

“The Role of Women in the Roaring Twenties”

Antonio Daniel Juan Rubio

Isabel María García Conesa

Centro Universitario de la Defensa San Javier – UPCT

C/ Coronel López Peña, s/n

30720 Santiago de la Ribera (Murcia)

E-mail: [antonio.juan@cud.upct.es](mailto:antonio.juan@ cud.upct.es) / isabelmaria.garcia@cud.upct.es

1. Introduction.

The 1920s proved to be a remarkable period in American history. It was also a period of contradictions. On the one hand, America’s manufacturing industry boomed, and the country enjoyed the kind of prosperity that made it the envy of the rest of Europe.

On the other hand, the affluence of a significant number of Americans was in stark contrast to the poverty of millions of others. Moreover, the razzamatazz that fascinated the rest of the world hid a deeply divided society.

America’s history of immigration had created a country full of prejudice, discrimination, racism, and an almost fanatical fear of political extremism that was thinly disguised by the glamorous façade. The 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote in all elections, was a major step in freeing half the American population. During the early 20th century, thousands of women conducted hundreds of campaigns to gain the rights to vote. Finally the time for women had come.

The 1920s was a challenging time for American women. Women were expected to raise children, keep house, provide emotional support for their husbands, and in myriad ways, contribute to American society. However, during the twenties, those demands came to seem less and less compatible.

Particularly for middle-class women, roles evolved in ways that often left women feeling pulled in two or more directions at once. Sometimes, women of the 1920s responded to the competing demands by rebelling against authority. Middle-class women had plenty of outlets for their energy. They could focus their time, energy, and resources on the common good, trying to improve the lot of all women.

Nevertheless, many exciting and glamorous distractions offered themselves to the New Woman. She could attend to her appearance by poring over the latest clothing styles. She could spend evenings at parties and movies. She could follow the latest sensational stories about celebrities in the newspapers and movie magazines.

The New Woman who chose to combine domesticity with a career had to experiment with new ways to manage her time and energy to meet the demands of being a wife, mother, and working woman. Substantial number of women took up the challenge of a career or job outside the home. Sometimes, women persevered to overcome barriers and gained admission to professions such as law and medicine. Others took up jobs such as work in textile mills that were readily offered to women.

Even though the 1920s offered new employment opportunities in industries previously closed to women, often the women who took these jobs found themselves exploited. No matter what her social standing, race or level of education, the New Woman found the 1920s a time of uncertainty. For the poor, being a New Woman meant new burdens, not opportunities.

2. The Roaring Twenties.

Life in the US from 1920 to 1930 seems as though it must have been lively and carefree. The nation was at peace. The standard of living was rising through much of the period, and Americans seems to have more than enough money.

For many people, it was a time of fun and a new feeling of personal freedom. When they were not dancing to popular music, they were taking to the road in their new cars, or finding other ways to enjoy themselves. The decade's nickname, The Roaring Twenties, is still used to suggest the seemingly free and easy life that Americans lived then.

Mention the 1920s, and Americans form a variety of pictures. To some, it was the era of big-city gangsters such as Al Capone and other mobsters who defied Prohibition and made fortunes selling illegal bootleg liquor. To others, it was an era of such industrial giants as Henry Ford. Ford's popular Model T automobile helped end the isolation of rural life, gave people more personal freedom, and transformed Americans into a people constantly on the move.

Still others picture the flapper. This was the name given to a new type of woman who defied the conventions. To her elders, the flapper was shocking because of her poise, boldness, and freedom in dress and manners. For some Americans, music defines the 1920s. The decade witnessed the boom of jazz and of uninhibited dance crazes such as the Charleston.

Finally, the Roaring Twenties was the decade when Americans' demand for entertainment exploded. The silent films of earlier years gave way to the talkies, or movies with synchronized sound. Americans followed the careers and love lives of wildly adored film stars. Equally adored were colourful sport figures whose names remain legendary.

The decade of the 1920s started with dashed hopes for future world peace and ended with dark fears of economic ruin. Sandwiched between these events was a period of rapid economic growth, increasing affluence for some Americans and momentous changes in American society.

