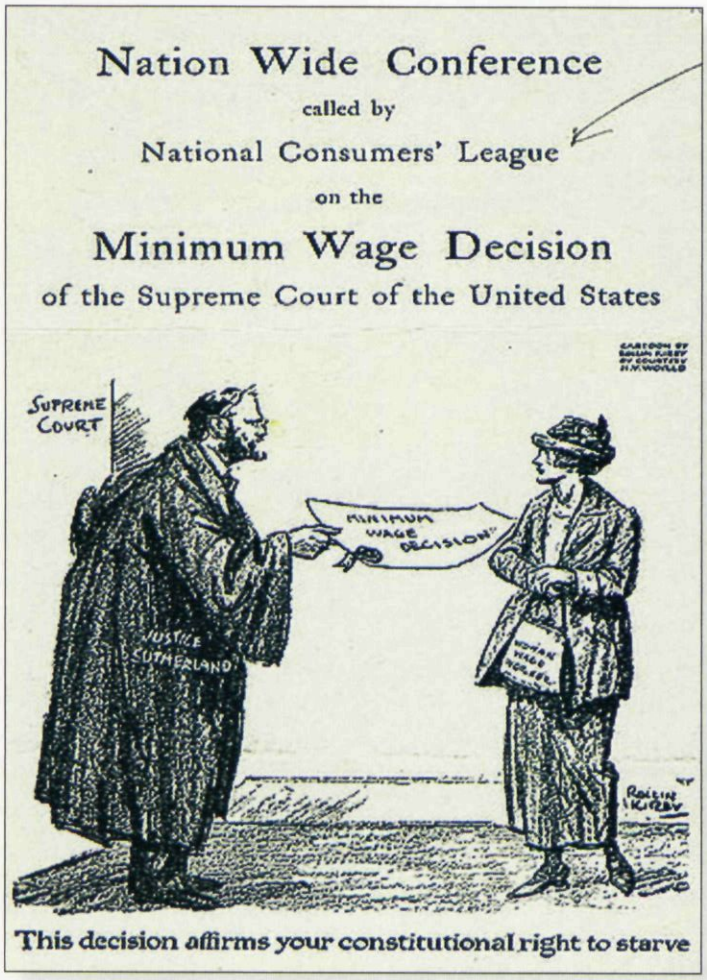
Gender is Powerful: The Long Reach of Feminism



Long before the 1960s, thousands of women worked to improve society through involvement in the labor movement and in organizations as the National Consumers League, the National Council of Negro Women, and the YWCA. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-10651.)

Of all the movements of the Sixties, those involving gender, enlisted the largest number of participants and produced the deepest transformation in American society. Emboldened by the wider activism of the era, especially the black freedom movement, and spurred by seismic changes in the economy and family life, feminists attracted a growing following after 1966 as they set out to end the reign of gender inequality in American institutions and culture. Within a few years, lesbians and gay men too showed new daring in laying claim to the nation's core promises of freedom and equality. Public debate has since raged between supporters and opponents of these movements over a host of specific issues: the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, affirmative action, gay school teachers, and more. Yet underlying the specific conflicts were profound alterations in political economy and culture that made gender issues matter as never before to activists on all sides—and to millions of ordinary citizens.

As is common with new social movements, early scholarship on second wave feminism took its cue from journalism and its inspiration from personal experience. Authors of the formative studies of the women's movement such as Jo Freeman and Sara Evans had themselves participated in the struggle, and so had intimate knowledge of their subjects. They showed, in the words of Evans' subtitle, "the roots of women's liberation in the civil rights movement and the New Left." Evans, in particular, focused on young women activists' recognition that "the personal is political" and showed how they used consciousness-raising discussion sessions to deepen understanding of the social roots of seemingly personal problems and develop innovative practices to address them, such as rape crisis centers (1). Yet, rich as these works were, closeness to the events led to greater interest in immediate concerns than in the deep structure of change.

Most textbooks today follow early participants and journalists in taking a short view of the movement. The texts lead students to think that organizing for gender equality stopped after women won the vote in 1920 and suddenly "reawakened," the oft-used word, in the 1960s. Certainly there is some truth to this view: in the late Sixties, the ranks of women activists surged, their supporters multiplied many times over, and the pace of reform accelerated. Within just a few years, women won protection from employment discrimination, inclusion in affirmative action, abortion law reform, greater representation in media, equal access to school athletics, congressional passage of an Equal Rights Amendment, and much more (2). Yet students are ill-served by the notion that such a powerful force came out of nowhere, or even that its main cause was the youth-led movements of "the Sixties."

