Timeline
18th – 21st Century

Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung

Women's Rights Movements in Europe and the USA

1789
The French Revolution
The slogan of the French Revolution is "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". Thousands of women actively participate in the revolution, but the "human and civil rights" formulated by the new National Assembly do not apply to them.

1804
The Napoleonic "code civil"
France, under Napoleon Bonaparte, introduces the "code civil" (the civil code) that will later influence legal systems in many European countries. The "code civil" legally establishes the subordination of married women. From now on, they owe obedience to their husbands and have neither legal capacity, nor can they dispose of their property.

1848/49
Revolution in Germany
In 1848 there are revolutionary uprisings in almost all the states of the German Confederation. No women are allowed into the first National Assembly in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt; only equal rights for men are discussed there. This meets with strong feminist protest. Louise Otto, for example, criticises the contradiction between the exclusion of women and the democratic and liberal ideas of the German Revolution in the "Frauen-Zeitung" she founded in 1849.

29 May 1851
Speech by Sojourner Truth
Even though most women's rights activists in the USA campaign for the abolition of slavery, Black women are hardly represented at their gatherings. Sojourner Truth, a former slave and itinerant preacher, draws attention to this fact at a women's rights meeting in Akron/Ohio in 1851. Her speech is published as a pamphlet in 1863 (probably in an altered form) and becomes famous under the title "Ain't I a Woman?".

1867
Admission of the first female student in Zurich
In 1867, the University of Zurich admits the Russian Nadezhda Suslova to a full course of medical studies. This makes it one of the first universities in Europe to allow a woman to do so. Soon after, universities such as Bern and Geneva follow Zurich's example, attracting women thirsting for education from all over the world to Switzerland.

1872
Presidential candidacy of Victoria Woodhull
Victoria Woodhull, a journalist and financial broker, becomes the first woman to run for the presidency in the USA. Even though her candidacy is not officially recognised, as women do not have the right to vote, it attracts a lot of attention in the media. Woodhull is also opposed by many bourgeois women's rights activists because of her lower-class background and her radical views on "free love" and socialism.

1902
Hedwig Dohm: "The Anti-Feminists"
The writer and radical women's rights activist Hedwig Dohm publishes her collection of essays "The Anti-Feminists" at the age of 70. In it, she sarcastically confronts misogynist authors and ideologies and draws up a typology of anti-feminist lines of argumentation that is essentially still valid today.

1 January 1900
The German Civil Code
The Civil Code comes into force in Germany, stipulating the exclusion of women from political rights and the subordination to their husbands. Feminists fiercely contest this, among them the lawyer Anita Augspurg. Her call to refuse state marriages causes a sensation.

March 1906
Emma Goldman and "Mother Earth"
The first issue of the magazine "Mother Earth", edited by the Russian American anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman, is published in New York. The magazine covers a wide range of political and feminist issues, including free love, contraception and abortion, until it is banned in August 1917. It repeatedly comes into conflict with the authorities due to its radicalism.

9 February 1907
"Mud March" of the suffragettes
In London, around 3,000 women take part in a march for women's suffrage. Known as the "Mud March" because of the bad weather, the demonstration attracts a lot of attention. Mass demonstrations become the standard means of the suffragettes (from "suffrage"). Up to 500,000 people are said to have taken part in the so-called Women's Sunday in June 1908.

4 June 1913
Disruptive action in Epsom
Suffragette Emily Davison throws herself in front of the horse of England's King George V at the Epsom horse race and dies of her injuries four days later. Because demonstrations and petitions had been unsuccessful, English women's rights activists had recently tried militant action: resisting arrest after protests, chaining themselves together, hunger strikes, vandalism (breaking shop windows) or disrupting public events.

28 – 30 April 1915
International Women's Peace Congress
In protest against the First World War, over a thousand women from twelve countries gather in The Hague for the International Congress of Women. The congress makes numerous proposals for a sustainable peace policy which include control of the arms trade, the establishment of an International Court of Justice and a fairer global economic order. Another demand is the participation of women in political decision-making.

