



# Women's Issues Then & Now

## A Feminist Overview of the Past 2 Centuries

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## One Step at a Time

### From Corns to Comfort

When asked to describe the image that is created when discussing the results of the feminist movement, an individual would undoubtedly describe a liberated woman. A woman of internal strength, appearing powerful and carefree and resisting silence is a woman they would describe. However, this woman makes a statement not only with her words and ambition but also her energy and attire. What is often overlooked about this woman is another subtle but important element of the feminist movement. This element is a woman and her choice of footwear. While at first this suggestion might seem rather incongruous, a closer look into the idea will reveal that the feminist movement took one of the first steps towards equality by taking those steps in a new direction in a new shoe. The evolution of women's footwear surfacing with pain and resulting in comfort paralleled the development of the feminist movement.

### Why this is Important!

Scholars who have often studied the feminist movement have viewed it as a struggle for women to break through the injustices done to them. Most of the time the injustices were the oppressive laws and societal duties imposed onto these women. However the movement was much more than laws and social norms, it encompassed every aspect of a woman that had to be hidden and sheltered from herself and the world. A woman's choice of footwear

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only assisted in this oppression by the limited choices and the deliberate restrictive style of her shoe which inevitably restrained her from abandoning her gender roles. All women knew that the road of the feminist movement towards equality was long and arduous, and in an uncomfortable pair of shoes that path can seem impossible. Therefore, one can understand that few were tempted to participate. However times got easier, and before a new pair of shoes could be broken in, footwear was evolving to provide the new liberated woman with comfort and endurance.

## The Style of Footwear

### The Restrictive Victorian

When the style is taken into account from the Victorian Era to the present there are not many differences in the style only additions to the market. Shoes have always been an important element of a women's attire, but in the Victorian period usually shoes were hidden under a woman's dress. As a result the demand for a variety was limited. In fact, there were three basic styles of shoes, which women wore at each appropriate occasion: the boot, clog, and dress slipper (Brooke, 97). The boot was typically made of hard leather which took quite a bit of time to break in. This shoe was worn during the day by socially busy woman or by the population of women in the working class. Once the sewing machine was patented in 1850, this made the boot accessible to more women and eventually it became the footwear for the working class. The dress slipper and clog were shoes worn for special occasions. These shoes were made of satin with many luminous colors and intricate designs that matched the dress a woman was wearing that evening. While these shoes were slightly more comfortable than the boot, the idea at that time was to fit into the smallest size possible in order to hide the feet below the large hoop skirt. During this era, a woman held an image of innocence and silence and was characterized as childish and petite. Therefore, if the feet and shoes were seen on these social occasions a woman had much to be embarrassed about (Pratt. 64).

### The Individualized Twenty-First Century

In our twenty-first century society, these ideas regarding footwear have vanished. In addition to the original three styles of footwear for the Victorian period many others have been added to the market ranging anywhere from "pumps" to gym shoes. These shoes are the result of the individualization of women, and an outcome of the feminist movement which demands that women feel comfortable with themselves. Along with the plethora of styles are newer and more durable materials used to make the different shoes. Including the original leather and satin a women can now buy shoes in cotton, suede, velvet, and even corduroy illustrating that there is no limit to what a women can have. Fashion today encourages women to wear the shoes that do not necessarily match the outfit but





instead compliment the it, contrary to the Victorian period when the shoe had to match. After years of eventual foot problems due to the cramming of a woman's foot into a shoe too small for her foot, it is not any wonder why today a trade-off had to be made between style and comfort (Brooke,98). While the worst health concern today from a pair of tight shoes could be a blister or bruise, these ailments seem trivial compared to the damage done to a woman's feet in the Victorian era due to bad shoes when many women suffered from problems of corns and even dislocated toes. The overall image of the shoe has not changed from then until now, and it still stands as an essential part of the outfit whether it is seen or not. However the underlying purpose of the shoe, aside from getting around, has definitely altered the way a women carries herself.

