

## HISTORY OF FEMINIST THOUGHT: THE BIRTH AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE MOVEMENT

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### **Abstract**

Any cause which challenges the established order faces an uphill battle and history has demonstrated that it is a long road to success, particularly if the goal is nothing less than equality among human beings. This paper offers an overview of the first steps of the modern feminist movement and its eventual successes, tracing the history of feminism from its initial unity to later atomisation due to the conflicting liberal, socialist and communist ideologies that swept Europe and America throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The movement, in the modern sense of the term, began in 1789. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the feminist cause had achieved notable successes thanks to its ability to unite countless individuals, while overcoming ideological divisions, to achieve a single objective: women's right to vote. Subsequently, within the new international order arising out of the Second World War, these latent divisions played out on the international stage. However, gender equality and the rights of women has now become a central issue in international debate.

**Key words:** *history of feminism, women, rights, equality, United Nations*

### **The struggle for women's rights**

In April 2020, the General Secretary of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, warned governments that the recent Covid-19 pandemic jeopardised the limited advances in gender equality and women's rights of recent decades. Although Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the UN's 2030 Agenda, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, the situation of women around the world is extremely disparate.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 declared "Men are born free and equal in rights", dismissing, as is well known, any recognition of the political rights of citizens without a minimum level of wealth or education, while entirely depriving women and slaves any right to political participation. It was the primary goal of feminists to secure equal political rights for both men and women.

It is difficult to offer a comprehensive overview of the political movements fighting for equal rights for women socially, politically and in public life. But, before remarking on the speed with which these goals are being achieved, it is important to contextualise the long and torturous path travelled thus far and the principal milestones *en route* to the present. For this we will start at the dawn of the Contemporary Era.

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### The French revolutionary parenthesis

The French Revolution was undoubtedly a tumultuous era, unstable, unprecedented and often terrible. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness” (Dickens, 2003). But it was also a highly favourable moment, after the annihilation of the *Ancien Regime*, for the public airing of issues and the raising of voices hitherto silenced. A time of supposedly fraternal equalitarianism, later also becoming fratricidal, spurred the rational discussion of ideas. People debated in taverns, lodges, sanctums and in the public squares. The cult of reason, the ideas of the Encyclopaedists and the Enlightenment fomented a climate of open and pluralistic debate within which a number of women made significant contributions to deliberations in the Constituent Assembly. Their participation in the revolutionary ferment gave them authority and an unprecedented opportunity to participate in political debate and voice their egalitarian aspirations for the political rights and emancipation of women (Roig Castellano, 1982). It seemed logical that if they could participate in forging the new regime, they could also participate in political debates. Furthermore, the popular demand for liberty, equality and fraternity legitimated reflections on the principles of equality in the forging of the new social and political order. In fact, this posture was entirely in tune with the spirit of the times and a logical consequence of the eradication of the *Ancien Regime* (Duran, 1986).

As a result of this atmosphere, the first women’s publications, women’s clubs and important female public figures and personalities emerged, such as Théroigne de Méricourt, Etta Palm and Olympe de Gouges, who would become a key figure among proto-feminists. Gouges (1748-1793) was involved in a multitude of causes, from the eradication of slavery to the rights of orphans and unwed mothers but she is most known to history for the Declaration of the Rights of Women and of the Female Citizen. This was a feminist version of the declaration by the French National Constituent Assembly which included very progressive rights for the time, such as equality in the treatment of marital and extramarital children and the equality of black citizens. Gouges’ most decisive contribution to the feminist cause was to call into question the representation and expression of the French popular will, that is, the representativity of the Assembly, without the decisive and essential participation of women. Olympe was a protagonist and a victim of her time. She was arrested, sentenced to death and guillotined in 1793.

Nevertheless, Gouges won fame for her feminist activism, her demands for women’s representation in public and social life. She appealed to women’s consciousness and recognition of their place in the world and the need for women to act together to achieve full political and social equality with men. As a result of this political associationism - and the exclusion of women from political clubs which were either exclusively masculine or merely permitted the presence of women as observers without the right to vote – exclusively female political clubs were formed, no doubt the first manifestation of feminine political associationism, an early form of “lobbying”.