19 February 1919
Speech by Marie Juchacz
The SPD politician Marie Juchacz is the first woman to give a speech in the German parliament. When she addresses the MPs as "Gentlemen and Ladies", she is met with "merriment", according to the minutes. Juchacz emphasises that women in no way owe a debt of thanks for the right to vote. It is rather their natural right which they have hitherto been unjustly deprived of.

1929
"A Room of One's Own"
The British writer Virginia Woolf publishes her essay "A Room of One's Own" about the difficult conditions under which women had to produce literature in the past. She famously said that if women had material resources and their own room, they would be just as creative as men.

1939
Pacifist women's organisations in the Second World War
Numerous pacifist women's rights activists, mainly of Jewish origin, had fled Germany or been arrested even before the start of the Second World War in 1939. From Geneva and New York, among other places, members of the women's peace movement support refugees and organise demonstrations against Nazi Germany. Not everyone's pacifism is unconditional: "We are the League for Peace and Freedom", writes the German activist Anita Augspurg, "and now I put freedom first".

1936
"Mujeres Libres" in the Spanish Civil War
In Spain, Lucía Sánchez Saornil, Mercedes Comaposada and Amparo Poch y Gascón found the anarchist women's association "Mujeres Libres" (Free Women), which soon has tens of thousands of members. They fight against General Franco's putschists in the Spanish Civil War and stand up for women's rights among their anarchist and communist comrades-in-arms.

1790 – 1945

5 September 1791
Olympe de Gouges
The writer Olympe de Gouges demands equal rights for women in the "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen". Two years later she is arrested for this and other texts as a "political disserter" and sentenced to death. On 3 November 1793 she is beheaded by guillotine.

1792
Mary Wollstonecraft
The English writer Mary Wollstonecraft publishes the work "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", in which she demands above all better education for women. She contradicts the prevailing opinion that women are intellectually incapable of making political decisions. Her book becomes a bestseller.

1832
Saint-Simonian women in France
Particularly female members of the "Saint-Simonians", followers of the philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon, who died in 1825, are active against the exclusion of women from civil rights. In 1832, they found the magazine "La Femme libre" (The Free Woman). Their main argument: since women and men are not equal, women cannot be politically represented by men and must not be economically dependent on them.

1843
Flora Tristan: "Workers' Union"
The Peruvian French writer Flora Tristan publishes the book "Workers' Union". For the socialist and women's rights activist, the liberation of the working class is inconceivable without the emancipation of women. She sees both as necessary steps towards real freedom and equality.

19 – 20 July 1848
Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls/USA
In the small town of Seneca Falls in the US state of New York, the first all-women's rights meeting in the USA takes place on 19 and 20 July 1848 with around 300 participants. The organisers of the Seneca Falls Convention are Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, both of whom are also involved in the anti-slavery movement. The "Declaration of Sentiments" formulated here in the style of the American Declaration of Independence calls for human and civil rights for women.

1859
Society for Promoting the Employment of Women
Jessie Boucherett, Barbara Bodichon and Adelaide Procter found the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women in London. They demand access to respectable gainful employment for bourgeois women, whose livelihood is at that time entirely dependent on men. In contrast to women from the working class, they cannot work in factories or as domestic servants without losing their social standing. The Society runs its own newspaper, the "English Woman's Journal", and a printing press known as the Victoria Press.

18 October 1865
General German Women's Association
The women's rights activist Louise Otto-Peters and the teacher Auguste Schmidt found the General German Women's Association in Leipzig. It is the first transregional association in Germany to campaign for women's rights. The aims of the association are to promote education and professional activity and to campaign for equal opportunities and political participation.

18 March 1871
The Paris Commune
Following a popular uprising, a republican-socialist coalition seizes power in the Paris city council. The resulting "Paris Commune" overthrows the political order and carries out social reforms. Women are heavily involved in the organisation of the Commune, for example the later anarchist Louise Michel, the writer André Léo or the Russian activist Elisabeth Dmitrieff. After 72 days, the Commune is brutally crushed by the French army.

