

Women's Progress

Eddie S. Jackson

Kaplan University

SS360 01: American Women

KAPLAN UNIVERSITY

## Introduction

Truly great nations are steered by its people, not its government; and in this case, the many extraordinary women that would change the course of American history through women's suffrage, the Progressive Era, and the redefining of gender roles and sexuality. In the mid-1800s, the idea of women working next to the side of men, being educated with men, and being equal to men, were all bizarre concepts that only a few would even contemplate. As our country began to change, due to westward migration, the roles of women in American culture started evolving. Women were no longer confined to just their homes; and it was not long before they began leaving their households and started working. This raised many questions about women's role in society; and women were challenged at every step along the way. A revolution started, and on this contemporary battleground, a new kind of woman would assert her right to walk among men as equals. It was not easy; battles were lost all along the way. But women pressed forward.

Eventually all their hard work, and their due diligence, culminated in the landmark victory of the 19th Amendment; passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920, the 19th amendment granted women the right to vote (DuBois & Dumenil, 2012). But as history tells us, there would still be much contention between the sexes, and women's socio-economic and political warfare raged on throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It would take second and third waves of Feminism, thousands of women's organized efforts, and a steadfast determination to challenge a male-dominated country. This essay assesses the last sixty years of American women's history, and highlights what women were fighting for in the first the place. The interview, herewithin, will observe and examine my interview candidate's, Dalia Stoffer, responses to the questions I have formulated.

The questions from the interview form a rough framework around women's history and their fight for the freedoms that they earned and deserved.

## Main Issues

Even after the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment victory, women would continue to fight for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What did this all mean to women in the second half of the twentieth century? Dalia Stoffer suggested in our interview that it meant women fought for equality, and should have received equality (D. Stoffer, 2012). Which is true, women did receive the right to vote, but there were many more issues that would be placed on the table. As LaDuke would say in Ms. Magazine, healthcare, quality of life in your family, and domestic violence were also women's issues (Baumgardner, 2001). Equality was more than just obtaining the right to vote. Equality meant having access to birth control; it meant maintaining better women's welfare; it meant freedom to express one's sexuality, despite one's lifestyle and personal choices; it meant fighting for peace over war; but most of all, it meant that the voices of women would not go unheard. As Feminism experienced a new sort of revival in the 1960s, women's liberation took on a political expression of its own. Thus, you would have the National Organization for Women (NOW) that would be created in 1966 (DuBois Dumenil, 2012). NOW would bring the voice of women, their rights, and their causes (like fighting for peace) into mainstream society.

NOW was founded in 1966 in Washington, DC. Its first president was none other than Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*. NOW, its president, and its members, would place women's civil rights on the political map; and this is why it was important. NOW would insist on women's equal rights, abortion rights, child care, and equal education and economic opportunity for

all women (DuBois & Dumenil, 2012). How did they fight for equality? NOW fought for equality through legislative campaigning, marches, cultural transformation, and by trying to dismantle the long-time standing patriarchy. But were they triumphant in their endeavors? NOW was successful in revolutionizing social consciousness and challenging the socio-economic norms of the modern day society. NOW made women, and their rights, mainstream topics. One important thing to note, NOW was essential in seeking equality for women, but was not the only organized group of women; you also had the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Chicana movement, American Asian nationalism, the Black Power Movement, and Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) (DuBois & Dumenil, 2012).

## **The Equal Right Amendment**

The year was 1923 and Alice Paul (suffragist leader and founder of the National Woman's Party) drafted something called the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The ERA was simple in its concept that women should be granted equality, and be guaranteed the same rights as men so defined by the U.S. Constitution; those rights would be equal justice, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (equalrightsamendment.org).

But why was the ERA the key focus in the 1970s and 1980s, so many years later? That is because the ERA was never ratified by Congress. Other circumstances also prompted that the ERA be reevaluated. There were still issues with equal access to education and career opportunities; there was sex discrimination in the work place; and there were issues with women's reproductive rights.

Women also wanted to be directly involved in politics. Thus, we have a more aggressive approach of women's rights in the form of political activism. In 1972, the ERA finally passed both houses of

Congress, but still failed to receive the necessary 38 state requirement to become the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment (equalrightsamendment.org). The reason why the ERA has not been ratified is because it only received 35 of the required 38 states to ratify the amendment; thus this is why it has yet to make its way into the U.S. Constitution.

