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7 Ways that Studying US History 1877 to Modern Times History Shapes the Way You Think About Women's Shifting Roles Throughout Time

Women love being told what to do all the time, right?



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1. Women were used as an excuse for lynchings and racism in the South after the Civil War

The New South & Lynching - Jan. 22



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Nast, Thomas, "The Union as it was, The lost cause, worse than slavery," 1874 <https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/reconstruction/union>

This political cartoon, drawn by Thomas Nast in 1874, illustrates the terror newly freed African Americans experienced after the Civil War, in the time period known as Reconstruction. In the South especially, strategies were used to intimidate them, including literacy tests, the segregation of public places, and lynchings. White men would justify these lynchings by saying a crime was committed by a black man and that it was only right to hold him accountable ([New South & Lynching, Jan. 22, 2020](#)). The most common crime these men were charged with was the rape of a white woman. This phenomenon allowed men to justify their brutality under the notion that they were just protecting their wives when in reality, they were committing murder and getting away with it. Not only did it force women to be the reasoning behind horrible actions, but it also put them in a position of immense power. During a time of blind ignorance, women could accuse any black man they wanted to of rape, either to encourage violence themselves or to protect their husband from judgment. Ida B. Wells, an African American activist, illustrates this point when discussing the lynching of Lige Strickland. On his chest, a paper was attached reading “We must protect our ladies” on the front and “Beware all darkies. You will be treated the same way” on the back, despite the fact that Strickland had not committed any crime ([Wells, Lynch Law in Georgia, 1899](#)). Unfortunately, lynchings that occurred because of an alleged rape happened frequently and were seen as speculative events. The lynching of Ell Persons, for example, was claimed to be a result of a rape and hundreds of people gathered to witness his burning and dismembering ([America Divided - Whose History?, Episode 4](#)). The use of women as an excuse for violence not only illustrates white southerner’s mistreatment of African Americans but also how controlling men were of a woman’s position at the time. This time period also strengthened the stereotypical view of a black man as a criminal.

2. During industrialization, society didn’t think women needed to work and used that as justification for the disproportionately low wages they were paid.

Industrialization - Jan. 24



Getty Images, Rinhart, George, “Operating room of Ladies Rayon Undergarment Factory,” 1920

<https://www.businessinsider.com/vintage-photos-of-women-working-factories#during-world-war-i-women-held-occupations-in-domestic-and-personal-service-clerical-occupations-and-factory-work-3>

In this picture, rows upon rows of women are working in an undergarment factory, a typical job for a woman at the time. In fact, industrialization marks a time in history where the majority of the workforce was working for wages in factories ([Crash Course #23: The Industrial Economy](#)). It was accepted within society that the man should be the one going to work during the day, while the woman stays at home with the children. This belief was carried on for decades, giving the basis for the longstanding argument against women in the workforce. At this time, wages were determined by how much business owners believed was enough to support the worker and his family, known as the “living wage” ([Industrialization, Jan. 24, 2020](#)). However, the wage received was typically not enough, forcing wives to enter the workforce. Because of the “living wage” idea that a man received enough to support the family, women that went to work were seen as just doing it for some extra spending money. Therefore, business owners paid women a significant amount less than what they would pay a man for the same job. Of course, widows and single mothers were not considered in this, so many women struggled to support their families. Women in the workforce were also blamed for wounding a man’s perception of himself as the “breadwinner,” contributing to the struggle for better jobs and pay ([“Shall Married Women Work,” 1879](#)). The implications of this mistreatment of women can still be seen today in the gap between a woman’s and man’s pay for the exact same job.

3. In response to the rise in flapper culture, ads were published in order to tell women how they should act and fulfill their role as a good wife and mother.

The “Modern” 1920s - Feb. 10



Hulton Archive, “Flappers dancing while musicians perform during a Charleston dance contest at the Parody Club”, New York City, 1926. <https://www.history.com/news/flappers-roaring-20s-women-empowerment>

