

The Progressive History of American Feminism

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First-Wave Feminism and Women's Suffrage

The main goal of feminists of the first wave (suffragists) in most of America was to obtain suffrage for women. Since 1920, when the XIX Amendment to the US Constitution was adopted, American women began to take part in elections on an equal footing with men. Still, they never got equal legal, economic, social, and other rights, so their subordinate position almost did not change. Women were a minority at all levels of political life, social guarantees were calculated for a husband-dependent position, and many women were definitely not available advantages in a new society of abundance. (National Archives, 2022)

Feminism During the Great Depression

The beginning of the 1930s – the end of the 1950s can be described as a period of calm, the gradual fading of the energy of feminism in the 1920s. Assessing the fate of American women in the crisis of the 30th and 40th years of the twentieth century, researchers pay much attention to the changes that occurred in the labor sphere. So, according to N. Walk, 2, the Great Depression and World War II caused a “crisis situation” that changed the role of women at home, at work, and in public life.

Women War Work and Mass-Media Influence

Mass media had a huge influence on public consciousness, which contributed to the implementation of state programs. In the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, women were advised to draw to a new role to satisfy national economic needs. However, during the Great Depression, some working women were forced to become housewives to cede their jobs to “breadwinners” – men. Confirmation of this can be found in Caroline Bird's book “The Invisible Scar: The Great Depression and its Impact on American Life, then and Now,” which deals with the social history of the Great Depression. During the Second World War, in order to fill the shortage of manpower, women are called upon to pay for work, especially in the military industry. Nevertheless, for both these crisis periods, the number of working women increased slowly – during the 1930s and quickly – during World War II, when a record number of women who started working was recorded. Both crises, in addition, attracted new groups of married women to the labor market. But by the end of the 1940s, the proportion of working women increased again, and its composition changed. Susan M. Hartmann notes that the impact of the Second World War on American women was varied³. For example, women were more attracted to

work and mastered the military men's professions of welders, riveters, turners, etc. However, this experience lost its value in the post-war period since now, the light industry enterprises are becoming traditional workers for women. The only thing that remains unchanged is that, like during the war and even in the 1930s, new women's wage earners were mainly middle-aged married women. In the post-war period, they were more of a middle class than they were before the Depression. By 1945, in most of Europe and America, women had made significant progress with regard to political and legal equality with men. They were no longer excluded from participation in politics, education, and employment, nor were they completely deprived of autonomy after marriage. In the 1950s, the USA as a whole experienced a sharp increase in the middle class, and the crisis of the 1930s and 1940s paved the way for the emergence of a modern working woman. (Library of Congress, 2026)

Postwar Return to Traditional Gender Roles

According to S. Bird, in the future, changes in the diversity of women's professions were not related to the idea that a woman should play a big role in society. On the contrary, the crisis situation of the 1930s-1940s confirmed the widespread belief that a woman's place is at home, both in good and bad times. Almost two decades of crises and wars only underscored the need for traditional stable American families, fathers who earn money, and caring mothers who would devote themselves to family life. During the 1930s and 1940s, the ideals of the Americans did not change. Having established them during the Great Depression and preserved them during the war years, these patriarchal ideas were revived and strengthened in the post-war period. By the end of the 1940s, the cult of the housewife reigned with even greater energy than its earlier versions. The crises of the 1930s and 1940s did not pave the way for sexual equality, at least ideologically. Rather, they laid the foundation for the conservative division of sex roles, the obvious retreat of women from public affairs, and an explicit anti-typist attitude.

