

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 Health

Key Concerns of the Women’s Movement Women’s health issues, particularly women’s reproductive rights (control over pregnancy and childbirth), were an important focus of the women’s movement. Most importantly, feminists demanded that women have complete decision-making power over their bodies. They focused on two areas, in particular the need for improvements in women’s healthcare, and greater control for women over reproduction, including access to birth control and legal abortion.

Women’s Healthcare The women’s movement had several concerns about women’s healthcare. First, feminists argued that some male doctors ignored or misdiagnosed women’s symptoms. They also believed that the medical profession failed to address other health-related issues, such as women’s sexuality. They said that doctors treated many women of color and poor white women worse than middle-class women, ignoring their needs or refusing to care for them because they could not afford health insurance. Furthermore, feminists noted that health research was primarily based on male bodies and needs. As a result, both doctors and women were ill-informed about female-specific topics such as menstruation, menopause (a midlife process in which women stop menstruating), and natural childbirth. They argued that more money should be spend on research of illnesses that particularly affect women such as breast cancer, which close to 180,000 women develop each year. In *In the Company of Women*, Jeri Rasmussen criticizes the lack of research:

I’ll tell you my ultimate outrage now... I’m a survivor of breast cancer. My sister-in-law didn’t survive. I’m outraged that the rates of survival are no different from what they were 50 years ago. The fact that there’s no research, no fundamental research done for breast cancer ...Something that has the potential of affecting every one of us nobody pays any attention to, because we’re female.



- What concerns did the women’s movement have about the medical profession?
- What did feminists suggest should be done about the lack of research?

Reproductive Rights The women’s movement also sought greater control for women over pregnancy and childbirth. Feminists pressed for free and available birth control—which was restricted to married people in the 1950s—for all women. They also lobbied for greater control over the childbirth process. Women typically had their babies in hospitals, and medical staff usually gave women anesthetics right before they gave birth, so that some women could not even remember having had a baby.

One of the most sensitive and significant issues the women’s movement addressed was the availability of legal abortions. Feminists argued that illegal abortions—which were dangerous, unsanitary, expensive, and difficult to get—accounted for 40 percent of deaths in pregnant women. In addition, women of color were four to eight times more likely to die from illegal abortions than white women. In the 1960s, a woman could receive a legal abortion only if the pregnancy threatened her life and it was approved by a hospital.

However, women still sought abortions for various reasons: they were unmarried and feared being disowned by their families; they felt they were too poor to successfully raise a child; they were victims of incest or rape; they did not wish to have another child; or they had been informed their child would be born with serious birth defects. Because few hospitals approved abortions, an average of 8,000 legal abortions occurred each year, as compared to 200,000 to 1,000,000 illegal abortions. Still, despite many feminists' support for making abortion legal, abortion was a painful and highly controversial subject for women both inside and outside the women's movement. Many women who supported a woman's right to choose whether to have an abortion had deep and painful feelings about the act itself. Other women—particularly those from Christian backgrounds—passionately opposed a woman's right to choose abortion, believing that every fetus had a right to life.



- **What three aspects of pregnancy and childbirth did feminists address?**
- **Why did the women's movement support legal abortion?**
- **Why was abortion a controversial issue among women?**

Changes in Women's Health The women's movement achieved widespread changes in the area of women's health. First, feminists began a self-help movement that encouraged women to take control of their own health needs. Feminists were hugely successful in raising women's understanding of many health topics, including women's anatomy, birth control, diseases women were prone to (such as breast and cervical cancer), menstruation, menopause, natural childbirth, and violations of women's bodies, such as rape. Activists established women's health centers that provided women with medical services, counseling, health publications, birth control, and other services. Partly due to pressure from women of color to address poor women's lack of affordable healthcare, many women's health centers provided services at low cost. One feminist group, the Boston Women's Health Collective, published the now-famous book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1969. This book provided women with clear, thoughtful information on everything from aging to sexuality.

The women's movement also made great progress in gaining reproductive rights. Feminists successfully pressured lawmakers and judges to repeal (cancel) state abortion laws. Their activism greatly influenced the momentous 1973 Supreme Court case, *Roe v. Wade*. In this case, the court ruled that a Texas statute (law) outlawing abortion violated a woman's constitutional right to privacy when deciding whether to have children. The ruling meant that performing or receiving an abortion was no longer a crime. Abortion was permitted within the first two trimesters, and even in the third trimester if a woman's health was at risk. Feminists also achieved greater access to contraception, particularly the birth control pill that was developed in 1960, for all women. By 1962, over 1.2 million were taking it to prevent pregnancy. Finally, feminists of color focused attention on doctors who recommended sterilization operations instead of birth control for poor women and women of color.



- **Why did feminists begin a self-help movement?**
- **How did health centers improve women's health?**
- **Why was the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* significant?**