

Women's Rights Newscast

Introduction:

From the beginning of the republic, American society was divided into two spheres: the domestic sphere and the public sphere. Religious beliefs held that women should excel in the domestic sphere—caring for children, keeping house, and providing support for a husband—and stay out of the public sphere of professions and politics. During the 1800s, women were prohibited by law from testifying in court, owning property, and establishing businesses. Women were also not permitted to vote, giving them the status of second-class citizens in the new democracy. However, many women refused to accept such secondary status. In 1848 a group of feminists, or activists seeking equal rights for women, met in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss the position of women in American society. They issued the Declaration of Sentiments, which declared that "all men and women are created equal." Feminist efforts to draw attention to women's second-class status encouraged more women—and some men—to join the fight for women's right to vote. Women finally won the vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

A few years later, Quaker feminist Alice Paul proposed another amendment to the Constitution, this one ensuring women's legal rights. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), as it was called, stated: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged [reduced] by the United States or by any state on account of sex." Congress refused to consider the proposed amendment, but women's groups continued to lobby for it during the 1930s and 1940s. The first and second world wars created new opportunities for women to work beyond the domestic sphere and help support the war effort in jobs as welders, factory workers, pilots, and professional baseball players. However, by the 1950s, as male veterans claimed the jobs they had held before the war, women were again encouraged to return to homemaking.

*The women's movement grew dramatic support and momentum in the 1960s, inspired by the African-American civil rights movement and a groundbreaking book by Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argued that American society should be changed to allow women to reach their full potential inside and outside the home. In addition, in 1961 President John F. Kennedy authorized a commission to write a report on the status of women. By 1964, over 64,000 Americans had bought the report, which documented the ways in which women were discriminated against and recommended 24 ways to improve women's status.*

When the women's movement revived the ERA, thousands of women and men lent their support. In 1972, the amendment was approved by Congress and submitted to the states for ratification. However, some groups in society began to advocate more strongly against the women's movement. As a result, the ERA was not ratified by the 1982 deadline; only 35 of the 38 states needed for ratification approved the amendment.

Despite the failure of the ERA, women made numerous gains in equal rights in many areas of American society. Feminists advocated for reproductive rights, improved childcare facilities, and opportunities for women in numerous professions, in sports, and in the media—in short, in every facet of American life. Declaring that the "personal is political," reformers sought to break down the barriers between the domestic and public spheres so women could move more freely between them. Their efforts were largely successful, radically altering the lives of every American, both male and female.

Class Procedure: The class will be graded together (5pts) on the flow of the newscast and the organization between groups. The class should choose an anchor and a co-anchor who will set the order of the presentation and handle the lead ins to the subtopics, writes and reads off the lead story.

Group Procedure: Learns about the topic by reading the information provided by the teacher, chooses an "on-scene reporter," writes a story and dialogue for the newscast and acts out the event. Rehearse your story (2-4 minutes) and get appropriate props and attire for your presentation.

Everybody: Takes notes on other sections while the newscast is progressing and participates in the discussion with the teacher after by being prepared for the following questions.

- What were the most prominent concerns of the women's movement?
- What were the most prominent successes of the women's movement?
- What were the chief frustrations of the women's movement? What obstacles and failures did feminists experience?
- In what significant ways did the women's movement change American society?
- Did the women's movement achieve full equity for American women? Explain.
- In what tangible ways have your daily lives and future aspiration been changed by the women's movement?

Press Release on Domestic Life

Key Concerns of the Women’s Movement The women’s movement pressed for changes in domestic life (family life inside the home). Feminists demanded freedom for women to go beyond society’s designated roles for them as wives, mothers, and homemakers. The women’s movement called for societal acceptance of women as equal individuals with needs for personal fulfillment. In addition, they pressed for changes in family structure, recognition of housework as unpaid labor, and government support for childcare.

