

Women's Rights in the American Century

Author: Kenneth J. Bechtel, Old Mill High School, Anne Arundel County Public Schools

Grade Level: High

Duration of lesson: 1-2 Periods

Overview:

The rights of women in the United States have been a source of debate since the country's inception. As early as 1789 Abigail Adams urged her husband, John Adams, to "remember the ladies" at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. In 1848, a meeting in Seneca Falls, New York marked the official beginning of a recognized women's movement. Out of that meeting came the Declaration of Sentiments that ended with the phrase "all men and women are created equal." However, it would take another 72 years before women were even given the right to vote. Since then the role of women in society has changed dramatically. World War II allowed more women to work outside the home, but after the war, many returned to their traditional roles. The feminist movement of the 1970s brought about important advances, such as the passage of the Equal Pay Act and Education Amendments Acts, which included Title IX.

Are women equal with men? In this lesson, students will try to get at the heart of this historically complex question. By examine primary source documents that span the existence of the United States, they will see how what "equality" for women has changed over time. In the end they will be asked to predict what the next great accomplishment for women will be.

Content Standards:

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties.

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A.** Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas.
- B.** Consider multiple perspectives.
- C.** Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas.
- D.** Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues.
- E.** Distinguish between unsupported expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence.
- J.** Hypothesize the influence of the past.

· Students will analyze the change in what equality meant for women throughout American History.

The Women's Rights Movement in the United States stretches over the nation's history. Many different leaders, successes, and failures shaped the movement's history. Beginning in the nineteenth century, activists interested in "the woman problem" worked to expand the meaning of the high-minded democratic ideals reflected in the Declaration of Independence and the nuts and bolts framework in the U.S. Constitution to include women at an equal level with men.

Attention to women as a group in need of legal protection is evident in the letters Abigail Adams sent to her husband John Adams. While John Adams participated in the 1789 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Abigail asked him to "remember the ladies" in the meetings' deliberations. John Adams seems to simply dismiss his wife's reference by joking that granting such rights to females would place women above non-landing holding men and compared to Indians and African Americans also calling for rights. Indeed, there is no evidence that the "ladies" question ever came up during the convention. It is likely that, as Robert Max Jackson argues, the men at the convention thought that "the prospect of full citizenship for women was not even credible enough to warrant the effort of rejection."¹ Women were not seen as equals by the majority of the upper class in the newly formed United States and the men of stature at the convention were a product of their times. Even most women would have thought the idea of female suffrage outrageous. In the end, women's exclusion from the U.S. Constitution was not simply an oversight. It was a reflection of the times and the status of women in the United States.² Women were not granted the right to vote and most Americans assumed it was natural to exclude women from holding government offices. By the early nineteenth century, ideas began to change. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published, *A Vindication of the Rights of*

¹ Robert Max Jackson, *Destined For Equality: The Inevitable Rise of Women's Status* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

² Schwarzenbach and Smith, ed., *Women and the United States Constitution*, 23.

Woman in England calling for full political, social, and economic rights for women. Such ideas spilled over to the United States and gave birth to the early American women's rights movement.

In the antebellum period, women reformers in the abolition movement were told that they could not speak before male and female audiences. This infuriated some of them, especially those that were Quakers and not prohibited from speaking in their religious services. These women and their male supporters began to call for not only an end to slavery, but equal rights for women. The start of the American woman's rights movement is often cited as the meeting in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. The meeting included passage of the "Declaration of Sentiments", which was very similar in its wording to the Declaration of Independence that was written by Thomas Jefferson and given to King George to signify the colonies complaints against England. The "Declaration of Sentiments" ended with the phrase "all men and women are created equal." The debate over slavery and the outbreak of the Civil War overshadowed the woman's rights movement. The movement lost momentum and fractured over passage and ratification of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments at the war's end. Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment specified voting rights as distinct to males. Woman suffrage supporters such as Frederick Douglass and Lucy Stone argued that it was "the negro's hour" and women's rights would come later. Other women's rights supporters such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were outraged.

In 1869 Wyoming became the first territory to grant women the right to vote and several western states followed. Leaders in the western states and territories argued that granting female suffrage would pull new residents to the West. However, on a national scale, the more established states in the east were much slower to move forward on female suffrage. In addition, the woman's rights movement remained split with only limited support until the reunification of

the two factions in 1890 as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).

