Definition: women's rights movement from Philip's Encyclopedia

Broad term for the international movement that began in the early 19th century to promote the equality of women. Originally concentrating on women's suffrage, the movement has since worked for equality of employment opportunity and pay. See also feminism; suffragette movement

Summary Article: Women's Rights
From Encyclopedia of Global Studies

The concept of women's rights has evolved and expanded as it has been informed by the global activism of women's movements. The expansion of women's rights, however, has not followed the classic trajectory of the expansion of rights of citizenship as proposed by the British sociologist T. H. Marshall. Marshall described the expansion of rights of citizenship in Europe and North America from civil rights in the 17th and 18th centuries, to formal political rights in the 19th century, and finally to social and economic welfare rights in the 20th century. In the case of women's rights, political equality has emerged at a slower pace. Up until the 1950s and 1960s, women generally gained citizenship later than men and sometimes even gained social rights before political rights.

As feminist political theorists like Carole Pateman have pointed out, even though citizenship and rights were often described as universal, they were premised on male norms, which have historically excluded women from participating as full citizens. Citizenship has often been equated with public participation and with rights and obligations in relation to the state, yet for women, structural inequalities in the private sphere (in the family and domestic sectors) have profoundly shaped the extent to which they can claim full citizenship in the public realm.

Thus, a major tension in both the history of women's rights activism as well as in feminist theory has focused on whether women could attain their rights through claims to equality (e.g., women need to attain the rights men have attained in order to be equal) or through claims of difference (women need equal rights in order that their particular experiences and interests might gain validation and full expression). Another debate exists between universal approaches to women's rights and those that emphasize difference through notions of multiculturalism (as was popular in the 1980s) or intersectionality (influenced by the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins in the 1990s), which viewed oppressions based on gender, class, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, class, and disability as creating a system of intersecting, multiple forms of discrimination. Some theorists and activists have emphasized the importance of addressing women's substantive rights, because procedural rights may be insufficient since membership in local, ethnic, religious, national, and global communities may create other impediments that prevent women from exercising their rights. Finally, an influential capabilities approach pioneered by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum views rights-based frames as too limiting because they rely too heavily on formalism. Capabilities theorists focus instead on what people can be or do to realize their full capabilities and full human potential so that they can exercise their rights.

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The Beginnings of Global Mobilization Around Women's Rights

Women's rights have generally been defined within the context of individual societies. The struggle for the right to vote became the first women's rights movement to take on a global dimension. The women's suffrage movement started in the early 1800s in Britain, in the mid-1800s in the United States, and in the late 1800s in China, Japan, India, Korea, and Burma. Some of the earliest transnational associations working on suffrage included the Association Internationale des Femmes (formed in 1868) in Geneva, the International Alliance of Women (founded in 1902), the International Council of Women (established in 1888), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (founded in 1915). Many of these organizations also took up other concerns of women, including equal pay for equal work and equal access to education and industrial training, as well as peace.

New Zealand was the first country to grant women the right to vote in 1893; Finland was the first country to allow not only full suffrage but also the right for all to run for office. Large numbers of new nations granted both men and women the right to vote at the same time as they achieved independence in the period after World War II. Saudi Arabia has been the last country in the world to limit suffrage to men alone, although King Abdullah has granted women the right to vote beginning in the 2015 elections.

While U.S. and European women's movements and transnational mobilization experienced a downturn in the 1930s with economic depression, the rise of fascism, and later with the outbreak of World War II, women in other parts of the world continued to mobilize regionally. The Pan-Pacific Women's Association, formed in 1928, was concerned with women's legal and political status, as well as women's access to education. At their 1955 Manila conference, their name was changed to the Pan-Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association. Similarly, the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Pan American Union, which was formed in 1928 in Havana, Cuba, focused on women's civil and political rights and monitored progress on the legal status of women in the region.

Expanding Frameworks for Women's Rights

After World War II, women became involved in numerous independence movements around the globe, providing important experiences and ideological influences for future mobilization. The United Nations became a focal point of women's transnational mobilization and has been referred to by some as the "godmother of the women's movement." Latin American women suffragists pressed for the formation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which was established in 1946. The CSW became a major node of international advocacy and of monitoring the promotion of women's rights globally. The Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) was also formed in 1946 to provide technical and substantive support to the CSW and other UN agencies.

Experiential, ideological, and conceptual differences in how women's rights ought to be framed led to tensions, dialogue, and accommodations between participants from the global North and South, and were evident in a series of conferences beginning with the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico (1975), the Wellesley International Conference on Women and Development (1976), and the Second UN Conference on Women in Copenhagen (1980). Many of the differences had to do with how broadly to frame women's issues and whether women's rights should focus on relations between men and women and on feminism or whether they should be situated within broader concerns of global inequality, political concerns (e.g., apartheid in South Africa), and problems of development and poverty.

