

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM & LIBRARY

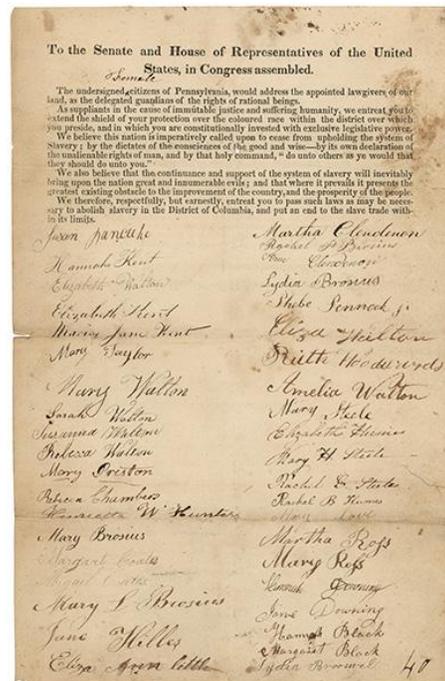
Women March February 28 – August 30, 2020

Selected PR Images

For as long as there has been a United States, women have organized to shape the nation's politics and secure their rights as citizens. Their collective action has taken many forms, from abolitionist petitions to industry-wide garment strikes to massive marches for an Equal Rights Amendment. Women March celebrates the centennial of the 19th Amendment—which granted women the right to vote in 1920—as it explores the efforts of a wide range of women to expand American democracy in the centuries before and after the suffrage victory. On view in the Joyce B. Cowin Women's History Gallery, this immersive exhibition features imagery and video footage of women's collective action, drawing visitors into a visceral engagement with the struggles that have endured into the 21st century.

Petition from the female citizens of Pennsylvania,
ca. 1838
25th Congress, Records of the United State House
of Representatives, National Archives

Beginning in 1830, hundreds of thousands of women sought to influence national policy by petitioning Congress. Their signatures represented moral opposition to a number of pro-slavery policies: the Indian Removal Act, Texas annexation, the interstate slave trade, slavery in the District of Columbia, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the admission of slave states into the Union. The limited effectiveness of such moral appeals became clear in 1836, when the House of Representatives implemented a "gag rule" that automatically tabled all antislavery petitions without a hearing. This infuriated women who saw their Constitutional right disregarded, intertwining abolitionism and women's rights closely.



Belva Lockwood campaign ribbon, 1886
The Dobkin Family Collection of Feminism

Belva Lockwood, a lawyer who was the first woman to argue before the Supreme Court, ran for president in 1884, endorsing equal rights, temperance, civil service reform, and citizenship for Native Americans. Lockwood won around 4,000 votes in her presidential bid.



State Presidents and Officers of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1892
Bryn Mawr College Special Collections

Although several Western states gave women the right to vote starting in 1869, the 1878 “Susan B. Anthony Amendment” proposing women’s suffrage gathered dust in Congress. New activism in the early 20th century reinvigorated the cause. While groups and individuals agreed on the end goal, they often disagreed philosophically. The National American Woman Suffrage Association, for example, initially pursued gradual change state by state, before focusing on a federal amendment.



Bookkeepers and stenographers marching in New York City, 1911
New-York Historical Society Library

In early 20th-century American cities, a third of women worked for a wage. Many were immigrants and women of color who saw the vote as crucial for addressing low pay, long hours, and dangerous sweatshop conditions. Working-class women were the first to march in the streets and were essential in engaging working-class men to support suffrage as part of the class struggle. While these women shown marched as bookkeepers and stenographers, other banners proclaimed other interests, such as “Women Need Votes To End Sweat Shops.”



Amalgamated Clothing Workers Strike, 1915

Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives/B'nai B'rith

Working women believed increased political power might help avoid disasters like the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, and, as union members, engaged in labor politics, from strikes to legislation. This sense of collective purpose led many to organizations such as the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women and the Wage Earners' Suffrage League. Some groups brought middle-class and working women together—to mixed results—while others prioritized labor perspectives.



Headquarters for Colored Women Voters, attributed as Georgia, ca. 1920

Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Following the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, many states still worked to keep black men and women from the polls. These Georgia women formed a voters' group despite widespread disenfranchisement.



