WOMEN AND POWER IN AMERICAN HISTORY

A READER

VOL. II FROM 1870

Kathryn Kish Sklar · Thomas Dublin

Women and Power in American History: A Reader Vol. II from 1870

Edited by
Kathryn Kish Sklar
and
Thomas Dublin

Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women and power in American history : a reader/ edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-13-962218-7 (v. 1). — ISBN 0-13-962234-9 (v. 2)
1. Women—United States—History. 2. Women—United States—Social conditions. I. Sklar, Kathryn Kish. II. Dublin, Thomas.
HQ1410.W643 1991
305.4'0973—dc20 90-7941
CIP

To our students—past, present, and future

Editorial production supervision and interior design: Tally Morgan, WordCrafters
Cover design: Lundgren Graphics, Ltd.
Manufacturing buyers: Debbie Kesar/Mary Ann Gloriande

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8

ISBN 0-13-962234-9

PRENTICE-HALL INTERNATIONAL (UK) LIMITED, *LONDON*
PRENTICE-HALL OF AUSTRALIA PTY. LIMITED, *SYDNEY*
PRENTICE-HALL CANADA INC., *TORONTO*
PRENTICE-HALL HISPANOAMERICANA, S.A., *MEXICO*
PRENTICE-HALL OF INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, *NEW DELHI*
PRENTICE-HALL OF JAPAN, INC., *TOKYO*
PEARSON EDUCATION ASIA PTE. LTD., *SINGAPORE*
EDITORA PRENTICE-HALL DO BRASIL, LTDA., *RIO DE JANEIRO*

Preface

These volumes demonstrate the phenomenal growth of the field of U.S. women's history during the past twenty years. Kathryn Kish Sklar began teaching American women's history at the University of Michigan in 1971, Thomas Dublin at Wellesley College in 1975. Since then the field has blossomed into one of the most vital areas of historical study in the late twentieth century. With the founding of the International Federation for Research in Women's History in 1987, its impact has become evident on a global scale. The introduction of women's experience has irrevocably changed the discipline of history, in the United States and throughout the world.

This transformation occurred as the result of collective action taken in classrooms, at conferences, and in professional organizations. These volumes build on a legacy of struggle to achieve a more complete and democratic representation of human experience. Within that struggle two groups have been particularly meaningful to us, and we wish to thank them here. First and foremost, our own students, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, have provided a constituency for women's history. Their insistent demand for answers to questions about the history of women gave this new scholarship a reason for being. Their questions sprang from the stuff of life itself in the late twentieth century—participation in social movements in the 1960s and 70s, the transformation in women's labor force participation in the 1970s and 80s, and new forms of family and social relationships.

Second, our colleagues in women's history have steadily supported our efforts to bring new research findings in women's history into the classroom. Beginning in 1977, the UCLA Workshop on the Teaching of Women's History provided a splendid forum for the discussion of problems and strategies in the teaching of U.S. women's history. Drawing on scholarly talent in the far West and Southwest, from Washington to Texas, this dedicated group of college teachers shaped our approach to classroom teaching. Our debt to them is very great. Later at the graduate level, the 1988 NEH-Wingspread Conference on Graduate Training in U.S. Women's History helped us synthesize the needs of graduate and undergraduate teaching. These resources have been sustained by the Berkshire Conference in Women's History, which at triennial national conferences since 1973 has nurtured the development of women's history.

This all goes to show that historians of women have benefitted from the same processes that have shaped the lives of average American women. Like them, historians of women have responded to the circumstances of their lives and times. Like them, historians of women have expressed their

commitment to social goals. Like them, historians of women have responded to new opportunities to assert their interests. Since 1970 changes in the historical discipline have brought historians of women into close conjunction with the lives of average women. These volumes reflect and celebrate that conjunction.

Binghamton, New York

Contributors

Suzanne M. Bianchi is a demographer at the Center for Demographic Studies at the U.S. Bureau of the Census and is co-author of *American Women in Transition.*

Ruth Bordin is an independent scholar in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her most recent book is *Frances Willard: A Biography.*

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis is Professor of History at Northern Virginia Community College. She is the producer of a documentary video, "Freedom Bags," which explores the migration of African-American women from the rural south in the period 1900–1930.

Laurie Coyle is an independent film-maker living in San Francisco. She recently completed "Fenix Rising," a documentary film on Mexico's first nuclear accident.

