

# Women's Studies: Perspectives and Practices

## WHAT IS WOMEN'S STUDIES?

Women's studies is an interdisciplinary academic field devoted to topics concerning women, gender, and feminism. As a body of knowledge, it examines women's status in society and seeks to improve the condition of women's lives, both in the United States and globally. Women's studies puts women (in all our diversity) at the center of inquiry and focuses on our reality as subjects of study, informing knowledge through this lens. This inclusion implies that traditional notions regarding men as "humans" and women as "others" must be challenged and transcended. Such a confusion of maleness with humanity, putting men at the center and relegating women to outsiders in society, is called *androcentrism*. By making women the subjects of study, we assume that our opinions and thoughts about our own experiences are central in understanding human society generally. Adrienne Rich's "Claiming an Education" articulates this demand for women as subjects of study. It also encourages you as a student to take seriously your right to be taken seriously and invites you to understand the relationship between your personal biography and the wider forces in society that affect your life. As authors of this text, we also invite your participation in knowledge creation, hoping it will be personally enriching and vocationally useful.

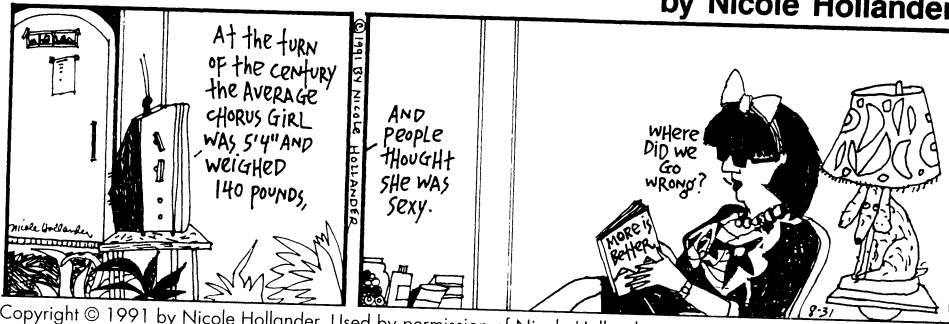
Women's studies involves the study of gender as a central aspect of human existence. Gender concerns what it means to be a woman or a man in society. Gender involves the way society creates, patterns, and rewards our understandings of femininity and masculinity. In other words, *gender* can be defined as the way society organizes understandings of sexual difference. Women's studies explores our gendered existence: how we perform femininity and masculinity and how this interacts with other aspects of our identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality.

## HOW DID WOMEN'S STUDIES COME ABOUT?

Women's studies emerged as concerned women and men noticed the absence, misrepresentation, and trivialization of women in the higher education curriculum, as well as the ways women were systematically excluded from many positions of power

## SYLVIA

by Nicole Hollander



Copyright © 1991 by Nicole Hollander. Used by permission of Nicole Hollander.

and authority as college faculty and administrators. This was especially true for women of color. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, students and faculty began demanding that the knowledge learned and shared in colleges around the country be more inclusive of women's issues, and they asked to see more women in leadership positions on college campuses. It was not unusual, for example, for entire courses in English or American literature to include not one novel written by a woman, much less a woman of color. Literature was full of men's ideas about women—ideas that often continued to stereotype women and justify their subordination. History courses often taught only about men in wars and as leaders, and sociology courses primarily addressed women in the context of marriage and the family. Similarly, entire departments often consisted exclusively of men with perhaps a small minority of (usually White) women in junior or part-time positions. Although there have been important changes on most college campuses as women's issues are slowly integrated into the

## MAPPING WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES **About Women's Studies**

- There are 652 women's and gender studies programs at community colleges, colleges, and universities in the United States, based upon survey responses
- Undergraduate women's studies courses enrolled nearly 89,000 students in 2005–2006, and 85% of women's and gender studies courses fulfilled general education requirements
- Undergraduate majors enrolled nearly 4,300 students, while undergraduate minors enrolled nearly 10,500 students in 2005–2006
- Graduate courses had a total enrollment of nearly 2,700, with 1,076 students registered in doctoral courses in 2005–2006
- 30.4% of women's studies faculty are faculty of color, compared with 19% of faculty nationally, based upon a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2003 report on postsecondary faculty at degree-granting institutions

Source: <http://nwsa.org/projects/database/index.php>.

curri  
these  
1  
gies  
catio  
into  
shifte  
gave  
cours  
cours  
In ac  
Engli  
studi  
focuse  
S  
of tra  
knowl  
societ  
knowl  
examp  
ily inc  
native  
“add v  
knowl  
ate pro  
also to  
unque  
wome  
how th  
W  
1960s a  
ninetee  
porary  
discipl  
ies pro  
ized p  
societa  
focuse  
reprod  
wome  
wome  
social r  
and oth  
wome  
of colo  
disabled  
changes

curriculum and advances have been made in terms of women in leadership positions, these problems still do, unfortunately, exist in higher education today.

It is important to note that making women subjects of study involves two strategies that together resulted in changes in the production of knowledge in higher education. First, it rebalanced the curriculum. Women as subjects of study were integrated into existing curricula through the development of new courses about women. This shifted the focus on men and men's lives in the traditional academic curriculum and gave some attention to women's lives and concerns by developing, for example, courses such as "Women and Art" and "Women in U.S. History" alongside "regular" courses that sometimes claimed to be inclusive but focused on (usually White) men. In addition, not only did traditional academic departments (like Sociology or English) offer these separate courses on women, but the development of women's studies programs and departments offered curricula on a variety of issues that focused specifically on (initially, usually White) women's issues.

Second, the integration of women as subjects of study resulted in a transformation of traditional knowledge. People began questioning the nature of knowledge, how knowledge is produced, and the applications and consequences of knowledge in wider society. This means that claims to "truth" and objective "facts" are challenged by new knowledge integrating the perspectives of marginalized people. It recognizes, for example, that a history of the American West written by migrating Whites is necessarily incomplete and differs from a history written from the perspective of indigenous native people who had their land taken from them. Although the first strategy was an "add women and stir" approach, this second involved a serious challenge to traditional knowledge and its claims to truth. In this way, women's studies aimed not only to create programs of study where students might focus on women's issues and concerns, but also to integrate a perspective for looking at things that would challenge previously unquestioned knowledge. This perspective questions how such knowledge reflects women's lives and concerns, how it maintains patterns of male privilege and power, and how the consequences of such knowledge affect women and other marginalized people.

