

# Women in the early 19th century

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The American experiment that began as a Republic after ratification of the Constitution created political, social, and economic participation for its citizens, but not for women. The status of women in the early 19th century was shaped by economic considerations, religious beliefs, and long-held notions of female inferiority. While poor, laboring women suffered the most, the characteristics of inequality were evident in all social classes. The Proper Role of Women in the Early Republic

The early 19th century experienced a shift, at least for women in the urban centers of the Northeast, from the household economies that reflected an agricultural society to the necessity of linking female responsibilities with their husband's careers. For lower class women, this meant supplementing family income by working either in early industrial mills, as domestic servants, or vending on city streets. Upper middle class women focused on social endeavors tied to their husband's employment and continued social upper mobility.

This included supervising servants, facilitating parties, and raising the children. Women who voiced any political activism were frowned upon. Perhaps the only place a woman might venture such opinions was around the dinner table. Above all, women were equated with virtue and purity. Middle and upper class women devoted time to helping charities that sought to alleviate the plight of the poor, especially widows and abandoned mothers with children. They worked with Protestant missions and labored to save poor women from prostitution.

Due to the cult of female purity, they were viewed as being the best teachers, the "moral guardians" of society. Women in the Working Class In <https://assignbuster.com/women-in-the-early-19th-century/>

the early 19th century, many Northeast cities, especially port cities, saw an increase in crude mass production industries, as in the first textile mills. One result was the use of poor class women working for cheap wages, often to augment their husband's meager incomes. Some poor women left the cities during periods of harvest to assist farmers needing cheap laborers.

Others earned meager sums vending on city streets. Still others worked in the growing sewing trades or as domestic servants. Single mothers, however, were often forced to rely on the Almshouses and the various charities geared toward the poor. Widows had a particularly difficult time. Historian Christine Stansell, in her 1986 study of New York women 1789 to 1860, writes that "widowhood was virtually synonymous with impoverishment." Another result of the changes in female status was the slow decline in birthrates.

Historians John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman state that, "Economic interest encouraged some families to have fewer children." They demonstrate a possible correlation of the rise of industrialization and the decline of agricultural pursuits with steadily lowering birthrates throughout the 19th century. Impact of Protestant Theological Shifts By the early 19th century, Protestantism had discarded earlier notions of man's relationship to God. This was particularly true of the Calvinist principle of predestination.

Religion focused on an individual relationship with God and placed on man a greater sense of controlling one's destiny. These views were being shaped by Transcendentalism as well as the emphasis on personal commitment coming out of the Second Great Awakening. Such views had a direct impact on sexuality and lowering birthrates. Sexuality was no longer simply a

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loveless act of procreation. Thus, families limited the number of children based on their economic situation. Still, the changing attitude was not universal and men and women had numerous children, especially in rural, farm areas.

Lucretia Mott, an early advocate of women's rights, for example, had six children. Female Status in the Early 19th Century Although the expectations of women in the early 19th century were shifting, their status within a patriarchal society remained the same. Politically, they were powerless. Job opportunities were severely limited. Because of the social expectations that tied female dependence on men, single women and widows were the most vulnerable. Even upper middle class women were doomed to conform to patterns of daily life that were dictated by their husbands.