The beginnings of modern feminism

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

When and where did modern feminism begin? What did feminists hope to achieve? Did they see themselves as feminists? It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that women began to organize themselves into groups with the purpose of challenging their subordinate position and achieving improvements in their lives. They faced a formidable task since legal barriers, religious beliefs, economic interests and political systems all stood in their way. Nevertheless, some women in Western Europe and North America began from the late eighteenth century to demand that their voices be heard.

The ferment of new ideas, political upheavals and economic change in late eighteenth-century Europe provided the perfect conditions for feminist ideas to develop. Gender issues were at the heart of contemporary debates known as the Enlightenment. Political thinkers and philosophers expressed optimism in the potential of human reason to understand the natural world and human behaviour. To achieve this potential, individuals needed freedom of speech and religious belief. They also needed a voice in politics so that they could reshape the political order on the basis of the natural world, thus challenging hierarchical political structures such as monarchies that were inherited from the past.

Emphasis was placed on the importance of a universal human nature and the ability to reason. Universality, however, did not seem to encompass women since most writers claimed that there were physical and intellectual differences between the sexes. Medical and scientific opinion was used to support the view that social and cultural differences were natural, or biologically based, rather than socially constructed. Men were thought to be rational, objective and scientific in their thinking, whereas women were seen as emotional, sensual, lacking in innate reason and a barrier to social progress. These different
characteristics were used as the basis for definitions of masculinity and femininity well into the nineteenth century and beyond.

They did not, however, go unchallenged. Women expressed alternative views on marriage, education and politics in an outpouring of novels, articles and pamphlets from the mid-eighteenth century. In salons in France or in literary circles in England small groups of well-educated women began to meet together in an attempt to influence intellectual and cultural life. They drew a response from the French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau whose influential text on education, *Emile* (1762), explored the socio-political implications of sexual difference. For him, boys needed education to develop their natural instincts for independence, autonomy and freedom which in turn suited them for public life and citizenship. In contrast, education for women should be designed to fit them for a domestic role where they could concentrate on motherhood and act as ‘the carriers . . . of a new morality through which the unnaturalness of civilisation . . . could be transcended’ (Outram, 1995: 84). Within this domestic space women were to be subordinate legally and politically to their husbands.

The French Revolution of 1789 added a new dimension to these debates. It raised the question of what it meant to be an active citizen in the new republic and opened a space for women to take political action. In the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* it was declared that ‘men are born free and equal in rights’, and yet when the revolutionaries drew up their first constitution a distinction was drawn between active citizens, who were property-owning males over the age of 21, and passive citizens, such as women and domestic servants. Political activists and commentators were quick to challenge this definition. The monarchist Olympe de Gouges, for example, in her book, *Declaration of the Right of Woman and the Citizeness* (1791), called for women to enjoy equality with men in the public sphere. She accepted that men and women had different social roles but thought that this was a sign of strength rather than a weakness. She argued that women would play a more conciliatory role in the Assembly and that this would be good for the nation.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was the most influential text written by a woman to come out of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft worked as a writer, critic and translator for the London publisher Joseph Johnson who introduced her to an influential group of radical thinkers, including her future husband William Godwin, and Tom Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, a text that defended the Revolution against its critics. In her book Wollstonecraft argued that women were just as capable as men of exercising reason and virtue but had been encouraged to see themselves as governed by their feelings and as existing only to please a man. [Doc. 1, pp. 98–9] In her view, women needed education to develop their

---

*Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1791–2): A fundamental document of the French Revolution defining individual and collective rights. Influenced by the doctrine of natural and universal rights of man, but did not address women’s status.
character and to enable them to contribute to shaping the new social order. In common with many other writers of the time Wollstonecraft also believed that equal intellectual capabilities could sit side by side with different social roles. She suggested, therefore, that women’s sphere of expertise was motherhood and that the raising of children could contribute to the development of the republic.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s powerful message, that a change in women’s ‘character’ and outlook would transform the social order for everyone, inspired many nineteenth-century feminists in Britain. But her unconventional private life – she lived for a time with Gilbert Imlay outside marriage and bore him an illegitimate daughter – and her republican politics meant that her influence was rarely acknowledged at the time. Her reputation was partly rehabilitated when Millicent Fawcett, leader of the British suffrage movement, wrote a sympathetic preface to a new edition of *A Vindication* in 1891, but it was not until the twentieth century that her importance for the development of feminist ideas, and her influence on the women’s movement, was given greater recognition.

