

Gender Issues

In her 1963 groundbreaking feminist book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedman denounced the « problem that has no name » : she blamed the social and cultural diktats that confine women to the role of housewife and mother, while the man is the sole breadwinner of the family. Friedman fought for the advancement of women's rights at a time when the movement was at its height, and her commitment to the cause fuelled an already heated debate in the US. Since the 1960s, significant progress for women has been made and many policies have been considerably reshaped ; how far have we come on gender equality ? Has the glass ceiling for women finally been shattered, and if so, to what extent ?

The Glass Ceiling

The phrase « Glass Ceiling » is a metaphor that describes the invisible barrier hindering the advancement of women and other members of minorities to higher positions. The term « glass » suggests a limit that is transparent, invisible, yet very real and incapacitating.

In 1991, the US Department of Labor defined the glass ceiling as « those invisible barriers based on attitudinal or organisational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upwards in their organisation into management-level positions. »

1. The evolution of Women's Rights 1900s-1970s

1. First wave feminism and the Suffragettes

The first wave of feminism (late 19th-early 20th century) was primarily concerned with women's political rights ; activists demanded that voting rights be extended to women.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century marked the beginning of the fight for women's right to vote, both in the USA and in the UK. In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst founded in Britain the *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU), an organisation campaigning for women's suffrage : the women who were committed to that cause were first labelled « suffragettes » by the *Daily Mail* in 1906. The movement started as a peaceful protest in Britain but soon turned to radical methods and to the use of violence ; the motto of the suffragettes was « deeds, not words ». Many suffragettes went to prison and went on hunger strikes but the Parliament passed the *Prisoners Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act* in 1913 (commonly referred to as the *Cat and Mouse Act*), which allowed for the temporary release of prisoners ; once they had recovered, they were sent back to prison. In June 1913, one activist, Emily Wilding Davison even threw herself under the King's horse. However, when WWI broke out, the suffragettes decided to support the government and the movement stalled.

In Britain, women over 21 were granted the right to vote in 1928.

2. The Right to vote in the USA

The Suffragette movement and its sometimes violent methods inspired the *National Women's Party* (NWP) in the USA with the ratification of the 19th amendment to the constitution **in 1920, which gave women the right to vote**. In an attempt to strengthen women's rights, Alice Paul, the leader of the *National Women's Party*, introduced in 1923 in Congress the Equal Rights Amendments ; the text was narrowly defeated ; reintroduced into every congressional session, it was finally approved by the Senate in 1972 but only 35 of the 38 required states ratified it, which means that **no equal rights amendment is included in today's Constitution**.

3. The impact of World War II and second-wave feminism

World War II represented a turning point in the history of the advancement of women's rights ; millions of women went to work for the first time while men were sent off to war. After the war, many women refused to go back to being housewives, which partly reshaped traditional gender roles and brought about considerable changes in the structure of society. During the second half of the 20th century, various landmark pieces of legislation were voted in the US and in the UK, such as the *Equal Pay Act* – 1963 in the US, 1970 in the UK – , which aimed at ending gender-based wage discrimination by implementing « equal pay for equal work » policies. In the US, the 1964 *Civil Rights Act* established the *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, in charge of overseeing the enforcement of the *Civil Rights Act* ; the 1972 *US Equal Employment Opportunity Act* later expanded the scope of the Act. Presidents themselves also contributed to the advancement of women's rights : a case in point is Lyndon B. Johnson's 1967 *Executive Order 11375*, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in hiring. In the UK the 1975 *Sex Discrimination Act* addressed equality of opportunity in employment and education.

From the 1960s onwards, second-wave feminism thus focused on broader issues, such as education, reproductive rights, and more generally the place of women within the society. The heyday of the *Women's Liberation Movement* took place in the 1960s and in the 1970s, with the emergence of a culture of revolution, and the first women's studies courses were launched at universities.

4. Abortion laws and maternity leave

Abortion laws represented another crucial victory for both British and American women : the US Supreme Court ruled abortion constitutional in *Roe vs. Wade* (1973) and the *Abortion Act* legalised it in 1967 in the UK. The right to paid maternal leave was extended to all working women in 1994 in Britain, whereas such a leave remains today unpaid in the USA, making it extremely difficult for women to juggle work and family.

