

Changes in the Position of Middle-Class Women

Changing economic and social conditions provided the context for the emergence of the feminist movement. In 1850, the unmarried middle-class woman who had to support herself had little choice but to become a governess or a paid companion to a widow. But by the 1870s, the expansion of the Industrial Revolution and the widening of state responsibilities created new opportunities. Middle-class women became typists, telephone and telegraph operators, sales clerks, and bank tellers. During the 1860s in England, the number of women working as commercial clerks and accountants increased tenfold.

The same period saw governments assume greater responsibility for the welfare and education of the poor. Middle-class women, who had served as volunteers and charity workers, quickly claimed both paying and elected positions in the new local and state bureaucracies. Women served on school and welfare boards, staffed government inspectorates, and managed poorhouses. In some states, they voted in local (but not national) elections and were elected to local (but not national) office. Compulsory mass education also created a voracious demand for teachers and thus a new career path for unmarried women.

Expectations also began to change for married middle-class women. As we have already seen, they moved into a new public role as consumers. It was the woman who was the principal target of the new advertising industry, the woman whom the new department stores sought to entice with their window displays and courteous clerks, the woman who rode the new tram lines and subways to take advantage of sales.

The largest change for married middle-class women was much more basic, however. In the last third of the nineteenth century, middle-class couples began to limit the size of their families. In Britain, for example, the average middle-class family in the 1890s had fewer than three children. In contrast, at mid-century, the typical family had had six children. This enormous change was in part a response to new economic realities. As economic

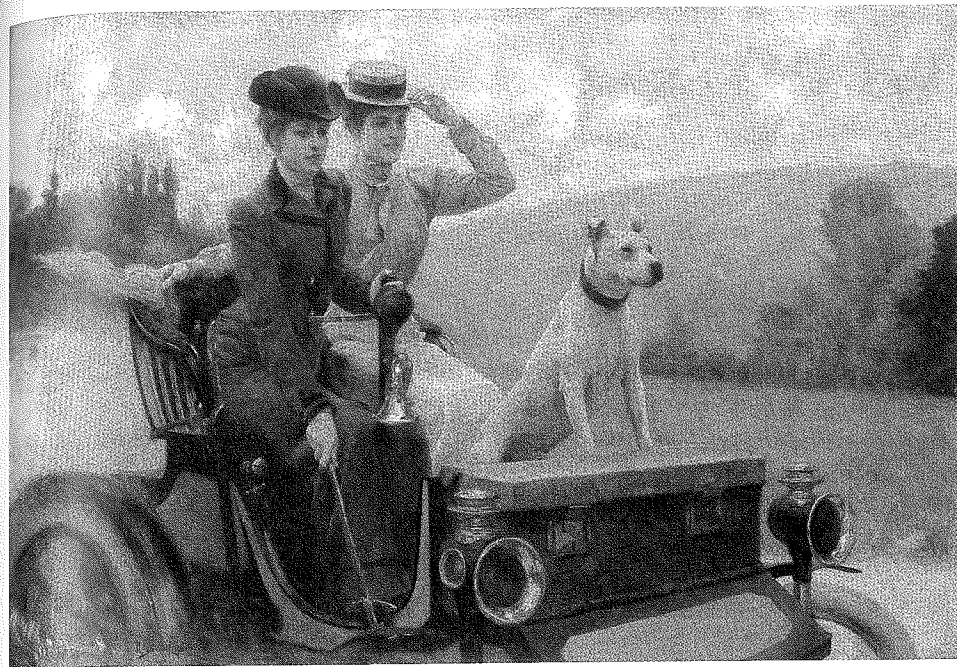
depression cut into business profits, middle-class families looked to cut expenses and yet maintain their lifestyle. Limiting births, through already well-known methods such as abstinence, withdrawal, and abortion, provided the answer. Married women no longer spent much of their adult life pregnant or nursing and were thus free to pursue other interests, including feminist activism.

In working-class families, however, children left school by age eleven or twelve and so began to contribute to the family income much earlier. In contrast to middle-class families, more children meant more income for working-class families, which remained large. The difference in the size of families meant the gap between middle-class and working-class women's experience widened. Perhaps it was not surprising, then, that the feminist movement remained largely middle class. To most poor women struggling to survive, the vote seemed irrelevant. Moreover, politically active working-class women tended to agree with Karl Marx that class, not gender, was the real dividing line in society. To better their lives, they turned to labor unions and socialism. The British activist Selina Cooper (1868–1946), for example, fought hard for women's rights, but within the British Labour movement. Cooper, who was sent to work in a textile mill at age ten, viewed the widening of women's opportunities and the achievement of working-class political power as two sides of the same coin.

