

## GENDER IN HISTORY – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

**Principal themes** A variety of major changes occurred in gender relations during the 150 years after about 1770. In Western Europe and the United States gender differentiation was strongly emphasized, but it was redefined, particularly in emphasizing women's special virtues in the home. These ideas combined with early industrialization to alter work roles, education, and legal provisions. This was also the context in which formal feminism began to take shape. Many other parts of the world were affected to some degree by Western example or pressure, leading to some reforms of traditional practices and some new attention to education. However the West's industrialization challenged women's work roles in many places, while Western imperialism could affect gender patterns in various ways. Change was widespread, but beyond this it is not easy to identify dominant global themes.

**New ideas in the West** By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ideas about women were beginning to shift, at least in the middle classes. Emphasis on the importance of women's beauty increased: women's colorful clothing began to contrast with the drab outfits men wore. More important, women's moral qualities gained new emphasis, reducing the sense that they were likely sinners (though treatment of sexual misbehavior remained severe). Praise for the special qualities of motherhood increased. As a late 18<sup>th</sup> century poem put it, "Who wat and watched my infant head...and tears of sweet affection shed? My mother". The imagery was double-edged: on the one hand, it emphasized domestic roles. On the other, it did quietly undermine some patriarchal assumptions about women's inferiority.

**The early industrial revolution** Industrialization began to take shape in Britain by the 1770s and spread rapidly to other parts of the West. It challenged jobs women held in domestic manufacturing, where the new machines fairly quickly mounted inescapable competition. Gradually, women's role in the formal work force declined: many working-class girls quit factory jobs after marriage, and most middle-class women never had paying jobs at all. Service as maids became the most common occupation for women in the cities. In the process, marriage became more economically important for women. At the same time, however, the prestige of women's roles in the home, as loving wives and mothers and efficient household managers, increased. Three other developments added to this complex mixture. First, the birth rate began to decline, first in the middle class, then more widely, as children's economic utility declined. Absent effective birth control techniques this required more sexual abstinence, and women were responsible for restraining male appetites – another moral role. But the result did leave more time for attention to individual children and, potentially, for other activities. Second, education for women became more widespread, at the primary and increasingly the secondary levels. It was assumed that women needed some formal education to be effective mothers and housekeepers, and some women even argued that they had educational rights just as men did. The literacy gap between the genders steadily declined, a huge change. By the later 19<sup>th</sup> century handfuls of women were even entering universities and professions such as law and medicine. And larger numbers of women began to participate in the growing clerical labor force, as secretaries, primary school teachers, bank tellers, at least before marriage. Finally, women became the primary consumer agents of the family, and began to participate in wider consumer opportunities by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. They became the favorite patrons of the new department stores, and advertisers began to devote explicit attention to the female market.

**Global patterns: work** While no region yet copied the West by entering into full industrialization, Western industry, with its massive, cheap factory exports, had huge impacts globally. Tens of thousands of women, as domestic manufacturers, were driven out of work in places like India and Latin America. Economic conditions for many women deteriorated, and alternatives like domestic service or prostitution became more common. Some countries took special advantage of cheap female labor. Japan, for example, as it began to industrialize, depended on cheap female silk workers, held almost as slaves, to produce stockings and other products sold on the world market to help pay for essential imports of capital equipment for industry. Women workers were also prominent in early Russian industrialization.

**Global patterns: education** Almost everywhere, women's schooling received at least some attention. Reformers paid attention to what was happening in the West, and local needs, including a need for some women school teachers, also entered into the picture. Japan's ambitious education decree of 1872, mandating primary schooling for girls as well as boys, was particularly revolutionary. But Mexico City required schooling for girls as early as the 1840s. The Tanzimat reform movement in the Ottoman Empire included establishment of some schools for girls, particularly for teacher training, though the results were limited. Christian missionary schools in Africa, India and China, often emphasized girls' education, and a few upper-class girls were even sent to the West: Wellesley College in the United States, received a number of Chinese young women for example. In most places the gender education gap was not yet closed. And it was widely assumed that education for girls should have a domestic focus, preparing them, as the Japanese government put it, to be "wise mothers". Still, this was a potentially revolutionary development that would lead a few women into new occupational fields, like medicine, and raise questions for a larger number about traditional practices like high birth rates.

**Imperialism as double-edged** New Western imperialism, including growing pressure even on independent states like China and the Ottoman empire, affected gender in several ways. In the first place, Westerners identified some traditional practices as unacceptable. In early 19<sup>th</sup>-century India for example British officials worked to abolish *sati*, with some effect, and they were joined by Indian reformers who, though opposed to British rule, agreed this was a violation. In China Western missionaries attacked footbinding, and here too Chinese reformers joined them, gradually reducing the practice into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And Western reformers, including missionaries, did push for some education, though their efforts were usually limited. At the same time, imperial officials explicitly refrained from trying to do too much, lest they rouse local opposition: reform was not their main goal. Thus in northeastern Africa British and French officials largely ignored the practice of female circumcision. They were aware of it; they did not like it; but they viewed it as too deeply rooted to attack. Finally, particularly in Africa, imperial legislation subjected women to new controls by husbands, much as had been the case for indigenous people in the Americas earlier. New rules for example sought to regulate dress and sexual behavior. Some of the earlier roles of the extended family, providing protection for women for example when a husband died, were reduced given the new emphasis on the nuclear family unit.

**Feminism** The emergence of formal feminist movements was a crucial feature of the long nineteenth century. Individual voices were raised as early as the 1790s. Mary Wollstonecraft, in England, and Olympe de Gouges, in France, argued that the "rights of man" arguments of the Enlightenment surely applied to women as human equals. Larger movements began to form by the 1840s, in places like England and the United States, sometimes linked to attacks on slavery. The movements focused on improved legal rights, for example to own and control property or to seek divorce, and they made real headway in Western legislation during the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. They also began to turn their attention to the vote, insisting that this should be a general and not a male right and even arguing that women, because of their superior morality, might help make governments better. Here, real change began to occur. Several American states gave women the vote from 1869 onward, and New Zealand became the first country to make the shift, in 1893; a number of Scandinavian countries joined in. Feminist agitation caused bitter, even violent strife in the United States and Britain, but it registered steady progress, setting the stage for wider changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, feminist organizations began to reach out globally from the 1880s onward, recruiting women leaders from China, Iran, Mexico and elsewhere. Widespread movements did not yet form, but individual feminists began to raise demands in many places, including Japan. Finally, feminists also sought to tackle global issues, such as sexual trafficking in women – called "white slavery" in the 1890s, pressing countries like Argentina to introduce new legislation to control prostitution. Here was a new global force, if at this point a modest one.

### Study questions

1. What were the strengths and weaknesses of imperialism as a force for change in gender relations?
2. What are the complexities in trying to balance the gains and losses of women in Western society amid new ideas about gender and the effects of industrialization?
3. Were changes in education the most important global development favoring women in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century? Why did educational change occur in societies that were still firmly patriarchal?

4. What were the conditions that prompted the emergence of formal feminism?

**Further reading**

Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: the Hijra, c. 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

Tiffany Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2007).

Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950: a political history* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).