19 July 1889
Clara Zetkin and the socialist women's movement
In her speech at the International Workers' Congress in Paris, the German socialist Clara Zetkin criticises the idea that women can liberate themselves through gainful employment. By doing so, Zetkin argues, they would "only exchange masters" and become dependent on their employer instead of their husband. Overall, Zetkin and other socialists demand improved working conditions for women in addition to legal equality.

1893
Women's suffrage in New Zealand
New Zealand, at that time a colony under British rule, is the first democratic state in the world to introduce active women's suffrage. New Zealand women with British citizenship are entitled to vote from the age of 21. The right to stand for election remains reserved for men until 1919.

1896
First women at Prussian universities
Women are admitted to study at Prussian universities – but only as guest students, i.e. they cannot take an official degree.

1 January 1902
German Association for Women's Suffrage
Anita Augspurg, Lida Gustava Heymann and eleven other activists found the German Association for Women's Suffrage in Hamburg, the first organisation in Germany to explicitly advocate the right to vote and the right to be elected. The immediate motivation is the first International Women's Suffrage Conference in Washington, D.C. in February 1902, with which the German women's rights activists want to network.

20 June 1906
Women's suffrage in Finland
Finland is the first country in Europe to introduce active and passive suffrage for women. The country is still under the rule of the Russian Empire, which many Finns want to shake off. Following a general strike in October 1905, the Russian Tsar gave in clearing the way for a new Finnish constitution with the right to vote for everyone over the age of 24.

1904
Feminist protests in France
French feminists use the 100th anniversary of the "code civil" to protest against the continued exclusion of women from civil rights. Hubertine Auclert, with a group of activists, interrupts a session of the Chamber of Deputies and tears up a copy of the civil code. Madeleine Pelletier, a doctor and women's rights activist, disrupts the centenary banquet.

15 May 1908
Women in German associations and parties
In Germany, the Reichsvereinsgesetz (Imperial Associations Act) comes into force, which is intended to unify the fragmented system of associations in the German Empire. It also lifts the ban on women joining political associations or parties, which had been in force in most regions until then.

19 March 1911
The first International Women's Day
On 19 March 1911, the first International Women's Day is celebrated in Germany, Austro-Hungary, Switzerland and Denmark. It is associated with demands for women's suffrage and rights for women workers. The idea came from American women socialists who had already initiated a Women's Day in the USA in 1909. The concrete proposal came from Clara Zetkin. In 1921, the date is moved to 8 March. Today, that day is a public holiday in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

12 November 1918
Women's suffrage in Germany
The Council of People's Representatives – the provisional government of Germany after the First World War – decides on universal and equal suffrage. On 19 January 1919, women are thus able to cast their votes for the first time in the election to the German National Assembly and can also be elected themselves. Out of a total of 423 seats, 37 are won by women, most of them from the SPD.

1923
The "flappers" of the twenties
The film "Flaming Youth" with Colleen Moore in the leading role is released in the USA. With her bob hairstyle, the actress becomes the symbol of the "flappers", young women who emancipate themselves from traditional gender roles. This is a phenomenon that spills over into Europe. Berlin in particular becomes a magnet for a new generation of women.

30 January 1933
Women in National Socialism
The beginning of the National Socialist rule in Germany marks the end and a reversal of all developments towards the emancipation of women. A series of laws aim to exclude women from working life and attempt to confine them to their roles as housewives and mothers. The NSDAP decided, shortly after its foundation in 1920, that women were not allowed to hold party office. When all parties except the NSDAP are banned in July 1933, women thus lose the right to stand for election. However, under the conditions of the dictatorship this soon ceases to have any significance.

1945 – 2024

23 May 1949
Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany
The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany is signed and promulgated. Article 3 states that "Men and women have equal rights", a clear formulation which was, however, the subject of much controversy. This clause was adopted thanks to Elisabeth Seibert (SPD), Friederike Nadig (SPD), Helene Weber (CDU) and Helene Wessel (Centre Party). These four are the only women among the 65 members of the Parliamentary Council that drafted the Basic Law.

