

United States - Second-Wave Feminism: Accomplishments & Lessons

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"Today is the beginning of a new movement. Today is the end of millennia of oppression."
— Kate Millett, feminist author, speaking to 50,000 in New York City, August 26, 1970.

AUGUST 26, 1970 marked the public emergence of second-wave feminism, coming 50 years after the winning of women's suffrage.

The women's liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s had a profound effect on society. It also had a profound effect on those of us who were a part of it. Working collectively for women's liberation, reveling in the joy and sisterhood that comes from that, was a life-changing experience.

I had the good fortune to be one of those women, as a member of Boston Female Liberation — one of the first and most widely respected radical feminist organizations of that time. I was also on the national staff of the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition (WONAAC) in 1971.



Second-wave feminism was part of the '60s radicalization. Howard Petrick

What is second-wave feminism? What did it accomplish? What can a new generation learn from it?

Coming on the heels of the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, women began to fight for their rights as part of a broader radicalization of youth that was unfolding, starting in the late 1960s.

To assess the accomplishments of second-wave feminism, it's helpful to take a quick look at the status of women at the time. As a whole, women were second-class individuals with limited opportunities.

Women were channeled into “female” jobs that paid less than those of men. We had no control over our bodies, with lack of accessibility to birth control and abortion.

Many of us were denied the possibility of furthering our education if we so desired, and were told over and over that motherhood and the home is where women “belonged.”

Marching into History

Following years of consciousness-raising groups — where women came together to discover that their “problems” were not individual ones but rooted in society — and years of attempts to legalize abortion, second-wave feminism came into public view with the massive women’s rights demonstrations on August 26, 1970.

On that day demonstrations took place in ninety cities, the largest being in New York City with 50,000 women marching down Fifth Avenue. The actions had three demands: free abortion on demand, no forced sterilization; free community controlled 24-hour childcare centers; and equal opportunities in jobs and education.

A diverse coalition of groups came together around these demands, including Church Women United, National Organization for Women (NOW), Redstockings, Socialist Workers Party, Third World Women’s Alliance, High School Student Alliance, and National Welfare Rights Organization, to name just a few.

Prior to the day of the march, numerous imaginative actions occurred. “Women of the World Unite” and “March on August 26 for Equality” were two forty-foot banners hung from the Statue of Liberty. “Freedom trash cans” were placed all over the city, into which symbols of women’s denigration were thrown.

Ruthann Miller, the official coordinator of the New York City march, described what happened that day in an interview published in Jacobin in November 2020. [1] The police had assumed few would march and had refused to block the street, saying that “the girls” could march on the sidewalk with their signs.

Miller explains: “Very early before the scheduled time, it was clear that large numbers were amassing.”

With the urging of participants yelling “turn around, turn around” to the police to view the size of the crowd, “I gave the signal, and the fifty-thousand-strong March for Equality began. Women once again marched into history.”

A major focus of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s was the issue of abortion, which was illegal at the time. Upwards of 5,000 women died each year from back-alley or self-induced abortions. The mortality rate for nonwhite women was 12 times that of white women.

The Abortion Struggle

Those of us in Boston Female Liberation realized that we didn’t choose the abortion issue on which to focus. It chose us; it was literally a life-and-death issue, one that struck at the very foundations of women’s oppression under capitalism. We demanded full control of our bodies. Without this, women could never be free.

We also realized that one group alone could not win legalization of abortion. So in July 1971, 36 members of Boston Female Liberation, the largest representation of any single women's group, joined the 1,000 women who came together in New York City to form the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition.

The conference came out of a call from women in New Haven, Connecticut, who were proposing a united nationwide campaign for the repeal of all abortion laws and no forced sterilization.

The New York City conference adopted a plan of action that included mass demonstrations, abortion hearings, testimonials, caravans, speak-outs, and legislative and judicial actions. "No forced sterilizations" and "Repeal of all contraceptive laws" were the demands adopted by the conference.

WONAAC reached out far and wide and gained endorsements from women who were members of NOW, Planned Parenthood, notable feminists and lawyers such as Black feminist Florynce (Flo) Kennedy, and others.

Local women's liberation groups, campus groups, socialists, and many others all united around repealing abortion laws. "Abortion, a woman's right to choose!" was our rallying cry.

