

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 Media and Beauty Standards

Key Concerns of the Women’s Movement Many in the women’s movement believed that media images of women and women’s fashions played a key part in women’s oppression (unjust and severe control of a group). Feminists sought to reduce society’s emphasis on women’s looks and beauty and to shift the emphasis to their talents and strength.

Objectification of Women The women’s movement argued that media images and advertisements objectified women, presenting them as objects to be looked at rather than active, unique individuals. Feminists noted that while the media focused on men’s intelligence and capabilities, it emphasized women’s looks, reinforcing the idea that a woman’s worth was based on her beauty. Feminists asserted that objectification served to make women uncomfortable, distracted from important issues such as equal pay for women, and kept women continually dependent on men’s approval. *Advertising Age* promoted this focus in 1969, saying “Magazines help distressed damsels remake their wardrobes, faces, hair, body...sometimes their whole way of being. And the ladies love it. And beg for more. When she gets involved with herself and fashion, in any magazine, she’s a captive cover to cover.” Many feminists stressed that such focus on women’s physical attributes (features) reinforced men’s belief that it was acceptable to judge women based solely on their looks. As Marcia Fluer explains in *In the Company of Women*, some men openly discriminated against women based on their appearance:

An early producer—a very large, balding, beige man—said...he didn’t know if I was going to last [in journalism], and he wouldn’t have hired me anyway, if he’d been there. I thought that was fair because when I started I really didn’t have any experience on television or in reporting. I knew I was a token [person hired to show that employers do not discriminate]. But that was fine because I was going to prove myself. But he said the reason he wouldn’t have hired me was because I have a funny mouth. Not a dirty mouth, or a big mouth—but the shape of my mouth. And this from a man who looks like a turnip!



- **What does it mean to objectify someone?**
- **Why did feminists criticize the media’s focus on women’s beauty?**
- **How did they say this focus influenced men’s judgment of women?**

Standards of Beauty Feminists also objected to narrow standards of beauty created by advertisements. Feminists criticized the growing advertising industry for emphasizing that women could be beautiful only if they conformed (looked similar) to the ads’ images of youthful, slim-waisted, voluptuous white women. They said such standards damaged girls’ self-esteem and body image and made them perpetually concerned with their looks. Women of color spoke out against the racism that encouraged them to try to look white. For example, black women’s magazines encouraged women to lighten their skin and straighten their hair. In addition, advertising often ignored women of color completely, as one woman described: “We’ve not been seen. It’s only been in the last couple of years that even the ads recognized the fact that we use toothpaste.”

Miss America Pageant One particular focus of the women’s movement was beauty pageants such as the Miss America contest, which reinforced the idea that women were objects to be gazed at and judged. The women’s movement demanded that society—and men specifically—give women the respect they deserved for their talents and freedom from narrow standards of beauty. In September 1968, a group called New York Radical Women (NYRW) staged a protest of the Miss America contest in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Over 200 protesters gathered where the contest was being held. They threw “woman-garbage” such as bras, girdles, hair curlers, and women’s magazines like *Cosmopolitan* into a “Freedom Trash Can” to express their rejection of women as sex objects. NYRW compared the beauty pageant to animals being judged at a county fair, and criticized the “ludicrous ‘beauty’ standards [women] are conditioned to take seriously.” They protested the pageant’s racism and stated that “there [has] [n]ever been a true Miss America—an American Indian.” Finally, the protest organizers pointed out, “In this reputedly democratic society, where every little boy supposedly can grow up to be President, what can every little girl hope to grow to be? Miss America. That’s where it’s at...men are judged by their actions, women by their appearance.”



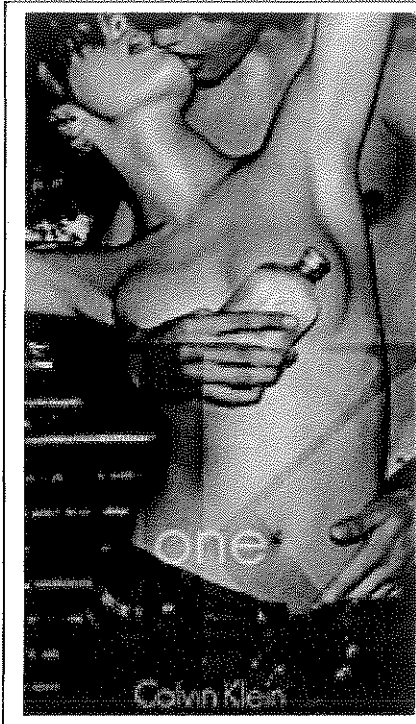
- Why did feminists object to advertisers’ standards of beauty?
- Why did feminists object to beauty pageants?
- How did NYRW protest the Miss America contest?