Women's studies as a discipline has its origins in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s (known as the "second wave" to distinguish it from "first wave" mid-nineteenth-century women's rights and suffrage activity and "third wave" contemporary feminism) and is often named as its academic wing. As an academic discipline, women's studies was influenced by the American studies, and ethnic studies programs of the late 1960s. The demand to include women and other marginalized people as subjects of study in higher education was facilitated by a broad societal movement in which organizations and individuals (both women and men) focused on such issues as work and employment, family and parenting, sexuality, reproductive rights, and violence against women. The objective was to improve women's status in society and therefore the conditions of women's lives. The U.S. women's movement emerged at a moment of widespread social turmoil as various social movements questioned traditional social and sexual values, racism, poverty and other inequities, and U.S. militarism. These social movements, including the women's movement and the civil rights movement, struggled for the rights of people of color, women, the poor, gays and lesbians, the aged and the young, and the disabled, and fought to transform society through laws and policies as well as changes in attitudes and consciousness. The focus on women's issues from a global

## HISTORICAL MOMENT **The First Women's Studies Department**



Following the activism of the 1960s, feminists in the academy worked to begin establishing a place for the study of women. In 1970 women faculty at San Diego State University (SDSU) taught five upper-division women's studies classes on a voluntary overload basis. In the fall of that year, the SDSU senate approved a women's studies department, the first in the United States, and a curriculum of 11 courses. The school hired one full-time instructor for the program. Other instructors included students and faculty from several existing departments. Quickly, many other colleges and universities around the nation followed suit, establishing women's studies courses, programs, and departments. In 1977 academic and activist feminists formed the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) to further the development of the discipline. NWSA held its first convention in 1979. Presently, more than 600 women's studies programs, departments, research centers, and libraries exist in the United States.

perspective has encouraged women's studies scholars to understand the similarities and differences among women worldwide.

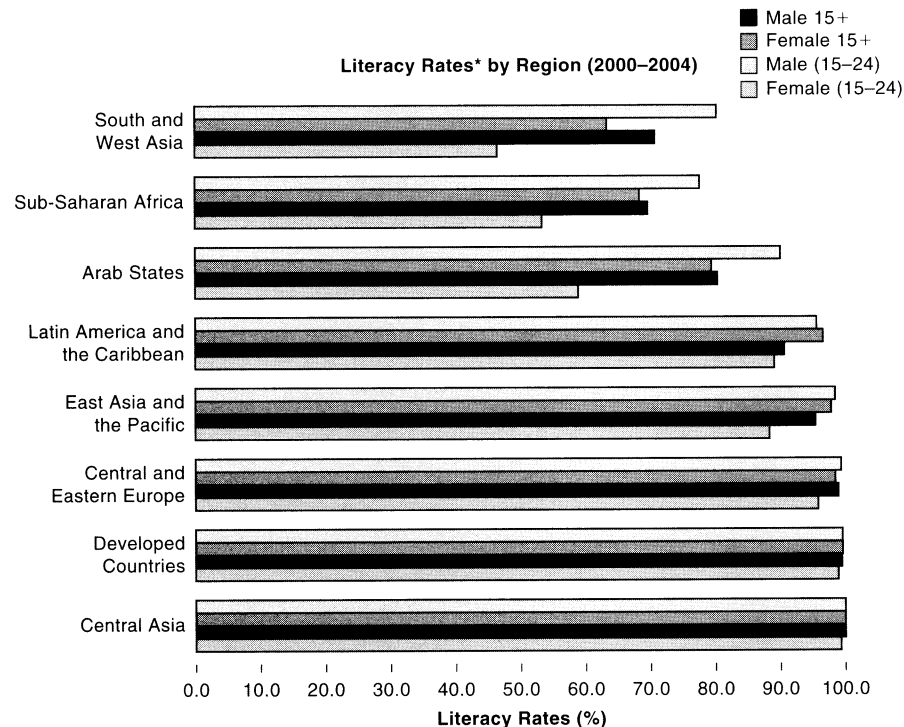
Two aspects of the women's movement—a commitment to personal change and to societal transformation—have helped establish women's studies as a discipline. In terms of the personal, the women's movement involved women asking questions about the cultural meanings of being a woman in U.S. society. Intellectual perspectives that became central to women's studies as a discipline were created from the everyday experiences of women both inside and outside the movement.

## Women and Education

Education is a basic right. It is essential for development, as education can help people to find solutions to their problems and can provide new opportunities. It opens chances to participate in labor markets or to look for more decent employment opportunities. Still, almost 800 million adults have not had the opportunity to learn how to read and write, about two-thirds of whom are women. In addition, 60 percent of school drop-outs are girls, as they often have to leave school at early ages to help in households or to work. Moreover, there are often cultural restrictions that prevent girls from finishing even basic education, severely limiting their chances to determine their own future.

The lowest literacy rates for women can be found in South and West Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Arab States. Even though these have increased in recent times, their comparatively low levels reflect the disadvantages faced by women in these regions.

Unfortunately, basic education does not always translate into better employment opportunities. This is why it is important for women to continue to gain knowledge and skills beyond those acquired during youth. An underlying reason for the discrepancy in decent work opportunities between adult men and women could well be the lack of lifelong learning opportunities for many women.



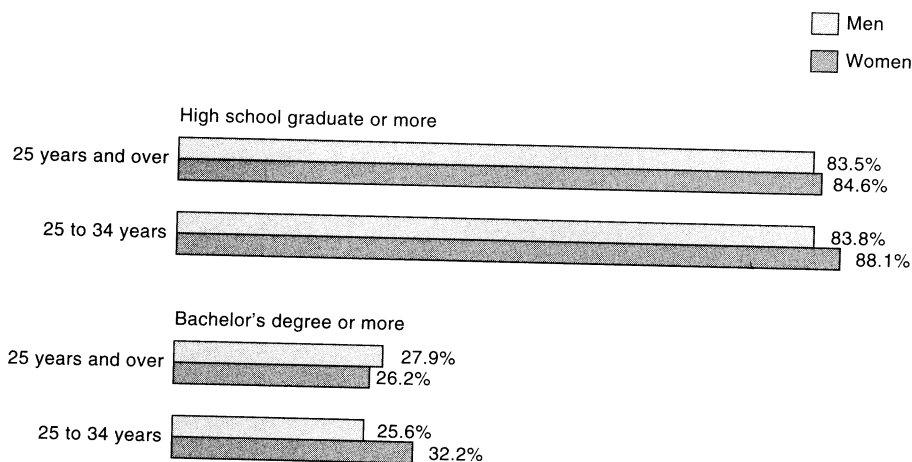
\*Traditionally, UNESCO has defined literacy as "a person's ability to read and write, with understanding, a simple statement about one's everyday life." The grouping of countries into regions is taken as provided by UNESCO and differs slightly from the groupings used in this publication.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2006, [http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=5020\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=5020_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC).

