

Feminism's Long March: You've Come a Long Way, Baby (Or Have You?)

The Women's Movement, the Next Half-Century

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In 1968, the Phillip Morris Company launched a memorable campaign to sell [Virginia Slims](#), a new brand of cigarettes targeting women, itself a new phenomenon. It had a brand-new slogan: "You've come a long way, baby." The company plastered it on billboards nationwide and put it in TV ads that featured women of the early twentieth century being punished for smoking. In all their advertising, smoking was equated with a set of traits meant to capture the essence of women in a new era of equality — independence, slimness, glamour, and liberation.

As it happened, the only equality this campaign ended up supporting involved lung cancer. Today, women and men [die](#) at similar rates from that disease.

Still, women *have* come a long way since the mid-twentieth century, and it's worth considering just how far — and just how far we have to go.

Once Upon a Time

These days it may be hard for some to believe, but before the women's movement burst on the scene in the late 1960s, newspapers published ads for jobs on different pages, segregated by gender. Employers legally paid women less than men for the same work. Some bars refused to serve women and all banks denied married women credit or loans, a practice which didn't change until 1974. Some states even excluded women from jury duty.

Radio producers considered women's voices too abrasive to be on the air and television executives believed that women didn't have sufficient credibility to anchor the news. Few women ran big corporations or universities, or worked as firefighters and police officers. None sat on the Supreme Court, installed electrical equipment, climbed telephone poles, or owned construction companies. All hurricanes had female names, due to the widely held view that women brought chaos and destruction to society.

As late as 1970, [Dr. Edgar Berman](#), a consultant to presidents and to Medicare, proclaimed on television that women were too tortured by hormonal disturbances to assume the presidency. Few people ran into women professors, doctors, or lawyers. Everyone addressed a woman as either Miss or Mrs, depending on her marital status, and if a woman needed an abortion, legal nowhere in America, she risked her life searching among quacks in back alleys for a competent and compassionate doctor.

The public generally believed that rape victims had probably "asked for it," most women felt

too ashamed to report rape, and no language existed to make sense of what we now call domestic violence, sexual harassment, marital rape, or date rape. One simple phrase seemed to sum up the hidden injuries women suffered in silence: “That’s life.”

On August 27, 1970, in response to such injustice, 50,000 women marched down New York’s Fifth Avenue, announcing the birth of a new movement. They demanded three rights: legal abortion, universal childcare, and equal pay. These were preconditions for women’s equality with men at home and in the workplace. Astonishingly, they didn’t include the ending of violence against women among their demands — though the experience and fear of male violence was widespread — because women still suffered these crimes in silence.

Those three demands, and the fourth one that couldn’t yet be articulated, have yet to be met.

The Hidden Injuries of Sex

As the women’s movement grew, women activists did, however, begin to “name” their grievances. Once named, they could be identified, debated, and — with a growing feminist political voice — turned into policy or used to change the law.

It turned out that there were plenty of hidden injuries, which women activists discovered and publicized through consciousness-raising groups, pamphlets, and books. Rape, once a subject of great shame, became [redefined](#) as a physical assault that had little to do with lust. [Date rape](#), for which there was plenty of experience but no name, opened up a [national conversation](#) about what constituted consensual sex. Few people had ever heard the words “marital rape.” (“If you can’t rape your wife,” California Senator Bob Wilson allegedly [said](#), “then who can you rape?”) In this way, a new conversation began about the right of wives to have consensual sex and the nature of power relations within marriage.

From the very beginning, the mainstream media and the public labeled women activists as “lesbians.” Why else would they complain about male behavior? Provoked by constant efforts to “tarnish” all feminists as lesbians, activists chose to embrace the label, rather than exclude lesbians from the movement. In the process, they also began to write about and then discuss [compulsory heterosexuality](#). Together with a burgeoning men’s gay movement, feminist lesbians and gay men formed the [Gay Liberation Front](#) in the 1969. Soon, lesbian feminists created an all-women’s group called the [Lavender Menace](#).

