

How did the women's rights movement shape modern Britain?

Scheme of Work Overview

From suffragettes chaining themselves to railings to women leading strikes, founding refuges, and creating activist art, the women's rights movement has dramatically reshaped the cultural, legal and political landscape of Britain. Yet this history is still contested, and many of the goals set out by second-wave feminists in the 1970s remain relevant today. This scheme of work invites students to explore the development, impact and legacy of the women's rights movement in Britain across the twentieth century, drawing connections to their own lives in the present. This Scheme of Work is designed for students aged 12 and up and fits within the wider curriculum on twentieth-century British history. It aligns with key themes from the Secondary National Curriculum for England, especially relating to 'Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day'. This scheme provides opportunities to study:

- Women's suffrage and activism
- Workers' rights and the Equal Pay movement
- Post-war social and cultural change
- The impact of migration and intersectionality
- Contemporary social movements and civic engagement

The initial lessons establish historical context and examine the roots and development of the women's movement. Students are introduced to key ideas, like the concept of intersectionality, and are encouraged to explore and challenge their assumptions. The unit then moves through a series of 'deep dive' lessons, using oral histories, primary source material, and political art to explore both the personal and the political dimensions of the movement. The final lessons connect past and present, inviting students to reflect on how these struggles continue today and what action they might take themselves.

Below is a summary of the planned scheme of work and lesson content.

SOW Lesson order:

1. How did the women's rights movement develop?

- Intro and context (Strand 1: A safe space for all)
- Shared classroom agreements
- Overview of 20th-century women's activism
- Oral history and women's voices

2. How did women seek legal equality in 1970s Britain?

- The Ford Dagenham Strike
- Primary source analysis
- The Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975)

3. How did the women's rights movement change British culture in the 1970s?

- Birth control and reproductive rights
- Cultural shifts and the slogan 'The personal is political'
- Fashion, music, literature, and protest

4. How did black and south Asian women shape the women's rights movement?

- Intersectionality and identity
- The Grunwick Strike and beyond
- Community activism and political organising

5. What does the women's rights movement look like today?

- Ongoing gender inequality
- Modern feminist trailblazers
- Art as activism
- Student-created poster project

Lesson Summaries

1. How did the women's rights movement develop?

This introductory lesson traces the early development of the women's rights movement in twentieth-century Britain. Students are encouraged to reflect on gender roles today and compare them with those in earlier decades. Through oral history sources (such as Emmeline Pankhurst's 1912 speech and wartime testimonies), students gain insight into the motivations behind women's activism. A short film from 1958 offers a window into post-war domestic life, helping students understand the restrictive gender norms that provoked second-wave feminism. The timeline and terminology worksheet provides essential scaffolding for the lessons ahead.

2. How did women seek legal equality in 1970s Britain?

This lesson focuses on the landmark Dagenham Ford Machinists Strike of 1968. Students analyse a range of primary sources, including interviews, letters, and contemporary commentary.

Working collaboratively and independently, they evaluate the strike's impact and consider its legacy in the context of the Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975). The lesson highlights the power and limitations of legislative change and the importance of collective action in achieving gender equality.

3. How did the women's rights movement change British culture in the 1970s?

Students examine how the feminist slogan 'The personal is political' influenced the campaign for cultural as well as legal change. Through the study of birth control access, the Miss World protests, women's shelters, and popular culture, students consider how private life became a site of political struggle. Using a cause-and-effect chart, they track how women's liberation reshaped British life in the home, media, fashion and relationships. Poster analysis builds visual literacy and introduces activist art as a form of political engagement.

4. How did black and south Asian women shape the women's rights movement?

This lesson introduces students to intersectionality and the specific challenges and contributions of black and south Asian women. The class reflects on how identities overlap to shape individual experience, using Jayaben Desai and the Grunwick strike as case studies. Students work with original source material and group discussion to explore how organisations like the Southall Black Sisters and the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent contributed to the movement. The session emphasises the importance of inclusive histories and the diversity of feminist struggle.

5. What does the women's rights movement look like today?

The final lesson brings the focus to the present. Students evaluate ongoing inequalities in modern Britain using current statistics and reflect on the progress that has been made. A discussion of modern trailblazers leads into a creative project where students design their own posters highlighting a social issue that matters to them. Drawing on examples from earlier lessons, students express how feminist strategies such as visual activism continue to inspire change. The lesson concludes with students considering how they might raise their own voices, echoing the legacy of the women they have studied.

This scheme of work was produced by Katherine Coble on behalf of Learn About Britain.