

THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



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Women's Industrial Conference, Washington DC, January 18-21, 1926, panoramic photograph (detail)

The MODERN WOMAN

In this collection of commentary from periodicals, novels, advertisements, a sociological study, and more, we are not considering the “flapper,” the rebellious young woman exploring new freedoms who came to personify the twenties in later times. Here we study the phenomenon of the “modern woman” as she was revered or reviled at the time—newly enfranchised by the 20th Amendment, entering the job market and the political arena in greater numbers than ever, and redefining marriage, motherhood, and “womanliness” for a new era.

Long established as the dean of modern “scientific” homemaking, Christine Frederick took on the role of consumer advocate in the 1920s, publishing *Selling Mrs. Consumer* to enlighten advertisers on the unique aspects of marketing to the modern American woman.

Christine M. Frederick
Selling Mrs. Consumer
1929

To begin with, it is very important to realize to the full the special position of women in the United States as contrasted with the rest of the world. Woman has never before attained, in any country, the psychological position that she enjoys in America. This status is so astounding to visitors from other countries that they often feel a sharp shock of surprise and revulsion; while even some of our young satiric novelists, like Sinclair Lewis and Louis Bromfield, who spend enough time in Europe to note the contrasts, are convinced that American women autocratically “rule the roost,” and that American men exist and labor largely to pour more spending money into their wives’ laps. Count Keyserling of Germany was convinced after his visit here, that woman in America represented a new kind of aristocracy, “queening it” in quite high-handed fashion, and living in luxury and leisure upon the labors of man, the commoner. He sensed an unconscious belief among American women that these were her inalienable rights, and that she regarded her position and privileges somewhat as the aristocracy in Europe regards their own special prerogatives.

This is satire of course, but not wholly unjustified satire; for any fair-minded American woman who has traveled must agree that she enjoys great economic advantages and is held in very high chivalrous regard by American men; a condition stemming back to the pioneer days of America when women were scarce and highly valued. She has the widest freedom to enter business even after marriage, and as a wife and mother she is deemed a partner in the family enterprise. Marriage being based on

“romance” in America, it is inevitable that women are highly regarded, and that this high regard be extended to financial considerations.

Walter Lionel George
*Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions
of a Conservative English Radical, 1921*

W. L. George was an English writer, a lover of America, and a social liberal, despite the tongue-in-cheek subtitle of *Hail Columbia!*, a memoir of his 1920 travels in the U.S.

I have been equally surprised by the conquests made in business by American women. It is rather a shock to a European to meet a pretty girl of twenty-seven, to hear that she is employed in a drug corporation, and then to discover that she is a director. A shock to find a woman running a lawyer's office entailing annual expenses of seven or eight thousand dollars, and making a living. It is a surprise to find the American stenographer earning four times as much as her European sister. All those shocks, however, arise out of particular instances, and, though I agree that the American woman has made herself a good position, when I go through a business reference book I find that not one in a hundred of the leading names is the name of a woman. In America man still rules; all you can say is that he does not rule women so harshly as he does in Europe.

Mildred Hardenbergh
“Taking the Hand Off the Cradle to Catch Devil Fish:
How Modern Woman Is Delving into the Sacred Precincts of
Male Occupation and Is Now Found in the Role of Bandit,
Judge, Bricklayer, Hunter, and Race Horse Jockey”
The Atlanta Constitution, August 12, 1923

Ain't it the truth that some will go to any length to earn pin money (spending money), as it were? Why, I've been reading lately in the papers about any number of the so-called weaker sex that have been invading the particular fields that the men have been surest was their very own, and getting away with it, too—especially in these United States. And far be it from me to say them nay, for why shouldn't they be given a chance when they're proving right and left that they're able in plenty to fill the bill—and hang on to their femininity at the same time?

Personally, I wouldn't be so keen about trying some of the stunts I've been reading about. But ladies must live, and if some of them prefer dangerous stuff, why, I say, let them have it. Still, just among ourselves, I think even if I did hanker after the rough stuff I could find something a little less exciting than octopus hunting to satisfy my emotional and mercenary demands!

Yes, sir, that's just what a lot of them are doing—catching octopuses or devilfish, out of Salon Beach, Washington, for \$40 and \$50 a month! They can catch as many as seven a day sometimes, and they sell them to the Chinese and Japanese for 10 cents a pound, all of which makes the sport quite profitable, if you look at it that way. . .

But if you are “East” you don't have to go west to find women doing men's work and keeping up with fashion, too.

The Inquiring Reporter

Every Day He Asks Five Persons,
Picked at Random, a Question

Chicago Daily Tribune, April 25, 1922

The Question.

Do girls who have earned their living make the best wives?

Where Asked.

In the Strauss building,
6 North Clark Street.

The Answers.

SIDNEY FRISCH, 6 North Clark St., attorney—My impression is that girls who have earned their own living do not make the best wives. It seems to me that the hustle and bustle of business life has a tendency to develop an unsettled frame of mind. The effect upon them later when they marry is not good.

Miss CARRIE KELSEY, 6 North Clark St., switchboard operator—I do not think that working girls—that is, girls who earn their living—make the best wives, for the reason that the most of them become too independent. They become accustomed to paying their own way and having their own way about everything.

LONSON D. CALKINS, 328 W. Washington St., manager, Kewanee Boiler Company—It is my opinion that girls who have earned their own living do make the best wives. They have more experience with the world and they should be, and I believe, are more practical than the home girl. The working girl knows the value of money.

RUDOLPH SHAPIRA, assistant state's attorney—Yes, I believe girls who have earned their living make the best wives. They appreciate the value of a dollar, and they know what a home is; in short, they realize that it is to their best interest to make home as comfortable as possible.

Miss AGNES BLICKLEY, 1300 N. Dearborn St., artist—The girl who has earned money by working knows the value of money, while the girl who hasn't worked does not. Newly married people seldom have any too much money, and when the young wife can't get what she wants when she wants it she is too liable to cause trouble.

Expert Woman Welder

Mrs. Martha Hoffman Henke of Chicago, one of the very few woman welders in the world, explaining the art of welding. A short time ago in Boston she gave a demonstration of her mechanical art for the American Welding Society and the students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

She Follows Mining

Miss Helen Antonkova overhauling a mining drill. Born in Siberia, she is now a student of mining engineering at the University of Washington.

