

Background Essay: Women in the Gilded Age

Directions:

Read the background essay and answer the review questions.

The vast social changes caused by industrialization, immigration, and urbanization fundamentally altered life in the United States. In turn, those changes provoked responses in which women increased their political, economic, and civic participation in American public life. Moreover, women led various reform movements to ameliorate the harsh conditions that resulted from rapid social and economic change.

The expectations of the Victorian Era of the mid-to-late nineteenth century held that men and women functioned in equally important but “separate spheres.” Men entered public life in business and politics, which had many temptations for corruption and vice. Women cultivated virtuous homes for their husbands as homemakers and educators of their children. However, in the late nineteenth century, increasing numbers of women began to enter the workforce especially as marriage rates and fertility rates began a long-term decline. In addition, women took advantage of increasing educational opportunities in colleges.

By 1900, more than five million women (and approximately eight million a decade later) worked outside the home due to both the problems and opportunities caused by an industrializing economy. Many young, single women – especially of the working-class – worked in dangerous factories earning low wages and working between ten and twelve hours every day of the week before they married and left the workforce. The rampant low wages and frequent

unemployment experienced by immigrant men meant that many of their wives also had to work in factories or as domestic servants in homes. Alternatively, they took on piecemeal work on garments and other products inside the home. However, African-American women usually were restricted to working as servants or in agriculture. Single, middle-class women increasingly worked as secretaries, store clerks, teachers, and nurses. A very small percentage of married, middle-class women worked outside the home. Even fewer women worked in the professions of law and medicine.

A socially acceptable means of women entering public life was to engage in social reform. Most of these reformers were white, middle-class, educated Protestants who wanted to promote an improved moral climate in society and politics. For example, in 1879 Frances Willard assumed the presidency of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The WCTU’s primary mission was closing saloons and ending the consumption of alcohol because of the ill-effects of drunkenness on families, including wasted wages and domestic violence. The WCTU supported women’s suffrage as a means of achieving the prohibition of alcohol and other reforms.

In 1889, Jane Addams founded the Hull-House in Chicago to provide immigrants with desperately-needed services in poor, ethnic neighborhoods of the city. Other women took the lead in establishing similar successful settlement houses in dozens of other cities. These

community centers helped immigrants adapt to American society by teaching them English and civics, with the goal of “Americanizing” them.

Florence Kelley formed the National Consumers’ League in 1898 to pressure stores to pay female clerks better. The League also worked for protective legislation regulating the hours and conditions for women and children. Women were shut out of male-dominated unions such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), partially because AFL leadership accepted the traditional belief that employed women were taking the jobs of men who were the main source of income for families. Lilian Wald and other women created the Women’s Trade Union League to help women organize their own labor unions to bargain for better working conditions and increased wages.

In 1909, women who worked in the garment industry formed a movement called the “uprising of the twenty thousand” and went on strike to protest poor wages, grueling hours, and dangerous working conditions. Met with violence and arrest, the striking women, led by Rose Schneiderman, formed their own union, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) to support the strike. By early 1910, the ILGWU won the strike with higher wages and a limit of 52 hours of work per week. However, the next year tragedy struck when 146 workers, most of them young immigrant women, were killed in a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, a garment manufacturer in New York City. Within half an hour, just before quitting time on March 25, 1911, a fire that started on the eighth floor had engulfed the building’s top three floors. The fire exits and stairwells were inadequate, the doors were kept locked, and the safety procedures were virtually nonexistent. Dozens of employees jumped out of windows to their deaths as the flames advanced, and many others were killed by

the blaze. The Triangle Waist Company tragedy was one of the most shocking of the events that focused national attention on unsafe working conditions. New York and other states passed laws to improve public safety for workers.

The various reforming civic groups and unions established by powerful women during the Gilded Age reflected the organizational strength of women fighting for social and economic reform. While they struggled for those reforms, they developed a keen sense of the political inequality faced by women excluded from the ballot box. Women re-invigorated the women’s suffrage movement through the same organizational strategies they had implemented in the reform movements of the late nineteenth century.

In 1848, a group of reformers had met at Seneca Falls, New York, and issued a Declaration of Sentiments modeled after the Declaration of Independence. The Seneca Falls document, signed by 100 delegates including thirty-two men, listed the ways women had been deprived of equal rights, including “the inalienable right to the elective franchise.” The women’s suffrage movement split, however, in 1869 when the National Woman Suffrage Association led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony sought to win women’s suffrage through an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The rival American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), led by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, pursued a strategy of achieving women’s suffrage at the state level. Thus, the principled debate was between those who wanted to amend the Constitution and those who desired most closely to follow the principle of federalism.

In 1890, the movement united and formed the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The suffragettes argued for the right to vote on the grounds that women

were the intellectual equal to men and capable of exercising an independent vote. Second, women argued that they were more virtuous and would help improve the moral character of politics through reform. Third, they made Social Darwinist arguments, asserting that if “inferior” black and immigrant men could vote, so should white, middle-class women. The NAWSA achieved notable successes in the more individualistic western states of Washington, California, Kansas, Oregon, and Arizona as they joined Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho in approving women’s suffrage in state and local elections.

Despite the successes, in 1913, radical suffragette Alice Paul broke with the NAWSA to form the Congressional Union (which later became the National Women’s Party). Paul disagreed with the state-by-state strategy and wanted a constitutional amendment. On March 3, 1913, the day before president-elect Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration, five thousand women bravely marched down Pennsylvania Avenue while being jeered and pelted with objects by a hostile crowd. The demonstration was aimed at pressuring incoming President Woodrow Wilson to support women’s suffrage. After suffering the indignity of insults for marching for equality, hundreds were arrested and imprisoned. Alice

Paul and others went on a hunger strike and were force-fed in prison.

In 1916, both Republicans and Democrats had a plan supporting women’s suffrage due to the efforts of thousands of women who showed up at the respective party conventions. Women’s patriotic contribution to the war effort at home, in factories, and near the front lines during World War I furthered the cause of suffrage. Still, President Wilson was lukewarm. Although a president’s signature is not necessary for a constitutional amendment, Wilson’s support would add the prestige of the office to the cause and help secure passage. Beginning in January 1917, suffragettes marched before the White House for six months to lobby the president. All of these efforts bore fruit when the House and Senate passed the amendment by the required two-thirds vote, and thirty-six states ratified it by August, 1920.

The women reformers of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era spearheaded a number of movements that profoundly reshaped women’s participation in American society and civic life. As a result, they would pave the way for other women to engage in politics, social reform, and the struggle for women’s equality during the course of the twentieth century.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What social and economic changes were occurring in the lives of women during the Gilded Age?
2. What were the different experiences of women in the workforce?
3. Compare and contrast the goals of the different social movements women joined.
4. How did the goals and strategies of the women's suffrage movement change over time?
5. Why were women successful in achieving a constitutional amendment for women's suffrage?