

Women, Feminism and Sex in Progressive America

On May 9, 1908, the United States Senate rejected a bill that would have established Mother's Day as a national holiday on the grounds that motherhood was too sacred to be demeaned by a day in its honor. Just 11 years later, in 1919, the Senate passed the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote. At the dawn of the twentieth century, women activists and their male allies were preaching a new day for women. What was the relationship between the suffrage movement and other feminist campaigns, and why did the women's movement quiet down in the 1920s after women got the vote? This lecture explores the history of the women's movement in America, both the struggle of women to get the vote, and the larger goals of feminism--social and economic equality with men.

Some questions to keep in mind:

1. **"All feminists are suffragists, but not all suffragists are feminists" stated a feminist in 1913. How did the goals of the early American feminist movement sometimes differ from those of the suffrage movement?**
2. **Why did the women's movement quiet down in the 1920s. Was it simply because women had won the vote?**
3. **How revolutionary was the so-called "sexual revolution" of the early twentieth century?**

"Cult of True Womanhood"

In the last half of the nineteenth century, Victorian ideals still held sway in American society, at least among members of the middle and upper classes. Strict, hierarchical Victorian thought promoted a so-called "cult of true Womanhood," which preached four cardinal virtues for women:

1. **Piety**--Advocates believed that women were far more religious and spiritual in nature than men.
2. **Purity**--America's women were supposed to be pure of heart, mind, and, of course, body, not engaging in sexual intercourse until marriage, and even then not enjoying it. A popular poem of the day expressed pride in the exceptional purity of American daughters:

*"Her eye of light is the diamond bright,
Her innocence the pearl.
And these are ever the bridal gems
Worn by the American girl."*

3. **Submission**--Women were supposed to live in a kind of perpetual childhood, passively responding to the actions and decisions of men.

4. **Domesticity**--The Industrial Revolution had created a clear division between the public sphere of work and the private sphere of home. Home and hearth, according to the Cult of True Womanhood, became the domain of woman and her refuge from the temptations of everyday life.

"Father Knows Best"

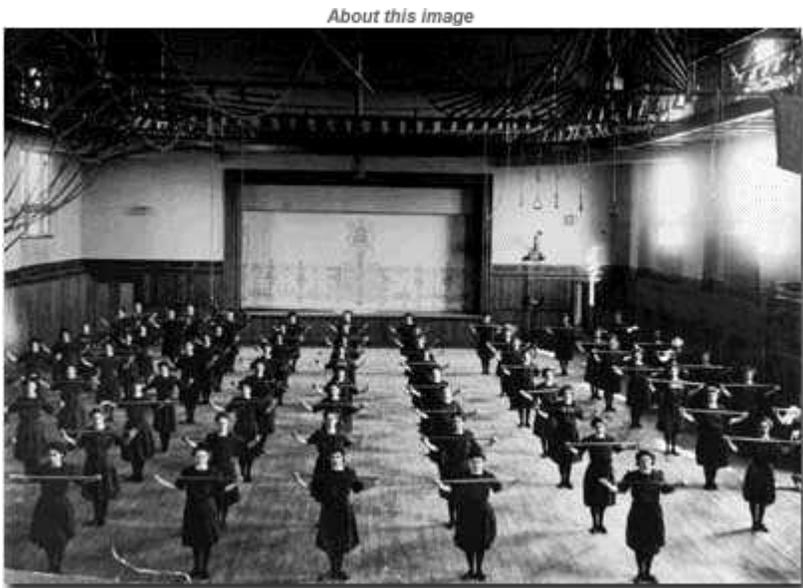
Two constant goals of Victorian life were the rejection of sin and the practice of responsibility, but many Americans at the time felt that women needed outside protection in their constant struggle with temptation. Supporters of the Cult of True Womanhood often referred to women and children as "weaker vessels"--a as feeble beings who were susceptible to sin unless isolated from the evils of society in the haven of domestic life. They viewed fathers as the rightful protector of families who should have unlimited authority over his wife and children.

