



# Women in Public Life

## MAIN IDEA

As a result of social and economic change, many women entered public life as workers and reformers.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Women won new opportunities in labor and education that are enjoyed today.

## Terms & Names

- NACW
- suffrage

- Susan B. Anthony
- NAWSA

## One American's Story

In 1879, Susette La Flesche, a young Omaha woman, traveled east to translate into English the sad words of Chief Standing Bear, whose Ponca people had been forcibly removed from their homeland in Nebraska. Later, she was invited with Chief Standing Bear to go on a lecture tour to draw attention to the Ponca's situation.

### A PERSONAL VOICE SUSETTE LA FLESCHÉ

**"We are thinking men and women. . . . We have a right to be heard in whatever concerns us. Your government has driven us hither and thither like cattle. . . . Your government has no right to say to us, Go here, or Go there, and if we show any reluctance, to force us to do its will at the point of the bayonet. . . . Do you wonder that the Indian feels outraged by such treatment and retaliates, although it will end in death to himself?"**

—quoted in *Bright Eyes*



▲ Susette La Flesche

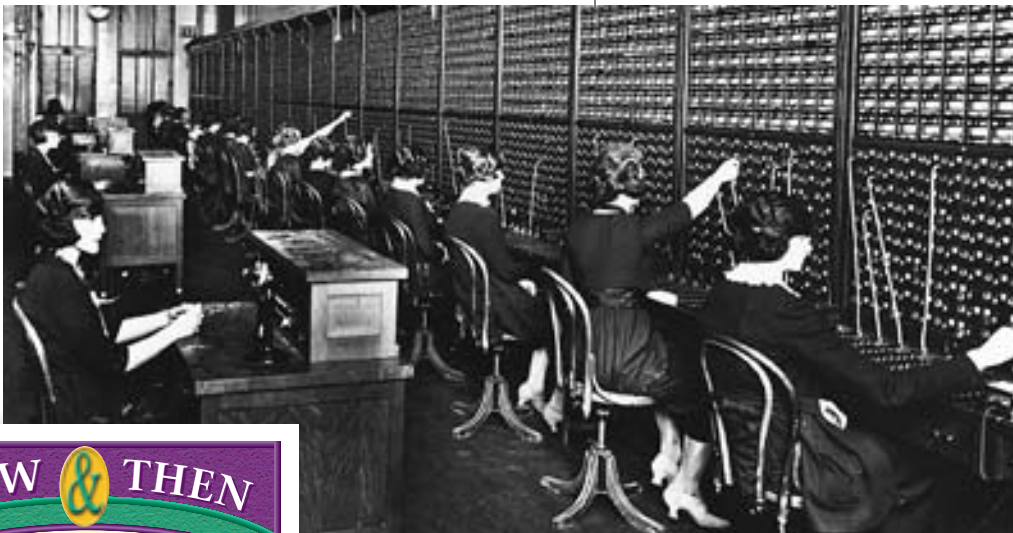
La Flesche testified before congressional committees and helped win passage of the Dawes Act of 1887, which allowed individual Native Americans to claim reservation land and citizenship rights. Her activism was an example of a new role for American women, who were expanding their participation in public life.

## Women in the Work Force

Before the Civil War, married middle-class women were generally expected to devote their time to the care of their homes and families. By the late 19th century, however, only middle-class and upper-class women could afford to do so. Poorer women usually had no choice but to work for wages outside the home.

**FARM WOMEN** On farms in the South and the Midwest, women's roles had not changed substantially since the previous century. In addition to household tasks such as cooking, making clothes, and laundering, farm women handled a host of other chores such as raising livestock. Often the women had to help plow and plant the fields and harvest the crops.

**WOMEN IN INDUSTRY** As better-paying opportunities became available in towns, and especially cities, women had new options for finding jobs, even though men's labor unions excluded them from membership. At the turn of the century,



◀ Telephone operators manually connect phone calls in 1915.

