



# **HIS 477 – WOMEN IN AMERICA**

## **The New Woman, 1919-1929**

### **Lecture 9**

# WOMEN DURING THE 1920S

- In 1919, NAWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt announced to the NAWSA convention in St. Louis: “Let us then raise up a league of women voters . . .the shall be nonpartisan and nonsectarian in nature.” In 1920, NAWSA officially became the League of Women Voters.

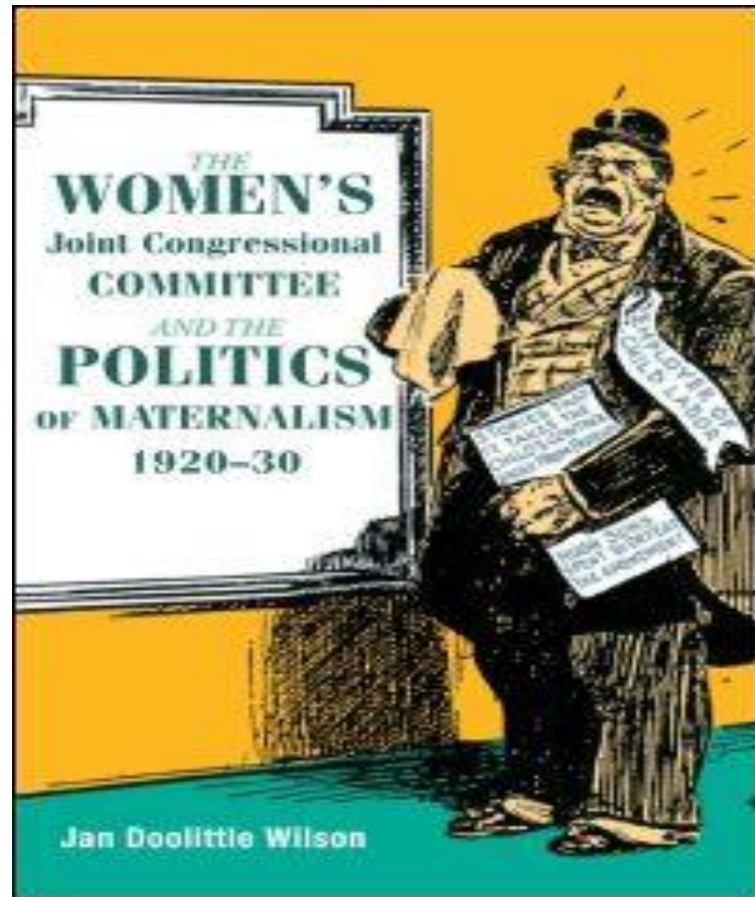


# WOMEN DURING THE 1920S

- The League advocated political education for women, social reform, and the elimination of discriminatory laws against women.
- Because League members believed in “wooing legislators in a dignified and league-like manner” they produced more speeches and literature than action.
- The League initiated in 1920, the Women’s Joint Congressional Committee. It engaged largely in joint lobbying.
- The Women’s Joint Congressional Committee (WJCC) supported the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which established public health centers and prenatal clinics

# WOMEN DURING THE 1920S

- The following year, the WJCC campaigned for the Cable Act which granted individual citizenship to married women and would prevent American women engaged to foreign nationals from losing citizenship upon marriage.
- By 1924, the WJCC encompassed twenty-one women's groups.



# THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

- Alice Paul and her followers maintained that an equal rights amendment to the Constitution was necessary to protect women from discriminatory laws at the national and state level.
- The National Women's Party proposed a simple provision--  
“all men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.”
- The NWP initiated its campaign for this single issue in 1923 but found Congress and the general public uninterested.



# THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

- The NWP's commitment to the ERA kept the spirit of feminism alive during the 1920s
- Feminists who supported ERA hoped it would eliminate the need for protective legislation for women because they view such legislation as unfair and restrictive of women's work rights.
- Social feminists believed ERA was too extreme and wanted equality primarily in social and economic areas.
- Feminists and social feminists formed two separate and often warring factions which hurt the effectiveness of both groups.

# ON-GOING REFORMS

- Progressivism continued during the 1920s. World War I had shown the need for greater improvement in American society.
- In hopes of helping lead the world to peace, two groups formed in 1921
  - Women's Peace Union of the Western Hemisphere
  - Women's Committee for World Disarmament
- In 1925, Carrie Chapman Catt organized the National Conference on the Cause and Cure of War and Jane Addams took an active role in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
- Alice Hamilton, the nation's leading industrial toxicologist, began to work with the National Consumers' League and in 1925 published *Industrial Poisons in the United States*.

# ON-GOING REFORMS

- In 1919, a group of teachers and clerical workers formed the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs to achieve equal rights for professional women.
- In 1921, The Association of Collegiate Alumnae (1882) merged with the Western Association of Collegiate Alumnae (1883) and the Southern Association of College Women (1903) to form the American Association of University Women.
- The AAUW awarded scholarships for women, funded women's dormitories, helped improve women faculties salaries, and promoted the admission of women students and the hiring of women faculty.
- The dominate issue of the 1920s was prohibition of alcoholic beverages and women's long fight for temperance culminated in the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment (1918) and the Volstead Act (1919) which prohibited liquor and established penalties for producing and selling it.



