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# History of Women's Fighting for Justice

## Women's Fight for Justice

Women have been fighting for equal rights for centuries. At the start of the feminist movement, women were seen as mere property to their husbands with no representation in government. Today, women of any race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and culture are able to go to school, join their preferred workforce, buy a house, and go to the polls. In fact, there is even a woman running to be the President of the United States. None of this would have been possible without the joined efforts of many influential women who dedicated their lives to enacting change and fighting the hard fight for equality.

First, we begin in the pre-suffrage era. Women started near the bottom of the food chain and have slowly climbed their way up. Early activists in this time period published feminist journals, spoke at conventions, and petitioned parliament to help improve women's status. At this time, women were seen as completely dependent on their husbands and solely responsible for reproduction and housework. They were stuck in an unfair separate sphere.

In the West, the first arguments for female equality spawned from the topic of education. Women reasoned that schooling was necessary in order to help prepare their young sons for the literate world. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz was an early advocate on this matter. Sor Juana—a Catholic nun—based her argument on all souls being equal. Some similar thinkers who laid the groundwork for education, property, and voting rights were Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor, and John Stuart Mill. These pioneers attacked gender inequality after the French Revolution, but while their arguments were progressive, they were not all encompassing. The idea still remained that women would be of most use in the household. Ultimately by the late 1800's, married women in America gained the rights to own property and control their wages. Similarly, British women won property rights with the Married Women's Property Act and also gained access to university education. These international movements began to advance the fight for women's equality.

However, in this same time period, the rise of capitalism led to the deterioration of working conditions. Women and children needed to labor grueling hours in unsafe environments to help their families survive. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 is the tragic result of owners exerting power over their workers with little to no regard for their safety. While that is an extreme example, working these hazardous and unsanitary jobs often led to numerous injuries and diseases. Because of this, women were inspired by Marxism and began to come together to join labor movements. They went on strike, demanded higher wages, and began to organize. Clara Zetkin and her protégé Alexandra Kollontai were German feminists who wanted to bring women into unions and support them as both mothers and workers. For a short time, Kollontai even granted women in the Soviet Union free maternity care and equal work responsibilities (Freedman, p. 61). Campaigning for laws to protect women in the workforce was on the agenda of early 1900's reformers in the United States as well.

Another feminist issue in the United States at this time was that of suffrage. By 1910, Norway, New Zealand, Australia, and Finland had granted women suffrage (Freedman, p. 55). However,

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American women did not win the vote until a decade later in 1920. In fact, over fifty years had passed between ladies holding their first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls and actually becoming enfranchised. This milestone in women's equality is largely thanks to the suffragist leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and Carrie Chapman Catt. The film *Iron Jawed Angels* depicts the extreme struggles of the Women's Suffrage Movement. Many brave ladies had to put their lives on the line to help American women win the right to vote. They endured unfair jail time and survived hunger strikes. This struggle in particular is responsible for uniting white women under one cause. At the same time, it is also responsible for dividing all women on the basis of generation and race.

The issue of suffrage divided women across generational lines because it pitted the progressive women against those who still wished to follow the older forms of social hierarchy. It divided them across racial lines because feminist movements did not necessarily align with racial justice movements. Black women were excluded from suffrage conventions and were not allowed to march alongside white women, as seen in the film. Here we have one less privileged group renouncing an even lesser privileged group. In this time period, the country was segregated. The Ku Klux Klan was widespread and lynching—the murder of innocent black people—was their product of racial hatred (Freedman, p. 79). Therefore, the enfranchisement of African American women was not integrated into the general feminist cause. Because of this, black women of this time period had two battles to fight: one justifying their descent, and another justifying their sex. The efforts of Charlotte Hawkins Brown reaching out to southern white women helped begin to close the racial divide. Her goal was to include ladies of color in the overall feminist agenda. Ultimately, this proves that women's identities are complex.

There are many factors that confound feminism such as race, class, and culture. During the suffrage movement, white women completely ignored racial and religious injustice in fear of complicating their cause. This neglect can be seen not only towards African American women but also towards Jewish women. The women's movement can be seen as anti-Semitic because parades and conventions were scheduled during the Jewish Sabbath (Freedman, p. 82). Interracial and interfaith cooperation did not become typical until after 1930, after countless movements and speeches made by post-suffrage activists. Even Eleanor Roosevelt—First Lady at the time—rejected racism and anti-Semitism. Consequently, the rebirth of feminism in the 1960s is largely due to the crossing of race and religious lines.

Overall, women's rights have drastically evolved since Sor Juana's days in the seventeenth century. Because of her efforts along with many others, women today are much closer equals to men. Feminist movements are responsible for helping women earn the rights to receive an education, own property, control their own wages, and vote. Some may even say the women of today take those privileges for granted. This is especially important to consider as Election Day draws nearer. As a woman, before you decide not to cast your vote, take a moment to reflect on the difficult struggle our predecessors like Alice Paul had endured to allow us that right.