

A Short History of the Women's Movement in the US

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The term feminism originated from France in the 1880s as a combination of the French word for woman *femme* and the social movement *ism*. Early feminism built upon idealizations about equality and liberty emanating from the European Enlightenment, the French and American Revolutions, and the US abolitionist movement. In the 1800s US suffragists set forth a notion of the female as someone with sovereignty, political standing, and the right to control her own body. These first wave feminists envisioned a society where women could vote, own property, and participate in civic life. Planned Parenthood emerged during this era. Early feminists also challenged inequities in the workplace. The Industrial Revolution had provided more opportunities and higher paying jobs for men. Women's careers were low status, low paying, and often limited to teacher, housekeeper, or seamstress—leaving women economically dependent and with few individual rights. Conditions worsened in the Great Depression. Despite waning support for women's issues by the 1940s, early feminist activism helped shape an emerging worldwide women's movement.

Second wave feminism began after World War II in response to the return of soldiers into the US labor force, displacing women and forcing them back into domestic roles. Second wave feminists fought to retain careers outside the home and intensified their focus on women's issues. Feminist lobby groups emerged including the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus. The uncoupling of sexual activity from childbearing with the birth control pill in the 1960s, Freidan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, Steinem's 1971 *Ms. Magazine*, and the 1973 US Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* ruling established women's personal rights over their bodies. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title IX Education Amendments of 1972, and the 1974 Women's Educational Equity Act increased educational and career opportunities for females. A unifying civil rights platform for all under girded these landmark changes in US public policy. During these years the Third World Women's Alliance, a US Women of Color political formation,

brought attention to the concerns of Black, Asian American, Chicana, and Puerto Rican women. Feminists performed social justice oriented community work including rape counseling, self-defense classes, and legal assistance to deal with both domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment. Workplace inequities remained unresolved, as evidenced by data showing that in 1970 women of equal qualifications made 52 cents to the dollar in comparison with men for the same employment positions.

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present, the women's movement has taken on various labels of Third Wave, Fourth Wave, and Post-Feminism. Further shaped by initiatives from women of color and informed by more diverse racial, ethnic, and global perspectives, feminists now viewed sexism, racism, and classism as intersecting issues, broadened their scope to include experiences and voices of people living in third world countries, and addressed the destructive impact of Western imperialism and globalization on people and the environment worldwide. Feminist platforms also reflected gay rights, anti-war, and anti-poverty initiatives. By the 1990s feminists began to utilize the Internet for networking and political action. Some contend that fourth wave feminism started in the 2000s in response to the September 11th attack on the US. This event brought women together on the blogosphere to engage in global peace activism. Some note a spiritual aspect in fourth wave feminist discourse. Post-feminism is a term used to denote either that the women's movement has transcended gender issues or that the term feminism itself is no longer relevant.

Regardless of whether one conceptualizes feminists today as third, fourth, or post, feminists today have a far reaching and global perspective. Contemporary feminists from all over the world and from diverse racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds now shape the work of and debates within the women's movement. Feminists are facile with digital and social media. And they maintain a strong connection to environmentalism. Core issues comprising feminist activism worldwide include the ongoing fight for women's self-determination, reproductive rights, affordable health care, family well-being and childcare issues, the right to education, to own property, to participate in political life, ending sexual and domestic violence, and employment equity.

Some see the expansive agenda of the contemporary women's movement as diffuse and unattainable. Others remain willfully ignorant of the dramatic improvements that have been made to everyone's lives as a result of 150 years of courageous feminist work. Still others reject feminism on face value. In response, in her August 2, 2012 NPR interview with *Fresh Air's* Terry Goss, feminist writer Caitlin Moran asks:

What part of liberation for women is not for you? Is it the freedom to vote? The right not to be owned by the man that you marry? The campaign for equal pay? Vogue by Madonna? Jeans? Did all that stuff just get on your nerves?

(<http://www.npr.org/2012/08/02/157728094/not-a-feminist-caitlin-moran-asks-why-not>)

Firmly aligned with the contemporary women's movement, the NAEA's Women's Caucus works through art education to achieve equity for women and all people who encounter injustice. Women's Caucus initiatives may be found at <http://naeawc.net/>, on <http://www.facebook.com/groups/177480239379/>, and at the NAEA 2013 Convention. We seek like-minded art educators, scholars, artists, and community workers to join us in our endeavors to make the world a better place for all.