



KEY QUESTION 7: The role of women

How did the lifestyle and status of women change during this period?

“After twilight, a young lady would not be conducting herself in a becoming manner, by walking alone; and if she passes the evening with any one, she ought, beforehand, to provide someone to come for her at a stated hour; but if this is not practicable, she should politely ask of the person whom she is visiting, to permit a servant to accompany her.”

From a 19th Century book of social etiquette for women

In 1900 women

- Had few jobs they were allowed to do as they were expected to be wives and mothers; some middle and upper class women were teachers or nurses, while the few working class women who worked did low-paid jobs like dress making or cleaning;
- Were expected to dress in restrictive clothing, tight waisted and ankle length dresses; they were not encouraged to wear make-up;
- Were expected to behave politely; they could not smoke or play sports in public; they had to be **chaperoned** (accompanied by an older or married woman) with their gentlemen friends; divorce and sex before marriage were very rare;
- Were only allowed to vote in a few states.

The First World War began to change this situation for some women. 90,000 women enlisted in the US military serving in supporting roles as office clerks, radio operators, telegraphers, electricians, chemists, accountants, police officers, mail deliverers and nurses. They also served in the American Red Cross and Salvation Army and worked as farm labourers attached to the Women’s Land Army. However when the war ended women were expected to give these new jobs up and return to their former lives.



Source 1: Silent Sentinels picketing the White House in 1917

Not all women wanted things to go back to the way they had been before. Women had gradually been gaining the vote on a state by state basis starting in Wyoming in 1869. The National American Women’s Suffrage Society was formed by Susan B Anthony in 1890. It attracted support from wealthy women who had the education, time and money to campaign

for the vote. By 1911 six states had given women the right to vote in state and local elections - Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Washington and California. In 1913 Alice Paul started the National Women's Party to do more to get publicity for women's right to vote, by obstructing traffic, chaining themselves to railings and so on. The NWP's 'Silent Sentinels' protested outside the White House. It was not long before they had persuaded Oregon, Kansas and Arizona to give women the vote.

By 1912 Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party was supporting the idea of national women's **suffrage** in the election. Even though he lost to Democrat Woodrow Wilson it did help to make women's voting rights a national issue. President Wilson avoided the issue until 1916 when he supported women's suffrage as part of the Democratic Party campaign. A year later Congress set up the Women's Suffrage Committee to look into it and a New York referendum gave women the vote in the state.

Politicians gradually came round to the idea that women should have the vote after women's work in First World War industrial effort was widely recognized. Women's support for prohibition was also appreciated by Congressmen. In 1918 the 'Anthony Amendment' passed the House but failed in the Senate by 2 votes. The National Women's Party campaign to remove anti-suffrage senators in 1918 elections was very successful so the amendment to give all women the vote was finally passed by Congress in 1919.

As with prohibition, the suffrage campaign was aimed at amending the US **Constitution** so that women would be able to vote right across America. The 19th **Amendment** said, "*The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.*" It was ratified by the minimum number of states on August 18th, 1920 and became law immediately. This gave women the vote in national elections.

The 1920 presidential election was the first election that women across America were all allowed to vote in. Jeanette Rankin became the first female Congressman representing the state of Montana. She went on to have a long career of campaigning for social reform and voting rights. In 1924 Mary Howard of Utah and Bertha Knight Landes became the first female mayors. In 1925 Miriam Ferguson in Texas and Nellie Taylor Ross in Wyoming became the first elected female state governors. As well as being represented by women in federal and state government, a new pressure group called the League of Women Voters was founded in 1920 to get women to use their vote to improve women's rights.

After getting the vote many women stopped working for more rights. **Feminism**, the idea that women should be treated equally to men, began in the 1920s but it did not get very far. As the Women's Leader magazine 1928 said, "*Everyone will agree that the foundation of feminism is belief in women as human beings. Women were hampered throughout their lives by dozens of rules for respectable female behaviour.*" However, Alice Paul and the Woman's Party introduced an Equal Rights Amendment into Congress in 1923. The amendment would not be adopted by Congress until 1972 and to the present day has still not been supported by enough states in the USA to be included in the Constitution.

