

Cracks in the glass

BY SCOTT PORCH

Earlier this month, the National Book Awards released its nonfiction longlist, and it included only one book written by a woman. None were biographies of women. The longlist reinforced a widely held notion within the publishing industry that because men disproportionately read some forms of nonfiction — particularly history — Great Wars and Great Men tend to dominate the field.

And yet, there are a wealth of stories about compelling, important women waiting to be told, and a good place to start is the feminist movement, which, over the last century, has made an almost unfathomable change in the lives of women in the United States. Consider that before 1920 American women could not vote, had virtually no access to contraception, were not likely to get a college education; had few opportunities for work outside the home; and, when they did work outside the home, earned far less than men.

How we got from there to here is the subject of "Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements," a quick, compelling and astute history of the women's movement from the 1920s to today and the first major history of women's political, social and economic progress in the United States in a generation.

The book is divided into three sections, and each is written by a historian writing in her particular wheelhouse: Dorothy Sue Cobble of Rutgers University on feminist progress through the labor movement in the 1920s to the 1960s; Linda Gordon of New York University on the women's liberation movement of the 1960s to the 1980s; and Astrid Henry of Grinnell College on modern feminism.

There is no chief protagonist of the women's movement — even in the women's liberation period from the late 1960s through the 1970s — as Martin Luther King Jr. was



Keystone/Getty

An undated photo of an American campaign for women's votes, left, and a 1970 march for women's equality.



Eugene Gordon/The New York Historical Society

in the civil rights movement. (And, in truth, the civil rights movement had many consequential figures that King has overshadowed.) The women's movement is an ensemble cast of labor leaders, legislators, health advocates and community activists who have cracked the glass ceiling with many different hammers.

The book's first section focuses on the years immediately preceding World War II, when — as in basically every

other period in American history — a substantial component of what constituted women's issues was economic equality. Women in the workplace wanted the same pay for doing the same work as their male counterparts, access to the jobs those male counterparts had, and the right to return from maternity leave with the same seniority and benefits. Many of those battles were fought and won by women in organized labor, and Cobble brings particular insight to the important role of black women in the labor movement.



Feminism Unfinished

By Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon and Astrid Henry, Liveright, 266 pages, \$25.95

problems weren't so much problems as conditions that were widespread, institutional and the product of a male-dominated culture.

"(M)any a woman tended to feel that she was the only one who didn't like her looks, her body, her sexual activity, her housework, and so on," Gordon writes. "Enunciating their discontents, consciousness-raising group members soon ... reclassified them as social, not personal."

Gordon notes that many of the important figures of the period — National Organization for Women co-founder Betty Friedan; attorney Sylvia Roberts, who won the first sex-discrimination case under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1969; Ms. magazine co-founder Gloria Steinem — were women who challenged accepted norms in the culture such as gender-specific classified ads and marrying young (or at all) by changing the status quo through collective action.

In the last section, Henry has the daunting task of charting the path of feminism from the 1990s to the present day, which she frames with the two elections where women made their biggest gains in Congress. In 1991, the all-male Senate Judiciary Committee grilled Anita Hill during Clarence Thomas' confirmation hearings, and the next election sent record numbers of women to Congress in 1992. In 2012, Rush Limbaugh called a female law student a "slut" for her contraception advocacy, and Missouri congressman Todd Akin declared that a woman who is "legitimately raped" can't get pregnant. The ensuing election represented another backlash.

There are so many present-day issues to cover — feminists reclaiming sex appeal, social media decentralizing protests, international activists like Ai-jen Poo and Malala Yousafzai, the movement losing ground on contraception — that many got shortchanged. Henry mentions Tina Fey's feminist character on "30 Rock" but says nothing of her groundbreaking work as a female head writer on the male-dominated "SNL" or of her role as creator of "30 Rock." She mentions Madonna as barrier-pushing entertainer but omits that Madonna became head of a record label.

But that's the nature of a survey class, and this is one you should take.

Attorney Scott Porch is writing a book about social upheaval in the 1960s and '70s.