This is an image of flappers dancing at a club in 1926. Flappers were typically white, upper-class females that challenged customs by wearing shorter skirts, bobbed hair, and makeup. Although the use of makeup doesn't seem that groundbreaking, “the use of cosmetics symbolized the woman's open acceptance of her own sexuality” (Fass, *Sex and Youth in the Jazz Age*, 204). It was a newfound lifestyle of freedom for women by being able to show affection in public, dancing, and smoking (The “Modern” 20s, Feb. 10, 2020). Some parts of society were not accepting of this change, seeing it as scandalous and straying from Christian values. However, that was only believed when it came to women. It was perfectly acceptable for men to go out and smoke, drink, dance, and show PDA, but deemed inappropriate for young women and inexcusable for wives and mothers. As a result, a collection of ads were published, known as “New Woman Ads,” encouraging women to stay in the home. They often depicted women as happy to be in the domestic setting or gave tips on how to be a good wife. For example, one of these ads opens by saying “Deep down in your heart- in the heart of every woman - is that eager wistful wish to be a *good wife*” (“A Good Wife” ad, 1920s). This forced women to experience an identity crisis in a sense because of the two opposing forces telling women what their roles in society should be, either aligned with the flapper lifestyle or the domestic one.

4. After fighting for the right to vote, women's role in politics shifted as they now had the ability to voice their own opinions.

Women's Suffrage - Feb. 12



The Struggle for Women's Suffrage: Selected Images from the Collections of the Library of Congress, “The First Picket Line-College Day in the picket line”. Feb. 1917. <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/august-28/>

In this image, women suffragists protest in front of the White House, demanding that women be allowed the right to vote. This is a tame example of different tactics used at the time. Some women in the Suffrage Movement went so far as going on a hunger strike after being wrongfully imprisoned. They endured the torture of being

force-fed for weeks in order to stay committed to the movement ([Iron Jawed Angels, 2004](#)). The ultimate suffrage argument was that women were totally different than men, so women should be allowed to vote in order to balance it out ([Women's Suffrage, Feb. 12, 2020](#)). It is important to also mention that women were classified as citizens of the United States but were unable to participate in elections. This is best explained in a quote from Helen Todd, a famous suffragist, saying “that in a country that boasted of its representative government, half the population of women were not represented at all” ([Todd, “Getting Out the Vote,” 1911](#)). Despite the obvious, women had to fight for decades and endure ridicule from society to be able to exercise their rights. After they won, women’s roles within the home also shifted. Before, the husband was supposed to represent the family’s overall opinion, but now, women could speak for themselves. They were also now seen as equal to men, at least in the eyes of the government.

5. Women were told it was their duty to fill the men’s jobs during WWII, but they better still look feminine and quit when the men return.

World War II - Feb. 19



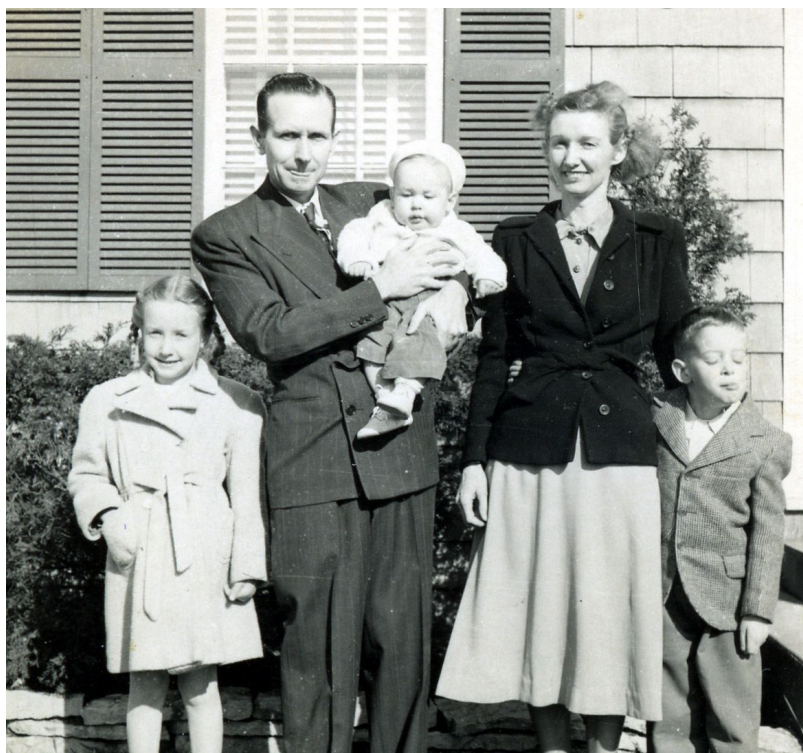
Getty Images, Lambert, Harold, “Like Rosie, this woman is a true riveter. She drives rivets into an aircraft while her co-worker sits in the cockpit.” <https://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/rosie-riveter1.htm>

