

Women in the United States: Historical Overview

Native American Women

When the first Europeans arrived in what became known as the New World, nearly 12 million people organized into roughly 600 tribes already inhabited the land. The Iroquois League stretched from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean, the Algonquin tribes thrived along the East Coast, and the Pueblo civilizations flourished in the Southwest. There was great diversity among the tribes and their governments, but in every society women fulfilled essential responsibilities—bearing and caring for the children, gathering seeds, roots, and fruit; planting and harvesting crops; making household utensils and furnishings; building dwellings; and preserving and preparing food. In hunting societies, women processed the hides of animals and turned them into clothing, blankets, and tepees. Women were also religious leaders and healers.

In many Native American societies, women had a great deal of influence and power. In the Iroquois Nation, women owned farming tools, long houses, and livestock, which were passed from mother to daughter. At the time of marriage, the husband moved into the wife's community and the children became members of the mother's clan. If marital problems arose, the man moved out. Matrons, or older women, were in charge of the distribution of food and other goods. Although the council elders were men, the matrons nominated them and had the right to "knock off the horns" of those who acted improperly or were dishonest and remove them from the council.

Colonial America

In the 1500s, the Spanish, French, English, and Dutch made serious attempts at establishing permanent colonies in the New World. At first there were more men than women, but soon growing numbers of women arrived. Some came as indentured servants. Others were imported and sold as wives, with their consent, for the price of their voyage. Then there were women who had been convicted of various crimes and had been given the choice of prison in England or a voyage to Jamestown. For a time, kidnapping European women for sale in America as indentured servants or wives was a very profitable business. As for African women, most of them came to America crammed into the holds of ships to be sold as slaves.

Of course, many women chose to come to America. They came with their families in search of a better life. One English minister told his congregation that America had plenty of “berries, minerals, rubies, pearls, gems, grapes, deer, fowl, herbs for food, timber for building materials.” Women, like men, came seeking freedom to build a new life, to practice their religions, and to seek adventure.

Life was hard in America, and in colonial times, perhaps as many as four out of every five women died within five years. Women rarely stopped working. They raised children, maintained the house and garden, cooked the meals, made the homespun cloth and clothing, soap, and candles, and they preserved foods, tanned leather for shoes, cared for any animals that the family owned, and tended to sick and injured people. In addition, many women pitched in when extra hands were needed to help plow the fields, clear the forests, or defend themselves and their families. Women also helped their husbands—printers, innkeepers, silversmiths, and butchers—in their trades. There were also women, especially unmarried women and widows, who ran their own shops, mills, shipyards, and boarding houses. In the 1700s, 16 of the 78 colonial newspapers were printed and published by women.

Women's Legal Situation

Although women and men worked side by side, they did not have the same rights and freedoms. Women could not vote. Married women could not sign contracts or wills. They did not have the right to their own earnings or property. In fact, a married woman could not act without her husband's approval. While girls were taught domestic skills, they were rarely taught to read and write. Some girls were married by the age of 12 or 13. Single women and widows had more rights and could own property, borrow money, and sue or be sued in court. Women's subordinate position was justified and maintained by two powerful forces: the increasing application of the English Common Law, under which wives had no legal existence apart from their husbands, and the predominance of religions in which women were viewed as obliged to be obedient to men.

First Women's Rights Convention

In 1848, the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss the unjust ways women were treated by laws and social

customs. Three hundred women and men attended the two-day meeting to hear speakers and debate *A Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions*, a document written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton that amended the familiar words of the "Declaration of Independence" to read: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal." Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed a list of resolutions, including a call for woman suffrage. The convention was soundly denounced and ridiculed. Nevertheless, the idea of women's rights conventions spread, and conventions were held every year until the Civil War.

Civil War Years

During the Civil War, women took on many vital, new responsibilities in war preparations, business, public service, and family life. With the men away, women were called upon to supervise family businesses and farms. Both Northern and Southern women collected and delivered supplies to the troops and more than 3,000 women on both sides of the conflict worked as nurses. More than 300 women disguised themselves as men and served in both the Union and Confederate armies. Other women served as spies and scouts, gathering and relaying critical information about enemy plans.

Freedom from slavery changed the lives of Black women living in the South. Black women and men could now legally marry. Thousands of couples immediately took their marriage vows. Others searched for loved ones lost during slavery and the chaos of war.

Industrialization and Urbanization

Following the Civil War, vast changes took place in the United States, as America became the world's leading industrial power. In urban areas, most of the women who worked for wages were young and single. The majority worked as servants in other people's homes, but many worked in textile mills. As these young women moved into new jobs created by industrialization, immigrant women who were beginning to arrive in large numbers took their servant jobs.

