



FEMINISMS AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Feminisms and Feminist Movements in Europe

XIX-XXI

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ABSTRACT

The feminist sensibility long preceded movements of the same name. During the first half of the nineteenth century, feminist ideas were essentially driven by individuals, both women and men, with the first feminist movements forming in Europe only in the mid-nineteenth century. These movements first and foremost advocated for women's right to pursue an education and freely exercise their talents, notably in the form of a paid activity and participation in public affairs. While these movements were mostly organized in the framework of nation states, they were very early on structured on the international scale as well. However, nationalism and the two world wars of the twentieth century tested the internationalism they laid claim to. During the 1970s and 1980s a new and important moment emerged for feminist movements, which now aspired to women's liberation on both the material and cultural levels. With globalization favouring transnational links, feminists today act within more or less institutional frameworks on various levels, ranging from the local to the transnational.



The symbol of the feminist movement consists of the symbol for the planet Venus, chosen during the eighteenth century as the biological symbol for the female gender, and the clenched fist used by the anti-Vietnam War and Black Power movements during the 1960s. It appeared for the first time in 1968 as the symbol of Woman Power in the United States, before quickly spreading across the globe. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

DÉCLARATION DES DROITS DE LA
FEMME ET DE LA CITOYENNE,

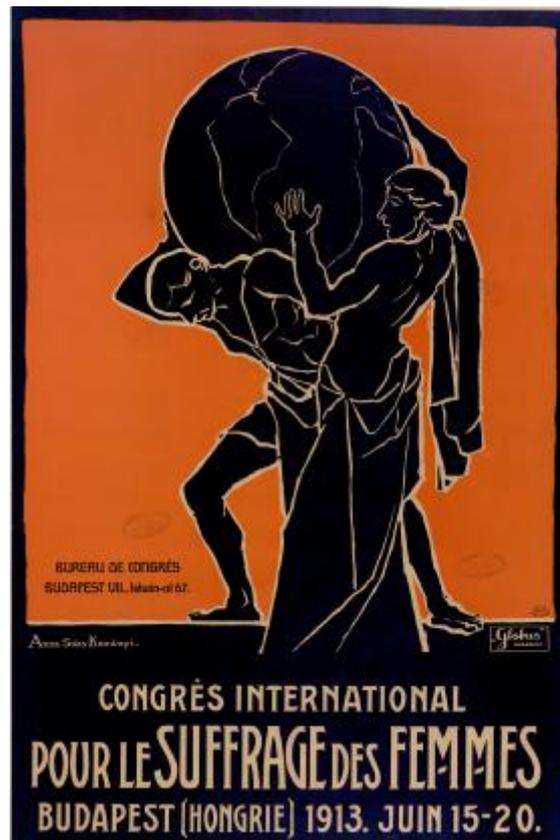
*A décréter par l'Assemblée nationale dans
ses dernières stances ou dans celle de
la prochaine législature.*

P R É A M B U L E .

Les mères, les filles, les sœurs, représentantes de la nation, demandent d'être constituées en assemblée nationale. Considérant que l'ignorance, l'oubli ou le mépris des droits de la femme, sont les seules causes des malheurs publics et de la corruption des gouvernements, ont résolu d'exposer dans une déclaration solennelle, les droits naturels, inaliénables et sacrés de la femme, afin que cette déclaration, constamment présente à tous les membres du corps social, leur rappelle sans cesse leurs droits et leurs devoirs, afin que les actes du pouvoir des femmes, et ceux du pouvoir des hommes pouvant être à chaque instant comparés avec le but de toute institution politique, en soient plus respectés, afin que les réclamations des citoyennes, fondées désormais sur des principes simples et incontestables, tournent toujours au maintien de la constitution, des bonnes mœurs, et au bonheur de tous.

En conséquence, le sexe supérieur en beauté comme en courage, dans les souffrances maternelles, reconnaît et déclare, en présence

Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen, Olympe de Gouges, 1791. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Feminist demonstration in Paris, rue Montmartre, March 29, 1914. Source : Bibliothèque nationale de France. [Wikimedia Commons](#)



"Free women," poster for the anarchist union CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), Spain 1936.



