



## Women's Liberation Movement

by Tina Gianoulis

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The phrase women's liberation was first published in Simone de Beauvoir's influential 1949 essay, *The Second Sex*, but the roots of the women's liberation movement reach back much further. Ever since men have claimed dominance over women in patriarchal societies, there have been strong women who have fought for dignity and human rights. At various times in history, these women have banded together to form feminist social movements, such as those that arose at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and during the 1920s and 1940s.

These movements were often followed by backlash periods of increased suppression of women. Such a period of suppression occurred during the 1950s, which in turn inspired a new period of female rebellion that began in the 1960s. This latter rebellion constitutes the largest and most widely publicized social movement of women in history. It affected women of all races and classes around the world.

### Roots in the 1940s and 1950s

Much of the civil unrest of the 1960s stemmed from social changes that occurred during the previous decades. Because every hand was needed for the war effort, during World War II (1939-1945) women and people of color were offered a wider range of opportunities and independence than previously. Once the war ended, however, those in power attempted to restore society to its original shape, with white men on top, Blacks on the bottom, and women in the kitchen.

The repression of the 1950s acted like a pressure cooker on rage and frustration. Unwilling to return submissively to second-class status, African Americans began to demand equal rights. The civil rights movement they started became an inspiration for other movements.

The pressure cooker of the 1950s was especially stifling for women. During the war, with many men in military service, women had been actively sought for employment at more interesting jobs for higher wages than they had ever known before. Once the war ended, they were unceremoniously fired and their jobs given to men returning from the war.

Societal pressure urged women to become dependent and "feminine," and to stay home to take care of husband and family. Many women worked for the same reasons they had always worked, to support themselves and their families. But society's image of the 1950s woman was the aproned housewife. Women who did have jobs outside the home were usually relegated to dead-end "pink collar" jobs and paid far less than men.

In addition, the 1950s brought the creation of the housing development and the nuclear family. Millions of houses were built in suburbs, and middle class families moved in. Rather than the sprawling extended families that had been common on farms and in urban tenements, the "typical" suburban family included husband, wife, and a couple of children.



Influential feminist leader Betty Friedan (above, in 1960) famously dubbed lesbians a "lavender menace" in 1963. Photograph courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Within suburban developments, families were often isolated, each in its own house surrounded by its own yard. Most isolated of all were the women. While husbands left for work and children for school, wives stayed home, planning and preparing meals and doing housework. Doctors prescribed tranquilizers, barbiturates, and even lobotomies to help women accept their stifling roles serenely.

### **Improved Conditions for Change**

In the early 1960s, the invention and distribution of the first reliable oral contraceptive, the birth control pill, opened a door in many women's trapped lives by giving them the power to plan or avoid pregnancies. In addition, the civil rights movement forced the passage of new laws. In particular, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade job discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The addition of sex to the Civil Rights Act was almost an afterthought, but it proved to have significant consequences.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission did little at first to enforce the part of Title VII that applied to women, however. But in 1966, at the Third Annual Conference on the Status of Women in Washington, D. C., a group of 28 women formed an organization to fight for women's rights. They called it the National Organization for Women (NOW). By the end of the year, NOW had 300 members; by the end of the century it would have half a million.

### **The Scope of the Movement**

Through mainstream organizations such as NOW, women began to demand changes in discriminatory laws, but women's liberation encompassed far more than the quest for legal rights. Women began to seek freedom, respect, and the right to an individual identity and a fulfilled life. No longer satisfied to define themselves in terms of husbands and families, these women performed the most radical act of all: they began to talk to each other.

Using a technique called "consciousness raising," women began to meet and talk about their lives. In these "cr" groups, women found that problems they had thought were individual were, in fact, shared by many other women. They also began to think that these personal problems could be solved only by changing society. This idea gave rise to one of the most important slogans of the 1960s women's liberation movement, "The personal is political."