1 July 1958
Equal rights law in the Federal Republic
In the Federal Republic of Germany, the "Law on the Equal Rights of Men and Women in the Field of Civil Law" comes into force. Women now no longer need their husband's consent for important decisions such as opening their own bank account, disposing of their own money and exercising a profession. However, for the latter the restriction applies that "this must be compatible with their duties in marriage and family".

7 October 1949
Constitution of the GDR
The constitution of the German Democratic Republic comes into force. Article 7 states: "Men and women have equal rights. All laws and regulations which stand in the way of equal rights for women are repealed." This wording is much more far-reaching than that of the Basic Law. But even though women in the GDR are better integrated into the job market, they remain predominantly responsible for housework and are hardly represented in political leadership positions until the very end.

20 July 1960
Sirimavo Bandaranaike becomes head of government
The socialist Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike is elected prime minister in Ceylon (since 1972 Sri Lanka), making her the first freely elected woman head of government in the world. After her husband, the former prime minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, had been assassinated a year earlier by a Buddhist monk, she had become the Sri Lankan Freedom Party's top candidate.

18 August 1960
Market launch of the "birth control pill"
The first "birth control pill" is launched in the US market. One year later, it also becomes available in the Federal Republic of Germany where initially it is prescribed only to married women with several children, as a remedy for menstrual cramps. The fact that women can prevent pregnancies by regularly taking a hormone preparation is vehemently criticised, especially by the Catholic Church. In the GDR, the "Wunschkindpille" ("Planned Child Pill") is available as from 1965 and is distributed free of charge as from 1972.

6 June 1971
The "We have had an abortion" campaign
In the magazine "Stern" 374 German women, including women's rights activist Alice Schwarzer and actress Romy Schneider, declare that they have had an abortion and thus confess to having committed a crime. Two months earlier, a similar declaration by hundreds of French women, among them Simone de Beauvoir and Jeanne Moreau, had appeared in "Le Nouvel Observateur". Both campaigns trigger a broad feminist movement against the ban on abortion.

19 June – 2 July 1975
The first UN World Conference on Women
The first UN World Conference on Women is held in Mexico City following the General Assembly of the United Nations' (UN) proclamation of the "International Year of Women" in 1975. It soon becomes clear that one year is not sufficient to deal with the global issue of women's rights. The ten years from 1976 to 1985 are therefore declared the "United Nations Decade for Women".

1 November 1976
First autonomous women's shelter
The first autonomous women's shelter, where women can find refuge from domestic violence, opens in a villa in Berlin-Grunewald. Others soon follow in numerous cities across the Federal Republic. Prior to the New Women's Movement of the 1970s, the issue of domestic violence by men against women and children had been a social taboo.

1 July 1977
Reform of the marriage and family law of the Federal Republic
With this reform, the Federal Republic abolishes the stipulation that women may only be gainfully employed "insofar as this is compatible with their duties in marriage and family". Furthermore, from now on, pension entitlements acquired during marriage are divided equally and husbands can adopt their wife's surname – if the couple agrees.

1 July 1984
Women's suffrage in Liechtenstein
The Principality of Liechtenstein is the last European country to introduce women's suffrage. The introduction in Portugal (1974) and Switzerland (1971) was also very late.

22 – 23 November 1986
The Mothers' Manifesto
Following a congress in Bonn on the theme "Living with children – mothers are becoming louder", the so-called Mothers' Manifesto is written. In the manifesto women demand a re-evaluation of domestic work and child-rearing, as well as a basic income that does not depend on gainful employment. This triggers controversial debates within the women's movement, which at that time is strongly focused on establishing equality in working life.

3 December 1989
Independent Women's Association of the GDR
1,200 women from the GDR meet in the Berlin Volksbühne and found the Independent Women's Association (UFV) in order to be able to influence the reforms of the Round Table. The "Manifesto for an Autonomous Women's Movement" written by Ina Merkel becomes their provisional founding programme. It contains many concrete demands particularly with regard to women's co-determination and the inclusion of women's interests in the process of political change.