[The birth control pill](#) and the [sexual liberation](#) movement of the mid-1960s gave women new freedoms. Grasping the limitations of such changes without abortion being legalized, feminists soon joined the medical abortion rights campaign of that era. Determined to [repeal laws](#) against abortion, in New York they testified before the state legislature and passed out copies of a “model abortion bill”: a blank piece of paper. Through “[public speak-outs](#),” they openly discussed their own illegal abortions and explained why they had made such choices. In Chicago and San Francisco, activists created [clandestine](#) organizations to help women seek qualified doctors. Some feminists even learned how to perform abortions for those who could not find a competent doctor.

Then, in 1973, the Supreme Court handed down its famous *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion and ignited the abortion wars that still rage today. You could even say that this is where the culture wars of the coming decades really began, and you wouldn’t be wrong.

What had feminists started? In essence, they had begun to redefine one “custom” after another as crimes. For instance, one of the greatest hidden injuries suffered by women in those years was the predatory sexual behavior of male bosses. In 1975, a group of women at Cornell University [coined](#) the term [sexual harassment](#). Previously, some women had called it “sexual blackmail,” but when legal scholar Catherine Mackinnon used the new phrase in the title of her 1979 book, [Sexual Harassment of Working Women](#), both feminists and judges began using it in litigation against predatory bosses. After Anita Hill’s [accusations](#) against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991, the phrase became a household term. In that same year, Congress added amendments to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, accepting the feminist argument that sexual harassment violated a woman’s right to earn a living and work in a non-hostile atmosphere.

If the naming of sexual harassment changed the workplace, the reframing of wife-beating as domestic violence turned a custom into a felonious crime. At the same time, feminists spread a network of battered women’s shelters across the nation, offering havens from marital violence and possible death.

A Half-Century to Go

If the women’s movement often surprised and sometimes blindsided men, it also radically expanded America’s democratic promise of equality. Women are now everywhere. No one is shocked in 2013 when a woman enters an operating room or a lecture hall. More than half the undergraduates at most universities are women.

Now, if your boss drives you crazy with sexual advances, you can report him for sexual harassment and sue him in court. If your husband beats you, he can be charged with a felony and, in most urban areas, you can escape to a battered women’s shelter. Women like [Marissa Mayer](#), the CEO of Yahoo!, and [Ruchi Sanghvi](#), head of operations at Dropbox, are some of the most powerful players in the [new technology universe](#). Three women have served as secretary of state and one as national security advisor. Three women sit on the Supreme Court. Hillary Clinton almost became the first woman president and may still achieve that goal. Major magazines and newspapers have women executive editors and managing editors — even the *New York Times*, which waited until 1986 before reluctantly putting “[Ms](#)” in front of women’s names on its pages. Hurricanes now bear male and female names. Women in the U.S. military [fight](#) alongside men. They work as firefighters and police detectives, and when a female plumber shows up to fix an overflowing toilet, most people don’t panic.

Because so much has changed, many people, including young women, believe that the longest revolution is over, that we should stop complaining, be proud of our successes, and go home. Consider for a moment, though, the three demands made in 1970, and the fourth one that couldn’t even be articulated.

As anyone who’s been awake for the last decade knows, despite *Roe v. Wade*, women can’t access abortion providers in many parts of the country. [States](#) have passed laws requiring pregnant women to watch ultrasound “pictures” of their “babies,” and forced them to endure 24- or 48-hour waiting periods so that they can “rethink” their abortion decisions. In May 2012, Utah established the longest waiting period in the nation: 72 hours. In that year, in fact, anti-abortion legislatures managed to [pass 43 new laws](#) that, in one way or another, restricted abortion.

In big cities, finding an abortion provider is often not difficult — unless of course you are poor (because the government won't pay for abortions). Women in rural areas have, however, been hit particularly hard. They have to travel long distances, pay to stay in hotels while they "rethink," and then, and only then, can they make the choice that was promised in 1973. So yes, women still have the right to legal abortion, but less and less access to abortion providers.

