Women's Suffrage

Signing of the 19th Amendment
A group of women watching as Governor Edwin P. Morrow of Kentucky signs the 19th Amendment.
Photo: Library of Congress

The struggle to achieve equal rights for women is often thought to have begun, in the English-speaking world, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). During the 19th century, as male suffrage was gradually extended in many countries, women became increasingly active in the quest for their own suffrage. Not until 1893, however, in New Zealand, did women achieve suffrage on the national level. Australia followed in 1902, but American, British, and Canadian women did not win the same rights until the end of World War I.

The United States:

The demand for the enfranchisement of American women was first seriously formulated at the Seneca Falls Convention (1848). After the Civil War, agitation by women for the ballot became increasingly vociferous. In 1869, however, a rift developed among feminists over the proposed 15th Amendment, which gave the vote to black men. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others refused to endorse the amendment because it did not give women the ballot. Other suffragists, however, including Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe, argued that once the black man was enfranchised, women would achieve their goal. As a result of the conflict, two organizations emerged. Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association to work for suffrage on the federal level and to press for more extensive institutional changes, such as the granting of property rights to married women. Stone created the American Woman Suffrage Association, which aimed to secure the ballot through state legislation. In 1890 the two groups united under the name National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). In the same year Wyoming entered the Union, becoming the first state with general women's suffrage (which it had adopted as a territory in 1869).

As the pioneer suffragists began to withdraw from the movement because of age, younger women assumed leadership roles. One of the most politically astute was Carrie Chapman
Catt, who was named president of NAWSA in 1915. Another prominent suffragist was Alice Paul. Forced to resign from NAWSA because of her insistence on the use of militant direct-action tactics, Paul organized the National Woman's Party, which used such strategies as mass marches and hunger strikes. Perseverance on the part of both organizations eventually led to victory. On August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment granted the ballot to American women.

**Great Britain:**

In Great Britain the cause began to attract attention when the philosopher John Stuart Mill presented a petition in Parliament calling for inclusion of women's suffrage in the Reform Act of 1867. In the same year Lydia Becker (1827–90) founded the first women's suffrage committee, in Manchester. Other committees were quickly formed, and in 1897 they united as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, with Millicent Garret Fawcett (1847–1929) as president. Like their American counterparts, the British suffragists struggled to overcome traditional values and prejudices. Frustrated by the prevailing social and political stalemate, some women became more militant. Emmeline Pankhurst, assisted by her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. Her followers, called "suffragettes," heckled politicians, practiced civil disobedience, and were frequently arrested for inciting riots. When World War I started, the proponents of women's suffrage ceased their activities and supported the war effort. In February 1918 women over the age of 30 received the right to vote. Suffrage rights for men and women were equalized in 1928.

**Other Countries:**

European countries such as Finland (1906), Norway (1913), and Denmark and Iceland (1915) granted women the vote early in the 20th century. Other continental powers were quick to accord women the right to vote at the end of World War I. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Netherlands granted suffrage in 1917; Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Sweden in 1918; and Germany and Luxembourg in 1919. Spain extended the ballot to women in 1931, but France waited until 1944 and Belgium, Italy, Romania, and Yugoslavia until 1946. Switzerland finally gave women the vote in 1971, and women remained disenfranchised in Liechtenstein until 1984.

In Canada women won the vote in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan in 1916; after federal suffrage was achieved in 1918, the other provinces followed suit, the last being Quebec in 1940. Among the Latin American countries, national women's suffrage was granted in 1929 in Ecuador, 1932 in Brazil, 1939 in El Salvador, 1942 in the Dominican Republic, 1945 in Guatemala, and 1946 in Argentina. In India during the period of British rule, women were enfranchised on the same terms as men under the Government of India Act of 1935; following independence, the Indian Constitution, adopted in 1949 and inaugurated in 1950, established adult suffrage. In the Philippines women received the vote in 1937, in Japan in 1945, in China in 1947, and in Indonesia in 1955. In African countries men and women have generally received the vote at the same time, as in Liberia (1947), Uganda (1958), and Nigeria (1960). In many Middle Eastern countries universal
suffrage was acquired after World War II. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, there is no suffrage at all, and in others, such as Kuwait, it is very limited and excludes women completely.

Bibliography:

Vocabulary:
Ballot: (1) The piece of paper used to vote. (2) The act of voting.
Citizenship: Having the duties, rights, and privileges of being a citizen of a country.
Enfranchise: To give the rights of citizenship to a person or group of people, especially to give that group the right to vote.
Federal: Belonging to the central government of a country as opposed to the local government of a city or state.
Militant: (1) Fighting or making war. (2) Aggressive or combative.
Municipal: Belonging to a city or town.
Petition: (1) An appeal, especially to a person or group in authority. (2) A written document formally requesting a right or benefit from an authority or government.
Picket: A person or group of people standing outside a building to protest.
Provincial: (1) Relating to a province. (2) Not sophisticated or worldly.
Suffrage: (1) The right to vote. (2) The act of voting.
19th Amendment

The 19th Amendment (1920) to the Constitution of the United States provides men and women with equal voting rights. The amendment states that the right of citizens to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Although this equality was implied in the 14th Amendment (1868), most of the states continued to restrict or prohibit women's suffrage.

The women's rights movements, which started as early as the 1830s and became intertwined with the struggle to abolish slavery, resulted in the proposal for the 19th Amendment, introduced in Congress in 1878. This proposed amendment remained a controversial issue for over 40 years, during which the women's rights movement became strongly militant, conducting campaigns and demonstrations for congressional passage of the amendment and then for ratification by the states. This political action, reinforced by the service of women in industry during World War I, resulted in the adoption of the amendment.

Bibliography:

Vocabulary:

Abolish: To put an end to.

Adoption: (1) To legally bring in one's family: We adopted a baby. (2a) To accept: adopt a suggestion. (2b) To approve officially: In 1920, the government adopted the 19th Amendment.

Amendment: A legal change or addition to a law or body of laws.

Citizen: A person who is loyal to a given country and has the protection of that country.

Controversial: Producing an argument or debate.

Intertwine: To join by linking together.

Ratification: To approve and make valid.