However, the Terror unleashed by Robespierre and the antifeminist prejudices of the Convention would result in the closure of these incipient centres for meetings and debate (Cantera, 1994). During the parliamentary debates of the 9<sup>th</sup> Brumaire, 1793,

the Convention decreed the closure of these clubs. The Deputy Amar received loud applause by the members of the Convention, all men, when he proclaimed: “in general, women are not capable of great conceptions or serious reflections” (Gárriz et al., 1990). The reaction of the heteropatriarchy was implacable, effectively expelling women from public life for more than a century.

The cause of women had no notable allies or defenders among the leading figures of the era and, with the exception of Condorcet, famed intellectuals such as Montesquieu, Voltaire or Diderot not only took scant interest in the cause “but rejected any alteration in the traditional status of women, a rejection symbolised above all by Rousseau” (Gárriz et al., 1990). The philosopher justified the subordination of women to men, claiming that the natural, pre-social sphere of women was housekeeping and raising children while men were concerned with supporting the family (Rousseau, 1754).

Hegel would later deny any possibility of women participating in public life, the sciences or politics, de facto relegating them to the *three K's: Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church). The German philosopher's exclusion of women from political, economic, and cultural life, as with Rousseau, was based on the notion of the supposed natural inferiority of women who, according to Hegel, were weak and passive by nature (Ballesteros, 1989).

The Napoleonic period of reaction was equally unsympathetic to revolutionary ideas and women would be banished from French political life. The Napoleonic Code expressly excluded women from political life, declaring them unable to exercise their civil rights independently, without the permission and supervision of a man. Women unable to buy or sell property could hardly be permitted to vote. The Napoleonic Code legally bound and subjugated women to the power of men, preventing them from acquiring the status of citizen able to exercise their political and civil rights (Saraceno, 1988).

### **Reception of revolutionary ideas in England**

This does not mean that the contributions of the French had no lasting impact. Their ideas spread rapidly throughout Europe, taking root in educated minds, stirring an awareness of the inequality of women and the difficult road ahead.

In England, the revolutionary ideas from France had a direct impact on the thinking and writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). The English author advocated for equal rights and opportunities among men and women, especially equal access to education. The absence of any demand for political rights has often been faulted, and Wollstonecraft has been alternatively dismissed as a bourgeois or a misogynist. However, contemporary interpretations have emphasised the originality and radicalism of her thought given the historical context in which she lived (Ford, 1989).

Wollstonecraft approached the problem of equality not as a political question but as a social one. In her essay “Vindication of the Rights of Women” of 1792, she refuted the views of Rousseau on women, on the basis of the same philosophical presuppositions and revealing the blatant contradictions of the author of “Emile”. If natural rights are inherent to every human being, then we must conclude all human beings are equal. There can be no justification of the radical inequality between men and women. If everyone enjoys the same natural rights, surely all human beings share

the same social rights. Consequently, girls should receive the same education as boys (Bedia, 1989).

In contrast to the egalitarian revolution in France, Wollstonecraft proposed evolution towards similar goals through education for both boys and girls, a slow but irreversible process which can change society and achieve equality. Women were in a subordinate position, no doubt, but through the denunciation of unequal access to education this unjust situation could be redressed. Eliminating the barriers to education would lead to a more just and equal society. Female exclusion from public affairs is due, according to Wollstonecraft, their inability to discourse, a failure to cultivate the mind and intellect enabling them to have a vision of the world and to articulate their ideas effectively and on an equal footing as men. It is not a congenital weakness but rather a circumstance that could be corrected through education. Ultimately, for Wollstonecraft, education was the most valuable tool for the empowerment of women and full equality with men. All of these ideas would be further developed and pursued by the English suffragette movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Feminism and social movements**

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen by the National Constituent Assembly in 1789 is a milestone that marks the beginning of the Contemporary Era. Although Article 1 of the Declaration states: “Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights”, the generic term *Men* did not include women who, as noted above, were excluded from politics. The 19<sup>th</sup> century began with vast movements of the oppressed and marginalised who progressively gained social awareness and mobilised to defend their interests. The Industrial Revolution would accelerate this process, with feminism becoming one of several movements gaining momentum. We referred earlier to the *iusnaturalista* justifications of Hegel for the separation of men and women into different roles, positions and spheres. This was the reality. The Industrial Revolution would drive vast numbers of peasants and farmers into industrial cities, creating new forms of interaction and a new urban reality that separated the workplace or factory and the home. Men worked outside the home while women worked at home (Astelarra, 1982). This separation extended to the public sphere, reserved for men while the private, domestic sphere became the domain of women. Hegel had accurately diagnosed and described the status quo but the feminist movement would rebel against its theoretical underpinnings, challenging the assumptions that relegated women to a subordinate role and giving primacy to men.