By the end of the Decade of Women (1976-1985) and by the time of the UN Conference on Women in...
Nairobi (1985), these debates had subsided as activists in the North came increasingly to accept the importance of global development concerns. New global networks, such as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (formed in 1984), emerged in developing countries to challenge new structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions. Moreover, emerging concerns such as the issue of violence against women united feminists in the North and South.

The United Nations and Women's Rights Globally

The Decade of Women produced the passage of the single most important treaty regarding women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979. It required member-states to enact legislation promoting gender equality and provisions against gender discrimination as well as repeal discriminatory legal provisions. The Decade of Women also saw the formation of several key UN agencies that advocated for women's rights globally. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was formed in 1976, while the commission on CEDAW was formed in 1982 to monitor progress on the treaty. This was followed by the creation of the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) in 1986 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and finally the creation in 1988 of the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) to promote the status of women in the UN system. In 2009, the United Nations announced plans to consolidate UNIFEM, DAW, OSAGI, and INSTRAW after hundreds of nongovernmental organizations pressured the United Nations to create a single organization to advocate for women's rights.

One of the most important global campaigns around women's rights after the 1980s involved violence against women. The 1981 feminist Encounter for Latin America and the Caribbean in Bogota organized a Day to Resist Violence Against Women, leading eventually to commemorations throughout Latin America and to the global campaign “16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence.” In the 1980s, transnational networks formed around violence against women, as did networks around the trafficking of women.

The 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna marked a watershed: It represented a major success for activists in bringing the women's rights agenda into the framework of the human rights agenda. A year later, the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development did the same for women's reproductive rights and sexual health. Demographic discourses about women's fertility rates, family planning, population control, and maternal and child health programs were replaced by women-centered development goals that placed women's health and well-being at the center of reproductive rights concerns as well as concerns about gender equality.

The issue of sexual violence as a weapon of war gained new global recognition with the conflicts in Rwanda (1994) and Bosnia (1992-1995). One of the most important rulings that helped shatter prevailing norms about gender violence was the judgment against former Rwandan mayor Jean-Paul Akayesu, delivered by the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 1998. For the first time in international law, rape was recognized as an act of genocide and a crime against humanity. The ruling was part of a long series of legal efforts to shift the normative ground regarding women and their rights to bodily integrity both during and after civil conflict. After 2000, two new UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) recognized the rights of women during and after war, reflecting changing international norms in this area. The 2000 UNSCR 1325 provides women with a greater role in conflict prevention and resolution, and the 2008 UNSCR 1820 on women, peace, and security notes...
that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity.”

At the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing, women activists found common ground around many issues: the rights of the girl child; increasing women’s leadership roles in government, parliament, and all arenas; continued efforts to increase microcredit to women; and a focus on gender-based violence. Following the Beijing conference, new issues came to the fore, including the adoption of quotas to increase female representation in legislatures; initiatives to make the gender implications of national spending priorities more explicit and fair through gender budgeting initiatives; and efforts to recognize the rights of self-employed or home-based workers.

**Changing Agendas in the Aftermath of the Cold War**

By the 1990s, two strands of thinking regarding rights had come together: (1) the individual-based human rights perspective common in Western liberal thinking and (2) sustainable development concerns. These two emphases are embodied in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights but became separated with the Cold War, as the West tended to emphasize the former set of rights and the Soviet bloc and many developing countries focused on the latter. These two strands were reconnected, and women’s rights claims similarly came to embody both types of rights concerns.

Although it was a major accomplishment of the global women’s movement to get women’s rights defined as human rights, there were several challenges that emerged in response to this normative shift. One came from advocates of cultural rights, who saw women’s rights as clashing with their right to protect ethnic and religious minority indigenous practices and beliefs. This clash between women’s rights and cultural rights was particularly heated over questions pertaining to female genital cutting, honor killings, virginity tests, and other practices that were justified on the grounds that they were necessary to preserve cultural integrity. Yakin Ertürk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women from 2003 to 2009, and others helped shift the discourse around culture by challenging monolithic static representations of culture by both cultural relativists and cultural essentialists who claimed to speak for all of society. Ertürk also called for the state to encourage alternative interpretations of culture by women and by encouraging greater dialogue around these contentious issues.

In the 21st century, there is no question that women’s rights are central to any discourse on citizenship and human rights. Women’s rights claimed center stage in the 2001 Millennium Development Goals, adopted by 192 UN member-states, who set 2015 as the target year in which to achieve eight goals, one of which is to promote gender equality and empower women through education, employment, and political leadership.

**See also:**

Communicative Power, Feminism, Gender Identity, Knowledge Production Systems, Modernization, Social Movements, Solidarity Movements, United Nations

**Further Readings**


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