These changes made the 1920s the first modern decade. It was the decade that marked the start of a shift from the rural, small-town values of the 19th and early 20th centuries to those of the more urban, industrial, and technological world of today. To some observers, though, it was also a decade of greed, excess, and materialism.

The 1920s are often regarded as a unique decade in American history. The overwhelming impression is of unequalled prosperity shared by the whole social spectrum. The decade is also characterised by frantic financial speculation, rebellion against authority, and uncontrolled crime.

Nonetheless, the twenties were undoubtedly an age of prosperity for a much wider social spectrum than had ever happened before. Mass production of consumer goods and the more affluent lifestyle of so many people are evidence of this.

However, the continuing existence of poverty experienced by so many different groups of Americans, and the failure of anyone to deal with it, limits the extent to which the period can be judged to be an age of prosperity.

In any case, it was a fragile prosperity as the Crash of 1929 demonstrated. It is difficult to see how this could have been avoided given the laissez-faire Republican policy that provided neither controls nor secure structures that would facilitate healthy economic growth.

3. Women in the Roaring Twenties.

The 1920s presidential election was the first in which women could vote. Women's organizations, though, were disappointed that only about 26% of eligible women voted. And besides, they tended to vote along party lines, and voted for Harding in about the same proportion as male voters did. Hence, no significant difference was rooted in the beginning.

The passage of the 19th Amendment was a first step in the liberation of women during the 1920s. After the sacrifices of the war years, young women wanted to break free from the restrictions of the Victorian age.

Many women's rights activists were disappointed that the 19th Amendment did not lead to changes in the role of women. During the 1920's, employment of women increased by only about 1%, and they were still employed largely in lower-paying service jobs.

The rebellious spirit unleashed by Prohibition manifested itself, not only in the illegal consumption of alcohol and all that went with this. Another consequence was the rejection of previously held codes of social and moral conduct by some young, well-off women in the twenties who caused eyebrows to rise and produce outbursts of moral indignation from older generations of women who regarded them as brazen.

These young women interpreted liberation as having the freedom to dress and behave as they chose. This meant defying all the accepted conventions of feminine behaviour. They were distinguishable by their bobbed hair, loose shorter length clothes, bare sometimes made-up legs, and often outrageous behaviour. Unlike her mother who dressed in dark, restrictive, modest clothing, the flapper of the 1920s was determined to express herself.

They smoked, partied, drank, and danced the Charleston until the early hours of the morning. They became inextricably linked with the popular and emerging musical craze of the twenties – jazz. They regarded themselves as thoroughly modern, a new breed of feminists. They were also very much the products of the affluence of the 1920s.

She wore lipstick and rouge, she cut her hair into a short, blunt style called a bob and plucked her eyebrows. She drove cars, went to movies, and she drank. Fashions were lightweight and comfortable. The sexual liberation of women took a first step when birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger opened the first birth-control clinic in New York.

They chronicled the thoroughly modern young woman's newfound leisure provided by economic growth and labour saving appliances. She lounged in bright, colourful costumes while at a jazz club, working a crossword puzzle, or reading one of the many new magazines launched during the 1920s.

Materialistic and impressionable, these young women were an easy prey to the aggressive advertising of the time in magazines and on the radio, which portrayed the glamorous and extravagant as desirable and attainable. So, images of beautiful women driving T Fords and wearing fashionable clothes made these a must for the truly emancipated female.

Magazines printed pictures of women wearing scandalous one-piece bathing suits to the beach, dancing the Charleston while wearing raccoon coats, or collapsing in exhaustion after dance marathons that often lasted days or even weeks. Magazines even printed pictures of women smoking.

Women's quest for emancipation in the 1920's. This popular image of the flapper was a creation of the media of the time. They did not, by themselves, represent a significant and enduring new feminist movement. In fact, other feminist groups in America regarded their materialistic emancipation as the very opposite of what they were trying to achieve.

Therefore, it is misleading to focus our attention exclusively on the flapper female if we wish to explore the changing role of women in American society in the 1920s. During the decade, groups of American women continued a quest for emancipation that had already begun in the 19th century and was to flourish in the 20th century.

