Alice Paul

Activists, Rebels and Reformers, 2001

Born: January 11, 1885 in Moorestown, New Jersey, United States
Died: July 09, 1977 in Moorestown, New Jersey, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Activist

“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”—Text of the Equal Rights Amendment as authored by Alice Paul in 1923

Alice Paul introduced the use of militant tactics—such as marches, demonstrations, picketing the White House, and hunger strikes—to the women's suffrage (voting rights) movement. Although her methods landed her and her colleagues in jail, they helped secure the passage of a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. Paul also authored the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and campaigned, unsuccessfully, for its adoption for half a century.

Although unquestionably committed to the cause of women's rights, Paul has been criticized for being domineering and elitist and for excluding African American women's rights from her agenda.

A Quaker upbringing

Paul was born in 1885 in Moorestown, New Jersey. She was the oldest of four children in a well-to-do Quaker family. Paul's father, William M. Paul, was a banker and a businessman. Both of Paul's parents instilled in their children traditional Quaker values of social justice, equal rights, and the duty to help oppressed people.

That Paul would become a women's rights activist came as no surprise to her mother, Tacie Parry Paul. In an interview published in the October 1919 issue of Everybody's Magazine, Mrs. Paul was asked what she thought of her daughter's political activities. "Well, Mr. Paul always used to say," stated Mrs. Paul, "when there was anything hard and disagreeable to be done, 'I bank on Alice.'"

Extensive education

In her youth Paul was educated by private tutors, after which she went to Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1905, then spent one year studying social work at the New York School of Philanthropy. Her field work at the school involved organizing women workers on New York's Lower East Side. Paul next attended the University of Pennsylvania, where she earned a master's degree in sociology in 1907 and a Ph.D. in 1912. She wrote her dissertation on the legal rights of women.

Paul did much of the course work and research for her Ph.D. in England. She took classes in social work at the University of Birmingham and classes in sociology and economics at the University of London's School of Economics.

Learns radical tactics from British suffragists
Paul's most profound learning experiences in England occurred not in the classroom but in meeting halls and on the streets. Specifically, Paul met women at the fore of the English struggle for woman suffrage. She was taken under the wing of Christabel Pankhurst—one of the most militant British suffragists and a leader of the Women's Social and Political Movement. Paul began attending the group's meetings and demonstrations.

The tactics of the British suffragists were quite radical, especially by the standards of the U.S. women's movement. The Englishwomen forced confrontations with lawmakers and risked arrest. Paul was arrested seven times for participating in demonstrations at the parliament building. During three of her jail stays, Paul refused to eat. Prison authorities responded by force-feeding her through nasal tubes, which is a very painful process.

**Joins suffrage movement in United States**

When Paul returned to the United States in 1912, she brought with her the militancy of the English suffrage movement. She immediately joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and took on the responsibility of heading its Congressional Committee. (NAWSA had been formed in 1890 by a merger of the two most prominent suffrage organizations—the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association.)

Paul's association with NAWSA did not last long. NAWSA members were cautious in their approach to social action and disapproved of the confrontational tactics favored by Paul.

**Founds National Woman's Party; pickets White House**

In 1913 Paul and Lucy Burns—an American woman she had met while working with the British suffragists—founded a new suffrage organization called the Congressional Union (CU). The CU employed a range of tactics in the push for women's enfranchisement, from lobbying members of Congress to picketing the White House to staging hunger strikes. Their first major event, held on the eve of the presidential inauguration of Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924; president from 1913-21), was a parade of five thousand suffragists through the streets of Washington, D.C.

In 1917 the CU joined with another suffrage association, the Woman's Party, to form the National Woman's Party (NWP). Beginning that January, the NWP held a nearly constant vigil at the White House gates. They displayed signs calling on President Wilson to demonstrate his commitment to democracy by supporting women's right to vote. The NWP picket drew the ire of many passersby, some of whom shouted insults or even physically assaulted the suffragists.

In October 1917 the suffragists were ordered by the police to leave the White House gate. They refused and were taken to the Occoquan Workhouse jail in Virginia. There Paul began a hunger strike in prison and convinced many of the other detained NWP members to join her. Again, Paul endured painful force-feeding. At the end of November the protesters were released, and two months later Wilson threw his support behind the woman suffrage amendment.

