

7 Ways that Studying US History 1877 to Modern Times History Shapes the Way You Think About the Modern Women Today

By Midge Costello

1. A call for *Social Reform* (week of September 16th) was spearheaded by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Women's Trade Union League, in an almost immediate response to Triangle Shirtwaist Company incident, and the details behind it.



Demonstration of protest and mourning for Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911, unknown photographer, 1911 "Demonstration of Protest and Mourning for Triangle Shirtwaist

Factory Fire of March 25, 1911.” *Smithsonian Institution*, 12 Dec. 2019, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/photos/demonstration-protest-and-mourning-triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire-march-25-1911>.

The early years of the 1900's were a time of change for workers across the US, in particular, women. Unions were rising and organized strikes were taking place. Women were tired of their poor working conditions and unfair pay ([Social Reform, September 16, 2019](#)) and started to take part in bottom up change. The problem with this, though, was the fact that so many immigrants were coming in, and needing more and more money in order to afford to live in America, New York especially. So even though they had been on a strike just the year before, many female laborers were working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York on March 25, 1911 ([Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire 1911 - film](#)). The fire that burned that Saturday in March only lasted 30 minutes, but by the end of it, 146 girls had died, some as young as 14 years old. “This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in this city,” Rose Schneiderman said at the Memorial meeting at the Metropolitan Opera House ([Rose Schneiderman, Conditions at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, 1911](#)). The same Rose Schneiderman who would go on and convince President Roosevelt to change his mind. This event triggered the outlash of women of the working and middle class to take action, move to the streets and demand better working conditions and pay for all women. The irony of the situation is that the shirts and outfits women would wear during these decades to become that modern working women, a symbol of a girl ready to work, were in fact the shirtwaist blouse. The same girl ready to work who burned while making the very shirts that empowered her. WORKING FASHION

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/triangle-fire-what-shirtwaist/>

2. *The Women's Suffrage* movement rose in the 1920's in the pursuit of the right to vote for women in America.



The head of the suffragist parade in Washington, 1913 Boissoneault, Lorraine. “The Original Women's March on Washington and the Suffragists Who Paved the Way.” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/original-womens-march-washington-and-suffragists-who-paved-way-180961869/>.

The Women's Suffrage movement technically had begun in 1838, but lost its steam due to the Civil War. When it resurfaced in the 1900's, the Suffragist's argument was because they were different from men, and more moral, they should be able to vote ([Women's Suffrage, September 25, 2019](#)). Not that they were equal, but that they could be a counter weight to men's indecently fueled votes. Alice Paul and other college graduates came on the scene and changed the pace the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was pushing at the time. Alice Paul encourage Suffragists to use militant tactics to make change happen, like picketing a

wartime president, which was unheard of at the time ([Iron Jawed Angels](#)). Even while imprisoned and heading a hunger strike, Alice Paul and other suffragists were still making a change and even calling the shots from behind bars ([Alice Paul Inspires Her Fellow Suffragists, 1917-1918](#)). The NAWSA joined with Paul's group, the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, to form the National Women's Party (NWP). The hunger strike, picketing, imprisonment, and rallies were all such public events, the nation grew more and more outraged and demanded the president do something. The 19th amendment went into effect in August, 1920, across the country. When Alice and others tried to push for more radical change, though, they were faced with far less support from both women and men, and so the movement once again petered out from there.

3. A radical and sexual awakening was happening during *The "Modern" 1920's* for women and the definition of a relationship in terms of what was now ok and appropriate.



Two flapper women and their dates having a smoke. Pruitt, Sarah. "How Flappers Redefined Womanhood (Hint: It Involved Jazz, Liquor and Sex)." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 17 Sept. 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/flappers-roaring-20s-women-empowerment>.

The 1920's, or more commonly known as the Roaring 20's, was a time of competing ideals. Modernism was on the rise, but fundamentalists were fighting it tooth and nail ([The "Modern" 1920's, September 23rd, 2019](#)). In the midst of all this, women were redefining how they could dress, act, socialize, and date. Shorter hair styles were seen as more freeing, and flapper dresses were shorter and sexier than any previous trend of fashion ([Crash Course #32: The Roaring 20's](#)). The idea of a Flapper was the ideal every young girl tried to make herself out to be. With these new looks also came new sexual awareness and activity. Fundamentalist parents taught their children, mostly girls, to stay virtuous, don't drink or smoke, and only have sex once married. With the new Modernist ideas and pressures, parties started to involve more and more drinking, even with prohibition in effect, and men started expecting premarital sex, and the young women didn't know what to do. While they wanted to take part in "petting", they felt they had an allegiance to their own generation and wanted to fit in with the times. They would even write to newspaper advice column looking for advice ([Young Women Discuss Petting, 1930](#)).

4. *World War II* spurred the US Economy into gear, and with so many men in the military, women had to fill in the left over jobs that needed to be done.



Rosie the Riveter “We Can Do It!” Trickey, Erick. “Analysis | Rosie the Riveter Isn't Who You Think She Is.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 26 Aug. 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/09/03/rosie-the-riveter-isnt-who-you-think-she-is/>.