Under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and a new generation, women reformers worked for female suffrage and many other causes in the Progressive Era.

Such efforts included the prohibition of alcohol, child welfare, and better government.

Consequently, as progressive reforms gained national appeal, the woman's right movement moved to mainstream status. With the outbreak of World War I, a large portion of the adult male population served in the military and there was a demand for women workers in traditionally male jobs. After the Armistice in 1918, citing their participation in war production, women did not let President Woodrow Wilson forget they had helped win the war. Furthermore, passage and ratification of the eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the sale and manufacture of alcohol in the United States helped promote the idea that women would help make America a more moral nation. It also removed a major opponent of female suffrage, the liquor lobby, from the debate. Congress passes the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 and was ratified on August 26, 1920. The struggle for women's right to vote was won. But, does the right to vote mean women won equality with men?

In 1923, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment prohibiting discrimination based on sex. However, the amendment was never ratified by the necessary number of states and was opposed by some women's rights activists. They worried that some of the hard won protections for women's workers, widowed and abandoned mothers, and other issues would be lost with the ERA.

As the Roaring '20s gave way to the Great Depression women had the right to vote, but their lives were still primarily connected to the home, children, and domestic work. During the Great Depression, some states passed laws prohibiting married women from working in state

employment if their husbands had a job. In the mid-1930s, a Gallup Poll showed that the majority of Americans believed that a married woman should not work if her husband was employed.³

With the outbreak of another war, World War II, things changed. Women were again called on to lend a helping hand by serving in military auxiliaries and joining the wage labor force. The famous poster, “Rosie the Riveter” was promoted by the government to show women that they could help defend the country by helping produce the guns, tanks, ships, and other supplies to help the men win the war in Europe and the Pacific. Women answered the call, especially married women with children, in larger numbers than any time in U.S. history. Wages were not equal, but women had access to higher paying jobs than before the war. Racism also remained a problem, but the war spurred some important social changes. But when the war was over, women were urged to leave their jobs for the men returning from the war. Many female workers were probably happy to leave their difficult jobs, but others complained about the policies. Women may have had the right to vote but they were still did not have equal economic opportunities with men.. Women were forced from factory jobs into lower paid secretarial and traditional female positions, as well as back into domestic roles to make room for returning veterans in the factories. With no leaders, many women simply returned to the home and began families in the post-war era, resulting in the highest birthrates of the twentieth century.⁴

The 1950s in the United States is considered by many historians to be the age of conformity. Traditional gender roles were applied to this generation and moving outside them was seen as un-American. Men were the bread-winners and few women worked outside the

³ Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987),.

⁴ Susan Hartmann, *The Homefront and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (New York: MacMillan and Company, 1984).

home. The number of children per household rose and women served as the primary care givers for children. According to the domestic prescription of the era, women, cleaned, decorated, learned to use the new appliances of the era to make domestic work easier, and had dinner ready when their husbands returned home from work. Women could vote, but they were not seen as equals in American society. However, a growing number were challenging this model and many were getting involved in politics through the League of Women Voters and other avenues.⁵

The next generation of female reformers came from the 1960s. These women learned from the African American Civil Rights Movement that change was possible. Men tried to impede women from gaining an equal standing in the economy. Employers did not pay women the same wages, men refused to let wives get jobs outside the home, and women who worked in a male dominated profession were treated poorly.⁶ Women began to fight for equality beyond the vote, something that most had never experienced. President John F. Kennedy established the President's Commission on Women and President Lyndon Baines Johnson supported passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This seminal legislation prohibited discrimination in the workplace on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.⁷ Finally, women had the protection of the law and more equality with men than ever in the United States.

