

A Timeline of Women's Rights & Liberation in the United States

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- 1769: The American colonies adopt the English system decreeing women cannot own property in their own name or keep their own earnings.
- 1777: All states pass laws which take away women's right to vote.
- 1839: Mississippi is the first state to grant women the right to hold property in their own names – as long as they have permission from their husbands.
- 1848: At the Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton presents her “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions,” her take on the Declaration of Independence. She calls for women’s representation in politics, suffrage, property rights, divorce, and custody rights.
- 1868: The 14th Amendment takes effect. Among other things, this establishes birthright citizenship, due process, and the right of all *male* citizens of the US to vote in federal, state and local elections, including African Americans.
- 1869: Arabella Mansfield becomes the first woman allowed to practice law in the United States (Iowa). The same year, Ada H. Kepley becomes the first woman to graduate from a US law school.
- 1872: Victoria Claflin Woodhull becomes the first female presidential candidate in the United States, nominated by the National Radical Reformers.
- Female federal employees are guaranteed equal pay for equal work under the law.
- Susan B. Anthony is arrested for “unlawful voting” when she tests the 14th Amendment.
- 1873: The Comstock Act makes it illegal to send “obscene” materials through the mail, including contraceptives and information *about* contraceptives.
- 1870: The Utah Territory grants women the right to vote. Congress revokes this right in 1877 as part of an effort to stamp out polygamy.
- 1878: Elizabeth Cady Stanton presents the woman suffrage amendment to Congress.
- 1887: The US Senate votes against women’s suffrage for the first time (but not the last).
- 1890: Wyoming grants women the right to vote in all elections.
- 1895: Utah grants women the right to vote and to hold office in its state constitution.
- 1900: By now all states have passed legislation guaranteeing women the right to keep their own wages and hold property in their own names. *Why thank you, gents!*
- 1916: Jeannette Rankin (MT) is first woman is elected to the US House of Representatives.

1917: Members of the National Women's Party go on hunger strike to demand women's suffrage. They are subjected to violent force-feeding. During the "Night of Terror" NWP picketers are arrested and assaulted by prison guards. This ain't *Mary Poppins*!

1920: The 19th Amendment takes effect when ¾ of state legislatures approve. Women can now vote in all elections. Concerns about the collapse of society are not realized.

1921: Margaret Sanger establishes the American Birth Control League, which later becomes Planned Parenthood.

1932: Hattie Wyatt Caraway (AR) is the first woman is elected to the US Senate.

The National Recovery Act forbids more than one family member from holding a government job. As a result, many women lose their jobs while their husbands continue to work.

1933: President Franklin D. Roosevelt appoints Frances Perkins to be the Secretary of Labor. She is the first female cabinet member in US history.

1936: Information about contraception is no longer classified as "obscene," which means that it can be sent through the mail.

1941-1945: During WWII, women's participation in the US workforce increases by 60%. After the war ends, women are rapidly displaced from the workforce by returning male GIs. The auto industry, for example, sees a decrease in female workers from 25% to 7.5%. Say goodnight, Rosie!

1946-1959: Cold War propaganda places the nuclear family at the center of American life and progress. With birth control illegal in many states, American women are encouraged to marry young, have lots of children, and stay home in the name of American values and prosperity. They are discouraged from pursuing college degrees, unless they are seeking an "M.R.S."

1950: The first class of women is admitted to Harvard Law School—14 of 534 students.

1954: Priscilla Holmes is the first woman is elected to the *Harvard Law Review*.

1956: Lila Fenwick is the first African American woman to graduate from Harvard Law.

1960: The FDA approves the first birth control pill for use.

1963: The Equal Pay Act prohibits pay discrimination on the basis of sex.

1964: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 illegalizes discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. It prohibits racial segregation in schools and other public accommodations, employment discrimination, and unequal application of voter registration laws.

1965: In *Griswold v. Connecticut* the Supreme Court strikes down laws preventing married couples from using contraceptives.

- 1967: The Summer of Love brings the 1960s counterculture “free love” movement to popular consciousness. Going back to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, feminists saw marriage as a state- and church-sanctioned institution designed to oppress women. They felt that love (emotional and physical) should be free of the influence of such institutions.
- 1968: Jeannette Rankin leads a women’s march against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C., feminists protest the Miss America Pageant, and Shirley Chisholm becomes the first black woman elected to the US House of Representatives. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy are assassinated just months apart.
- 1969: California adopts the nation's first "no fault" divorce law, allowing divorce by mutual consent. Meanwhile in Connecticut, Yale University begins to admit undergraduate women for the first time in its 267-year history.
- 1972: Title IX of the Education Amendments prohibits sex discrimination in all aspects of education programs that receive federal support. Girls can be athletes, too, y’all!
- The Supreme Court upholds the right of unmarried people to access and use contraceptives.
- The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) finally passes Congress (it was introduced and rejected every year from 1923 to 1971). Congress sets a 7-year deadline for state ratification. The requisite 3/4 of states fail to ratify it by the deadline. It finally reaches the threshold in 2020, when Virginia ratifies it.
- 1973: With the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, women gain the legal right to an abortion throughout the United States.
- 1974: Susan Estrich is the first woman elected president of the *Harvard Law Review*.
- 1975: The Supreme Court denies states the right to exclude women from juries. Get angry, ladies!
- 1976: Nebraska enacts the first marital rape law in the country. Prior to this, non-consensual sex between spouses was not legally recognized as a crime.
- 1978: The Pregnancy Discrimination Act bans employment discrimination against pregnant women.
- 1981: President Ronald Reagan nominates the first woman, Sandra Day O’Connor, to the Supreme Court.
- 1984: Democratic Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro becomes the first woman to run for Vice President on a major party ticket, alongside Walter Mondale. As a member of Congress, Ferraro had championed equity for women in wages, pensions, and retirement plans. Mondale and Ferraro lose the election to incumbent President Ronald Reagan.
- 1986: In *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* the Supreme Court finds that sexual harassment is a form of illegal employment discrimination.