Forty years have passed since some activists coined the phrase "women's liberation" and others formed the National Organization for Women (NOW). In that time a wealth of new scholarship has revealed the far deeper roots of these movements, both in social changes over generations and in political history reaching back to the early twentieth century. What made some kind of change in the gender order feel necessary to so many was, most immediately, the demise of the family wage system: the male breadwinner/female homemaker model that shaped government policy and employer practices, even though it never described the reality of millions of American households. Just

as important, however, were profound demographic changes sweeping every industrial society: infant mortality and birth rates declined, life expectancy surged, and women entered the paid labor force in massive numbers. In this context, popular understanding of marriage and the very meaning of life changed: no longer expecting to die soon after their last child left home, women came to want more from men, marriage, education, and themselves. That is why even countries that had no equivalent upheaval in the 1960s nevertheless generated their own variants of feminism as they sought to cope with these massive changes using the tools of the democratic process, above all, new public policies suited to changing family forms and individual life cycles (3).

While one track of recent history reveals how a seemingly new movement accomplished so much so quickly, another provides a deep context for why so many welcomed feminism. The feminist movement, in other words, was not new at all. The ranks of self-described "feminism" dwindled after 1920, to be sure, as the elite, white National Women's Party made that label anathema to women working for wider social justice thanks to its leaders' single-minded quest for an Equal Rights Amendment, a gender-blind approach that threatened hard-won, gender-conscious reforms like protective legislation (4). But tens of thousands of others continued to try to improve the lives of women between 1920 and 1965 through their work in the labor movement and in such organizations as the National Consumers League, the National Council of Negro Women, and the YWCA (5).

This grassroots base made possible an ambitious organizing effort after World War II, a broad-based left-led coalition called the Congress of American Women. It joined women's equality to peace and wider social reforms, such as full employment, government sponsored child care facilities, and an end to racial segregation. CAW anticipated all of the agenda of second wave feminism save its sexual politics, and had more black women in leadership positions than any other feminist movement in U.S. history (6). Such broad advocacy was enabled by changes in the infrastructure of American politics that began in the Progressive Era and expanded in the New Deal and war years. Feminism's goals and accomplishments depended on prior national commitment to a federal regulatory state to advance social citizenship, and on the mass membership organizations that ensured continued government commitment to a welfare state in the face of opposition from northern corporate Republicans and southern white supremacist Democrats.

One reason the Rip van Winkle account of feminism seemed plausible for so long was that the postwar Red Scare hurt organizing among women as it did labor and civil rights activism. CAW was a broad coalition, but communist women had played a key role in bringing it together. Under the harsh glare of investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee and a demand by the attorney general that the organization must register as a "foreign agent," membership plummeted from a claimed high of 250,000 to just 3,000. Gerda Lerner, who later became a pioneer historian of women and president of the OAH, was then a rank-and-file CAW activist, a Jewish refugee from Nazism, and a Communist Party member herself. She burned all her records in terror of what the Right's new power portended. Most other groups doing innovative work for gender equality in 1940s and 1950s were affected in some way, and individual leaders became much more cautious. But many continued working, forming a human bridge between eras more propitious to activism as they labored quietly but steadily in arenas ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to the United Auto Workers Women's Commission (7).

This existing infrastructure helps explain how feminists were able to make such stunning headway after the formation of NOW and the take off of women's liberation. The wide array of leaders from earlier groups came together in the President's Commission on the Status of Women, which in turn spurred state-level women's commissions that became organizing centers. In 1963, the PCSW issued its major report calling for wide-ranging reform to end sex discrimination. Textbooks thus get it wrong when they credit Betty Friedan's best-selling 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, for the rise of second wave feminism. What the book did, rather, was name what so many women were already feeling and invigorate those already acting. Friedan developed her expert aim, moreover, in the Popular Front of the 1940s as a labor-left journalist. Her book thus built on far more than her experience as a suburban wife and mother (8).

Stonewall Inn, Christopher Street, New York City. (Image courtesy of Wikipedia.)

Similarly, some of feminism's greatest policy victories in the 1960s and 1970s came as a result of using tools won by other movements. By far the most important was the employment section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, won by the black freedom movement to end occupational segregation. Women used it not only to enter good jobs of all kinds long closed to them but also to end pregnancy discrimination and fight sexual harassment. Indeed they raised foundational questions about gender and power with reverberations in every area of American life. Title VII also encouraged new coalitions between feminists and labor and civil rights groups of all kinds that expanded the constituency pushing for gender equity. Without a Title VII, NOW and small women's liberation never would have achieved so many successes so quickly, if they achieved them at all (9).

