The New Woman

An icon of changing gender norms, the "new woman" first emerged in the late nineteenth century. Less constrained by Victorian norms and domesticity than previous generations, the new woman had greater freedom to pursue public roles and even flaunt her "sex appeal," a term coined in the 1920s and linked with the emergence of the new woman. She challenged conventional gender roles and met with hostility from men and women who objected to women's public presence and supposed decline in morality. Expressing autonomy and individuality, the new woman represented the tendency of young women at the turn of the century to reject their mothers' ways in favor of new, modern choices.

What was "new" about women in the early twentieth century? The most prominent change was their increased presence in the public arena. Whereas the lives of most nineteenth-century women - especially middle-class women but also domestic servants and slaves - tended to revolve around home life, modern women ventured into jobs, politics, and culture outside the domestic realm. They did not do so, however, on equal terms with men; women remained economically and politically subordinate to men in the early twentieth century. They did not do so without struggle either. Conservative forces in society, including churches and such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, vehemently opposed women's new roles. Others who supported change, such as Progressive Era reformers and suffragists, also criticized the new woman for her disinterest in politics and careers in favor of the world of commercial entertainment.

Although many women participated in expanding women's public roles, women accepted and pressed for change in varying degrees. The symbol of the new woman was a conglomeration of aspects of many different women from across the nation who lived between the 1890s and the 1920s. Among them were glamorous performers, female athletes, "working girls" employed in city factories and rural textile mills, middle-class daughters entering higher education and professions formerly closed to women, and reformers involved in women's clubs, settlement houses, trade unions, and suffrage.
The earliest images of changing roles for women appeared in the press in the 1890s. The fashion symbol known as the "Gibson girl," taking her name from artist Charles Dana Gibson, revealed women's changing appearance. Discarding heavy corsets, petticoats, and frills, the Gibson girl sported a shirtwaist (blouse) and long skirt, which better enabled her to play tennis or ride a bicycle. She appeared confident, capable, athletic, and flirtatious. The image did not clearly convey class origins; she could be from the working class or elite society. And while this particular series of drawings depicted white women, the style was indicative of changes in roles for women of color as well. Replacing the Gibson girl by 1913, the "flapper" became the visual icon of the twentieth century's new woman. Thin, flat-chested, and boyish-looking, the flapper exposed more flesh, reveled in dancing, drinking, and smoking, and otherwise defied old-fashioned norms. She took leads from such stars as the theater's "it" girl, Clara Bow, and the Harlem Renaissance's blues diva Bessie Smith.

Changing demographic patterns contributed to the emergence of the new woman. Single urban women, known as "women adrift," lived outside their parents' homes in working-class areas of town. Black and white women as well as new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe rented rooms in such communities and posed what many commentators viewed as a social problem. Earning their own wages and less subject to parental supervision, working-class women's work and leisure activities gained public attention and expanded the parameters of women's space. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, changes among working-class women filtered into middle-class society, via cabarets and other types of performances, so that by the 1910s and 1920s, young middle-class women were wearing styles and engaging in behaviors objectionable to their parents' generation. Part of the paradox of the new woman was that she flouted conventions while adhering to new standards of conformity within a rising peer culture.
Women adrift and "working girls" were among the pioneers of women's growing public visibility and changing gender norms. The category "working girls" applied mainly to young women, usually single, engaged in wage labor. Through the 1930s, more women worked as domestic servants than at any other job, showing how tradition was not immediately overturned and that many women continued to engage in conventional "women's work"; housework. Domestic and sex work (another, better paying form of work traditionally done by women) left women vulnerable to employees and customers, as did semiskilled and unskilled industrial work in factories and sweatshops. Although the labor movement thrived in the early twentieth century, by 1920 a small fraction of women in the workforce had union jobs, and rarely did the movement take up issues of concern to working women or allow them leadership roles. Such outspoken labor leaders as Emma Goldman and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were exceptions among women, challenging assumptions about gender with their passionate politics and fiery speeches. Wage labor profoundly shaped women's identities during a period of industrialization, urbanization, and commercialization, and although women entered new arenas, they faced obstacles of many sorts.