"Ya' know, young whippersnapper, back when I was a young 'un..."

Three areas of social change, in particular, alarmed members of Victorian-era American society:

1. Dress Reform
2. Education of Women
3. Women Entering the Workforce

Dress reform--In 1850, in reaction to the cost and physical restrictiveness of Victorian dress, with its bustles and corsets, Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Cady Stanton designed a simple dress that women could wear over "bloomers," which were ankle-length pantaloons. The bloomers, which many Victorian-era Americans viewed as sexually suggestive, caused a huge public outcry. In a nineteenth



Young women wearing bloomers in UW-Madison Woman's Gymnasium

century women's magazine, one professor wrote that trousers on women "were only one manifestation of that wild spirit of socialism and agrarian radicalism which at present is so rife in our land."

Education of Women--Many nineteenth-century physicians accepted Darwinism, concluded that women had stopped evolving sooner than men, and, therefore, were less developed mentally and less suited for education. In addition, medicine of the nineteenth century tended to view the body as a closed system which contained a finite amount of energy. Since women had to devote their energy to childbearing, any excesses in the "three R's" during puberty would only cause later problems with the fourth "R"--reproduction. One physician of the day stated:

"Woman has a head almost too small for intellect, but just big enough for love."

Even the "Progressive" state of Wisconsin was hardly progressive regarding higher education during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1877, for example, the annual report of the University of Wisconsin Regents recommended a separate course of study for women on the grounds that women could not handle the stress and rigor of the standard men's college curriculum. The report concluded:

"Education is greatly to be desired. But it is better that the future matrons of this state should be without a university training, than it should be produced at the fearful expense of their ruined health. Better that the future mothers of our state should be robust, hearty,



Students at work in University of Wisconsin "home economics laboratory"

healthy women than that by
overstudy, they entail upon
their descendants the germs
of disease."

Women Entering the Workforce--Immigrant women and poor American-born women had no choice but to work as laundresses, servants, and factory help. Proponents of True Womanhood, however, often demonized women forced to work outside the home. They argued that the working world was the first step on a downward spiral that would lead women, eventually, to prostitution. At the very least, they held, working outside the home would give women financial independence from their fathers and husbands and, in turn, undermine the family and endanger women's reproduction.

Is it a breast or just light meat?

What might seem like a recent obsession with crafting politically correct speech is really nothing new. The power of words fascinated Victorian-era Americans who manipulated everyday language to guard against vice. The arbiters of the English language stripped women, or, more properly, "ladies," of their "arms and legs," words which seemed too sexually suggestive, and replaced them with "limbs." At the dinner table, gentleman never offered a proper lady a chicken "breast," only "light meat." Not everyone went along passively with this the stifling conventions of true womanhood. Well before the Civil War, women began laying the foundation for the modern women's rights movement. As early as the 1820s, for example, women were active in broad "humanist" movements such as abolition, war relief efforts, and the temperance movement. Although not focused directly on women's issues, these campaigns allowed women the opportunity to hone the skills required to organize and protest for suffrage and more expansive rights.



The Women's Rights Movement

The Seneca Falls Convention met in Seneca Falls, New York, from July 19 to July 20, 1848. Organized by Quakers Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the convention was the first public gathering in the United States to address the rights of women. One result of the convention was the "Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments." Modeled on the Declaration of Independence, the "Declaration of Sentiments" indicted American society for keeping women from voting, from owning property, and from having equal access to education and employment. Nearly 240 people attended the meeting, including such intellectual luminaries as Susan B. Anthony and [Frederick Douglass](#). Douglass, a former slave, argued fervently in

favor of the Seneca Falls convention's most controversial resolution: a woman's right to vote. Encouraged by this first meeting, the new women's rights movement held annual conventions through the 1850s. During the Civil War years, many women campaigned for the abolition of slavery, hoping that new political rights for oppressed African-Americans would translate into greater rights for women. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which gave the vote to black men, but not to women, was one point of debate which caused a split in the women's movement in 1869.

