Information on the Changing Role of Women

Women’s roles in society changed a great deal during World War I and throughout the 1920s. Before the war, many women, particularly white women, did not work outside the home. Like their working counterparts, many of whom were poor or women of color, these women performed traditional domestic responsibilities of conserving food and fuel resources in the early part of the war. However, as the war continued and more men were drafted to serve in the military, over 23,000 women entered wartime industrial plants for the first time. They took jobs as shipment collectors, accountants, telephone operators, and even steel mill workers. Women who had already been working outside the home found greater employment opportunities, and many were able to move from domestic service to industry jobs.

Women’s success in traditionally male jobs increased their motivation to be treated as equals with men. As a result, women demanded better wages from their employers and rallied for more political rights. Begun in 1848, the women’s suffrage movement (fight to gain women the vote) gained steam in the late teens. After decades of speaking at outdoor meetings and even painting “Votes for Women” on their backs as propaganda, suffragists finally won. The Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, gave women the right to vote and sparked a new era in women’s political participation.

After winning suffrage, however, women’s political interests splintered and faded in the light of the exciting 1920s cultural innovations. Feminists argued over the goals of feminism, and women of different races tended to believe unified female political participation was impossible. Most of all, in light of new fashion trends and movies, politics seemed boring to many women. Swayed by societal pressure and consumer advertising for new products and sexier images, many women channeled their attention away from politics and into social life.

- How did World War I change women’s roles in society?
- What was the Nineteenth Amendment? How did women help achieve its ratification?
- Why did many women lose interest in politics during the 1920s?

For many women the 1920s brought newfound freedom and independence. Empowered from political successes, and entering an era when people had more leisure time to spend, women began to challenge traditional ideas of women’s role in society. Unmarried working women had their own money to spend, and access to automobiles brought greater mobility. In addition, sexual mores were changing, influenced by the work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Many people believed that Freud promoted uninhibited sexual expression as a means for curing a multitude of ills. Margaret Sanger, a birth control advocate who had been shunned in the past, became respected and admired during the twenties. Attention to female sports stars, like tennis champion “Queen Helen” Wills, encouraged women to prize a combination of health and femininity. Women’s fashions became an outlet for personal
expression, and women’s focus on body image became more prominent. Ads for cigarettes promoted smoking as a sign of sophistication, and also promised to help women stay thin, claiming, for example, “Light a Lucky and you’ll never miss sweets that make you fat.”

Embracing widespread societal changes, women engaged in practices that their Victorian mothers and grandmothers labeled as shockingly “immoral.” Women’s clothing fashion styles became less modest, beginning with shorter hemlines. One researcher charted the “rise” of women’s skirts from 1919, when the long dresses uncovered only 10 percent of women’s bodies, to 1927, when knee-length flashy wraps left 25 percent of their bodies bare. Many women also cut their hair short, wearing “shingle bob” hairstyles cropped at men’s barber shops, and covering them with close-fitting hats. Disapproving elders nicknamed these daring young women flappers: rebellious young women who wore short skirts, smoked, danced wildly in new dances like the Charleston, joined the Communist Party, and used cosmetics and birth control. Indeed, many flappers, usually young, upper-middle-class white women, proudly displayed the signs of their independence, sexuality, and energetic youth. Image-conscious women took up smoking, and the number of women smokers doubled during the decade. Many flappers also painted their faces with rouge, powder, and lipstick, practices that society had earlier assigned to prostitutes.

Reflecting looser attitudes toward sex, many women in coeducational colleges sought to become “the cat’s meow” with “s.a.,” or sex appeal. They told more off-color jokes, and snuck away from romantic movies to “park” and “pet” in automobiles, devoid of chaperones. One 18-year-old female announced, “If I see any more of these passionate fiery movies I will not be able to resist the plan to become a wife before next quarter. …when I first entered high school these scenes gave me unpleasant and guilty feelings. …[now] in such a different light… I actually want to experience these scenes, and see beauty in them.” Despite the changes and trends in sexuality, however, few women during the 1920s considered sex outside of marriage. Only a few bold women openly declared a commitment to their autonomy, such as African-American singer Bessie Smith, who sang, “I ain’t gonna marry, ain’t gonna settle down.”

- How did 1920s social changes affect women?
- What fashion and social trends did young women embrace during the twenties?
- Who were flappers, and what kind of reputation did they carry?
- How did women’s sexual ideas and practices change during the decade?
Rev. Hugh L. McMenamin [Roman Catholic priest]

"Evils of Woman's Revolt against the Old Standards"

*Current History*, October 1927

Look about you. The theatre, the magazine, the current fiction, the ballroom, the night clubs and the joyrides—all give evidence of an ever-increasing disregard for even the rudiments of decency in dress, deportment, conventions [standards], and conduct. Little by little the bars have been lowered, leaving out the few influences that held society in restraint. One need be neither prude nor puritan to feel that something is passing in the hearts and in the minds of the women of today that is leaving them cold and unwomanly. . . .

We may try to deceive ourselves and close our eyes to the prevailing flapper conduct. We may call boldness greater self-reliance, brazenness greater self-assertion, license greater freedom, and try to pardon immodesty in dress by calling it style and fashion, but the fact remains that deep down in our hearts we feel a sense of shame and pity. . . .

