

[Betty Friedan \(1921–2006\)](#) [1]

By: Abdi-Moradi, Sepehr Keywords: [Reproductive rights](#) [2]

Betty Friedan advocated for the advancement of women's rights in the twentieth century in the United States. In 1963, Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, which historians consider a major contribution to the feminist movement. Friedan also helped establish two organizations that advocated for women's right, the [National Organization for Women](#) [3] (NOW) in 1963 and, in 1969 the [National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws](#) [4] (NARAL). Friedan argued for legalizing access to [abortion](#) [5] and [contraception](#) [6], and her advocacy helped advance women's [reproductive rights](#) [7].

The oldest of three children, Friedan was born Bettye Naomi Goldman on 4 February 1921 in Peoria, Illinois, to journalist Miriam Horowitz and jeweler Harry Goldstein. Raised in a Jewish household, Friedan experienced anti-Semitism in her community and she struggled with bouts of asthma. While her grandmother dissuaded Friedan's mother from pursuing an education, Friedan's mother encouraged her daughter to read and study. In 1938, Friedan graduated from Central High School in Peoria, where she founded the school's first literary magazine, titled *Tide*.

After graduating from high school, Friedan enrolled in Smith College, an all-women's liberal arts college in Northampton, Massachusetts. While at Smith, Friedan served as the editor in chief of the school newspaper, which featured her political opinion pieces about World War II. Within these pieces, Friedan argued against the United States' participation in WWII. In 1942, Friedan graduated *summa cum laude* (highest honors) with a bachelor's degree in psychology. She then moved on to doctoral studies in 1943, accepting a psychology internship at the [University of California at Berkeley](#) [8], in Berkeley, California. At Berkeley, Friedan worked with psychologist Erik Erikson, who established the psychosocial development theory, which postulates that [humans](#) [9] undergo an ordered sequence of eight stages of development from birth to death. Friedan states that her boyfriend at the time, who was a physicist, was jealous of her success at Berkeley, so he issued an ultimatum. Friedan had to either cease her pursuit of an internship in psychology or end their relationship, so she decided to abandon her studies at Berkeley.

After leaving Berkeley, in 1943 Friedan became a journalist at the *Federated Press* in New York City, New York. In 1946, she became a writer for the *United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (UE) News*, also in New York City, and the union's newspaper. She covered issues related to the union's workers, particularly women's issues. In 1952, Friedan wrote "UE Fights for Women Workers," in which she chronicled the sexism and racism that African American women endured in the US. In 1947, Friedan married Carl Friedan, a public relations firm manager, with whom she had three children. In 1952, the *UE News* fired Friedan, when her second child was born. Friedan later stated that the *UE News* did not consider her fit to work due to her obligations raising children.

After losing her job at *UE News*, Friedan began freelance writing for magazines. In 1957, she returned to [Smith College](#) [10] for the fifteenth anniversary of her class graduation, and she conducted a survey on her former classmates about the quality of their lives. The vast majority of her classmates responded to the survey with answers that indicated a consensus of dissatisfaction fueled by having given up either jobs or the pursuit of higher education due to motherhood. Friedan reported that she was not pleased by the results of her survey, which spurred her to write about the challenges women faced in the workplace and higher education. Motivated by the dissatisfaction her colleagues and by her prior experiences of forfeiting her own opportunities, Friedan used those anecdotes as the basis for an article about women's equal rights that she pitched to various magazines, all of which rejected the pitch. Instead, she sought and received a book advance in 1958 from a publishing house. Friedan then spent the following years carrying out research on women's statuses in the US. On 19 February 1963, Friedan published her first book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which sold more than two million copies in its first year.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that women should not be satisfied to serve as housewives and stay content with minimal education. Friedan claimed that the *status quo* stemmed from the effects of World War II and the uncertainty of the Cold War, anxiety that pressured Americans to compensate by creating the most comfortable home scenario. Friedan contended that the *status quo* assumed that, in a typical household, the man should be the breadwinner, and the woman should adopt the role of homemaker. In her view, proponents of those gender roles argued that those roles provided stability to assuage the tensions of the Cold War. In her book, Friedan denounced that notion of the voluntary homemaker as a myth, and she stated that women were held back by schools that implemented curricula for women limited to classes mostly about marriage and family. Friedan also criticizes Freudian psychology because Sigmund Freud, in Europe during the early twentieth century, had proposed theories that portrayed women as child-like and incapable of handling careers.

Friedan also described an earlier feminist movement in the US and the acquisition of suffrage, and she stated that the sentiment behind that movement had stagnated over time due to the homemaker family model the *status quo* imposed. Friedan argued that a second feminist movement was needed to solve that stagnation that led to unemployed women trapped in their homes. Friedan also alluded to skyrocketing US birthrates. According to Friedan, those statistics showcased the lack of accessibility to

contraceptives for married couples in the US. In 1965, two years after the publication of her book, the case US Supreme Court Case *Griswold v. Connecticut* rendered a decision that granted the right for married woman to use [birth control](#)^[11]. Friedan only briefly referred to [abortion](#)^[5] in her book.