The explicit exclusion of women from active citizenship during the French Revolution encouraged them to make demands on behalf of their sex. They established their own organizations to call for government support for educational and social work and also for women’s complete equality with men. These activities aroused so many suspicions that in 1793 women were banished from public life. They no longer had the right to attend meetings or to parade in the streets and this was later reinforced when Napoleon came to power. And yet the revolutionaries did see women as having a key part to play in developing the new republic. Through their role as ‘patriotic mothers’ they would educate their children into the values of republican citizenship. This emphasis on mother educators might seem to give a boost to the notion that women should be identified largely with home and family, but it also gave women an innovative and semi-public role. The notion of ‘patriotic motherhood’, which was also a feature of nationalist movements in the nineteenth century, could then be used by feminists to promote women’s education and to demand equal access to the public sphere.

In the short term, however, legal, economic and social changes reinforced women’s identification with domesticity. Their subordination to men within marriage and the family was at the heart of the *Napoleonic Code*, introduced in France in 1804 and then widely adopted by other countries across Europe, including Italy, Belgium and the German states, either as a result of their being conquered by Napoleonic armies or through choice. Britain had its own framework of laws that gave men ownership of their wives’ persons, property and earnings and denied women most rights over their children.
Rapid urbanization and industrialization also led to an emphasis on women’s domestic role, although the pace and timing of this varied in different countries. Waged work increasingly took place away from the family and became identified with men and masculinity. This had the dual effect of ensuring that women’s paid employment was seen as marginal, thereby justifying low pay, and reinforcing the view that women’s natural role was in the home. Working-class women still needed to contribute to family income, but their right to employment was challenged as men sought to achieve a ‘family wage’. For the middle class, who were growing in wealth and influence during these years, the withdrawal of women from making an active contribution to family income was seen as a mark of status and was integral to the way in which they developed a class identity. Even if middle-class women needed, or wanted, paid employment they found that they were hampered by their lack of education and were excluded from most professions. An ideology of domesticity, therefore, based on the concept of a separation of spheres between the sexes, came to dominate political and social thought during the first half of the nineteenth century. It was assumed that biological and social differences affected the personalities of men and women and their suitability for particular tasks. Men were seen as aggressive, competitive and rational, and therefore fitted for the world of paid work and public activity, whereas women were thought to be emotional, nurturing and passive, traits which made them most suited to care for a family in a domestic setting. Separate spheres for the sexes were thought to be natural and ordained by God. These ideas then underpinned republican and liberal political theories and were used to justify women’s economic and legal dependence on men.

On the other hand, the concept of separate spheres did not necessarily reflect the reality of women’s lives since it was employed in complex and contradictory ways and could be affected by class, religion and nationality. In practice, of course, women were not entirely constrained by the private world of the family. There was no hard and fast dividing line between the public and the private. The home itself can be seen as a ‘political space’ since it was the ‘the site of salons, informal discussion groups, political correspondences, ideologically motivated consumer choices . . . all of which were crucial to the emergence of specific radical political cultures’ (Gleadle, 2001: 151). Family and friendship networks, and the sociability that was an integral part of these, could facilitate women’s involvement in public life. For example, women who were active in the anti-slavery movement in Britain and America, met in each others’ homes, made articles for sale at bazaars and then went on to boycott goods produced using slave labour. Such activities remind us that women could be inspired by contemporary definitions of femininity, in particular, their caring and moral qualities, to
attempt to make a difference in the world and could use their distinctiveness from men to justify a role in social and moral reform movements, such as temperance and philanthropy.

**EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REFORM MOVEMENTS**

Did involvement in social, political and moral reform movements lead to an interest in women’s rights? Some women were far more concerned with moral and religious questions than with gender inequalities, while others might be just too busy to get involved with women’s rights. The British Unitarian Mary Carpenter, for example, a leading social reformer, was willing to speak in favour of women’s suffrage, but gave most of her energies to the cause of destitute children. Nonetheless, many of the women who were inspired to work with her, including the journalist Frances Power Cobbe, also became convinced that the vote was necessary so that they could influence social legislation and went on to play an active part in the women’s movement. In her autobiography Cobbe claimed that

> It was not until I was actively engaged in the work of Mary Carpenter at Bristol, and had begun to desire earnestly various changes of law relating to young criminals and paupers that I became an advocate of “Women’s Rights”. It was good old Samuel J. May of Syracuse, New York, who, when paying us a visit pressed on my attention the question “Why should you not have a vote?” Why should not women be enabled to influence the making of laws in which they have as great an interest as men?  
> (Cobbe, 1904: 583)

This complex relationship is also mirrored in the anti-slavery campaign. In Britain, a commitment to anti-slavery work delayed women’s involvement in feminist politics until the cause had been won. But women did gain experience of working together, corresponded with each other across the Atlantic and developed friendship networks they could draw on in developing an organized women’s movement (Midgley, 1992: 174).

