

Civil Rights for Women and Minorities

Unfortunately, the United States has had a long and painful history of racism and discrimination. When European settlers came to North America in the seventeenth century, they brought with them the first cargoes of Africans. At first, African immigrants became indentured servants, similar to those of many poor Europeans who traded passage to America for several years of labor. Although a race-based slave system did not develop fully until the 1700s, it took until the American Civil War for slavery to be legally abolished. However, it was not until almost a century later that African Americans were able to realize equality. This was due to the passionate efforts of black and white activists in the form of boycotts and protests in addition to powerful messages of equality espoused by civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X.

In the early years of the republic, African Americans were not the only group to face hostile and violent discrimination. While freedom from religious and ethnic persecution drove many immigrants from Europe to North America, they often encountered discrimination in the United States as well. Jews, Catholics, Italians, the Irish, and other groups were routinely the target of anti-immigrant “nativist” (America-born) groups, forced to quickly assimilate into society, take the lowest-paying jobs, and segregate into slum neighborhoods. Other minority groups who faced overt prejudice throughout our country’s history include Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans.

However, racial and ethnic minorities were not the only ones to experience discrimination. Women, the disabled, and homosexuals were also widely persecuted. All of these groups fought long and hard to earn recognition from the government and the American people of their civil and political rights, and many of these battles continue to be fought today.

Latinos

The “Chicano Movement” formed early in the 20th century to help end discrimination in public and private institutions, although it had been fomenting since the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848. In the 1960s, Mexican Americans began organizing to address a broad range of issues—farm worker rights, bilingual education, voting rights, and ethnic stereotyping. Latino civil rights organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and the National Council of La Raza helped to assemble Latinos from all over the world to advocate for school and housing desegregation. One of the most notable leaders of the movement was Cesar Chavez, who lobbied for improved working conditions for migrant workers and organized strikes and boycotts in the 1960s and 1970s.

In recent years, Latino activists have been involved in the ongoing debate over immigration reform on the state and federal level. The Immigration Reform and Control



Act of 1986 made it illegal to hire or recruit illegal immigrants in the United States. Immigration reform proposals in Congress have stalled since, despite intense lobbying from Latino groups. However, in 2010 the Arizona legislature passed SB 1070, the most comprehensive and strictest immigration reform proposal in the United States. The law would make the failure to carry immigration documents a crime and give the police broad power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. As a result, Latino civil rights groups have mounted numerous boycotts and protests throughout the state.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2009 Latinos surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the country. They have, as a result, become a critical voting bloc. As such, both Republicans and Democrats have tried to woo Latino voters in the run up to the 2012 presidential election.

Asian Americans

Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which halted Chinese immigration and prevented them from naturalizing as American citizens, and followed by decades of institutionalized discrimination, Asian Americans faced a long struggle in obtaining full equality in the United States. Perhaps the most egregious example of discrimination occurred in 1942 when President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order forcing the relocation and internment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the precursor to the U.S.'s entry into World War II.

The Asian-American civil rights ("yellow power") movement began in the 1960s, encouraged by the African American movement. While the movement originally included those of Japanese and Chinese descent, it expanded to include Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Indians. Activists called for the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the end of racial stereotypes against Asians, reparations for internment camp survivors and their families, and the inclusion of academic curricula that more accurately represented the Asian-American experience. In 1988 the federal government officially apologized for Japanese internment and disbursed \$1.6 billion to the survivors and their heirs.

Native Americans

Although indigenous to the United States, Native Americans have faced one of the longest and most violent struggles for equality in the nation's history. Beginning in the late 1700s, numerous presidential administrations believed in the notion of "civilizing" Native Americans and forcing assimilation into American society. In the aftermath of several decades of warfare and resistance, the United States embarked on an official policy of displacement with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The law authorized the forced relocation of numerous Indian tribes to the south and west of the Mississippi River to accommodate expansion by American settlers. Native Americans would not be formally recognized as naturalized Americans until passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.



