



F. Feminist Movements and Protests [1]

The first wave of feminism in the 19th and early 20th centuries was predominantly western, with US and British women starting to campaign for legal and political rights from the 1840s, and New Zealand and Australian women achieving the first successes in gaining votes for women in national and state elections. Feminism spread during the 19th century to other parts of the world: there were campaigning groups in Turkey, India and especially Japan before 1900. Feminist internationals created around the beginning of the 20th century (one specifically focused on the right to vote) had members in many parts of the world, although the organizations were western dominated. Many women in colonized countries focused their energies on the national liberation struggle, although political involvement could encourage activism on the rights of women. Huda Sharawi, who led a women's demonstration in support of the nationalist struggle in Cairo in 1919 and became Egypt's first prominent feminist and suffragist, epitomized this dual commitment. Radical and working class women often supported socialist movements, which endorsed in principle women's rights, but gave priority to socialist goals; although prominent women could influence party agendas, as Alexandra Kollontai did in Russia in the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution. The first wave of feminist protest in the west helped create better education opportunities for girls and young women, and exerted pressure for legislative change. Feminist activism also included mass demonstrations and (by some in Britain and the US) forms of civil disobedience and direct action. Tactics such as chaining oneself to railings have been taken up by more recent movements.

The experiences of the first wave of feminism had parallels in the second wave which began at the end of the 1960s in English-speaking countries and parts of Europe. These protests occurred in a context where women had already won basic legal and political rights, but where they still faced many forms of legal or de facto discrimination at work, in the family and in their personal lives. The early protests were primarily by young middle class women and included brief symbolic actions to highlight particular issues: against beauty contests and products, and forms of direct action were later sometimes used in a number of countries to challenge restrictions on abortion, tolerance of rape, and promotion of pornography. But the political strand of the movement focused primarily on political lobbying, sometimes supplemented by marches and rallies, or using the courts to achieve new rulings in favour of equality.

Although second wave feminism in the west was primarily a middle class movement, there were (as in the first wave) also significant expressions of militancy among working class women, notably in Britain. Many feminist pressure groups sprang up in the 1970s, and pre-existing ones were revitalized. But women's liberation was also a social movement which grew partly out of the New Left, but criticized male chauvinism on the left. Although, as in its first manifestation, key demands were those of 'liberal feminism', e.g. equal pay, equality in the professions, the right to contraception and abortion, Marxists and/or radical feminists were also influential in the movements in many countries.

Second wave feminism's roots in the 1960s were reflected in its emphasis on consciousness raising, sexual freedom and challenging dominant cultural and theoretical constructions of femininity. A new feminist literature arose, heralded by polemical and widely read books by authors such as Andrea Dworkin, Eva Figes, Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Juliet Mitchell, and developed into a sustained critique of many academic disciplines.

Indeed one of the lasting impacts of the movement was the rise in feminist publishing and the creation of women's studies or gender courses in many universities. There were also important feminist experiments in communal organization to complement protest: for example rape counseling centres and refuges for women subject to domestic violence, which often lasted well after protests had subsided and in some countries gained government funding.

Radical feminism was also associated with a strong commitment to an anti-hierarchical mode of organisation. These feminist views influenced many major environmentalist direct action campaigns in the west in the 1970s and



campaigns against nuclear weapons in the 1980s (see Epstein, [Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s](#) [2] ([A. 6. Nonviolent Action and Social Movements](#) [3])).

During the 1980s in Britain and the USA the momentum of feminist campaigning subsided, although some significant new groups representing women in racial minorities emerged. The divisions between different ideological strands of the movements also became more marked. Committed radical feminism emerged in part of the nuclear disarmament movement, symbolized by the Greenham Common camp at the cruise missile base in England and by the Seneca Falls peace camp in the USA. Since the rise of feminism in the 19th century, there has been a close (though complex and contested) link between feminist activists and peace movements (a number of feminists in all the combatant countries opposed the First World War), and feminist activism has also emerged in recent decades in protests against a number of wars (see [F.5](#) [4]). Since the rise of the Green movement some feminists have also argued that women have a particular role in preserving the environment. This 'ecofeminism' has been expressed through theoretical analysis, for example by Vandana Shiva, ([298](#) [5] [C.1.a.](#) [6]) as well as by protests, and by promoting constructive roles for women in their local contexts – for example Wangari Maathai's campaign to plant trees ([321](#) [7] [C 1.c.](#) [8]).