Sara Evans is Professor of History at the University of Minnesota. She recently completed *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* and *Wage Justice: Comparable Worth and the Paradox of Technocratic Reform.*

Dana Frank is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She is completing a study entitled *Labor and the Politics of Consumption: Seattle, Washington, 1919–1929.*

Estelle Freedman is Professor of History at Stanford University. She recently co-authored *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America.*

Linda Gordon is Florence Kelley Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the author of *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence.*

Gail Hershatter teaches History at Williams College. She is author of *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900–1949* and coeditor of *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's.*

Emily Honig is Assistant Professor of History at Yale University. She is author of *Sister and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* and coeditor of *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's.*

Julie Roy Jeffrey is Elizabeth Todd Professor and chair of the History Department at Goucher College. She is author of *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* and has just completed a forthcoming biography of the missionary Narcissa Whitman.

Christine A. Littleton is Professor of Law at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of "Reconstructing Sexual Equality, *California Law Review,* vol. 1975 (1987), pp. 1279–1337.

Ruth Milkman is Professor of Sociology at the University of California,

Los Angeles. She is author of *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II.*

Mary J. Oates is Professor of Economics at Regis College. She is editor of *Higher Education for Catholic Women: An Historical Anthology.*

Kathy Peiss is Associate Professor of History at University of Massachusetts. She is author of *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* and coeditor of *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History.*

Jessie M. Rodrique is a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and assistant editor of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project at Smith College.

Mary Logan Rothschild teaches History at Arizona State University and is author of *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers, 1964–1965.*

Christina Simmons teaches History at the University of Windsor. She is coeditor of *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History.*

Daphne Spain teaches Sociology and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia. She is co-author of *American Women in Transition.*

Rosalyn Terborg-Penn is Professor of History at the Morgan State University. She is founder of the Association of Black Women Historians and the author and editor of numerous works on Black women's history, including the anthology *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora.*

Carole Turbin is an Associate Professor at Empire State College of the State University of New York. She is author of a forthcoming book on gender, family, and labor activism among the collar workers of Troy, New York.

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Introduction: Power as a Theme in Women's History

One of the biggest challenges facing historians of American women is the task of identifying the causes and consequences of long-term changes in women's lives. That task looms large not only because it is central to the historian's chief calling—analyzing change over time—but also because the turning points of historical change for women differ from those that have mattered most to men. When history is history seen from the perspective of women's experience, then new categories of analysis are clearly needed, since wars and other political events that have marked the standard historical divisions have usually been less important in the lives of average women than changes in family values, social movements, or the organization of the paid labor force. Thus during the first twenty years of its existence as an academic discipline, the field of U.S. women's history has focused more attention on women's family lives, their working lives, and their community activism than on the larger themes of power that pervade male-centered treatments of American history.

Yet the need to analyze change over time in U.S. women's history has grown more urgent as the field itself has grown. Its abundant diversity, embracing women of all classes, ethnicities, races, religions, and regions, poses serious challenges as to how this diversity can be meaningfully synthesized into a coherent whole. In their search for unifying themes, historians of American women have found new uses for the most fundamental category of analysis known in the discipline of history—the study of social power, its components, causes, and consequences.

Power is a very useful means of depicting change in women's lives over time. First, it is a theme capable of linking changes in the three fundamental dimensions of women's lives—family, work, and community experiences. We know that changes in these three arenas of women's experience overlap and influence one another, but to understand that process we need tools of analysis that cut across all three. Themes relating to power do that effectively since they embrace personal relations of the sort found in family life as well as collective identities located in community activities and the workplace.

Second, power is a valuable theme for connecting women's history with other dimensions of American history. The field's effectiveness as an illuminator of all American history hinges on its use of a Promethean new category of historical analysis—gender as a principle of social organization.

Since women can never be studied totally in isolation from men, gender relations are central to women's history, bringing with them the experience of men and their relations with women. In this context, power is a key category of analysis because it illuminates the relationships between men and women.

Thirdly, power is a helpful vehicle for understanding relations among women of different social standing. Most differences among women are socially constructed. Differences of class, race, ethnicity, religion, or region are generated by social structures. Much as they may appear to be natural, they are created by social values and social institutions that reinforce social hierarchies and distribute power unevenly. Women's history needs to take account of differences among women and the way social disparities translate into differences of power.

For these and other reasons historians of women are increasingly using power as a leading category of analysis. This collection of writings in American women's history is the first to focus centrally on themes of power in women's lives. It seeks to convey the diverse perspectives from which this theme can fruitfully be viewed, as well as the wide variety of female experiences the theme can integrate.