Involvement in the anti-slavery campaign also encouraged women to question aspects of their own social position. They drew an analogy between the position of slaves on plantations and their own sexual, legal, emotional and physical slavery to men within marriage. This could then inspire them to make demands on behalf of their sex, whether at home or in European colonies. Feminists continued to draw on the metaphor of slavery to describe their own position in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They
felt able to identify, as women, with the sufferings of others, including those in countries subject to colonial rule, and used this in making a claim for political rights (Burton, 2002: 19).

Utopian socialists added a further dimension to the debates around women’s emancipation in the 1820s and 30s. Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon, political theorists from France, both envisaged a new communal society that would be free from all inequalities, including sex inequality. They were committed to a general movement for ‘human liberation’ that would include changes in women’s social position. Indeed, Fourier argued that the degree to which women were emancipated provided a measure of how far general emancipation had been achieved. Socialists wanted to put their ideas into practice and formed communities in France, Britain and the United States. Rather than focusing exclusively on new forms of production, they sought a transformation in all areas of life, including marriage and the organization of the household. Women took an active part as speakers and as members of the communities. The most well-known female propagandist was the French socialist, Flora Tristan, who argued in her writings and speeches to working men that the emancipation of women and of workers was inextricably linked. In Britain, where the movement was associated with the cotton manufacturer Robert Owen, many female propagandists came from working-class backgrounds, while in France the Saint-Simonians Suzanne Voilquin, Désirée Gay and Jeanne Deroin were all young, working women. Although Utopian socialism declined in the 1840s, the links made between the emancipation of women and of workers were to re-surface during the socialist revival of the late nineteenth century. In Britain a number of women influenced by Owenite socialism took their radical views and unconventional behaviour with them into the feminist campaigns of the 1850s and 60s.

Socialist women also took part in the revolutions of 1848 in Europe that challenged conservative regimes and sought to achieve representative governments and a range of civil liberties. In the process women again raised their own demands. In France Jeanne Deroin called for women’s participation in public affairs and argued that only with the end of male privileges in politics could a new society be achieved. She disseminated her views through her own journal, *La Voix des Femmes* (Women’s Voice). After declaring that she would stand as a candidate for office she was arrested, with Pauline Roland, and imprisoned for trying to organize male and female workers. Using arguments that were common in the French Revolution, Deroin claimed that women, as ‘humanitarian mothers’, needed a political voice to safeguard the future of their children and to show men how to achieve harmony. In Germany, Louise Otto-Peters, a well-educated woman from an upper-middle-class background, was also radicalized by the events of 1848.
She drew attention to the need to organize women workers and, a year later, took advantage of the liberal climate to found a weekly women's newspaper that called for social reforms to improve women's position. [Doc. 3, pp. 100–1]

Otto-Peters insisted that women could make a distinctive contribution to the building of a German nation. For her, womanly qualities included courage, patriotism and the desire for peace and morality. However, if they were to develop their 'true womanliness' to the full women needed education and economic independence.

In Britain women formed female associations to support Chartism, a working-class movement that called in 1838 for all men to have the vote. When Chartism declined in the early 1850s, supporters in Sheffield set up a suffrage society to demand votes for women. They were influenced by the radical Quaker, Anne Knight, an anti-slavery campaigner, who wrote one of the first pamphlets calling for women's suffrage. She had connections with outspoken abolitionists in the United States, including Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two women had met at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London in 1840, where they had been incensed by the decision of male delegates that women should not be allowed to play a full part in the conference even if, as in the case of Lucretia Mott, they had been nominated to serve as official delegates by their respective abolitionist organizations. This was the first time that the question of accepting or rejecting women had been raised explicitly and it provided an opportunity for women reformers from Britain and America to meet together to consider issues that they faced as women. As a result of this experience Mott and Stanton were determined to hold a convention on women's rights when they returned home. This was finally held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 – a key event in the history of organized feminism. Three hundred delegates passed resolutions on married women's rights, divorce and the need for employment and educational opportunities. Stanton's resolution that it was women's duty to secure the franchise was the most controversial, but it was accepted with a narrow majority. [Doc. 2, pp. 99–100]

The interconnections between anti-slavery, women's rights and race are exemplified in the life and activism of Sojourner Truth. A former slave, she took part in the abolitionist movement from the late 1840s. In her speeches she drew on her own personal experiences of slavery that were then published in the form of a memoir entitled The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave (1850). She has become most well known, however, for the speech that she made to the Ohio Woman's Rights Convention in 1851. She criticized men who denied women's claim for rights on the grounds that they needed male protection by detailing all of the physical labour that she had performed and ending with the phrase and 'Ain't I a Woman?' Newspaper accounts do not mention this phrase, and no formal record of the speech was

---

**Chartism**: Extensive British working-class movement, lasting over ten years, organized around The Charter of 1838. This had six aims, one of which was universal male suffrage.

