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Feminist Betty Friedan's best-selling book, "The Feminine Mystique," sparked a debate on women's roles in society and challenged women to strive for greater social and political opportunities. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

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Transcript

Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique

TODD JOHNSON reporting:

Feminist Betty Friedan is widely acclaimed as one of the leading figures of the modern Women's Rights Movement, advocating for rights that many women today take for granted. As Friedan wrote in her hugely influential, best-selling book, The Feminine Mystique, "'Rights' have a dull sound to people who have grown up after they have been won."

Published in 1963, the book exposed what Friedan called the "nameless, aching dissatisfaction" many women felt in their limited roles as wives and mothers. The book signaled the start of a great social change.

BETTY FRIEDAN: Just the freedom to think, to be, to choose, to face life and the diversity of it and - and be a person, that is the major change.

JOHNSON: Friedan wrote "something is very wrong with the way American women are trying to live their lives today." She blamed what she termed "the feminine mystique" - the idea that the traditional roles of wife and mother offer the ultimate fulfillment for women. Friedan's book opened the debate on stereotypical roles and challenged women to strive for more opportunities.

FRIEDAN: At that time the focus had to be on breaking through the feminine mystique that defined us solely in terms of family so that we could start our own personhood in this society and that we could break through the barriers of sex discrimination.

JOHNSON: Friedan believed women needed to find meaningful work at their full intellectual capacity. "In almost every professional field, in business and in the arts and sciences," wrote Friedan, "women are still treated as second-class citizens" with limited jobs available and less pay for equal work. Friedan encouraged women to take their place in the mainstream as equals to men, demanding equal opportunities for education and employment and an equal voice in the political process.

To bring the fight for change to the national level, Friedan co-founded the National Organization for
Women and helped organize the National Women's Political Caucus with Shirley Chisholm, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, and others. In the NOW Statement of Purpose, Friedan wrote that the organization would "initiate or support action…to break through the silken curtain of prejudice and discrimination against women." Through these organizations, women began lobbying congress and initiating lawsuits for equal employment opportunities, equal pay, maternity leave and child care, and reproductive rights - radical ideas at the time.

However, Friedan didn't agree with radical elements in the feminist movement who saw men as the enemy. Friedan thought men and women should work together to liberate them both from obsolete sex-roles.

FRIEDAN: Equality - no more, no less - but equality means assertion of the personhood of women in society - doesn't mean end of marriage, end of motherhood, and certainly doesn't mean down with men.

JOHNSON: Until her death in 2006, Friedan continued to write and advocate for women's issues. But she's best remembered for
The Feminine Mystique
, the book that galvanized a social revolution.