Through consciousness-raising groups and other situations where women came together to talk about their lives, women realized that they were not alone in their experiences. Problems they thought to be personal (like working outside the home all day and then coming home to work another full day doing the domestic tasks that are involved with being a wife and mother) were actually part of a much bigger picture of masculine privilege and female subordination. Women began to make connections and coined the phrase *the personal is political* to explain how things taken as personal or idiosyncratic have broader social, political, and economic causes and consequences. In other words, situations that we are encouraged to view as personal are actually part of broader cultural patterns and arrangements. Note that the idea that the personal is political has relevance for men's lives as they understand the connections between patterns of gender in societal institutions and personal experiences of gender privilege and entitlement. In "The Movement That Has No Name," Deborah Siegel writes of a contemporary disconnect between many young women's understandings of their personal lives and awareness of wider social structures in which those personal lives are embedded. She points to the ways individualism and consumerism have "trumped collective action" and calls for a reexamination of this connection. The title of this reading reflects on feminist writer Betty Friedan's famous phrase about women's inequality as "the problem that has no name."

A key term for women's studies writers and activists is *patriarchy*, defined as a system where men dominate because power and authority are in the hands of adult men. It is important to remember that many men are supporters of women's rights and that many of the goals of the women's movement benefit men as well, although

## Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and over by Sex and Age: 2006



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, [www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.htm](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.htm).

being a supporter of women's rights does not necessarily translate into men understanding how everyday privileges associated with masculinity maintain entitlements in a patriarchal society. It is one thing to feel indignant about inequality or compassion for marginalized people, and another to recognize that your privilege is connected to the oppression of others. Connecting with the personal as political encourages men to potentially function as allies on a deeper, more authentic level.

In terms of societal change, the U.S. women's movement, for example, continues to be successful in bringing about various legal and political changes that increase women's status in society and in higher education. These legal changes of the second wave include the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963 that sought equal pay for individuals performing the same work, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that forbade workplace discrimination, and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce antidiscrimination laws in the early 1970s. Affirmative action as a legal mechanism to combat discrimination was first utilized in 1961 and was extended to women in 1967, although it is increasingly under attack. Similarly, though legislation such as *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion and provided reproductive choices for women, such gains are under attack as well. In terms of legal changes directly aimed at higher education, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 supported equal education and forbade gender discrimination in schools. This includes women's access to sports in the context of schooling and most recently covers the right of school officials to sue in cases of retaliation as a result of Title IX school officials' complaints.

Legal changes in the United States have been accompanied by relatively significant increases in women running for political office and taking positions of authority in government, business, education, science, and the arts. Women have become visible and active in all societal institutions. These societal changes have strengthened the demand for alternative educational models: Not only is it the right thing to include women in college life, but it is illegal to prevent their participation. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards encourage you to think about these second wave gains in the reading "A Day Without Feminism."

## WHAT WERE THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN THE UNITED STATES?

Although women's studies emerged out of the second wave of mid- to late-twentieth-century social activism, that activism itself was a part of an ongoing commitment for women's liberation that had its roots in late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century struggles for gender equity. Women had few legal, social, and economic rights in nineteenth-century U.S. society. They had no direct relationship to the law outside of their relationships as daughters or wives; in particular, married women lost property rights upon marriage. Women were also mostly barred from higher education until women's colleges started opening in the mid-nineteenth century.

Most early women's rights activists (then it was referred to as "woman's" rights) in the United States had their first experience with social activism in the abolition movement, the struggle to free slaves. These activists included such figures as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Sarah M. and Angelina Grimké, Henry Blackwell, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman.

ACTIVIST PROFILE **Susan B. Anthony**

Born in Massachusetts in 1820, Susan B. Anthony grew up in a Quaker family in which she learned justice and activism. In the 1840s she became involved with the temperance movement, campaigning for stricter liquor laws to address the ill effects of drunkenness on families. In 1853 she was denied the right to speak at the New York Sons of Temperance meeting because she was a woman. That year she joined with Elizabeth Cady Stanton in founding the Women's State Temperance Society. The society gathered 28,000 signatures urging the state legislature to pass a law limiting the sale of liquor, but, because most of the signatures were from women and children, the legislature rejected the petition. As a result of this experience, Anthony realized that women needed the vote in order to have political influence.

From that point on, Anthony campaigned vigorously for women's suffrage. In 1866 she and Stanton founded the American Equal Rights Association and in 1868 began to publish *The Revolution*, with the masthead "Men, their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less." In 1872 Anthony was arrested in Rochester, New York, for voting. At her trial, the judge ordered the jury to find her guilty, and then he fined her \$100 plus court fees. Although she refused to pay, he did not imprison her, thereby denying her the opportunity to appeal and force the issue before the Supreme Court.

In 1877 she gathered 10,000 signatures from 26 states, but Congress ignored them. She appeared before every Congress from 1869 to 1906 to ask for passage of a suffrage amendment. Even in her senior years, Anthony remained active in the cause of suffrage, presiding over the National American Women Suffrage Association from 1892 to 1900. Anthony died in 1906, 14 years before American women won the vote with the Nineteenth Amendment, also known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment.