**World Anti-Slavery Convention, 1840**: A meeting of abolitionists held in London. The British Foreign Anti-Slavery Society refused to allow American women delegates to take their seats; this was a pivotal moment in highlighting women's rights.

**Seneca Falls Convention, 1848**: Attended mainly by Quaker women, produced a Declaration of Sentiments on women's rights that included the controversial demand for the vote.
made until over ten years later when Frances Gage, who helped to organize the Ohio meeting, wrote down her own recollections of what was said. This version varied considerably from contemporary reports, and included the phrase four times. It is Gage’s account, however, that has become the standard version and ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ has been used as an inspiration for subsequent generations of feminists. [Doc. 4, pp. 101–3]

The demand for women’s emancipation, therefore, developed as part of a much broader radical campaign – to free slaves, to introduce representative government, to advance the rights of workers and to achieve property reforms. Links were already being made between like-minded women in different countries. In 1851, for example, Jeanne Deroi and Pauline Roland wrote from their prison in France to the Second National Women’s Convention held in the United States, sending greetings to their sisters of America and Great Britain who were united with them ‘in the vindication of the right of woman to civil and political equality’ (Rendall, 1985: 320). In the political upheavals of the period women from all social classes found a space to articulate their own demands. They challenged the legal, political and economic constraints on their lives, but also used notions of difference to support their demands for a public role.

Did the mid-nineteenth-century women’s movement arise from a reaction against the restrictions placed on women, in particular unmarried middle-class women who needed to gain employment? Or did it arise from an attempt by women to extend a public role that was already enjoyed by many? The answer is a complex one lying somewhere between these two positions. As already noted, women were involved in a range of social and political reform movements and organizations which gave them political skills and established a network of contacts. But the restrictions that they experienced, along with the belief that they should use their female values for the good of the community, also provided an impetus towards involvement in feminist politics.

THE ORGANIZED WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

The precedent set by the United States was soon followed in Europe. The first women to establish organizations to demand their rights and to gain improvements in their social position were to be found in Britain, France and Germany, but these were followed swiftly after 1870 by Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Well-educated, middle-class women predominated in these organizations, although the term ‘middle-class’ covered a wide range of backgrounds. The unmarried daughters of low-income
clergymen worked together with the wives of wealthy industrialists and with women in professional employment such as school teaching or medicine. Men, in particular the relatives of women activists, often gave practical and emotional support. In France, for example, the republican journalist Leon Richer established a newspaper, *Le Droit des Femmes* (*The Right of Women*) (1869) to campaign for women’s legal rights and approximately 50 per cent of the members of French feminist groups were male. Individual working-class women did take part in the movement and gained a reputation for their propaganda skills but their numbers remained small. After the political upheavals of 1848 there was a conservative backlash against radical, feminist and socialist politics. This made it difficult to sustain the ‘challenging and subversive’ side of feminism (Taylor, 1983: xvii). The leaders of the women’s movement were anxious to emphasize the moderation and respectability of their movement and to distance themselves from political and sexual radicalism.

In the mid-nineteenth century single, middle-class women were in a difficult position if they had no male relatives to support them. Their education did not prepare them for employment and they were hampered by legal and other restrictions. Thus, key demands of the women’s movement at this stage were the provision of secondary and higher education for women and access to professional employment. [Doc. 5, p. 103] Women’s suffrage was also highlighted in Britain and the United States but was seen as a more controversial demand in France and Germany. Here it was feared that support for suffrage might harm other causes. Feminists were not, however, just narrowly focused on equal rights. They also took an interest in the family and in moral issues, including the legal position of married women, marital violence and the double standard of morality between the sexes.

The regulation of prostitution by the state came in for particular criticism. In Britain a number of groups were formed in the late 1860s to campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Acts gave extensive powers to the police in garrison towns to detain prostitutes who were suspected of having venereal disease. They could be forced to have a medical examination and then to undergo treatment in a Lock hospital. Repeal campaigners argued that the Acts infringed civil liberties and sanctioned vice. An all-female group, the Ladies National Association, led by Josephine Butler, added a feminist dimension to the campaign by criticizing the power that the Acts gave to men to control women’s bodies and highlighting the double standard of morality between the sexes. Campaigners argued that sexual relations should take place within marriage and refuted the belief that men were less able than women to curb their sexual desires. The Acts were finally repealed in 1886 although they still applied to India and other British colonies. Butler formed the International Abolitionist Federation in 1875 to
take her campaign to other countries and there was an active abolitionist movement in France, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands and Italy. This had different degrees of success depending on national political, religious and social structures. After 1895, for example, most Dutch municipalities, faced with abolitionist pressure and new medical views about the effectiveness of the system, no longer regulated prostitution, whereas in Italy regulation continued until 1958. For many women the double standard of morality, domestic violence and marital relationships were the areas that concerned them the most, and it was involvement in campaigns around these issues that drew them into feminist activism, not just in Europe and North America but also in countries such as India.