Homework : Research the different forms of maternity leaves with exist around the world. Which country has the longest maternity leave ? Which countries refuse mothers this right ? Which countries give both fathers and mothers parental leaves ? What difference does a maternity leave makes for women ? For men ?

2. The evolution of Women's Rights 1980s-2000s

1. More women in top positions

The 1980s marked the accession of more women to top jobs and positions of power : Margaret Thatcher became in 1979 the UK's first female prime minister, and Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman to be appointed to the US Supreme Court in 1981. Madeleine Albright became in 1997 America's first female Secretary of State and Condoleezza Rice was the first African-American to be appointed to such a position in 2005. Hillary Clinton's election as New York senator in 2000 was a double victory for women : she became both the first female senator from New-York and the first president's wife to hold elected office. The legislative branch also saw several women reach its highest rungs : Sonia Sotomayor became in 2009 the third female Supreme Court Justice and the first Hispanic American to be appointed to the Court.

2. Role of the United Nations

The United Nations played a key role in the advancement of women's rights worldwide, by organizing the first World Conference on Women in 1975 and adopting in 1979 the Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), often described as the “Women's Bill of Rights”. On 31 October 2000, the United Nations adopted resolution 1325 on women, peace and security : the resolution emphasized the need to increase the involvement of women in peace processes. Two other resolution followed, establishing that rape and sexual assault constituted war crimes. Appointed UN Women Goodwill Ambassador in 2014, British actress Emma Watson delivered an inspirational speech in New-York during the launch of the HeForShe gender equality campaign.

Homework : Research Hillary Clinton's, Madeleine Albright's and Condoleezza Rice's actions in favour of women. Look for other women politicians or activists who have supported the cause of women in the 1980s and 1990s.

3. Third-wave feminism

In the 1980s (the Reagan years), despite some progress, there was a backlash against what many women viewed as unfinished work. Third-wave feminists rejected identity politics and harshly criticized second-wave feminists for overlooking certain groups of women – in other words, for failing to grasp women's social, cultural and sexual diversity and for focusing too much on white middle-class women. Contemporary feminism is often referred to as “fourth-wave feminism”; what the term encompasses is still rather unclear, but it is generally believed to be an expansion of third-wave feminism, and to describe a wider inclusion of groups who were previously excluded, such as transgender individuals. It is also associated with the development of the Internet; social media represent a powerful platform for debate and allow women to actively and effectively spread their feminist views.

3. Persisting inequalities

1. Economic inequalities

The *Glass Ceiling Commission* was created by the US Congress in 1991 by the *Glass Ceiling Act*; the 20-member bipartisan commission was aimed at examining hiring practices and ratios within the workplace. In 1995, a study conducted by the commission revealed that only 5% of the senior management positions were held by women.

Women activists regularly point at persisting inequalities and emphasize the need to empower women even more. That is what Facebook's COO Sheryl Sandberg examines in her 2013 book entitled *Lean In : Women, Work and the Will to Lead* : she argues that cultural and social biases enhance the feeling of anxiety and insecurity experienced by women, which in turn hamper their ambition. According to her, women should “lean in”, that is to say stop holding themselves back and realize they have the ability to juggle work with a family. A 2016 *Glass Ceiling* report by the Economist found that Nordic countries are leading the push for gender equality, with more female labour force participation, a higher number of women holding top positions, a lower wage gap and more equal opportunity policies. They have for instance introduced day care schemes or advantageous paid-leave systems. Women also enjoy better political representation : in Sweden, they occupy 44% of parliamentary seats.

Nevertheless, even in these countries, women's wages still lag behind those of their male counterparts. As far as the United States is concerned, the study ranked it 19th in the world, which shows that much remains to be done for gender equality. The issue of women's rights was even at the core of the 2016 US presidential campaign and a 2016 Congressional report fuelled the controversy, revealing that pay equity is far from being achieved : for the same amount of work, a woman earns 79% of what a man earns – and the same phenomenon can be observed worldwide.

2. more women at the top ?