Changes in Beauty Standards Despite feminists’ continued protests, the Miss America pageant remained a part of American society. However, the women’s movement inspired many women to examine and protest their role as sex objects, and to reject female stereotypes to create new, diverse standards of beauty. During the 1960s and 1970s, many women stopped wearing make up, wore their hair natural (instead of curling, ironing, or teasing it), and expressed pride in their individual, unique appearance. In addition, women athletes emerged as admirable examples of women’s strength.

The women’s movement also successfully presented alternative images of women. Some women published new women’s magazines, such as *Ms.*, which focused on women’s intellectual and health concerns, and encouraged women to redefine beauty. For example, as one woman wrote to *Ms.* magazine: “Makeup is often called a mask—only true if the woman wearing it believes it. A woman’s true soul shines through squeaky-clean skin or a pound of pancake stick. Let little girls play with makeup. Emphasize the play.” Feminists raised women’s consciousnesses to consider for themselves what made them feel good, what image they wanted to portray, and what beauty meant to them. In addition, many feminists tended to agree that images went hand in hand with reality, and that positive, powerful images would lead to more positive, powerful women.



- How did the women’s movement affect standards of beauty?
- Why did feminists publish magazines like *Ms.*?



Provocative images of women's partly clothed or naked bodies are especially prevalent in advertising. Shari Graydon, former president of Canada's MediaWatch, argues that women's bodies are sexualized in ads in order to grab the viewer's attention. Women become sexual objects when their bodies and their sexuality are linked to products that are bought and sold.

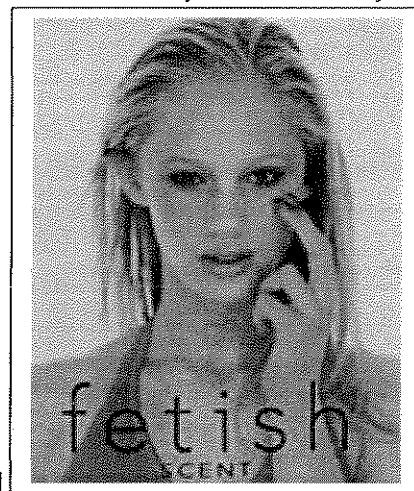
Media activist Jean Kilbourne agrees. She notes that women's bodies are often dismembered into legs, breasts or thighs, reinforcing the message that women are objects rather than whole human beings

Many researchers argue that the over-representation of thin women in mass media reinforces the conclusion that "physically attractive" and "sexually desirable" mean "thin." Amy Malkin's study of magazine covers reveals that messages about weight loss are often placed next to messages about men and relationships. Some of her examples: "Get the Body You Really Want" beside "How to Get Your Husband to Really Listen," and "Stay Skinny" paired with "What Men Really Want."

The fascination with finding out what men really want also tends to keep female characters in film and television busy. Professor Nancy Signorielli reports that men are more likely than women to be shown "on the job" in movies and television shows. Female characters, on the other hand, are more likely to be seen dating, or talking about romance.

That romance often has a darker side. As Graydon notes, the media infantilize women, portraying them as child-like, innocent and vulnerable. Being vulnerable is often closely linked to being a potential victim of violence. Kilbourne argues that ads like the Fetish scent ad (right) imply "women don't really mean 'no' when they say it, that women are only teasing when they resist men's advances." The ad's copy reads: "Apply generously to your neck so he can smell the scent as you shake your head 'no.'" The obvious implication here is, "he'll understand that you don't really mean it and he can respond to the scent like any other animal."

Kilbourne notes that sex in the media is often condemned "from a puritanical perspective—there's too much of it, it's too blatant, it will encourage kids to be promiscuous, etc." But, she concludes, sex in the media "has far more to do with trivializing sex than with promoting it. The problem is not that it is sinful but that it is synthetic and cynical. We are offered a pseudo-sexuality that makes it far more difficult to discover our own unique and authentic sexuality."