## LEARNING ACTIVITY **The National Women's Hall of Fame**

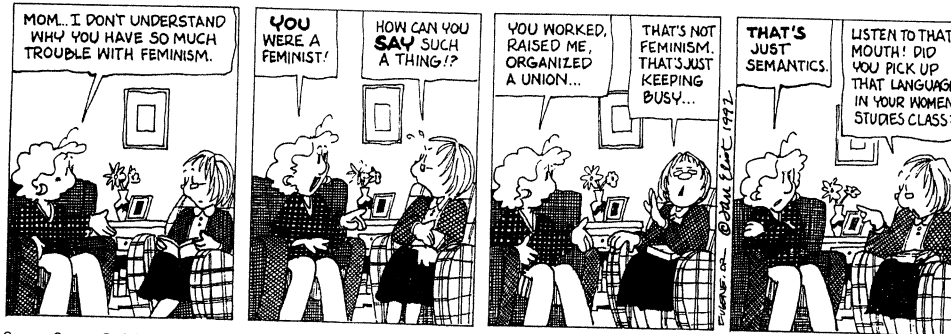
How many significant American women can you name? Most students cannot name 20 women from American history. To learn more about some of the women who have made important contributions in the United States, visit the National Women's Hall of Fame at [www.greatwomen.org](http://www.greatwomen.org). What is the mission of the Hall of Fame? Who are this year's inductees and why were they inducted? What do you think is the significance of having a National Women's Hall of Fame?

Many abolitionists became aware of inequities elsewhere in society. Some realized that to improve women's status a separate social movement was required. In this way, for many abolitionists, their experiences with abolition inspired their desire to improve the conditions of all women's lives.

English philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is seen as the first important expression of the demand for women's equality, although the beginning of the women's movement in the United States is usually dated to the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. This convention was conceived as a response to the experience of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who, as delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, were refused seating, made to sit behind a curtain, and not allowed to voice their opinions because they were women. Their experience fueled the need for an independent women's movement in the United States and facilitated the convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. An important document, the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," came out of this convention. Authored primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it used the language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and included a variety of demands to improve women's status in the family and in society. Woman's suffrage, the right of women to vote, was included. Other conventions occurred across the country, and national organizations were organized to promote women's rights generally and suffrage in particular. These organizations included the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) formed in 1869 and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890. NAWSA was formed from the merging of NWSA and the American Woman Suffrage Association and continues today as the League of Women Voters. These organizations fought for women's political personhood—a struggle that continues today. The "Anthony Amendment," the women's suffrage amendment, was introduced into Congress in 1878; it took another 42 years for this amendment to be ratified as the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote.

### **WHAT IS THE STATUS OF WOMEN'S STUDIES ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES TODAY?**

Over the last several decades, women's studies has steadily become institutionalized, or established as a regular custom, on many college campuses. From a scattering of courses (often taught for free by committed faculty when colleges did not want to



Stone Soup © 1992 Jan Eliot. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All Rights Reserved.

spend money on these courses) have come whole programs and departments with minors and majors of study and graduate degrees at both the master's and doctoral levels. Although most campuses have adopted women's studies, some have gone with gender studies and others with feminist studies. These different names reflect different perspectives concerning knowledge about and for women. How is women's studies institutionalized on your campus?

Professors of women's studies might teach only women's studies, or they might do most of their work in another department like anthropology or history. This illustrates the multidisciplinary nature of women's studies: It can be taught from the point of view of many different disciplines. For the most part, however, women's studies is *interdisciplinary*; that is, it combines knowledge and methodologies from across many academic disciplines. Knowledge integration has occurred at a more rapid rate in the humanities and social sciences than in the biological and physical sciences. This is primarily because these sciences are considered "objective" (free of values), with topics of study immune from consideration of issues of gender, race, and class. However, as scholars have pointed out, science is a cultural product and its methodologies are grounded in historical practices and cultural ideas. There are now courses on many campuses examining the history and current practices of science that integrate knowledge about science as a human (gendered and racialized) product.

A list of the goals or objectives of women's studies might look like this:

- To understand the social construction of gender and the intersection of gender with other systems of inequality in women's lives
- To learn about the status of women in society and ways to improve that status through individual and collective action for social change
- To experience how institutions in society affect individual lives and to be able to think critically about the role of patterns of privilege and discrimination in our own lives
- To improve writing and speaking skills, gain new insights, and empower self and others

## WHAT DOES WOMEN'S STUDIES HAVE TO DO WITH FEMINISM?

Women's studies is generally associated with feminism as a paradigm for understanding self and society. Although there are many definitions of feminism and some disagreement concerning a specific definition, there is agreement on two core principles underlying any concept of feminism. First, feminism concerns equality and justice for all women, and it seeks to eliminate systems of inequality and injustice in all aspects of women's lives. Because feminism is politics of equality, it anticipates a future that guarantees human dignity and equality for all people, women and men. Second, feminism is inclusive and affirming of women; it celebrates women's achievements and struggles and works to provide a positive and affirming stance toward women and womanhood. Feminism is a personal perspective as well as a political theory and social movement. Put this way, feminism is hardly a radical notion. Most people, if asked, will say they support equal rights; fewer will identify themselves as feminists. (See *What Are the Myths Associated with Feminism?* later in the chapter.)

Various kinds of feminisms (while embracing the two core concepts listed above) differ in terms of their specific explanations for understanding the social organization of gender and their ideas for social change. An important distinction is that between liberal feminism and radical feminism. Liberal feminists believe in the viability of the present system (meaning, the system is okay), and work within this context for change in such public areas as education and employment. Liberal feminists attempt to remove obstacles to women's full participation in public life. Strategies include education, federal and state policies, and legal statutes.

Although liberal feminists want a piece of the pie, radical feminists (sometimes known as radical cultural feminists or difference feminists) want a whole new pie. Radical feminists recognize the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as inferior based upon their gender. It is not enough to remove barriers to equality; rather, deeper, more transformational changes need to be made in societal institutions (like the government or media) as well as in people's heads. Patriarchy, radical feminists believe, shapes how women and men think about the world, their place in it, and their relationships with one another. Radical feminists assert that reformist solutions like those liberal feminism would enact are problematic because they work to maintain rather than undermine the system. Not surprisingly, although the focus of liberal feminism is on the public sphere, the focus of this radical approach is the private sphere of everyday individual consciousness and change. Radical feminist offshoots include lesbian feminism, which focuses on how compulsory heterosexuality (the cultural norm that assumes and requires heterosexuality) and heterosexual privilege (the rights and privileges of heterosexuality, such as legal marriage and being intimate in public) function to maintain power in society. Radical feminist thought also includes ecofeminism, a perspective that focuses on the association of women with nature and the environment and the simultaneous relationships among patriarchy, global economic expansion, and environmental degradation.

