

GENDER IN NORTH AMERICAN HISTORY (United States and Canada)

Overview Patterns of gender history in North America closely parallel those in Western Europe, based on shared culture; comparable dates of industrialization; and overlapping feminist movements from the 19th century onward. Colonial interactions with indigenous peoples, plus the extensive frontier experience, contributed some distinctive elements. In the United States, slavery and then racial discrimination after emancipation left an important mark on a vital minority. In general, Canadian and United States developments overlapped, though feminism arose a bit more slowly in Canada and the dominance of Catholicism in Quebec province generated some differences until the later 20th century. Unusually high religious commitment has also played a role in United States developments (compared to Western Europe), enhancing a number of variations among subgroups and regions and contributing to some ongoing controversies.

The colonial period Several features stand out from this period, along with some questions. European arrival in what became the United States and Canada placed severe pressures on indigenous groups, most obviously through disease and loss of land, but also pressure from missionaries – though this was most pronounced under French Catholicism. Missionaries characteristically believed that indigenous women had too much authority (sometimes describing them as “shrews” or “hellish”), and sought to reinforce the position of husbands along with stricter sexual morality; at the same time, they criticized undue emphasis on women’s agricultural work, urging men to take a greater role so that women could concentrate on domestic tasks. Efforts to alter gender patterns, for example through mission schools and boarding schools, would continue into the early 20th century, involving frequent compulsion and disorientation. Imported slave labor, particularly in the southern colonies, established another gender context. Enslaved women were pressed into hard work; were frequently punished; and were widely exploited sexually. These issues, combined with the sale of individual family members, could severely inhibit stable family patterns. For White women, gender patterns were fairly standard for agricultural societies: emphasis on domestic tasks, few legal rights, subordination to husband and father. Sparse population encouraged higher birth rates than were common in Western Europe at the time. In Canada, where males at first predominated in the White population, the French explicitly imported some women almost all of whom quickly married and developed higher birth rates than their counterparts in France, and French Quebec would long be known for high levels of fertility. Frontier conditions may have prompted some individual women to take on more assertive roles than usual. This was the case in responses to some attacks by indigenous groups, where individual women responded with violence and were hailed by the settler community. From the 17th century onward, however, some assertive women were legally punished for violating patriarchal gender norms. Women’s education lagged behind that of men, but a number became literate. Partly on this basis, many women would participate actively in the American revolution, in a few cases opposing husbands who continued to serve the British.

Developments in the nineteenth century Gender imbalance on the frontiers, both in the United States and Canada, encouraged a highly masculine culture, where respectable women often assumed a particulate mission to instill manners and civility. Among African Americans, individual women played a major role in resistance efforts like the Underground Railway. The abolition of slavery in the United States, after 1863, did not end sexual attacks on Black women; economic disadvantages also prompted high labor rates among married Black women (often as domestic servants) in contrast to predominant patterns among Whites. Immigration brought complex contacts with American gender standards, along with considerable reliance on religious communities. Reactions varied. Italian immigrants sought to keep working in or around the home, for example in small retail shops; Slavic immigrants were more willing to let daughters work as domestic servants to others. Immigrant families also maintained higher birth rates than the native-born population, but would gradually adjust. Birth rate reduction began early, in contrast, among middle-class Whites. The rapid spread of educational opportunities was a major development. Educational reformers, like Horace Mann in the United States, saw women’s education as vital to

improvements in motherhood, and also as a source of teachers, though there was brief debate about whether school might harm women's physical health. Middle-class culture strongly emphasized gender distinctions – what some historians have called the “cult of true womanhood”, with good women seen as possessing natural qualities of love and maternal protection as well as sexual restraint; the rise of women's magazines, as a new genre, carried these ideas forward, along with instructions on good housekeeping. This same culture, however, could be put to other uses. Both in the United States and Canada women played a major role in unusually active temperance movements, sometimes in support of outright prohibition, as against men's irresponsible and family-damaging impulses. Feminist movements began early, particularly in the United States and sometimes spinning off from women's support of efforts to abolish slavery. Seneca Falls, New York, hosted the nation's first women's rights convention, in 1848. While full suffrage was not granted to women until after World War I, amid sometimes violent agitation and government resistance, Western states and territories moved faster, beginning with Wyoming in 1869, and Montana would elect the first women to the United States congress shortly after 1900. Feminism in Canada developed only late in the 19th century, often based on arguments that women would bring special moral virtues to government. Western provinces granted the vote first, followed by the national government in 1919 (after a partial move two years before); but Quebec granted the vote only in 1940. In the United States women gained the vote on a national basis in 1920, but in several Southern states access for Blacks was limited; African American women played a major role in the agitation that would lead to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which some argue gave tens of thousands of African American women the vote for the first time.

Developments since the 1920s After achieving the vote, feminism trailed off a bit in North America. Considerable energy went into lifestyle changes: new and less formal clothing for women, new dance styles, new participation in public entertainments like night clubs. The 1950s also saw renewed emphasis on domesticity and a considerable rise in birth rates (baby boom), particularly in the middle classes. Deeper changes took shape from the 1960s. Thanks in part to more accessible birth control, the birth rate began to drop fairly steadily, ultimately falling below population maintenance levels. Marriage age increased for women, but the marriage rate fell; stable two-parent families became a minority by the 21st century, and new choices by women were in part responsible. As in Europe, second-wave feminism emphasized more systematic equality and less emphasis on domestic values and roles; a key statement was Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963). (African American women participated in this new feminism, but put greater energy into movements for racial equality and collaboration with male leadership in this domain.) Women's labor force participation began to soar (it had increased briefly during both world wars, but then dropped back). By the 21st century about 57% of all adult women were employed both in the United States and in Canada. Gender pay gaps persisted but lessened, and women gained major roles in professions like the law and medicine. Educational levels changed as well: only about 35% of the college population in the 1950s, women gained a majority position by the 1980s, with educational and professional ambitions now surpassing those of men. Women also gained new roles in sports and the military. Important tensions remained, often reflecting religious divisions. The United States saw unusually bitter and persistent battles over abortion rights, with compromise more elusive than in Western Europe. And while women's participation in elected office expanded, it lagged somewhat compared to Western Europe and Latin America – and no woman yet achieved the top political position in either North American country. By 2023 women constituted just over 30% of membership in the Canadian parliament, just over 38% in the U.S. Congress. Change in this category was accelerating (along with women serving in top state offices), but many observers argued that there were still important if ill-defined barriers to full equality. On another front: it was also in North America that new movements against sexual offenses took shape. The term sexual harassment was introduced in the 1970s as a legal category; in 2017 the Me/Too movement gained ground, urging women to come forward against various kinds of sexual exploitation on the job and in entertainment. Launched in the United States the movement quickly spread to Canada, where it sparked a rapid increase in complaints and in appeals to women's support groups. Finally, both the United States and Canada saw major waves of immigration from the 1960s onward, mainly from non-European sources, often involving some distinctive gender and family patterns that interacted with “native-born” norms.

Study questions

1. What were the most important ways that women's experiences in North America, during the 17th and 18th centuries, differed from patterns in early modern Western Europe?
2. Why did Western states, provinces and territories move earlier to grant women's suffrage than other parts of the United States and Canada?
3. What are the most distinctive features of African American gender history, since the colonial period, compared to trends in the broader society?
4. What were the major changes in women's goals and roles from the 1960s onward? Was North American gender history taking a decisive new turn?

Further reading

Wendy Mitchison, ed., *Canadian Women, a reader* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996).

Nancy Shoemaker, *Negotiators of Change: historical perspectives on native American women* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Daina Berry and Kali Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021).

Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011).