Within this context various social groups began the struggle for social and political rights, and this period marks the origin of the feminist cause as a genuine social movement, that is, a movement founded on social principles, sustained by an ideology and with pragmatic proposals for social change. All of these aspects would be brought together in the suffragette movement (Astelarra, 1982).

Here we find the origins of modern feminism, a term coined in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and becoming increasingly pervasive after the first Feminist Congress held in Paris in 1892 (Offen, 1991). Some authors have sought to trace much more remote origins of the term, even back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson & Zinsser, 1991). In any case, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term “feminism” came into popular usage, substituting the earlier

“women’s movement”, articulating the concept of equality between men and women (Gahete, 2016).

The suffragist movement first arose in England in the fight for women’s right to vote; both active, the right to vote, and passive, the right to be elected. It was primarily a movement of middle-class women of certain education and social status, like Christine de Pisan, accustomed to participating in social causes, such as the abolition of slavery or Chartism, who joined the struggle for political rights (Anderson & Zinsser, 1991).

The main key to the success of the suffragette movement was its focus on a single cause, women’s right to vote, as an essential precondition for any other improvement. However, middle class women commonly involved in philanthropic causes, played an essential role in raising the political awareness of working-class women (Gahete, 2016). Within the broader movement was the prominent Women’s Social and Political Union (“WSPU”) (Grant, 2011).

Of note was the philosopher John Stuart Mill and his wife Harriet Harry Taylor who used their fame to promote the suffragette cause and to broaden its objectives to include improvements in education, demands for profound legal reforms including birth control to free women from domestic duties and offer them greater autonomy. However, the great benefit of a single, easily identifiable and expressed issue is that it helps galvanise wills in achieving a common objective, permitting a degree of cohesion among a multitude of ideologies and political attitudes in securing legal equality. Thus, both in England and in Scandinavia, feminist movements succeeded in introducing their program into the political platforms of liberals, socialists, syndicalist and workers’ movements with the support of women from all classes and conditions (González, 2007).

#### **1.4. The atomisation of the feminist movement**

The feminist movement was not immune from the political tensions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, a turbulent time of social and political upheaval and violence, including the Bolshevik revolution and two world wars. During this period the ideological conceptions of mankind and society were extremely polarised, and the divergent strategies proposed to achieve social gains, revolution or evolution, also impacted the feminist cause. Hence, there began a process of atomisation and disintegration of paths, discourses, and achievements of emancipation, becoming more divergent when one examines events in different countries and even particular regions within nations. In fact, some authors suggest an end to the feminist movement as such, assigning ideological labels to the evolution of feminist thought: bourgeois feminism, socialist feminism, or movement for the liberation of women (Elejabeitia, 1987). Broadly speaking, these movements can be grouped or categorised as liberal, socialist or more radical and revolutionary (Astelarra, 1998).

Of course, it is impossible to condense a century and a half of history into a few pages. The following is a broad outline of the main currents of the feminist movement and the most significant authors within each current who have had the most lasting impact. Liberal feminism can be understood as arising out of a constitutional democratic outlook, compared to more revolutionary or radically anti-systemic movements, seeking the emancipation of women through their self-affirmation of equality with men. This implies, firstly, a departure from the domestic sphere and entry

into the professional world; secondly, the possibility of establishing a life with or without a husband (divorce) and the securing of reproductive rights, that is, the right to decide when to become pregnant or to terminate a pregnancy. These rights are to be fought for and achieved through the law, that is, complete legal equality between men and women.

“The Feminine Mystique” (1963) by Betty Friedan exemplifies the presuppositions of liberal feminism: women must abandon the domestic sphere and join the working world, since a housewife is little more than a slave. This incorporation of women into professional life is a central goal of the movement. The notion of femininity itself is deconstructed and subjected to critical revision since prevailing notions of womanhood and femininity constitute a symbolic repression from which the modern woman must free herself (Friedan, 1963).

The liberal movement is not associated with any political party or ideology; its adherents are further their political and social goals from within whatever organisation they may find themselves and legitimating western liberal political values. This is a powerful lobby which aspires to integrate and work from within any political party or democratic institution.