“Forgotten women,” unemployed and single, in job demand parade, World-Telegram staff photo, 1933

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs

The Great Depression impacted women and their families across the country. Yet women's collective action did not cease. While they rarely spoke of a “women's movement,” American women met the challenges of economic crisis, war, and segregation by mobilizing for labor rights, victory, and civil rights. Women went to work and organized unions, reshaping the labor movement and the New Deal.



Women activists with signs for registration, 1956

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Frances Albrier Collection. © Cox Studio

Wartime civil rights organizing shaped later civil rights efforts, from the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama to voter registration drives in San Francisco and school desegregation protests in New York City. These proved to be formative trials for a generation of women, who witnessed the power of direct action. Many also confronted the ways such campaigns privileged male leadership. Activists eventually would draw on these experiences to launch new movements energized by collective action.



Bob Adelman

Young African American women at the March on Washington, 1963

Courtesy of the Bob Adelman Estate

For African American women living in the south, the promise of the 19th Amendment was only fulfilled nearly 50 years after its ratification. Incidents of racial violence in response to renewed civil rights activity, such as the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration campaign, drew national attention to widespread voter discrimination and violence occurring in the South. The 1965 Voting Rights Act outlawed poll taxes, prohibited literacy tests, and allowed Southern black women, with federal assistance, to freely participate in the voting process.



Eugene Gordon

Women Strike for Peace and Equality, 1970

New-York Historical Society Library

The Women's Strike for Equality on August 26, 1970 marked the 50th anniversary of the passing of the 19th Amendment and issued new demands for women's equality, including equality in work opportunities, free childcare, and abortion on demand. In New York City, 10,000 people marched down Fifth Avenue towards Bryant Park.



Bettye Lane

Christopher Street, 1978

Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Photo courtesy of Bettye Lane Estate

Women's liberationists exposed the power struggles within the seemingly private world of sexual relations. Some lesbians in the movement further argued that heterosexuality itself promoted sexism, pointing to the rampant sexual objectification of women in American culture. The 1969 Stonewall riots compounded these debates, catalyzing the movements for gay liberation and transgender rights which intersected and clashed with feminism.



Bettye Lane

Bella Abzug at women's march, 1980

Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Photo courtesy of Bettye Lane Estate

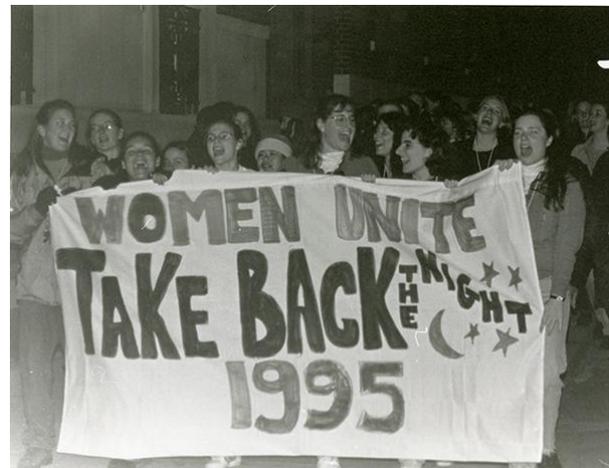
Activist and Congressional representative Bella Abzug (seen here) began wearing instantly recognizable hats early in her legal career, to avoid being mistaken for a secretary. In 1972, five decades after its initial introduction, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to the states for ratification. In 1982, the ERA fell three states short of the 38 needed for ratification. A major plank of the feminist platform splintered, prompting a reevaluation not only of future activism, but the definition of feminism itself.



Take Back the Night, 1995

Barnard Archives and Special Collections

In the 1970s, women broke the silence around the enduring problem of violence against women. They increasingly rejected the notion that violence was a normal part of sex, and redefined rape as an act of control deployed by men to intimidate women. In 1972, feminists in Washington, D.C. and Berkeley, California organized the first rape crisis centers. Battered women's shelters opened to provide refuge to those who escaped abusive partners and pressured law enforcement to take women's accusations seriously. In the years since, women's anti-violence activism from Take Back the Night marches to #MeToo, has focused attention on this pervasive problem.



Lori Steinberg

Pussyhat worn at Women's March on Washington, 2017

Wool

New-York Historical Society, Gift of Lori Steinberg, 2019.67.1

Clothing is frequently used by demonstrators to create a sense of unity or send a particular message. Many participants in the 2017 Women's Marches wore home-made "pussy" hats. The original knitting pattern, created by the Pussyhat Project, was downloaded 100,000 times, and craft stores ran low on pink yarn.