**Efforts bear fruit in Nineteenth Amendment**

The work of Paul and others in the women's suffrage movement met with success in 1919, when the
proposed voting-rights amendment was passed by Congress. Over the next year suffragists successfully campaigned from state to state, until the amendment was ratified by the necessary thirty-six states (ratification by three-fourths of all states is required for the adoption of any Constitutional amendment).

Women in the United States were granted the right to vote in 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. The Nineteenth Amendment reads, in its entirety: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

**Drafts Equal Rights Amendment**

After the victory for woman suffrage, Paul began pushing for women's rights on a broader scale. On behalf of the National Women's Party, Paul drafted an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The ERA was to have granted equality to women in all respects of public life. In 1923 the proposed legislation was introduced into Congress but was not approved. For the next six decades, Paul continued her ultimately unsuccessful campaign for the ERA's passage.

**Earns law degrees; fights for international women's rights**

In 1920 Paul recognized that she would be a more effective advocate for women's rights if she had a thorough understanding of the law. She enrolled in Washington College of Law and in 1922 earned her bachelor of legal letters degree. She continued her studies at American University in Washington, D.C., earning master's and doctoral degrees in law in 1927 and 1928, respectively.

In the 1930s Paul concentrated on international women's rights. She settled in Geneva, Switzerland, and attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Pan American Congress and the League of Nations (the precursor to the United Nations; formed after World War I [1914-18]) to make women's rights part of their platforms. Paul participated in a League of Nations committee on women's issues. In 1938 she founded the World Woman's Party, which later succeeded in getting a commitment to women's rights (including voting rights) included in the charter of the United Nations (formed in 1945 after World War II [1939-45]).

**Creates controversy in National Woman's Party**

At the outbreak of World War II, Paul returned to Washington, D.C, where she resumed living at the headquarters of the National Woman's Party and working for the passage of the ERA. In the 1940s Congressional support for the ERA mounted. The NWP, however, was weakened by infighting and was not able to effectively advocate for the ERA. Paul was at the center of the controversy. First she was accused of misusing NWP funds. And in the early 1950s several party members quit over Paul's endorsement of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist crusade. (McCarthy [1909-1957] spearheaded a series of investigations—commonly referred to as "witch-hunts"—from 1950 to 1954 to rid government, educational institutions, and entertainment industries of anyone believed to have communist [antiprivate ownership] leanings.)

**Uses civil rights movement to advance women's issues**

In the 1950s Paul adopted the strategy of piggybacking women's rights issues onto civil rights issues. Many people criticized Paul for this approach, accusing her of using the burgeoning African American
Alice Paul rights movement for her own purposes after previously having ignored the needs of African American women. (During the 1913 march on the eve of Wilson's inauguration, for example, Paul had made African American suffragists march in the back of the procession to avoid offending southern white women.)

Paul was undeterred by the criticism. During congressional debate over the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Paul convinced Howard Smith, a conservative representative from Virginia, to attach a rider to the proposed legislation that would prohibit discrimination in employment based on sex. Smith's action was widely viewed as an attempt to complicate the Civil Rights Act, and thus to hurt the act's chances of succeeding. The act passed, however, and working women have benefitted as a result. (The 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination in the areas of education, employment, voting, and public accommodations.)

**The defeat of the ERA**

In 1972 Paul and other women's rights activists brought a weaker version of the original ERA before Congress. Congress passed the bill and sent it along to the states for ratification. While two-thirds of the state legislatures approved the amendment, campaigns by conservative organizations prevented its ratification in the other states. To this day, the rights of women are not explicitly defined in the Constitution. (While there are presently numerous laws protecting the rights of women, there is no one piece of sweeping legislation that grants equality to women in all aspects of life.)

The Equal Rights Amendment, as it was proposed in 1972, read:

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied by the United States or any state on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

**Final years**

In 1972, at the age of eighty-seven, Paul moved to a cottage in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and continued her work by telephone. In 1974 she suffered a stroke, after which she moved into a Quaker nursing home in her hometown of Moorestown, New Jersey.

In 1977, as Paul's ninety-second birthday neared, ERA ratification still stood four states away. The National Organization for Women (NOW) used the occasion of Paul's birthday to renew the push for ratification. NOW members visited legislators in states that had not voted for ratification, urging them to deliver their support for the ERA as a birthday present for Paul. Paul died later that year, and the ERA was never ratified.

- Alice Paul
Further Readings


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