A protest in Italy in support of the law on abortion (1975): "I died from an illegal abortion"; "Abortion is not a crime." Source : Aucafedeleurope



Initially used by the medical corps in France to refer to an effeminate man, the adjective “*féministe*” and substantive “*féminisme*” were first used in their current meaning by the French journalist and activist Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914), who founded *La Citoyenne*. The term made its way throughout Europe, and designated, in the broad sense of the term, both a form of thought that was critical of gender inequality, and the various means for protesting it. The historiography of feminist movements today stresses their diverse character and distinguishes between a number of waves, respectively centred around women’s rights (mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), women’s liberation (1970s and 1980s), and their multiple identities (1990s to the present).

Revolutions and Gender Inequality (1789-1848)

The French Revolution was a catalyst for debate regarding women’s emancipation. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* from August 26, 1789, which declared that “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights” (art. 1), suggests that equality was granted to all human beings. However, and despite women’s participation during revolutionary times, the successive assemblies granted elements of civil equality to women (especially in matters of inheritance), but refused to give them the political equality that was demanded, among others, by the mathematician and deputy marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), as well as the woman of letters Olympe de Gouges (1748 or 1755-1793), who in 1791 published the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*. By confining women to the domestic sphere in this way, the French First Republic proved itself to be profoundly anti-feminist, depriving women of rights as fundamental as the right of assembly and the right to participate in expressing the general will.

This paradox prompted criticism abroad, for instance the English philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1759-1797) 1792 response to Talleyrand’s (1754-1838) report of the preceding year to the *Assemblée constituante*, which had affirmed that women should only receive a domestic education. She denounced the unjust and incoherent character of women’s submission. That same year, the mayor of the Prussian city of Königsberg, Theodor G. von Hippel (1741-1796), anonymously published a text in which he argued for improving the civil status of women. Feminist demands emerged in similar fashion in a number of European countries during the 1790s, including France, the Dutch Republic, and states and principalities in Italy and Germany. Napoleon, who was crowned Emperor in 1804, nevertheless equipped France that same year with a retrograde Civil Code with regard to gender equality, which validated the submission of married women to their husbands and consecrated the authority of the *pater familias*. Owing to the Napoleonic conquests, this Civil Code was imposed on—or served as a model for—most of Europe, exacting a heavy price on gender relations in Europe up through the mid-twentieth century.

The new European order which arose from the Congress of Vienna (1815) was not by nature inclined to promote reform movements, even more so those of a feminist nature. Nevertheless, the social utopia developed by the Frenchman Charles Fourier (1772-1837), for whom the people’s progress depended on women’s progress towards liberty, along with the reflections of Saint-Simonians on women’s liberty, which they explored in all its aspects without taboos, were discussed in neighbouring countries during the 1820s and 1830s. The first Saint-Simonian women’s newspapers, such as *La Femme libre*, which was published and written exclusively by women, promoted the circulation of these ideas.

During the revolutions of the “People’s Spring” in 1848, women could be seen on barricades and in democratic clubs in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Prague, Frankfurt, Milan, Barcelona, Cologne, Venice, and Stockholm. Taking up the demands for rights and equality in their own name, they called for the right to participate in affairs of state, pursue an education, enjoy freedom in marriage, and divorce. Jeanne Deroin (1805-1894) in Paris and Karoline Perin (1808-1888) in Vienna called for women’s suffrage, and founded women’s democratic clubs, such as the one in Paris centred around Eugénie Niboyet (1796-1883) and her newspaper *La Voix des femmes*.

In the ensuing restoration phase, the anti-feminist reaction was harshly felt, as the governments of continental

Europe closed women's clubs and associations and forbade women from expressing themselves in the political press. From 1850 in German states and the Austrian Empire, women not only did not obtain equality at the civil level, but were also legally forbidden from any activity of a political nature, measures that excluded them from a public sphere that was being built at the time.

The Birth of Feminist Movements (1848-1880)

While the women of continental Europe were momentarily reduced to silence, new feminist initiatives emerged from the 1850s in England and Scandinavia, in connection with debates surrounding legal reforms in the fields of matrimony, education, and women's employment. English feminists mobilized against the legal subjection of wives in marriage (dispossession of their personal property in favour of their husbands, highly unequal handling of adultery, virtual impossibility of divorce). With the support of Members of Parliament such as Lord Henry Brougham (1778-1868), they succeeded in passing a law that facilitated divorce (Matrimonial Causes Act, 1857), but married women were still dispossessed of their own property. In Scandinavian countries, the legal submission of women, authority of fathers over daughters, and status of single adult women were called into question and became the subject of reform in the 1850s.