Other perspectives within the general rubric of feminism include Marxist feminism, a perspective that uses economic explanations from traditional Marxist theory to

## Thank a Feminist

---

Thank a feminist if you agree that . . .

- Women should have the right to vote.
- Women should have access to contraceptives.
- Women should have the right to work outside the home.
- Women should receive equal pay for equal work.
- Women should have the right to refuse sex, even with their husbands.
- Women should be able to receive a higher education.
- Women should have access to safe, legal abortion.
- Women should be able to participate in sports.
- Women should be able to hold political office.
- Women should be able to choose any career that interests them.
- Women should be free from sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Women should be able to enter into legal and financial transactions.
- Women should be able to study issues about women's lives and experiences.

One hundred years ago, none of these statements was possible for women in the United States. Only through the hard work and dedication of women in each decade of the twentieth century did these rights become available to women.

Imagine a world without feminism. If you are a woman, you would not be in college. You would not be able to vote. You could not play sports. Contraception is illegal. So is abortion. You're expected to marry and raise a family. If you must work, the only jobs available to you are in cleaning, clerical services, or teaching. And you have no legal protection on the job if your boss pressures you for sex or makes lewd comments. Your husband can force you to have sex, and, if you were sexually abused as a child, most likely no one will believe you if you tell. If you are sexually attracted to women, you are considered mentally ill and may be subjected to an array of treatments for your illness.

Today, young women who claim, "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." benefit from the many gains made by feminists through the twentieth century. So, the next time you go to class or vote or play basketball, thank a feminist!

---

understand women's oppression. For Marxist feminists, the socioeconomic inequities of the class system are the major issues. This can be distinguished from socialist feminism, a perspective that integrates both Marxist and radical feminism. Socialist feminists use the insights of class analysis alongside radical feminist explanations of gender oppression. Socialist feminists seek to understand the workings of capitalist patriarchal institutions and societies. All these feminist approaches have been critiqued by the perspectives of women of color, who require that these approaches be inclusive of *all* women's lives. Multiracial feminism is among the most essential of all influences in asserting that gender is constructed by a range of interlocking inequalities that work simultaneously to shape women's experience. It brings together understandings drawn from the lived experiences of diverse women and influences all feminist writing today. The reading by bell hooks fits into this genre. Finally, some feminists have utilized a postmodern perspective to emphasize that truth is a relative concept and that identity

## IDEAS FOR ACTIVISM **Two-Minute Activist**

---

Many important legislative issues related to women come before elected officials regularly. You can make your voice to support women heard by contacting your senators and representatives. To become a two-minute activist ("one minute to read, one minute to act"), visit the website of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) at [www.aauw.org](http://www.aauw.org). Follow the "Issue Advocacy" link to find the Two-Minute Activist link. There, you'll find links to information about the latest issues before Congress and to prewritten AAUW messages that you can personalize and send to your representatives.

---

is more multifaceted than we often imagine. This approach pays attention to how language constructs reality. It emphasizes that humans actively construct or shape our lives in the context of various social systems, and often in the face of serious constraints.

Many writers now refer to a current "third wave" of feminist activity that is influenced by postmodernism and multiracial feminism and which problematizes the universality and potential inclusivity of the term *woman*. Third wave feminism has its origins in the 1990s and reflects the thinking, writing, and activism of women and men who tended to come of age taking for granted the gains of second wave feminism, as well as the resistance or backlash to it. Third wave perspectives are shaped by the material conditions created by globalization and technoculture, and tend to focus on issues of sexuality and identity. Contemporary third wave activity has been important in fueling feminist activism, especially through musical and art forms, various "rages" or "zines" (consciousness-raising magazines produced locally and usually shared electronically), and the use of electronic information and entertainment and virtual technologies generally. The reading by Rebecca Walker (the writer Alice Walker's daughter) titled "We Are Using This Power to Resist" discusses third wave feminism and the founding of the Third Wave Foundation, and Deborah Siegel's article on "The Movement That Has No Name" is written from this perspective. Despite the advantages of using a "wave" metaphor to characterize the developments in feminism, the metaphor distracts attention from the continuity of feminist activity and runs the risk of setting up distinctions and potential intergenerational divisiveness between a more stodgy, second wave generation, devoid of sexuality and unwilling to share power, and a younger, self-absorbed generation obsessed with popular culture and uncritically sexualized. Neither of these extremes reflects reality; it is enough to say that just as feminism encompasses diversity, so feminists do not all agree on what equality looks like or how to get there. As a social movement, feminism has always thrived on differences of ideology and practice. In "A Day Without Feminism," third wavers Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards actively claim feminism as relevant to their lives and underscore the gains of second wave feminist activism.

Finally, feminists recognize both the similarities and differences in women's status worldwide. Women's status in developing and nonindustrialized countries is often very low, especially in societies where strict religious doctrines govern gendered behaviors. Although women in various countries around the world often tend

to be in subordinate positions, the form this subordination takes varies. As a result, certain issues, like the ability of women to maintain subsistence agriculture and feed their families—matters of personal survival—take priority over the various claims to autonomy that characterize women's issues in the West. What are considered feminist issues in the United States are not necessarily the most important concerns of women in other parts of the world. It is important to understand this in order to avoid overgeneralizing about feminism's usefulness globally, even though the notion of global feminism or transnational feminism is real and useful for political alliances across national borders. It is also important to recognize that any claims for Western feminism are necessarily interpreted internationally in the context of U.S. militarism, a history of colonialism, and international "development," as well as in regard to the power of U.S.-based corporations, consumerism, and popular culture. Nonetheless, global feminism underscores the similarities women share across the world and seeks strategies that take into account the interdependence of women globally. And, as communication technologies have advanced, the difficulties of organizing women in all parts of the world have lessened. International feminist groups have worked against militarism, global capitalism, and racism, and they have worked for issues identified by local women. Such actions were reflected in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995 and the post-Beijing gatherings of the last decade. More than 30,000 women attended the Beijing conference, and 181 governments signed the "Platform for Action." This platform was a call for concrete action to include the human rights of women and girls as part of universal human rights, thus eradicating poverty of women, removing the obstacles to women's full participation in public life and decision making, eliminating all forms of violence against women, ensuring women's access to educational and health services, and promoting actions for women's economic autonomy. The reading by Estelle B. Freedman titled "The Global Stage and the Politics of Location" focuses on the historical development of the global women's movement.

