

# The women's liberation movement (WLM) in the USA and the UK

## The WLM in the USA

Although an Equal Pay Act had been passed by Congress in 1963, to be enforced by an Equal Opportunities Commission, sex discrimination cases brought by women were rarely acted upon. This led to the foundation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. NOW's statement of purpose was written by the feminist author, Betty Friedan and the civil rights activist, Pauli Murray, aiming 'to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society... in truly equal partnership with men.' NOW was increasingly under pressure by women on the radical left to broaden its concerns, and a separate WLM was inaugurated.

Radical feminists eschewed more formal associations and often worked in small, autonomous, women-only groups. For example, in Chicago in 1967, the Westside Group was founded after a women's rights resolution was ignored by a left-wing conference on 'new politics'. Its co-founder, Shulamith Firestone, also established New York Radical Women, the first WLM group in the city. By the early 1970s there were a proliferation of radical feminist groups across the country for black feminists, lesbian feminists, socialist feminists as well as interest groups promoting safe (though illegal) abortion, access to contraception, and opposing violence against women.

In 1970, 50,000 women took part in the Women's Strike for Equality, urging women not to go to work or do housework that day (with the slogan 'don't iron whilst the strike is hot'). Perhaps the greatest success of the movement was the landmark decision of the US Supreme Court in the case *Roe v Wade*, which ruled that the US Constitution protected women's right to have an abortion.



A march along New York's Fifth Avenue in 1970

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## The WLM in the UK



A rally in London's Trafalgar Square in 1971

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The WLM in the UK is generally considered to have begun in 1970 with two significant events: the first WLM conference in Oxford, and the protest against the Miss World Competition. The Oxford conference published four main demands: equal pay for equal work; equal education and equal opportunities; free contraception and abortion on demand; and free 24-hour nurseries.

Women in the UK were increasingly becoming aware of inequalities and discrimination. In June 1968, women at the Ford car factory in Dagenham went on strike against the 'women's grade' of pay which meant they earned only 85% of the male rate. Industrial action was a key feature of the British WLM. A strike at Grunwick from 1976 to 1978, largely organised by Asian women workers, was eventually defeated because the male leadership of the TUC withdrew support.

This reinforced the view of many black feminists that the WLM and wider society marginalised their concerns. In 1979, the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent argued that they needed a separate movement to address issues specific to women in minority ethnic groups.

The WLM helped put pressure on successive governments to pass landmark legislation, including the Equal Pay Act, the Employment Protection Act and the Sex Discrimination Act. Yet by the end of the 1970s, feminists realised that the legislation failed to bring about the radical changes they campaigned for. The 1978 Birmingham conference led to a split in the movement and it fragmented into disparate special interest groups.

1963

Equal Pay Act passed by the US Congress

1964

US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission created

1965

US Supreme Court establishes the right of married couples to use contraception

1970

Women's Strike for Equality in New York.

1972

The US Supreme Court upholds right of married couples to use birth control

1973

*Roe v Wade* makes abortion legal in the USA

1975

US Supreme Court denies states the right to exclude women from juries

1977

International Women's Day formalised as an annual event by the UN General Assembly

1962

1964

1966

1968

1970

1972

1974

1976

1978

1967

Abortion made legal in Great Britain (except Northern Ireland). The contraceptive pill is made available to all women in the UK

1968

Women strike at the Ford car factory in Dagenham, England, leading to the passing of the Equal Pay Act

1970

First WLM conference held in Oxford, UK. Feminist activists protest at the Miss World Competition

1971

The first Women's Liberation march in London

1972

The first women's refuge established in Chiswick, London.

1975

Passing of the UK Sex Discrimination Act and UK Employment Protection Act

1976

UK Equal Opportunities Commission established

1978

The Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent founded in the UK. Passing of the UK Pregnancy Discrimination Act

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