During the ensuing decade, feminist movements formed in Western and Central Europe. In France, the first feminist associations were created at the initiative of the journalist André Léo (masculine pseudonym of Léodile Champseix, 1824-1900). In the German states, Louise Otto-Peters (1819-1895) and Auguste Schmidt (1833-1902) created the General German Women's Association in 1865, in the presence of the socialist leader August Bebel (1840-1913). Feminist associations were also born in Bohemia, Bulgaria, the Ukraine and Moldavia. During the 1870s and 1880s, this first feminist wave extended to Eastern and Southern Europe. However, in Russia, Poland, Hungary and Spain, one can hardly speak of a feminist movement before 1900. In Russia, the All-Russian Union for Women's Equality was created in 1905 in the wake of the revolution, although its calls for female suffrage were not taken up by the revolutionary movement.

Focusing on women's rights, these feminist movements pursued objectives that revolved around two central questions: reforming the education of young girls and marriage. Other demands were added on to these, such as reforming sexual morals, gender equality before the law, and women's access to universities and qualified occupations. During the decade preceding the Great War, women's right to vote became a dominant demand in Europe. Moderate and more radical branches were in confrontation on all these questions, each with its own corresponding modes of action and arguments. The vast majority of feminists were legalists, preferably making recourse to petitions or the press, and seeking to obtain the support of politicians for their causes. Only a minority, such as British suffragettes, resorted to violence in order to be heard, for instance when Emily Davison (1872-1913) threw herself beneath the king's horses during the Epsom derby in June 1913. She died four days later as a result of her wounds. Beyond these differences, the period between 1890 and 1910 marked a high point for first wave feminism in Europe.

The Era of Feminist Congresses (1890-1914)

During the nineteenth century, feminist movements emerged and developed in the framework of the nation state. In areas where such a state was lacking or in multi-ethnic states (Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires), they became established in connection with nationalist movements, which highlights the specific role of women in the transmission of national culture (Poland, Bohemia, Ukraine, Bulgaria). Many feminists were involved in other social movements, which were as numerous as they were varied: anti-slavery, religious, pedagogical, hygienist, unionist, liberal, socialist, anarchist, and pacifist. The numerous and complex links between these movements were established and displayed during international congresses that brought together activists on the European scale and beyond.

The two largest feminist internationals were the International Council of Women (ICW, created in 1888), and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA, 1904). With 7 million members from 24 countries, the ICW brought together 2,000 women in Berlin in June 1904 for the International Conference of Women, which revolved around the four primary areas of activity of the associations it represented: women's education, professional training and employment, social institutions, and the legal status of women. Organized internationally within the IWSA, the women's suffrage movement emphasized the universal character of women's rights and presented itself as a human rights movement. Comparisons between countries enabled it to exert pressure on national political decision makers.

The proletarian women's movement also organized at the international level. In 1907, female German workers called for the First International Conference of Socialist Women in Stuttgart, with women agreeing on the demand for unrestricted suffrage. It was during the Second International Conference in Copenhagen in 1910 that Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) proposed to simultaneously organize an International Women's Day in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, and Switzerland, to be held on March 19, 1911.

Aside from a minority of pacifist women, who in April 1915 created the Women's International Committee (and later League) for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the First World War put a temporary halt to women's internationalism and brought a halt to feminist demands. With the declaration of war, women's associations in all countries suspended their demands in order to serve the nation and prove their patriotism. Women were mobilized in the war effort of warring countries, although protest returned as the conflict continued. The year 1917 saw female workers go on strike and protest for better working conditions and higher pay, such as the "*midinettes*" working as seamstresses in Paris, or the "*munitionnettes*" working in war factories. In Russia, the revolution of February 1917 was launched by women's protests held on International Women's Day. Owing to the overthrow of monarchies and the political upheaval resulting from the end of the war, women won the right to vote in multiple European countries (Russia in 1917, Germany, Austria, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and the United Kingdom in 1918, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in 1919), where they henceforth participated in political parties and held seats in national parliaments.

On the Feminist Front, From One Post-war Period to Another (1920-1960)

The involvement of women in the war effort shook representations of virile superiority. During the 1920s, both the world and fashion changed. In major European capitals during the "Roaring Twenties," clothing and haircuts shrank (tomboy haircut). However, the "modern woman," the smoking female student, or the working and financially independent woman remained in the minority. In reality, gender relations did not deeply change, with societies aspiring to a return to normality.