Currently, much transnational feminist emphasis is on the passage of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979, and already ratified by 185 countries (over 90 percent of UN countries). CEDAW prohibits all forms of discrimination against women by legally binding the countries that ratify it to incorporate equality of men and women into their legal systems. Measures include abolishing discriminatory laws and adopting new ones, establishing tribunals to ensure the protection of women, and eliminating acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations, or enterprises. The United States is the only industrial society that has not yet (as of this writing) ratified the convention because of a fear among those in authority that it would give the UN power over U.S. legal statutes and institutions.

### WHAT ARE THE MYTHS ASSOCIATED WITH FEMINISM?

Recent national polls show a marked increase in women identifying as feminists: 56 percent did so in 2003, up from 51 percent in 1995. It is important to mention that when respondents in the 2003 poll were given the dictionary definition of *feminist*

as “someone who supports the political, economic, and social equality of women,” the percentage of women identifying as feminists rose to 77 percent. There was also an increase in support for the women’s movement, with 83 percent in 2003 having a favorable opinion, compared with 57 percent in a 1998 poll. Note again that respondents in the 2003 poll were asked their opinion of the movement to strengthen women’s rights, not the “women’s rights movement.” The misleading and negative connotations associated with the word “feminism” play a central role in backlash, or organized resistance, and encompass what some call the “battered-word syndrome.” The organized backlash to feminism also involves, for example, the ways certain groups who believe they would lose from a redistribution of power have worked hard to discredit and destroy the feminist movement and brand feminists in negative ways. This perspective is known as anti-feminism. Although such anti-feminist activity includes conservative groups and politicians, it also involves women who claim to be feminists yet are resistant to its core principles. These women, whose careers in part have been fueled by the gains brought about by the feminist movement, include such successful female academics as Christina Hoff Summers, Camille Paglia, Daphne Patai, Katie Roiphe, and Rene Denfield, and syndicated journalists like Mona Charen. The reading by Deborah L. Rhode, an excerpt from *Speaking of*

## LEARNING ACTIVITY **The Dinner Party**

---

In *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards tell the story of a dinner party they had, reminiscent of the consciousness-raising meetings of the 1970s during which women shared the stories and frustrations of their lives, most of which were directly related to sexism. The point of consciousness raising was to radicalize women, to help them develop the consciousness and motivation needed to make personal and political change in the world. One night in 1999, Jennifer and Amy brought together six of their friends around a dinner table to talk about current issues for women and directions needed for the contemporary women’s movement. They found that the conversation wound its way around personal experiences and stories and their political implications and strategies. Their dinner party offered the beginnings of a revolution. They write, “Every time women get together around a table and speak honestly, they are embarking on an education that they aren’t getting elsewhere in our patriarchal society. And that’s the best reason for a dinner party a feminist could hope for.”

Have a dinner party! Invite five or six of your friends over for dinner to discuss issues related to women. What are the experiences of the people around the table in terms of sexuality, work, family, body image, media, religion? What are the political implications of these experiences? What can be done to make the world better around these issues?

After your dinner party, write about what happened. What issues came up? What did various guests have to say about the issues? What strategies for change did the group identify? What plans for action did the group make? What did you learn from the experience?

---

*Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality*, focuses on the backlash that denies the existence of gender inequality despite the concrete realities of women's lives.

One result of this backlash has been the coining of the term *postfeminism* by those who recognize feminism as an important perspective but believe its time has passed, and it is now obsolete. "We're already liberated" is the stance they take. Like other broad generalizations, there is some truth to this: Things have improved for some women in some areas. Although generally it is accurate to say that women's status in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century is markedly improved, we still have a long way to go to reach equality. In terms of the issues of poverty, violence, pornography, and HIV/AIDS (to name just a few), things are worse for many women than they ever have been. There are still many areas in which women's status might be enhanced, and, for the majority of the world's women, life is very difficult indeed.

The idea that women have achieved equality is reinforced by the capitalist society in which we live. Surrounded by consumer products, we are encouraged to confuse liberation with the freedom to purchase products or to choose among a relatively narrow range of choices. Often personal style is mistaken for personal freedom as the body becomes a focus for fashion, hair, piercing, exercise, tattoos, and so forth. We are often encouraged to confuse such freedoms of expression with freedom in the sense of equality and social justice. Of course, popular culture and media play a large part in this. We are encouraged to enjoy the freedoms that, in part, feminism has brought, often without recognition of this struggle or allegiance to maintaining such freedoms. Feminist writers such as Ariel Levy (her article, "Female Chauvinist Pigs," from the book by the same name, is included in Chapter 9) explain that cultural changes exacerbated by virtual technologies have encouraged young women to participate in their own objectification (being made into objects for male pleasure) in such practices as "Girls Gone Wild." Levy emphasizes that these young women (who often consider themselves feminists) confuse their freedom to objectify themselves with authentic freedom.

Many people, groups, and institutions have attempted to discredit feminism (and therefore women's studies) in other ways. Feminism has been subject to the following associations: (1) feminists are angry, whiny women who have an axe to grind, no sense of humor, and who exaggerate discrimination against women; (2) feminists hate men or want to be like men and selfishly want to create new systems of power *over* men; (3) all feminists are said to be lesbians, women who choose romantic relationships with other women; (4) feminists are said to reject motherhood, consider children a burden, and have rejected all things feminine; and (5) feminism is dismissed as a White, middle-class movement that draws energy away from attempts to correct social and economic problems and discourages coalition building.

While several of these myths contain grains of truth, as a whole they can easily be shattered. First, although there are some feminists who respond, some would say rightly, to societal injustices with anger, most feminists work patiently with little resentment. Men as a social group demonstrate much more anger than women, feminists included. Even though male rage comes out in numerous acts of violence, wars, school shootings, and so on, men's anger is seen merely as a human response to circumstance. Note the androcentrism at work here. Because a few angry feminists get much more publicity than the majority of those working productively to change the status quo, a better question might be why women are

Ye  
not  
and  
orga  
ange  
to w  
work  
pass  
imag  
as ho  
S  
affir  
men  
than  
privi  
privi  
cepts  
more  
or co  
ences  
most  
men  
(even  
pared  
how  
wome  
encou  
Fe  
vatio



## Yes, I Am



Ashley Judd



Margaret Cho



Camryn Manheim



Whoopi Goldberg

not more angry, given the levels of injustice against women both in the United States and worldwide. Feminists do not exaggerate this injustice; injustice is a central organizing principle of contemporary society. We should also ask why women's anger provokes such a negative response. The cause of the relatively intense reaction to women's anger is grounded in a societal mandate against female anger that works to keep women from resisting their subordination—that is, it keeps them passive. Anger is seen as destructive and inappropriate, going against what we imagine to be feminine. As a result, organized expressions of anger are interpreted as hostile.