# ON-GOING REFORMS

- Women expanded their interest in racial issues
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  - Gertrude Simmons Bonnie worked for Native American causes through the Society of American Indians (1911)
  - She campaigned for Indian citizenship which was finally granted in 1924
  - Bonnin founded the National Congress of American Indians in 1926
- Latinos also got attention when in 1924 a young civil rights leader from Mexico, Maria Hernandez spoke and wrote in Texas for increased liberty.
- In 1929, Hernandez and her husband organized a male civil rights group known as *Orden Caballeros de America* and later developed the *Raza Unida* party in Texas

# ON-GOING REFORMS

- For most the term “racial issues” meant African American difficulties. Black women took the lead in distributing information and implementing change.
- In 1924, clubwoman Nannie Burroughs helped establish the National League of Republican Colored Women and served as its first president.
- Burroughs urged black Americans, that rather than wait for “deliverance” at the hands of white Americans, to “arise and go over Jordan” themselves.



# ON-GOING REFORMS

- Other black women were more interested in social reforms –
  - In 1927, Selena Sloan Butler founded the National Congress on Colored Parents and Teachers, a child-advocacy group
  - In 1921, the Montana State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs brought together eight clubs statewide to unify black women's efforts
- A divisive point among black women was the wisdom of working with white women. Some black women opposed it.
- Black nationalist, Amy Jacques Garvey wrote and spoke on behalf of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the most successful Pan-American movement.

## ON-GOING REFORMS

- Other women believed there has to be interracial cooperation in order to have change.
- Cooperation occurred in the Commission on InterRacial Cooperation of the Women's Council of the Methodist Episcopal Church which in 1920 sponsored a major conference on race relations.
- The most pressing issue to black women during the 1920s and one that frequently led to collaboration between black and white women was lynching.
- In 1922, black reformer Mary B. Talbert organized a movement called the Anti-lynching Crusade with hopes of bringing together “a million women” to stop lynching in the United States.

## ON-GOING REFORMS

- Labor problems continued to attract women's attention.
- In 1920, the U.S. government responded to the needs of working women by creating a special division within the Department of Labor.
- The new Women's Bureau collected data, studied women workers, and lobbied for protective legislation.
- Between the peak years of 1912 to 1919, fourteen states, mainly in the Midwest and on the West Coast, enacted legislation limiting the number of hours women worked; prohibiting night work; and banning women from selling liquor, carrying mail, running elevators, and working in foundries and mines.

# ON-GOING REFORMS

- Florence Kelly and the National Consumers' League led a wide-based coalition in lobbying for minimum wage laws.
- Employers and male unionists opposed such laws and in 1923 the U.S. Supreme Court agreed that gender-specific wage laws were unconstitutional.



# ON-GOING REFORMS



- Other women took a different tack. They joined the Communist Party after its organization in the U.S. in 1919.
- Despite such innovations as the Women's Bureau and the Communist Party, some labor reformers were convinced that reform would only come through strikes, protests, and violence



# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- During the 1920s, the concepts of marriage and family shifted into a 'modern' mode.
- Consumerism and advertising raised women's expectations of standards of living in marriage to unrealistic levels
- F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald captured the popular imagination as the 'ideal' couple – spoiled, selfish and hedonistic.





# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- Women's attempts to act like 'flappers' also did little to contribute to satisfaction in traditional marriage.
- *Ladies Home Journal* described the flapper as morbid women who smoked, wore short skirts, performed obscene dances, favored one-piece bathing suits, listened to jazz, entered psychoanalysis, practiced birth control, and leaned toward Bolshevism.



# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- Women who could now vote and hold paid employment were less willing than their mothers and grandmothers to suffer abuse at the hands of spouses.
- By the end the decade slightly more than one in six marriages ended in divorce.
- The American woman's dream focused on romance, a blissful marriage, and a model family.
- During the 1920s, motherhood now required 'psychological' knowledge.
- Advice literature counseled mothers to refrain from controlling their children.

# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- The new family bound its members with affection rather than rules.
- Companionate marriage, one based more on partnership, constituted the ideal, while lesbian love fell into disrepute. People in the 1920s increasingly viewed lesbian relationships as a threat to marriage.
- The happy and prosperous family of the 1920s was smaller.
- A public health nurse in New York, named Margaret Sanger coined the term “birth control” in 1914.
- She published and distributed her magazine, *Woman Rebel* on the streets and in it she advocated women’s right to sexual freedom and control of their own bodies.

# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- When faced with arrest under the Comstock Law because she distributed the journal through the U.S. mail, Sanger fled to Europe. There she studied family planning clinics.
- When she returned to the U.S. in 1916, she and her sister opened the first birth control clinic.
- They were arrested and sent to the workhouse but the publicity brought the issue to the public and created great interest.
- The result, unfortunately, was that birth control was put into the hands of physicians, allowing them to dispense a restricted amount of birth-control information.

# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- In 1919, Sanger appealed to middle class women and medical doctors for support and financial assistance.
- The Voluntary Parenthood League formed a lobby to Congress for modifications in the Comstock Law.
- In 1921, the first American Birth Control Conference was held and Sanger founded the American Birth Control League.