A Worker in Wood

Mrs. Park of Garrard's Cross, England, making fittings for her invention—a portable telescopic nursery gate. This British matron knows tools as well as babies, and she keeps a workshop in her home. Her nursery gate placed across the nursery door makes of the room a big and safe play pen.

With Synthetic Sunshine

Doctor Rosalind Wulzen, of the University of California, is shown above experimenting with synthetic sunbeams. She uses a "sunshine" machine in her search for a cure for various ills now deemed almost incurable.

Behold "Mrs. Hercules!"

This is Mrs. Angelina Francesca, of Boston, carrying a big barrel. She is six feet six inches in height, and for 10 years she has been handling barrels and hogsheds at a barrel plant where she is employed. She, without a doubt, is the Amazon of New England.

Mechanics Her Choice

Miss Thelma Holliday repairing the distributor of an automobile engine. She holds a regular job in a garage in New York City. She always preferred a screwdriver to a typewriter, and today she is said to be a genuinely competent auto mechanic. She says she thoroughly enjoys her unusual vocation and sees no reason why a woman who is mechanically inclined should spend her days filing cards or adding figures.

Popular Science Monthly
March 1926



John Macy, "Equality of Woman with Man: A Myth—A Challenge to Feminism," *Harper's*, November 1926

Let us be done forever with this nonsense about the equality of the sexes. They are not equal in nature and never can be. If the woman argues—and it is proverbially useless to argue with her—that she wants a chance to show what she can do, the answer is, Certainly, madame, all the chance in the world, for you, and for the man and for the child, opportunity for everybody to cultivate the best that is in him or her for the good of the individual, for the good of the race. But in heaven's name let not the woman try to compete with man, for the more chance she has, the freer the world grows, the more chance man will have, and he will always keep slightly ahead of her.

Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd
Middletown: A Study in American Culture
1929

Selected in 1924 as a typical town of “middle America,” Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists’ research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s.

The Federal Census for 1920 showed that approximately twenty-eight women in every hundred women gainfully employed in Middletown were married, and among those employed in “manufacturing and mechanical industries,” thirty-three in every hundred. These married women workers, according to the Census distribution, go largely into working class occupations. . . .

The cases of a few representative women will make more specific the complex of factors involved in the wife’s working:

In one family, characteristic of a large number of those in which the mother works, a woman of forty-five, mother of four children aged eighteen, sixteen, fifteen, and twelve, had worked fifteen months during the previous five years at two different factories. At the first she worked ten hours a day for \$15.15 a week, stopping work because of a layoff; at the second, nine and a half hours a day for approximately the same wages, stopping because her health “gave out.” She went into factory work because “We always seemed to have a doctor’s bill around. The mister had an operation and I wanted to help pay that bill. Then he got back to work and was laid off again. He was out of work nine months last year. The children needed clothes and I had to do it.” But although the mother did what she could at home after her day at the factory and washed and ironed on Sundays, the oldest daughter had to leave high school and give up going to the Girl Reserves to look after the children. “I made a big mistake in leaving them. The youngest got to running away from home with other girls. *Then* was the time I should have been with her.”

. . .

In some more prosperous families, securing a higher standard of living as well as education for her children leads the mother to work. One mother of two high school boys, a woman of forty-two, the wife of a pipefitter, goes outside her home to do cleaning in one of the city’s public institutions six days a week. “I began to work during the war,” she said, “when everyone else did; we had to meet payments on our house and everything else was getting so high. The mister objected at first, but now he don’t mind. I’d rather keep on working so my boys can play football and basketball and have spending money their father can’t give them. We’ve built our own home, a nice brown and white bungalow, by a building and loan [bank] like everyone else does. We have it almost all paid off and it’s worth about \$6,000. No, I don’t lose out with my neighbors because I work; some of them have jobs and those who don’t envy us who do. I have felt better since I worked than ever before in my life. I get up at five-thirty. My husband takes his dinner and the boys buy theirs uptown and I cook supper. We have an electric washing machine, electric iron, and vacuum sweeper. I don’t even have to ask my husband any more because I buy these things with my own money. I bought an icebox last year—a big one that holds 125 pounds; most of the time I don’t fill it, but we have our folks visit us from back East and then I do. We own a \$1200 Studebaker with a nice California top, semi-enclosed. Last summer we all spent our vacation going back to Pennsylvania—taking in Niagara Falls on the way. The two boys want to go to college, and I want them to. I graduated from high school myself, but I feel if I can’t give my boys a little more all my work will have been useless.”

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, novel, 1922

Lewis’s fictional midwestern city Zenith claimed several hundred thousand residents, as did Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Kansas City in 1920.

In Floral Heights and the other prosperous sections of Zenith, especially in the “young married set,” there were many women who had nothing to do. Though they had few servants, yet with gas stoves, electric ranges, and dishwashers and vacuum cleaners, and tiled kitchen walls, their houses were so convenient that they had little housework, and much of their food came from bakeries and delicatessens. They had but two, one, or no children; and despite the myth that the Great War had made work respectable, their husbands objected to their “wasting time and getting a lot of crank ideas” in unpaid social work, and still more to their causing a rumor, by earning money, that they were not adequately supported. They worked perhaps two hours a day, and the rest of the time they ate chocolates, went to the motion pictures, went window shopping, went in gossiping twos and threes to card parties, read magazines, thought timorously [timidly] of the lovers who never appeared, and accumulated a splendid restlessness which they got rid of by nagging their husbands. The husbands nagged back.

John Dos Passos
The Big Money
novel, 1936

A passionate writer in the modernist-leftist movement of the period, Dos Passos produced the trilogy of novels *U.S.A.* that chronicled twelve characters struggling to make their way in the economic maelstrom of the postwar era. Interspersed throughout the novels are “newsreels” comprised of news headlines, song lyrics, silent newsreel titles, etc., to encapsulate the twenties as lived by those struggling in the business heyday.
[Annotations added]

__NEWSREEL LI__

The sunshine drifted from our alley.

