**The History of American Feminism: An Enduring Fight Against a Flawed Society**

Author: Morgan Daniel from The Kinkaid Schools, Texas

According to both the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Beyoncé in her feminist-empowering anthem *Flawless,*⁠1feminism is the theory of the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.⁠2 Coined in France in the 1880s (« féminisme » directly translating to “social movement” or “political ideology” of women), the term feminism entered North America in 1910.⁠3 In a 21st century society, feminism has taken on a brand new face; feminism is no longer a mere discussion held at solemn conventions, but a ferocious fight held in all aspects of society including culture. Beyoncé and other successful artists who have pioneered “new feminism” not only disprove the anti-feminists’ ideal “cult of domesticity”, but also advertise feminism across the globe. With its prevalence in American society today, it is hard to believe that feminism was not always a prominent aspect of an active American’s agenda. Nonetheless, there was a time in America when activism for gender equality was not in the forefront of its citizens’ minds. In fact, the fight for feminism did not spark until the 1800s, a time of heavy reform including achievements and breakthroughs in the field of women’s rights known as the “women’s movement⁠4”. Feminists throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries have vastly changed a woman’s position in a modern society compared to one in an antebellum America. Despite this progress, supporters of the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes will continue fighting until Beyoncé’s declaration and Merriam-Webster’s definition of feminism become reality.

Before the 19th century, women in America lived with very few legal rights and hardly any political power. Any little sway they did hold in society took place outside of establishments. For example, early feminist Abigail Adams urged husband John Adams to “remember the ladies” when participating as a delegate in the Constitutional Convention.⁠5 Though Adams was unable to attend the Convention himself, he and his fellow delegates failed to heed Abigail’s warning when creating and agreeing upon a Constitution that clearly excludes women in its explicit declaration that “all *men* are created equal.”⁠6 The common American perception throughout the new republic was that women were best suited for domestic work. Ironically, for a period traditionally known for a rigid separation between men and women, colonial gender roles were occasionally blurred. For example, in the case of her husband’s absence, a rich white woman taking care of the family’s Southern land would carry out male tasks such as disciplining slaves, managing the plantation, and even temporarily holding legal powers to assist her husband in economic affairs⁠7. Furthermore, poor women worked even if their husbands’ did, and single women ran households of their own⁠8. Amidst these blurred lines, Southern women were still unable to attain a citizen’s right to vote or to own land (unless widowed). Few rights and opportunities impeded women in the north as well. Women in large, urban areas were limited only to jobs deemed “appropriate” for women: inn and tavern keepers, laundresses, nursemaids, prostitutes and more. The vast majority of African-American women at this time were enslaved, serving as nursemaids, domestic workers and cotton pickers on Southern plantations⁠9. Despite race or class, a woman’s primary job in colonial society was to provide for and support men; the extent of a woman’s economic and political participation was through the concept of “republican motherhood”, or essentially the woman’s duty to prepare future male citizens to take part in the republic⁠10. Although seemingly demeaning, the idea that American women’s primary purpose was training young male citizens in motherhood gave them a stronger economic and political hand over society’s future, which eventually allowed them a firm grip in propelling reform.

As labor opportunities broadened in northern American cities in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, women felt the beginnings of unrest. (The ramifications of gender inequality such as job limitations and unequal pay did not immediately bother women in the south since southern labor opportunities mostly remained the same). For example, in the 1830s, the women employed in newly industrial jobs in Northeastern factories were extremely exploited; they were barely paid pennies, lived in detrimental conditions, and had little time off. Women were also involved in the putting-out system, in which they would complete unfinished manufactured garments and return them to their manufacturers for almost nothing in return.⁠11 Although the putting-out system allowed women to be somewhat active in the nation’s economy, it also supported the cult of domesticity; it kept women where traditional values insisted they ought to stay: in their homes. At the close of the 19th century, job availabilities widened but were unofficially assigned to women according to class and ethnicity. Elite white women became doctors, lawyers, writers and essayists; though clearly given more opportunity than women of the middle and lower classes, elite women’s rights were still very much distanced from those of men. In the 1890s, African-American women were largely employed as sharecroppers and domestic workers in the South while immigrant women were employed as unskilled laborers in the North. Middle and lower class American women had yet to work predominantly outside of their homes due to still-standing rigid culture values.⁠12 At the turn of the 20th century, these assignments slightly shifted. African-American women migrated from to Northern cities like Chicago, New York and Detroit to take advantage of factory labor; white women took on new white-collar jobs as typists, telephone operators and department store clerks.⁠13 Though these changes in job opportunity were certainly small steps in the right direction, they were hardly breakthroughs by the standard of feminism since these newly accessible jobs were essentially created to cater to the needs of working men. Thus, the cult of domesticity remained alive and kicking. However, America had yet to witness the victories of one of the greatest social fights that had already begun in the early 19th century.

