



History of Marches and Mass Actions

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Parades, pickets, demonstrations, marches, rallies, protests. No matter what they are called, perhaps the single most powerful, peaceful way to bring about social change is for people to stand together publicly on behalf of an important cause.

For many women, a mass action like NOW's [2004 March for Women's Lives](#) is an unprecedented opportunity to speak out and do grassroots organizing, a celebration of strength and unity, and a defining moment in their lives.

“Many women I talk with say they got hooked on being an activist the moment they stepped off a bus and into a crowd of hundreds of thousands of other feminists,” said former NOW President [Patricia Ireland](#).

The history of mass political actions organized by U.S. women dates back to the turn of the century. As early as 1903, labor reformer [Mary Harris “Mother” Jones](#) organized children working in factories to parade in front of city hall in Kensington, Pennsylvania, with their maimed fingers and hands held high in the air.

The Suffragist Example

Although the movement for women's right to vote began in the latter half of the 19th century, evolving out of women's activism in and frustration with the abolition (anti-slavery) movement, the first mass demonstrations for suffrage weren't held until 1911. They were organized by [suffragist leader Alice Paul](#), who had been impressed by the tactics of the British suffrage movement while she was traveling in England.

A suffrage parade in 1913 on the eve of President Wilson's inauguration was marred by violence, but also increased the integration of the movement. Members of the Black sorority Delta Sigma Theta marched as a delegation, while Black journalist and anti-lynching activist [Ida B. Wells](#) marched side-by-side with white women from Illinois.

In 1916 and 1917 suffragists picketed the White House, with one silent picket leading to the arrest of 218 women from 26 states. The women were jailed and force-fed at the Occoquan workhouse, a prison in Virginia, and their mistreatment led to public outrage and helped with the campaign. [The 19th amendment](#) guaranteeing women the right to vote passed Congress in 1919 and was ratified in 1920.

Women of Color Early Leaders

During those early years, and throughout the 20th century, women of color were leaders of mass actions on behalf of many causes. In 1914 and 1915, Black leftist Lucy Parsons led mass demonstrations of homeless and unemployed people in San Francisco and Chicago. In 1917, Black women in white dresses were prominent in the front lines of a 15,000-person march in New York protesting lynchings and racial discrimination.

In the latter part of that century, Latinas like Delores Huerta, who co-founded the [United Farm Workers Union](#) with Cesar Chavez, organized and marched on behalf of improved working conditions.

With a single carefully-planned act of protest, refusing to give up her seat on a bus, NAACP activist [Rosa Parks](#) gave new vigor to the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Black women were among the protesters arrested during a May 1963 civil rights march on Birmingham, Alabama, and were key organizers across the country for the 1963 civil rights March on Washington that featured Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "[I Have A Dream](#)" speech.

Second Wave's Early Protests

Many young women joined in Vietnam era student marches and protests that drew record crowds to Washington in 1969 and 1971. But something was missing for women in the radical student movement and many of the other movements of the 1960s.

"Many of our earliest activists were women who felt squeezed out of leadership in these movements, and were drawn to possibilities for them in the women's movement," says Ireland.

And the possibilities were endless, with the energetic new movement using creativity, daring and sometimes both the costumes and techniques of the suffragists.

In perhaps the first picket ever by NOW members, activists in August 1967 dressed in vintage clothing to protest the old-fashioned policies of *The New York Times*, which then segregated help-wanted ads by gender. In December of the same year, NOW held its first national day of demonstrations in five cities, targeting the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) for issuing guidelines approving of the ads.

In September 1968, New York NOW members and other women's liberation activists picketed the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and though no bras were actually burned

that day (some were thrown into a trash can), this is the event from which the myth of the bra burners evolved.

On August 26, 1970, on the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage, NOW activists organized a "Women's Strike for Equality." Approximately 50,000 women marched in New York and another 100,000 women participated in demonstrations and rallies in 90 cities, 42 states.

In 1973, NOW activists organized "Take Back the Night" marches and vigils around the country, which protested sexual assault and other violence against women, and those events continue to this day on many campuses and in many communities.

The ERA's Heyday

Marches on behalf of the [Equal Rights Amendment](#) began in May 1976, when NOW brought 16,000 supporters to Springfield, Illinois, to urge ratification by the Illinois legislature, many of them arriving from the East Coast on the ERA Freedom Train. In August 1977, 4,000 women and men marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to demand that President Carter take a more active role in efforts to ratify the ERA. Days later, activists donned jogging shoes for the first of what became five annual ERA walk-a-thons that together raised over \$1.7 million for the ratification campaign.