HELP WANTED: ADVANCEMENT

positions that offer quick, accurate, experienced, wellrecommended
young girls and young women . . . good chance for advancement

*Ever since the day
Sally went away*

GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS

canvassers . . . caretakers . . . cashiers . . . chambermaids . . .
waitresses . . . cleaners . . . file clerks . . . companions . . . comptometer
operators . . . collection correspondents . . . cooks . . . dictaphone
operators . . . gentlewomen . . . multigraph operators . . . Elliott Fisher
operators . . . bill and entry clerks . . . gummers . . . glove buyers . . .
governesses . . . hairdressers . . . models . . . good opportunity for stylish
young ladies . . . intelligent young women

*Went down to St. James Infirmary
Saw my baby there
All stretched out on a table
So pale, so cold, so fair*

Went up to see the doctor

WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF POSITIONS OPEN

we are anxious to fill vacancies, we offer good salaries,
commissions, bonuses, prizes, business opportunities, training,
advancement, educational opportunities, hospital service . . . restroom
and lunchroom where excellent lunch is served at less than cost

*Let her go let her go God bless her
Wherever she may be
She may roam this wide world over
She'll never find a sweet man like me*

“I Wonder What’s Become of Sally,”
song by Ager & Youmans,
recorded by Al Jolson and others.

*I wonder what’s become of Sally,
That old gal of mine.
The sunshine’s missing from our alley,
Ever since the day Sally went away.*

*No matter where she is,
Whatever she may be,
If no one wants her now,
Please send her back to me.*

*I’ll always welcome back my Sally,
That old gal of mine*

comptometer: early mechanical calculator

dictaphone: office recording device for
dictating correspondence, memos, etc.

multigraph: early office printing machine

Elliott Fisher: specialized office typewriter
for billing and bookkeeping

“St. James Infirmary”: American blues
number based on an English folk song,
recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1928,
in which a down-and-out man recounts
finding his loved one’s body at a hospital.

“St. James Infirmary”

SEVENTY-EIGHTH YEAR

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

THE MONTHLY JOURNAL OF PRACTICAL INFORMATION

NEW YORK, APRIL, 1922



Agriculture	Manufacturing	Transportation	Trade	Professional	Domestic and personal	Clerical
1,264,806	1,891,998	214,900	479,000	1,018,800	2,184,000	1,424,905
12.7%	22.6%	2.5%	7.8%	11.9%	25.2%	16.7%

How our female workers are distributed over the several broad classifications into which the Census Bureau groups them. The 0.3 per cent unaccounted for are engaged in mining and public service, but in such small numbers that they cannot be satisfactorily shown on the same scale with the groups above represented. The "Domestic and Personal" group includes only hired workers, and not home-keeping wives and mothers, who are officially listed as without occupation.



Agriculture	Mining	Manufacture	Transportation	Trade	Professional	Domestic and personal	Clerical
9,967,999	1,587,800	16,352,000	2,852,999	2,574,999	1,336,999	1,216,000	1,606,000
29.5%	3.9%	32.9%	8.6%	10.8%	3.4%	3.7%	5.1%

The way in which the male workers are distributed over the same groups. The public service workers, 2.3 per cent of the total, are again not represented. As might have been expected, the men and the women are allocated in entirely different proportions to most of the groups. The most significant feature of the showing here made is the size of the "Manufacture" group, and the fact that less than one-third of the male workers are able to produce food for all of us.

HOW AMERICA'S MALE AND FEMALE WORKERS EARN THEIR DAILY BREAD

Scientific American, April 1922

Rev. Hugh L. McMenamin [Roman Catholic priest]
"Evils of Woman's Revolt against the Old Standards"
Current History, October 1927

Look about you. The theatre, the magazine, the current fiction, the ballroom, the night clubs and the joyrides—all give evidence of an ever-increasing disregard for even the rudiments of decency in dress, deportment, conventions [standards], and conduct. Little by little the bars have been lowered, leaving out the few influences that held society in restraint. One need be neither prude nor puritan to feel that something is passing in the hearts and in the minds of the women of today that is leaving them cold and unwomanly. . . .

We may try to deceive ourselves and close our eyes to the prevailing flapper conduct. We may call boldness greater self-reliance, brazenness greater self-assertion, license greater freedom, and try to pardon immodesty in dress by calling it style and fashion, but the fact remains that deep down in our hearts we feel a sense of shame and pity. . . .

Modern economic conditions, with the mania for speedy profits, have been a powerful factor in producing the "New Woman," inasmuch as they have dragged her into the commercial world and made her economically independent. It is quite impossible for a woman to engage successfully in business and politics and at the same time create a happy home. A woman cannot be a mother and a typist at the same time, and unfortunately she elects to be merely a wife, and out of that condition have arisen those temples of race suicide—our modern apartment houses—and the consequent grinding of the divorce mills.

V. F. Calverton [editor and essayist]
"Careers for Women—A Survey of Results"
Current History, January 1929

If the mother has children, their lives are no longer confined only to the narrow boundaries of a single house, but have a chance at a more varied and stimulating form of growth. As one woman very aptly expressed it: "The future mother will not threaten to abandon the care of her baby for a job. She will not have to. The baby will have abandoned her. No educational sign of the times seems clearer. Quite irrespective of his mother's desire for domesticity or a career, tomorrow's toddler will be cared for outside the home for at least a part of the day." (Eunice Fuller Barnard, "The Child Takes a Nurse," *Survey Graphic*, December 1926). The old patriarchal home, in which everything centered, disappeared long ago with the rapidly changing developments of our modern industrial civilization. Not only could it not persist with women working, but it had had the children drawn from it even before by the many new institutions and attractions of modern life. While the women of the old generation were afraid of precisely this change, and attacked it as a sign of decay, the new women, the women of this rising generation, greeted it with an enthusiastic intelligence.

The community needs educated and efficient women just as it needs educated and efficient men. The modern world can no longer do without either. But its very existence and continuity depend upon good homemakers and mothers. In other words, there can be no solution until ample provision is made in our educational system from the bottom to the top for the training of future homemakers, side by side with the training of women for professional and other careers. One should always involve the other.

Louis L. Dublin, "Homemaking and Careers,"
The Atlantic Monthly, September 1926



Progress

- 1900: She owns her own home.
- 1910: She owns her own car.
- 1920: She owns her own business.