Although feminists were united in their opposition to the double standard of morality and generally disagreed with state regulation of prostitution, they differed on how prostitution should be managed after repeal. Towards the end of the nineteenth century some feminists began to look to the state to play a positive role in protecting young girls from sexual abuse, in reducing prostitution and in preventing the *white slave trade*. In Britain, for example, they joined social purity groups to ensure that the provisions of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, that raised the age of consent and gave the police powers to shut down brothels, were enforced. Although feminists still attempted to challenge the sexual basis of male power, their actions were often repressive towards working-class women. Moreover, the abolitionist emphasis on the human rights of the prostitute, and critique of male power, often became lost in a general attack on vice in which women were seen as victims.

The women’s movement in different countries shared many goals and characteristics in common, but there were also national differences. In the United States native born women of rural New England predominated and they used the language of the Declaration of Independence to claim individual, natural rights, including the suffrage. Inspired by the view that it was women’s special mission to undertake moral reforms they were very active in temperance, social reform and anti-slavery movements. Similarly in Britain women were extensively involved in philanthropic work, but feminists were largely drawn from urban industrial and professional families who were rooted in a dissenting reform tradition. Aware of class differences, they took an interest in industrial reform and the position of working-class women as well as a range of equal rights campaigns, including women’s suffrage. In Catholic France there was far less opportunity for women to organize together for philanthropic purposes and there was ‘no easy route to humanitarian and political activity, such as the anti-slavery or *anti-Corn Law movements* in Britain’ (Rendall, 1985: 299). The women’s movement was far weaker in terms of support and was to become a moderate, bourgeois

---

**White Slave Trade:** This term was used to refer to women, in particular girls, who were sold into prostitution across national borders. An International Conference to suppress the ‘white slave traffic’ was held in London, 1899.

**Anti-Corn Law League:** Formed 1838 to gain repeal of the Corn Laws and to establish free trade to ensure low priced food. Many women gave support.
movement linked with republicanism. Emphasis was placed on educational and legal reforms rather than the franchise since republicans feared that women would use their votes to support the monarchy and the church.

Women met regularly in small groups to discuss ideas and to give each other support. Sometimes, as in Britain, there were separate committees to campaign for specific issues such as women’s suffrage, the expansion of secondary education, the promotion of employment opportunities or the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. At others, for instance in France and Germany, there were general associations that took up a range of causes. Tactics included lobbying politicians, gathering signatures for petitions, and publicizing ideas through public meetings, pamphlets and newspapers. Petitioning was a key campaign method used throughout the world by women committed to gaining the suffrage. Petitions could demonstrate the strength of support of individual men and women and helped to raise the profile of the movement. In New Zealand a women’s suffrage petition was used in a dramatic way when the liberal politician Sir John Hall unrolled a petition 300 yards long, signed by 25,000 women, on the floor of the House of Commons in 1893. [Doc. 6, p. 104]

It was a radical and courageous act for women to address an audience outside the home, since their appearance in a public space was equated with immorality. Public meetings with women speakers were most likely to be found, therefore, in the ‘liberal’ societies of Britain and the United States. It was far more common for feminists to publish their own journals. Amongst the most well known were the Englishwoman’s Journal (1858) and The Revolution, founded in the United States in 1868 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. But nearly every country had its own publication including the Spanish Journal La Voz de la Mujer (Woman’s Voice), Nylæende (New Frontiers) published in Norway in 1887 and La Donna (Woman), which appeared in Italy between 1868 and 1892. There could be tensions over finance and editorial control that influenced the content of the paper. Also, when the women’s movement split in some countries, especially over women’s suffrage, different groups used their publications to demonstrate the strength of their own particular strategies and to justify their own position. Nonetheless, with the growth of education and literacy the importance of these journals cannot be overstated. They provided a space for feminists to challenge prevailing ideas about appropriate social roles for women and brought like-minded women in touch with each other. For a minority of women there were also opportunities to gain skills as editors, journalists and financial managers.