Images of female bodies are everywhere. Women—and their body parts—sell everything from food to cars. Popular film and becoming younger, taller and thinner. Some have even been known to faint on the set from lack of food. Women's magazines are full of articles urging that if they can just lose those last twenty pounds, they'll have it all—the perfect marriage, loving children, great sex, and a rewarding career. It is estimated that the diet industry alone is worth \$100 billion (U.S.) a year.

Research indicates that exposure to images of thin, young, air-brushed female bodies is linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women and girls. The American research group Anorexia Nervosa & Related Eating Disorders, Inc. says that one out of every four college-aged women uses unhealthy methods of weight control—including fasting, skipping meals, excessive exercise, laxative abuse, and self-induced vomiting. And the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute warns that weight control measures are being taken by girls as young as nine. American statistics are similar. In 2003, Teen magazine reported that 35 per cent of girls 6 to 12 years old have been on at least one diet, and that 50 to 70 per cent of normal weight girls believe they are overweight.

Media activist Jean Kilbourne concludes that, "Women are sold to the diet industry by the magazines we read and the television programs we watch, almost all of which make us feel anxious about our weight."

Unattainable Beauty

Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that media images of female beauty are unattainable for all but a very small number of women. Researchers generating a computer model of a woman with Barbie-doll proportions, for example, found that her back would be too weak to support the weight of her upper body, and her body would be too narrow to contain more than half a liver and a few centimeters of bowel. A real woman built that way would suffer from chronic diarrhea and eventually die from malnutrition.

Still, the number of real life women and girls who seek a similarly underweight body is epidemic, and they can suffer equally devastating health consequences.

The Culture of Thinness

Researchers report that women's magazines have ten and one-half times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines do, and over three-quarters of the covers of women's magazines include at least one message about how to change a woman's bodily appearance—by diet, exercise or cosmetic surgery. The Pamela Anderson-esque ideal of feminine beauty is physically impossible for the majority of women to attain, yet we continue to measure ourselves by these standards. Seeing as Pam herself needed the help of a plastic surgeon and a little silicone to reach the heights of sex-appeal that she would soon define, it should come as no surprise that more and more women are choosing to go under the knife in an effort to graft themselves into an objective and arbitrary ideal of feminine beauty. Even though many women are (at least initially) happy with the results of their surgery, one successful surgery will seldom be enough to help them attain society's elusive beauty ideal. Far from being a source of pleasure and a solution to all their problems, the decision to re-form oneself according to an arbitrary image of beauty too often leads us right back where we started from: dissatisfaction with the figure that appears before us in the mirror, and yet another trip to the surgeon's office. Although a psychological study from the 80s states that undergoing plastic surgery "for a reason other than trauma must be considered a clear symptom of neurosis," cosmetic surgery today has become a commonplace.

Television and movies reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a woman's worth. Canadian researcher Gregory Fouts reports that over three-quarters of the female characters in TV situation comedies are underweight, and only one in twenty are above average in size. Heavier actresses tend to receive negative comments from male characters about their bodies ("How about wearing a sack?"), and 80 per cent of these negative comments are followed by canned audience laughter.

However, advertising rules the marketplace and in advertising thin is "in." Twenty years ago, the

average model weighed 8 per cent less than the average woman—but today's models weigh 23 per cent less. Advertisers believe that thin models sell products. When the Australian magazine *New Woman* recently included a picture of a heavy-set model on its cover, it received a truckload of letters from grateful readers praising the move. But its advertisers complained and the magazine returned to featuring bone-thin models. *Advertising Age International* concluded that the incident "made clear the influence wielded by advertisers who remain convinced that only thin models spur the sales of beauty products."

Self-Improvement or Self-Destruction?

The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells "ordinary" women that they are always in need of adjustment—and that the female body is an object to be perfected.

Jean Kilbourne argues that the overwhelming presence of media images of painfully thin women means that real women's bodies have become invisible in the mass media. The real tragedy, Kilbourne concludes, is that many women internalize these stereotypes, and judge themselves by the beauty industry's standards. Women learn to compare themselves to other women, and to compete with them for male attention. This focus on beauty and desirability "effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate."