When women of the 1800s gradually exposed themselves to the harsh reality of an unequal society under a prejudiced Constitution in the name of expanded job opportunity, a rude awakening was inevitable. Women were not happy with the way they were treated in comparison to men, and thus feminism was born. A flurry of reform movements passed through this decade including the rise of abolitionist organizations, education expansion, and an increase in feminist groups. Though with varied goals in mind, each one of these movements asserted the notion of individual dignity and equal rights that lay in the founders’ rhetoric.⁠14 Because of similar timing and values, individual and organized reformers overlapped in causes; in particular, abolitionists and feminists. Sarah Grimke, Margaret Fuller, and Sojourner Truth are examples of women who became leading voices in the closely linked worlds of both feminism and abolition⁠15. The women’s movement that sparked in the 1830s and continued blazing onward was a period of accumulating strength and an increased following of women and men, feminists and abolitionists, known as “first-wave feminism”.

“First-wave feminism” owes itself to the plethora of women’s rights conventions organized by some of the most influential women of the 1800s. These conventions entertained a myriad of discussion topics including women’s right to suffrage, women’s right to serve in Congress and as president, women’s right to an expanded education, the need for increased profession opportunity, and several other issues along the lines of civil and legal rights.⁠16 Activists would gather from Northern, Eastern and Midwestern states with heightened passions in asserting women’s intellectual equality with men, women’s moral superiority and the need to enlarge the “women’s sphere” beyond the realm of the home.⁠17 These progressive conventions originated from the most famous women’s convention in history: the Seneca Falls Convention held in New York in the summer of 1848. Unlike all other women’s conventions, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott made sure to set Seneca Falls apart by creating of the Declaration of Sentiments. Closely following the pattern of the original Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments used manipulated phrasing to embed the ideas directly addressing the issue of gender inequality.⁠18 Where the original Declaration of Independence reads, “all *men* are created equal”, the Declaration of Sentiments asserts, “all men *and women* are created equal.”⁠19 A combination of conventions and the feeling of under appreciation during Civil War efforts inspired feminists to redirect their goals putting suffrage in the forefront. However, since the nation was focused mainly on the emancipation of former slaves in the mid-19th century’s Reconstruction period, it was not until after the Fifteenth Amendment in which black citizens were granted the right to vote did the issue of women’s suffrage gained traction. Ultimately, the antebellum women’s movement period succeeded in amassing a strong following just in time for woman’s fight for suffrage.

Only once the issue of African-American rights had been (temporarily) settled came the enduring struggle for feminists’ foremost ambition: suffrage. The primary postbellum women’s suffrage organization was the American Equal Rights Association formed by Stanton and Anthony in 1869. The group’s goal was to secure a Sixteenth Amendment guaranteeing women’s suffrage. The association’s proposal was immediately shot down due to the popular belief that women’s suffrage agitations should be postponed until black men’s suffrage agitations were put to rest with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment.⁠20 Anthony, Stanton, and other suffragists were enraged by this dismissal and believed that the Fifteenth Amendment was but a mere extension of man’s right to vote; they requested that their male allies withdraw support of the amendment unless modified to include women. Stanton prepared a petition to set her plan into motion; however, most male abolitionists were shocked by female opposition to the amendment and refused to sign.⁠21 Soon after in 1869, suffragists split on the issue of the Fifteenth Amendment and formed two groups: the “anti-Fifteenth Amendment” National Woman Suffrage Association led by radicals Stanton and Anthony and the “pro-Fifteenth Amendment” American Woman Suffrage Association led by a more conservative Lucy Stone. Alas, neither group held enough support on its own, so neither group held great influence. After setting all differences aside, the NWSA and AWSA eventually united in 1890 under the combined leadership of Stanton, Anthony and Stone. The National American Woman Suffrage Association recreated both groups’ image and did whatever it took to gain states’ support in the ratification of women’s suffrage; the group’s efforts included disassociating itself with radical causes and even using racist rhetoric in order to win Southern support. NAWSA later convinced President Wilson to favor the national suffrage amendment by supporting him and his efforts in World War I. Finally by the summer of 1920, the 36 states needed for ratification had ratified the amendment for women’s suffrage, and the Nineteenth Amendment was added to the Constitution.⁠22

Simultaneous to this feat in the 1920s, American women began entering professions that had been closed to them in the past including airline pilot, editor and Congress member. American culture transformations due to women’s role in World War I, the growth of the middle-class, and technological developments of the car and radio lessened gender definition. Post World War I, women practiced these new social liberties as “flappers” who smoked, drove cars, and wore their hair in short bobs. This new image of liberated American women challenged the earlier one of the cult of domesticity, and did not falter even in the 1930s when New Deal programs forced some women out of work in response to the overwhelming unemployment of the Great Depression. World War II opened economic opportunity to women as they took on male roles such as welders, shipyard workers and heavy equipment operators for those in combat. However, those opportunistic doors closed as fast as they opened as soon as the war was over and veterans reclaimed their jobs. A booming post-war economy in the 1950s led to family formation and cultural homogeneity – thus, women were expected to reenter the traditional role as homemaker. The climate of complacency among men who retook jobs from talented women stirred frustration, pouring gasoline on the freshly lit the fire of second-wave feminism.