In the 1960s, Native Americans began organizing to address their long history of discrimination in the United States and the need for ethnic solidarity. The American Indian Movement (AIM) formed in 1968 with the goals of tribal sovereignty, cultural preservation, and the enforcement of treaties with the U.S.

Contemporary Native Americans occupy a unique space in the United States, as most tribes exist as sovereign, independent nations. Since the 1980s, many tribes have established gaming and casino businesses on their reservations, which generate billions of dollars annually. However, Native Americans continue to suffer higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and alcoholism in comparison to other minority groups.

Women

The women's rights movement had its origins in the 19th century abolitionism (anti-slavery) movement. It was during this time that women, both black and white, became the most influential and prominent voices for a critical social cause; however, they were still relegated to inferior positions to men in the movement. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention, organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (both abolitionists), was held in New York state to call for full suffrage and equality. The convention marked the unofficial beginning of the women's rights movement. Although some states allowed women the right to vote as early as the late 19th century, women did not fully gain the right to vote until passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920. Women achieved another notable victory with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, anti-discrimination legislation which included sex along with race, age, religion, and national origin.

One of the most important organizations that formed out of the women's rights movement is the National Organization for Women (NOW). Established in 1966 and currently the largest feminist organization in the United States, NOW works to secure political, professional, and educational equality for women. In 1972, NOW and other women activist groups fought to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution, which affirmed that women and men have equal rights under the law. Although passage failed, the women's rights movement has made significant inroads in reproductive rights, sexual harassment law, pay discrimination, and equality of women's sports programs in schools.

The Disabled

Although the disability rights movement (including those with both physical and mental handicaps) began in the 1960s, it achieved what was perhaps its most significant victory with passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Disability advocates had long pushed for the removal of physical, employment, educational, and housing barriers. The ADA provided comprehensive civil rights protections for the disabled in the areas of employment, public accommodations, and telecommunications. However, the ADA has faced challenges in recent years, mostly by critics who contend that the definition of "disability" is too general and allows for certain individuals to claim a



“questionable” disability status. The law has been litigated for a number of years, with the result being more limited protections for those with disabilities.

Homosexuals

The catalyst for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) civil rights movement was the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, a series of demonstrations against a police raid of a gay Greenwich Village establishment. After the riots, LGBT organizers formed gay rights organizations throughout the country, focusing on job and housing discrimination and AIDS awareness as well as pushing for changes in the way society viewed homosexuals.

However, equal rights would continue to come more slowly. Not until 2003 would the U.S. Supreme Court rule state sodomy laws unconstitutional, and passage of the first LGBT-inclusive federal hate crimes legislation would not come to fruition until 2009. The controversy over gays in the military achieved prominence when, in 1993, President Clinton issued the federal “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, which prohibited military personnel from discriminating against gay service members while barring openly gay persons from military service. In July 2011, Congress and the Obama Administration repealed the policy, allowing for homosexuals to serve in the military without concern of disclosing their sexual orientation.

Another major civil rights issue in the LGBT community is marriage equality. The first civil union law, a legally recognized partnership similar to marriage, was passed in Vermont in 2000. Several other states soon followed. Civil unions are recognized only in the state where the couple resides and offer significantly less legal protection than marriage. Neither civil unions nor same sex marriages are recognized by federal law, although six states in addition to Washington, D.C. allow gays to legally marry. In July 2011, New York became the latest state to legalize gay marriage under the Marriage Equality Act, which was passed by the state legislature.

In 1996, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defines marriage as solely between a man and a woman and would not allow non-recognition of these unions among the states. The federal court has found provisions of DOMA unconstitutional, although the ruling is currently under appeal.

A setback for the gay rights community occurred in 2008 when California passed Proposition 8, a ballot initiative which overturned a state Supreme Court decision giving same sex couples the constitutional right to marry. The campaigns both for and against the proposition were among the costliest in California history. After numerous demonstrations and protests, the U.S. district court overturned Proposition 8, stating that the law violated both the due process and equal protection clauses of the Constitution. As of 2011, the ruling is pending appeal.



