Feminism: From Ripples to Waves

History-18

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Actor, Victor Webster once said “Everything we do, even the slightest thing we do, can have a ripple effect and repercussions that emulate. If you throw a pebble into the water on one side of the ocean, it can create a tidal wave on the other side.” From the founding of our country in 1776, countless activists have spent over 158 years fighting for the equality of women in our society. Although the fight for women’s rights has been a long and strenuous task, it has not always been consistent; it has ebbed and flowed much like waves in the ocean. But how have events in history played a role in societal changes and what has caused this rights movement to act in such a way? Society has challenged the role that women should play, and history has shown that women have adapted along with it.

From colonization and farming to the movement of single unit households, life in the early 1800’s was no easy task. With expansion on the rise, the cultural idea of “the household” slowly began to take form. Due to the lack of workplace regulation, workers, who were predominantly men, were forced to work countless hours per week. Catherine Lavender explains her article, *The Cult of Domesticity & True Womanhood Defined*, that for men to succeed in the workforce, “men had to adopt certain values and behaviors: materialism, aggression, vulgarity, hardness, rationality.” In order to find balance, society deemed that men needed a place of isolation, the home, where he could express “humanistic characteristics” that he could receive from his wife. In Barbara Welter’s 1966 article *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*, she explains that society stressed that women embody four main characteristics which were: Piety, Purity, Submissiveness and Domesticity “by God’s appointment” and will.[[1]](#footnote-1) Women were expected to uphold the stability, morality and democracy of the household while men focused on its financial and physical safety. Popular culture began to deem “free” women, or those who did not follow these virtues, as well as those enslaved in the south as “’fallen’ or immoral, undeserving and fatally flawed”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Women who were angered by the voice given to them in society, spoke out, causing a ripple that would eventually lead to the waves of feminism.

Every human wants a voice but gaining rights to that voice must begin somewhere. As for women’s rights in America, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, has become known as the birthplace of feminism. After the ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendment, Elizabeth Cody Stanton and other suffragettes such as Susan B. Anthony became angered that black men were allowed to vote before them. 300 women and men attended Seneca Falls to debate the Declaration of Sentiments created by Stanton and Anthony, which defended their right to vote by using terminology from the Declaration of Independence such as “all men and women are created equal”. It was revolutionary at the time for women to hold a convention although, much like their arguments, did not include black or poor women. During the years, Stanton and Anthony, who opposed the 15th Amendment created the National Women Suffrage Association and those that were pro-15th amendment created the American Woman Suffrage Association and spread its importance state by state. The two eventually combined to create the National American Woman Suffrage Association where Stanton was president. The convention continued to be held each year thus after for over the next seventy years, growing in supporters each year.

By the beginning of the 1900s, events in history slowly began to change. In 1910, the west started to adopt the right for women to vote which spiked supporters in the east. Shortly after, was World War I, where women’s place in the work force and education began to grow in order to help with war efforts. The increase of women working slowed suffrage movements but at the end of war, when women return home, proven that they were just as deserving of men to have their place in society. On August 18, 1920, ratification of the 19th amendment to the Constitution was put into place allowing women to vote and by November of that year almost 8 million women voted in the election. With voting rights won, women began to feel satisfied with their new place in society, ending the first wave of feminism.

With the roaring 20’s on the rise and World War I behind them, there was an increase in women exercising their right to vote, joining the workforce, and consuming alcohol. Surprisingly, between the 1920s and the 1960s, many women slowly reverted to the virtues deemed by the cult of womanhood and returned to their role as a housewife and tended for their children. Pop culture, media, and toys all centered around the idea that this was where women belonged. But what caused this? In the late 1940s and early 1950s, media played a big role in solidifying these ideas as Hollywood portrayed women in ultra feminine roles either as fairy tales or as housewives. Young girls were pressed with media from mainstream companies like Disney that Bridget O’Keefe describes in her article, *Happiness, Womanhood, and Sexualized Media* as “films [that] star a princess or virtuous female character, one with beauty, passivity, kindness, gentleness, and a peculiar knack for getting into trouble. The precious damsel in distress being saved by a handsome prince to live happily ever after”. In contrast, women were also faced with the boom of new icons that challenged these views such as Elvis and Marilyn Monroe. [[3]](#footnote-3)The media began to portray women in a more sexualized manner that counteracted the view of the female role in popular culture. Young women began to be drawn in by the sexual nature brought by new pop icons and the rebellious nature of premarital sex that was portrayed. Young women were challenged to channel this energy into building a nuclear family.

Financially, during World War II, many women much like during World War I, helped in the war effort but worked many jobs like those that would normally be done by men. When the war ended in 1945, men returned home and the jobs they had worked previously were returned to them. With the post-war rise in marriages and birth rates, society reestablished the pre-war values as women returned to their place in the home. Historian Elaine Tyler May points out in her book, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* that many Americans returned to these ideologies because of the safety they felt from “an insecure world” specifically the devastation from the Depression and World War II.[[4]](#footnote-4) But by the 1960s due to the increase in household size and income needed to sustain them, households became hammered by the need of a dual income to support the family which led to another increase in the number of women in the workforce. The combination of how women were portrayed in media with the increase of women in the workforce, escalated a series of issues that would later spark a new wave in feminism.

