

Then: The Women's Rights Movement

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. While women had earned the right to vote in 1920, they had largely continued to be treated as second class citizens. The struggle for more meaningful equality/justice started as women fought for more respect in the workplace and more rights and more realistic expectations at home. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Women's Rights Movement
2. The National Organization For Women



BEFORE YOU START

How have the challenges facing women changed over time?

1. The Women's Rights Movement

The work of the suffragists moved the cause of civil rights for women forward, but winning the vote didn't end the struggle. Throughout the 20th century, the role of American women shifted again and again. In the years that the United States was involved in the Second World War (1941–1945), men were fighting overseas, so women had to take their places in factories, offices, and farms. American women suddenly began leaving their families and homes in large numbers to go to work each day.



As a cultural icon of World War II, Rosie the Riveter represented the women who worked in factories and shipyards during the war.

After the war, most women had to return to the home, making room for the returning male workforce. Even so, a wave of change was approaching. In the 1960s, a new movement for women's rights emerged—the women's rights, or women's liberation, movement.

In 1963, former reporter and freelance writer Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a bestselling book that sparked a new feminist movement. Friedan drew on her own experiences and those of women who, like her, were educated but had given up their careers to be suburban housewives (Michals, 2017). According to the ideals of post–World War II society, this should have been a fulfilling role for any woman. But Friedan, and the women she interviewed across the country, wanted something more (Friedan, 1963):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Book

Author: Betty Friedan

Year: 1963

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning the women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question, “Is this all?”

The Feminine Mystique brought to light the struggles of many middle-class women in postwar U.S. society and contributed to dramatic debates about what a woman’s role should be. But Betty Friedan didn’t stop there. She also advocated for women’s rights more broadly and was one of the founding members of the National Organization for Women (NOW).



DID YOU KNOW

Though an almost instant classic, *The Feminine Mystique* was criticized by many at the time for speaking to a predominantly white, middle-class audience. It did little, if anything, to help empower women of color.

2. The National Organization for Women

The National Organization for Women was founded in the mid-1960s to promote women’s civil rights. The NOW statement of purpose, released in 1966, lays out the reasons for the organization’s founding. This primary source gives us a window into the concerns of women in the 1960s and 1970s who were fighting for women’s rights (Friedan, n.d.):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Statement of Purpose

Author: The National Organization for Women

Year: 1966

Despite all the talk about the status of American women in recent years, the actual position of women in the United States has declined, and is declining, to an alarming degree throughout the 1950’s and 60’s. Although 46.4% of all American women between the ages of 18 and 65 now work outside the home, the overwhelming majority—75%—are in routine clerical, sales, or factory jobs, or they are household workers, cleaning women, hospital attendants. About two-thirds of Negro

women workers are in the lowest paid service occupations. Working women are becoming increasingly—not less—concentrated on the bottom of the job ladder. As a consequence full-time women workers today earn on the average only 60% of what men earn, and that wage gap has been increasing over the past twenty-five years in every major industry group. In 1964, of all women with a yearly income, 89% earned under \$5,000 a year; half of all full-time year round women workers earned less than \$3,690; only 1.4% of full-time year round women workers had an annual income of \$10,000 or more.

NOW remains a powerful advocacy organization for women's rights. One measure it supports is the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that was first proposed nearly a century ago. The ERA would prohibit denial of equal rights based on sex. After decades of debate, the ERA still has not become part of the Constitution.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **the women's rights movement** of the 1960s and 1970s. The women's rights movement was more expansive than the women's suffrage movement, and advocated for an equal rights amendment to the Constitution. You also read and analyzed primary sources from the women's rights movement, including Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and **the National Organization for Women's (NOW's) Statement of Purpose**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

Friedan, Betty. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique, Chapter 1*. National Humanities Center.
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Friedan, Betty. (n.d.) *The National Organization for Women's 1966 Statement of Purpose* National Organization for Women. www.now.org/about/history/statement-of-purpose

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- **As a cultural icon of World War II, Rosie the Riveter represented the women who worked in factories and shipyards during the war.** | Author: John Parrot/Stocktrek Images / Getty Images | License: Royalty-free