The next major battle for women's rights came in the 1970s when many activists advocated called for the reintroduction of the 1923 Equal Rights Amendment; a Constitutional Amendment guaranteeing that women would be the equals of men in the United States. The Equal Rights Amendment was re-drafted and sent to Congress for ratification in 1972. The ERA

⁵ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

⁶ Jackson, *Destined For Equality*, 71; and Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

⁷ Judith A. Baer, *Women in American Law: The Struggle toward Equality from the New Deal to the Present* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1996), 58; Schwarzenbach and Smith, ed., *Women and the United States Constitution*, 274.

met stiff resistance from some men, but also from some women who felt that the women's rights movement and feminists had gone too far. The opposition of ERA, led by Phyllis Schlafly accused the supporters of ERA of rejecting family, child rearing, and the everyday duties of a wife to chase male lifestyles outside the home.⁸ After years of debate, ERA fell three states short of ratification.⁹ The Women's Movement and feminism was scarred for years because of the small radical element of women who fought so hard for the passage of ERA. The extremists detracted from the message the majority of feminists were trying to explain. That message was that since many women worked outside the home that meant that women really had two jobs, their pay job, and their housework and child care job. The latter of which was extremely undervalued.¹⁰

Another Act from the 1970s is still at the forefront of the equality issue between men and women. College athletics, long a male dominated arena, was opened to female athletes with the passage of the Educational Amendments Acts of 1972, particularly Title IX. Title IX prohibits gender discrimination within our educational institutions and led to an explosion of women's involvement in sports.¹¹ Title IX mandates equal opportunities for women in college athletics and has been the basis for the founding of new professional teams, such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA).¹²

Are women equal with men? Over the last two hundred plus years the question has been debated. Originally, being included in the Constitution was equality. When that did not occur,

⁸ Baer, *Women in American Law*, 55.

⁹ Baer, *Women in American Law*, 58.

¹⁰ Mary Lou Kendrigan, *Political Equality in a Democratic Society: Women in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), 47-49.

¹¹ Sue J.M. Freeman, Susan C. Bourque, and Christine M. Shelton, *Women on Power: Leadership Redefined*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 116.

¹² Freeman, Bourque, and Shelton, *Women on Power*, 116; Baer, *Women in American Law*, 236.

the struggle for women's equality with men started. In the 19th century equality was being allowed to assemble and protesting the female place in the United States. In the 20th century, equality was the right to vote. By the end of the 20th century women realized that voting was not equality, especially in the workplace. The Equal Pay Act and the Educational Amendments Acts, including Title IX have been working to make women equal with men. As the 21st century continues, women will resume the fight for true equality with men. The movement has come very far, but there is still some work to do.

Bibliography:

- Baer, Judith A. *Women in American Law: The Struggle toward Equality from the New Deal to the Present*. New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1996.
- Freeman, Sue J.M., Bourque, Susan C., and Shelton, Christine M. *Women on Power: Leadership Redefined*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2001.
- Jackson, Robert Max. *Destined For Equality: The Inevitable Rise of Women's Status*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Kendrigan, Mary Lou. *Political Equality in a Democratic Society: Women in the United States*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Schwarzenbach, Sibya A. and Smith, Patricia, ed. *Women and the United States Constitution: History, Interpretation, and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

- Betty Friedan-** United States feminist who founded a national organization for women.
- Feminism-** the doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men.
- National Organization of Women-** The National Organization for Women (NOW) is the largest American feminist organization. NOW was founded in 1966 and has a membership of 500,000 contributing members.
- Gloria Steinem-** is an American feminist icon, journalist, and women's rights advocate.

Equal Rights Amendment-

As supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment between 1972 and 1982 lobbied, marched, rallied, petitioned, picketed, went on hunger strikes, and committed acts of civil disobedience, it is probable that many of them were not aware of their place in the long historical continuum of women's struggle for constitutional equality in the United States. From the very beginning, the inequality of men and women under the Constitution has been an issue for advocacy. The ERA Amendment was not ratified by the Congress of the United States.

Phillis Schlafly-

American author and political activist, known for her opposition to the women's liberation movement.

Title IX-

was the first comprehensive federal law to prohibit sex discrimination against students and employees of educational institutions.

Motivation: Pose the following lead question:

Have women succeeded in gaining equality with men?

Procedures:

1. Distribute to each student the Agree/Disagree Reading Strategy (RS #1).
2. In the center of the Agree/Disagree Reading Strategy is the statement: "A woman's place is in the home."
3. Give each student a document packet containing RS #2-9. Review the directions for the Agree/Disagree Reading Strategy and have students decide if the 8 documents strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. (This activity works best if RS #2-9 are placed into a packet that students can look through. Only a class set of the documents is needed.)