What do historians of women mean by "power?" The newness of the term's application to women can be seen in historians' tendency to leave it undefined. Many dictionaries define power as the "possession of control, authority, or influence over others."* Yet an important aspect of women's power has been expressed in their ability to exercise control over their own bodies, to limit men's access to their sexuality and to control their own reproductive lives. From the perspective of women's history, then, a more suitable definition of power is the ability to control the distribution of social resources. Women's power has often rested in their ability to control the distribution of things or services rather than persons. Put another way, the essence of women's power has historically rested in their control of goods or services through which they frequently, albeit indirectly, have controlled persons. Women's power has often been expressed through a withdrawal of their services. For example, the meat boycott led by Jewish housewives in 1917, described in this volume's article by Dana Frank, expressed women's power as consumers and demonstrated their ability to control the distribution of their grocery money. At another level of power, women reformers affected the access of women workers to trade union organizing and the eight-hour day.

Short introductions to each article in this collection provide a guide to how each historian analyzes themes of power. Less evident are the ways that women's power changed over time. It is useful to identify four principles of change that shape the period between 1869 and 1990—that is, between the emergence of the woman suffrage movement and the present.

**Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1989).

The first principle concerns the interconnectedness of the major arenas of women's activities—family, work, and community life. Changes in one of these dimensions have invariably been linked to changes in the others. Thus, for example, changes in women's family status, as reflected in higher divorce rates after 1960, were closely related to the sharp increase in women's labor force participation rates, which gave many women an increased sense of their own worth and to an unprecedented degree made it possible for them to assume financial responsibility for their children. Both of these changes, in turn, were reflected in the reemergence of feminism in the 1960s. How the causal arrows point within the triad of family, work, and community life depends upon the circumstances at any given moment, but those connections have been central to women's experience of change over time.

Another important principle is that change in female experience is often excruciatingly slow. Perhaps because gender constitutes the most fundamental form of social organization—the one upon which all others are built—changes in gender relations involve a multitude of other categories of change, and these, in turn, require their own sets of causes, many of which are long in the making. For example, the dramatic decline in birthrates experienced by American women between 1800 and 1940, which reduced the average number of children born to women of all races, classes, and regions, was caused by factors so pervasive that they continue to elude historical analysis today. Historians used to attribute the long-term decline to industrialization and urbanization. But recent research has shown that rural Americans accounted for most of that decline in its most intensive decade—the 1850s. Recently, historians have turned to even larger and more elusive causes, such as the growth of the market economy and its mirror image, the decline of subsistence agriculture. The new valuation placed on each individual child was also important, historians now believe, along with religious beliefs that made human agency the cause of salvation. Since each of these and other causal components of fertility decline had its own chain of causes, fertility decline rested upon a pyramid of other historical changes. Taken together, they constituted an almost total transformation in American life—a transformation that took more than one hundred years to achieve.

Other less complex changes in women's lives also need to be measured by decades rather than years. For example, the women's rights movement, born in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, took more than seventy years to achieve its goal of woman suffrage in 1920, making it the longest-lived continuous social movement in U.S. history. Similarly, changes in women's labor force participation, surely the single most important transformation in women's lives in the twentieth century, occurred in a series of stages between 1880 and 1980.

This does not mean that women's history lacks turning points or that it forms one long progression of achievement. Rather, it shows us that when

turning points do occur, they usually involve a multitude of causes that have deep social roots and extend across more than one generation.

Another key principle of change over time in women's history involves differences among women. The social construction of dissimilarities among women may change to reflect changing social, economic, or political structures. For example, the passage of the Woman Suffrage Amendment in 1920 nominally extended voting rights to all women citizens, but actually created new differences between white and African-American women in regions where all blacks were excluded from voting. Conversely, changing social, political, or economic realities have also eroded differences among women. For example, the massive entrance of married white women into the paid labor force between 1950 and 1980 has made their life-cycle working patterns more similar to those historically experienced by black women. Thus differences and similarities among women are constantly changing, reflecting, and influencing changes in the larger society, polity, and economy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, women's agency—that is, their ability to influence changes in their lives and in their society—commands our attention as a crucial principle in the interpretation of change over time in women's history. No one proposition is more widely held in the field of women's history than the view that women have not been merely passive victims, but have played a part in shaping their historical destiny. No women were totally lacking in agency; even poor immigrant women made choices that enhanced their ability to control their life circumstances.

The extent to which women have been able to shape the circumstances of their lives has itself changed over time, offering us one of the most fruitful avenues of historical inquiry. For example, the ability of women to control their reproductive lives increased significantly after the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* ruled unconstitutional all state laws prohibiting abortion.

