

# PROJECT: WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

## Instructions

The role of women in society has changed in the past one hundred years. In the struggle to be accepted on equal terms, many women fought a variety of social, economic, and legal obstacles. Answer the following questions, referencing the attached text:

1. In your opinion, how have these changes affected American society? Consider the family structure, economic health, and the strength of the work force. Use specific moments of history as examples.
2. In your opinion, has greater gender equity improved American society? Consider how the changing role of women has changed the identity of American society in Americans' eyes and the world's.

## Debate over Women's Equality

For women's rights advocates at the turn of the century, "the woman question" boiled down to a few key demands:

- Women should be able to vote;
- They should be able to control their own property and income;
- They should have greater access to higher education;
- There should be a larger number of professional job opportunities for them.

These demands were countered by those who insisted that giving women political and economic power would upset the social order. Some argued that a woman's femininity would be destroyed by allowing more public roles.

What was the reality of women's lives at the turn of the century? Women's lives were undergoing rapid changes at this time—both inside and outside the home—in the following ways:

- Their work at home and on farms continued to be essential;
- Young women increasingly migrated from rural areas to the cities to work in factories;
- Immigrant women also found work in factories;
- Some organizations sought reforms in education, labor relations, and public health.

## Women's Work in the Home

As they had for centuries, women performed most of the jobs in the home. It is estimated that it took twenty-seven hours per week to clean an eight-room house with a furnace and fireplaces that produced soot. In the 1880s, technology had begun to reduce this burden with the popular and affordable vacuum cleaner. However, as late as 1917, only one-quarter of American homes had electricity. The development of electric appliances as you know them had limited effect on the average American home of the time.

## Working Outside the Home

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided increased opportunities for education, less-demanding work at home, and volunteer experience that would provide women with more opportunities to enter the workforce. In 1870, nearly two million women and girls over the age of ten worked outside the home. By 1900, 18.8 percent of women were in the workforce. Between 1900 and 1910, the number of women

employed in the United States increased from 2.6 million to 7.8 million. With industry booming, many women found jobs in factories and mills. Because it was widely believed that careers and married life for women did not mix, a large number of the working women were single. How did some of these women work outside the home?

An important source of income for many women was domestic work. At the turn of the century, 60 percent of all working women were employed as domestic servants. About one in fifteen American homes employed live-in servants in 1900. African Americans or immigrants made up the largest percentage of the domestic workforce.

Many single women workers were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. If their employers believed that they would leave when they got married, then they did not receive supervisory jobs or advanced training. In addition, women were often paid 30 to 60 percent less than men and discouraged from entering fields that put them in competition with men. Thus, many women who needed work became teachers or nurses because society accepted women in caretaking roles.

The invention of the typewriter in the 1870s provided an area where women would not be in competition with men because these positions served to assist men who supervised the work. By 1900, more than one-third of American clerical workers were women—usually typists, who were supervised by men. The rapidly growing telephone network provided jobs for women as operators and order takers for department stores.

Women faced an uphill battle when it came to the professions. Many Americans had the belief that women did not have the mental capacity for professional training. As a result, the few women professionals found most of their opportunities in women's colleges and hospitals.

## **New Women, New Ideas**

The early 1900s saw "the woman question" include other issues besides economic and political rights. The issues of lifestyle with regard to how women should dress and behave began to change. As women moved into the workforce or went to college, they took the matter of dress into their own hands. The need for convenience resulted in wearing shorter hairstyles, raising the hemlines, and wearing skirts and blouses more suited to their activities.

Marriage and courting customs also changed. Many young women began to go out on dates instead of entertaining a man at home under parental supervision. While the "new women" still hoped to marry, she had higher expectations of fulfillment than those of previous generations. Those who married began to advocate for more information on such issues as birth control. These developments were shocking to more traditional Americans.

The issue of the vote prompted huge numbers of women to support the suffrage movement in some way. Soon, the vote would become an issue on which women from many walks of life would unite.