Part of what made feminism so successful is the way that, almost from the outset, women in different situations developed their own variants and organized for the goals most important to them. As historian Nancy Cott wrote of the first wave, "feminism was an impulse that was impossible to translate into a program without centrifugal results" (10). The trite caricature of a white middle-class movement obscures this far

more interesting history. From the beginning, black women inside and outside the movement put forth their own visions of gender justice, often with a particular focus on how the combined impact of racism and sexism hurt black families and harmed men as well as women. Latina feminists soon advanced a critique of *machismo* and of the constraining role of the Catholic Church in their communities. And so it went: Native American women, working-class women in trade unions, Jewish women, Catholic women, sex workers, older women, and women with disabilities all described what gender equality would mean from their vantage points and worked to achieve it (11). Initial friction notwithstanding, over time these differences enriched the very definition of feminism while enlisting the commitment of a vast spectrum of Americans (12).

Protesting against the Federal Equal Rights Amendment outside the White House in the early 1970s. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, *U.S. News and World Report* Collection, LC-U9-33889A-31/31A.)

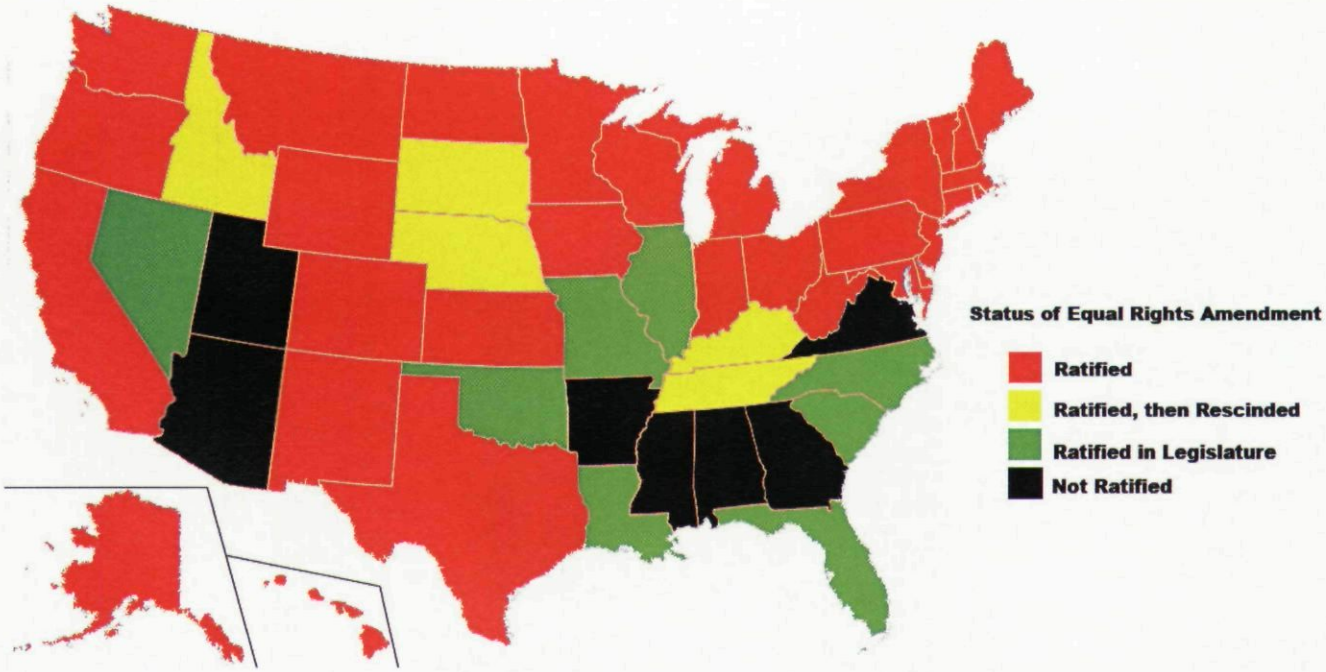
Seen in the light of this older and broader story, the lesbian and gay quest for equality seems almost inevitable. It too responded to changes in family life and gender as it emphasized mutual love as the basis for domestic partnership, regardless of the sex of each partner. Like feminism, this movement built on foundations laid during the New Deal and World War II: newly accepted ideas about the rights of citizens and the role of government, newly powerful grassroots movements of labor and the left, massive same-sex armed forces, and a new capacity to enforce rights made possible by an expanded administrative state. It was no accident that the first gay rights group, the Mattachine Society, was founded in the wake of World War II by left-wing activists such as Harry Hay, or that it identified gay rights with "our fellow minorities . . . the Negro, Mexican, and Jewish Peoples" (13).

The cold war had subdued this organizing, too, as it encouraged a "lavender scare" that cost more government workers their jobs than did the Red Scare itself. The State Department alone boasted in 1950 that it was firing one suspected homosexual a day (14). But as in the case of women's equality, the social and cultural changes driving this movement were too powerful for repression to succeed over the long term. Thanks to being held back artificially in the 1950s, the gay liberation movement, like the women's movement, exploded with greater force in the 1960s—most dramatically in the four-night-long Stonewall riot in New York City in 1969. And the gay movement too generated a panoply of different organizations, the division of labor among which enabled the movement to work on various fronts—from creating its own media to changing municipal law, medical knowledge, and the practices of police and employers (15).