In business and politics, more and more women assume world leadership positions, showing that progress has undeniably been made. It now seems very likely that some of the richest and more powerful countries in the western world will be in the near future increasingly led by women. In June 2016, Hillary Clinton indeed clinched the Democratic Party nomination, making history by becoming the first woman to lead the presidential ticket of a major political party. In July 2016, Theresa May replaced David Cameron as UK Prime Minister – after he stepped down following his crushing defeat on Brexit – and became the second female prime minister after Margaret Thatcher. Finally, Angela Merkel, Germany's first female Chancellor, has been described in 2016 by Forbes as the world's most powerful woman for the sixth consecutive time. The domination of female leaders does not only concern the Western World : Chile, Liberia, South Korea or Taiwan are also run by female presidents.

However, the battle is far from being over : women are still under-represented in national politics. Several 2016 studies pointed that women only account for 19% of all members of the US Congress, while only 29% of members of the UK Parliament are women. In 2015, Britain ranked 36th in the world for its female political representation. As far as the world of business is concerned, a few highly influential women such as Marianne Lake – Chief Financial Officer of JPMorgan Chase & Co – or Sheryl Sandberg – COO of Facebook – have paved the way for greater gender equality. However, women are still largely excluded from boardrooms : a 2016 study found that only 7% of executive directors in Britain are female, and in the US, women only hold 4.2% of CEO positions.

Besides, some researchers have suggested that women tend to be appointed to top positions in the context of a crisis, and this puts them in very unstable situations. In 2005, researchers at the University of Exeter (UK) coined the phrase “glass cliff” – a variation on the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” – to describe this phenomenon. A 2015 study showed that 42% of female CEOs were appointed to firms in difficulty, against 22% of male CEOs. When it comes to politics, Theresa May's accession to the leadership is a case in point : as she has been given the perilous task of handling and implementing Brexit, she will face intense scrutiny and must tread very carefully to avoid being blamed for a potential failure of the negotiations.

3. Women in developing countries

The issue of gender inequality can be considered as a universal aspect of developing countries. Unlike women in developed countries who are, in relative terms, economically empowered and have a powerful voice that demands an audience and positive action, women in developing countries are generally silent and their voice has been stifled by economic and cultural factors.

Even though they make up 70% of the world's poor, current statistics show only 24 percent of women sit in national parliaments internationally. Only 13 percent of women are agricultural landholders, and over 19 percent of women from ages 15 to 49 have experienced physical and sexual violence. Almost half of women in 57 countries around the world are denied the freedom to decide on what to do with their own bodies, the United Nations said in a report in April 2021. This includes issues around sex, contraception and health care. The head of the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency (UNFPA), Natalia Kanem, said: "In essence, hundreds of millions of women and girls do not own their own bodies. Their lives are governed by others." Those other decision-makers may include partners, family members, society and government. Crimes and practices that violate a woman's bodily autonomy include "honor" killings, forced and early marriage, "virginity" tests and female genital mutilation. Forced pregnancy or abortion also violate a woman's power to make decisions concerning her body. Some of these crimes, like rape, may be

criminalized in some countries but are not always prosecuted and punished. Other violations go unchallenged altogether because they are reinforced by community norms, practices and laws. Wars and epidemics (like the Covid-19 pandemic) often worsen the situation of women in those countries.

Increasing women's and girls' access to education may contribute to women's economic empowerment and more inclusive economic growth. Girls' education goes beyond getting girls into school. It is also about ensuring that girls learn and feel safe while in school; have the opportunity to complete all levels of education acquiring the knowledge and skills to compete in the labor market; learn the socio-emotional and life skills necessary to navigate and adapt to a changing world; make decisions about their own lives; and contribute to their communities and the world. Girls' education is thus a strategic development priority. Better educated women tend to be more informed about nutrition and healthcare, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and their children are usually healthier, should they choose to become mothers. They are more likely to participate in the formal labor market and earn higher incomes. All these factors combined can help lift households, communities, and countries out of poverty.

According to UNESCO estimates, around the world, 132 million girls are out of school, including 34.3 million of primary school age, 30 million of lower-secondary school age, and 67.4 million of upper-secondary school age. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected countries. And in many countries, among girls who do enter primary school, only a small portion will reach and far fewer will complete secondary school.

4. Feminism in the 2010s

1. The Harvey Weinstein scandal

By the 2010s, feminists pointed to prominent cases of sexual assault and “rape culture” as emblematic of the work still to be done in combating misogyny and ensuring women have equal rights.

