

Women's Roles and Rights in the 1800s

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Longtime women's rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (front row, fourth from left) sits with executive committee members from the International Council of Women during their first meeting in Washington, D.C. Photo by: Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

Who would wear the pants in most American families? Would it be men or women? The social changes created by the Second Great Awakening, to some degree, shaped the answer to that question. The Second Great Awakening was a series of religious revivals that swept the United States from the 1790s and into the 1830s, and forever changed the religious landscape of the country. This spiritual resurgence fundamentally altered the character of American religion, as Evangelical Methodists and Baptists became the fastest growing Christian denominations in the United States by 1800.

The social forces transforming the new nation had an especially strong impact on white women who, of course, could be found in families of all classes throughout the nation. As we have seen, the early Industrial Revolution began in the United States by taking advantage of young farm girls' labor. Meanwhile, the Second Great Awakening was largely driven forward by middle-class women, who were its earliest converts and filled churches in large numbers.

Husband and wife raising a family as partners

People emphasized equality and independence as fundamental principles of the United States, challenging the traditional idea of a family life where the husband ruled commandingly over his wife and children. Instead, a new notion of more cooperative family life began to spread where husband and

wife worked as partners in raising a family through love and kindness rather than harsh discipline. A change of this size occurred over a long period of time and with an uneven impact throughout the country. Middle-class women in the northeast, however, were at the forefront of this new understanding of family life and women's roles. The northeast was at the leading edge of major social changes in the new nation.

Historians disagree over whether these changes were good or bad for white women, but most agree that the new developments of the early 19th century have remained strong up to the present day. For example, it was only in the 1820s and 1830s that women began to replace men as the overwhelming majority of schoolteachers. As a result, more women received advanced education. Teaching allowed women to serve a public role in improving American society, but the rise of female school teaching also suggests the limited choices available even to middle-class women. They had almost no other options for public employment, and they were more attractive to employers because they could be paid less than men.

Ultimately, we need to recognize how the rapid changes of this period included both positive and negative qualities. White women gained a new social power as moral reformers and were thought to possess more Christian virtue than men. On the other hand, while this idealization limited what white middle-class women could do, working-class women and enslaved African-Americans were unable to achieve this new standard of womanhood at all.

Women's role as servants questioned

Although women had many duties in the home, church and community, they had few political and legal rights. When Abigail Adams reminded her husband John during the Constitutional Convention to "Remember The Ladies!" her warning went ignored. Women did not have the power to make contracts, own property or vote. A woman was seen merely as a servant to her husband. By the 1830s and 1840s, however, that began to change when many bold, outspoken women championed social reforms of prisons, war, alcohol and slavery.

Activists began to question a woman's role as man's servant and rallied around the abolitionist movement as a way of calling attention to all human rights. Two influential Southern sisters, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, called for women to "participate in the freeing and educating of slaves."

Harriet Wilson became the first African-American to publish a novel about racism. The heart and voice of the movement, however, was in New England. Lucretia Mott, an educated Bostonian, was one of the most powerful advocates of reform. She acted as a bridge between the feminist and the abolitionist movements, and she endured fierce criticism wherever she spoke.

Demanding equality and rights

Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the first convention for women's rights in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Under the leadership of Stanton, Mott and Susan B. Anthony, the convention demanded improved laws regarding child custody, divorce and property rights. They argued that women deserved equal wages and career opportunities in law, medicine, education and the ministry. Their biggest demand was the right to vote. The women's rights

movement in the United States had begun. Amelia Bloomer began publishing an abolitionist newspaper called *The Lily* and advocated for women to wear pantaloons, which would allow for greater mobility than the expected Victorian costume. These garments are now called “bloomers.”

As with the Civil War, the seeds of the quest for women’s rights were planted in the Declaration of Independence, claiming that “all men are created equal.” Sarah Grimke wrote in 1837 that “men and women were created equal ... whatever is right for men to do is right for women.” So, in this era of reform and renewal, women realized that if they were going to push for equality, they needed to ignore criticism and what was considered acceptable social behavior. Citizens would need to have “every path laid open” to them. However, the ardent feminists discovered that many people felt women neither should nor could be equal to men. The nation soon became distracted, and the climate for reform disappeared. This important struggle would continue for many generations to come.

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