The Women’s Era

As with other areas of society, women also dealt with both an expansion of activism as well as a restriction of boundaries. The 1890s are the beginning of three decades that become known as the Women’s Era. Although they still could not vote until 1920, they were able to gain other rights. Just about every state had adopted laws that allowed them to control their own wages and property – versus giving it to their husbands. They could made separate wills and contracts.

Roughly 5 million women worked for wages – although most were single and in the domestic fields, there was also a new generation of college educated women that could have clerical and professional jobs.

Women also began to have more of an influence in public affairs through their participation in women’s clubs, temperance associations and social reform organizations. The first such major temperance group was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union founded in 1874 and led by Francis Willard. They urged for the prohibition of alcohol as it resulted in domestic abuse as well as health and financial problems. They also focused on other economic and political reform. She urged that women should stop accepting the idea that “weakness” and dependence were their nature.

At the same time this was happening, feminism also continued to accept the racial and ethnic norms of the time period. They continued to fight for equality in employment, education, and politics but native-born, middle class women dominated the suffrage movement and believed that their participation in the voting process would actually overcome the immigrant or illiterate vote.

The Working Woman

As more and more women were working they were more visible in society – you could see them in many urban settings – work, shopping, entertainment, etc. This was one of the early signs that the roles of women were changing. In 1900 18% of the workforce were women and 20% of women were working. By 1930 they made up 25% of the workforce and 24.3% of all women worked. Most women were single, however the number of working married women also increased. Black women were still generally kept in domestic fields, but for native born white women the types of jobs they could work in began to expand.

Working women began the symbol of female emancipation even though they faced exclusions from many jobs and wage discrimination. Women saw it as a form on independence despite these shortfalls. This was the focus of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In 1898 she wrote *Women and Economics* where she pointed out that this “spirt of personal independence” showed a change that was coming in economic and family life. She claimed that the road to women’s freedom was through work. The home created women as “unproductive parasites, little more than a servant to her husband and children”. If women continued to live this way they would not be able to contribute to society or enjoy true freedom.

This change was also seen in immigrant families with American born or raised children – especially daughters. Parents complained about how their children were spending their money on novelties and frivolities of fashion. Daughters would complain how chaperones or curfews were not “American”.

The New Feminism

Feminism although not new was a new word that came about during Progressivism. Although it is hard to define some thought of it as women’s emancipation “both as a human being and a sex being” It was an attack on traditional rules of sexual behavior and it added a new dimension to the idea of personal freedom.

An example of one of the women’s groups that focused on this new idea of feminism is the group Heterodoxy. It was part of the new bohemia – a social group of artists, writers and others that rejected conventional rules and practices. When they looked at feminism they merged the ideas of the vote, economic freedom and sexuality together. They were the first that gave rise to this new idea of the “lyrical left” – these were discussion clubs, experimental theaters and published magazines. They were represented by Isadora Duncan who brought a new form of dancing that was called free movement that “liberated the body of the constraints of traditional technique and costume”. Another example was the Armory Show of 1910 that introduced cubist paintings from Europe to New York. Picasso is one example. The lyrical left’s focus was on freedom as the vision of society.

The Rise of Personal Freedom

As the progressive movement continued, the idea of personal freedom began to form. One journalist, William M. Reedy referred to this time as “sex o’clock” in America. Much of this was that Freud’s ideas of psychoanalysis that focuses on unconscious desires of sex and aggression were made mainstream in the U.S. after he presented at Clark University. The definition of feminism again changed and was now the mixture of free sexual expression and reproductive choice along with economic and political rights. Greenwich Village became the center of sexual experimentation and a place that welcomed homosexuality. But the idea of sexual freedom extended beyond Greenwich Village.

The Birth Control Movement

As more and more women were working, access to birth control becomes more and more important. Not because women want to have sex freely, but bearing children interfered with their ability to work. The idea of control over one’s body changed from being able to refuse sexual advances to being able to enjoy sexual life without bearing children. One of the early proponents of this was Emma Goldman – an immigrant from Lithuania. She often lectured on being accepted of homosexuals as well as birth control – “freedom of action, freedom, in love, and freedom in motherhood”. The call for birth control was picked up by Margaret Sanger. She continually challenged laws that banned contraceptive information and devices. In 1911 she wrote a sex ed column called “what every girls should know” for a socialist newspaper. The post office barred it when it contained information on venereal diseases. By 1914 she was openly advertising birth control devices in her own paper the Woman Rebel. In 1916 she open a clinic in Brooklyn and distributed contraceptives to poor Jewish and Italian women – she ended up in jail for a month. Most progressives wouldn’t touch the topic, but for a short time it was taken up by labor leaders such as the IWW and Goldman. Slowly laws concerning birth control changed – but they were addressed by states, not the federal government.

Spearheads for reform

Many of the new women were college educated and they focused on not only uplifting the poor but also on uplifting other middle class woman. They realized that even well-organized social work was not enough that legislative changes would need to take place. In the south, women focused on child labor in the textile mills as a “menace to white supremacy” (this was mostly their focus since AA women were already discriminated against in those fields). They didn’t pay any attention to black children though. States began to pass laws banning child labor – the earliest was in Alabama in 1903 and by 1915 every southern state had a similar law – however they were not truly enforced.

Settlement Houses

One of the earliest examples of women working to improve social conditions during the Progressive Era are the Settlement Houses. The first was created by Jane Addams in Chicago – Hull House. Women had already been fighting for rights such as suffrage, but a new issue began to emerge – the plight of poor immigrant women. Jane Addams was well educated but never married – despised the belief that she should devote herself to a husband and children. Hull house was created to better the lives of the immigrant poor. The major difference with settlement houses and other reforms for the poor were that the women of the settlement houses lived in the community. This made a big difference then someone coming in and telling you how you should be living and then leaving without truly experiencing what you go through. They built kindergartens and playgrounds for children, established employment bureaus and health clinics and showed victims of domestic abuse how to get legal protection. By 1910 more than 400 existed in cities across the U.S. The Settlement houses outside of Chicago began to institute changes such as shorter work weeks, stronger building and sanitation codes and safer labor conditions. They were called Spearheads for reform and produced such women as Julia Lathrop – the first woman to be the head of a federal agency – the Children’s Bureau – Florence Kelley mobilized woman as consumers for social change. She created the National Consumers’ League that advocated for regulation for women and children workers. They urged people to use their wallets as their voice and boycott companies that had unsafe working conditions or employed child labor.