Liberal democracies provided the most fertile ground in which feminism could flourish and it was difficult for a women’s movement to develop in the context of authoritarian political systems. In Germany, for instance, it was
illegal for women to become involved in political meetings or to join political groups. Thus, the General German Women’s Association, founded by Louise Otto-Peters in 1865, concentrated on philanthropy and the expansion of educational and employment opportunities for women. In Russia women’s public activity was equated with sexual promiscuity and with oppositional politics and was looked on with suspicion by the state. Nonetheless, women did benefit from the government’s modernizing agenda. Educational reforms to ensure that girls would be better mothers had the unintended effect of fostering independence and raising expectations. Feminists were then able to build on this to demand access to higher education. By 1900 women had gained entry to most professions except for the law and, through their work as teachers and doctors, were increasingly seen by the state as a force for stability.

Many countries were still subject to the rule of a foreign power. How far did this affect the growth of a women’s movement? To what extent did demands for national autonomy and liberal, representative governments stimulate feminism? Women were often encouraged to take part in nationalist struggles. As mothers, it was assumed that they would educate children in the language and culture of their nation, thereby helping to develop a sense of national identity. It was then only a small step before women began to raise their own demands. Alexandra Gripenberg, a leading feminist in Finland, recognized this connection when she observed that the nationalist movement, by encouraging mothers to teach their children the Finnish language, ‘became also an indirect means of awakening the women to a sense of their rights and responsibilities’ (Evans, 1977: 86). In Norway, for example, women played a part in the struggle with the Swedish Crown to establish independent political institutions. When this succeeded in 1884 they formed the Norwegian Feminist Society, a moderate group open to both sexes, that aimed to achieve economic and educational reforms. Women involved in nationalist and feminist movements could find their loyalties divided, in particular if they had to make the decision to prioritize one over the other. Nonetheless, in Iceland, Norway and Czechoslovakia women’s rights were presented as a nationalist issue and this helped to drive forward the struggle for women’s suffrage. The links with nationalism were especially strong in Czechoslovakia that was part of the Hapsburg Empire. Here women joined in the campaign in the 1890s to gain parity for the Czech language in the civil service and in 1909 demanded that the International Woman Suffrage Alliance should use Czech as a fourth language in its proceedings.

How far did women gain a sense of sisterhood from working together for their rights? Campaigns that challenged their unequal and dependent position highlighted the difficulties that women shared in common. Close friendships, forged in committee work, added an emotional dimension to
feminist politics that helped to sustain individuals as they faced hostility and criticism for flouting conventions. A distinct feminist culture developed based on an alternative set of values that included a critique of male conduct and morality. Women did not, however, just move in a female world. They worked closely with male sympathizers, many of whom were family members. In a movement that roused such strong passions and commitment a sense of sisterhood could be fragile. Some women were difficult to work with and others, including the British feminist Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, came under criticism because of their unconventional private lives. Disagreements were frequent and could undermine personal friendships, while class, religion and party political differences could cut across and conflict with a sense of common sisterhood. In the United States, for example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone set up rival suffrage organizations because of their disagreements over whether to support the Fifteenth Amendment which prohibited disenfranchisement on the grounds of race, but excluded women. Despite her earlier support for the abolition of slavery Stanton was incensed by women's failure to gain the vote and opposed the amendment. She then accepted financial backing from the racist Democratic Senator George Francis Train for her journal, the *Revolution*, in which suffrage was connected with a wide range of other reforms. Stone, on the other hand, accepted the amendment and worked with republicans in the mistaken belief that women would gain their support in the future.

Class differences in particular could undermine gender solidarities. In Britain and France feminists argued that they had a common sisterhood with working-class women over the question of employment. They defended women's right to work against attempts by the state, through 'protective legislation', to limit hours of employment or to prohibit women from particular types of work. Drawing parallels with women's exclusion from professional work, they argued that protective legislation was an infringement of women's liberties. Socialist and trade union women took a different view. They looked to legislation and trade unionism as a solution for the long hours and low pay suffered by working women. In the late nineteenth century, when opposition to protective legislation became less pronounced, there was space for greater cooperation between the women's movement and the labour movement.

International sisterhood was also difficult to achieve. News of events and activities in different countries, carried in journals and by propagandists on world-wide speaking tours, did help to stimulate the development of a women's movement, in particular, in places where the political climate was difficult. [Doc. 9, p. 107] For example, the United States envoy of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Mary Leavitt, travelled throughout the world and left behind 86 women's organizations that aimed to achieve votes for
women. The establishment of the International Council of Women (ICW) in Washington in 1888, an initiative of the American suffrage leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, then provided the possibility of a more formal link being made. The Council was an umbrella group for a wide range of women’s associations and by 1914 23 national councils had affiliated, mostly from Europe. By aiming to foster unity among its members, however, the ICW avoided controversial issues such as women’s suffrage and gained a reputation for moderation and respectability. When the demand for the suffrage became more urgent any pretence at unity collapsed as many individuals and groups left the ICW to pursue their interests in other organizations.

