

Jewish Women Pioneers in the Civil Rights Movement

Betty Friedan

Eka MELADZE*

Abstract

The Civil Rights Movement was a turning point in American history, which sought to bring an end to racial segregation and discrimination (Shultz, 2023).

Jewish women made significant contributions to the civil rights movement in the United States. This is how Debora Shultz, author of one of the articles about civil rights movements in the U.S., describes Jewish women's contribution to this process" Jewish women put their lives on the line to fight racism and white supremacy in the Southern civil rights movement and contributed professional skills and organizational clout to move the civil rights agenda forward throughout the country".

Their involvement often intersected with their commitment to social justice and their understanding of the historical oppression faced by both African and Jewish communities (Shultz, 2023).

Jewish women in the civil rights movement fought for equality, highlighting the interconnectedness of different struggles for justice and equality in America. Although individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks are frequently at the forefront of conversations about this era, Betty Friedan, a well-known Jewish feminist and novelist, should not be disregarded for her influence (Shultz, 2023).

This article examines Betty Friedan's numerous contributions to the civil rights movement and her societal effect, illuminating the ways in which her feminism interacted with and influenced the larger fight for civil rights.

Betty, Friedan, a prominent Jewish feminist and author, was a key figure in this movement. Her 1963 book, "The Feminine Mystique," challenged the idealized view of femininity as social domestic, sparking the second wave of feminism. Friedan co-founded the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966, advocating for equal rights, pay, and reproductive rights for women. Her legacy continues to influence feminist and social justice movements today.

Keywords: Civil Rights, Feminism, Betty Friedan, Jewish women

* Doctor of American Studies, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: meladzeeka75@gmail.com

Introduction

In the 1960s, Jewish women were instrumental in promoting human rights and social justice in the United States. They were active participants in civil rights movements, advocating for racial equality and women's rights, and worked in coalition with other marginalized communities to confront systemic discrimination. Their efforts remain a source of inspiration for subsequent generations committed to social change.

They were participating in protests demonstrations, and voter registration drives. They formed alliances with African-American activists, recognizing the power of unity in creating lasting social change. Jewish women held leadership positions in civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which actively fought for racial equality.

Jewish women also worked within the legal system, providing legal representation, contributing to landmark cases, advancing the cause of equality, and combating discrimination for marginalized communities (Horowitz, 1998).

They were actively involved in providing financial support and resources to organizations and organizing events. They formed alliances with other minority groups. They also worked in media and communications to raise awareness about civil rights issues, writing articles, and documentaries, and challenging the status quo. Jewish women were early proponents of intersectional feminism, emphasizing the intersection of gender, race, and other factors to create unique forms of discrimination. Their understanding of intersectionality influenced feminist and civil rights movements, promoting inclusivity and advocating for social justice.

This article underlines the important involvement of a prominent Jewish woman writer, Betty

Friedan, whose activism was a significant contribution to that time's great challenges in human rights.

Literature Review

In this paper, we use scholarly works and well-established publications such as "Betty Friedan: Her Life" by Judith Henness and "Betty Friedan and Making of the Feminine Mystique", by David Horowitz to examine the life and impact of Betty Friedan, a prominent figure in the feminist movement. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Friedan's influence extended beyond the realm of feminism; her contributions to the civil rights movement were equally noteworthy and deserve attention in the broader context of social and political activism in the United States during that era.

Friedan's renowned work, "The Feminine Mystique" (1963), is often credited with igniting the second wave of feminism and sparking discussions about women's roles and rights. While this groundbreaking book remains a focal point of her legacy, it is essential to delve deeper into her involvement in the civil rights movement, which has received less scholarly attention but is no less significant.

Also, we practice documentaries and films about Betty Friedan and the feminist movement which deliver visual and audio context to her life and work.

This source provides valuable insights into Friedan's personal experiences, her role in founding the National Organization for Women (NOW), and her influential book, "The Feminine Mystique." Through an analysis of these works, we aim to shed light on Friedan's contribution to women's rights and her lasting legacy in shaping the feminist discourse.

Factors That Influence Friedan's Activism

The post-World War II period in the United States was characterized by a range of social, political, and economic conditions that profoundly shaped Betty Friedan's work. These factors not only defined the context in which Friedan wrote but also influenced the development of her activism and ideological perspectives. During this time, Friedan began to question prevailing societal norms and expectations for women, driven by her observations of the widespread discontent and dissatisfaction experienced by many women.

In her groundbreaking work, *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan refuted the notion that a woman's primary role was confined to that of a wife and mother. The book ignited a national discourse on gender equality and women's rights, challenging traditional societal expectations.

Although the post-World War II economic boom brought about suburbanization and a rise in the middle class, it also frequently left women feeling unfulfilled in their duties as mothers and homemakers. In the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement picked up steam, questioning conventional gender norms and fighting for women's rights. In order to change societal norms and pave the path for greater gender equality, women wanted equal chances in the job, in school, and with regard to reproductive rights (Hennessee, 1999).

A heavy emphasis on conformity and social pressures to conform to traditional gender roles were characteristics of the 1950s and the early 1960s. Non-conformity was frequently stigmatized, particularly for women. Women who didn't play the traditional roles of mother and wife were frequently referred to as rebellious or unfeminine. Due to this societal pressure, it was challenging for women to pursue interests or occupations outside of the house without receiving negative feedback. The fight for women's rights, however, in the 1960s overturned these expectations

and paved the path for greater gender equality in society (Friedan, 1963).