By viewing women's agency over time we gain a clearer understanding of the other principles of change evident in examining women's history: the interrelationships among family, work, and community life; the tendency for changes in women's lives to reflect long-term, deeply rooted alterations; and the shifting relationships between different groups of women. For example, the empowerment of women's political culture through the Woman's Christian Temperance Union between 1874 and 1900 buttressed a steady expansion of women's agency in family and community life. The American Birth Control League, seeking greater agency for women in their ability to control their reproductive lives, both reflected and reinforced the long-term decline in fertility in the United States since 1800. Finally, woman's agency was highly visible in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which did much to erode racial differences between women.

The history of American women is a history of struggle. We can understand that struggle better by viewing the changing dimensions of power in women's lives.

* * *

These essays reveal dramatic changes in all areas of women's lives during the past one hundred years. Women's working lives, their family experiences, their expression of sexuality, and their political culture underwent profound transformation in the decades between 1870 and 1990. Affecting different groups of women in different ways, these changes dramatically altered women's experience in the twentieth century, their ability to control their life circumstances, and their access to social resources.

Growing labor force participation has served as the most important engine of change bringing new forms of power into women's lives. Before 1900 the vast majority of women wage earners were young and unmarried. This meant that they faced enormous difficulties in engaging in collective action to improve their working conditions. Historians, such as Carole Turbin, have recently shed new light on the experience of women workers by investigating occasions when women succeeded in organizing unions. These successful occasions highlight the factors that helped women prevail over the demographic facts of their youth and their temporary status in the waged labor force. Nevertheless, in the early twentieth century most working women remained unorganized; in 1920 one out of every five working men was a trade union member, but only one out of fifteen women. That difference reflected occupational distinctions in which women were excluded from the vast majority of jobs open to men—especially high-paying skilled jobs—and were crowded into few, relatively unskilled occupations.

Crowding is a key concept that historians and sociologists have used to describe women's waged work and the powerlessness that has persistently accompanied it. Despite many significant changes in women's labor force participation between 1870 and 1990, the crowding of women workers into relatively few sex-segregated occupations remains constant. Crowding has meant that women strenuously competed against one another for the few jobs available to them. It has rendered their skills less meaningful and has kept their wages low.

A good example of the effects of crowding can be found among Catholic sisters in Massachusetts in the early twentieth century, as described by Mary Oates. Their increased crowding into school teaching was accompanied by a loss of their religious community's control over the terms of their labor and a reduction in their income.

For many African-American women, sex-segregated work has also been race segregated. For example, although the proportion of women who worked as household servants declined dramatically between 1900 and 1940, the proportion of wage-earning black women who worked as servants actually increased because their exclusion from manufacturing jobs crowded them into domestic service. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's article shows, these women found ways to enhance their ability to control their life circumstances and increase their contribution to community organizations.

Ethnic segregation has been another feature of the female labor force, as demonstrated by the Mexican and Mexican-American women garment workers employed by the Farah Manufacturing Company in the 1970s. While their ethnic identity aided in the workers' solidarity during their strike, and their consciousness of their power was enhanced by collective action, these workers are examples of the continuing exploitation of minority women in the labor force. The growing Latina population in the United States in the 1990s means that this problem too will grow.

While many problems related to women's exploitation in the paid labor force remain, there is no doubt about the single most visible change in women's labor force participation in the twentieth century—the considerable increase in the proportion of women who work for wages. World War II is often taken for a turning point in the history of women's waged labor, but as Ruth Milkman's essay argues, women's work experience remained sex-segregated even under those unusual conditions. As Suzanne Bianchi and Daphne Spain's article demonstrates, the most important change in women's labor force participation in the twentieth century are visible in the numbers of women working for wages rather than in changes in the occupations in which they have worked.

Have these increases in women's wage-earning activities significantly enhanced women's ability to control their life circumstances? For many women the answer to this question is no; wage-earning work has merely absorbed them into the same unrewarding routine that men have long known, the chief difference being that they now do two jobs—one at the workplace, one at home. Nonetheless, women's increased earnings have laid the foundation for new sorts of power in their lives, flowing from their dramatically greater ability to contribute to their own and their family's support.

Important changes in women's family and sexual experience preceded this rapid rise in their labor force participation. While the 1970s witnessed transforming changes in the proportion of women who worked outside the home, the 1920s introduced thoroughgoing and enduring changes into women's family and sexual lives. The first and most obvious of these might be called "the revival of heterosexuality." Victorian sexual values were strongly shaped by the long-term decline in fertility called the "demographic transition." Beginning in 1800 and continuing until 1940, this decline had an even more profound effect on women's lives than their movement into the paid labor force after 1950, since it reduced from seven to two the average number of children born to women who survived to the age of fifty. Two-thirds of this decline occurred before 1880 without the use of artificial contraceptive techniques. Relying on sexual abstinence to lengthen the intervals between births, couples were aided by Victorian sexual values, which discouraged the expression of sexual desire and granted women unprecedented control over their own bodies. These values also ex-

aggerated the differences between the sexes and treated women as morally superior to men. In this context the proportion of women who never married rose to an all-time high between 1870 and 1910 (much greater than today), and many women—married and unmarried—formed what historians have come to call "homosocial" relationships with other women.