While men, from government officials to radical leftists, had trivialized women's issues, by talking together women began to construct a political analysis of a sexist society that encompassed the government, the educational system, the media, religion, the family, and even the language. Rape, abortion rights, and day care became issues just as important as equal pay for equal work.

The new feminists rejected the traditional role that had been imposed upon women of the 1950s. In one of the most famous actions of the women's liberation movement, in 1968, a hundred women gathered to protest the shallow values of the Miss America pageant. Into a trashcan, they threw symbols of the sexual objectification of women such as bras, girdles, and make-up. Though nothing was burned, the media seized on the event, and feminists were "bra-burners" ever after.

By the late 1960s, the women's liberation movement had expanded with energy and excitement. Women started women's centers, women's health clinics, rape crisis centers, and bookstores. They formed political groups that published feminist political writings, such as Redstockings' "Bitch Manifesto." Bread and Roses in Boston took over a building on the Harvard campus where they set up a day care center and taught classes for ten days before being forced out. They used money that they collected from supporters to open one of the longest running women's centers in the United States. In 1969, Cornell University in Ithaca, New York became the first college to offer accredited Women's Studies courses.

## **Diversity in the Movement**

Although many defined the movement as white and middle class, working class women and women of color were some of the most important founders of women's liberation. Strong Black feminists such as Cellestine Ware, Florynce Kennedy, and Barbara Omolada were pivotal in the formation of feminist theory.

African American women's groups such as Mothers Alone Working, formed in 1965, and the Mount Vernon/ New Rochelle Group, formed by Pat Robinson in 1960, may not have called themselves feminist, but they were models of women's liberation. Most radical feminist groups came to place on their agendas the struggle against racism and classism alongside the struggle against sexism, seeing them inextricably related.

## **Lesbians in the Movement**

Each of these early feminist groups had lesbian members and lesbians among the leadership. After the Stonewall rebellion in the summer of 1969, most of these lesbians became unwilling to remain closeted. However, many straight feminists were homophobic. They were reluctant to admit or accept the presence of out lesbians within the women's liberation movement.

Betty Friedan, the first president of NOW and author of the pivotal 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, coined the phrase "lavender menace" to describe what she saw as the damaging effect of lesbians within the movement. Unable to resist the challenge, many radical lesbians, who were already working hard to fight sexism, had lavender t-shirts emblazoned with the words "lavender menace." They wore them en masse to the Second Congress of United Women in New York City in 1970 to demonstrate that lesbians were already a major part of the women's liberation movement.

Although homophobia continued to exist within the movement, as elsewhere, in 1971 NOW made support for lesbian and gay rights part of its policy, leading the way for other liberal feminist groups to do the same.

## **Success and Backlash**

The women's liberation movement flourished into the late 1970s, gaining energy as it spread. All over the country, women published newspapers, such as Washington, D. C.'s *off our backs* and Denver's *Big Mama Rag*. Lesbian feminists published literary journals, such as *Moonstorm* in St. Louis and *Amazon Quarterly* in Berkeley. Because male-dominated publishing houses could not be counted on to publish women's work, feminists started their own publishing houses, including Spinsters, Ink, Kitchen Table Press, and the Feminist Press.

Women gathered in women's restaurants, coffeehouses, and bars. They listened to women's music, like that of Alix Dobkin and Meg Christian, and watched women's theater groups, such as At the Foot of the Mountain in Minneapolis. Feminists created a women's culture, which was closely intermingled with lesbian culture.

As frequently happens, however, there was a conservative backlash to the explosion of activity and energy of the women's movement. Anti-feminists had always trivialized the movement, calling feminists humorless and strident, but by the 1980s, conservatives began to treat women's liberation as a *fait accompli*. Women had once been discriminated against, laws had been changed, and now all was well, they said. Young women became reluctant to call themselves feminists and some began to call themselves "post feminist."

However, the women's liberation movement lives on, both in the work of older feminists who never stopped working to address the issues of sexism, and in the younger women who continue to be inspired by the courage and dedication of generations of women who fought for liberation, lesbians prominent among

them.

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**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.