

American Women in the 20TH Century

The Festival of Life



Robert L. Daniel

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Ohio University



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To Robert, Martha, and Joseph

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Preface

One of the most notable transformations of the twentieth century has been the entrance of American women into what Margaret Dreier Robins called "the festival of life." Women have substantially expanded their political roles and legal standing, pushed steadily and boldly into the labor force, broadened their access to education, and greatly altered their social and family roles.

Since the first courses in women's studies and women's history surfaced in the early 1970s, there has been a profusion of studies of American women. Most have been highly specialized monographs; precious few provide a rounded account of the vast changes that have marked the lives of American women since 1900.

This book provides a broad, balanced, systematic analysis of the transformations in women's lives thus far in the twentieth century. Several features stand out. Access to education is seen as prerequisite to expanding women's perspectives and providing women from all backgrounds with the skills and self-assurance required to undertake expanded political, economic, and social roles outside the home. Women's educational attainments are assessed in terms of those of previous generations of women, affording a measure that is free from distortion by the ups and downs that have characterized the enrollment patterns of men. In fact, the educational attainment of women has been marked by steady progress, contradicting the conventional picture of women "copping out" or even regressing at times during the past.

In evaluating women's political roles I look beyond the pursuit and utilization of the suffrage. Far more central are the tensions between those reformers who emphasized the need for legislative protection of working-class women and the middle-class reformers concerned with equal rights. I trace the reflections of this debate in constitutional law and assess the genuine gains of the 1970s and 1980s, when legislation and policy were reshaped in conformity with the principles of the Equal Rights Amendment, although the amendment itself failed to be ratified.

Major attention is devoted to women's economic roles. The text shows that structural changes in the American economy gave women increasing opportunities for roles outside the home and for greater personal autonomy. These structural changes produced a rapid growth of middle management and a concomitant need for clerical support, which in turn stimulated the steady rise in women's labor-force participation. Just as changes in the economic structure increased the demand for women in the labor force, changes in the demographic structure of the female population had

major consequences for the supply of women to meet the increased demand for their labor.

In evaluating women's gains in the labor market, I rely heavily on uniform series of data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to delineate the interplay of the supply of and demand for female workers. In particular, I use the labor force participation rate (LFPR) to measure changes in the propensity of women to engage in paid labor. Use of the LFPR also permits analysis of the function of age, marital status, ethnicity, and race in determining the supply of women in the labor force. A constant-share/expanded-share analysis shows how much of the numerical growth in the female labor force resulted from the growth in the nation's population and how much resulted from changes in women's share of the job market. An examination of the proportion of women employed in "female" jobs provides a clearer picture of the degree to which the labor-market experience of women has differed from or approximated that of men. In many ways the expanded public roles of women are rooted in economic forces quite independent of organized feminism. But, by the same token, these expanded roles required adjustment of women's political and social roles to keep pace.

Finally, this book assumes that because American society is pluralistic, women have not had a common shared experience. There never has been, nor is there now, an "American woman." Among Anglo-American women, the life experiences of working-class women differed from those of the middle class whose values set the norms for American society. Special attention is given to the lives of minority women—black women, to be sure, but also those of Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian heritage. These women, too, were Americans, but their lives were often guided by values that differed substantially from those of middle-class Anglo-American woman. They often bore a dual burden of balancing their efforts to improve their lot as members of an ethnic or racial minority with their desire to expand their roles as women. As a result, feminism developed many faces.

As with any broad historical study, this work draws on the monographic studies of scores of scholars, as my footnotes and bibliography attest. I wish to express special thanks to my colleague Marvin Fletcher for his insightful reading of the sections treating minority populations; to my son Joseph for lending his expertise in the sections treating legal and constitutional issues; to Judy Daso and her staff at the Ohio University Library for expediting access to government publications; and to George Hinkle for introducing me to the techniques of computer graphics. Last, but not least, I am especially grateful to Andrea McCarrick of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich for the meticulous care with which she exercised her editorial skills and to Amy Krammes for her sound judgment in the selec-

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Robert L. Daniel



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Introduction

Numerous historians, from Arthur Maier Schlesinger, Sr., to Gerda Lerner, have remonstrated against “the pall of silence” with which historians have shrouded the “services and achievements” of American women. Long denied a share in the “transmission and exercise of power,” women have remained largely invisible to most historians. The effort to reconstruct the female past has been termed “women’s history.”¹

But what is women’s history? Historians are not agreed, and scholarly efforts have exhibited little unanimity in approach or content. Most of the earliest works were compensatory efforts to find “missing women” and fit them into the empty spaces of traditional history. This approach—dating to the nineteenth century—involved assembling collections of women’s “contributions.” Uncritical toward their sources and their criteria for selection, the authors tended to praise anything women had done. The resulting work, as Gerda Lerner has noted, was “topically narrow, predominantly descriptive, and generally devoid of interpretation.” This early work was especially flawed in that it had a thoroughly white middle-class Anglo-Saxon orientation. Women who were black, Indian, Hispanic, or Asian, as well as white women who were immigrants or of the working class, continued to be invisible.²