The next year NOW organized over 100,000 people to march on Washington in 95-degree heat, in a sea of purple, gold and white banners (reflecting the suffragist colors), to press for an extension of the time limit on ratifying the ERA. Having won the extension, NOW activists organized a record 90,000 people to march on Chicago, again urging Illinois' ratification, in the 1980 Mother's Day March for ERA.

After ERA, the Storm of Abortion Rights Marches and other Protests

After the defeat of the ERA in 1982, NOW did not organize another major march on women's rights until the East Coast/West Coast March for Women's Equality/Women's Lives in March 1986, when over 120,000 women and men demonstrated in Washington, D.C., and the following weekend in driving rain in Los Angeles, against the impending threat to abortion rights.

During the interim, NOW was a major organizer of the 1983 March for Peace, Justice and Equality — the March for the Dream, a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the 1963 Martin Luther King march, as we have been for each of the subsequent anniversary marches in 1988, 1993 and 2003.

The threat to reproductive rights again became palpable in 1989, with Missouri's anti-abortion laws pending before the Supreme Court, and the Bush administration siding with abortion foes, explicitly urging reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. NOW's April 1989 March for Women's Lives drew crowds that had not been seen in Washington since the Vietnam protests of 1969 and 1971. After organizing a recording-breaking crowd of 600,000 in April, we followed up with a rally of

350,000 that fall — the November, 1989 “Mobilize for Women’s Lives” at the Lincoln memorial — then broke our own record by bringing 750,000 abortion rights supporters for a massive [April 1992 March for Women’s Lives](#) as another threatening case, *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, was pending in the Supreme Court.

These mass marches forced the issue of abortion rights into the forefront of political debate going into the 1992 elections and provided strong, new networks of activists and contributors.

Lesbian and gay rights marches on Washington in 1979, 1987 and 1993 and in New York in 1994, each drew crowds from hundreds of thousands to over 1 million, and reflected the growing power of that movement. The largest to date was the Millennium March in 2000.

In 1995, more than 200,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C., on April 9 for the [Rally for Women’s Lives](#), the first and largest mass action to stop violence against women. Organized by NOW and endorsed by a record 702 national and local groups, the rally coincided with NOW Foundation’s Young Feminist Conference, brought in many new activists, especially young activists from more than 200 college campuses.

1995’s Million Man March in Washington, which focused on African American men, was followed in 1997 by a Million Woman March, in which African American women filled the streets of Philadelphia with demands of justice and equality.

NOW marched again on April 14, 1996, when over 30,000 women and men gathered in San Francisco to [Fight the Radical Right](#). The march, organized by NOW, united activists from a range of causes and organizations to actively support affirmative action; economic justice; abortion rights and reproductive freedom; civil rights for people of color; lesbian, gay and bisexual rights and efforts to end violence against women.

Over 140 countries around the world participated in the October 2000 World March of Women, demanding an end to poverty and violence, and NOW was the U.S. organizer of the march in Washington, D.C. Over 20,000 women and men came from across the country, including many who joined us from other countries, and NOW Foundation organized the Women’s International Symposium on Health (WISH) Conference to coincide with the World March.

In 2001, after the elevation of George W. Bush by the Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore*, NOW organized a “Zap Action for Women’s Lives,” which brought 30,000 marchers to the Capitol for a rally and march to draw attention to Bush’s threat to women’s reproductive rights and to focus public attention on the danger of Bush stacking the federal courts.

2004 March for Women’s Lives

The April 25, 2004, [March for Women’s Lives](#) drew a record 1.15 million people to Washington, D.C., to protect and advance access to a full range of reproductive health care options, including abortion, birth control and emergency contraception. The such march that was not organized solely by NOW, this massive event was coordinated by an unprecedented coalition of women’s rights and social justice groups — led initially by six core groups: NOW, Black Women’s Health

Imperative, Feminist Majority, NARAL, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, and Planned Parenthood, with the ACLU joining the leadership in the final months. Activists came from all parts of the country, angered by the anti-woman policies imposed by President Bush, making the 2004 March for Women's Lives was the largest protest in U.S. history.

Why Demonstrate?

Marches build and rejuvenate the various movements for women's rights by sending a message to those in power, and by forever changing the lives of participants.

“When women work to mobilize and fund a group of local participants for a big event like our March for Women's Lives, they are often transformed from enthusiastic but inexperienced activists into community leaders,” said Ireland.

“I've seen it happen over and over again. We count on it. The other transformation I have seen hits everyone from the most seasoned pioneer activist to the college sophomore. Standing side by side with a sea of kindred spirits, each of us finds renewed strength to wage the struggle for women's equality.”