When referring to socialist currents within feminist, we must differentiate between early utopian socialism from the pragmatic socialism which arose with the publication of the Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels in 1848. Of particular note within utopian socialism is the figure of Flora Tristan, who decried the oppression suffered by proletarian women for being a woman. “Women are the proletariat of the proletariat. Even the most oppressed of men wishes to oppress another: his wife”.

In this case the authority and iron discipline imposed by political parties demanded that socialist feminists toe the line in supporting the party and committee positions. Utopian socialist theories of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Saint-Simon, Owen) have their feminist correlation in Flora Tristan and her famous statement: “Women are the proletariat of the proletariat. Even the most oppressed of men wishes to oppress another: his wife”, denouncing the non-remuneration of household work as another symbol of female oppression, something which escaped the notice of Karl Marx in his exhaustive work “Das Kapital”; as did Engels in his later works (Bellucci & Norman, 1998). The publication of the Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels no doubt marks a turning point in these movements. With all its nuances and peculiarities, Marxist socialism offered an analysis of reality and a necessary and uncompromising program for action to eliminate injustices and inequalities. From this perspective, the dual oppression suffered by women, socioeconomic and gender, could only be overcome by prioritising one struggle over another. The triumph of socialism would bring economic and social equality. The dictatorship of the proletariat would put an end to the class struggle and bring harmony and equality between the sexes, the ideal of a “paradise on earth” and the end of history. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish the two paths followed by the movement by looking to events in Germany and in Russia.

The German socialist Clara Zetkin affirmed: “Just as male workers are oppressed by capitalism; women are oppressed by men and will continue to be so until they achieve economic independence. Work is the indispensable condition of economic

independence” (Anderson & Zinsler, 1991). The oppression and inequality of the sexes is nothing more than a feature of capitalism.

Given the individualist posture of liberal feminism, which sought the emancipation of women in a rational and political confrontation, one-to-one, between men and women and the socialist position that the existing power structure doubly oppressed women (capitalist oppression and patriarchal oppression) there arose the radical feminist revolution, a true revolution led by women. The leading exponent of this was Simone de Beauvoir, who turned the personal into the political and coined the famous phrase: “One is not born a woman but becomes one”. This celebrated phrase decoupled sexual gender from gender role in order for women to freely enter masculine spaces, signifiers, and dominions. Other important demands of radical feminism included the right to abortion, sexual freedom, lesbianism, and complete autonomy for women. The critique of maternity and the conventional family as being limitations on the full development of women are also found within the thinking of Beauvoir and her followers.

### **Global responsibility in achieving gender equality**

The new international order created in the wake of the Second World War established forums for dialogue and means for nations to resolve their differences peacefully. Once established, new voices would begin shifting the focus from Western perspectives towards a new vision that put global inequalities on the agenda.

It was not until thirty years after the end of the WWII that the UN issued its first formal declaration on human rights, created specialised agencies to address global issues, ended colonialism and welcomed new nations into the UN, that women’s rights became an international issue. The first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico in 1975, year of the United Nations International Women’s Year. This international conference was the first to be exclusively centred on improving the condition of women. The United Nations reviewed its policies and actions in this field, recognising that advances in improving the situation of women have been slow and uneven, requiring greater efforts on the part of the UN and member states.

This international approach broadened the focus from developed countries which had taken actions to promote gender equality to other countries where decisive measures were required to raise awareness and address the situation of women. The Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace recognised the need to remove obstacles to equality between men and women, calling on states to create the conditions necessary for the full integration of women into society (Women’s Institute, 1999).

The World Action Plan was ratified by the 133 countries participating in the conference, recognising the widespread discrimination against women throughout the world and proposing, as a top priority, measures to achieve real equality among men and women.

The conference resulted in the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women, from 1976 to 1985 during which 14 goals were established. Furthermore, the United Nations established two new organisations with the mission to ensure the achievement of the proposed goals and to create a space for research on women and

development: The International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Finally, one highly important aspect of the conference that it actively promoted the participation of women in its deliberations, with the participation of over 4,000 women from a broad range of non-governmental organisations. Of the 133 national delegations attending the conference, 113 were led by women (United Nations, 2000).