Women's groups were involved in a variety of diverse campaigns on a range of issues. Although women were now accepted as fully qualified doctors and lawyers, they continued to campaign for equal rights, particularly wage and labour rights.

Women had campaigned successfully for the vote in several states during the latter part of the 19th century, but there had been no national suffrage movement. This was largely because women seem to have been less interested in their political rights than in other social issues.

Suffrage. By the eve of America's entry into WWI, the campaign for women's suffrage was gaining momentum. Finally in 1919, Congress passed the 19th Amendment to the Constitution by a narrow majority. It became law on 26 August 1920 and women were allowed to vote for the first time in the presidential election of that year. However, African-American women in the southern states continued to experience discrimination when they tried to register to vote as did African-American men.

During World War I, while the men were away, women had taken over their work in heavy industry, manufacturing, driving transport vehicles and delivering mail. This experience had clearly had some impact on support for the movement to gain the vote for all American women.

Moreover, individual women certainly did make progress in gaining political power. For example, Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming became the first woman to be elected governor of a state in 1924. And in 1926, Bertha Knight Landes became the first female mayor of a city – Seattle.

However, these were exceptions. During the 1920s, and in spite of the flapper image, the feminist movement weakened. The vote made very little difference to the majority of women. And it certainly did not transform politics as some feminists expected.

This was because, in spite of the educating efforts of Carrie Chapman Catt and the National League of Women Voters, the majority of women were fundamentally uninterested in politics or did not see politics as the means to achieving what they wanted.

Although apparently liberated by mass-produced, labour-saving devices, married women were unable to resolve the conflict between work and home. Women who did not try to do both were more successful. Even then, opportunities were limited.

Medical schools allocated only 5% of places to women. Consequently, the number of women doctors actually declined in the period. In 1920, 47% of college students were women, but the numbers subsequently declined.

Number of women working rose by 2 million in the 1920s, but this still only represented 24% of the population. Discrimination in wages continued as did the view that women only worked until they married. Feminist activists turned their attention to a variety of issues. As a result, the movement splintered. Many pursued the cause of equal rights in employment and promotion opportunities, and equal pay.

Others, for example Jane Addams and Carrie Chapman Catt, put their energies into peace movements and into other areas of social reform such as the abolition of child labour. Their efforts to get reforming legislation were unsuccessful.

Fundamentally, there were philosophical disagreements between the different feminist organizations. The real meaning of equality and equal rights for women was a particularly controversial issue. The “old guard” of the feminist movement rejected the materialism and mass culture of the Roaring Twenties, but in the process lost the support of young women who were caught up in it.

From the late 19th century onwards, women were involved in a number of key issues and campaigns: some political, some social, and some economic. The extent to which the position of women changed significantly is a matter of debate still nowadays.

Were the Roaring Twenties a decade of opportunity? On the surface, the freedom and affluence that characterize this period would seem to make it potentially a golden age of opportunity for women. Methods of mass production both increased job opportunities for women and provided the labour-saving devices that promised liberation from time-consuming domestic work.

The media boom of the twenties provided images of affluent young women, the flappers, who had apparently broken the traditional mould and who were enthusiastically setting new trends in fashion and behaviour. But these images are misleading. The true picture is difficult to define because it is clear that American women in the inter-war period continued to hold different and often conflicting views of their role in society and of their ambitions. This undoubtedly limited the extent of change.

The male perception. In spite of what seemed like a social revolution in the twenties, the traditional view of the American woman, inextricably bound up with home and family, continued to be pervasive at that time. Nor did the close association of manliness with the ability to provide for wife and family diminish despite the efforts of the feminist groups.

To some extents, women were revered and respected by men for their strength of character and endurance. This was especially true in the west where women had shown courage and perseverance during the period of settlement.

The legacy was further enhanced by the fact that men significantly outnumbered women. This certainly gave women the upper hand. This also helps to explain why women in the west were given the vote before those in any other part of America.

Apart from the fact that this was sometimes used to attract families to go west, it also created opportunities for women who were interested in politics or public office that they might not have enjoyed elsewhere at that time.