And what about child care? In 1971, Congress passed the [Comprehensive Childcare Act \(CCA\)](#), providing national day care to women who needed it. (Such a law wouldn't have a chance today.) President Richard Nixon [vetoed](#) it that December. Using Cold War rhetoric, he argued that the legislation would harm the family and turn American women into their Soviet counterparts — that is, working drudges. His veto was also payback to his religious supporters in the South who opposed women working outside the home, and so using child care. It set childcare legislation back until, well, this very moment.

Ask any young working mother about the nightmare of finding day care for her infant or a space in a preschool for her child. Childcare, as feminists recognized, was a major precondition for women entering the labor force on an equal footing with men. Instead of comprehensive childcare, however, this country chose the more acceptable American way of dealing with problems, namely, that everyone find an individual solution. If you're wealthy, you pay for a live-in nanny. If you're middle class, you hire someone to arrive every day, ready to take care of your young children. Or you luck out and find a place in a good preschool — or a not-so-good one.

If you're poor, you rely on a series of exhausted and generous grandparents, unemployed husbands, over-worked sisters, and goodhearted neighbors. Unlike every nation in Europe, we have no guaranteed preschool or after-school childcare, despite our endless political platitudes about how much we cherish our children. And sadly, childcare has remained off the national political agenda since 1971. It was never even mentioned during the 2012 presidential debates.

And let's not forget women's wages. In 1970, women earned, on average, [59%](#) of men's wages. More than four decades later, the figure is [77%](#). When a university recently invited me to give a keynote address at a conference, they asked what fee I expected. I wasn't quite sure how to respond. The best advice I got — from my husband — was: "Just tell them to give you 77% of whatever they're paying the male keynote speaker." That response resulted in a generous honorarium.

But what about all the women — widowed, divorced, or single — who can't draw on a second income from a man? How can we claim we've reached the 1970 equal pay demand when 70% of the [nation's poor](#) are women and children? This isn't about glass ceilings. What concerns me are all the women glued to the sticky floor of dead-end jobs that provide no benefits and no health insurance, women who, at the end of each month, have to decide whether to pay the electricity bill or feed their children.

As an activist and historian, I'm still shocked that women activists (myself included) didn't add violence against women to those three demands back in 1970. Fear of male violence was such a normal part of our lives that it didn't occur to us to highlight it — not until feminists began, during the 1970s, to publicize the wife-beating that took place behind closed doors and to reveal how many women were raped by strangers, the men they dated, or even their husbands.

Nor did we see how any laws could end it. As Rebecca Solnit [wrote](#) in a powerful essay recently, one in five women will be raped during her lifetime and gang rape is pandemic around the world. There are now laws against rape and violence toward women. There is even a U.N. international resolution on the subject. In 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna [declared](#) that violence against girls and women violated their human rights. After much debate, member nations ratified the resolution and dared to begin calling supposedly time-honored “customs” — wife beating, honor killings, dowry deaths, genital mutilation — what they really are: brutal and gruesome crimes. Now, the nations of the world had a new moral compass for judging one another’s cultures. In this instance, the demands made by global feminists trumped cultural relativism, at least when it involved violence against women.

Still, little enough has changed. Such violence continues to keep women from walking in public spaces. Rape, as feminists have always argued, is a form of social control, meant to make women invisible and shut them in their homes, out of public sight. That’s why activists created “[take back the night](#)” protests in the late 1970s. They sought to reclaim the right to public space without fear of rape.

The daytime [brutal rape](#) and killing of a 23-year-old in India in early January 2013 prompted the [first international protest](#) around violence against women. Maybe that will raise the consciousness of some men. But it’s hard to feel optimistic when you realize how many rapes are still regularly being committed globally.

So, yes, we’ve come a long way, but without achieving full access to legal abortion, comprehensive childcare, or equal pay — those three demands from so many decades ago. Nor have we won the right to enjoy public space without fearing violence, rape, or worse.

I always knew this was the longest revolution, one that would take a century or more to unfold. It’s upended most of our lives, and significantly improved so many of them. Nothing will ever be the same. Yet there’s still such a long way to go. I doubt I’ll see full gender equality in my lifetime.

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