The Cold War and McCarthyism created a climate of political conservatism and anti-communism. This contributed to a societal focus on traditional values and the suppression of dissent. As a result, any deviation from the expected gender roles was seen as a threat to the stability of the nation. Women who dared to challenge these norms were often accused of being unpatriotic or even communist sympathizers. However, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s challenged these conservative ideals and fought for women's rights, ultimately leading to significant social and cultural changes (Hennessee, 1999).

During this period, the Civil Rights Movement was significantly intensifying its efforts to combat racial discrimination and segregation. Concurrently, women began to critically examine their own rights and social standing, spurred by the discussions and activism surrounding civil rights. As a result, a robust feminist movement emerged, driven by the realization among women that they, too, were subjected to systemic disadvantages and mistreatment. The central objective of this movement was to challenge the entrenched gender norms of the time and advocate for the equality of women across all aspects of society.

In this complex social, political, and economic environment, Betty Friedan's work emerged as a powerful critique of the limitations placed on women and played a central role in catalyzing the second-wave feminist movement in the United States. "The Feminine Mystique" challenged the prevailing norms and contributed to a broader discussion about women's roles, equality, and liberation in American society. Friedan's book not only exposed the discontent and dissatisfaction experienced by many women in their traditional roles but also sparked a collective awakening among women who began to question their own aspirations and desires. By highlighting the personal stories and experiences of women, Friedan

gave voice to a shared sentiment of frustration and ignited a nationwide conversation about gender inequality and the need for change (Judith, 1999).

Betty Friedan: A Catalyst for Changes

Friedan's advocacy for women's rights intersected with the broader fight for civil rights as she recognized the interconnectedness of various social justice issues. Her efforts to dismantle gender inequality aligned with the larger goal of achieving equality for all marginalized groups, and she actively collaborated with civil rights leaders to promote a more inclusive society. Friedan's multifaceted impact solidifies her legacy as a trailblazer in both the feminist and civil rights movements (Churchill, 2023).

Beyond working with civil rights leaders, Friedan was dedicated to social justice. She was aware that correcting systemic inequalities required a comprehensive strategy if real progress was to be made. In addition to fighting for women's rights, she also opposed racial prejudice and economic injustice. In her writings and lectures, Betty Friedan regularly emphasized the connections between these concerns, highlighting the significance of removing the obstacles that oppressed not only women but also people of color and those from low socioeconomic status. In order to build a more inclusive and fair society for all, Friedan worked to acknowledge the interconnectedness of these battles. She was convinced that eliminating one type of injustice would eventually result in the elimination of all other forms, promoting a more equitable and just society (Churchill, 2023).

Furthermore, Friedan's legacy endures through the organizations she founded, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), which continues to champion gender equality and intersectional social justice. Her pioneering efforts paved the way for subsequent generations of activists, inspiring them to advocate for equality on multiple fronts.

Friedan's influence extends well beyond the institutions she established. Her seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*, initiated a nationwide dialogue regarding women's societal roles and catalyzed a surge in feminist activism. Her ideas remain central to contemporary discussions on gender equality, continuing to drive progress across multiple domains of social justice.

Betty Friedan, a trailblazer in feminist and civil rights movements, fought for women's rights and social justice issues. Her holistic activism challenged gender norms and highlighted intersections of race, class, and sexuality. Her legacy serves as a reminder that progress requires addressing systemic inequalities on multiple fronts.

Collaboration with Civil Rights Leaders

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was organized by Betty Friedan in partnership with civil rights activists A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. Diverse organizations of civil rights activists came together for this momentous occasion, which is best known for Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Friedan's participation emphasized the value of collaboration and allyship between various social justice movements (Judith, 1999).

By joining forces with civil rights leaders, Betty Friedan demonstrated the interconnectedness of various social justice causes and the need for solidarity. Her collaboration with these leaders showcased the power of collective action in achieving common goals, inspiring future generations of activists to work together across different movements.

Friedan's collaboration with civil rights leaders not only underscored the importance of solidarity but also illustrated the principle that advancements in one domain of social justice can facilitate progress in others. As she joined prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Ella Baker in marches, Friedan

emphasized the interconnected nature of the struggles for women's rights, racial equality, and economic justice. This salient message reverberated through the volatile decades of the 1960s and 1970s, fostering a sense of cohesion among diverse activist movements.

Moreover, Friedan's legacy extends beyond her time, continuing to inspire contemporary social justice movements. Her example serves as a reminder that, just as she joined forces with civil rights leaders, today's activists can forge alliances across a spectrum of causes, amplifying their collective voices and strengthening their impact. Betty Friedan's legacy is a testament to the enduring power of collaboration and solidarity in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

Conclusion

Betty Friedan's contributions to the civil rights movement were influenced by her conviction that every person, regardless of race or gender, is entitled to

basic rights and dignity. Her intersectional style of activism placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of cooperation in the fight for social justice. Friedan is frequently praised for her contributions to the feminist movement, but her dedication to civil rights shows the need for cooperation and inclusivity in furthering equality. Today, activists are still motivated by her legacy, which serves as a reminder that the fight for civil rights is fundamentally a fight for the rights of all oppressed communities.

Friedan's intersectional approach to activism also recognized the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, acknowledging that gender and race discrimination often intersect and compound each other. By advocating for the rights of all marginalized communities, she sought to dismantle systems of power that perpetuated inequality. Her work serves as a reminder that true progress toward social justice can only be achieved through collective action and solidarity among diverse groups.

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