RS #2- Excerpt from a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams, 1776

RS #3- Declaration of Sentiments

RS #4- Petition of E. Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and others, ca. 1865

RS # 5- The Nineteenth Amendment

RS #6- How to be a Good Wife, 1954

RS #7- 1950s Advertisement Targeting Women

RS #8- Equal Pay Act of 1972

RS #9- Excerpts from Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972

4. Review as a class where students classified the 8 documents (RS #3-10) and discuss significant differences in how the students evaluated the documents and why they made their choices.
5. Writing Assignment - On paper, answer the question: What will the next great accomplishment for women will be? How will this accomplishment come about?

Closure:

Ask students: How have the documents presented to them changed their views on the Women's Rights Movement? What did they already know, what was new information, and what would their next steps be if they wanted to learn more about this topic?

Extension Activities:

At the teacher's discretion, students could be asked to research individual women who were influential in the Women's Rights Movement.

Excerpt from a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband John Adams, 1776

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/rbcmillerbib:@field\(SUBJ+@od1\(Adams,+Abigail\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/rbcmillerbib:@field(SUBJ+@od1(Adams,+Abigail)))

This is a document that shows that women began to fight for equal rights as soon as the United States was founded. In this letter reproduction, Abigail Adams presses the women's rights issue on her husband, John, who is partaking in the Constitutional Convention and could impact very early legislation pertaining to women. Students should realize that women's struggle for equality has been going on ever since the United States became an independent country.

Declaration of Sentiments

http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?rbcmillerbib:2:/temp/~ammem_WkMl::

This is the Seneca Falls Declaration of Rights that women in New York drafted to resemble the Declaration of Independence the colonists sent to the British to spark the American Revolution. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the leaders of the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) who pushed fervently for the passage of laws granting the same rights to men and women. Students should be able to connect the women's rights movement to other movements in the mid 1800's including abolitionism, temperance, and utopian societies.

Petition of E. Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and others, ca. 1865

http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/arch_results_detail.jsp?&pg=23&si=0&st=b&rp=digital&nh=39

This document is asking for an amendment of the Constitution that shall prohibit the several States from disfranchising any of their citizens on the ground of sex. Students should realize that women were very organized and as early as 1865 women knew that if they wanted to change men's outlook on women's rights they would have to change laws.

The Nineteenth Amendment

http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/arch_results_detail.jsp?&pg=33&si=0&st=b&rp=digital&nh=44

This is the Nineteenth Amendment, which allowed women the right to vote in the United States. This amendment granted Universal Womanhood suffrage, something Women's Rights Reformers had been working towards since the founding of the nation. Students should realize that this amendment is a huge stepping stone for women in their quest for equality but the struggle for true equality was far from finished.

How to be a Good Wife, 1954

<http://iws.ccccd.edu/grooms/goodwife.htm>

This is an excerpt from a Home Economics textbook from the age of Consensus and Conformity, the 1950s. Even though women had earned the right to vote women were not treated as equals in the United States. This document shows students that even decades after women gained the right to vote they were still not equal with men and even taught in schools to treat men like they were superior.

1950's Advertisement Targeting Women

http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/arch_results_detail.jsp?&pg=1&si=0&st=b&rp=digital&nh=7

This advertisement shows vacuuming as a specific woman's job in the home. The advertisement can be used to show the division of gender roles in the 1950s. Students can analyze this document and conclude that the subservient role of women was common in the United States and even advertisements target women in what was considered a "traditional" role as homemaker.

Equal Pay Act of 1972

http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=299866&st=b&rp=details&nh=1&si=0

This act granted the equal pay of employees no matter what their gender. Women traditionally earned less than men even if they were completing the same job. This act was the next step in the full equality of women in the United States. This document shows that women, even in the 1970s, were earning much less than men. This shows that

the women's rights movement still had several problems to address before women could consider themselves equal with men.

Excerpts from Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972

<http://www.dol.gov/oasam/regs/statutes/titleix.htm>

In 1972 the most comprehensive civil rights act for women was passed which guaranteed women equal rights in any program receiving federal aid. The Equal Education Amendment of 1972 had been fought for by women for centuries in the United States and it became landmark legislation for the Women's Rights Movement. Students should realize that this is another huge step in the direction of true equality but even into the 21st century this is still an ongoing battle.