In the 1800s, women in the United States faced significant limitations on their rights, both legally and socially. **State statutes and common law prohibited women from inheriting property, signing contracts, serving on juries, and voting in elections**. **Husbands and fathers typically directed the lives of women**. Economic opportunities were severely restricted; women could only find a few service-related jobs and generally earned about half the wages of men for the same work.

Under the legal doctrine of coverture, which was part of the English common law the American legal system was modeled on, the **very being or legal existence of a married woman was "suspended during the marriage"**. This meant married women were often required by law to turn over their wages, money, and property to their husbands. They could not legally sign contracts in many states. The laws were so restrictive that in North Carolina in 1862, a chief justice denied a divorce to a woman whose husband had horsewhipped her, stating the law gave the husband power to use force necessary to make his wife "behave and know her place". While some states began passing Married Women's Property Acts, like New York in 1848, which allowed women to retain property brought into or acquired during marriage, these laws were initially limited. Despite some improvements, even by the late 19th century, a married woman in not a single state was held to possess a right to her earnings within the family. **Women lacked access to higher education and many professional careers** and faced strong opposition to their involvement in public affairs, particularly speaking to audiences that included both men and women.

This backdrop of pervasive denial of rights set the stage for the **Seneca Falls Convention**, held on **July 19-20, 1848**, in Seneca Falls, New York. Advertised as "a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman," it is recognized as the **first women's rights convention**. The meeting was organized by local Quaker women and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. During a planning session at the M'Clintock home, five women – Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann M'Clintock, Martha Coffin Wright, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Jane Hunt – decided to hold the convention. They drafted a **Declaration of Sentiments**, modeled on the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and a list of resolutions. The Declaration famously declared, **"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men and women are created equal"** and listed a history of grievances detailing the "repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man towards woman".

One of the most significant points added to the Declaration and resolutions by Stanton was the issue of **women's voting rights**. This proved highly controversial, with many attendees, including Lucretia Mott, initially believing it was too extreme and would make the movement "ridiculous". However, **Frederick Douglass**, the only African American at the convention, delivered a powerful speech arguing that he could not accept the right to vote for himself if women were denied that same right. His eloquent support was crucial, and the **resolution demanding women's right to the elective franchise was adopted**. Approximately 300 people attended, and 100 signed the Declaration of Sentiments. The Seneca Falls Convention, particularly its Declaration of Sentiments, became the **"single most important factor in spreading news of the women's rights movement"**. Stanton viewed it as the beginning of the women's rights movement.

The Seneca Falls Convention galvanized further action, inspiring a **series of women's rights conventions**. The first in a series of **National Women's Rights Conventions** was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850, a meeting whose influence was felt internationally. These national conventions were held almost annually until the Civil War. **Suffrage quickly became a central and preeminent goal of the movement**.

Key figures like **Susan B. Anthony** and **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** formed a crucial partnership, with Stanton's writing skills complementing Anthony's organizational abilities. The movement gained important experience and visibility through efforts like the **Women's Loyal National League**, organized by Anthony and Stanton during the Civil War to campaign for the abolition of slavery. Although focused on ending slavery, the League made its stand for political equality for women clear and its massive petition drive (nearly 400,000 signatures) demonstrated the effectiveness of formal organization and shifted women's activism further towards political action.

After the war, the movement faced internal disagreements, notably regarding the proposed **Fifteenth Amendment**, which would enfranchise black men but not women. Stanton and Anthony opposed the amendment, arguing for universal suffrage for all regardless of race or sex. This disagreement led to a split, resulting in the formation of rival organizations: the **National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA)** led by Stanton and Anthony, which sought a national amendment and addressed a range of women's issues, and the **American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA)** led by Lucy Stone and others, which pursued a state-by-state strategy and often aligned with the Republican Party. The **rivalry between these two groups lasted until their merger in 1890**. The movement also grappled with issues of race, with some leaders, particularly in the later years, making concessions to the prevalent racism to gain support in the South, sometimes excluding or marginalizing Black women activists.

Tactics evolved beyond conventions to include **publishing newspapers** like *The Revolution* by Stanton and Anthony and the *Woman's Journal* by Lucy Stone, public speaking that challenged social norms, marches, and protests. The **National Woman's Party (NWP)**, formed by Alice Paul in 1916, employed more militant strategies like the "Silent Sentinels" picketing the White House, leading to arrests and imprisonment but also generating crucial publicity for the cause.

Despite significant opposition and internal divisions, the persistent efforts of the women's suffrage movement led to incremental victories, starting with partial or full suffrage in some Western states. Finally, after decades of campaigning, Congress passed the **Nineteenth Amendment** (also known as the **Susan B. Anthony Amendment**), which was ratified on **August 18, 1920**, stating that the right to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex. While this was a monumental achievement, it did not immediately enfranchise all women, as racial barriers continued to prevent many African American women and men in the South from voting until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Nevertheless, the movement initiated at Seneca Falls fundamentally transformed the political landscape, secured a cornerstone right for women, and provided valuable experience and organization for future social activism.