## The Deeper Message

### Oppressive Victorian

There is no argument against the idea that women were regarded as inferior in the Victorian Era, but if it were claimed that a women's footwear added to the image of inferiority this idea would sound absurd. At first to the individual uneducated on the evolution of footwear, this statement would sound ridiculous; however, upon further examination, the shoe industry, which was controlled by men, knew exactly how to keep a woman in her assigned role. As mentioned earlier the shoes that were particularly worn for a special occasion were meant to be small and unnoticed rather similar to the way women were expected to act at social occasions. If their shoes were not only uncomfortable to put on let alone unbearable to walk in the reason for a woman to be up and socializing with the crowd for any length of time was non existent. As described by the book, *Women's Shoes in America*, "flimsy shoes or gaiter boots worn painfully short and tight were a very real discouragement to physical activity, and as a result they tended to foster both dependence and domesticity" (Rexford, 46). This was a deliberate act preformed by the footwear industry to make sure that women were kept right where they were thought to belong in society.

### A New Liberated Century

However, in the twenty-first century this idea disappeared as the feminists gained more and more momentum. Now with the presence of women designers in the industry, comfort is quite possibly the only deep-seated interest. This idea is beautifully illustrated in the evolution of the "pump" or high-heeled shoes, which can be seen as an adaptation of the former dress shoe or slipper. What was once a shoe of high social status, but great discomfort, is now a shoe admired and worn by every working woman in the world. This example provides great insight into the idea that women should be restrained and quiet. By making a shoe for the working woman that is unbearable to wear, women are kept out of the workforce. As the years progressed more emphasis was put on the awareness of the comfort issue and later great improvements were made to make way for the woman in her designer "pumps" on her feet for eight hours. Once the feminist movement helped women break away from the old societal views, the footwear industry along with many other fashion industries could put emphasis on individuality and comfort since that was the direction that society was moving towards.



## How the Feminists Did it

### Identification

While it seems rather far-fetched that the evolution of women's footwear is a direct result of the feminist movement, one cannot discard the idea completely. When analyzing the era and circumstances it seems rather logical to claim that as more women became liberated and stepped out of their social norms things even as miniscule as a woman's footwear would change. As Iris Brooke explains in her book *Footwear*, "a considerable proportion of the so-called 'intellectual' female population had shed the bustles and boots and appeared in public in sandals and the flowing gowns" (Brooke, 100). The feminists in the Victorian Era had initiated the evolution of the shoe by discarding what felt very restricting and painful for a shoe more free and flamboyant. These were the first little steps taken into the fashion prevalent today. Another contribution to the evolution of the shoe from the feminists is the entry of women into sports in the late 1800's. While still participating in sports at a minimal level, "the outdoor sports gave women the new opportunities for enjoying companionship with men, and a whole class of leisure activities that had previously lain within a solely masculine sphere now became common ground" (Rexford, 55). Therefore, with the acceptance of women into these new activities no longer would a clog, dress slipper, or boot be acceptable. These activities further opened the door for more adaptations to footwear.

### In a Nutshell

Looking back on the progress of the feminists movement, one can now see shoes as a direct representation of some of the feminists ideals held at that time. From the suppressed Victorian period to the rebellious twenties through the revolutionary sixties and up to the individualized twenty-first century, the objective has always been style. Now it appears each woman can have a style all her own. One could look at the fashion today and claim that now in regards to shoes everyone is a feminist. Whether she is the corporate executive or the third grade physical

education teacher, no longer are her shoes hidden and avoided, but they have become part of who she is and the path she has chosen in her life. Inevitably, the path towards equality will always be arduous, but today no woman has to take another step in that path and face the world in bad shoes again.



## Where did I find this Stuff?

### Bibliography

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This page was last updated [Saturday, 18-May-2002 08:28:18 CDT](#)