About this image



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), suffrage leader

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The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony was the more radical woman's suffrage group. It accepted only women and opposed the Fifteenth Amendment since it only enfranchised African-American men. The NWSA began a tentative critique of American society, with a special focus on the family as the real source of women's inequality in society. Stanton and Anthony argued that marriage, as it existed, was set up to gratify men and to disempower women.

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Lucy Stone (1815-1903), suffrage leader

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The American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was more moderate in its views than the NWSA. It allowed men to join and rallied behind the Fifteenth Amendment as a step in the right direction toward greater civil rights for women. Leaders of the AWSA included Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone.

One of the most outspoken and flamboyant women's rights activists of the day was Victoria Claflin

About this image

Woodhull (1838-1927). At various times she dabbled in spiritualism, ran a successful brokerage firm, published a newspaper with Marxist leanings, and, in 1870, became the first woman to declare herself a candidate for President in 1872. Anthony and Stanton thought that Woodhull would be an ideal speaker at the 1871 NWSA convention. They got more than they had bargained for, however, when Woodhull made a ringing speech calling for the overthrow of the United States government. Stated Woodhull:

"We mean treason...We are plotting revolution."

Later in 1871, Woodhull gave another speech in which she proclaimed "I am a free lover." Stanton and Anthony eventually disavowed Woodhull and her controversial opinions, but the public continued to associate her with the NWSA. The associations connection to such radical thought, in fact, severely damaged the organization.



Victoria Claflin Woodhull (1838-1927), social reformer

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Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906)

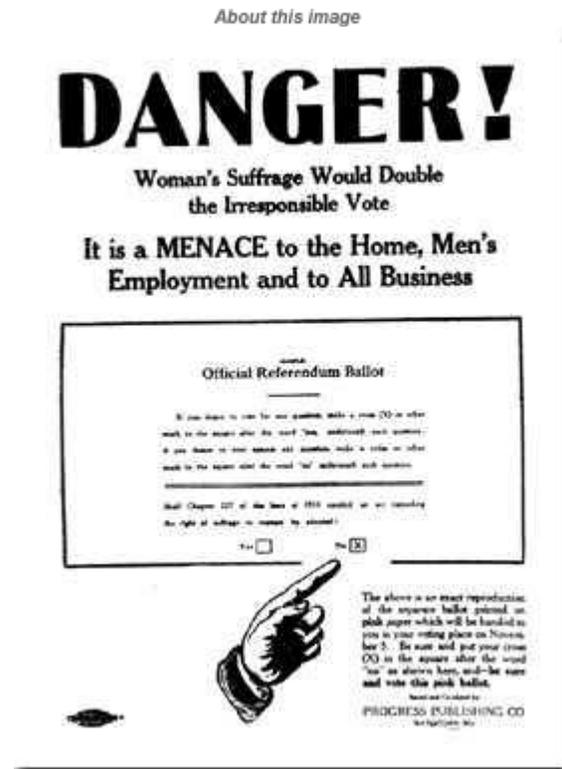
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Three main feminist movements: 1870s-1919

From the 1870s until World War I, many feminists became more conservative in their views and goals. They were divided into three major groups of reformers:

1. The Suffragists

After 1870, suffragists focused on winning for women the right to vote. Their arguments were slightly different than those of suffragists before the Civil War. Early reformers had argued that women, as human-beings, had a natural right to vote. From the 1870s on, however, suffragists took their cues from the Cult of True Womanhood and argued that women were different and, in some cases, better than men. Women, for example, were more noble, more spiritual, and truer of heart than men. Granting women the right to vote, they argued, would help purify political corruption in the United States.



Poster warns: "Danger! Woman's Suffrage Would Double the Irresponsible Vote"

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Mrs. Henry M. Youmans of Waukesha,

2. The Social Feminists

Social feminists agreed with the suffragists that women should get the vote, but dedicated themselves to social reforms other than suffrage. Prominent social feminists were often leaders of the settlement movement, such as [Jane Addams](#) and Florence Kelley. **Florence Kelley** (1859-1932) was a prominent feminist and social reformer. Part of [that generation of women who first gained access to higher education](#), Kelley graduated from Cornell University in 1882. However, like many women graduates of her time, she had difficulty finding work that was worth her talents. She went to Europe, studied law and government in Zurich, and translated major works of Marx and Engels into English. In 1891, she joined Jane Addams at Hull House. From 1898 until 1932, Kelley served as the head of the National Consumers' League (NCL), a lobbying group for the rights of working women and children.