Lacking power in the workplace, working-class women were nonetheless empowered by earning an income. Wages gave daughters more independence at home, enabling some to live apart from their parents. The urban industrial work system, along with growing secondary school attendance, contributed to the formation of a youth and peer culture that loosened young women's allegiances to their families. Created by capitalist entrepreneurs, commercialized forms of recreation—dance halls, nickelodeons, and amusement parks—attracted working girls after long hours of drudgery and fostered their awareness of social customs and conventions different from those of their parents' generation.

Fewer in numbers than working-class girls, some women succeeded at making inroads into careers and education that previously excluded women. Offering better pay and working conditions, white-collar jobs in clerical, sales, and telephone work went almost exclusively to native-born, unmarried white women from the middle class. Women's Christian Temperance Union began attending some of the more progressive colleges in the mid-nineteenth century, but only in the twentieth century did women's college enrollment...
approach parity with men. Women predominated in such helping professions as teaching, social work, and nursing. These jobs built on assumptions about women's special attributes, yet gave them access to the world beyond their homes. Women sought such professions for a number of reasons. African American women, for instance, used these jobs to contribute to the uplift of their communities. Likewise, work in settlement houses attracted middle-class women into poorer neighborhoods, where they placed their privilege and skills at the service of the urban poor. Poor women often resented Protestant reformers' condescension and unsolicited advice.

The image of a new woman was usually single, but married women also played a significant role in transforming gender roles. As in other aspects of society, women's organizations took on a national scope in the late nineteenth century. Such organizations as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the General Federation of Women's Clubs consolidated into national organizations and achieved greater prominence for women, especially married, middle-class women, in public activities. Women's clubs, volunteer work, and women's suffrage activism were not new in the early twentieth century, but they were more visible to the public and more widespread. Reformers, educated women, and working girls together as individuals and groups forged new ground for women. But their visions of womanhood were often at odds.
The concept of the "new woman" possessed a sexual connotation, reflecting changing ideas about female sexuality. Led by young working-class women and encompassing women of all social and economic classes, a sexual revolution of sorts was taking place in the United States by the 1920s. Different from the Victorian era, a middle ground between prostitution and celibacy emerged for unmarried heterosexual women in the early twentieth century. Their parents most likely did not approve of the change, and police forces, juvenile courts, and Progressive reformers sought to curb young women's participation in new social opportunities beyond the purview of adult supervision. Some policewomen and Protestant reformers who monitored young women's public activity and instigated alternative forms of recreation were themselves, ironically, "new women" who had stepped outside of traditional gender roles. Conflict among women who had competing visions of women's roles in modern society was thus significant to the transformation of gender roles. A model of dispute between two generations captures one of the dynamics of the 1910s and 1920s, but it does not fully explain the complex ways that change occurred. Within each generation were great differences among women--and for every young woman who rebelled against her mother's ways there was probably another who chose restraint. Exploring new women's sexual attitudes further shows how the "old" and "new" were not easily separable categories.

Marriage is one aspect of sexual life in which there was continuity between generations. Young and unmarried women on the whole by the 1910s and 1920s preferred to participate in a consumer-oriented, heterosocial (or mixed-sex) culture situated in the public sphere and saturated with heterosexuality, but they tended to settle into family life upon marriage, much as earlier generations had. Unlike their predecessors, however, these women could flirt and date in the world of cheap amusements, which catered to sensual pleasures and small pocketbooks. Meanwhile, the female solidarity of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's reform movements, clubs, and colleges--the late Victorian new woman's realm of activity-declined in popularity.

**Limits of Change**
Turn-of-the-century women entering public space seemed unconventional in one respect, but they failed to fully embrace modernity's exaltation of social mingling between the sexes when they remained centered in what one historian has called a "female world of love and ritual." Over one-half of the first generation of women college graduates (late nineteenth century) never married but found love and affection in the company of women. In contrast, the large majority of twentieth-century women, while still appreciative of other women's companionship, defined their identities in mixed company and worked to gain men's attention and ultimately, but not immediately, a marriage partner. These new women were, in this sense, different from both conventional and unconventional turn-of-the-century women. They were critical of matronly and domestic Victorian women as well as so-called spinsters whose passions were politics or social work.