Under the leadership of both Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), a member of the communist government that arose from the October Revolution, and Inessa Armand (1874-1920), a member of the party's Central Committee, Russia became the country to grant women the most rights: equality of spouses with regard to children, systematic granting of divorce by mutual consent, protection for pregnant workers, maternity leave, free and easy access to abortion. Reforms to the Family Code (1918 and 1926), along with the measures taken during the 1920s to promote the integration of women in political and economic life, led to hopes of a profound change in gender relations. However, from the late 1920s, a new Stalinist model took hold, which reasoned in terms of power and embarked on a controlling natalist policy. Soviet authorities, who wanted to restore family order and prevent any form of "feminist deviationism," closed the women's section of the Central Committee (created in 1919) and decreed the women's question resolved. During the 1930s, the recently granted rights (abortion, divorce) were abolished or largely evaded, in favour of a pro-family and natalist policy.

In countries where women had won the right to vote following the war, political parties courted them and worried

about the consequences of this right in terms of political majorities. New questions emerged for female activists, such as how to rise to political office, and how to act on all fronts in order to obtain other rights. The mobilization for the right to vote continued in France and Italy, albeit without success until the end of the Second World War. Feminists everywhere met with strong resistance, amid societies in transformation marked by a tense social and political context.

In France, only a small minority of feminists belonging to the neo-Malthusian branch denounced the passage of the natalist law from July 31, 1920, which banned all information regarding contraception and abortion. The French feminist Avril de Sainte-Croix (1855-1939) took up the torch of international struggle against regulated prostitution (abolitionist movement), the trafficking of women and children, and for preventative medicine for venereal diseases. Maria Vérone (1874-1938), the journalist and president of the French League for Women's Rights, published numerous articles on the law of single mothers, divorce, condition of war widows, the housing crisis, pacifism, and equal pay for equal work. During the 1930s, she shared the struggle of a new international association that divided feminist circles. Born in Berlin in June 1929, and known for its virulence and dynamism, Open Door International: For the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker fought for professional gender equality and against specific protections for women workers, notably denouncing the ban from working at night or working in mines or underground. Meanwhile, all feminist branches agreed on opposing the exclusion of married women from the working world, one that had been implemented in many countries facing economic crisis, with the exception of France, Sweden and Norway.

In a Europe that was anything but peaceful, pacifist women redoubled their efforts to change the paradigm in international relations, and to prevent the dangers of arms proliferation. Within the women's unions for the League of Nations (LN), women from various European countries mobilized and strove to successfully complete the pacifying project of the LN. WILPF rallied women around major causes, and in 1932 gathered eight million signatures for a petition on disarmament.

Fascist regimes in Italy and Nazi Germany sought to regain control over women. Once feminist associations were forbidden (in 1933 in Germany, 1938 in Italy), female activists were reduced to silence, and women were enlisted in large women's organizations under the authority of the party. During the Second World War, as customary in times of war, sexuality, especially that of women, was subject to heightened control, and sexual violence was used as a weapon of war and for purges.

In the aftermath of the conflict, political rights were finally granted to women in a number of countries in Western Europe (France 1944, Italy 1945, Belgium 1948) and the Balkans (Croatia and Slovenia 1945, Albania 1946, Yugoslavia 1947), while in Southern Europe Greek, Portuguese, and Cypriot women—along with women from Switzerland—were still kept away from the ballot box. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognized both gender equality and equality between spouses. A number of Western European countries inscribed gender equality in their new constitutions (France 1946, Italy 1947, Federal Republic of Germany 1949). During the 1950s, the perception of sexuality evolved, especially that of young people, although European societies during the baby boom wanted stay-at-home mothers, and had difficulty dissociating sexuality and procreation. Allowing access to contraception was the difficult struggle led by family planning associations.

The “Movement Years” West of the Iron Curtain (1960s to 1980s)

In communist countries east of the Iron Curtain, gender equality was part of state ideology, which especially promoted work-family balance for women and liberalized abortion (1955 in the USSR, 1956 in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Romania, 1957 in Czechoslovakia, 1960 in Yugoslavia, and 1972 in the GDR, in other words well before Western European countries), but stigmatized feminism as a “bourgeois” deviance and a subversive movement. The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which was of communist persuasion, promoted

women's rights at the international level, and helped women's associations in the young states emerging from decolonization.