"We are quick to adopt the latest time and labour saving devices in business. The modern woman has an equal right to employ in her home the most popular electric cleaner: The Frantz Premier: Over 250,000 are in use. We have branches and dealers everywhere. Our price is modest - time payments if desire."

An advert for a vacuum cleaner

More skilled and educated women were hired when jobs shifted from labour-intensive to office work. 30% were involved in clerical office or sales positions. By 1928 women earned 39% of college degrees in America - up from 19% in 1900. Throughout this time women still faced limited access to higher education degrees in subjects like Law or Medicine. Women held mostly

low-paying occupations, while female professionals were paid less than men for the same job, often working in nursing and teaching. By 1920 1 in 4 women over the age of 16 worked.

In 1920, the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labour was established to gather information about the situation of women at work, and to advocate for changes it found were needed. Many suffragists actively lobbied for legislation to protect women workers from abuse and unsafe conditions but with little success. In 1923 the **Supreme Court** decided that a minimum wage for women violated the right to freedom of contract.

There were a number of important breakthroughs for women in the 1920s. Margaret Sanger promoted the use of birth control. Sanger opened the first family-planning clinic in New York in 1916 by asking women if they could afford to keep having large families. In 1921 she started the American Birth Control League. In a traditionally masculine field, Amelia Earhart was a pilot who broke the woman's altitude record in 1922 and by 1928 she was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic. However, there was also a continuation of the idolizing of women and a focus on female beauty as the first Miss America beauty pageant in 1921 was won by Margaret Gorman from Washington.



Source 2: Amelia Earhart and her aeroplane in 1928

In many ways the changes in women's lives in America in this period were superficial. Working class women with large families to look after still struggled through day-to-day life. As the writer Doris Fleischman explained in her book 'America as Americans See It' published in 1932, "women who live on farms – and they form the largest group in the United States – do a great deal of work besides the labour of caring for their children, washing the clothes, caring for the home and cooking... thousands still labour in the fields... help milk the cows... The other largest group of American women comprises the families of the labourers...of the miners, the steel workers... the vast army of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers. The wages of these men are on the whole so small [that] wives must do double duty – that is, caring for the children and the home and toil on the outside as wage earners."

*"The Playful flapper here we see,
The fairest of the fair.
She's not what Grandma used to be,
You might say, au contraire.
Her girlish ways may make a stir,
Her manners cause a scene,
But there is no more harm in her*

Than in a submarine."

From 'The Flapper', a poem by Dorothy Parker

Flappers were middle class urban women who had more money and more leisure time as a result of consumerism. The motor car gave them more freedom and their fashion was more daring – some dressed in a more masculine way, others in a more sexually provocative way. Flappers broke the old expectations of female behaviour by smoking and drinking in public, as well as spending time with men without chaperones. As the New York Times newspaper put it in 1929, *"By sheer force of violence, the flapper has established the feminine right to equal representation in such hitherto masculine fields of endeavour as smoking and drinking, swearing, petting and upsetting the community peace"*.

Flappers seemed to have a lot more freedom than women had enjoyed previously. This can be seen in their revealing bright clothes, in their drinking in illegal speakeasies, in their dancing along to jazz music. As the Daily Illini newspaper explained in 1922, *"The word flapper means to us not a female that smokes, swears and kisses her gentlemen friends goodnight, although there is no harm in any of that. We think of the flapper as the independent young woman who feels like punching someone when called the 'weaker sex', who resents being put on a pedestal and who is responsible for the advancement of women's condition in the world"*.

This freedom extended to relationships as well. Flappers felt less pressure to find a man, settle down, marry, have children. As an article in 'New Republic' put it in 1925, *"... not so many girls are looking for a life meal ticket nowadays. Lots of them prefer to earn their own living and omit the home-and-baby act. Well, anyhow, postpone it years and years. They think a bachelor girl can and should do everything a bachelor man does"*. According to the New York Times in 1922, *"She will never make you a husband or knit you a necktie, but she'll drive you from the station on hot summer nights in her own sports car. She'll put on trousers and go skiing with you or, if it happens to be summertime, go swimming."*



Source 3: Louise Brooks in 1927

There were a number of flapper icons:

- Louise Brooks was one of the famous flappers of the age; she was an actress and a model starring in films like 'A Social Celebrity', embodying the flapper image with her short hair, short skirts and make-up.
- Clara Bow was a movie star, seen as the leading sex symbol of the 'Roaring 20's' with her

films like 'It', known to be 'wild, sexy, and carefree...'

