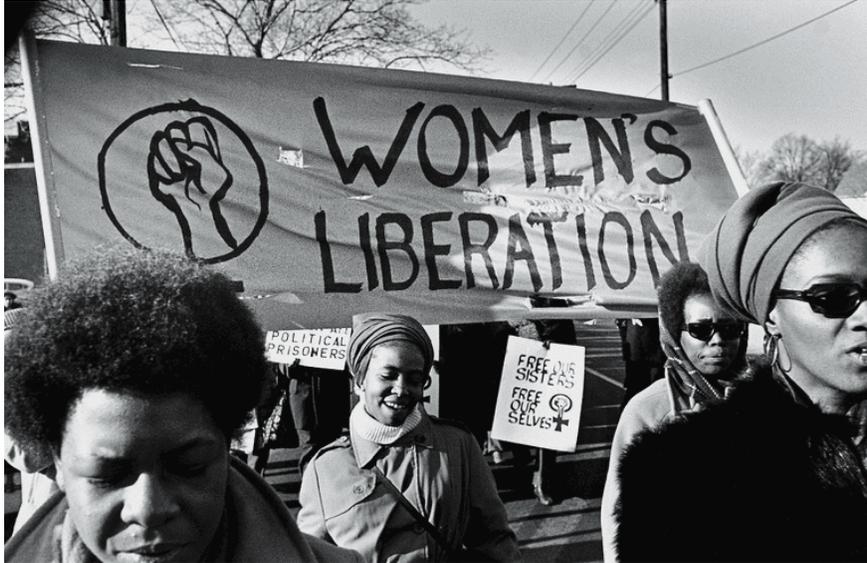


The Early U.S. Feminist Movement in *A Raisin in the Sun*

By Madison Wenum



Women's Liberation Movement (image accessed from Wikimedia Commons)

The early feminist movements in the United States were in reaction to many years of conditioning women to stay compliant. Up until these movements, women were taught that the only role they should fulfill is that of a housewife. Young girls were learning in school how to cook, clean, and be a good wife. The structure of society forced women to be subservient to men. This is why in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama and Ruth are so shocked that Beneatha is not much interested in marriage. Beneatha is a model of many women in this time, because she is in school to be a doctor, which sets her up to support herself. Early feminist movements in America were focused on autonomy and equality, despite so many years of being trapped in domestication.

After World War II, it became very important in American society to live the American Dream. People were getting married and having children much younger than many do today. The suburban lifestyle was depicted as the ideal for how people should live. The common stereotype was that women should stay home while men went to the city for work. The problem with this, though, was that women knew they could also, and often did, work. While the men were at war, women worked in the factories to support the war effort. They earned better money and realized they could just as easily carry out what had been labeled “men’s work” for so long. When men returned from the war, many women were forced right back into their place as housewives. The government promoted this return to domestication as well. However, by the mid 1950s, many more women were in the work force. Women began to realize that life as a housewife did not make them happy, and this was very confusing. Magazines, television, government, and all of society had women believing they could only be happy fulfilling the needs of their family. Women did not even know how to live for themselves. The realization that there was so much more to life than serving their families’ every need sparked the fight for equality and autonomy.

Women refused to be shoved back in the box they were in for too many years. In the 1960s, women's issues became more apparent. The National Organization for Women was formed in 1966, and it was an organization fully committed to equal rights for women in all areas of society. This organization pushed for women to be able to fully participate in society rather than watch from the sidelines. Economic independence was one of the main goals of the feminist movements, and this was the only way women who wanted to be free from the chains of marriage and domestication could do so.

The structure of American society before the early feminist movements promoted the idea that women are less than men. It was difficult for women to escape the mental prisons they had been trapped in for so long, but if it was not for the realization that they were just as capable as men, society would not be where it is today. *A Raisin in the Sun* is just one play that speaks to those changing times.

Sources

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