"Tom Masson Says," regular feature of humorous commentary, *Collier's*, January 5, 1929



It is a great mistake, however, to think that woman can ever be completely independent of man, no matter what she wishes to believe or have others believe. The movement of emancipation begun by women has gone too fast and too far and many have misunderstood the question. Her great aim appears to be Freedom from Man. What woman should want in reality is to be delivered from the shackles into which man has put her, her intelligence, desires, ambitions, and talents.

Dr. Joseph Collins, "Woman's Morality in Transition," *Current History*, October 1927



The character of American women under the impact of modern conditions has, it would seem to the observer, gained in strength, honesty, initiative, camaraderie, and self-confidence, but perhaps lost somewhat in patience, sweetness, and the more superficial "feminine" traits. There is no evidence to show that their moral quality has deteriorated.

Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, "The Women's Revolution," *Current History*, October 1923

Elise Johnson McDougald
 "The Double Task: The Struggle
 of Negro Women for Sex and
 Race Emancipation"
Survey Graphic, March 1, 1925

Elise J. McDougald was a noted Harlem school administrator active in vocational guidance and social welfare programs. Her essay appeared in the special issue of *Survey Graphic* edited by Alain Locke, entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro."

Throughout the long years of history, woman has been the weather vane, the indicator, showing in which direction the wind of destiny blows. Her status and development have augured now calm and stability, now swift currents of progress. What then is to be said of the Negro woman today?

In Harlem, more than anywhere else, the Negro woman is free from the cruder handicaps of primitive household hardships and the grosser forms of sex and race subjugation. Here she has considerable opportunity to measure her powers in the intellectual and industrial fields of the great city. Here the questions naturally arise: "What are her problems?" and "How is she solving them?" . . .

Better to visualize the Negro woman at her job, our vision of a host of individuals must once more resolve itself into groups on the basis of activity. First, comes a very small leisure group—the wives and daughters of men who are in business, in the professions and a few well-paid personal service occupations. Second, a most active and progressive group, the women in business and the professions. Third, the many women in the trades and industry. Fourth, a group weighty in numbers struggling on in domestic service, with an even less fortunate fringe of casual workers, fluctuating with the economic temper of the times. . . .

A spirit of stress and struggle characterizes the second two groups. These women of business, profession, and trade are the hub of the wheel of progress. Their burden is two-fold. Many are wives and mothers whose husbands are insufficiently paid, or who have succumbed to social maladjustment and have abandoned their families. An appalling number are widows. They face the great problem of leaving home each day and at the same time trying to rear children in their spare time—this too in neighborhoods where rents are large, standards of dress and recreation high and costly, and social danger on the increase.

The great commercial life of New York City is only slightly touched by the Negro woman of our second group. Negro businessmen offer her most of their work, but their number is limited. Outside of this field, custom is once more against her and competition is keen for all. However, Negro girls are training and some are holding exceptional jobs. . . .

We find the Negro woman, figuratively, struck in the face daily by contempt from the world about her. Within her soul, she knows little of peace and happiness. Through it all, she is courageously standing erect, developing within herself the moral strength to rise above and conquer false attitudes. . . . The wind of the race's destiny stirs more briskly because of her striving.



Elise J. McDougald



Mary McLeod Bethune



The Brown Madonna

Illustrations by Winold Reiss for Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 1925, collection of the *Survey Graphic* essays

Courtesy of the New York Public Library

Motherhood True Mission

:: WYOMING GOVERNOR PRAISES MODERN DRESS ::

Of Woman, Says Nellie Ross

Digital image courtesy of ProQuest Historical Newspapers

The Atlanta Constitution, March 28, 1926

Rock Springs, Wyo., March 27—(AP)—Although she has faith in the future of America's young womanhood and believes the "freedom of the younger generation of women will prove beneficial," Governor Nellie Ross holds that the highest position of woman in life is matrimony and motherhood and not in the business world or in public life.

In such fashion Wyoming's woman governor expressed her views in an address today before the Rock Springs organization of Girl Scouts, of which she is an honorary member.

She characterized the new liberties and freedom accorded modern girls as leading to greater "intellectual and spiritual development and physical charm of womankind." The modern miss is more attractive than the clinging vine type of a generation ago, she declared, and the modern dress is not only more sensible but promotes health and grace.

"I am old-fashioned enough, however, to believe that no career for women," she said, "is as glorious or satisfying as that which wifehood and motherhood offers and it is there she fulfills her highest destiny."

The modern girl is "fortunate in living in a day when practically every restraint is removed that could repress a girl's happy spirit or handicap her progress," Governor Ross said.

The woman executive, however, sounded a note of warning about "this freedom" of women by saying that "it may be the pendulum has swung too far and that we have gone to extremes in our liberalized views, for it is most important that liberty be not mistaken for license and the girl of today should use her liberty as a means of development into the finest type of womanhood."

Henry R. Carey
"This Two-Headed Monster—The Family"
Harper's, January 1928

Wholesale divorce is thus a distinctively American phenomenon. If we wish to explain it, therefore, we must look for a distinctively American cause. We must see its reason for existence in some

clearly American aspect of family life. Is it due to the comparative brutality or neglect of American husbands? But American husbands have the reputation in all foreign countries of being the most faithful, indulgent, and even cringing in the world. Is it caused by the American woman's political freedom? Hardly, for women have liberty as citizens in many foreign countries where divorce is not a rapidly growing phenomenon: women may vote even in China. But just notice this: a wife's financial independence of her husband is a characteristic of family life far more marked in America than elsewhere. Nowhere has a married woman's economic emancipation been carried so far. An American wife is remarkably free to earn money and to spend it; in a word, to live a life comparatively independent of her husband. Of course there are cases of husbands whose unproductiveness forces their wives to earn outside the home. But the fact remains that public opinion permits the American wife to make money whether or not it is really needed. . . .

Feminists, note this well! It is the double-headedness of the modern American family which is causing it so frequently to split down the middle, leaving the children more or less exposed. The heads are at war with each other. The house divided against itself does not, we observe, stand. Marriage dissolves in feminism as sugar melts in acid. No one expects married women with the priceless gift of leisure to spend their time entirely within the home. But let them avoid the mistake of assuming the man's part.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC FREEDOM BLAMED IN MARRIAGE DECLINE

New York Experts Aver Morals Are Not Involved in Slow but Sure Divorce Rise

Dorothy Ducas, *New York Evening Post*, January 5, 1929

Marriage is declining in popularity in New York City, while divorce is gaining in favor, and the women are to blame.