1991: President George H.W. Bush nominates Clarence Thomas, to the Supreme Court to replace its first African American justice, Thurgood Marshall. During the confirmation process, law professor Anita Hill testifies under oath that Thomas had sexually harassed her while she worked for him at—ahem!—the Employment Equal Opportunity Commission. Her claims, though credible and substantiated by other women who worked for Thomas, were ultimately dismissed by the all-male Judiciary Committee. Thomas was confirmed by the full Senate in a 52-48 vote.

1992: The Year of the Woman: Record numbers of women are elected to Congress, bringing the rolls to 7 women in the Senate and 47 in the House as of 1993. (That's 7-10% of the total in each body, for those of you who are keeping track.)

In *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v Casey*, the Supreme Court upholds *Roe v Wade* but allows states to impose restrictions such as a waiting period and parental consent for minors seeking abortions.

1994: Congress passes the Violence Against Women Act. The Supreme Court later invalidates portions of the law that permitted victims of rape, domestic violence, and abuse to sue their attackers in federal court.

1996: In *United States v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court finds that “separate-but-equal” for sexes in publicly funded education violates the 14th Amendment. The Virginia Military Institute (VMI) must accept qualified female candidates.

1997: Madeleine Albright becomes the first female Secretary of State.

2001: After the Taliban government of Afghanistan falls to US and coalition forces, the Bush Administration argues the US has a moral responsibility to protect Afghan women's rights and democratic ideals. US forces remain in the country until 2021.

2003: The Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act outlaws a particular type of medical abortion procedure that occurs before fetal viability. The Supreme Court upholds the law in a 5-4 2006 decision, *Gonzales v. Carhart*. The dissent, written by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, argues that the law is unconstitutional because it does not have an exception to protect the health of the mother.

Elena Kagan becomes the first woman to serve as Dean of Harvard Law School. She becomes the first female Solicitor General of the United States in 2009 and is appointed to the Supreme Court in 2010.

2006: Activist and sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke employs the phrase “me too” on social media to reduce the social isolation of sexual assault survivors.

2007: Rep. Nancy Pelosi becomes the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House of Representatives.

2008: Alaska Governor Sarah Palin becomes the first woman to run for Vice President on the Republican ticket. Hillary Clinton loses the Democratic nomination to Barack Obama, who becomes the first African American elected President of the United States.

- 2009: President Obama signs the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act, under which victims (who were/are mostly women) of pay discrimination can file a complaint within 180 days of their last paycheck. Formerly victims were only allowed to file 180 days from receipt of their *first* unfair paycheck. This made winning a lawsuit virtually impossible.
- 2012: The Paycheck Fairness Act, meant to fight gender discrimination in the workplace, fails in the Senate on a party-line vote. It fails twice more in 2014.
- 2013: The ban against women in military combat positions is removed.
- 2015: In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court finds (5-4) that same-sex couples are guaranteed the right to marry under the due process and equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment.
- 2016: Hillary Rodham Clinton secures the Democratic presidential nomination, becoming the first U.S. woman to lead the ticket of a major party. She loses the election to Republican Donald Trump, despite multiple women accusing Trump of sexual harassment and assault.
- The Supreme Court strikes down onerous abortion clinic regulations that were forcing women's clinics to close.
- 2017: The Women's March (aka The People's March) draws an estimated 500,000 protesters to Washington, D.C., after President Trump is inaugurated. Between 3.3 and 4.6 million others participate in sister protests across the country.
- Actress Alyssa Milano promotes the hashtag #MeToo on social media to draw attention to the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. Many prominent women come forward and self-identify as survivors of sexual assault, coercion, and harassment. Various powerful, wealthy men are exposed as sexual predators, starting with film producer Harvey Weinstein.
- 2018: Brett Kavanaugh is nominated to the Supreme Court. During his nomination process, two women allege that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted them during high school and law school. He is confirmed by the Senate after the FBI conducts a sham investigation into the accusations.
- 2020: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a champion of women's rights on the Supreme Court, dies, vacating a seat just before the election. Senator Mitch McConnell rushes Amy Coney Barrett through the confirmation process in under a month. A new record!
- Former Attorney General of California and US Senator Kamala Harris becomes the first woman elected Vice President. She had been one of a record number of female candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination that year.
- 2021: Senator Kamala Harris is the first woman to serve as Vice President. She is also the first person of African or Asian descent to occupy the office.
- 2022: In *Dobbs v. Jackson*, the Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade* by returning legal oversight of abortion to the states. Many states outlaw abortion immediately.

- 2023: A record number of women are seated in Congress, with 128 female House members and 25 female Senators. (Representation Tracker: 25-30%, up from 7-10% in 1993)
- 2024: Vice President Harris secures the Democratic nomination for president. Former President Trump secures the Republican nomination and wins the election despite recently having been found liable for the sexual assault of writer E. Jean Carroll. Delaware elects the first openly transgender person to the House of Representatives, Sarah McBride.
- 2025: On the same day as his inauguration, President Trump signs an executive order titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.” The order purports to be protecting women and girls from unscrupulous men who disguise themselves as women to commit sexual assault or to win in women’s athletic competitions. Four months later, Trump signs another EO, “Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy,” which puts the financial independence of women at risk and rolls back regulations that prevent discrimination in a variety of settings.