Remaining at the fringes of these changes in sexual norms in the twentieth century were prostitutes, radical women, and lesbians, revealing significant historical continuity in sexual behavior and thought. Women reformers were among the most vocal proponents of rescuing prostitutes whose lives they pitied and sought to redeem. Although few in number, bohemian middle-class women experimented with new forms of living and loving, questioning marriage and exploring "free love." Subject to scrutiny and arrest, birth control pioneers, socialists, and feminists often paid a price for violating community norms. Also falling outside the norm were same-sex couples and emergent lesbian communities. Some women reformers in previous decades had lived with female partners (in relationships known as "Boston marriages"), supported women's rights, and wielded influence in local and sometimes national politics without tainted reputations. Yet by the 1920s, intimate relationships among women became suspect, as medical labeling of "homosexuals" and sensationalized stories of sex criminals called attention to "deviant" women and reinforced heterosexual norms.

The Famous radical thinker Emma Goldman delivering a speech in 1919. [Courtesy Library of Congress]
Accompanying the new woman's entrance into unconventional territory were new rules and restrictions as well as opposition from proponents of old-fashioned morality. Whether it was parents, media commentators, social workers, or religious leaders, critics of women's independence and indulgence in pleasures were a considerable obstacle to women's autonomy and self-expression. Young women were not simply discarding the norms of their mothers' generation, though, but adapting them to the changing landscape of modern American life. Women as a group in the 1910s and 1920s did not fully rebel, but through a process of struggle, they shifted the boundaries of what was considered acceptable. Sexual norms were recast but not shattered as prostitutes, radicals, and lesbians suffered abuse and derision; the sexual double standard persisted; and most women eventually abandoned youthful pursuit of dating and pleasure for marriage and motherhood. The new woman was nevertheless an emblem of change and a source of controversy among her contemporaries.
The Harlem Renaissance and its invention of the New Negro cast a positive spin on African American cultural life. Jazz was a central part of this celebration, and black women were among the contributors to the post-World War I era artistic achievements. Such writers as Nella Larsen explored the "double consciousness" of being black and female in America (and in her case, mixed-race), and such musicians as Bessie Smith simultaneously embodied pleasure and the blues. Sexuality was less purely a terrain of liberation for black women than it was for white women. Only decades removed from the abolition of slavery, stereotypes of black women's allegedly primitive, exotic, or heightened sexuality persisted. In an era of lynchings, Jim Crow segregation, and mass migration, black women struggled to define their sexuality and gender identities in empowering ways. Blues singers donned glamorous attire, flouted convention, and sought sexual satisfaction. Middle-class club women and political activists were more circumspect, but nevertheless sought to establish new identities for black women. Editor of the women's page of the Negro World (the Universal Negro Improvement Association's publication), Amy Jacques Garvey championed equal positions for women in the popular Black Nationalist movement. The various cultural and political movements in black communities showed the potential of self-help and racial uplift for women and men together.

Society's preoccupation with glamour permeated black communities during the 1910s and 1920s, where beauty parlors were ubiquitous and cosmetics sales soared. While contemporary black artists stressed the beauty and strength of African American culture and people, black women sometimes accepted the assumption that white was better; among popular cosmetics were skin-lightening creams and hair-straightening products. Not all products, however, minimized black features, and beauty culture reinforced cross-generational bonds among black women in small towns as well as large cities. The sale of skin- and hair-care products also fostered a thriving community of black-owned commercial enterprise. Most successful in this regard was Madame C. J. Walker, entrepreneur, millionaire, and philanthropist.
Many people in the 1910s and 1920s were alarmed by the new woman phenomenon. In popular magazines throughout the period, writers called for a return to old-fashioned morals and codes of behavior that had been discarded by much of the younger generation. Men and women alike were critics of the new woman, and social agencies joined parents in attempting to return to Victorian standards of conduct, in which women were supposed to be sexually passionless. Middle-class women took leadership roles through voluntary organizations and social work, in some ways transgressing conventional gender roles but in other ways reinforcing them. During the First World War, the Young Women's Christian Association aided young urban women by providing boarding, libraries, gymnasiums, homemaking courses, and religious instruction to help minimize the temptations of modern city life. Both Catholics and Protestants disapproved of the new woman and the societal changes she represented. The second Ku Klux Klan (KKK) sought to reverse the changes in gender and sexual norms. The women's KKK worked to elevate white Protestant women while blaming the demise of America's moral standards on Catholics, Jews, and people of color. Also patronizing—but less extreme—were measures state institutions took. Progressive reformers created special police officers, a juvenile court system, detention facilities, and reformatories to contain female sexuality. Parents generally welcomed such efforts, as they were at a loss for how to control their daughters.
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