In spite of the solemn pronouncement from pulpits and platform that the younger generation is, at heart, exactly like the elder, sociologists today have to admit a change has come over metropolitan young folk, especially women, in the face of figures now available for the year just ended.

In 1928, the City Bureau of Vital Statistics reports today, there were 6,007 fewer marriages than in 1927. . . .

AN AGE OF ADJUSTMENT

As for divorces, . . . it was estimated there would be some 1,300 decrees granted, an increase of more than 100 over those handed down in 1927.

"Women with their new opportunities won't stand for what they used to stand for," is the way Professor Clarence G. Dittmer, head of the department of sociology at New York University, explained it. "Increase in divorce is part and parcel of an age of adjustment. It accompanies growth and expanding democracy, comes along with new economic and social opportunities for women.

"It is part of women's readjustment to a new situation, and it is either a temporary phase or it will be disastrous."

Professor Dittmer said the decline in marriage rate is peculiar to urban centers, for the country, as a whole, is "the most married country on the face of the earth," quoting Dr. E. A. Rose of the University of Wisconsin, who is now director of Floating University. . . .

NEED SANER REGULATION

"If this state of affairs goes on, with one out of every six marriages in the United States ending in divorce, the time will come when every other marriage performed will [obscure] on the rocks. If such inefficiency existed in any

other social institution we'd worry our heads off. For we certainly are up against it until we get uniform, decent, and honest divorce laws and very much saner regulation of marriage." . . .

"The economic independence of women may mean delayed marriage," he commented [Dr. Samuel McCune Lindsey, professor of social legislation, Columbia University]. "But even this factor is counteracted to a great degree by the entrance of married women into industry. Careers and children are satisfactory to women today when only a short while ago the two were thought incompatible."

"The rise in divorce is economic rather than moral, I believe. It springs from an adjustment to a higher standard of living, a desire for material comfort not formerly taken into consideration. But in general, monogamy rests more securely on the economic life of the present day than never before, individual variations count for nothing in statistics."

A philosophy of individualism is responsible, in part anyhow, for the slump in marriages and rise in divorces, thought Professor Robert MacDougall of the social psychology department of New York University. This philosophy also accounts for a shrinking of the size of families these days.

Modern youth is engaged in a "struggle for greater individual freedom of action," and adapts marriage to that end, Professor MacDougall declared.

The facts of the case would seem to bear out the opinions of sociologists that women are to blame. Twice as many wives as husbands obtain divorces, even in New York State, where the whole situation cannot be studied successfully because of the great number of New Yorkers who obtain divorces in Paris or Rome or Sonora, Mexico.



Life magazine ad, 1919
Life



Women transcribing dictaphone records, no location, ca. 1925
National Archives



Woman at sorting machine, Florida, ca. 1925
Library of Congress

Two Women's Views on Birth Control

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW ■ MARCH & MAY 1929 ■ EXCERPTS

Birth control within modern womanhood was a highly charged controversy often featured by American periodicals that invited commentary on its myriad socio-economic, medical, ethical, and religious considerations. This 1929 point-counterpoint discussion focused on the justifiability of large families in the age of “female emancipation” and growing national population.

— “Are Ten Too Many?” —

MARJORIE WELLS*
March 1929

I suppose I am old-fashioned. . . . The reason is that I have a large family, stretching already as far as the eye can reach and with the end not yet in sight. In an age when two or three children are considered the civilized and respectable achievement, I have ten to date and am still unchastened and unrepentant. . . . There are some who would weep for me and with me, if I gave them have a chance. There are others who probably think me a scab and blackleg, traitor and backslider, in these days of feminine emancipation. . . .

The trouble with all this loose talk and careful propaganda about Birth Control is that it implies, more or less subtly, that the large family is in itself a dangerous, undesirable, and even reprehensible performance. . . . It ignores all chances that the large family may have positive and intrinsic advantages of its own, and its own rewards and compensations for all the toil and trouble attached to it. It implies—without actually saying so—that the small family is the right family and the large family the wrong family, and that therefore people like myself are in some sense a public nuisance or a public menace. . . .

. . . Nobody denies that there are many mothers who have more children than they know what to do with. Everybody must agree that the world holds too much misery which is a by-product of unrestricted child-bearing, particularly now that Mrs. Sanger has filled a book with it [*Motherhood in Bondage*, 1928]. . . .

. . . Every married woman must draw up her own balance sheet of debits and credits in this business of motherhood. Every married man must do the same. Children are both a liability and an asset, and in order to reckon the net values of the family—natural, moral, and spiritual—the parents must have an honest showdown with their own consciences and convictions. What they do about it is their own business, and should have nothing to do with the current fashions in families or the legal status of this doctrine of that. When the subsurface agitation in favor of Birth Control begins to assume shape as a popular notion that three or four or five children are enough, it takes away from the most conscientious parents something of the freedom to which they are entitled.

*probably the wife of writer-columnist Donald F. Rose, using her maiden name. The couple eventually had twelve children. [NHC note]

— “Women and Birth Control” —

MARGARET SANGER, birth control activist
May 1929

I was one of eleven children. My mother died in her forties. My father enjoyed life until his eighties. Seven of my brothers and sisters are still living. If I am not an “old-fashioned” woman, at least I was an old-fashioned child. I have never thought it necessary to call public attention to these circumstances of my life. . . .

I have been impelled to cast aside my habitual reticence because I have just finished reading a highly personal essay in the March number of the *North American Review*, written by a lady known as Marjorie Wells. Mrs. Wells confesses herself the mother of ten children. . . . This biological fact seems to endow Mrs. Wells with the glib authority to hand down decisions concerning complex problems which have puzzled humanity since civilization first began. . . .

Even for that very limited and very special type of woman who is gifted by nature and natural inclination—and also by wealth—to undertake a specialized career in maternity and to become the mother of ten or a dozen children, there is need for the practice of Birth Control. For if she be intelligent and farseeing, such a woman will recognize the necessity of “spacing” her children, of recuperating her full physical strength and psychic well-being after the birth of one child before undertaking the conception of another. Mothers of large families have written me expressing their gratitude for the benefits of Birth Control. It has enabled them to give each of their children a good start in life. It has prevented crowding, and has moreover permitted them to enjoy marital communion which would otherwise have been impossible. But let us recognize today—with the ever-increasing cost of living, and the high cost of childbirth—that the large family must more and more be considered the privilege of the moneyed class. . . .