As middle-class women's opportunities widened, they confronted the legal, political, and economic disabilities that they still faced. An international feminist movement emerged and campaigned on four fronts: the legal impediments married women faced, employment opportunities and higher education for girls and women, the double standard of sexual conduct enshrined in European laws, and national women's suffrage.

Women and the Law

European legal systems strongly reinforced the liberal ideology of separate spheres for men



MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN MOVING INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Julius LeBlanc Stewart, *The Goldsmith Girls in a Peugeot Voiturette in the Bois de Boulogne* in 1897, 1901. As this turn-of-the-century painting testifies, new leisure opportunities for women challenged the middle-class ideal of the "Angel in the House." No longer passive or confined to the domestic sphere, middle-class women began to move onto not only the roads, but also ski slopes, billiards halls, tennis courts, and many other public arenas.

and women. Law codes often classified women with children, criminals, and the insane. Article 231 of the Napoleonic Code, the legal system of France and the basis of the legal codes of much of Europe, declared that "the husband owes protection to his wife; the wife owes obedience to her husband." In Russia a woman could not travel without her father's or husband's permission, and the husband was also the legal guardian of all children. He alone picked their schools, determined their punishments, and approved their marriage partners. In Prussia only the husband could decide when his baby should stop breastfeeding. According to English common law, "the husband and wife are one person in law," and that person was the husband: Most property brought into

a marriage, given to a woman, or earned by her while married, became the property of her husband.

From the mid-nineteenth century on, women's groups fought to improve the legal rights of married women. The results were uneven. By the end of the 1880s, English married women could own their own property, control their own income, and keep their children. Two decades later, French women could claim similar rights. In contrast, the German Civil Code of 1900 granted all parental authority to the husband—even over his stepchildren. While married women could keep money they earned, all property owned by the wife before marriage or given to her after marriage became the husband's.

Finding a Place: Employment and Education

Feminists also worked to widen women's educational and employment opportunities. Even girls from privileged families rarely received rigorous educations before 1850. The minority who did go to school spent their time learning ladylike occupations such as fancy embroidery, flower arranging, and piano playing. Posture was more important than literature or science. Widening the world of women's education, then, became a crucial feminist aim and an area in which they achieved considerable, but limited, success.

Feminists' educational campaigns had three main emphases: improving the quality of girls' secondary education, expanding the number of girls' secondary schools, and opening universities to women. The fight to upgrade the quality of girls' secondary education was difficult. Many parents opposed an academic curriculum for girls, a position reinforced by medical professionals who argued that girls' brains could not withstand the strain of an intellectual education. Dorothea Beale (1831–1906) established one of the first academic high schools for girls in London in the 1850s, but she faced an uphill battle persuading parents to allow her to teach their daughters mathematics. In France, feminists achieved their goal of a state system of secondary schools for girls in the 1880s. They lost the battle for a university-preparatory curriculum, however, which made it difficult for girls to pass the exams necessary to enter the French university system.

Not surprisingly, few women entered French universities in this period. Opportunities for university education for women varied. In the United States, one-third of all students in higher education were women by 1880, while in Germany, women were not admitted as full-time university students until 1901. In Russia, full-time university study became available to women in Moscow in 1872, and by 1880 women in Russia had some of the best opportunities for higher education in Europe. But the involvement of Sofiia Perovskaia—an educated woman—in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 convinced the authorities that revolutionary

politics and advanced female education went hand in hand. Most educational avenues for Russian women were blocked for more than two decades after the assassination.

Despite such limitations and reverses, the range of jobs open to women broadened. In 1900, French women won the right to practice law, and in 1903 a French woman lawyer presented a case in a European court for the first time. In 1906, the Polish-born physicist and Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie became the first woman to hold a university faculty position in France. By the early twentieth century, women doctors, although still unusual, were not unheard of. In Russia, women accounted for 10 percent of all physicians by 1914.

No More Angels

The campaigns for women's legal rights and the expansion of employment and educational opportunities helped women move into the public sphere. But the third goal of feminist activity—eradicating the double standard of sexual conduct—posed a more radical challenge to separate-sphere ideology. By arguing that the same moral standards should apply to men and women, feminists questioned whether separate spheres should exist at all.

The ideology of separate spheres glorified women's moral purity and held that the more aggressive, more animal-like natures of men naturally resulted in such pastimes as heavy drinking and sexual adventurism. The laws and the wider culture reflected these assumptions. For example, in France, a woman with an illegitimate child could not institute a paternity suit against the father: Premarital sex was a crime for the woman, but not for the man. Similarly, the English divorce legislation of 1857 declared that a woman's adultery was sufficient for a husband to sue for divorce, but for a wife to divorce her husband, she had to prove that he had committed not just adultery, but bigamy, incest, or bestiality.