In October 2017, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* reported that dozens of women accused American film producer Harvey Weinstein of rape, sexual abuse and sexual assault over a period of at least 30 years. Over 8 women in the film industry have since accused Weinstein of such acts. On May 25th 2018 Weinstein was arrested in New York, charged with rape and other offences and released on bail. Many more women came forward with allegations against other powerful men—including President Donald Trump.

2. The #MeToo Movement

In 2006, civil rights activist Tarana Burke founded the #MeToo movement on Myspace and what would be one of the most defining and impactful advances for gender equity regarding sexual violence across the globe. As a youth worker and sexual assault survivor, Burke started the movement to empower women by fostering empathy across a wider community, connecting sexual assault and harassment survivors to share their stories. But, it was not until 2017, in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, when white actress Alyssa Milano called to the women of Twitter to write #MeToo to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem,” that Burke's hashtag received substantial recognition – at the hands of someone else. Many celebrities such as Jennifer Lawrence, Angelina Jolie and Gwyneth Paltrow responded to Milano's tweet with accounts of their personal experiences, drawing popular attention to the stories shared by predominantly white women in Hollywood.

While it was mostly upper-class white women who brought attention to the issue, #MeToo at its

start was designed by Burke to aid survivors of sexual violence, especially black women and women of color from lower-income communities. By offering resources such as those offered on the #MeToo website, the movement works to lead survivors on paths to healing. Since the #MeToo hashtag went viral on Twitter in 2017, a wide recognition had initiated a long-overdue conversation about sexual assault and harassment. Organisations like Time's Up, a charity which raises money to support victims of sexual harassment funded in January 2018 by Hollywood celebrities, have been created in response to the Weinstein effect and the Me Too movement.

3. Abortion rights in danger in the USA ?

Since Donald Trump's election in 2016, abortion rights have been under constant fire.

On US President Donald Trump's first day in the Oval Office, he signed a ban on federal money going to international NGOs or associations that perform or provide information on abortions, causing an outcry on social media. Even during his campaign trail, Trump had been accused of touching women inappropriately and had notoriously been heard over a 2005 recording obtained by The Washington Post where he bragged about “grabbing them by the pussy.” Trump’s conservative platform declared excessive limits to women’s health rights such as defunding Planned Parenthood based on the “abortion factor” and proposing a global gag rule that would restrict U.S. family planning funds from going to foreign non-governmental organizations that provide abortion services.

Such threats to the safety of women sparked outrage and mass protests such as the *Women’s March* in 2017, a demonstration in Washington D.C. to push for civil rights and equality. It was one of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history and displayed the massive population affected by the injustice. Donald Trump also added three anti-abortion conservatives to the Supreme Court, one of them (the very religious, right-wing Justice Amy Coney Barrett) replacing feminist icon Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, thus pretty much guaranteeing a rollback of women’s rights.

The Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health research organization that tracks abortion bills in the states, assessed the damage in a report issued in April 2021. In the first four months of 2021, state lawmakers have introduced no less than 536 abortion restrictions, including 146 bans, and 61 of those bills have been signed into law. Nearly half (28) of the restrictions were enacted, between April 26 and 29 2021, which was the highest number of anti-abortion bills signed in a single week in over a decade. Among the laws enacted in 2021 : Idaho Gov. Brad Little signed a bill banning abortion at the first sign of a fetal heartbeat, which is before many women even realize they’re pregnant. (It won’t become law unless a federal appeals court upholds similar legislation in another state.) Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt signed three new anti-abortion laws, including one that would ban the procedure entirely outside of medical emergencies. Arizona enacted a ban on abortion in cases where a genetic abnormality, like Down syndrome, is detected. Montana banned abortion at 20 weeks and required that abortion medication be administered in person, rather than via telehealth, which will severely restrict women’s access (especially low-income women and working mothers) in the sprawling, rural state amid the pandemic.

These disparate policy actions are compared to a war on women's sexual and reproductive health rights by pro-choice activists. The success of these policies not only threatens decades of progress on women's reproductive freedom and gender equality worldwide but also inflicts collateral damage, by curtailing scientific research and medical tax deductions.