American civilization has long passed the pioneer stage of its development. We no longer have a vast continent to populate. We no longer need mere numbers. But we are only beginning to realize that there are other values in life than those of mere quantity. We have not yet outgrown the adolescent habit of worshipping the biggest this, the largest that, the most of the other thing.

Will Rogers, the "cowboy-philosopher"
Weekly syndicated column
March 31, 1929*

For decades, Will Rogers claimed the seat as the most popular political humorist in America—his witty folksy newspaper column was published in hundreds of newspapers across the nation. Often tongue-in-cheek as in this piece, Rogers supported women's suffrage among other progressive causes.

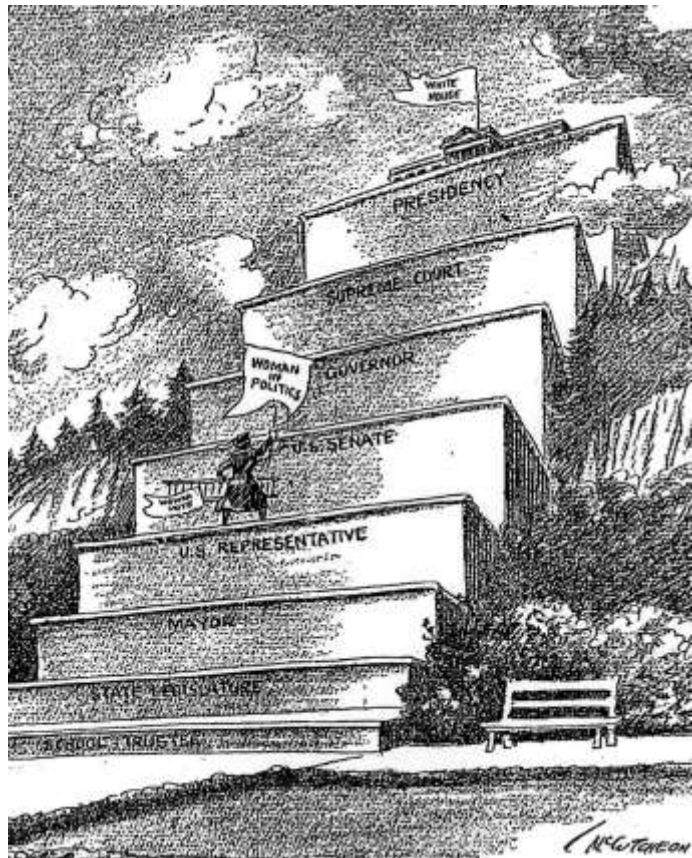
You know Women are getting into more things that are embarrassing to them men. You see the first idea of giving them the vote was just to use the vote. But the Women contrary like they are, they wasnt satisfied with that. They started to take this equality thing serious. They begin to think they really was somebody. The women figured that "While we may not be as good as a Man, we are at least as good a Politician." So the Scamps commenced to want to get in on the loot. As soon as they found out a Political Job took no experience to hold, that it only took experience to get, why they commenced to making themselves rather embarrassing around the Political employment Bureau, and now every one of them call themselves as a Number 2 Company of Mabel W. Willerbrandt.[†] It was all right with the men when the women took the little Committee assignments where there was NO salary connected, but when they started to want to put their powdered nose into the feed trough, why that brought on complications. Now they are wondering, "Was the Women's vote worth what they are asking for it?" . . .

But this Nineteenth Amendment is worrying more people in the Country than the Eighteenth. . . . The men give 'em the vote, and never meant for them to take it seriously. But being Women they took the wrong meaning and did.

Carrie Chapman Catt [women's rights activist]
"Women Suffrage Only an Episode in
Age-Old Movement"
Current History, October 1927

The vote won, some women ask, "Has it been worth the trouble it cost?" Some men ask, "What good has it done?" "What change has it wrought?" "Is the new way better than the old?"

The first and chief effect of the triumph of woman suffrage is one the general public has probably not noticed, or if so, has not comprehended. A vast army has been demobilized. What became of the army? Every woman discharged from the suffrage campaign merely stepped back into the ranks of the broader woman movement from which she and her predecessors emerged some seventy-five years ago with the definite object of eliminating one discrimination against women. Having achieved the aim of that endeavor by notable sacrifice and effort, they returned to carry on. What is the woman movement and what is its aim? It is a demand for equality of opportunity between the sexes. It means that when and if a woman is as well qualified as a man to fill a position, she shall have an equal and unprejudiced chance to secure it.



"How High Will She Go?"

John T. McCutcheon, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 29, 1922

Step labels: School trustee. State legislature. Mayor. U.S. Representative.
U.S. Senate. Governor. Supreme Court. Presidency.

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* *The Writings of Will Rogers* (Oklahoma State University Press, 1980-1981), ed. James M. Smallwood, Vol. IV, The Hoover Years: 1929-1931; 1981, pp. 6-8.
Reproduced by permission of the Will Rogers Memorial Commission (an agency of the State of Oklahoma).

[†] Mabel Walker Willebrandt: Asst. U.S. Attorney General in charge of enforcing Prohibition.

The “Blanket Amendment”—A Debate

THE FORUM ■ AUGUST 1924 ■ EXCERPTS

The Forum, a monthly magazine of commentary, regularly invited essays on controversial issues of the day. In 1924 it addressed the “Blanket Amendment” to the Constitution that had been introduced into Congress the year before, asserting that “men and women shall have equal rights through the United States and every place under its jurisdiction.” The *Forum* invited essays by Doris Stevens, a suffragist leader on the executive committee of the National Woman’s Party, and Dr. Alice Hamilton, the first female faculty member of the Harvard School of Medicine. (A similar amendment passed Congress in 1972 but failed state ratification.) Photos: Library of Congress

—“Suffrage Does Not Give Equality” —

DORIS STEVENS

[Suffragist leader and author of *Jailed for Freedom*; age 31]



When women finally got the right to vote, after seventy-five years of agitation in the United States, many good citizens sighed with relief and said, “Now that’s over. The woman problem is disposed of.” But was it? Exactly what do women want now? Just this. They ask the same rights, in law and in custom, with which every man

is now endowed through the accident of being born a male. Frail and inadequate as these rights may be, compared to those rights we would like to see enjoyed by all men, women are nevertheless still deprived of many of them. . . .

