

# MODERN AMERICAN WOMEN

*A  
Documentary  
History*

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SUSAN  
WARE



# Modern American Women

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## A Documentary History

**Susan Ware**  
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# Introduction



How does the world look through women's eyes? How does our perception of history change when we place women at its center rather than on the margins? This anthology provides a woman-centered view of modern America. With only two exceptions (Supreme Court decisions on protective legislation and abortion), every document in the book was written by women about women. (Alas, there were no women on the Supreme Court until 1981, or perhaps those documents too would have been a woman's work.) In this book, history unfolds through the perspectives of the participants—women themselves—rather than through prescriptive literature designed to tell women what they ought to be and do. When women tell their own story, they emerge as actors and participants in a host of activities beyond home and family, providing strong evidence for the pioneer feminist historian Mary Beard's categorization of women as *force in history*.

There is no single female voice that emerges from these documents, but a multiplicity of voices. We hear from intellectuals and housewives, from seasoned political veterans and teenagers, from radicals and antifeminists. We hear stories of the despair of the unemployed in the 1930s or the anger of women on welfare. But we also hear narratives describing the exhilaration of learning to ride a bicycle in the 1890s, or experimenting with new feminist lifestyles in the 1920s. We meet many women of courage—settlement house leaders, civil rights activists, pioneer doctors, labor organizers, writers, and radicals, all of whom helped to shape the course of modern

American history. We also meet women whose courage was more private: women trying to feed their families during hard times, anxious rural mothers worrying that the doctor would not get there when their labor pains began, and Japanese-American women coping with forced relocation during World War II. The experiences of both the extraordinary women who shape public events and the ordinary women whose lives comprise the social history of the times find their places here.

This anthology is dedicated to capturing, indeed celebrating, the diversity of American women's lives. We must not tell the story of American women in the 20th century entirely from the perspective of the white, middle-class, urban, heterosexual women who are the most visible actors. For every experience of a white woman, we need to think about how the lives of black women or Chinese-Americans or Native-Americans might be different. For every example from urban America, we need to recall the experiences of rural women (who were, in fact, a majority until the 1920s and a significant minority ever since). We need to contrast married women with unmarried, especially those who chose to remain single as an expression of a different sexual or affectional preference. And even as we contrast minority women's experiences with those of the middle-class ideal of our "mainstream" popular culture, we must remember the significant differences among minority women themselves.

Two methodological tools are useful for highlighting and interpreting an even further diversity in women's experiences. The first is the life cycle: that is, looking at women's experiences over the entire course of their lives. Women who choose to marry and have children can still spend a majority of their adult years working outside the home—in other words, once a homemaker, not necessarily always a homemaker. This life-cycle approach has the potential to capture the cumulative effects of small changes over time. It also can demonstrate how women's lives are shaped by outside events at the same time they are changing from within.

The other useful tool for understanding twentieth-century women's history is a generational approach. At any given historical moment, several generations of women are participating in events and interacting among themselves. A generational approach is especially well suited to understanding the 1920s and the 1970s, two periods in which younger women inherited

the gains of earlier feminist activism without having to fight for them. A generational approach dramatically increases the complexity of the story historians are trying to tell, because at any given moment women of different age groups may be undergoing very different experiences. In conjunction with attention to the life cycle and minority perspectives, a generational approach reminds us that a host of factors shape women's lives—ranging from class, ethnic, or racial identification to sexual preference, age, and geographical location. There can be no such thing as a "typical American woman"; instead there are stories of a varied multitude of American women.

The portrait that emerges from this collection of women's voices confirms the resourcefulness of American women and demonstrates their contributions to the shaping of the society at large. It also captures women's hopes and aspirations for themselves, their families, and their communities. The history of the twentieth century, both its politics and everyday life, looks richer, fuller, and certainly more representative when the diverse stories of the nation's women occupy center stage. Here, then, is modern women's America.



# Acknowledgments



Putting together an anthology seems deceptively simple, until you try to do one yourself. Choosing the documents and then providing the historical interpretation to accompany them amounts to no less than coming to grips with all of women's history over the past century. For being patient while I tackled this undertaking, I thank my publisher and friend David Follmer, who originally suggested the idea for the book and never despaired when it took longer than either of us had originally expected. I would also like to thank Jack Wilson of Smith College and Anne Knowles, formerly of the Dorsey Press, for their contributions in shaping the final product. Thanks to Susan Zeiger of New York University for bringing the story by Honoré Willsie to my attention. My friends and colleagues Joyce Antler and Barbara Miller Solomon proved both supportive and helpful during the compilation of this anthology, as did (as always) Don Ware.

**Susan Ware**



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## PART ONE

# Modern Women in the Making 1890–1920



"At the opening of the twentieth century," asserted suffragist Ida Husted Harper, women's status "had been completely transformed in most respects." The separate spheres ideology, which had reigned earlier in the century (with women ensconced in the home and men ceded the public world), had by the 1890s begun to break down under the twin impact of industrialization and urbanization. The main result for middle-class women was a dramatic expansion of opportunities to take their women's domestic concerns and values into the public arena. Working-class women also experienced greater autonomy in their lives through wage-force participation and as participants in the new commercialized leisure of modern urban life. The lives of rural women, however, were still shaped far more by the struggle for survival than by any dramatic increase in options associated with the "new woman."

Historians usually refer to the period between 1890 and 1920 as the Progressive era. During this cycle of reform and activism, the United States began to confront the problems raised by its recent industrialization, the massive immigration underway, and the increasing concentration of population in urban areas. Although no one strand unifies Progressive era historiography, the period certainly looks different when women are included. Instead of just hearing about efficiency,



regulation, scientific management, and experts (the dominant interpretations of men's participation), the women's perspective directs our attention toward humanitarian and social reform: concern for child labor, unhealthy conditions in city neighborhoods, and long hours and low pay in factories or sweatshops. What had long been women's province through voluntary associations and charitable benevolence was increasingly defined as a proper scope for public policy.

With the onset of World War I in 1917–1918 and the period of repression that followed it, the cycle of reform came to a close. Women too passed a significant milestone in 1920 with the attainment of the vote after seven decades of struggle. By 1920, many women had left the nineteenth century behind and were ready to step into the modern era.

## CHAPTER 1

# Visions of the New Woman



y the 1890s, a new woman had appeared on the American scene in education, athletics, reform, and the job market. One way to capture what was “new” about the new woman is to examine how she was dressed. Rather than encumbered in yards of material, heavy corsets, and petticoats like her mother and grandmother wore, the new woman was dressed comfortably in tailored suits or long dark skirts worn with simple blouses. Artist Charles Dana Gibson popularized this image of women with his magazine illustrations of “Gibson Girls.” The new styles were more than just a change in fashion. Not only did these women look self-reliant, but they acted that way. Style changes allowed more freedom of movement, increased athleticism, and more physicality on the part of women who were no longer confined by corsets and hoopskirts. As such, the new style symbolized the freedom and opportunity available to the new woman of the 1890s.

The new woman was one product of the vast changes underway in American society due to the maturation of the American economy and the growing urban orientation of the country. The increase in opportunity for higher education for women in the late nineteenth century and the corresponding growth in professional careers provided avenues for gainful employment and a viable alternative to marriage. In many ways, the late nineteenth century was a golden age for single women: such women as settlement pioneer Jane Addams were widely revered for their contributions to public life. Approximately 10 percent of the cohort of women born between 1860 and 1880 remained single—one of the highest rates recorded.