In late 1979, shortly before the start of the second World Conference on Women to be held in Copenhagen the following year, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted. It was initially ratified by twenty countries with additional adherents totalling 100 by the end of the decade. Currently, over 176 states have ratified the Convention and signatories have committed to permitting the monitoring of the achievement of the agreed goals and submitting reporting every four years to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women to assess progress and make recommendations for improvements. This document has been described as an “international bill of rights for women” (Women’s Institute, 1993).

In 1980 the Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen, where there was an assessment of compliance with the goals agreed in the Mexico Conference. It was found that advances were limited and the some of the principal obstacles to real equality were identified, including the lack of political will or recognition of the contribution of women to society, the insufficient representation of women in positions of responsibility, the lack of economic resources to address inequalities, difficulties in accessing credit, the lack of awareness of the plight of women on the part of men and women themselves (UN Women, 2016).

The Copenhagen Conference adopted a Program of Action aimed at concentrating efforts over the next five years on three priority areas: equal access to education, equal access and opportunity in the labour market and health care. Just as the feminist movement had become fragmented along ideological lines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a similar process was happening at the national level: the strategies and programs seeking the integration of women met with cultural resistance and the deliberations of the Conference did not reach the desired consensus as a result of political tensions and disagreements which, in fact, were more about international power relations than the issue of gender equality.

Nairobi was chosen as the site of the Third World Conference on Women of 1985, ten years after the first conference and with all the policy experience acquired over the course of the decade. By 1985, more countries had joined the global effort and 157 countries attended the conference while over 15,000 representatives from non-governmental organisations participated in a parallel event. At the Nairobi Conference it was again found that limited progress had been made and that further obstacles to achieving the goals of equality, development and peace must be identified. Furthermore, for the first-time objective criteria were established to verify the achievement of these goals. It was found that gender equality impacts all areas of human life and that greater participation of women was essential in all areas, not only in those directly related to gender issues (Women’s Institute, 1987).



The Nairobi Conference resulted in the “Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000”, a document agreed by consensus for the first time. Participating countries agreed that prejudices and cultural stereotypes perpetuate gender inequalities and issued a call for the elimination of these barriers through education. For the first time, it was also agreed that there is no basis for considering the domestic sphere, home, and family, to be the exclusive domain of women. This has been considered the most important international recognition of feminism, understood as a disassociation between traditional female roles and gender. The Nairobi Conference has often been hailed as the birthplace of global feminism. No doubt, it signalled the definitive and worldwide refutation of Hegel, Rousseau and all those who advocate for the “natural” relegation of women to the domestic sphere for supposed anthropological reasons.

Importantly, the conference established the notion of “empowerment”, a word that would finally be used at the Cairo Conference and included in the Beijing Declaration of 1995 (Vázquez & Villalba, 1997). The last conference specifically dedicated to women was held in Beijing in September 1995. The importance of this event can be measured not only by the number of participating countries and NGOs, the largest international conference ever held by the United Nations, a historical milestone (Solana & Rodríguez, 1995:35), but also by the number of certified informers, over 3,200, almost triple the number at the Nairobi conference (Gallagher, 2000).

At the Beijing Conference the question of culturally attributed roles was examined, introducing the concept of gender as a social construct of roles assigned to men and women and the consequences of this in terms of diverging opportunity, discrimination, and oppression. The conference also consolidated the notion of the “empowerment” of women, understood as the adoption of positive measures aimed at redressing the under representation of women in positions of authority in government, ministries or other institutions and organisations. These barriers to executive positions must be eliminated through positive, proactive policies that establish parity in positions of authority (Pellicer, 1995).

Since the Beijing Conference the issue of women is no longer relegated to specific conferences but is now part of all United Nations events dealing with environmental, human rights, development, and population issues, with specific sections analysing these issues from the perspective of gender. Thus, in November 2000, the United Nations held a global conference culminating in the Millennium Declaration, in which signatories committed to the elimination of extreme poverty and hunger, establishing eight goals subdivided into 18 objectives to be achieved before 2015.

Two of these goals were specifically aimed at reducing gender inequality: to promote access to primary, secondary, and higher education for both boys and girls and to achieve parity in parliamentary representation or access to paid agricultural work (Martínez, 2005). Goal 3 of the Millennium Declaration aimed to promote gender equality and women emancipation. Additionally, Goal 5 was to improve maternal health, reduce women’s mortality rates through better health and reproductive care. Although the results were uneven in different countries, the accumulated experience made it possible to take gender issues into account in each and every one of these goals.