Women moved very slowly into traditionally male professions. In 1869, Arabelle A. Mansfield became the first woman lawyer admitted to practice law when she was admitted to practice in Iowa. In 1879 Belva Lockwood became the first woman lawyer to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Women such as Louisa May Alcott and Sarah Orne Jewett had successful writing careers. A few women became dentists, scientists, and artists. Most working women, however, became teachers and nurses.

By 1880, over 4 million women—about 1 out of every 7—worked for pay outside of their home. The majority were young, unmarried immigrants, who worked as servants or in manufacturing. They typically labored for between 60 and 80 hours a week, often under noisy, crowded and dangerous conditions.

World War I and the Fight for the Vote

In 1917, the United States entered World War I. Like the men who went to fight, women participated in the war effort. Jobs that had been closed to women were suddenly open, such as mechanics, munitions workers, truck drivers, police officers, welders, and riveters. Throughout the war, women continued their fight for woman suffrage. Women marched, wrote letters and signed petitions, picketed the White House, went to jail, and undertook hunger strikes, until Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which stated that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” The amendment was ratified on August 26, 1920. (In 1971, a joint resolution of Congress was passed designating August 26 of each year as Women's Equality Day).

During the 1920s, the country enjoyed great prosperity and many of the features of modern America took hold. Electricity was widely used for lighting, cooking, and household appliances. Consumer goods galore were being widely produced—refrigerators, automobiles, pianos—and advertised as never before. The cosmetic industry began to boom. New devices of mass media—radio and movies—were creating a mass culture by transmitting images, messages, and experiences to huge numbers of people in America. Increasing numbers of women entered college.

The Great Depression and the New Deal

In 1929, America plunged into an economic crisis—the Great Depression. Millions of people lost their jobs. Black and Mexican-American women, who were primarily limited to domestic or agricultural work, were particularly hard hit by the Depression. Men were given jobs before married women, and many married women who had jobs were forced to quit so that men could take their

jobs. In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who pledged to bring a “new deal” to the American people, was elected president. He appointed Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor, the first woman cabinet member. Perkins served for twelve years and was the architect of far-reaching social and labor reforms, such as the minimum wage law and Social Security.

World War II

In 1941, the United States entered World War II and millions of men went to war. Millions of women went to work in an extraordinary variety of jobs, including welders, riveters, electricians, fire fighters, police officers, geologists, lawyers, and plumbers.

Women also sold war bonds, volunteered for the Red Cross, gave blood, recycled rubber and newspapers, collected scrap metal, and grew victory gardens for their families.

Several hundred thousand women served in the armed forces as noncombat pilots, nurses, and clerks. Women aviators received a great deal of national publicity for transporting aircraft to combat zones. Unfortunately, as in the larger society, racial discrimination was a fact of life in the military; military units and hospital wards were segregated.

While patriotic fervor was the order of the day, some women marched to a different drum. Many worked to promote international peace. Jeanette Rankin, Congresswoman from Montana, was an ardent pacifist. In fact, she was the only representative in Congress to vote against U.S. entry into both World War I and World War II. “We’ve got to get it into our heads, once and for all,” she stated, “that we cannot settle disputes by eliminating human beings.”

Postwar America

When the war began, the U.S. government launched an intensive media campaign to lure women into the labor force. In 1944, when it was clear the Allies would win the war, the government launched another intensive media campaign to force women out of the labor force. A woman, women were told, devoted herself to her husband and children. She fulfilled herself by baking, cleaning, and keeping herself attractive for her husband. All Americans were urged to consume—to buy new homes, new cars, new electric appliances, televisions, clothes, and cameras. And, Americans did. They also had babies

in record numbers. Despite the pressure to stay at home, growing numbers of married women took paid jobs. Others, divorced and widowed women, provided the primary financial support for their families.

Forging Ahead

By the end of the 1980s, Sally Ride had become the first American woman to fly into outer space. Wilma Mankiller had been elected the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation. Women made up almost half of the workforce, or double the rate at the beginning of the century. The number of women lawyers and judges had increased from six percent in 1970 to twenty-seven percent in 1980 and the number of physicians from eleven percent to twenty-two percent.

Contemporary Issues

At the end of the twentieth century, many of the rights and freedoms that women had fought hard for were well established, including the vote and educational and occupational opportunities.

Equal pay, a safe working environment, promotion, paid family leave, health care, and retirement security are at the top of working women's agenda, according to the findings of the Ask a Working Woman Survey, a national random survey conducted by the AFL-CIO in 2000. When asked what they most want to improve in their job, seventy-eight percent of women surveyed (especially women earning less than \$25,000) responded: respect and recognition.

Although no one knows what the future will bring, the legacy of women's history is clear: American women have proven over and over again that they are determined to be full participants in every aspect of life. As the twenty-first century unfolds, women will undoubtedly face future challenges with creativity and courage as they continue to play key roles in shaping American society.