Toward the end of the demographic transition, around 1920, these Victorian values gave way to the new sexual values described by Christina Simmons: companionship between men and women—before and after marriage—and an intolerance for close relations between women. As Kathy Peiss's essay indicates, the heterosexual leisure culture of turn-of-the-century working-class women suggests that they were in the vanguard of changing sexual mores. All that remained to make this change complete was the access to birth control techniques described in articles by Linda Gordon and Jessie Rodrique. Gordon analyzes the strong support Margaret Sanger drew from middle-class women, who by the 1920s relied on artificial birth control techniques to limit their fertility. Rodrique shows that African-American women, though not as active in the American Birth Control League as white women, controlled their fertility in ways that reflected post-1920 assumptions about separating sexuality from reproduction. These four articles demonstrate the importance of women's actions in defining their own reproductive lives. They also illustrate some of the forces opposed to these actions. Ultimately they show that this "personal" issue is also political.

Margaret Sanger was one of a multitude of women reformers who exemplified the power of women's political culture that arose from women's separate institutions between 1870 and 1930. Launched in the antebellum era, women's political culture was energized through women's service in the Civil War. Many new institutions—the women's club movement, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the social settlement movement to name only a few—emerged in the decades after 1870 to create the social space within which women attempted to bridge racial, class, and regional differences; train women leaders; and articulate women's issues. Forces promoting the extension of women's political culture extended into rural as well as urban areas. Nevertheless, the success of women's separate institutions can only partly be explained by women's triumphant mobilization in these decades. Equally important were the opportunities open to women in the U.S. political domain. Many of these opportunities were created by traditions of limited government that empowered the voluntary sector in which women played so important a part. For example, the U.S. Sanitary Commission during and after the Civil War empowered women in positions that in Europe were occupied by male bureaucrats. Under the Sanitary Commission women held important positions in the administration of hospital care and the awarding of widows' and other forms of war pensions.

Other gaps engendered by traditions of limited government became

more apparent as American society underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization after 1880. In addition to its work for prohibition the Woman's Christian Temperance Union offered shelter, food, and medical care to needy women, men, and children. Women on state charity boards urged more attention to the problems of the poor, and the social settlement movement found new ways to advocate the redistribution of social resources to meet the needs of working class people. Not surprisingly in this context, the woman suffrage movement justified its goals in social justice terms—women voters would end political corruption, reorient public policy, and eliminate social injustice.

While women's political culture depended upon coalition building, women's assumptions about gender-based solidarity were often disappointed by the persistence of class, ethnic, and racial distinctions within their political cultures. Viewed positively, these distinctions were an inherent feature of women's collective action because they expressed an essential aspect of women's lives. Thus the raucous consumer boycotts through which Jewish immigrant women expressed their own view of social justice built on ethnic as well as gender identities. Likewise, the political culture of African-American women was rooted in their distinctive experience of the social construction of race in the United States. Yet, as Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's essay shows, white women's political culture often buttressed social distinctions that discriminated against black women. The Nineteenth Amendment did not bring suffrage to black women as readily as it did to white—especially in regions where black men did not vote. By accepting that outcome, the white-dominated suffrage movement reinforced the barriers between itself and black women's political culture. In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, however, those barriers were significantly eroded.

Just as a multitude of causes led to the empowerment of women's political culture in the early nineteenth century, a confluence of many causes eroded its power in the 1920s. The dispute over whether to pursue strategies for women's advancement based on women's difference from men or on their similarities to men, accentuated by the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) proposed in 1922, debilitated the women's movement during the interwar years.

The reemergence of feminism in the 1960s built on four decades of growing equality between the sexes as illustrated by women's labor force participation rates, their place in family life, and their sexual identity. As a result, the new feminists championed equality rather than difference as the mode by which they advanced women's interests. A telling landmark in this shift was the endorsement of the ERA by women members of the United Automobile Workers and by the U.S. Women's Bureau in 1972.

Nevertheless, in the late 1980s the need for some recognition of gender differences reemerged in legal causes fostering the advancement of women's interests in the paid labor force. As Christian Littleton argues in