Although second wave feminism was waning in some western countries during the 1980s, in many other parts of the world feminism was gaining momentum, though often with different agendas reflecting varied political and cultural contexts. In some countries women have been struggling for the most basic rights. Women have also been active in many movements against repressive political rule, but have not been able to focus specifically on women's rights until greater political freedom had been achieved. In Spain, for example, a campaign for legislative reform emerged after the death of Franco, whilst in South Africa, it has only been since the end of apartheid in 1994 that major feminist issues, such as violence against women, have come to the fore. The collapse of apartheid gave women an opportunity to influence the new constitution, and an alliance of women's groups achieved a constitution embodying women's rights.

In much of the Global South feminist activism was growing in the 1980s and 1990s, encouraged by the UN Decade for Women and its non-governmental conferences, which culminated in the 1985 Nairobi Forum. Established women's organizations played an important part, but many new groups sprang up and had a prominent role. Feminism internationally was then given a substantial boost by the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing. At an international level tensions had emerged between some western feminists and activists in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, sensitive to neo-imperialist attitudes and assumptions by western spokeswomen and aware of the complexity of their own history and contexts. But one key theme, on which all women were able to unite at Beijing, was that of violence against women, and other issues such as the importance of education and political representation were also unifying.

When feminist campaigning re-emerged in Britain and other western countries in the 21st century, it was part of a wider global movement and awareness of the struggles of women and girls in other parts of the world. This revived feminism has been reflected in the annual Billion Women Rising demonstrations, initiated in 1998; by 2013 protests by dancing women were held in 207 countries, and the protests have strengthened local activists and legislators in the UK and US as well as in countries as diverse as Guatemala and Somalia. Feminist activism in the 21st century is strongly influenced by the new social media: in the UK a number of campaigns have been coordinated by and expressed through the internet or Twitter. Whilst proving a powerful tool for mobilizing protest, the new media also provided widespread opportunities for targeting feminists with hate messages and threats, and revealed the strength of hostility towards women in the most apparently liberal, as well as the more obviously patriarchal, societies.

There is a large literature focusing on women's general position in society, rather than on movements and protests. This wider literature is not covered here, although some books and chapters of course discuss both. Since this Guide focuses on post-1945 campaigning it does not cover the earlier history of feminism in any detail. But a few books providing a historical perspective on both western and non-western feminism are listed below:

Bouchier, David, [The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA](#) [9], London, Macmillan, 1983, pp. 252

Traces the course of the feminist movement from its beginnings at a meeting in Seneca Falls, USA, in 1848,



through the campaign for voting rights in the early 20th century to the emergence of radical feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Cliff, Tony, [Class Struggle and Women's Liberation: 1640 to the Present Day](#) [10], London, Bookmarks, 1984, pp. 271

Sweeping historical and transnational survey from a socialist standpoint, noting industrial action by working women and criticizing class base and focus of second wave American and British feminism.

Costain, Anne N., [Women's Movements and Nonviolence](#) [11], PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. 33, issue 2 (June), 2000, pp. 175-180

Discusses nonviolent direct action by US feminists in both early suffrage movement and the 1970s.

Jaywardina, Kumari, [Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World](#) [12], London, Zed Press (Third World Books), 1986, pp. 288

Study of women's rights movements in Middle East and Asia from 19th century to 1980s, covering Egypt and Turkey, China, India, Indonesia, Korea and the Philippines. Argues feminism was not an alien ideology but indigenous to these countries.

Offen, Karen, [Globalizing Feminisms, 1789-1945](#) [13], London and New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 472

Collection of essays providing a comparative history of women's activism round the world.

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