This picture shows two women working on an airplane to help the war effort during World War II. It was expected of women at the time to do their part as American citizens and fill the men’s jobs while they were away at war ([Crash Course #36: WWII - The Homefront](#)). However, as one can see in the picture, there were some odd expectations built in with that. For example, women were expected to do labor-intensive work in factories for long hours yet still look feminine. This is why the women have their hair tied back so neatly and are wearing lipstick in the picture. One can also see this expectation in the popular “Rosie the Riveter” ads that were distributed during

the war to encourage women to do their part, in addition to looking good while doing it. For example, one ad has a beautiful woman wearing makeup and hair the same way as the women in the picture above, saying “I’ve found the job where I fit best! Find your war job in industry, agriculture, and business” (George Roepp, “Find Your War Job” poster, 1943). In addition, women were expected to quit their jobs when the men returned. This emphasizes how the role of women in society was to help when needed and then go back home. Many women resented this expectation, but still complied out of respect for their husbands and to fulfill the role of a good wife and mother at home (World War II, Feb. 19, 2020).

6. During the fight against communism, women that didn’t marry or have children were seen as unpatriotic, social deviants that were susceptible to communist theory.

The Postwar Boom - Mar. 11



WordPress, “Fitz Family Photo,” 1950s. <https://hardbullets.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/1950s-family-values/>

This is a photo of a family from the 1950s, known as a “nuclear family.” It was the standard among society that women get married and have as many children as possible as quickly as possible. This is the time period known as the “baby boom.” When discussing why the nuclear family was so important at the time, scholar Elaine May says, “It fit their belief in abundance, progress, and productivity. As one man declared in 1955, ‘I’d like six kids... it just seems like a minimum production goal’” (May, “Men and Women: Life in the Nuclear Cocoon,” 340). Instead of women choosing to have children when ready, it was the expectation that they stockpile the next generation as an outward sign of patriotism. As one can assume, those that did not subscribe to the nuclear family

ideals were shunned from the community and seen as social deviants. An important thing to mention as well is the fact that the US was in a state of fighting communism at all costs, so it was the role of US citizens to prove that capitalism was the better economic system (The Postwar Boom, Mar. 11, 2020). Women could contribute to this effort by moving their families to the suburbs, where the “cookie-cutter” stereotype developed. The most famous suburb at this time was known as Levittown, a neighborhood for veterans where every house and yard looked the same. (“A Journalist Describes Levittown,” 1948). Moving to the suburbs was another way to display responsibility and fuel the economy. Because the nuclear family was the symbol of American ideals at the time, women that did not want to or were unable to have children were seen as being more susceptible to communist beliefs, the ultimate detriment and insult of the postwar boom.

7. Despite modernization, women were still expected to submit to male dominance in the workforce and home and had to protest to enact change.

Feminism and Women’s Movements



Washington Post, “Demonstrators from the National Women’s Liberation Party protest the Miss America pageant in front of the Convention Hall in Atlantic City,” Sept. 7, 1968.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-year-women-refused-to-stay-silent-tossed-their-bras-and-redefined-politics/2018/05/23/bf37606e-495c-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html

Despite the cultural shift to more modern values among society, women were still struggling to be treated as equals. In the picture, women of the National Women’s Liberation Party protest a Miss America beauty pageant due to its objectification of women. Pageants weren’t the only places women experienced mistreatment. In fact, there

was little societal regulation on tactics of objectification by men, like catcalling or even unwanted touching and harassment. In the workforce, women experienced blatant job discrimination under the expectation that a woman should stick to clerical work. Ads for jobs would specify which gender should apply and would even describe exactly what type of woman the business was looking for, using words like “good looking” and “put together.” ([She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry, 2014](#)). The discrimination didn’t end there. Once given a job, women were expected to dress nicely, wear makeup and jewelry, and always have their hair styled nicely. If a woman did not meet these expectations, she could be fired. Ann Hopkins, for example, was told by her male supervisor that if she wanted a real chance at business, she needed to walk, talk, and dress more femininely, in addition to taking a course at a charm school ([Makers: Women In Business](#)). Although it was more acceptable for women to leave the home and enter the workforce, raising the children and maintaining the house continued to be the responsibility of the mom. In a newsletter, Pat Mainardi, a member of the Redstockings feminist group, describes the position women had been put in, saying “We women have been brainwashed more than even we can imagine, probably too many years of seeing television women in ecstasy over their shiny waxed floors” ([Mainardi, “The Politics of Housework,” 1970](#)). As they did during the suffrage movement, women banded together again to change the assumed inferiority of women in all aspects of life, including the classroom, workforce, and home.

