Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set

Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and Social Activism from the 1960s to the 1980s

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/feminism-and-anti-feminism

Teaching Tips

In this eight-resource set, students will encounter the evolution of feminist and anti-feminist movements in the second half of the 20th century. Starting in the 1960s, students will see the ways in which women began to emerge on the political scene, both in positions of political power and as advocates for legislation. But as the movement continued, the role of women in the public sphere, the role of government in determining rights for women, as well as who was included in the movement created a hotly contested battleground, culminating in the fight over the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Background Information

Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:

- the women’s suffrage movement, beginning in Seneca Falls in 1848 through the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920
- the tactics used by women to gain the constitutional right to vote, including parades, marches, rallies, hunger strikes, and imprisonment
• the racial divisions that existed in the women’s suffrage movement, beginning with divided tactics within the abolitionist movement; the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which introduced the word “male” into the Constitution; the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment without extending the right to vote to women; and the ways in which women of color were excluded from the mainstream suffrage movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries
• the fact that the first draft of the Equal Rights Amendment was written in 1923 by Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman to guarantee equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex
• a basic understanding of the word “feminism”: mainly, the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes
• a basic understanding of the word “anti-feminism”: the opposition to some or all forms of feminism
• an understanding that feminism and anti-feminism were movements in which political organizations were formed that pushed various agendas forward around issues such as employment opportunities, childcare, reproductive rights, education, and domesticity

Essential Question

How did the rise of women’s liberation and women’s rights movements in the 1960s shape the role of women in public life?

General Discussion Questions

• To what extent have women needed to be responsible for seeking opportunities for themselves, and to what extent did the federal government need to create those opportunities for women?
• How did the rise of feminist and anti-feminist grassroots organizations help shape the conversation around the federal government’s role in defining gender equality in the public sphere?
• How did Black women experience second-wave feminism differently from their white counterparts?
• Why was the Equal Rights Amendment so contentious, especially among women?
• Did more opportunities exist for women in the early 1960s or the late 1980s? Defend your answer with examples from the sources.
Classroom Activities

- Listen to Representative Shirley Chisholm’s commencement speech at Mount Holyoke and Betty Friedan’s commencement address at Smith College, both in 1981. Considering that both women fought for gender equality, their speeches take on noticeably different tones. What did each woman say in her speech, and what different tactics did they employ? What might account for that?

- In the two discussions about the Equal Rights Amendment, what arguments are made in support of the ERA and what arguments are made in opposition to the ERA? What differences do you notice between the ways in which Anne Scott and Karen DeCrow construct their arguments and how Phyllis Schlafly and Geline B. Williams construct theirs? Which arguments do you find to be more direct and clear and why? Which arguments do you find to be more persuasive? Why might that be?

- Have students research one of the women included in this source set (suggestions include Margaret Chase Smith, Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Friedan, Shirley Chisholm, Phyllis Schlafly, Geline B. Williams). How would their selected person define the term “feminism” and why? Students should be prepared to put their findings in a 1 to 2 page written response or in an oral recording.

- In 2020, Virginia became the 38th pivotal state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), decades after the ratification deadline had passed. Have students conduct more research on the ERA, including legislation and Supreme Court decisions that either support or contradict the ERA. Then, have students discuss: Is a modern-day ERA needed to guarantee equal protection under the law on the basis of sex?

- In 1971, Helen Reddy’s song “I Am Woman” was released and became a number one hit the following year, eventually selling over one million copies as a single. Have students listen to “I Am Woman” and follow along with the lyrics. After discussing what the song means, students should write their own songs that they feel best encapsulate the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

- Imagine it is 1964. Have students create campaign slogans for Margaret Chase Smith in her bid for president. How should they address gender in their slogans?