Second, it is often said that feminists hate men. It is accurate to say that, in their affirmation of women and their desire to remove systems of inequality, feminists ask men to understand how gender privilege works in men's lives. Many men are more than willing to do this because the same social constructions of masculinity that privilege men also limit them. Because the demand for the examination of gender privilege is not synonymous with hating men, we might ask why these different concepts are so easily conflated. A more interesting question is why men are not accused more often of hating women. Certainly the world is full of *misogyny*, the hatred of, or contempt for, women, and every day we see examples of the ways misogyny influences, and sometimes destroys, the lives of women. The reality, of course, is that most feminists are in relationships with men, and some feminists *are* men. Some men eagerly call themselves pro-feminist because feminism is a perspective on life (even though some feminists would argue that just as people of color are better prepared to understand racial inequality, so women are in a better place to understand how gender works). Nonetheless, the man-hating myth works to prevent many women who want to be in relationships with men from claiming feminism. They are encouraged to avoid a political stance that suggests antagonism toward men.

Feminists often respond to the declaration that they hate men with the observation that the statement illustrates a hypersensitivity about the possibility of



"I'm really proud of my daughter. She's  
a thorn in the side of the patriarchy."

Copyright © The New Yorker Collection 1998 Edward Koren from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

exclusion and loss of power on the part of men. Only in a patriarchal society would the inclusion of women be interpreted as a potential threat or loss of men's power. It is a reflection of the fact that we live in a competitive patriarchal society that it is assumed that the feminist agenda is one that seeks to have power over men. Only in an androcentric society where men and their reality is center stage would it be assumed that an inclusion of one group must mean the exclusion of another. In other words, male domination encourages the idea that affirming women means hating men and interprets women's request for power sharing as a form of taking over. This projection of patriarchal mentality equates someone's gain with another's loss.

In response to the assertion that feminists want to be men, it is true to say that feminists might like to share some of the power granted to men in society. However, feminism is not about encouraging women to be like men; it's about valuing women for being women. People opposed to feminism often confuse *sameness* and *equality* and say that women will never be equal to men because they are different (less physically strong, more emotional, etc.) or they say that equality is dangerous because women will start being like men. Feminism of course affirms and works to maintain difference; it merely asks that these differences are valued equally.

Third, feminists are accused of being lesbians in an effort to discredit feminism and prevent women both from joining the movement and from taking women's studies classes. The term for this is *lesbian baiting*. Feminism affirms women's choices to be and love whomever they choose. Although some lesbians are feminists, many lesbians are not feminists, and many feminists are heterosexual. Feminists do not interpret an association with lesbianism as an insult. Nonetheless,

*homophobia*, the societal fear or hatred of lesbians and gay men, functions to maintain this as an insult. There is considerable fear associated with being called a lesbian, and this declaration that all feminists are lesbians serves to keep women in line, apart from one another, and suspicious of feminism and women's studies. Note that this myth is related to the above discussion on men-hating because it is assumed that lesbians hate men too. Again, although lesbians love women, this does not necessitate a dislike of men.

Fourth, feminism has never rejected motherhood but instead has attempted to improve the conditions under which women mother. Contemporary legislation to improve working mothers' lives and provide safe and affordable health care, child-care, and education for children (to name just a few examples) has come about because of the work of feminists. In terms of rejecting femininity, feminists have rejected some of the constraints associated with femininity such as corsets and hazardous beauty products and practices. Mostly they strive to reclaim femininity as a valuable construct that should be respected.

Fifth, feminism has been critiqued as a White, middle-class perspective that has no relevance to the lives of women of color. The corollary of this is that women's studies is only about the lives of White, bourgeois women. This critique is important because throughout the history of the women's movement there have been examples of both blatant and subtle racism, and White women have been the ones to hold most of the positions of power and authority. Similarly, working-class women have been underrepresented. This is also reflected in the discipline of women's studies as faculty and students have often been disproportionately White and economically privileged. Much work has been done to transform the women's movement into an inclusive social movement that has relevance for all people's lives. Women's studies departments and programs today are often among the most diverse units on college campuses, although most still have work to do. It is absolutely crucial that the study of women as subjects both recognizes and celebrates diversity and works to transform all systems of oppression in society. In "Feminist Politics," bell hooks claims back feminism as the movement to do just that. She emphasizes that any call to sisterhood must involve a commitment on the part of White women to examine White privilege and understand the interconnections among gender, race, and class domination. Likewise, Rebecca Walker in "We Are Using This Power to Resist" makes a similar plea for young women. She uses the term *queer* in this essay as a way to affirm and celebrate the diversity of sexual identities. Her hope is for solidarity among all groups.

Although the women's movement has had a profound impact on the lives of women in the United States and great strides have been made toward equality, real problems still remain. Women continue to face discrimination and harassment in the workplace, domestic violence, rape and abuse, inequities in education, poverty, racism, and homophobia. Anna Quindlen responds to this in the short reading "Still Needing the F Word." Women's studies provides a forum for naming the problems women face, analyzing the root causes of these problems, envisioning a just and equitable world, and developing strategies for change. As you read the following articles, keep these questions in mind: What does the author identify as problems women face? What does the author suggest is the root of these problems? What strategies does the author suggest for bringing about change to improve the lives of women?