## NOW & THEN

### TELEPHONE OPERATORS

Today, when Americans use the telephone, an automated voice often greets them with instructions about which buttons to press. In the 19th century, every telephone call had to be handled by a telephone operator, a person who connected wires through a switchboard.

Young men, the first telephone operators, proved unsatisfactory. Patrons complained that the male operators used profane language and talked back to callers. Women soon largely replaced men as telephone operators, and were willing to accept the ten-dollar weekly wage.

Department stores advertised shopping by telephone as a convenience. One ad in the Chicago telephone book of 1904 declared, "Every [telephone] order, inquiry, or request will be quickly and intelligently cared for." The ad pictured a line of female telephone operators.

one out of five American women held jobs; 25 percent of them worked in manufacturing.

The garment trade claimed about half of all women industrial workers. They typically held the least skilled positions, however, and received only about half as much money as their male counterparts or less. Many of these women were single and were assumed to be supporting only themselves, while men were assumed to be supporting families.

Women also began to fill new jobs in offices, stores, and classrooms. These jobs required a high school education, and by 1890, women high school graduates outnumbered men. Moreover, new business schools were preparing bookkeepers and stenographers, as well as training female typists to operate the new machines. **A**

**DOMESTIC WORKERS** Many women without formal education or industrial skills contributed to the economic survival of their families by doing domestic work, such as cleaning for other families. After almost 2 million African-American women were freed from slavery, poverty quickly drove nearly half of them into the work force. They worked on farms and as domestic workers, and migrated by the thousands to big cities for jobs as cooks, laundresses, scrub-women, and maids. Altogether, roughly 70 percent of women employed in 1870 were servants.

Unmarried immigrant women also did domestic labor, especially when they first arrived in the United States. Many married immigrant women contributed to the family income by taking in piecework or caring for boarders at home.

## Women Lead Reform

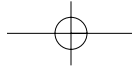
Dangerous conditions, low wages, and long hours led many female industrial workers to push for reforms. Their ranks grew after 146 workers, mostly young women, died in a 1911 fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. Middle- and upper-class women also entered the public sphere. By 1910, women's clubs, at which these women discussed art or literature, were nearly half a million strong. These clubs sometimes grew into reform groups that addressed issues such as temperance or child labor.

**WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION** Many of the women who became active in public life in the late 19th century had attended the new women's colleges. Vassar

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

**A** What kinds of job opportunities prompted more women to complete high school?



College—with a faculty of 8 men and 22 women—accepted its first students in 1865. Smith and Wellesley Colleges followed in 1875. Though Columbia, Brown, and Harvard Colleges refused to admit women, each university established a separate college for women.

Although women were still expected to fulfill traditional domestic roles, women's colleges sought to grant women an excellent education. In her will, Smith College's founder, Sophia Smith, made her goals clear.

### ★ A PERSONAL VOICE SOPHIA SMITH

**“[It is my desire] to furnish for my own sex means and facilities for education equal to those which are afforded now in our College to young men. . . . It is not my design to render my sex any the less feminine, but to develop as fully as may be the powers of womanhood & furnish women with means of usefulness, happiness, & honor now withheld from them.”**

—quoted in *Alma Mater*

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Effects

**B** What social and economic effects did higher education have on women?

By the late 19th century, marriage was no longer a woman's only alternative. Many women entered the work force or sought higher education. In fact, almost half of college-educated women in the late 19th century never married, retaining their own independence. Many of these educated women began to apply their skills to needed social reforms. **B**

**WOMEN AND REFORM** Uneducated laborers started efforts to reform workplace health and safety. The participation of educated women often strengthened existing reform groups and provided leadership for new ones. Because women were not allowed to vote or run for office, women reformers strove to improve conditions at work and home. Their “social housekeeping” targeted workplace reform, housing reform, educational improvement, and food and drug laws.