With millions of Americans in the military overseas, fighting the Japanese, Germans, and other in WWII, there was a huge demand for workers at home. Every resource, dollar, and second was spent trying to help those fighting overseas. Women entered the workforce with new found

purpose and motivation. There were more 30 year old, middle class, married women in the workforce than there were single women than ever before ([Crash Course #36: World War II Part 2 - The Homefront](#)). These women also had the government on their side, for the government enforced fixed wages and made companies to recognize unions so that the workers wouldn't go on strike. Women were working more advanced jobs, earning more money and contributing to the war in more ways than one ([World War II, October 2, 2019](#)). The unemployment rate went down to 2% by 1943. Women were also joining the military, becoming Cadet Nurses in many of the branches ([Alexander Ross, U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps - historical poster, 1945](#)). Women were learning more, earning more, working more in the national economy than ever before. This was meant to be a temporary fix, and as soon as the war was over, the men would come back and take back all the jobs they left, putting the women out of work once again.

5. *The Social Movements of the Late 20th Century* would not have happened had it not been for the help of the women in each movement.



SNCC workers being briefed before going in Belzoni, MS, to organize for the Freedom Vote, fall 1963. "Ida Mae Holland." *SNCC Digital Gateway*, <https://snccdigital.org/people/ida-mae-holland/>.

People across the country were fighting for social justice on all fronts: racial sexual, and immgrantional. They all wanted rights, to get on an even playing ground with the white majority. They organized, they planned, and they took action. There are accounts of Chavez being a great leader in the Chincano Movement, student activists taking charge of their education, American Indians demanding justice fore their ancestors and ownership of their land again, and the Gay Liberation Front setting up rallies in many major cities ([Social Movements of the late 20th century, october 23, 2019](#)). All moving and converging at the same time, are reaching for more and more, fighting united. Behind the scenes of the plans for the Trail of Broken Treaties, in the details of the Gay Rights rallies, in the organization of the five year strike of grapes, are women. Not only in these movements, but in

every other movement to, especially the Black Freedom Movement ([Crash Course #40: The 1960's in America](#)). Some women noticed these facts, like Casey Hayden and Mary King from non-violent student organizations, but realized at the time it was hard for women to rise up and voice their thoughts with all the other issues currently at the forefront, so they bided their time until they could finally take a stand ([Casey Hayden and Mary King, Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo, 1965](#)).

6. *Feminism and Women's Movements* was one of the strongest moments in American history by women, for women, about women.



Fetters, Ashley. "In Defense of Old-School Feminism." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 13 Nov. 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/forgotten-pro-family-feminists/575683/>.

Your history books will tell you that *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was the start of the Women's liberation movement. She said "the problem that has no name" and she spoke to millions across the country with her book ([Feminism and Women's Movements, October 28, 2019](#)). The ideas had already been around for decades, even before Alice Paul and NOW took up arms in the early 1900's, Betty Griedan just gave them a new and currant voice. After that book, it was like an explosion. Dioffeerent divisions of feminist and women's movements started popping up everywehre. When of different ages, different races, different citizenship started raising their voices. Documents and demands started coming out, some even using our Declaration of Independence as inspiration ([Bread and Roses, Declaration of Women's Independence, 1970](#)). Demonstrations across the country were also taking place, bra and degree burnings, rallies and marches, safety patrols, meetings, conventions, all to communicate ideas and thoughts and feelings, trying to get the country to understand and give them their rights ([She's Beautiful When She's Angry](#)). If they didn't

give them, than they would take them. Women were fast paced and unforgiving, covering many issues and not relenting for anything or anyone.

7. The *New Right* was the resurgence of the conservative thinking and ideas in the country.



Opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment, led by Phyllis Schlafly, center, white coat, march in front of the White House in Washington, D.C., Feb. 5, 1977. Johnson, Emily Suzanne. “Women Have Been the Heart of the Christian Right for Decades.” *The Conversation*, 31 Oct. 2019, <https://theconversation.com/women-have-been-the-heart-of-the-christian-right-for-decades-118094>.

Feminists were not the only kind of women out there. The New Right was made up of majority women, from middle class suburban women to christian women to white southern women too ([The New Right, November 11, 2019](#)). The New Right were the formal Silent Majority that won Nixon his presidency. Women out there still believed being conservative, or some might say some Fundamentalist, values, even writing books to help guide

women back to a successful marriage ([Marabel Morgan, The Total Woman, 1973](#)). They wanted to show that not all women were “angry, never happy, feminists”. When the Women’s Movement started pushing for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the New Right drew a line and said “that’s enough”. The succeeding in fully stopping the ERA from being ratified, the point person in this movement a women herself. The platant who was in the legendary court case Roe v. Wade, fully changed her tone and joined the New Right. She felt silenced in a movement that prided itself on being the voice of women everywhere ([Roe v. Wade Part 2: The Culture Wars](#)). These women showed that there is no one way a women should or shouldn’t be, and that you don’t have to join someone because they are screaming the loudest.