It cannot be entirely coincidental that the first women to achieve positions of public influence were in the west and mid-west. Jeannette Rankin of Montana became the first woman to enter the House of Representatives in 1917.

In addition to Rankin, Mary McDowell became Commissioner of Public Welfare in Chicago in 1923. Mary Howard of Utah became the first female mayor of a large city when she won the elections in Seattle in 1924. Mary Margaret Barthelme of Illinois was the first female judge, whilst Miriam Fergusson of Texas and Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming became the first female state governors when they were elected in 1925.

At the time, these women were quite exceptional. The traditional male view was that politics was not for women, not always because they considered them intellectually inadequate, but often because they considered that politics was too dishonest and disreputable for women.

Generally, however, men's admiration for women took the form of an expressed need and desire to protect and cherish them. There was also a recognised belief that women's boundless talents and abilities were best used at home.

This was, frankly, a view that the vast majority of women supported. During America's involvement in World War I, for example, women flooded into the workplace to sustain the home front whilst the men were away fighting.

When the war ended, it was the duty of women to resume their domestic role in order to make jobs available for the returning soldiers, as the statement from the New York Labour Federation clarifies: "The same patriotism, which induced women to enter industry during the war, should induce them to vacate their positions after the war".

The female perspective. Returning to the home was a duty that the majority of women readily accepted. Moreover, when the franchise was extended to women in the 1920s, the attempts of Carrie Chapman Catt and The National League of Women Voters to educate women were largely ineffective.

Indeed, many women saw their traditional feminine role as a satisfying and empowering one. Hence, the vast majority of women were unaffected by the achievement of suffrage for women. For African-American women in the south, it was an empty victory since they continued to be denied their voting rights.

For large sections of the urban and rural population, women were forced to concentrate on the daily struggle to survive by poverty, rather than on their rights. Even those women who appreciated that the extension of the franchise potentially empowered them were divided on how this power should be used.

Feminists chose to pursue the cause of equal rights and began as early as 1923 to campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment, a campaign which ultimately failed 50 years on. Others concentrated on narrower aspects of reform such as equal pay for equal work or equality of opportunity in employment.

Women's leaders such as Jane Addams advocated the use of the vote to secure wider social reform. Addams opposed the pursuit of equal rights because she believed that this put the success of more important social legislation in danger. This included legislation to regulate working hours and create special conditions for women, to abolish child labour and to set a minimum wage. Educated African-Americans, such as Mary Talbert, campaigned for legislation to prevent lynching, incidences of which increased in the 1920s with the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan.

Even within the ranks of those who supported some social reform, there were philosophical differences, particularly over the issue of the meaning of equality. Some women argued that to campaign for legislation that created special conditions to safeguard women in the workplace placed the emphasis on the differences of women and contradicted concepts of equality.

Success in the sphere of social legislation was limited. A Women's Bureau was created within the Department of Labour in 1920, and in 1921, the Shepherd Towner Bill made funds available for maternity and infant health education.

But this success was short-lived. Opposition from the medical profession limited the effectiveness of the Shepherd Towner initiative and progress towards regulating child labour and working hours was slow and generally ineffective.

Even when female pressure groups were effective in bringing about reforming legislation, most notably in the case of the introduction of Prohibition, there were divisions. Right-wing women's organizations opposed Prohibition on the grounds that it limited freedom. Such divisions did not help much to improve the social perception of women.

The modern woman. What did this mean? That was the burning question in the 1920s. No one really knew the answer. Certainly, a different lifestyle separated the young and perhaps more affluent women from the rest.

The girls were only united in their determination to rebel and to reject the accepted norms of the day when it came to dress, hair, correct behaviour, and sex. But the world of Zelda S. Fitzgerald and the *Great Gatsby* was generally transitory. Educated African-American women, however, tended to be more conservative. They needed to avoid controversy in order to win the struggle for respect and equality in a fundamentally racist society, so they generally prevent themselves from being publicized.

It is probably true to say that the younger and more rebellious female was more certain about what she was not, rather than what she aspired to be. She rejected the moral values and expectations of her mother and grandmothers. She was not interested in the social reform issues that were providing a platform for the older female generation.

