



The fight for female equality

Fifty years ago, Ford factory workers made history.

On 7 June 1968, 187 women in Dagenham, Essex swapped their sewing machines for campaign banners. These women worked as machinists for Ford the car maker, where they sewed and created car-seat covers. Although this required a lot of skill – one woman even made clothes for the Queen – Ford bosses considered the job to be less important than those done by men, such as spray-painting cars. This meant the company didn't pay women as much money as it paid men.

Angry about being paid less, the machinists went on strike, which means they refused to work. They took to the streets to protest. It worked. Ford lost so much money because work had stopped (around £117 million in today's money) that politicians took notice. The Equal Pay Act was introduced two years later, in 1970. The act made it illegal for women to be paid less than men for work of the same type.

By helping to make history, the Ford machinists of 1968 became heroes. Like the suffragettes who forced politicians to let women vote, they shaped the very idea of feminism. But what does this mean exactly?

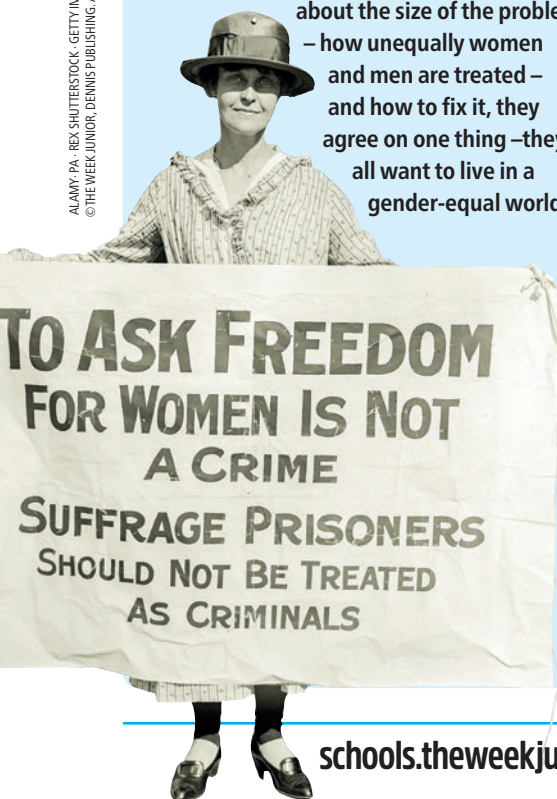
What is feminism?

Although the term feminism means different things to different people, at its heart it is the belief that all women should have the same rights, opportunities and choices as men.

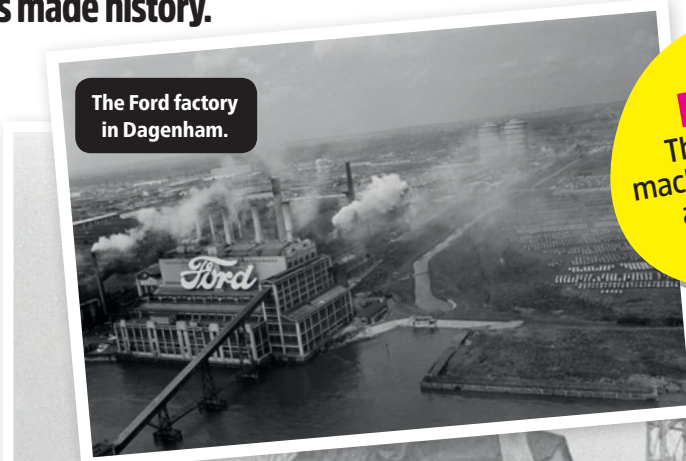
A feminist therefore supports women's rights – and tends to oppose attitudes in society that limit what women can achieve or do, or how they should behave.

Although feminists sometimes disagree about the size of the problem – how unequally women and men are treated – and how to fix it, they agree on one thing – they all want to live in a gender-equal world.

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The Ford factory in Dagenham.

BIG SCREEN
The story of the Ford machinists was turned into a film in 2010 and a musical in 2014.



The women stopped working and protested.

How feminism started

The early feminists were those who, during the late 1800s, campaigned for women to have the right to vote. Strengthened by the arrival of the suffragettes, who often used extreme and violent methods of protest, these feminists helped to give women a say in politics for the first time. This made people think about the roles and jobs given to men and women. The majority of British women worked during the Second World War, gaining a sense of freedom and independence that



DID YOU KNOW?
Iceland was considered the most gender-equal country in the world in 2017. The UK was in 15th place.

could not be matched by their former roles as housewives and mothers. Then, in the 1960s, a second wave of feminism began. Although this was mostly about gaining equal rights and opportunities in the workplace, women also rebelled against traditional ideas of how women should look and behave, as well as what they should want from their lives. These aims are still being pursued by feminists today.



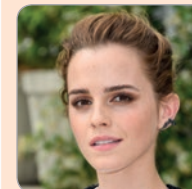
A suffrage march in New York in 1912.

Five feminist icons



Malala Yousafzai

The activist became famous when she was attacked in Pakistan for speaking out against a ban on girls' education. At the age of 17, she received a Nobel peace prize – the youngest person ever to win this award.



Emma Watson

In 2014, the actor launched an international campaign called #HeForShe. The campaign set out to get one billion men to take action against gender inequality. Watson's feminist book club has more than 200,000 members.



Prince Harry

The recently married prince has spoken out about women's rights. In a 2013 speech for a feminist organisation called Chime For Change, the prince said, "Real men give [women] the respect they deserve."



Hillary Clinton

Before being nominated as a candidate for US president, Hillary Clinton was a senior politician who used her position to fight for gender equality.



Theresa Bennett

In 1978 this determined 12-year-old girl used the legal system to fight the Football Association (FA) because they had banned her from playing football. Her challenge put pressure on the FA to set up leagues for young girls, which it eventually did in 1993.

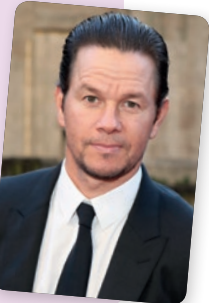
What about the boys?

Andy Murray



Some people think that feminism is about placing the rights of women above those of men. However, most feminists simply want both sexes to have the same opportunities, rather than put men in a worse position.

In the early 1900s, a group of men who sided with the suffragettes was formed. They called themselves "suffragettes in trousers". Today, many men argue for women to have the same opportunities, pay and status as they do. When he learnt that he had been paid a lot more than a female co-star, film star Mark Wahlberg, right, donated his earnings to a women's campaign group. Tennis champion Andy Murray has campaigned for women's tennis tournaments to be given more publicity.



Do we still need feminism?



The UK is a more gender-equal society since the Ford machinists went on strike. Women's rights have continued to develop, and it is now illegal to discriminate against women in education or at work. Despite this progress, there remains inequality between men and women. For example, women earn on average 14% less than men, and women make up less than a third of the UK Parliament.

Other countries share a similar story – one of progress, but continuing inequality. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women secured the right to vote in 2015, and a female driving ban will be lifted on 24 June 2018. Despite this, women in the Middle Eastern country must still get permission from men to travel and work.

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