To feminists, applying different moral standards to men and women degraded men and

blocked women's efforts to improve their own lives and society as a whole. As the French feminist leader Maria Desraismes explained, "To say that woman is an angel is to impose on her, in a sentimental and admiring fashion, all duties, and to reserve for oneself all rights.... I decline the honor of being an angel."⁸

To erase the moral distinctions between men and women, feminists fought on several fronts. One key struggle was over the regulation of prostitution. By the 1870s, many European countries, as well as the United States, had established procedures that made it safer for men to hire prostitutes, while still treating the women involved as criminals. In England, the Contagious Diseases Act, passed in 1870 to address the problem of venereal disease, declared that the police could require any woman suspected of being a prostitute to undergo a genital exam. Feminists such as Josephine Butler (1857–1942) contended that such legislation made it easier for men to indulge their sexual appetites, while punishing the impoverished women who had to sell their bodies to feed themselves and their children. For almost 20 years Butler led a campaign both to repeal the legislation that regulated prostitution and focus public attention on the lack of employment opportunities for women.

Abuse of alcohol was another battleground for the women's movement. Feminists argued that the socially accepted practice of heavy male drinking impoverished families and caused domestic violence. The temperance or prohibitionist cause thus became a women's rights issue. Temperance organizations spread across much of the western world and, between 1916 and 1919 succeeded in pushing through prohibitionist legislation in Iceland, Finland, Norway, the United States, and many Canadian provinces. "Prohibition," however, did little to transform gender relations, proved difficult to enforce, and was fairly rapidly repealed.

Other feminist moral reform campaigns achieved only limited success. The regulation of prostitution did end in England in 1886 and in the United States, France, and the Scandinavian countries by 1914, but remained in effect in

Germany. By 1884 in France, a husband's adultery, like a wife's, could end a marriage; but in England, the grounds for divorce remained differentiated by gender until 1923. In all European countries and in the United States, the sexual double standard remains embedded in much of middle- and working-class culture.

The Fight for Women's Suffrage

The slow pace and uneven progress on both the legal and moral fronts convinced many feminists that they needed the political clout of the *national* suffrage to achieve their goals. In 1867 the National Society for Women's Suffrage was founded in Britain. Over the next three decades, suffrage societies emerged on the Continent. The French suffragist Hubertine Auclert (1848–1914) described the vote as "the keystone that will give [women] all other rights." She refused to pay taxes on the grounds of "no taxation without representation" and was the first woman to describe herself as a "feminist," a word that entered the English language from French around 1890.

Auclert and other suffragists had little success. Only in Finland (1906) and Norway (1913) did women gain the national franchise in this period. The social upheaval of World War I brought women the vote in Russia (1917), Britain (1918), Germany (1918), Austria (1918), the Netherlands (1919), and the United States (1920). But women in Italy had to wait until 1945, in France until 1944, and in Greece until 1949. Swiss women did not vote until 1971.

Feminists faced significant obstacles in their battle for the national franchise. (See *Different Voices* in this chapter.) In Catholic countries such as France and Italy, the women's suffrage movement failed to become a political force not only because the Church opposed the women's vote, but also because in Catholicism—in its veneration of the Virgin Mary and other female saints, in its exaltation of family life, in the opportunity it offered for religious vocation as a nun—women found many avenues for emotional expression and intellectual satisfaction.

DIFFERENT VOICES THE DEBATE OVER WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

The debate over a woman's right to vote did not divide along gender lines. Many men supported women's suffrage, and many women, including Britain's Queen Victoria, regarded it as a violation of the natural order. The excerpts below present arguments in the women's suffrage debate. The best-selling British novelist Mary Ward—or, as she always presented herself, Mrs. Humphry Ward (1851–1920)—wrote the first document, a letter to the editor of an influential magazine, in 1889. Many well-known and influential women signed the letter. The second excerpt comes from a French suffragist pamphlet published in 1913.

An Anti-Suffrage Argument: Mrs. Humphry Ward

We, the undersigned, wish to appeal to the common sense and the educated thought of the men and women of England against the proposed extension of the Parliamentary suffrage to women.

While desiring the fullest possible development of the powers, energies and education of women, we believe that their work for the State, and their responsibilities towards it, must always differ essentially from those of men, and that therefore their share in the working of the State machinery should be different from that assigned to men.... To men belong the struggle of debate and legislation in Parliament; the working of the army and navy; all the heavy, laborious, fundamental industries of the State, such as those of mines, metals, and railways; the lead and supervision of English commerce, the service of that merchant fleet on which our food supply depends.