In Western democracies the protest movements of the late 1960s created a favourable context for the emergence of what is called second wave feminism in the United States (Women's Lib) and Western Europe. It was not so much a matter of winning equal rights, but of achieving effective equality—including within the "private" sphere of the family, marriage, and sexuality—as well as the material and cultural "liberation" of women. The exclusion of men from most women's groups and collectives was considered to be an indispensable condition for the emancipation of women. Organized in "consciousness-raising groups," committees and networks of varying sizes and shapes, feminists preferably acted on the local level on projects often social in nature: campaigns for reproductive control (access to the contraceptive pill and abortion liberalization), creation of press outlets (over 400 feminist periodicals in the FRG between 1973 and 1980), women's seminars or universities, and shelters for battered women.

This movement favoured spectacular actions covered by the media and used the weapon of provocative language. In August 1970, a dozen French feminists placed a spray of flowers at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe in memory of the wife of the unknown soldier, "more unknown than the unknown soldier." The French Women's Liberation Movement (Mouvement pour la libération des femmes, MLF) was born. In April 1971, the "Manifeste des 343 salopes" [Manifesto of 343 Sluts], who had the courage to say "I had an abortion" and demand free access to contraception and abortion, appeared in the periodical *Nouvel Observateur*. Taking inspiration from this action, a few weeks later German women, including the journalist Carola Stern (1925-2006) and the actress Romy Schneider (1938-1982), launched the "*Wir haben abgetrieben*" (We had abortions) press campaign in the FRG, in the large circulation magazine *Stern*.

In line with these international mobilizations, the UN declared 1975 as the "Year of the Woman," and in 1979 adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The political influence of feminism, which was visible on the international scale, translated in many countries into the adoption of legislative reforms and programs promoting gender equality during the 1970s and 1980s, and later into efforts to stop sexual harassment and sexist violence. For example, in 1970, the Italian Parliament approved a law on divorce, and partially decriminalized abortion in 1978. In England, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 was followed in 1975 by the Sex Discrimination Act and the Employment Protection Act against wrongful termination in cases of pregnancy, and in 1976 by the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act as well as the Sexual Offenses (Amendment) Act, to strengthen women's rights in the face of sexual violence. In Spain the death of Franco in 1975 and the democratic transition brought about a revival of feminism. The codification of women's rights reflected recognition of their struggle, which went hand in hand with institutionalization, especially political (attribution of dedicated ministries, implementation of quotas in certain political parties in the FRG during the 1980s) and academic (creation of chairs for women's and gender history). This is referred to as state feminism, especially the kind developed in Scandinavian countries and France during the "Roudy years" (1981-1986).

Some feminist activists, referred to as femocrats, became involved in political parties and institutions in order to gain new reforms. On the opposing end were others who were more radical, and wanted to remain independent, but could not avoid a drop in the mobilization of women.

An Activist Revival in a Globalized World (1990s to the Present)

The 1990s were marked by two changes of a different nature. On the one hand, in the East the fall of the Wall and the collapse of the Communist bloc called into question a certain number of rights and advantages for women in these countries, such as abortion, protection against conjugal violence, childcare, and access to qualified occupations. On the other, after the advances of the preceding period, new questions were emphasized. After the

question of the body, which was central during the 1970s, the role of women in political decision-making returned to the forefront and led to laws ensuring quotas or parity (law of June 6, 2000 in France). In addition, gender identity was questioned at the intersection of the feminist and LGBT struggles (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender). Current debates in the feminist movement revolve around gender binarity or fluidity, exploited prostitutes or sex workers, and acceptance of the veil as the freedom to wear what one wants or its refusal as a symbol of oppression. In contrast to the notion that we are living in a post-feminist period in which women have gained all rights, observations show the persistence of gender inequality. In an intersectional perspective, the inequalities of "race" and "class" have also been added, as have those appearing on the global scale as a result of neoliberal globalization. Female migrants, who are particularly exposed to violence, stand as proof of this.

The form of action has also been called into question. An activist revival has seen the emergence of small determined groups such as Pussy Riot in Russia, transnational networks such as the Femen, or mobilizations via social media. #Metoo has enabled the massive and transnational expression of a long-standing revolt towards violence against women.

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