One of the brochures put out by WONAAC explained: "A woman's right to control her own body — to choose when and if she will bear children, to have access to safe, effective means of contraception, and not to fear forced or coerced sterilization — is a fundamental right restricted or denied by law and by custom in every state in the United States."

As the movement was still gaining strength, a major victory was won in January 1973, when the Supreme Court legalized abortion in the historic Roe v. Wade case. This victory is the biggest achievement of second-wave feminism.

Other Accomplishments

In addition to the abortion victory, second-wave feminism accomplished many other things. Avenues opened up for women in both education and employment. Women broke into "non-traditional" jobs and became electricians, plumbers, machine operators and more.

Others pursued career paths that most women before them could only dream of — engineers, architects and doctors, to name just a few.

The passage of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited discrimination against women in any educational program receiving federal funds, had a huge impact on women in sports.

One of the major achievements of the women's liberation movement, and perhaps one that may be hard to recognize today, is the change in cultural mores — most fundamentally in the family structure and marriage.

In the early 1960s, two-thirds of all children were raised in the "traditional nuclear family," i.e. father as breadwinner, with mother and father as a married couple. Today, that pattern is no longer the dominant one.

A reflection of this change, coming after years of protests, was the Supreme Court decision in June 2015, legalizing same-sex marriage. According to a study done in 2019 by the Pew Research Center, almost one-quarter of all children in the U.S. now live in a single-parent home. In addition, it is now more common to live with a partner to whom you are not married than with one to whom you are. In

another study done by the Pew Research Center in 2019, 59% of people aged 18-44 have lived with an unmarried partner at some point in their lives. And 69% recognize this living arrangement as acceptable.

Second-wave feminists organized not only around the issue of abortion, but also viewed the issue of childcare as important.

For example, in 1971 Boston Female Liberation participated along with other groups in a coalition that succeeded in placing a referendum for free, community-controlled childcare up to 24 hours per day on the Cambridge, Massachusetts ballot. Despite the fact that 76% of the vote was won, the Cambridge City Council refused to implement it.

In 1971, then President Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have created a national network of federally-funded childcare centers. Along with this veto came an ideological campaign against childcare, claiming that advocates wanted the government to rear children, asserting that child labor would rise, and stressing that women's place "was naturally in the home."

ERA Stalemate and Gay Uprising

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), also a major issue at the time, remains one of the unresolved issues coming out of the women's liberation movement of that time

First introduced in Congress in 1923, the amendment simply stated "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." In 1972, the ERA was finally approved by both houses of Congress. The amendment was then sent to the states for ratification, with a seven-year deadline that required an extension that was granted by Congress in 1982.

In response to a right-wing campaign attacking the ERA, thousands took to the streets. In Springfield, Illinois in 1976, 16,000 marched, some coming from the East Coast in an ERA Freedom Train, to demand ratification by the Illinois legislature. In 1978, 100,000 marched in Washington, D.C.

Nevertheless, anti-woman forces were able to block the ERA ratification. The ERA is still not part of the constitution.

Related to the rise of second-wave feminism was the emergence of the gay rights movement. In 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City's Greenwich Village, a bar frequented by gay people.

Police harassment of gays was a common occurrence at the time. However, on June 28, 1969, the actions of both regular cops and riot police were met with street battles and demonstrations involving thousands. The Stonewall Rebellion, as it has been called, marked the public emergence of the gay liberation movement, a movement hailed by many feminists at the time.

Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian rights organization, grew rapidly in the aftermath of these events. While some conservative feminists were initially opposed to the involvement of lesbians in the women's movement, that opposition gradually disappeared.

Over the decades, many myths and misconceptions have arisen about second-wave feminism. One such myth is that it was a movement exclusively of white middle-class women.

Myths and Misconceptions

While white women were certainly the majority, Black women were an integral part of the movement from the beginning. Black women, triply oppressed — due to the color of their skin, as women, and as workers — were able to raise specific class-based issues.

They were able to point out that while many white middle-class women could remain in the home, Black women needed to work to support their families. And since Black women faced special attacks from the government due to racism, they, along with Puerto Rican, Chicana and Native American women, raised demands that spoke to their needs, such as “no forced sterilizations.”

Black women often formed their own organizations to fight for their demands.

The Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), founded in 1970, had its origins in the civil rights movement, specifically the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the major organizations in the fight for Black rights in the 1960s.

TWWC’s newspaper, Triple Jeopardy, printed its first issue in the fall of 1971. It issued a poster with the heading: “Smash capitalism, racism and sexism.”

