

Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.

Timeline of Key Events in the American Women's Rights Movement

by Ann-Marie Imbornoni

- 1848** The first women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York. After 2 days of discussion and debate, 68 women and 32 men sign a Declaration of Sentiments, which outlines grievances and sets the agenda for the women's rights movement. A set of 12 resolutions is adopted calling for equal treatment of women and men under the law and voting rights for women.
- 1850** The first National Women's Rights Convention takes place in Worcester, Mass., attracting more than 1,000 participants. National conventions are held yearly (except for 1857) through 1860.
- 1869** **May** Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton form the National Woman Suffrage Association. The primary goal of the organization is to achieve voting rights for women by means of a Congressional amendment to the Constitution.
- Nov.** Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, and others form the American Woman Suffrage Association. This group focuses exclusively on gaining voting rights for women through amendments to individual state constitutions.
- Dec. 10** The territory of Wyoming passes the first women's suffrage law. The following year, women begin serving on juries in the territory.
- 1890** The National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Women Suffrage Association merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). As the movement's mainstream organization, NAWSA wages state-by-state campaigns to obtain voting rights for women.
- 1893** Colorado is the first state to adopt an amendment granting women the right to vote. Utah and Idaho follow suit in 1896, Washington State in 1910, California in 1911, Oregon, Kansas, and Arizona in 1912, Alaska and Illinois in 1913, Montana and Nevada in 1914, New York in 1917; Michigan, South Dakota, and Oklahoma in 1918.
- 1896** The National Association of Colored Women is formed, bringing together more than 100 black women's clubs. Leaders in the black women's club movement include Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper.
- 1903** The National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) is established to advocate for improved wages and working conditions for women.
- 1913** Alice Paul and Lucy Burns form the Congressional Union to work toward the passage of a federal amendment to give women the vote. The group is later renamed the National Women's Party. Members picket the White House and practice other forms of civil disobedience.
- 1916** Margaret Sanger opens the first U.S. birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, N.Y. Although the clinic is shut down 10 days later and Sanger is arrested, she eventually wins support through the courts and opens another clinic in New York City in 1923.
- 1919** The federal woman suffrage amendment, originally written by Susan B. Anthony and introduced in Congress in 1878, is passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate. It is then sent to the states for ratification.
- 1920** The Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor is formed to collect information about women in the workforce and safeguard good working conditions for women.
- Aug. 26** The 19th Amendment to the Constitution, granting women the right to vote, is signed into law by Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby.
- 1921** Margaret Sanger founds the American Birth Control League, which evolves into the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942.

- 1935** Mary McLeod Bethune organizes the National Council of Negro Women, a coalition of black women's groups that lobbies against job discrimination, racism, and sexism.
- 1936** The federal law prohibiting the dissemination of contraceptive information through the mail is modified and birth control information is no longer classified as obscene. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, birth control advocates are engaged in numerous legal suits.
- 1955** The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian organization in the United States, is founded. Although DOB originated as a social group, it later developed into a political organization to win basic acceptance for lesbians in the United States.
- 1960** The Food and Drug Administration approves birth control pills.
- 1961** President John Kennedy establishes the President's Commission on the Status of Women and appoints Eleanor Roosevelt as chairwoman. The report issued by the Commission in 1963 documents substantial discrimination against women in the workplace and makes specific recommendations for improvement, including fair hiring practices, paid maternity leave, and affordable child care.
- 1963** Betty Friedan publishes her highly influential book *The Feminine Mystique*, which describes the dissatisfaction felt by middle-class American housewives with the narrow role imposed on them by society. The book becomes a best-seller and galvanizes the modern women's rights movement.
- June 10** Congress passes the Equal Pay Act, making it illegal for employers to pay a woman less than what a man would receive for the same job.
- 1964** Title VII of the Civil Rights Act bars discrimination in employment on the basis of race and sex. At the same time it establishes the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to investigate complaints and impose penalties.
- 1965** In *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court strikes down the one remaining state law prohibiting the use of contraceptives by married couples.
- 1966** The National Organization for Women (NOW) is founded by a group of feminists including Betty Friedan. The largest women's rights group in the U.S., NOW seeks to end sexual discrimination, especially in the workplace, by means of legislative lobbying, litigation, and public demonstrations.
- 1967** Executive Order 11375 expands President Lyndon Johnson's affirmative action policy of 1965 to cover discrimination based on gender. As a result, federal agencies and contractors must take active measures to ensure that women as well as minorities enjoy the same educational and employment opportunities as white males.
- 1968** The EEOC rules that sex-segregated help wanted ads in newspapers are illegal. This ruling is upheld in 1973 by the Supreme Court, opening the way for women to apply for higher-paying jobs hitherto open only to men.
- 1969** California becomes the first state to adopt a "no fault" divorce law, which allows couples to divorce by mutual consent. By 1985 every state has adopted a similar law. Laws are also passed regarding the equal division of common property.
- 1970** In *Schultz v. Wheaton Glass Co.*, a U.S. Court of Appeals rules that jobs held by men and women need to be "substantially equal" but not "identical" to fall under the protection of the Equal Pay Act. An employer cannot, for example, change the job titles of women workers in order to pay them less than men.
- 1971** *Ms. Magazine* is first published as a sample insert in *New York* magazine; 300,000 copies are sold out in 8 days. The first regular issue is published in July 1972. The magazine becomes the major forum for feminist voices, and cofounder and editor Gloria Steinem is launched as an icon of the modern feminist movement.

- 1972 Mar. 22** The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification. Originally drafted by Alice Paul in 1923, the amendment reads: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." The amendment died in 1982 when it failed to achieve ratification by a minimum of 38 states.
- Also on Mar. 22** In *Eisenstadt v. Baird* the Supreme Court rules that the right to privacy includes an unmarried person's right to use contraceptives.
- June 23** Title IX of the Education Amendments bans sex discrimination in schools. It states: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." As a result of Title IX, the enrollment of women in athletics programs and professional schools increases dramatically.
- 1973** As a result of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court establishes a woman's right to safe and legal abortion, overriding the anti-abortion laws of many states.
- 1974** The Equal Credit Opportunity Act prohibits discrimination in consumer credit practices on the basis of sex, race, marital status, religion, national origin, age, or receipt of public assistance.
- In *Corning Glass Works v. Brennan*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that employers cannot justify paying women lower wages because that is what they traditionally received under the "going market rate." A wage differential occurring "simply because men would not work at the low rates paid women" is unacceptable.
- 1976** The first marital rape law is enacted in Nebraska, making it illegal for a husband to rape his wife.
- 1978** The Pregnancy Discrimination Act bans employment discrimination against pregnant women. Under the Act, a woman cannot be fired or denied a job or a promotion because she is or may become pregnant, nor can she be forced to take a pregnancy leave if she is willing and able to work.
- 1984** EMILY's List (Early Money Is Like Yeast) is established as a financial network for pro-choice Democratic women running for national political office. The organization makes a significant impact on the increasing numbers of women elected to Congress.
- 1986** *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, the Supreme Court finds that sexual harassment is a form of illegal job discrimination.
- 1992** In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the validity of a woman's right to abortion under *Roe v. Wade*. The case successfully challenged Pennsylvania's 1989 Abortion Control Act, which sought to reinstate restrictions previously ruled unconstitutional.
- 1994** The Violence Against Women Act tightens federal penalties for sex offenders, funds services for victims of rape and domestic violence, and provides for special training of police officers.