The failure of British suffragists to win the national franchise persuaded some activists to adopt more radical tactics. Led by the imposing mother-and-daughters team of Emmeline (1858–1928), Christabel (1880–1958), and Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960), the *suffragettes* formed a breakaway women's suffrage group in 1903. The *suffragettes* argued that male politi-

At the same time we are heartily in sympathy with all the recent effort which have been made to give women a more important part in those affairs of the community where their interests and those of men are equally concerned; where it is possible for them not only to decide but to help in carrying out, and where, therefore, judgment is weighted by a true responsibility, and can be guided by experience and the practical information which comes from it. As voters for or members of School Boards, Boards of Guardians, and other important public bodies, women have now opportunities for public usefulness which must promote the growth of character, and at the same time strengthen among them the social sense and habit. But we believe that the emancipation process has now reached the limits fixed by the physical constitution of women, and by the fundamental difference which must always exist between their main occupations and those of men. The care of the sick and the insane, the treatment of the poor; the education of children: in all these matters, and others besides, they have made good their claim to larger and more extended powers. We rejoice in it. But when it comes to questions of foreign or colonial policy, or of grave constitutional change, then we maintain that the necessary and normal experience of women does not and can never provide them with such materials for sound judgment as are open to men.

In conclusion: nothing can be further from our minds than to seek to depreciate the position or the importance of women. It is because we are keenly alive to the enormous value of

cians would never simply give the vote to women; instead, they had to grab it by force. Adopting as their motto the slogan "Deeds, Not Words," *suffragettes* disrupted political meetings, chained themselves to the steps of the Houses of Parliament, shattered shop windows, burned churches, destroyed mailboxes, and even, in a direct attack on a cherished

their special contribution to the community, that we oppose what seems to us likely to endanger that contribution. We are convinced that the pursuit of a mere outward equality with men is for women not only vain but demoralizing. It leads to a total misconception of women's true dignity and special mission. It tends to personal struggle and rivalry, where the only effort of both the great divisions of the human family should be to contribute the characteristic labour and the best gifts of each to the common stock.

A Pro-Suffrage Argument: The French Union for Womens' Suffrage

We are going to try to prove that the vote for women is a just, possible and desirable reform....

A woman has responsibility in the family; she ought to be consulted about the laws establishing her rights and duties with respect to her husband, her children, her parents.

Women work—and in ever greater numbers; a statistic of 1896 established that... the number of women workers was 35 percent of the total number of workers, both male and female.

If she is in business, she, like any businessman, has interests to protect....

If a woman is a worker or a domestic, she ought to participate as a man does in voting on unionization laws, laws covering workers' retirement, social security, the limitation and regulation of work hours, weekly days off, labor contracts, etc.

....

Finally, her special characteristics of order, economy, patience and resourcefulness will be as

useful to society as the characteristics of man and will favor the establishment of laws too often overlooked until now.

The woman's vote will assure the establishment of important social laws.

All women will want:

To fight against alcoholism, from which they suffer much more than men;

To establish laws of health and welfare;

To obtain the regulation of female and child labor;

To defend young women against prostitution;

Finally, to prevent wars and to submit conflicts among nations to courts of arbitration.

For Discussion

1. How does the argument of Mrs. Humphrey Ward reflect the liberal ideology of separate spheres for men and women?
2. What is the basic argument presented by the French Union for Women's Suffrage? Why did the suffragists argue that the women's vote would create a better world?
3. How does this argument in the pro-suffrage pamphlet reflect rather than reject separate sphere ideology?

Source: 1. Mrs. Humphry Ward. "An Appeal against Female Suffrage," *Nineteenth Century* 147 (June 1889): 781–785. 2. A report presented to Besançon Municipal Council by the Franc-Comtois Group of the Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes. Besançon, March 1913, 6–9.

citadel of male middle-class culture, vandalized golf courses.

In opting for violence, *suffragettes* assaulted a central fortification of middle-class culture—the ideal of the passive, homebound woman. Their opponents reacted with fury. Police broke up *suffragette* rallies with sexually focused brutality:

They dragged *suffragettes* by their hair, stomped on their crotches, punched their breasts, and tore off their blouses. Once in jail, hunger-striking *suffragettes* endured the horror of forced feedings. Jailers pinned the woman to her bed while the doctor thrust a tube down her throat, lacerating her larynx, and pumped in food until she gagged.

— refused to eat