The mainstream women’s movement can be characterized as moderate in its aims, ideas and tactics. But this does not tell the whole story. Throughout the period there were dissenting voices, in particular from those who maintained links with an earlier, radical tradition and were prepared to use less conventional methods to achieve their aims. What meanings does the term radical have in the context of the women’s movement of the nineteenth century? One of the most influential historians of British suffrage, Sandra Holton, has been instrumental in drawing our attention to a radical tradition within the suffrage movement and has, therefore, changed the way in which it has been viewed. For her, a woman could be defined as a radical if she was impatient with the social conventions of the day, was committed to a radical current of politics outside the women’s movement and took up controversial questions such as opposition to the state regulation of prostitution (Holton, 1996). In Britain radicals included Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, the working-class propagandist Jessie Craigen and members of leading Quaker families such as the Brights and the Priestmans. At a time when there was fierce debate in the suffrage movement about which women should be enfranchised and whether links should be made between suffrage and other political parties, they supported the enfranchisement of married women, attempted to make alliances with working class women and with the labour movement and campaigned for a range of other radical causes. Some of them refused to pay their rates because they were disenfranchised, while Elizabeth Wolstenholme lived in a ‘free union’ before being pressurized by members of the women’s movement to marry Ben Elmy.

In France and Germany, however, where women’s suffrage was viewed as a particularly controversial demand, women could be described as radical largely because they were willing to prioritize the vote. Hubertine Auclert, for instance, criticized the moderate outlook of feminist organizations in France because they did not demand the vote for women. In 1870, therefore, she established her own suffrage group and aimed to attract support from women of all social classes. In common with her British counterparts she carried out direct actions to achieve her aims. With other members of her
The beginnings of modern feminism

In the 1880s her broad radicalism went beyond suffrage when she carried out other forms of protest, including attending civil marriage ceremonies where she addressed brides on the iniquities of the marriage law. Auclert founded a magazine, *La Citoyenne* (Citizeness), that lasted from 1881 to 1891, but at this stage she was only able to attract a few hundred women to her organization. The German suffragists Anita Augspurg and Lida Gustava Heymann also established their own suffrage group at the turn of the century. They lived together as a couple and combined suffrage activities with demands for sex reform and work for international peace. Heymann also refused to pay her taxes while she was denied the right to vote.

Feminists not only had different priorities, but also had different understandings about what was meant by women’s emancipation and how to achieve it. Early histories of feminism tried to make sense of these differences by identifying strands – in a pioneering study Olive Banks, for example, pointed to an equal rights, an evangelical and a socialist tradition in British feminism (Banks, 1980). Feminists certainly had different ideas and strategies, but attempting to fit them too neatly into strands can be constraining. Individuals could draw on a complex set of ideas that often cut across each other and changed as alliances, priorities and tactics shifted over time.

JOHN STUART MILL AND AUGUST BEBEL

Two key texts that helped to stimulate debates on the ‘woman question’ and provided a framework of ideas for feminists, were both written by men. One was John Stuart Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women* (1869). An eminent liberal philosopher and politician, Mill was influenced in his intellectual development by Harriet Taylor, a married woman with whom he began a long friendship in 1830. They married in 1851 after the death of her husband and in the same year she published an article on ‘The enfranchisement of women’ in the *Westminster Review*. They moved in radical intellectual circles that were sympathetic to rethinking the social position of women, but it was not until after his wife’s death that Mill began to write his book. It was to be a groundbreaking text proposing the legal and political emancipation of women.

Mill rejected the view that women were biologically inferior to men and argued that their social upbringing was responsible for any special characteristics that they displayed. Only if women were able to develop fully as human beings, free of legal and cultural restrictions, would it be possible to know what women’s nature was really like. Mill emphasized the importance
of individual ‘self development and the cultivation of individual faculties’ and insisted that women should be able to play a full part in political life (Rendall, 2001: 172). Mill’s ideas were not always in tune with those of the women’s movement. He criticized marriage as a form of slavery for women, but did not challenge the sex division of labour and assumed that women with young children would remain within the home. He also said little about single women, who were central to the concerns of the nineteenth-century women’s movement. Mill assumed that domesticity made women unsuited for public roles and, therefore, they needed to be exposed to public life before they could participate in it. This was in complete contrast to feminists who argued that the skills and qualities developed by women within the home qualified them for public and political life.