- Joan Crawford was another actress, famous for kissing, dancing, smoking and drinking in films like 'Our Modern Maidens'; her behaviour widely copied by women; F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "Joan Crawford is doubtless the best example of the flapper, the girl you see at smart night clubs, gowned to the apex of sophistication, toying iced glasses with a remote, faintly bitter expression, dancing deliciously, laughing a great deal, with wide hurt eyes. Young things with a talent for living".
- Dorothy Parker was a writer famous for her wit and sharp sarcasm, her poems and stories appeared in The New Yorker and she went on to earn two Oscars for her film scripts. Unfortunately, she had a very unhappy private life that included three marriages and many suicide attempts.

In many areas attitudes towards women did not change and flappers were not welcome. This was particularly true in the rural areas of America where the Church still shaped people's attitudes. The President of Florida University said the low cut gowns and short skirts "*are born of the devil they are carrying the present generation to destruction*". In some states female tourists were arrested for wearing bathing costumes that were too revealing. Chicago fined women \$10 to \$100 for wearing short skirts or baring their arms. Mothers formed the Anti-Flirt League to protest against the acts of their daughters.

RECOMMENDED VIEWING – Key Question 7

The issue of women's political rights is covered by Crash Course History: Woman's Suffrage <https://youtu.be/HGEMscZE5dY> and videos showing images of the flapper lifestyle <https://youtu.be/3svvCj4yhYc> and https://youtu.be/IFRG_B--1v8 and about the wider changes to women's lives <https://youtu.be/uDZ93syAQfA> although the best overview about the varied experience of women is BBC American Voices : Boom and Bust <https://youtu.be/iwy5HNuHNes>.

GENERAL 1920s AMERICA SUPPORTING VIDEO MATERIAL:

Crash Course History - Roaring 20s <https://youtu.be/VfOR1XCMf7A>

BBC 20th Century Boom and Bust https://youtu.be/4Xrz69_W4ew

BBC American Voices: clips on Timelines TV <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvsS9mRi0sXb78FqO8DACjXgoF-sih5K->

BBC American Voices: full episodes

1. Immigration https://youtu.be/txB7_9E1E8Q
2. Boom and Bust <https://youtu.be/iwy5HNuHNes>
3. Hard Times <https://youtu.be/OenNGPd6n-l>
4. New Deal <https://youtu.be/Re-XsLwylCo>
5. Black America https://youtu.be/_4wiOs5T9go

The Century: America's Time –

1. The Beginning: Seeds of Change <https://youtu.be/dssfiPirT2U>
2. 1914-1919: Shell Shock https://youtu.be/1GBWDQ5cF_U
3. 1920-1929: Boom To Bust <https://youtu.be/RN7ftyZigYs>

GLOSSARY:

Chaperoned	Being accompanied in public by an older man or woman.
Suffrage	The right to vote.
Constitution	A list of rules a government has to follow.
Amendment	Changes to the Constitution.
Feminism	The idea that women and men should be treated equally.
Supreme Court	The highest appeal court in the USA so deals with important court cases which cannot be decided at state level by the Supreme Court.
Flappers	Women who challenged traditionally restricted behaviour to live a more independent lifestyle.

REFERENCES :

FRONT COVER : Women's suffrage parade 1912 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism_in_the_United_States#/media/File:Feminist_Suffrage_Parade_in_New_York_City,_1912.jpeg)

Source 1 : the Silent Sentinels protest outside the White House in 1917 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Sentinels#/media/File:Women_suffragists_picketing_in_front_of_the_White_house.jpg

Source 2 : Amelia Earhart and her plane in 1928 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amelia_Earhart#/media/File:Amelia_Earhart,_circa_1928.jpg

Source 3: Louise Brooks in 1927 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flapper#/media/File:Louise_Brooks_ggbain_32453u_crop.jpg