Personal Fulfillment The women’s movement criticized society’s expectation that women would find complete fulfillment in domestic life. In her 1963 groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan argued that American culture did not accept women’s need to grow and reach their human potential. She argued that housewives and mothers were held up as the model of femininity, and that society told women that “the highest value...for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity.” Friedan urged, “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’” Friedan’s ideas electrified many women, who strove to open new opportunities for women outside the home. As Carol Connolly reflected in *In the Company of Women*, changing people’s ideas about women’s roles was difficult:

I was married in the '50s, when I was 23. That was late, very late, for that time. I was rebellious, even then. I knew that marrying was kind of the end, but really there were no other career choices. I can remember arguing years later with a guy who said, “That’s ridiculous. You could have gone to law school, you could have gone to medical school.” Well, maybe, but you would have chosen to be a freak. You would have been the outsider.

Family Structure While most feminists did not want to abandon marriage or motherhood, they demanded greater equality within the home. Women who had always worked outside the home to support their families sought recognition of the “double burden” they were carrying—work both inside and outside the home. They argued that men should assume more responsibility for care of the family and home and treat their wives equally. Feminists also brought attention to the need for women’s protection, pointing out that domestic violence was the main cause of injury among women of childbearing age. Lesbian women—excluded from the practice of marriage—sought to broaden the definition of *family* to a group of people who support and love each other. Many women of color, however, were concerned about adequately playing the role of wife and mother, rather than escaping it. One African-American woman said, “At a time when some radical white feminists are striving for a different family structure, many black women are trying to stabilize their families. They are making a special effort...to assume the wife and mother role more effectively.”



- Why were many women unfulfilled by their domestic lives?
- What changes did feminists call for in family structure?
- What does the term “double burden” refer to?

Housework as Unpaid Labor The women’s movement also demanded recognition that women’s unpaid labor in the home was essential to the family’s and society’s well-being. Many women found housework and care of the family exhausting, boring, and unappreciated. A 1965 poll showed that women performed 80 percent of all household work. One study found that housewives worked 99 hours a week. Edith M. Stern, a housewife and writer, described a want ad for a housewife: “Help Wanted: Domestic: Female. All cooking, cleaning, laundering, sewing, meal planning, shopping, weekday chauffeuring, social secretarial service, and complete care of three children. Salary at employer’s option. Time off if possible.” She commented, “No one in her right senses would apply for such a job.”

Childcare Adequate childcare was seen as a pressing need for both women already in the workforce and those who wanted to join it. Since women were not paid for taking care of children but society benefited from their work, feminists argued that the government should help pay for childcare. This would allow women to work outside the home and keep their jobs. Childcare proponents also believed that children would benefit more from being with other children under the supervision of qualified childcare providers than staying at home with a single parent. Some activists further argued that children growing up in racially mixed centers could help reduce racism in American society.



- Why did the women’s movement criticize society’s view of housework?
- Why did feminists think the federal government should fund childcare?

Changes in Domestic Life The women’s movement successfully raised public awareness about society’s restrictions on women, and changed many people’s ideas about what were “proper” male and female roles in the family. As a result, greater numbers of men began to take on a share of the household labor, actively participate in raising children, and support women’s attempts to enter the workforce. In 1974, the use of “Ms.”—which unlike “Miss” and “Mrs.” does not indicate a woman’s marital status—was legalized in California. Feminists also successfully pressured lawmakers to pass equal opportunity employment laws, paving the way for women to enter new fields of work.

On the legal front, feminists’ pressure for government-supported childcare resulted in special tax breaks for families who paid for outside childcare. The women’s movement also lobbied for maternity leave so that women could keep their jobs after taking time off to have babies. Their efforts led to several state laws that approved unpaid maternity leave. Finally, feminists were instrumental in having laws passed in a few states that required that a divorced couple’s property be equally divided between the husband and wife, recognizing housewives’ contribution to the couple’s well-being. By the late 1970s, the women’s movement had not achieved the widespread changes it desired, but it had paved the way for greater equality between men and women in the home.



- How did the women’s movement influence people’s ideas about men’s and women’s roles?
- What successes did feminists have in supporting working women?