In a workforce dominated by men, sexual harassment and discrimination plagued the workplace for many women during the early 1960s. In a time of war and political scandal, women, along with other minorities, raised their voices to fight for what they deemed as unjust and question their role in society. In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote a book called *The Feminine Mystique* which highlighted Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas from her book *The Second Sex* but utilized her own experiences to connect with other women that faced the same issues. [[5]](#footnote-5)The book reached a much greater audience than Beauvoir’s and was able to reignite the fire that dimmed during the 1950s. Although many women were able to secure more right through the second wave, much was led by middle class white women and pushed issues solely based on gender without taking racial equality into consideration.

Women fought for rights such as equal pay, sexuality, reproductive rights and legal inequalities. In 1971, the National Women’s Political Caucus, or the NWPC, was founded to increase the number of women involved in politics regardless of their party. The NWPC proposed the Equal Rights Amendment to eliminate sexual discrimination under the constitution but has yet to be ratified by the necessary 38 states. In 1970, the Federal Food Administration approved the first oral contraceptive for women and within two years was distributed to over 1.2 million American women.[[6]](#footnote-6) The contraceptive greatly increased the number of women in the workplace and in schools due to the ability to now postpone when they would have children. Further advances in reproductive rights, the case of Roe v. Wade fought for a woman’s right to privacy that protected the right to abort her fetus. Continued arguments fought for moral and religious views and how they played a part in politics. In order to maintain balance and protect women’s health and prenatal life, a pregnancy trimester timetable was created to regulate abortions in the US.[[7]](#footnote-7) Like its predecessor, the second wave cleared a pathway for some of the most historic liberations for women in history.

With rigorous wins during the previous two decades, organized feminism in the 80s began to dwindle. With many women still fighting for equality, most women began to feel that they had achieved what they had wanted to accomplish. In 1992, Anita Hill, an American lawyer, testified about sexual harassment allegations against Clarence Thomas. Hill’s case caused a ripple effect that allowed new age feminists, such as Rebecca Walker, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards to open the door to the third wave of feminism. As daughters of the second wave feminists, Walker, Baumgardner and Richards, also authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future (2000)*, organized the Third Wave Direct Action Corporation in 1992. Britannica explains that these feminists evolved the women’s rights movements to challenge other ideas such as womanhood, beauty, gender roles and what identifies them. Though connected, third wave feminists wanted to speak to feminism and achieve their goals in a new way. They sought to “question, reclaim and redefine the ideas, words and media” that were originally shaped by society and challenged others to construct a new identity based on “one’s authentic gender identity”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Unlike previous movements, third wave activists were inclusive to all women and challenged them to redefine themselves and have control over their sexuality. In the mid-80s, activist movements such as the Guerilla Girls and the Riot Grrrl movement shook up the movements with art and punk rock music that pushed a feminist agenda. In the late-80s, pop culture elevated new female icons of all races such as Madonna, Queen Latifah, and Mary J. Blige. Televised sitcoms began to have a strong female presence that displayed success, individuality, and sexuality such as *Sex and the City*. The internet also drastically changed how individuals could express themselves through videos and blogs to a larger audience. The third wave opened the door for the public to view women naturally as strong and independent but evolved to include a more inclusive and diverse group of women which evolved even further in our current wave of feminism.

As the internet continued to grow, the rise of social media and the platform that it has been given to countless individuals has helped spread their stories and continue to grow the reach for social injustices. Started in the early 2000’s, Tarana Burke launched the “me too” campaign after hearing a story of sexual abuse from one of her camp youths. She launched a foundation that helped challenge women of color to speak out against sexual abuse cases and train survivors to help and heal others in need. In October of 2017, the sexual harassment scandals of Hollywood Producer, Harvey Weinstein, helped skyrocketed the Me Too platform on all social media platforms. Actress Alyssa Milano helped promote the Me Too platform where eventually millions of women spoke out to sexual harassment stories and used the hashtag #MeToo. In November 2017, two protests which included the Me Too Survivors March and the Take Back the Workplace March took place in Downtown Los Angeles. The two met at the same place and protested social reform.

Similarly, other activist movements took place that further challenged sexual harassment and injustice. In January 2017, after the inauguration of President Donald Trump called for a single day walk to Washington DC called the Women’s March to confront the sexual comments that he made towards women during his running. In January of 2018, over 250 Women’s Marchs took place in remembrance of the walk that had taken place the year before. Later in 2018, TIME’s Up was launched which was created by 300 celebrities in response to a letter from 700,000 female farmworkers to help promote their safety in the workplace.[[9]](#footnote-9) The women’s rights movement has changed during recent years to not only fight for women’s rights but to include the rights to those that break the grounds of gender norms and fight for equality and safety for individuals regardless of their race, gender, or sexuality. The fourth wave and those that proceeded it have given women the platform and the voice to stand up for what they believe in.

Over the years, social injustices and those that have fought to rectify them have changed their approach, their focus and their resources. Over 100 years women have fought to have their place in society and bridge the gap between men and women. Society has always been driven by its environment and the events that have taken place. Society’s reactions have allowed substantial progress but have also digressed or halted multiple times throughout history. For example, in 2022, the United States overruled a substantial win in the 1960s, Roe v. Wade, forcing us to take a step back in our fight for women’s reproductive rights. An individual caused a ripple and created numerous waves that have allowed us to advance in our ongoing fight for equality. The fight is not over, and the fourth wave will not be last, but the question is: who will make the next ripple?

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