Domesticity and Women's Search for Independence

It is best to make their first escape from the prison of marriage, motherhood, femininity, homework, self-care, and isolation when their services are desperately needed: in industry, in wartime, or in social movements. Whenever, for practical reasons, a woman is dragged out of her imprisonment (something like correctional labor with conditional release), an attempt is made to push her back as soon as there is no need, which leads the women of the United States to fight for change. "

Intellectual Origins of Second-Wave Feminism

Speaking about the reasons for the emergence of the second wave of feminism, one cannot ignore the process of formation and transformation of feminist ideas. According to N. Walker, during the

1920s, within the women's movement there is a tense struggle, it is being reorganized, since the main goal of the first wave of feminism-suffragist, the suffrage for women, has already been achieved. However, women's early hopes for equality were in vain. In the era of the expansive 20-ies, new women's aspirations for economic independence and individualism were suppressed by depression, which very quickly made them an unreasonable luxury. In the National Women's Party, the number of equality supporters, already small, fell to a minimum. The most stable and strong current, the so-called "Social Feminism," gradually disappeared. During the early New Deal, thanks to the work of Eleanor Roosevelt, veterans of progressive reform aimed at achieving equality, have an impact on federal policy. However, women's activism in politics and government during the New Deal was more like the last breath of the progressive energy of the 1920s than foreshadowing future trends. Family values prevail everywhere. By the end of the 1930s, the number of feminists decreased, and the war was the cause of the latest surge of feminist ideas of the early twentieth century. S.D. Becker confirms this in the following way. She writes that by the end of the Second World War, the reformist liberal-social wing of the women's movement was leaving. Its functions are replaced by the "New Course" to create a welfare state, labor laws, and the emergence of a strong labor movement. The government social worker has long replaced the reformer of the house. Surviving large women's organizations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the League of Women Voters, have now become apolitical and have melted away as a suburban landscape. Although the battle for equal rights amendment continued in the early 1950s, feminism was now perceived as an extreme force. (National Archives, 2022)

Early Struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment

A vivid page in the history of American feminism in the 1940s was a long struggle in society to adopt the "Equal Rights Amendment" (era) 2. However, there was no single opinion within the women's movement itself. For example, most prominent women politicians, like F. Perkins and E. Roosevelt, viewed the "equal rights amendment" as anathema, and their opinions had to be reckoned with. In the late 1920s, the "amendment on equal rights" was supported by women in business and professional circles, during the 1930s. Some of the political figures become its supporters, as evidenced by S.D. Becker. "No man in the public eye would like to look like an opponent of" equal rights " notes Mary Anderson, who, in her book "Woman at Work" describes women's career opportunities. In 1936 the subcommittee of the White House confirmed the "amendment on equal rights"; in 1938, the Senate's Legislative Committee passed an amendment to the parliamentary debate. In 1940, the Republican Party, which rarely encourages changes in the country's social structure, confirmed the amendment. Only in 1944 was the amendment approved by the Democratic Party, which contributed to the activity of M.E. Gaffei, who played a leading role in the small female organization that remained after the dissolution of the National Women's Party. This is evidenced by a number of scientific works and collections of memoirs and documents. (National Archives, 2024)

Political Mobilization Around the Amendment

The struggle for the amendment mobilizes the forces of women politicians. In 1945, the Women's Committee described the supporters of the National Women's Party (NWP) as aging veterans who once fought for the right to vote, and now they are offended that they "were not born men." According to the same Women's Committee, changes in legislation can only harm women and deprive them of such benefits as alimony. (National Archives, 2024)

Revival of Feminism and Legislative Progress

In 1969 the era again appears on the political scene thanks to the National Organization of Women. In 1972, the era accepted the US Senate. From this point on, for feminist leaders, the inclusion of it in the platforms of political parties and the deployment of a struggle for its ratification by at least 38 states becomes fundamental. Despite the support of Presidents Nixon and Ford, the era is opposed by the strong opposition of the conservative Republican majority in the legislatures of many states. While its supporters are trying to arrange an economic boycott of states that refused to ratify it, the opponents are organized under the slogan "STOP era." With the election in 1980 to the presidential post of her opponent Ronald Reagan and the exception of the requirements of the era from the party platform of the Republican Party, her fate was predetermined: by June 30, 1982, for entry into force, she did not have enough ratification by the three states. The special section of the report stated that the V and 14 amendments are sufficient grounds for guaranteeing equality and abolishing discriminatory acts through the procedure of suits in the Supreme Court. Although the era was never adopted, its ideas were widely disseminated. After the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution was accepted, American women began to take part in elections equally with men. (National Archives, 2024)

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