## **Gender roles, Racial relation, and Women's sexuality**

Women's fight for their rights in the academic world, the workplace, and to control their own reproductive health, all began making noticeable differences in and on society. Women's traditional perception of being pure, mothers, wives, and only homemakers, moved to objects of desire, the educated, and social and political forces to be reckoned with; many areas of society were affected by the new, contemporary woman. And as more and more women fought for their equality in organized groups like NOW, the perception of societal views began to change; politics, radio, television, music, art, and fashion all evolved to accept women's well-deserved places among men.

Several things assisted women in their plight. The first was the FDA's approval of the birth control pill in 1960 (history.org). With the birth control pill, women could now plan careers around their lifestyles, as well as have time to become a grassroots activist. And secondly, organizations like NOW, the spotlight on the ERA, the positive impact of women on society, their political and social capabilities starting to be acknowledged, the idea of woman equality would enter and stay in the mainstream society. Traditional gender roles, on a large scale, would become a thing of the past. It would now take men and women, the mother and father, to raise a family. It would require husbands and wives to run a successful household. Males and females could seek more equal education and career opportunities. The Feminism Movement not only transformed gender roles, but

also allowed women to openly explore their sexuality in ways that had never been done before.

Feminism changed relationships; Feminism changed women's place in society; and, in a significant way, Feminism altered the course of United States' history.

## Conclusion

Throughout history, if you look at those that fight for freedom, you will realize that freedom is not without consequence, and no one knows this better than the American women of the past. Starting with woman suffragists, and the many battles won and lost, the success of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the path of the ERA, along with the women of the 1960s and 1970s who advocated peace and women's welfare above else, each of these had their ups and downs; each of these were driven by motivated and influential women. Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s marked an era of female independence and the socio-economic and political awareness of women; but it also redefined gender roles, and brought about changes to the racial and sexuality norms. Women would stay progressive through the 1980s and 1990s as they continued to seek equality. In the end, the containment and suppression of women's civil rights would remain in the past, as the *new woman* would no longer tolerate anything less than equality. And, if you look at society today, the freedoms that women possess (access to education, career choices, and reproductive rights) are largely because of the many great women of the past. Most importantly, we all get to live in a better country because of the perseverance and due diligence of women.

References:

(D. Stoffer, personal communication, December 12, 2012).

This is the interview I had with Dalia Stoffer. As this essay is based on the interview, it is an important source of information and commentary that is utilized.

*equalrightsamendment.org*. (ND). The Equal Rights Amendment. Retrieved on 1/8/2013 from <http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/>

While researching the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), one web-based resource kept coming up more than any other in the search engine; and that was [equalrightsamendment.org](http://www.equalrightsamendment.org). The site covers the overview, history, FAQs, as well as many other topics surrounding the ERA. When I reference the ERA, in many cases it will be from this site.

*history.org*. (ND). FDA approves the pill. Retrieved on 1/8/2013 from <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fda-approves-the-pill>

Sometimes, writing requires you to go outside the textbook. What better website to obtain an article from than [history.org](http://www.history.com)? It is credible and has reputable authors; specifically, when it comes to the FDA and their approval of the pill. I will reference the [history.org](http://www.history.com) site when I need even more information outside that of our textbook. The article is short and to the point about the history around the pill and the FDA.

Dubois, E.C. & Dumenil, L. (2012). *Through women's eyes* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

First and foremost, the most practical and definitely the best resource, and my primary source, is *Through women's eyes*. There is a wealth of information, as well as being a credible resource for American women's history (and for American history for that matter). There will be multiple references to our textbook as this is the most valuable resource I have at my disposal.

Baumgardner, Jennifer. (2001, April/May). Kitchen Table Candidate. *Ms. Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.msmagazine.com/apr01/laduke.html>

I selected this article because it represents just how far women have come over the last 60 years; a half-Jewish, a person of color, and yet still Ms. Winona LaDuke is an extremely successful woman. LaDuke is the embodiment of a modern female champion. When Ms. LaDuke speaks, what she has to say is important.