Friedan received criticism on different parts of her book, including her treatment of lesbians. Friedan considered the lesbian community as a threat to the efficacy of the movement for the advancement of women's right. She generalized lesbians as man-hating women. Friedan's book was also criticized for focusing exclusively on the experience of middle-class women, excluding the problems of women from lower socioeconomic classes.

In 1964, Friedan reasoned that the progressive movement for women required more incisive action than just a publication. In 1966, Friedan and her peers established the National Organization for Women (NOW), and her colleagues appointed her as the first president. That [organization](#)^[12] advocated for equality between both genders, and through her tenure as president, Friedan pushed for enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Pay Act of 1963. The law stated equal work by both genders should yield equal pay. In 1963, John F. Kennedy, who was the president of the US at that time, signed the Equal Pay Act (EPA) to abolish the gender gap in wages. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned all discrimination predicated on race, sex, color, and nationality, but was not well enforced and faced numerous legal challenges.

Additionally, Friedan laid out the Women's Bill of Rights for NOW, which outlined the fundamental premises of the [organization](#)^[12] for women's advancement in the US. That document included the right to maternity leave, no sex discrimination in employment, and equal job training opportunities. Furthermore, Friedan organized the Women's Strike for Equality, a protest motivated by the fact that women at that time received fifty-nine cents for every dollar a man earned in similar fields of work. That protest occurred on 26 August 1970, and the march spanned all over New York City, where women held picketed signs that showcased their dissatisfaction. Months later, Friedan abdicated her position as president of NOW due to her disagreements with the [organization](#)^[12]'s refusal to accept men as members, along with the group's desire to extend rights to lesbians.

In the late 1960s, Friedan met with obstetrician-gynecologist Bernard Nathanson and with activist Lawrence Lader, who both led a campaign to repeal laws that forbade abortions. Lader recruited Friedan to help with the campaign's efforts. In 1969, Nathanson, Lader, and Friedan co-launched the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL). In February 1969, Friedman made the connection between the second wave feminist movement and the movement to legalize access to [abortion](#)^[5] in a speech at the First National Conference on Abortion Laws in Chicago, Illinois, where she declared that women's rights included the ability to control their reproduction. She also mentioned the hazards of illicit abortions and described situations in which women endangered their lives by receiving abortions from unlicensed doctors. She argued that legalizing [abortion](#)^[5] could help prevent those situations. Friedan modified the Women's Bill of Rights endorsed by NOW to include the right to have an [abortion](#)^[5] outside of the extenuating circumstances of rape and life endangerment. During all of these efforts, Friedan and her husband divorced in 1969.

Friedan continued to advocate for the benefits of the repeal of anti-[abortion](#)^[5] legislation, which helped set a national stage for the US Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*^[13] in 1973. The ruling of the case affirmed women's right to have abortions up through the second [trimester](#)^[14] of [pregnancy](#)^[15] without any state [regulation](#)^[16]. It also affirmed that women's rights to privacy extends to decisions they makes with medical providers about personal healthcare.

In the mid-1970s, Friedan began to deviate from NARAL's objective to repeal anti-[abortion](#)^[5] laws. While Friedan still voiced her support, she began to claim that [abortion](#)^[5] issues had drawn too much attention away from the problems she had presented in *The Feminine Mystique*. She spent the rest of her career in activism, focusing on the other issues she had brought up in the early sixties on women's lack of opportunities and advancement in pursuing higher education and in their careers.

In 1972, Friedan pushed for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution. The amendment proposed to grant women equal rights to men in every field. Phyllis Schlafly, a Republican lawyer from Illinois, and her followers convinced enough state legislatures to abandon the amendment. Friedan continued to advocate for women's rights. In 1976, Friedan published *It Changed My Life: Writing's on the Women's Movement*, a sequel to *The Feminine Mystique*. That book is a collection of articles and essays she had published in magazines, and the book did not generate nearly as many sales as its predecessor.

In 1975, Friedan served as a delegate for the United Nation's women's conferences in Mexico City, Mexico, then again in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1980, and also in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985. During that time period, Friedan lectured at several institutions, including [Columbia University](#)^[17] in New York City, New York, [Cornell University](#)^[18] in Ithaca, New York, and the [University of Southern California](#)^[19] in Pasadena, California. She authored additional works that included *The Second Stage* in 1981, *The Fountain of Age* in 1993, *Beyond Gender* in 1997, and her personal memoirs of *Life so Far* in 2000. In *Life so Far*, Friedan addressed several topics, including rumors about her physically abusive marriage, her ongoing feud with fellow feminist Gloria Steinem, and her reaction to some of her critics that claimed Friedan was abrasive and bull-headed. None of those publications approached the commercial success of her 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*.

Friedan received honorary degrees from The State University of New York in Buffalo, New York, and [Columbia University](#)^[17] in 1994. She died from congestive heart failure on 4 February 2006 on her eighty-fifth birthday in Washington, D.C.

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