Here lies the heart of the whole controversy. It is not astonishing, but very intelligent indeed, that the battle should center on the point of woman’s right to sell her labor on the same terms as man. For unless she is able equally to compete, to earn, to control, and to invest her money, unless in short woman’s economic position is made more secure, certainly she cannot establish equality in fact. She will have won merely the shadow of power without essential and authentic substance.

Those who would limit only women to certain occupations and to certain restricted hours of work, base their program of discrimination on two points, the “moral hazard” to women and their biological inferiority. It is a philosophy which would penalize all women because some women are morally frail and physically weak. It asks women to set their pace with the weakest member of their sex. All men are not strong. Happily it has not occurred to society to limit the development of all men because some are weak. . . . Natural fitness, not “protection,” will determine the extent of competition.

—“Protection for Women Workers” —

ALICE HAMILTON

[Physician and Harvard professor of medicine; age 55]



I belong to the group which holds that the right method is to repeal or alter one by one the laws that now hamper women or work injustice to them, and which opposes the constitutional amendment sponsored by the Woman’s Party on the ground that it is too dangerously sweeping and all-inclusive. If no legis-

lation is to be permitted except it apply to both sexes, we shall find it impossible to regulate by law the hours or wages or conditions of work of women, and that would be, in my opinion, a harm far greater than the good that might be accomplished by removing certain antiquated abuses and injustices, which, bad as they are, do not injure nearly so many women as would be affected if all protective laws for working women were rendered unconstitutional. . . .

. . . For every woman linotypist [typesetting machine operator] who wishes to take night work on a newspaper, there must be hundreds of textile mill operatives [workers] who suffer from the compulsion to work on the night shift. For one supervisor or forewoman who wishes to work overtime, there must be hundreds of saleswomen and telephone girls who long to be freed from the necessity of so doing. It would seem that the safer, if slower, way would be to work out exemptions, so far as possible, in such legislation, to provide for those women who really do wish for entire freedom in making their bargains and are entitled to it.

We are told by members of the Woman’s Party that if we “free” the working women, allow her to “compete on equal terms with men,” her industrial status will at once be raised. . . . But such a statement could never be made by anyone familiar with labor.

Mayme Ober Peak [*Boston Globe* reporter]
 "Women in Politics"
Outlook, January 23, 1924

Given an outlook beyond the narrow confines of home, women were astonished to find politics so closely allied with other things. It came as a surprise to them to learn that politics meant street laws, ash barrels,* speeding laws,

the school, the movie, and the playground; that politics, as Kathleen Norris aptly puts it, "was not a mysterious big machine turning vaguely somewhere in space, with no reference to your boys and mine, your little girls and their school, their first beaux [boyfriends] and their first babies."

With the realization that the way they voted would have a profound influence on all these things, came the desire to vote right. And, woefully aware of their lack of political knowledge, the first thing the women undertook was to learn *how to vote right*. They attended citizenship schools and leagues and joined organizations specializing on women as voting citizens. Which non-partisan training is largely responsible for the woman's vote being the independent unit it is today.

A man inherits his politics, voting as his father and grandfather before him. This is not true of a woman. She takes her politics as seriously as her job, and more seriously than her religion. She may be a Presbyterian because her mother is, but she will not be a Democrat because of her father or husband.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman [writer & feminist activist]
 "Women's Achievements since the Franchise"
Outlook, October 1927

It is quite beyond the limits of this brief study to examine the 420 newly enacted state laws worked for by the League of Women Voters, or the 500 laws drafted by the National Woman's

Party, but "the traces of woman's hand" in one state may be taken as a sample of the general trend. The substance of some of the amendments and additions enacted in the laws of California since 1921 follows herewith:[†]

- married women given general right to sue or be sued without husband
- creation of division of dental hygiene for children under State Boards of Health
- stiffening of act to enforce educational rights of children
- raising legal age of marriage to 18 for boys, 16 for girls, if approved by parents—otherwise 21 and 18
- punishment of father for failure to provide for legitimate or illegitimate child [born in or out of wedlock]
- abandonment of legitimate or illegitimate child, born or unborn, by father a misdemeanor
- various amendments to juvenile court laws . . .
- in the public school curriculum these additional subjects must be taught: "thrift, fire prevention, the humane treatment of animals, the evil effects on the human system of tobacco, alcohol, and other narcotics."



Life, women's suffrage cover, Oct. 28, 1920



Women at voting poll, New York City(?), ca. 1922



Ruth Owen (middle), Florida's first woman congressman, 1929

* Ash barrel: refuse bin for coal ashes from heaters. Cities were responsible for the pickup and disposal of coal ash.

† List formatting added.

Eleanor Roosevelt
"Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do"
Red Book Magazine, April 1928*

In 1928 Eleanor Roosevelt was appointed director of the Bureau of Woman's Activities of the Democratic National Committee. That year her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was elected governor of New York.

Personally, I do not believe in a Woman's Party. A woman's ticket could never possibly succeed. And to crystallize the issues on the basis of sex-opposition would only further antagonize men, congeal their age-old prejudices, and widen the chasm of existing differences.

How, then, can we bring the men leaders to concede participation in party affairs, adequate representation, and real political equality?

Our means is to elect, accept, and back women political bosses.

To organize as women, but within the parties, in districts, counties and states just as men organize, and to pick efficient leaders—say two or three in each state—whom we will support and by whose decisions we will abide. With the power of unified women voters behind them, such women bosses would be in a position to talk in terms of "business" with the men leaders; their voices would be heard, because their authority and the elective power they could command would have to be recognized.

Women are today ignored largely because they have no banded unity under representative leaders and spokesmen capable of dealing with the bosses controlling groups of men whose votes they can "deliver." These men bosses have the power of coordinated voters behind them. Our helplessness is that of an incoherent anarchy.

