

# Womens movement in the 19th and 20th century

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Women's Movement in the 19th and 20th Century Americans began moving into the cities at the end of the 19th century as the industrial revolution continued to grow. Part of this move included bringing their women in from the fields to the internal sitting rooms of the middle class. This new middle class culture developed what has been labeled the Cult of the True Woman by Barbara Welter in the mid-1960s (1966). "The onset of industrialization at the beginning of the nineteenth century highlighted differences among women just as it exacerbated those between men and women workers" (Kessler-Harris, 1991). Widows, single women and women who needed to supplement the household income in order to feed their children filled the mill towns of New England, New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. "In 1870, 60 percent of all female workers were engaged in some aspect of domestic service and another 25 percent earned their livings in factories and workshops" (Kessler-Harris, 1991). Middle class women were expected to distance themselves from this lowly working class, expected to uphold the True Woman feminine values of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. This is the background that fed the birth of the Women's Liberation movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Catherine Beecher (1800-1878) was definitely a product of the True Womanhood cult; however, she worked within that system to create change so that there would be a socially acceptable alternative for young women like herself who wanted something other than the narrow traditional boundaries without the need to ruin their reputation. After the loss of her fiancé at sea, Beecher emerged from her grief unable to relinquish her sense of self and self-will (Sklar, 1973). Her philosophy was outlined in several tracts, books and lectures making her educational offerings less threatening to the men who wished to

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constrain women as well as to the women who felt the present culture was the only natural and right path for a woman (Sklar, 1973). Considered a prime spokesman for the domestic ideology, Beecher gave the woman's role as moral example within the home a newly significant social importance. This gave women a growing sense of self-respect and personal value which paved the way for the future. Francis Willard was one of the organizers of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (formed in 1874) and also worked to redefine the traditional concept of women to have a larger, more public responsibility. She did this by focusing on the expected role of women as protectress of the home and family. According to Amy Slagell (2002), "Willard knew that by recruiting, organizing and energizing interested women to being their work of transforming the world as she believed they were called to do, women would come to a new awareness of their power so that not only would the outer world be transformed, but the women themselves as well" (23). She took a "shrewd" approach of "a series of tangential moves, in the course of which women ... were gradually led to understand that they could not protect their homes and families from liquor or other vices, without a voice in public affairs" (Flexner, 1975: 187). In addition, she helped strengthen women's faith by helping them rediscover "scriptural passages that supported women's activism and as they experienced a calling from God to work for temperance and for Home Protection" (Gifford, 1986: 111). She continuously argued it was necessary for women to be involved in the public sphere in order to provide the protections expected of them. This urbanizing, industrializing, conflict-filled context of the late 19th century and early 20th century saw the birth of the middle class New Woman and the new Working Class Girl, both of which gained new individuality and <https://assignbuster.com/womens-movement-in-the-19th-and-20th-century/>

autonomy. There was a new emphasis upon autonomy, pleasure, and consumption (Evans, 1989: 145). " Perhaps the most striking evidence of change among women was the emergence of the college-educated, frequently unmarried, and self-supporting new woman. Nearly half of all college-educated women in the late nineteenth century never married. Those who married did so later than most women and bore fewer children. For a few years or for a lifetime these independent career women began to create a new life-style. They moved into growing female professions such as teaching and nursing" (Evans, 1989: 145). In addition, women became very active in the total landscape of America's immersion in consumerism and pleasure as they achieved access to more and more communal areas. With the advent of the twentieth century, it became natural to see a woman enjoying public spaces on their own. The second and third generation college-educated women gained, for the first time in history, the ability to seek a new lifestyle and ideology that did not infringe upon her personal rights or individuality. Having learned first-hand the invisible shackles that bound them in times of difficulty, women were naturally inclined to fight for the rights of the victim. This brought them out again in support of social change in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement. Works Cited Evans, Sara M. *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*. The Free Press, 1989. Print. Flexner, Eleanor. *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975. Print. Gifford, Carolyn. " Home Protection: The WCTU's Conversion to Woman Suffrage." *Gender, Ideology, and Action: Historical Perspectives on Women's Public Lives*. Ed. Janet Sharistianian. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986. Print. Kessler-Harris, Alice. " Women and the Work Force." *The Reader's*  
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