Beginning with the collectively authored *History of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, women’s history has been preoccupied with the woman’s rights movement. Eleanor Flexner’s classic, *Century of Struggle*, (1959), reinforced a view that the central theme of women’s history was the decades-long campaign for the suffrage and for related political and legal rights. Flexner regarded political citizenship as “a vital step toward achieving human dignity and the recognition that [women], too, were endowed

with the faculty of reason, the power of judgment, the capacity for social responsibility." Recognizing that women's history had other, nonpolitical dimensions, Flexner focused attention on women's struggle for expanded access to education and the movement out of the home and into factories. She sketched the activities of middle-class women's clubs, as well as those of working-class women in the trade union movement. Furthermore, she included black women as an element of women's history.³

Numerous historians have accorded the center stage of women's history to an economic interpretation. "The issue of earning a living," William Henry Chafe argued, "has been central to the definition of mass culture and feminine responses." Indeed, much of the rationale for exploring women's entrance into the labor force derived from a conviction that the suffrage amendment had "a negligible impact" on the status of women. As Carl Degler viewed it, the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century had provided "the impetus to women's aspirations for equality of opportunity" and "carried through the first stage in the changing position of women—the removal of legal and customary barriers to women's full participation in the activities of the world." This point was challenged, however, by Lois Banner who saw industrialization as but one of a number of forces—urbanization, changing attitudes toward sex and marriage, the growing power of mass media, expansion of the economy, two world wars, depressions, and technological advances—that shaped the status of women. Nevertheless, the economic role, so important to men, operated differently for women who shifted readily from one role to another at different stages in their lives. In this connection it is essential to distinguish among their "economic status, family status, and political-legal status." What this means, as Leila Rupp reminds us, is that as there is no "homogeneous group of 'women,'" so industrialization has meant different things for different women depending on class, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, and place of residence.⁴

Feminists and Marxist-feminists have done much to broaden the conceptual framework of women's history. Under the influence of feminism, historians of women, irrespective of ideological orientation, have argued that the female experience must be considered in relation to male experiences. Thus, while examining the past in terms of traditional time periods, the historian should explain why women have a "different historical experience from men." In particular, this approach makes sex "as fundamental to the analysis of the social order as other classifications, such as class and race." To make sex a social category assumes that women form a distinct social group and that the invisibility of women in traditional history is not to be ascribed to inherent female nature. Whereas traditional Marxism embraced a deterministic doctrine of class struggle, Marxist-feminists held that it was one thing to use tools of class analysis, "another to maintain that women are a class." In reordering their ideas, these Marxist-feminists

argued that “notions of caste and minority group are not productive when applied to women.” “Clearly the minority psychology of women, like their caste status and quasi-class oppression, has to be traced to the universally distinguishing features of all women, namely their sex.”⁵

In arguing that women experience the world about them in different terms than men, feminists have argued, first, that it would be worthwhile “to distinguish the ideas society holds at any given moment in regard to woman’s ‘proper place’ from what was actually woman’s status at that time.” Accordingly, historians have been led to explore the domestic world of women and to examine the family as a basic unit of analysis. A study of the life cycle provides an especially useful tool for analyzing female roles according to age and marital grouping. Still another related set of topics growing out of sexuality includes prostitution, rape, homosexuality, illegitimacy, and the control of reproduction.⁶

The content of women’s history, then, has been broadened by the concerns of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The conceptual framework for the systematic study of women’s history is still evolving. As one element of women’s studies, women’s history addresses a wider range of concerns than conventional political and economic history. Further, it has prompted a reassessment of the past, yielding new interpretations of old issues. While the evidence is not all in, a trial balance is in order.

NOTES

¹ Arthur Maier Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 126. Gerda Lerner, “New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History,” *Journal of Social History* 3 (1969): 53. Gerda Lerner, *Teaching Women’s History* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1981), 2–3.

² Lerner, “New Approaches,” 53.

³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda J. Gage, eds., *The History of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 6 vols. (Rochester and New York: 1881–1922). Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1968[1959]), xiii.

⁴ William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman* (New York: Oxford, 1972), ix; David M. Kennedy, “Review, The American Woman by William Henry Chafe,” *JAH* 60 (1973): 493. Carl N. Degler, “Revolution Without Ideology: The Changing Place of Women in America,” *Daedalus* 93 (Spring 1964): 654. Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), vi; Lerner, “New Approaches,” 60. Leila J. Rupp, “Reflections on Twentieth-Century American Women’s History,” *Reviews in American History* 9 (June 1981): 276.

⁵ For Marxist-feminists see Margaret Benston, “The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation,” *Monthly Review* 21 (Sept. 1969): 13–25; and Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (Middlesex: Pelican, 1973). Joan Kelly-Gadol, “The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women’s History,” *Signs* 1 (1976): 812–14.

⁶ Lerner, “New Approaches,” 61–62.

* See p. 432 for a list of abbreviations used throughout the Notes and Bibliography.