In addition to the NCL, there were a host of other reform organizations headed by women: the Woman's Trade Union League, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the National Council of Colored Women. These groups saw the state as a potentially beneficial agent of social welfare.



Crowd gathers in Washington, D.C., on March 3, 1913 to witness a parade for women's suffrage

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The new generation of social feminists were more conservative, but also more pragmatic. In 1890, these new feminists reunited the squabbling AWSA and NWSA and formed the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). NAWSA was led



Carrie Lane Chapman Catt (1859-1947), women's suffrage leader

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from 1900 to 1904 and again from 1915 to 1920 by Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947). Catt was born in Ripon, in the great state of Wisconsin, went to school in Iowa, and worked for women's suffrage, eventually becoming a close colleague of Susan B. Anthony. Catt believed it was a woman's natural right to participate in politics, and also wanted women to have the vote in order to reform society. Catt reasoned that if women had political power, they could not only improve life for themselves and for their children, but have influence over more global issues such as world peace. Catt founded the League of Women Voters in 1920.

3. The Radical Feminists

Radical feminists offered a much stronger critique of American society, economics, and politics. The most prominent radical feminist was Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), a sociologist, author, lecturer, and self-proclaimed socialist. In 1898, Gilman achieved international fame with her book, *Women and Economics: The Economic Factor between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, a condemnation of the Cult of True Womanhood. Her chief arguments in the book were quite radical for America at the turn of the century. She argued that:

- Common humanity shared by men and women was far more important than sexual differences
- Social environment, not biology, determined the roles of men and women in society
- In an industrial society, women would be released from the home, enabled to make a broad human contribution rather than a narrow feminine contribution to society

"What we have to do is to recognize the woman as a human being, with her human rights and human duties, and we have to learn to reconcile happy work with happy marriage." --Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Alice Paul, who organized the Woman's Party in the 1910s and introduced the first Equal Rights Amendment in 1916, represented the other facet of radical feminism. The campaign for the ERA during the 1910s was so radical that most social feminists rejected it out of fear that the

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proposed constitutional amendment would endanger protective legislation for women. As a result, the campaign for the ERA remained a minority movement within feminism.



*Alice Paul (1885-1977),
women's suffrage leader*

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The Nineteenth Amendment

In addition to the ERA, another point of division among various feminist groups was World War I. Jane Addams and other social feminists were vocal pacifists who opposed Wilson's decision to enter the war. Hard-core suffragists, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, endorsed Wilson's decision, with the understanding that Wilson would support women's suffrage at war's end. After the war came to a close, Wilson pointed to women's loyalty in the war effort and urged Congress to pass the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. In 1919, Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment and the states ratified it in 1920. After decades of struggle, American women had finally won the vote.

About this image



Lucretia Mott (1793-1880)

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Feminism in the 1920s

In the 1920s, the women's rights movement died down. This was due, in part, to the achievement of the goal of suffrage, but also because of a general retreat from activism in post-WWI America. Feminists of the time made three discoveries:

1. Women did not vote as a bloc; there was no such thing as the "women's" vote
2. The struggle for suffrage no longer united disparate elements of the feminist movement
3. Younger women were less interested in reform and more interested in rebelling against social conventions

To put it simply, the daughters of the early feminists were more interested in smoking, drinking, going without corsets, bobbing their hair, reading daring literature, and dancing the Charleston. They were enjoying new economic and sexual freedoms in the prosperous years that immediately followed World War I. The technological and economic boom that fueled a higher standard of living for many Americans is a crucially important part of our story. So important, in fact, that we'll take it up in [Lecture 15: "The Politics of Prosperity."](#)