Perhaps the word "boss" may shock sensitive ears. To many it will conjure all that is unhealthy and corrupt in our political machinery. Yet when I speak of women bosses, I mean bosses actually in the sense that men are bosses. The term *boss* does not necessarily infer what it once did. Politics have been purged of many of the corruptions prevalent a quarter of a century ago. In neither of the political parties are there many, if any, such bosses, great or small, as were such common types in the heyday of Quay and Tweed.[†] As things are today, the boss is a leader, often an enlightened, high-minded leader, who retains little of the qualities imputed by the old use of this obnoxious word, but who still exercises authority over his district. I therefore use the word, as it is the word men understand.

If women believe they have a right and duty in political life today, they must learn to talk the language of men. They must not only master the phraseology, but also understand the machinery which men have built up through years of practical experience. Against the men bosses there must be women bosses who can talk as equals, with the backing of a coherent organization of women voters behind them.

There has been some question whether the women jurors would not be too sympathetic [*sic*] and let criminals go scot-free or allow them undue leniency. This doubt certainly has not been borne out in my experience. John Azzarello was tried for first-degree murder before me and found guilty; the only woman on the jury was steadfast for conviction. We have lately tried Frank Motto [gangster] for first-degree murder in my court. He was found guilty without a recommendation of mercy, which means that he received the death penalty. The foreman of the jury was a woman; in fact, she was the only woman on the jury. . . .

However, in the preliminary selection of jurors for these cases, many women were excused because they were opposed to capital punishment and would shrink from sending to the [electric] chair another mother's son. It is evident that generalizations cannot be made as to women jurors any more than as to men jurors, as far as leniency is concerned.

Judge Florence E. Allen, an elected woman judge in Ohio, *The Woman Citizen*, quoted in "Tried and Approved—The Woman Juror," *The Literary Digest*, Sept. 17, 1921



Women may wear trousers in Wisconsin, a facetious state senator remarked in discussing the bill, just passed, which gives full legal equality to the women voters of the state. "But they are not going to do it," predicts the *New York Herald*, and the *Manchester Union* is sure that "the women of Wisconsin will be just as womanly as ever, and the men will find that nothing happens to dim the old ideals of either the man or the woman." Thus, as the *Omaha Bee* points out, despite "the old-fashioned fears that woman would be unsexed, that she would lose the mother instinct, and that the home would be broken up by her advent [entrance] into politics." Now that all legal restrictions governing the fair sex in Wisconsin have been removed and an important precedent thus established, the National Woman's Party is considering a "twentieth amendment" to the Constitution which will give them equal representation by women in Congress, on the Supreme Court, and on all federal and state tribunals [courts]—"everywhere," as one editor remarks, "except in the Army and Navy."

"Wisconsin, Where Women Are People"
The Literary Digest, July 30, 1921

* Courtesy of George Washington University Library, Dept. of History, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project.
† Matthew Quay in Pennsylvania and "Boss" William Tweed in New York.



"I simply **CAN'T** Let Him Outgrow Me"

SHE LIVES IN A LITTLE HOUSE in a suburb of New York and makes that house a home.

He too lives in the little house for a part of his life; but the rest of it is spent in an office in the city.

All sorts of men ride with him on the suburban trains, or visit him in his office, or meet him for luncheon at his club.

His life is full of stimulating contacts. Every day brings him new experiences that mean larger growth and more assurance. He is a far bigger man to-day than he was last year, and ten times bigger than when they were married ten years ago.

And she?

Her life, too, is filled full; but the experiences that come to her are neither so various nor so stimulating.

There are the older children who must be hurried off to school each morning. There is the baby to be bathed and put to sleep. There are meals to be planned, and bills to be paid.

So, day after day slips by with hardly a spare moment. Happy days—she would not change them if she could! Only a single cloud crosses the horizon of her happiness.

In the evening sometimes when they sit on their little front porch, and he tells her of the experiences of the day, of the men he has met and the topics he has discussed, of the problems he has solved—problems that a few years ago would have been far too large for him—at such moments the cloud is there.

No such experiences have come to her that day. The problems that he and his friends discuss are strange and far away. She had meant to know more about them, but there was no time.

"Suppose he should outgrow me," she

says to herself. "Suppose that ten years from now should find him bigger, broader, abler because of his experiences, and me, no longer his mental companion, merely the mother of his children."

The thought causes her lips to close a little more tightly.

"Somehow I must find a way to keep my thought and interest constantly fresh, constantly expanding, step by step with his. *I simply can't let him outgrow me.*"

How many million women in America have been troubled by that thought? How many of them have felt a vague resentment at the conditions of modern life, which make mental growth so easy for men and so frequently difficult for women?

How many couples have set forth into life with every thought and interest in common, only to find themselves at the end of ten or twenty years living in wholly different mental worlds?

No, one can know the answer to this question. But this one thing is sure—*at least two million American women have faced this difficulty frankly and have conquered it.*

They have put definitely behind them any fear that their husbands or their children will outgrow them.

Other women frequently wonder at their breadth of information.

Does the conversation turn to the industrial unrest that permeates every part of our country? These alert women have a clear knowledge of its causes and effects. They are familiar with unique and sensible plans to reduce the cost of living.

They are quite at ease in their knowledge of our national and international affairs; what great personalities are doing; the season's plays and operas; modern verse;

new books; our relations with Japan; the latest developments in the fields of invention and science.

These far-seeing women are equally at home on all topics—have a well-rounded knowledge of the great developments of life the world over. *They keep up with the times!*

Men find their conversation stimulating; their children turn to them confidently, knowing that on the subject which has that day been discussed in school—perhaps some current problem of great importance—mother can be of help.

"Who are these extraordinary women?" you ask. "How can they, with the multitude of personal responsibilities, find time to be so well informed?"

The answer is very simple. They have learned this secret of the modern world—that the highest achievement is possible only to those who employ trained help to do for them the things they can not accomplish for themselves.

And so, they let our organization of specialists labor constantly for their benefit. Every week 4,000 newspapers, and magazines, and books, representing every land and language, are read by this organization and then by direct translation, or reprint, or in digest form *all phases* of the important news of the world contained in them are presented by striking articles in **THE LITERARY DIGEST**. Through the magic of its pages the world, with all its throbbing interests and personalities, is carried to men and women. And a couple of hours' reading weekly is all the time required to absorb this feast!

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