24 June 1994
Second Equal Rights Act
The "Law for the Enforcement of Equal Rights for Women and Men" comes into force in Germany. At the same time, article 3, paragraph 2 of the Basic Law ("Men and women have equal rights") is supplemented by the following clause: "The state shall promote the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men and shall work towards the elimination of existing disadvantages." This gives active equality policy constitutional status.

16 August 1994
Reproductive justice
Black activists in the USA coin the term "reproductive justice". It combines the classic demands for a right to abortion, "reproduction rights", with aspirations of social justice. Reproductive justice insists that women should not only have the right to decide for or against having a child but that people from disadvantaged groups in particular should also be able to make this decision freely in practice.

1 July 2002
Rape recognised as war crime
The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court enters into force. Among other things, it recognises rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity. Feminist activists had demanded this following the acts of violence committed in the civil wars in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

15 May 1997
Marital rape becomes a punishable offence
The German Bundestag decides that marital rape will also be treated as a punishable offence. A large majority of 471 MPs vote in favour of the bill, which was introduced by members across party lines, including Ulla Schmidt (SPD), Vera Lengsfeld (CDU) and Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger (FDP). 138 MPs vote against, 35 abstain.

24 January 2013
#Outcry
A broad debate about sexism begins in Germany under the hashtag #Aufschrei. Within a very short time, thousands of people share their experiences of sexual harassment in everyday life on Twitter. The debate is also fuelled by media reports about misogyny in the Pirate Party as well as an article by journalist Laura Himmelreich in which she accuses FDP politician Rainer Brüderle of sexually assaulting her.

15 October 2017
MeToo protests
Actress Alyssa Milano calls on women worldwide to share their experiences of sexualised violence under the hashtag #MeToo. Previously, it had come to light that US film producer Harvey Weinstein sexually assaulted women on repeated occasions. On Facebook alone, "MeToo" is used by more than 4.7 million people in one day. The slogan was coined as early as 2006 by activist Tarana Burke on the MySpace network.

1 January 2020
Reduction of VAT on period products
In Germany, the so-called tampon tax is lowered. VAT on menstrual hygiene products is now charged at only 7 per cent instead of 19 per cent as was previously the case. Feminists had been pointing out for some time that these constitute "goods of daily use" for which the reduced tax rate applies in Germany.

1 May 2015
Quotas in supervisory boards
The "Act for the Equal Participation of Women and Men in Leadership Positions in the Private and Public Sector" comes into force in Germany. Among other things, it stipulates a "women's quota" of at least 30 per cent on the supervisory boards of listed companies. In Germany, this applies to about 100 companies.

22 November 2005
Angela Merkel becomes chancellor
The CDU politician Angela Merkel is elected the first female Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. She remains in office for 16 years, until 8 December 2021 – the second longest term of office and only ten days shorter than Helmut Kohl's.

21 February 2012
Protest by Pussy Riot
In the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, feminist activists from the band "Pussy Riot" hold a "punk prayer" to protest against the alliance between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state. They had been organising spectacular events criticising the patriarchal and undemocratic structures in Russia for a long time. The activists Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samuzevich are now arrested and their trial triggers international debate.

14 – 16 March 2014
The "Care Revolution" network
The three-day action conference "Care Revolution" takes place in Berlin with lectures and workshops on various aspects of care work, both in the professional and private sector. This results in the formation of a nationwide network to draw political attention to the importance of care and caregiving and to advocate for conditions that make appropriate care work possible.

24 June 2022
Paragraph 219a is abolished
The Bundestag deletes paragraph 219a, the so-called ban on advertising for abortions, from the Criminal Code. In previous years, radical opponents of abortion had filed numerous criminal charges against doctors who provided information on their websites about the methods they employ to perform abortions in their practices. Following the deletion of the "advertising ban", all convictions under paragraph 219a against doctors are lifted.

2017/18
Feminist mass protests
Feminist mass protests take place in many countries around the world in order to counter the growing populism of the right wing and its misogynist positions. In January 2017, half a million people gather at the Women's March in Washington at the inauguration of president Donald Trump in the USA. In March 2018, tens of thousands protest in Poland for the right of abortion and in Spain several million people take part in a general strike for equality.