## U.S. Suffrage Movement Timeline



- 1792 British author Mary Wollstonecraft argues for the equality of the sexes in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
- 1840 The World's Anti-Slavery Convention is held in London, England. When the women delegates from the United States are not allowed to participate, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton determine to have a women's rights convention when they return home.
- 1845 Margaret Fuller publishes *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which has a profound influence on the development of American feminist theory.
- 1848
- July 19 The first woman's rights convention is called by Mott and Stanton. It is held on July 20 at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, NY.
- August 2 A reconvened session of the woman's rights convention is held at the Unitarian Church in Rochester, NY. Amelia Bush is chosen chair and becomes the first woman to preside over a meeting attended by both men and women. New York State Legislature passes a law which gives women the right to retain possession of property they owned prior to their marriage.
- 1851 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony meet and begin their 50-year collaboration to win for women their economic, educational, social, and civil rights.
- Sojourner Truth delivers her "And Ain't I a Woman" speech at the Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, OH.

- 1855 Elizabeth Cady Stanton makes an unprecedented appearance before the New York State Legislature to speak in favor of expanding the Married Woman's Property Law.
- 1863 Stanton and Anthony organize the Women's Loyal National League and gather 300,000 signatures on a petition demanding that the Senate abolish slavery by constitutional amendment.
- 1866 The American Equal Rights Association is founded with the purpose to secure for all Americans their civil rights irrespective of race, color, or sex. Lucretia Mott is elected president. To test women's constitutional right to hold public office, Stanton runs for Congress receiving 24 of 12,000 votes cast.
- 1867 Stanton, Anthony, and Lucy Stone address a subcommittee of the New York State Constitutional Convention requesting that the revised constitution include women's suffrage. Their efforts fail.
- Kansas holds a state referendum on whether to enfranchise Blacks and/or women. Stone, Anthony, and Stanton traverse the state speaking in favor of women's suffrage. Both Black and women's suffrage is voted down.
- 1868 Stanton and Anthony launch their women's rights newspaper, *The Revolution*, in New York City.
- Anthony organizes the Working Women's Association, which encourages women to form unions to win higher wages and shorter hours.
- The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is adopted. The amendment grants suffrage to former male African American slaves, but not to women. Anthony and Stanton bitterly oppose the amendment, which for the first time explicitly restricts voting rights to "males." Many of their former allies in the abolitionist movement, including Lucy Stone, support the amendment.
- 1869 National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) is founded with Elizabeth Cady Stanton as president.
- American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) is founded with Henry Ward Beecher as president.
- Wyoming Territory grants suffrage to women.
- 1870 Utah Territory grants suffrage to women.
- First issue of the *Woman's Journal* is published with Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, as editors.
- 1871 Victoria Woodhull addresses the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives arguing that women have the right to vote under the Fourteenth Amendment. The Committee issues a negative report.

(continued)

- 1872 In Rochester, NY, Susan B. Anthony registers and votes contending that the Fourteenth Amendment gives her that right. Several days later she is arrested.
- 1873 At Anthony's trial the judge does not allow her to testify on her own behalf, dismisses the jury, rules her guilty, and fines her \$100. She refuses to pay.
- 1874 In *Minor v. Happersett*, the Supreme Court decides that citizenship does not give women the right to vote and that women's political rights are under the jurisdiction of each individual state.
- 1876 Stanton writes a "Declaration and Protest of the Women of the United States" to be read at the centennial celebration in Philadelphia. When the request to present the Declaration is denied, Anthony and four other women charge the speakers' rostrum and thrust the document into the hands of Vice President Thomas W. Ferry.
- 1880 New York State grants school suffrage to women.
- 1882 The House of Representatives and the Senate appoint Select Committees on Woman Suffrage.
- 1887 The first three volumes of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, edited by Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, are published.
- 1890 After several years of negotiations, the NWSA and the AWSA merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone as officers.
- Wyoming joins the union as the first state with voting rights for women. By 1900 women also have full suffrage in Utah, Colorado, and Idaho.
- New Zealand is the first nation to give women suffrage.
- 1892 Susan B. Anthony becomes president of the NAWSA.
- 1895 Elizabeth Cady Stanton publishes *The Woman's Bible*, a critical examination of the Bible's teaching about women. The NAWSA censures the work.
- 1900 Anthony resigns as president of the NAWSA and is succeeded by Carrie Chapman Catt.
- 1902
- October 26 Elizabeth Cady Stanton dies.
- Women of Australia are enfranchised.
- 1903 Carrie Chapman Catt resigns as president of the NAWSA and Anna Howard Shaw becomes president.

- 1906
- March 13 Susan B. Anthony dies. Women of Finland are enfranchised.
- 1907 Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, founds the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, later called the Women's Political Union.
- 1910 The Women's Political Union holds its first suffrage parade in New York City.
- 1911 National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage is founded.
- 1912 Suffrage referendums are passed in Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon.
- 1913 Alice Paul organizes a suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., the day of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration.
- 1914 Montana and Nevada grant voting rights to women.  
Alice Paul and Lucy Burns organize the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage. It merges in 1917 with the Woman's Party to become the National Woman's Party.
- 1915 Suffrage referendum in New York State is defeated.  
Carrie Chapman Catt is elected president of the NAWSA.  
Women of Denmark are enfranchised.
- 1916 Jeannette Rankin, a Republican from Montana, is elected to the House of Representatives and becomes the first woman to serve in Congress.  
President Woodrow Wilson addresses the NAWSA.
- 1917 Members of the National Woman's Party picket the White House. Alice Paul and ninety-six other suffragists are arrested and jailed for "obstructing traffic." When they go on a hunger strike to protest their arrest and treatment, they are force-fed.  
Women win the right to vote in North Dakota, Ohio, Indiana, Rhode Island, Nebraska, Michigan, New York, and Arkansas.
- 1918 Women of Austria, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, and Wales are enfranchised.  
House of Representatives passes a resolution in favor of a woman suffrage amendment. The resolution is defeated by the Senate.
- 1919 Women of Azerbaijan Republic, Belgium, British East Africa, Holland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Rhodesia, and Sweden are enfranchised.  
The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution granting women the vote is adopted by a joint resolution of Congress and sent to the states for ratification.  
New York and twenty-one other states ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.

(continued)

- 1920 Henry Burn casts the deciding vote that makes Tennessee the thirty-sixth, and final, state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.
- August 26 The Nineteenth Amendment is adopted and the women of the United States are finally enfranchised.

*Source: Anthony Center for Women's Leadership: US Suffrage Movement Timeline, prepared by Mary M. Huth, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Libraries, February 1995. Obtained from <http://www.rochester.edu/SBA/timeline1.html>, August 2002.*

---