For movement opponents, however, open homosexuality dramatized the separation of sexuality and reproduction that traditionalists already feared. It also showed how pliable gender was: its very existence implied there was no "natural" way for men or women to behave and so raised unprecedented questions about gender hierarchy and the meaning of family. Further, what would it mean to grant equal rights for lesbians and gay men? That would require acknowledging the legitimacy of rights enforcement for others, too, beginning with blacks, something that conservatives in the North and South had long resisted. In short, on virtually every front that mattered to the right, this new movement seemed a particular challenge (16).

With a focus on the deeper roots and larger stakes of these movements, it is easier to make sense of the phenomenon of mass antifeminism among women. Mobilized in 1972 by the veteran conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly in a group called STOP ERA, female antifeminism proved powerful enough to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, which had sailed through both houses of Congress in 1972 after the surge of pro-equality activism. In my experience the paradox of women who fought gender equality is a great hook for teaching; it is hard to imagine, for example, African Americans organizing to fight passage the Civil Rights Act. On the face of it, it is so odd that students who yawn at feminism itself sit up to figure this out.

Solving the puzzle of why some women fought against equal treatment for their sex requires looking at how the family wage system and its breakdown drove gender-conscious politics of all kinds. Different groups of women came up with different answers to the decline of the family wage and the deep alterations in marriage and family because they stood in very different relation to these developments. Women who feel that they have benefited from the changes of recent years often become feminists, who try to further dismantle the old male dominated system in the name of equality and fairness. Yet many women who feel they have lost or will lose from the changes have rallied to the old system's defense (17). Both reactions are understandable in a society that provides less of a social safety net than any other comparably developed nation. In western Europe, by contrast, which has more public policy supports for family well being and a stronger ethic of social solidarity, antifeminism is far weaker and there is no mass-based or influential analogue to America's religious right (18).



The initial pace of state legislative ratifications of the Equal Rights Amendment was intense during 1972 and 1973. This pace slowed in 1974 only three ratifications and only one in 1975. (Image courtesy of Wikipedia.)

Analysis of the deep structure of gender politics also helps to make sense of the prominent place of issues of masculinity, femininity, family, and sexuality in other movements of the era not ostensibly concerned with gender. For example, historians have recently used gender analysis to reveal new dimensions of civil rights and black nationalism, the Chicano youth movement, and the conflict over the war in Vietnam. Their studies reveal how heated gender rhetoric signaled underlying concerns that influenced conduct once beyond the purview of women's history (19).

This call for a new framework based on "the long women's movement" promises both challenges and opportunities for teachers of the U.S. survey (20). It demands more of teachers, who will have to supply storyline, analysis, and documents that current textbooks do not. Most texts say little or nothing about women's organizing between 1920 and 1966, and almost none mentions the decisive role of the labor movement and broader progressive organizations, not explicitly feminist, in helping to advance women's equality. Taking the long view may also require sacrificing some of the attention-getting drama that dominates journalistic accounts. Time spent on media magnets like the demonstration at the 1969 Atlantic City Miss America Pageant may have to make room for how older women in the 1940s and 1950s worked for measures that would reduce the burden of the "double day" on working women, when few young people were paying attention. Given the widespread concern among today's students about how they will manage to combine employment and family commitments, that seems a fair trade (21).

Indeed, the concept of a long women's movement offers pedagogical benefits that more than offset its start-up costs. Incorporating the best new scholarship, it introduces students to a cast of activists far more diverse than they meet in the worn-out stereotype of a "reawakened" white, middle-class movement based in the Northeast. The actors in these broader struggles look more like today's student bodies in class, race, religion, and region, if not in age, and therefore are more likely to hold their interest. Perhaps the most enticing advantage of "the long women's movement" framework for teachers, however, is that it reinforces earlier lessons by deepening student understanding of the present-day ramifications of the Progressive Era, the New Deal, the cold war, the civil rights movement, and the rise of political conservatism. It offers, that is, an opportunity for the ever-elusive synthesis. Not least, in a time of rapid worldwide economic restructuring and political disorientation, it provides students a better understanding of how momentous democratic change has really come about in the past. ❑

Endnotes

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University Press, 2005). An excellent documentary that makes this case, is *Step by Step: Building a Feminist Movement* (Videocassette, Wisconsin Public Television, 1998; distributed by Women Make Movies).

6. Amy Swerdlow, "The Congress of American Women: Left-Feminist Peace Politics in the Cold War" in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
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9. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); also Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*.
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