At the end of the 18th century, women's rights movements that advocated equality for women in law, politics and other parts of society emerged in many countries. These movements and their ideas are marked by great diversity and differ from each other depending on era, cultural space and social class.

The purpose of this timeline is to give an overview of the development of women's rights and women's movements, respectively feminism, from the late 18th century until today. In particular, ideas, events and persons from Europe and the United States are depicted with special focus on the German context.

— Legend

Explanation of colours:

Grey = legislative developments

Light blue = selected events in politics, society and cultural life

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— *Note:*
This timeline does not claim to be comprehensive. It is the result of careful research and represents a selection of important events related to the history of women's rights movements in Europe and the USA. For educational purposes, the timeline can be completed with further details and extended as needed.

1949
Simone de Beauvoir: "The Second Sex"
"Le Deuxième Sexe" ("The Second Sex") by philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir is published in France. "One is not born a woman: one becomes one" is the core dictum of her historic study on gender order, where she distinguishes between biological and socially determined gender. In the 1970s, the book becomes the most important fundamental text of the women's movement.

13 September 1968
The tomato-throwing incident
The filmmaker Helke Sander gives a speech at a delegates' conference of the Socialist German Student League (SDS) in Frankfurt am Main about the patriarchal structures in society and within the SDS. Subsequently, when the conference participants want to move on to the order of business without debate, Sigrid Rüger from the audience throws tomatoes onto the podium. The tomato-throwing incident is seen as the start of a new phase of the women's movement in Germany.

1972
The "Wages for Domestic Labour" campaign
The US-American Selma James and the Italian Mariarosa Dalla Costa jointly publish the manifesto "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community". It describes domestic free labour as a problem and questions the gender division of labour. The book becomes a core text for the international campaign "Wages for Domestic Labour".

9 March 1972
Abortion: the GDR's policy on abortion time limits
The People's Chamber of the GDR passes the "Law on the Interruption of Pregnancy" which allows for abortion within a specified time frame. Pregnant women are now free to decide whether to have an abortion in the first twelve weeks after conception. In neutral Germany a de facto time-limit regulation, according to which abortion in the first twelve weeks remains illegal but is not prosecuted, does not apply until 1993.

1979
Womanism
The US writer Alice Walker uses the term "womanism" for the first time in connection with women's rights in her short story "Coming Apart". Walker and many other Black women activists establish the term to refer to their experience of dual discrimination as women and as Black people.

4 May 1979
Margaret Thatcher becomes prime minister
With her election as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher becomes the first female head of government of a European country. She soon becomes known as the "Iron Lady" because of her uncompromising confrontation with the welfare state and trade unions. Her hard-line attitude towards the European Community and her intransigent military stance with regard to the Falkland Islands.

1986
"Showing Our Colours"
The book "Showing Our Colours: Afro-German Women Speak Out" – edited by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz – deals with German colonial history and the racism experienced by Black people in Germany. The project was inspired by the American poet and activist Audre Lorde, who was living in West Berlin at the time. Initially, the book is met with little response, but it is now considered a classic.

1989
"How female freedom comes about"
In their book "Wie weibliche Freiheit entsteht" ("How female freedom comes about), Italian feminists develop a practice that becomes known as "Affidamento" (best translated as: "to entrust"). According to them, women's freedom cannot be achieved through formal equality with men, but through direct relationships among women that encourage each other thus initiating social change at all levels.

1989
Kimberlé Crenshaw: Intersectionality
The US-American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw coins the term "intersectionality" for the overlap, or intersection, of different forms of discrimination. She argues that for people who are affected by several forms of discrimination (for example, as a woman and as a Black person) these systems of oppression do not simply add up but result in a completely new quality of discrimination.

1990
Judith Butler: "Gender Trouble"
The US-American philosopher Judith Butler publishes her book "Gender Trouble". In it, she argues that also biological sex and thus the distinction between men and women in general is not naturally given but socially constructed. The book becomes the basis for queer feminist activism and the demand for acceptance of trans and nonbinary gender identities.