Contemporaries therefore had mixed reactions to his book but it had a considerable impact that went beyond Britain. In the first year of publication it appeared in the United States, Australia and New Zealand and in translation in France, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Denmark. The leading Italian women’s rights advocate, Maria Mozzoni, translated Mill’s book, while in 1884 the Finnish Women’s Association was founded by a group of women in Helsinki who had met to discuss Mill’s ideas. The Association demanded equal rights in education and employment, sought legislation to end the double standard of morality and supported the demand for votes for women. On a practical level Mill, who was elected as an MP in 1865, attempted to further the cause of women’s suffrage by presenting a petition comprising 1,499 signatures to the House of Commons in 1866 and in the following year proposing an amendment to include women in the Second Reform Bill.

A second key text, based on a very different set of political assumptions and ideas, was *Woman and Socialism* (1879) written by August Bebel, a leader of the influential German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Bebel argued that a woman in capitalist society was doubly disadvantaged since she suffered economic and social dependence on a man within the family as well as from economic exploitation at the workplace. He explored the social construction of gender and claimed that the ‘domination of women by men was rooted not in biology but in history and was thus capable of resolution in history’ (Sowerwine, 1987: 403). On the other hand, by using economic definitions of class to describe women’s role within the family, or a sex/class analogy, he argued that women would only gain emancipation if they worked alongside men to achieve a socialist society. Bebel’s writings provided ‘no clear space to develop an understanding of patriarchy, as either a separate or a related system to capitalism’ (Hunt, 1996: 25) and, therefore, had an ambivalent and contradictory impact on the socialist construction of the woman question. By asserting the primacy of class he enabled socialists to

---

**Patriarchy:** Term used by ‘second wave feminists’ to describe and analyse a social system in which men had power over women in key social organizations and in personal life.
marginalize women’s concerns, but by recognizing that women had specific experiences he also ensured that the woman question would be debated extensively in socialist circles.

Bebel’s book was translated into several languages and went into numerous editions. His ideas about the relationship between sex and class were then developed further by Clara Zetkin, a leader of the women’s section of the German SPD. [Doc. 11, pp. 109–10] She popularized her views in a pamphlet on the woman question in 1889 and through her editorship of the newspaper *Die Gleichheit* (Equality), first published in 1891. In 1896 she made an influential speech at the Congress of the Socialist Second International where, while sympathetic to the aims of the ‘bourgeois women’s movement’, she opposed any attempts to cooperate with them and set out to show that the interests of women workers lay with their class. In practice, however, socialist women adopted a variety of strategies to achieve their goals; they challenged the preoccupation of their own organizations with the interests of the male worker and sought to foreground the specific needs of women. They also, on occasion, joined with ‘bourgeois’ women over specific campaigns, although there was often mutual hostility between women who had very different political agendas. [Doc. 8, pp. 106–7]

Irrespective of any differences in political perspective, feminists did share a number of common assumptions. They recognized that it was crucial to contest contemporary definitions of masculinity and femininity and to engage in what Offen describes as ‘knowledge wars’ (Offen, 2000). They denied that women were suited only for domestic life and challenged the liberal assumption that the private world of the home was separate from the public world of work. In doing so they drew upon the language of liberalism and socialism to condemn the restrictions that women faced, but added a new dimension by addressing the ‘central question of sexual oppression, as distinct from political or social oppression’ (Caine, 1992: 41). They also demonstrated how work and family roles structured female subordination. In demanding a role for women outside the home feminists used Victorian domestic ideology and notions of sexual difference to their own advantage. If women possessed distinct virtues and values then these needed to be used for the good of society as a whole and justified a role for women in public life. Negotiating this complex relationship between ‘equality’ and ‘difference’ was something feminists continued to do well beyond the nineteenth century.

At the start of the new century the women’s movement in Europe and North America was many faceted. Despite disagreements over theory, tactics and strategies feminists did share many similarities as they confronted a common set of ideas about women’s nature and their social roles. As well as seeking equal rights for women in employment, education and the law, they also claimed a role for women in public life on the basis of sexual

**Second International (1889–1916):** An umbrella group to which European socialist and labour parties affiliated. Its congresses provided the opportunity for delegates to formulate policy that would guide, rather than bind, members. It had a permanent executive, the International Socialist Bureau. In 1910 declared 8 March International Women’s day.
difference and the positive qualities possessed by their sex. They challenged male dominance, or patriarchy, in all spheres of life, exposed male violence within the family and contested the double standard of morality. By 1900 women in most countries had greater access to education and professional employment, while married women had an improved legal status. These changes were achieved through a combination of feminist campaigns and broader economic and social developments, including the willingness of some governments to improve women’s education in the interests of the state. The one demand that still remained elusive, however, was the right to vote, and at the end of the nineteenth century this increasingly came to the foreground of feminist campaigning.