Center stage of the second wave of feminism was the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As the loosening cultural values and faltering economy of the 1960s propelled women into the workplace, more and more women continued to face massive discrimination; thus, more and more women embraced feminism and its focus on gender equality.⁠23 The women’s liberation movement meant more than a continual fight for equal rights, but illustrated women’s desire to break free of societal confines.⁠24 The same gender inequalities that plagued antebellum American women persisted into the 20th century: limited profession availability, minimized wages, and restriction from economic and political affairs. Feminists once again separated into two groups of differing beliefs similar to those in the struggle for suffrage: the moderate National Organization for Women who sought equal rights and wanted to integrate women into mainstream power positions, and the radical Redstockings who condemned men, patriarchy and capitalism and wanted liberation through a revolutionary movement. After a number of demonstrations by both groups and a seating of the Congress To Unite Women in 1969, various social and political demands such as nationwide, free child care centers, women’s programs at colleges, and a greater representation of women in all political bodies were made in addition to proposals for the mutually supported Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights.⁠25 In the heat of proposals and protests, both moderate and radical feminists faced backlash from conservative men and women; most of this backlash was aimed toward the Equal Rights Amendment, which never actually reached the Constitution due to its failure in the ratification process.⁠26 Nevertheless, the assault against male domination continued through boycotts, lawsuits and protests. Eventually, feminists’ persistence paid off when various victories in the remainder of the century cued each other like dominos: corporations and colleges began hiring more and more women as professionals, payment and promotion procedures were revised, more women ran for public offices, and the Supreme Court’s 1973 case of Roe v. Wade overruled state antiabortion laws⁠27. The advancement in social, political and economic rights in the women’s liberation movement brought women one step closer to living in an utterly equal society: a feminist’s utopia.

Feminism is prone to challenge. Altering beliefs and ideas as traditional as those that an entire nation was founded upon is not an easy task. However tedious the bi-century fight for feminism may have been, the status of women from 1776 to 2015 has drastically changed in feminism’s favor. Today in the 21st century, women in America have proven themselves capable of working virtually any job. That being said, gender parity in income and unequal opportunity to reach the uppermost echelons in many occupations still requires work⁠28. Feminism is a progressive theory supported by intelligent, ambitious women and men who truly believe in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes and will not accept a reality of anything less. Amidst the struggle against the “glass-ceiling” that keeps women from rising into power positions among numerous gender inequalities that exist in today’s society, two questions come to mind. How will the feminists of the 21st century choose to make history? Will we ever reach a feminist’s utopia? Beyoncé and other activists taking part in current “third-wave feminism” keep the idealistic vision ablaze, and the fire will not burn out until our flawed society attains *\*\*\*Flawless* equality between men and women.

1 Knowles, Beyoncé, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. "\*\*\*Flawless." 2013. In *Beyoncé*.

2 Merriam-Webster: An Encyclopædia Britannica Company. Accessed May 16, 2015. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism.

3 Finley, Laura and Emily Stringer. "Feminist Goals: Key Question." In American History. ABC-CLIO, 2000-. Accessed May 16, 2015.

4 Ibid.

5 *American History*, s.v. "antebellum women's rights," accessed May 16, 2015.

6 Madison, James. "Constitution" (address, The Federal Convention, State House (Independence Hall), Philadelphia, US, May 25, 1787).

7 Newman, Jason. "women in the workplace." In American History. ABC-CLIO, 2000-. Accessed May 16, 2015.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 American History, s.v. "antebellum women's rights."

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, and Lucretia Mott. "Declaration of Sentiments." (address, Seneca Falls Convention, New York, US, 1848).

20 *American History*, s.v. "women's rights conventions."

21 Campbell, Heather. "woman suffrage movement." In *American History*. ABC-CLIO, 2000-. Accessed May 16, 2015.

22 Congress. "19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote." (address, Joint Resolution of Congress, Washington D.C., US, August 18, 1920).

23 Newman, Jason. "women in the workplace."

24 Hamilton, Neal. "women's liberation movement." In *American History*. ABC-CLIO, 2000-. Accessed May 16, 2015.

25 Ibid.

26 Hawley, Marisa. "Failure of the Equal Rights Amendment: The Feminist Fight of the 1970s." The National Archives. Accessed May 16, 2015. http://blogs.archives.gov.

27 Hawley, "Failure of the Equal," The National Archives.

28 Newman, Jason. "Women in the workplace."