Education. Education continued to be important to women and opportunities expanded especially for middle-class women. They increasingly undertook higher degrees, even though these tended to lead to traditionally female occupations, such as teaching and library work.

The legal and medical professions continued to discriminate and to limit the opportunities that were available for women. Consequently, middle-class educated women came to focus increasingly on campaigning for the accessibility of the professions as opposed to working for greater freedom and equality of opportunity for all women.

The decade saw the expansion of educational opportunities for African-Americans who considered education as essential to furthering the cause of social and economic equality and the recognition of their rights.

In 1921, Carey Thomas founded the Bryn Mawr Summer School for women workers in an attempt to make education available to working-class women. Several voluntary religious groups such as the Young Women's Christian Association created opportunities for young women from different cultural heritages to come together to discuss issues that were of common concern.

Women and work. The consumer boom of the 1920s and especially the availability of credit of labour-saving devices created not only jobs but also the opportunity for all women and especially for married women. By 1928, sales of vacuum cleaners, irons, refrigerators, and washing machines had risen phenomenally.

But jobs were not accessible to all women and in the workplace, women faced discrimination in wages. They also faced the hostility of male trade unionists who argued that if women needed special legislation to protect them in the workplace, perhaps they should not be there.

When the Great Depression hit the USA after 1929, and unemployment escalated, women were once again expected to give up their jobs to men. This was particularly hard in poor families where the woman was the only breadwinner and for female heads of households who were condemned to extreme poverty at a time when there were no welfare benefits.

The significance of the Great Depression. The trend towards an increase in the number of women in the workplace, especially married women might be taken as indicative of change both in perceptions and attitudes to women as wage earners.

However, unemployment exposed the reality. Undoubtedly, the increase in job opportunities was created by methods of mass production which provided opportunities for women workers. Increased demand during the consumer boom of the twenties may also have made female employment a necessary expedient.

Moreover, the opportunities offered by credit buying for working-class families to possess luxuries such as radios, refrigerators, and cars, made it acceptable for wives and mothers to go out to work. It is tempting to speculate on how the role of women might have changed had the boom continued.

The wave of condemnation and criticism of women workers that followed the Great Crash suggests that the position of women in the workplace had been generally tolerated rather than accepted during the booming years of prosperity.

4. Conclusions.

How far had the position of women really changed by 1930? The answer to this question lies in the criteria that may be used to evaluate change: perceptions of equality, admission of women in the professions, women in the workplace, women, legislation and politics.

Perceptions of equality. This was evident amongst educated middle-class women. Certainly, there was a recognition that women's talents were not confined to the domestic sphere. There is, therefore, little evidence of a woman's movement as such, united in its aims.

On the contrary, women were divided throughout the period either by aspirations, class, or racial origin. This inevitably restricted the achievement of goals. Nor is there evidence that the perceptions of men had changed.

For the majority of men, a woman's place remained securely in the home. Moreover, there is little doubt that this was a view shared by the majority of women. The family and family life remained the most important social institution that could only survive if women maintained their traditional role.

Admission of women in the professions. The expansion of educational opportunities is a feature of this period. There are outstanding examples of women who established themselves in the professions and in public life.

However, they remained a minority. Generally, those who were successful did not attempt to mix a career with marriage, home, and family. Moreover, opportunities for advancement, especially in the professions, remained limited.

Women in the workplace. There was an increase over the period of married women entering the workforce. However, they were restricted and forced into limited occupation. There was inequality in pay and conditions, and there was little job security.

Both world wars gave women brief glimpses of another kind of life, but there was an expectation and an acceptance that these experiences were temporary. By the 1930s, married women in the workplace were forced there by poverty.

Women, legislation, and politics. The extension of the franchise is perhaps the one significant recognition of the changing role of women. However, the fact that its potential was not recognized by women themselves limited its potential for further change.

Perceptions of equality were muddled. Nor was change likely to happen until women became sufficiently ambitious to enter politics in greater numbers and men were prepared to encourage them to do so. There is evidence that women could exert pressure for change when they combined together. In other respects, government did not intervene in any other way to bring about change in the position of women.

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