

Feminism

Feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political [equality](#) of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of [women's rights](#) and interests.

Throughout most of Western history, [women](#) were confined to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men.

In medieval Europe, women were denied the right to own [property](#), to study, or to participate in public life. At the end of the 19th century in France, they were still compelled to cover their heads in public, and, in parts of Germany, a husband still had the right to sell his wife. Even as late as the early 20th century, women could neither vote nor hold elective office in Europe and in most of the United States (where several territories and states granted [women's suffrage](#) long before the federal government did so). Women were prevented from conducting business without a male representative, be it father, brother, husband, legal agent, or even son. Married women could not exercise control over their own children without the permission of their husbands. Moreover, women had little or no access to education and were barred from most professions. In some parts of the world, such restrictions on women continue today.

History Of Feminism

The [suffrage](#) movement

When the feminist movement rebounded, it became focused on a single issue, [women's suffrage](#), a goal that would dominate international feminism for almost 70 years.

After the [American Civil War](#), feminists assumed that women's suffrage would be included in the [Fifteenth Amendment](#) to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited disfranchisement on the basis of race. Yet leading abolitionists refused to support such inclusion, which prompted Stanton and [Susan B. Anthony](#), a temperance activist, to form the [National Woman Suffrage Association](#) in 1869. At first they based their demand for the vote on the Enlightenment principle of [natural law](#), regularly invoking the concept of inalienable rights granted to all Americans by the Declaration of Independence. By 1900, however, the American passion for such principles as equality had been dampened by a flood of Eastern European immigrants and the growth of urban slums. Suffragist leaders, reflecting that shift in attitude, began appealing for the vote not on the principle of [justice](#) or on the common humanity of men and women but on racist and nativist grounds. As early as 1894, [Carrie Chapman Catt](#) declared that the votes of literate, American-born, middle-class women would balance the votes of foreigners: "[C]ut off the vote of the slums and give to woman...the ballot."

In 1920 American feminism claimed its first major triumph with the passage of the [Nineteenth Amendment](#) to the Constitution.