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Abstract: Presents an overview of the women's rights movement in the United States, beginning in 1920. Introduction of women in the American workforce during World War II; Sexual discrimination against working women; Publication of 'The Feminine Mystique' by Betty Friedan; Creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW); Evolution of radical feminism during the late 1960s; Launch of 'Ms.' magazine by Gloria Steinem; Debate surrounding abortion rights; Impact of feminism on sex discrimination in the US.

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Feminism & the Women's Rights Movement

The modern women's rights movement in the United States began in the 1960s as a reaction to the decades of social and civil inequities faced by women. Over the next thirty years, feminists campaigned for equality between the sexes; championing causes such as equal pay for equal work, abortion rights, and social parity.

Women's Suffrage

The roots of the campaign for women's rights date back to the nineteenth century. The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 condemned the hardships and biases experienced by women in American society. The convention's chief concern was to achieve voting rights, or suffrage, for women. Leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony campaigned persistently for women's suffrage. They also pressed for equality in other areas, including politics, religion, and the workforce.

Women finally gained the right to vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920. This victory, although it was important, did not mark the end of the fight for women's equality. Participation in the political process did not bring about fully equal social standing for women, especially in the workplace.

Women Join the Workforce

During World War II, large numbers of women entered the American workforce for the first time. Because so many men were fighting the war, female workers were vital to the production of tanks, airplanes, ships, and other necessary military equipment. Defense industries and the US government created advertising encouraging women to contribute

to the war effort. Perhaps the most famous example of this propaganda is the poster depicting "Rosie the Riveter," dressed in a work shirt and kerchief, flexing her biceps and saying, "We Can Do It!"

As the war progressed, working women proved that they were just as capable as the men they had replaced. Once the war ended, however, most female workers were fired, and their jobs were given to returning servicemen. The few women who did remain in the workforce found that their opportunities were restricted by their gender, and their pay was less than that offered to men in comparable positions.

These lingering inequalities combined with other social trends sparked the birth of the modern feminist movement during the 1960s. The most apparent indicator of sweeping societal changes was the return of a substantial number of women to the workplace. The birth-control pill, approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960, had given women the freedom to start professional careers without the complications of unplanned pregnancies and childcare. At the same time, inflation and the rising cost of living made it economically imperative for women to join the workforce.

As more women began working, however, they discovered that the discriminatory attitudes that their predecessors had opposed were still firmly entrenched in the American consciousness. Women found it nearly impossible to be promoted to top positions within companies. This type of gender discrimination was so common that it became known as "the glass ceiling." Female workers were also confronted with the uninformed beliefs that women were less important than men, married women were merely adjuncts to their husbands, and women should find fulfillment in dedicating their lives to men.

Growth of the Movement

Author Betty Friedan made one of the first public challenges to these attitudes in her 1963 book, "The Feminine Mystique." Friedan conducted a study of female college graduates during the 1950s and early 60s, and discovered that most of them identified themselves solely as mothers and housewives, and were frustrated and dissatisfied with the roles forced upon them. Friedan argued passionately that women needed to discover their own identities outside the confines of the home, marriage, and family. Many believe that the publication of "The Feminine Mystique" marked the beginning of the modern feminist movement.

Feminists soon began to pressure the US government to mandate occupational equality. Their first victory came with the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963. This law made it illegal for women to be paid less than men for performing the same work. The following year saw another victory, when Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, sex, religion, and national origin. The passage of these laws did not change people's attitudes or behavior, however, and feminists realized that further steps would need to be taken to ensure full equality between the sexes.

The National Organization of Women

It was clear that better organization was needed in order to attract more attention and support for the feminist cause. In 1966, twenty-eight feminists, including Betty Friedan and Kathryn Clarenbach, founded the National Organization for Women (NOW), which quickly became the most influential women's rights group in the United States. The organization advocated the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA); a proposed constitutional amendment that would outlaw discrimination based on gender. The group

also supported abortion rights, rights for homosexuals and the civil rights movement in general.

NOW was not the only women's political organization formed during the 1960s. The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) was founded in 1969 with the purpose of legalizing abortion on demand in the United States. To apply more political pressure in the area of women's rights, Betty Friedan and another leading feminist, Gloria Steinem, formed the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) in 1971. This group's goals included the election of women to public office, increased appointments of women to judgeships, and the inclusion of women in the American political process.

Radicalism

Younger feminists found inspiration in some of the more radical protest movements of the 1960s, such as the anti-war movement that protested American involvement in the Vietnam War, and the struggle of African Americans and other minority groups for civil rights. Many female college students became involved in these movements, and applied the tactics and goals of those struggles to the feminist movement.

Radical feminists believed that the root of gender discrimination lay in the traditional values of American society. They contended that from infancy to adulthood, men were conditioned to view women as sex objects, rather than as equal individuals. According to feminists, this attitude led to violence, including rape and domestic abuse, committed against women. They focused on reforming the way women were portrayed in the media, literature, and popular culture. This era saw the rise of gender inclusive language, such as the use of term "firefighter" instead of the gender-specific "fireman." Some married women chose to retain their own last name, rather than take the last name of their husband. Other women created their own identities by referring to themselves as "Ms." instead of "Miss" or "Mrs."

Steinem launched the magazine "Ms." in July of 1972. This magazine championed feminist causes, and was instantly popular. For the first time, women were able to read about issues important to them, written from a woman's point of view. Many issues, including such controversial topics as abortion rights, pertaining to women's roles and status in society were raised in the magazine, and its readership swelled.

Abortion Rights

Television shows with a feminist slant, such as the situation comedy "Maude," achieved popularity in the 1970s. One particular episode, which aired in 1972, depicted the forty-seven-year old title character's decision to end her pregnancy with an abortion, an extremely controversial subject at the time. As a result of a campaign led by an overzealous religious group, thirty-nine CBS television stations refused to re-air the episode. NOW got involved by organizing protests in cities where anti-abortion groups had forced the cancellation of the show.

The debate over abortion rights reached a climax in 1973, when the US Supreme Court legalized abortion with its decision in the case of Roe v. Wade. Both NOW and NARAL had pushed for legalized abortion, and both groups continued to work to protect a woman's right to choose from those who objected to the procedure.

Impact

The momentum behind the feminist movement seemed to slow as the 1970s drew to a close. Many felt that the positions taken by NOW reflected a solely liberal viewpoint, and were not representative of all women. In 1979, Beverly LaHaye founded Concerned

Women for America (CWA), an organization with a conservative stance on women's rights issues. Since its formation, CWA has often opposed NOW on matters of public policy regarding women. Also, the election of Republican president Ronald Reagan in 1980 signaled an end to government activism for societal change. The ERA, which had been passed by Congress in 1972, failed to be ratified by the necessary thirty-eight states before the July 1982 deadline, and was defeated during Reagan's administration. By the early 80s, however, most of the discriminatory laws that the ERA intended to change had already been struck down by the Supreme Court.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the supporters of the women's rights movement have made significant strides toward equality between the sexes. Although discrimination continues to exist in varying degrees, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s opened many doors for the women of the twenty-first century. By refusing to tolerate the injustices imposed upon them, feminists were able to effect significant change in both the political system and social standards of the United States, restoring integrity and equality where they had once been lost.

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By Veronica Loveday

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