The Combahee River Collective formed in 1974 in Boston. In the Combahee River Collective statement published in April 1977, it states clearly: “Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start.”

A groundbreaking article written by Maryanne Weathers in 1969, titled “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force,” is today still used in women’s and gender studies classes. Weathers was both a member of Boston Female Liberation and the Black and Third World Women’s Alliance.

Other misconceptions about second-wave feminism actually stem from attacks on feminists at the time from reactionary “pro-family” and “pro-life” forces. Some of these caricatures still resonate today in popular depictions of the movement as consisting of bra burners and man-hating lesbians.

Experiencing the never-ending attacks on women’s rights — especially attacks on the right to abortion — some have come to the false conclusion that second-wave feminists “dropped the ball.” One important lesson coming out of the women’s liberation movement of these years is the understanding that no right is secure; that we must continue to fight.

Women’s oppression is so fundamental to the workings of capitalism that it should be no surprise that the movement meets such opposition from those who benefit from the second-class status of women.

Another aspect, however, needs to be kept in mind — the struggle for women’s liberation in the 1960s and early 1970s was not monolithic. Different political perspectives were present, from conservative feminists in the leadership of organizations such as NOW who wanted a bigger piece of the pie under the present system, to radical feminists such as many of us in Boston Female Liberation who believed that full women’s liberation can never be won under capitalism.

The radical wing of the movement also understood that if we don’t fight for our rights, no one will. We must be independent of both capitalist parties, and organize a movement that refuses to subordinate women’s rights to anyone or anything.

Some women like me, initially a radical feminist, became socialists. We saw no contradiction in being both a feminist and a socialist. And we took the lessons we had learned in organizing to the new women's movement.

Ruthann Miller is a good example of this. She was an active socialist who had worked prior to August 26, 1970 in the fight to legalize abortion in New York state, and had participated in the anti-Vietnam War movement. She understood the importance of uniting as many forces as possible around agreed-upon demands.

Masses of people in motion are what makes change, and building coalitions and alliances with organizations and individuals with varying political perspectives is necessary to do this.

Lessons and Challenges for Today

Noting the accomplishments of second-wave feminism provides the opportunity to draw some lessons for today. First and foremost, fighting for the liberation of women is not some secondary struggle.

If women are not free, no one is free. An independent women's movement that draws in as many people as possible is necessary. Seeking alliances with others around key demands is essential.

As Ruthann Miller explained, "Today as new young women organize, it does seem important to see clearly that we need to organize politically the largest number of women from different walks of life — different groups in coalitions around what we can agree on — and leave our disagreements for another time."

In the 48 years since the Roe v. Wade decision, the attacks on the right to abortion have been relentless. Having control over our bodies — whether or not, or when, to bear children — is fundamental to our liberation.

The focus on abortion rights in the early days of second-wave feminism was the correct decision. The centrality of abortion rights internationally has recently become clear, as women from Ireland to Poland and Argentina have been in the streets in massive numbers, culminating in some recent victories.

The situation facing women today highlights our second-class status in society and cries out for immediate action.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the unfolding recession, 800,000 women left the work force just in the months of August and September 2020. Many of these women face the effects of the pandemic on their families: children being home due to schools and childcare centers closed.

The Washington Post headlined an article in July, 2020: "Coronavirus childcare crisis will set women back a generation," and added "one out of four women who reported becoming unemployed during the pandemic said it was because of a lack of childcare — twice the rate among men."

This crisis poses serious challenges for those of us fighting for women's rights. Right-wing forces, fueled by the government and with wind in their sails, will continue with their attacks on our rights.

In these challenging times, all women — from those of us who were involved in second-wave feminism to those just entering the struggle — need to come together as equal fighters and chart a course forward.

Chanting “We will never go back,” we continue to march for our rights. From Poland to Argentina, the women of the world inspire us!

Nancy Rosenstock

P.S.

- Against the Current No. 211, March/April 2021:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc211/second-wave-feminism-accomplishments-lessons/>
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Footnotes

[1] November 1, 2020 online edition of Jacobin; it is an interview Rosenstock conducted with Ruthann Miller, the strike coordinator of the August 26, 1970 march in New York City. Available on ESSF (article 57029), [United States : How the Strike for Equality Relunched the Struggle for Women’s Liberation in the US](#).