In 1896, African-American women founded the National Association of Colored Women, or **NACW**, by merging two earlier organizations. Josephine Ruffin identified the mission of the African-American women's club movement as “the moral education of the race with which we are identified.” The NACW managed nurseries, reading rooms, and kindergartens.


After the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, women split over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which granted equal rights including the right to vote to African American men, but excluded women. **Susan B. Anthony**, a leading proponent of woman **suffrage**, the right to vote, said “[I] would sooner cut off my right hand than ask the ballot for the black man and not for women.” In 1869 Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had founded the National Women Suffrage Association (NWSA), which united with another group in 1890 to

**Suffragists recruit supporters for a march.**





**KEY PLAYER**



**SUSAN B. ANTHONY**  
1820–1906

Born to a strict Quaker family, Susan B. Anthony was not allowed to enjoy typical childhood entertainment such as music, games, and toys. Her father insisted on self-discipline, education, and a strong belief system for all of his eight children. At an early age, Anthony developed a positive view of womanhood from a teacher named Mary Perkins who educated the children in their home.

After voting illegally in the presidential election of 1872, Anthony was fined \$100 at her trial. "Not a penny shall go to this unjust claim," she defiantly declared. She never paid the fine.

become the National American Woman Suffrage Association, or **NAWSA**. Other prominent leaders included Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe, the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Woman suffrage faced constant opposition. The liquor industry feared that women would vote in support of prohibition, while the textile industry worried that women would vote for restrictions on child labor. Many men simply feared the changing role of women in society.

**A THREE-PART STRATEGY FOR SUFFRAGE** Suffragist leaders tried three approaches to achieve their objective. First, they tried to convince state legislatures to grant women the right to vote. They achieved a victory in the territory of Wyoming in 1869, and by the 1890s Utah, Colorado, and Idaho had also granted voting rights to women. After 1896, efforts in other states failed.

Second, women pursued court cases to test the Fourteenth Amendment, which declared that states denying their male citizens the right to vote would lose congressional representation. Weren't women citizens, too? In 1871 and 1872, Susan B. Anthony and other women tested that question by attempting to vote at least 150 times in ten states and the District of Columbia. The Supreme Court ruled in 1875 that women were indeed citizens—but then denied that citizenship automatically conferred the right to vote.

Third, women pushed for a national constitutional amendment to grant women the vote. Stanton succeeded in having the amendment introduced in California, but it was killed later. For the next 41 years, women lobbied to have it reintroduced, only to see it continually voted down. **C**

Before the turn of the century, the campaign for suffrage achieved only modest success. Later, however, women's reform efforts paid off in improvements in the treatment of workers and in safer food and drug products—all of which President Theodore Roosevelt supported, along with his own plans for reforming business, labor, and the environment.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Making Inferences**

**C** Why did suffragist leaders employ a three-part strategy for gaining the right to vote?

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**ASSESSMENT**

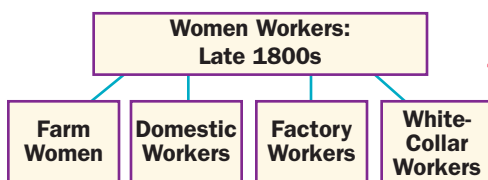
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- NACW
- suffrage
- Susan B. Anthony
- NAWSA

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

In a chart like the one below, fill in details about working women in the late 1800s.



What generalizations can you make about women workers at this time?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. SYNTHESIZING**

What women and movements during the Progressive Era helped dispel the stereotype that women were submissive and nonpolitical?

**4. MAKING INFERENCES**

Why do you think some colleges refused to accept women in the late 19th century?

**5. ANALYZING ISSUES**

Imagine you are a woman during the Progressive Era. Explain how you might recruit other women to support the following causes: improving education, housing reform, food and drug laws, the right to vote. **Think About:**

- the problems that each movement was trying to remedy
- how women benefited from each cause