

A Very Short Summary of Liberal Feminist Theory and Practice*



Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1880

Many activists have offered theoretical defenses of equal rights for women, including important Americans such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton (pictured above) and Frederick Douglass ([Seneca Falls Convention, 1848](#)). The struggle for women's suffrage in the U.S. was the first large project of liberal feminism. This struggle was interwoven with the struggle against slavery and for the rights of African-Americans in complex ways that are shown in the excellent documentary [One Woman: One Vote](#). Women in the U.S. won the vote in 1920 with passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In the 20th century, many theorists - including the people we now call liberals - came to believe that human beings should have more than just the vote; they should have rights that emphasized equal opportunity across the full spectrum of life including all forms of employment, education, and access to elected office.

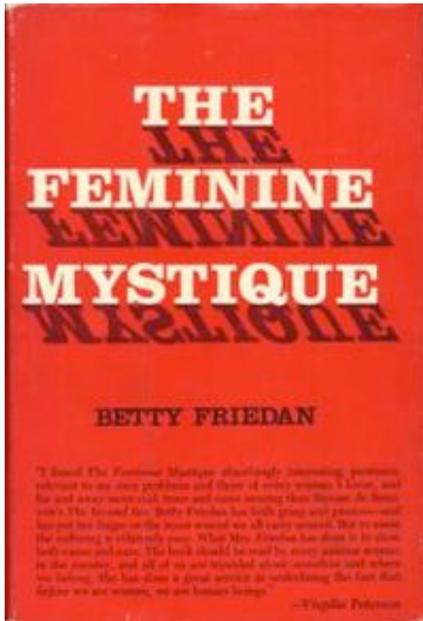


Mirra Komarovsky, 1940's, Barnard College. [Komarovsky](#) conducted 2 important sociological studies [well ahead of](#) Betty Friedan's "Feminine Mystique". In her 1946 study, she showed that college women were torn between the injunction to commit their lives exclusively to marriage and motherhood and their interests in successful academic and professional careers. In her 1953 study, she documented how full-time mothers were wondering "what is wrong with me that home and family are not enough?" (Aulette, et al., 2012). This type of inquiry has at its heart a liberal feminist perspective.

Contemporary liberal feminism emerged in the U.S. in the early 1960's. It was associated with Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*. In 1966 the [National Organization for Women](#) was founded with Friedan as president; it became and remains the premier liberal feminist organization. In its early years, NOW's greatest emphasis was on winning the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment). NOW was initially hesitant about emphasizing reproductive rights and gay and lesbian rights, due to a belief that emphasizing them would undermine the struggle for the ERA. After many internal battles, the supporters of reproductive rights and gay/lesbian rights won the day. Of course, the huge struggle for the ERA was ultimately unsuccessful, and this most fundamental concern of liberal feminism remains unfulfilled in the U.S. [Ms. Magazine](#), founded by Gloria Steinem in 1972, was an important publication for liberal feminism.

**FEMINISM
IS THE RADICAL
NOTION THAT
WOMEN ARE
PEOPLE**





Summary of Liberal Feminist Thought:

- Equal rights should not be abridged because of sex.
- Laws should uphold equal rights and equal opportunities for women in all areas, including schools and workplaces.
- Rights such as the right to education, healthcare, and affordable childcare are also necessary for equal opportunity and should be crafted with women's situations in mind.
- Moderate reforms will secure the liberation of women. The structure of the state, the economy, and the family do not need to be fundamentally changed.

NOTE: All other feminist theories begin with a critique of liberal feminism. The inadequacies of this viewpoint have been widely examined, and many contemporary liberal feminists have tried to expand their view to answer these criticisms.

* *This was modified from the original by Holly Graf, Professor of Philosophy, Oakton Community College.*