

## **Issue Brief: European Americans and Women/Gender Issues**

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**Key Words:** waves of feminism; feminism; whiteness in feminism; history of feminism

**Description:** This issue brief outlines the involvement of European Americans (white) women in the three phases of the feminist movement in the United States and offers that white women controlled the direction of the movement during the first and second phases. This brief also discusses contemporary feminist movement organizing during what is currently called the third phase. It offers examples of “barriers” being eradicated and “bridges” that are being built between white (majority) and non-white (minority) women.

### **Key points:**

- The first two phases of the women’s movement in the United States has been dominated by European American (white) women.
- Although women advocated for the right to vote during this first wave of feminism, they all-too-often neglected to address issues of race or class.
- With the onset of the civil rights movement for blacks in the 1960s and the anti-war sentiment of the nation, the feminist movement evolved into a second wave.
- While many accomplishments and gains were achieved, this second wave is largely criticized as being dominated by white women.
- Some white women and many women of color offered critical analyses about the second wave of feminism. Many ventured to call it a “white women’s movement.”
- The onset of these critiques shepherded what has been called the third wave of feminism. In this third and current wave, many women embark on delivering social justice to women understanding that they have numerous identities and associations – identities and associations that serve to frame how they view and participate in civil society.

### **Issue brief:**

This brief takes up the journey of American feminism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary times spanning what has been called three waves of activity. These three waves are respectively the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1920, the early 1960s through the late 1970s and the early 1990s to current times. This brief offers that white women have controlled the direction of American feminism in most, if not all, of the first and second waves. The brief concludes that a transformation is currently occurring that realizes that there is no singular experience to being a woman and thus feminism must encompass cultural and class experiences. As such, some white

women have joined the chorus of women of color who claim that feminism must include issues of class, race and ethnicity.

The first wave of feminism in the United States is mostly connected to de jure related

issues and namely the quest for securing women's suffrage and

discussions about race were largely absent. Although many of its leaders

such as Susan B. Anthony (pictured at left), Lucretia Coffin Mott, Lucy

Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were staunch white abolitionists and

quite vocal regarding the emancipation of slavery, the central discourse

of the feminist movement was devoid of issues regarding race. There

was little discussion about blacks and other non-whites being extended

the right to vote. A seemingly singular voice bringing the issue of race into the context of

feminism came from Sojourner Truth (pictured below), who was an ex-slave. At a women's

convention in 1851, in Akron, Ohio she delivered the famed "Ain't I A Woman?" speech. Her

words spoke to the "narrowness" of the thinking at the time – a

thinking that was chiefly shaped by the belief of what

womanhood was supposed to be.<sup>1</sup> Although there were some

examples of radicalism at the time, many future critics labeled

the organizing that took place as primarily catering to white

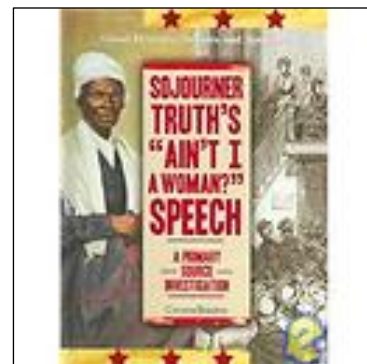
middle and upper class women and especially beholden to a code of ethics that was conservative

and continued to label women in the context of what was then called the "culture of

domesticity." The core principles of this belief were that women were virtuous, extremely pious

and that all of their efforts were to center around the home and the family. Critics of the first-

wave of feminism believe that this ideology kept the movement from challenging other de facto



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<sup>1</sup> Heywood, Leslie L., *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*

representations of feminist oppression and from organizing across race and class boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

Critics have also called this the “Cult of True Womanhood” and felt that its membership had no room for non-whites. By claiming her “womanhood,” Sojourner Truth challenged the thinkers of the time to recognize that she too was a woman and therefore, in addition to racism, experienced oppression from the male dominated society.

Although the above mentioned abolitionists and women’s rights activists were not able to achieve the goal of women’s suffrage during their lifetime, it did finally become law in 1920 with the passage of the nineteenth amendment thus signaling the end of what has come to be known as the first wave of feminism. While much transpired between 1920 and the 1960s that saw greater numbers of women (white and non-white) entering the workforce and into non-traditional jobs<sup>3</sup>, the second wave of feminism is credited as having begun in the early 1960s with the onset of the civil rights movement for blacks.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the earlier wave, this second wave which lasted through the late 1970s focused of de jure (e.g., passage of the Equal Rights Amendment) and de facto issues such as employment discrimination, sexual harassment and abortion rights. Icons such as the late Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, both white women, are often credited with being major forces of the feminist movement of the 1960s. Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, which was written in 1963, is often seen as being the catalyst for the second wave as it articulated the ongoing frustration and challenges women continued to face in a society continually dominated by men. As a journalist for New York Magazine, Gloria Steinem wrote a scathing article (also in 1963) about the treatment of women by Playboy magazine. In spite of the gains that women had made since 1920, women realized that they were continuously locked out of jobs and continued to be treated as an “other” in American society (**a graph or**

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<sup>3</sup> Cite text used for class

<sup>4</sup> Cite text used for class.

**chart will be inserted here depicting on-going challenges for women**). Friedan would go on to become one of the founders of the National Organization of Women (NOW), which began operation in 1966 and Gloria Steinem became the founding editor and publisher of Ms. magazine.

Although the nation failed to ratify the equal rights amendment to the United States Constitution (falling short just by three states), there were many in the feminist movement who believed that the goal of equal rights had been achieved. At the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, there were some who believed that the country had arrived at delivering women from the depths of denigration as they were now enrolling and graduating from colleges, entering the workforce at increasing rates and securing greater numbers of professional positions thanks to legislative and societal changes that had taken place in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>5</sup> While this may have been true for many, women of color continued to find that they were at the proverbial low-end of the totem pole when it came to achieving equal rights (**another chart will be implemented here depicting this**). As such, many call the activism that took place in the 1960s and 70s became what many have called the “white women’s movement,” as they felt that it did not address the diversity of all women.<sup>6</sup>

Whites and blacks criticized second wave activists, and those of the first wave for that matter, for replicating the racist and essentialist views of dominant white males. Women of color created their own spaces because they felt that the “whiteness” of feminist organizing did not consider the diversity of their needs.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the third and current wave of feminism came into play in the early 1990s because “the simultaneity of oppressions in race, sex, and class (was) of utmost importance” to them and they believed that the feminist movement of the 60s

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<sup>5</sup> cite

<sup>6</sup> cite

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and 70s and been too silent on these issues – issues they believed served to shape their worldviews.<sup>8</sup>

**I stop here understanding that this will need to close shortly (and probably need to cut some stuff above). Remaining points:**

- White women did much to build bridges via organizing and academia (writing);
- while some barriers were constructed, some bridges were also built between ethnicities and sexualities (weave in Peggy McIntosh's 1988 work "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack
- End with dichotomy of white women in the feminist movement representing "majority" privilege and simultaneously their experiences as the "minority"
- Will need to weave in census data on white women and the rest of the ethnoracial pentagon.
- I welcome any suggestions about what I could cut to keep this b/w 800 to 900 words.

#### General References (3-5)

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<sup>8</sup> Cite (268 of encyclopedia)