Modern economic conditions, with the mania for speedy profits, have been a powerful factor in producing the "New Woman," inasmuch as they have dragged her into the commercial world and made her economically independent. It is quite impossible for a woman to engage successfully in business and politics and at the same time create a happy home. A woman cannot be a mother and a typist at the same time, and unfortunately she elects to be merely a wife, and out of that condition have arisen those temples of race suicide—our modern apartment houses—and the consequent grinding of the divorce mills.

V. F. Calverton [editor and essayist]

"Careers for Women—A Survey of Results"

*Current History*, January 1929

If the mother has children, their lives are no longer confined only to the narrow boundaries of a single house, but have a chance at a more varied and stimulating form of growth. As one woman very aptly expressed it: "The future mother will not threaten to abandon the care of her baby for a job. She will not have to. The baby will have abandoned her. No educational sign of the times seems clearer. Quite irrespective of her mother's desire for domesticity or a career, tomorrow's toddler will be cared for outside the home for at least a part of the day." (Eunice Fuller Bamard, "The Child Takes a Nurse," *Survey Graphic*, December 1926). The old patriarchal home, in which everything centered, disappeared long ago with the rapidly changing developments of our modern industrial civilization. Not only could it not persist with women working, but it had had the children drawn from it even before by the many new institutions and attractions of modern life. While the women of the old generation were afraid of precisely this change, and attacked it as a sign of decay, the new women, the women of this rising generation, greeted it with an enthusiastic intelligence.

The community needs educated and efficient women just as it needs educated and efficient men. The modern world can no longer do without either. But its very existence and continuity depend upon good homemakers and mothers. In other words, there can be no solution until ample provision is made in our educational system from the bottom to the top for the training of future homemakers, side by side with the training of women for professional and other careers. One should always involve the other.

Louis L. Dublin, "Homemaking and Careers."

*The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1926

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**Progress**

1910: She owns her own car.
1920: She owns her own business.

"Tom Mason Says," regular feature of humorous commentary. *Collier's*, January 5, 1929

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It is a great mistake, however, to think that woman can ever be completely independent of man, no matter what she wishes to believe or have others believe. The movement of emancipation begun by women has gone too fast and too far and many have misunderstood the question. Her great aim appears to be Freedom from Man. What woman should want in reality is to be delivered from the shackles into which man has put her, her intelligence, desires, ambitions, and talents.

Dr. Joseph Collins, "Woman's Morality in Transition." *Current History*, October 1927

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The character of American women under the impact of modern conditions has, it would seem to the observer, gained in strength, honesty, initiative, camaraderie, and self-confidence, but perhaps lost somewhat in patience, sweetness, and the more superficial "feminine" traits. There is no evidence to show that their moral quality has deteriorated.

How our female workers are distributed over the several broad classifications into which the Census Bureau groups them. The 6.5 per cent unrepresented lot are engaged in mining and public service, but in such small numbers that they cannot be satisfactorily shown on the same scale with the groups more represented.

The "Domestic and Personal" group includes only hired workers, and not home-keeping wives and mothers, who are officially listed as without occupation.

The sex in which the male workers are distributed over the same groups. The public service workers, 2.3 per cent of the total, are again not represented. As might have been expected, the men and the women are allocated in entirely different proportions to most of the groups. The most significant feature of the showing here made is the size of the "Manufacture" group, and the fact that less than one-third of the male workers are able to produce food for all of us.

HOW AMERICA'S MALE AND FEMALE WORKERS EARN THEIR DAILY BREAD

Scientific American, April 1922
Expert Woman Welder

Mrs. Martha Hoffman Henke of Chicago, one of the very few woman welders in the world, explaining the art of welding. A short time ago in Boston she gave a demonstration of her mechanical art for the American Welding Society and the students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

She Follows Mining

Miss Helen Antonikova overhauling a mining drill. Born in Siberia, she is now a student of mining engineering at the University of Washington.

A Worker in Wood

Mrs. Park of Garrard's Cross, England, making fittings for her invention—a portable telescopic nursery gate. This British matron knows tools as well as babies, and she keeps a workshop in her home. Her nursery gate placed across the nursery door makes of the room a big and safe play pen.

With Synthetic Sunshine

Doctor Rosalind Wolzen, of the University of California, is shown above experimenting with synthetic sunbeams. She uses a "sunshine" machine in her search for a cure for various ills now deemed almost incurable.

Behold "Mrs. Hercules!"

This is Mrs. Angelina Francesca, of Boston, carrying a big barrel. She is six feet six inches in height, and for 10 years she has been handling barrels and hogsheads at a barrel plant where she is employed. She, without a doubt, is the Amazon of New England.

Mechanics Her Choice

Miss Thelma Holliday repairing the distributor of an automobile engine. She holds a regular job in a garage in New York City. She always preferred a screwdriver to a typewriter, and today she is said to be a genuinely competent auto mechanic. She says she thoroughly enjoys her unusual vocation and sees no reason why a woman who is mechanically inclined should spend her days filing cards or adding figures.


Let us be done forever with this nonsense about the equality of the sexes. They are not equal in nature and never can be. If the woman argues—and it is proverbially useless to argue with her—that she wants a chance to show what she can do, the answer is, Certainly, madame, all the chance in the world, for you, and for the man and for the child, opportunity for everybody to cultivate the best that is in him or her for the good of the individual, for the good of the race. But in heaven’s name let not the woman try to compete with man, for the more chance she has, the freer the world grows, the more chance man will have, and he will always keep slightly ahead of her.