In 2015, the UN took a further step towards shared global goals in the reduction of inequality through the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), calling on all developed countries and social agents such as NGOs, companies, associations and individual citizens, to take part in their achievement. On this occasion the number of goals was greatly expanded, with sub-objectives and measurements where gender issues and environmental sustainability were fully incorporated into each of the SDGs. Specifically, Goal 5 is aimed at achieving gender equality.

The first SDG clearly suggests that the ambitious Millennium Goals were not entirely achieved, although significant advances were made, reducing global extreme poverty by 50%. Nevertheless, it is a long road to eliminating hunger as a daily reality for millions of people in developing countries. The sub-objectives of SDG 5 are clearly oriented towards improving the situation of women, including the guaranteed universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, information and education and the inclusion of reproductive health into national health strategies and programs, also part of SDG 3 for “Good health and Wellbeing”. The multiplication of objectives, measurements and evaluations should, at the very least, offer a clear assessment of the progress in achieving these goals (Fernández et al, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

In this article we offer a review of feminist thought and the long path throughout history to achieve the equality of women. Evidently, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the first lone voices were raised in favour of equality, to the UN declaration of Sustainable Development Goals, much has been achieved.

The fight for women’s right to vote launched by the suffragettes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century successfully stirred women’s awareness of injustice and sense of shared purpose, galvanising the enthusiasm of enough women and men around a just cause. It was clear that activism can achieve its goals and also that it requires social and political alliances at all levels of society and internationally.

The maturity of the movement was revealed when feminist thinking confronted other issues: new ideologies are applied to feminist demands, further contributing to securing the political rights of women. We see how socialist thinkers broadened the focus of gender inequality, pointing to the inequalities caused by poverty and emphasising the importance of equality in education and the workplace. Liberal feminists took a more conciliatory approach, seeking to influence political debate within the system without radicalisms and disruptions. In contrast, radical feminism demanded immediate changes, without delays or concessions, with a radical program with which they wholeheartedly identified calling for egregious injustices to be stopped immediately. Their efforts focussed on the total emancipation of women and real equality, synonymous with sexual freedom and reproductive rights, abortion and the release of women from the domestic sphere.

The consolidation of the feminist movement parallels the new international order which arose after WWII and decolonisation. During this period, the internationalisation of the feminist cause created forums for engagement and permanent dialogue among those involved, further extending the vision of gender issues

to encompass other global problems such as poverty, inequality, climate change, water scarcity and global sustainability in general.

From the 1970's onwards, the feminist movement found solid arguments to deny that established gender roles are natural, that is, women being relegated to the private, domestic, family sphere while men participate in public and professional life. With this widespread conviction it was possible to identify the causes of gender inequality. The Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975 served to bring to the political forefront the problems faced by women and firmly establish these as a priority on the global agenda.

The United Nations has not only created a forum for debate but has also served to bring women together to build networks and alliances, exchange information and compare strategies to continue advancing the rights of women.

The cause of gender equality has become firmly established in international forums. Today, few countries defend radical inequality of rights between men and women. Thus, at least a formal, albeit tenuous, equality has been achieved. In successive international conferences under the auspices of the United Nations, an ample consensus has been reached on fundamental questions; it was only ten years from the first international conference when the Nairobi Conference recognised that cultural prejudices and stereotypes, considered 'natural' a hundred years earlier, at a key factor in perpetuating gender inequality.

These intuitions crystallised the notion of the gender gap, the objective statistics of inequality. If men and women are equal and aspire to participate in the public sphere, why are there such disparities in representation? It is no longer sufficient to voice support for equality; it must be translated into statistics which show inequality is receding, into equal access to education girls and boys, into ending higher mortality rates among women, into more women in parliament and on corporate boards of directors, into an end to physical and sexual violence against women.

Formal equality is not sufficient. Real equality must be secured through specific legislation to eliminate obstacles and establish positive, proactive policies that reduce real inequality. These issues were first addressed in the year 2000 when equal access to education and parity in parliamentary representation were established as priority objectives around the world. These objectives were renewed in 2015 as part of the broader objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the concept of gender perspective has been incorporated, in that an analysis of any of the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda are viewed through the prism of gender inequality. This perspective allows global inequalities to be contextualised using an inclusive approach that recognises that, in today's world, global problems impact men and women differently and that global dialogue is more necessary than ever.

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