

“The New Woman” (1995)¹

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Women’s lives, like those of men’s, were profoundly affected by the increasingly organized nature of society, the emergence of the mass media and a consumer culture, and the changes in work and politics. And, like men, women constituted a heterogeneous group divided by race, class, ethnicity, and cultural values, whose very diversity testified to the increasingly pluralistic nature of society. Similarities in what men and women encountered in the 1920s are important, but gender was crucial in determining experience. Contemporary observers recognized this implicitly by characterizing the “new woman,” as she was called, as a telling marker, a symbol, of modernity itself. They were right in their assessment that women’s lives had changed dramatically since the late nineteenth century. Their entry into the public arena through participation in politics and an expanded presence in the workplace challenged older assumptions about women’s proper sphere. Changing sexual mores also set the stage for a new conception of womanhood. This chapter explores the contours of the new womanhood by examining politics, work, and the personal arena. While documenting the complex changes which transformed and in many ways modernized women’s lives, it demonstrates that for most women the modern goals of equality and personal autonomy were often elusive.

THE NEW WOMAN AND POLITICS

Perceptions of a new woman emerged as early as the 1890s. The term itself referred to women’s increased college attendance and modest entry into the professions, and to their new athleticism and rejection of bulky, restrictive Victorian garments. It also encompassed the way in which late-nineteenth-century middle-class women had begun to shed traditional notions that their place was exclusively in the home. They were pushing out the boundaries of their traditional sphere and entering the political arena. Through their voluntary associations, these women had become political actors, lobbying for progressive reform legislation such as factory and child labor laws, prohibition, and urban reforms.

Women also continued the battle for full political rights through suffrage. A significant number of twentieth-century Suffragists argued that women’s superior morality would place them above the corruption of politics and they would bring their moral influence into the political scene and effect wide-ranging reforms. The practical uses of the vote attracted both upper- and middle-class reformers as well as working-class women to the campaign. Black women in their communities, although generally rebuffed by white women’s organizations, also campaigned for suffrage, which they viewed as one step toward racial progress.

The long battle for suffrage heated up in 1910 when the state of Washington approved a suffrage referendum and brought renewed enthusiasm to the campaign. At about the same time,

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more radical voices were heard within the movement. Although elite and middle-class women were in the forefront of the fight, working-class and socialist women were a growing presence and helped to strengthen the Congressional Union, later called the National Woman's Party (NWP). The Congressional Union was founded in 1913, and a year later, led by Alice Paul, it broke with the more conservative National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), directed by Carrie Chapman Catt, and launched a campaign for a national amendment. Influenced both by British "suffragettes" and by the experiences of American working-class women with industrial strikes, Congressional Union members picketed the White House during World War I to protest that while the country fought a war for democracy abroad it denied women their democratic rights at home. Distressed by such militant tactics, NAWSA leaders continued their more moderate campaigns in which they emphasized women's wartime service to the country. This uneasy alliance of a wide variety of women, using different tactics, finally overcame determined opposition, and in 1920 the federal amendment passed, enfranchising women throughout the nation. Having won the vote, women's leaders entered the new decade with optimism about their newly enlarged public responsibilities. They expected women voters to make a difference on a variety of fronts. They would pursue equality through legislation to expand their legal rights. Through organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Women's Committee for World Disarmament, they would bring about disarmament and set the framework for a lasting peace, and domestically, they would implement a wide range of social reforms.

Women activists were not alone in their expectations about the potential power of female voters. Male politicians, many of whom had resisted suffrage and the disruption it threatened to the political equilibrium, took suffragists at their word that women would be a force to reckon with. The Democratic National Convention of 1920 incorporated twelve of twenty recommendations of the newly founded League of Women Voters; the Republican Party adopted five. Women became active as cadre in the political parties, and through their voluntary associations they lobbied for a variety of reforms.

Given the enthusiasm, energy, and commitment of these activists, and the susceptibility of politicians to claims about women's political power, one of the crucial questions of twentieth-century women's history has been why they accomplished relatively little with their votes. By the end of the 1920s, social reform had stalled, and the women's movement itself was in the doldrums. The new woman had clearly not fulfilled the great political expectations that her supporters had prophesied. The explanation is complex. External circumstances, particularly the conservative political climate of the 1920s, were important factors in setting limits to women's gains. In addition, weaknesses within the movement played a part. Before suffrage, diverse women could unite behind the single issue of the vote, but the women's movement, like progressivism itself, had been a fragile coalition and it fissured in the 1920s. Once the vote was achieved, differences and special interests surfaced. As activist Frances Kellor put it in 1923: "The American woman's movement, and her interest in great moral and social questions, is splintered into a hundred fragments under as many warring leaders."

The many splinters suggest an increasing awareness on women's part of the significance of categories other than gender that defined them. Certainly this was the case with African American women. Like their white counterparts, middle-class black women were well organized

in the late nineteenth century. Through groups such as the National Association of Colored Women, founded in 1893, they sought to “uplift” their race through a variety of reforms. In addition, many women leaders had a strong feminist sense as well, and were eager to raise women’s position. Black women, in at least twenty suffrage organizations, were strong supporters of the campaign for the vote, especially after 1910. Black suffragists sought the vote in part as a means of protecting their sisters, but they also viewed it as a way of addressing racial issues such as Jim Crow, male disenfranchisement, and economic discrimination, goals that underlined their view that the elevation of black women as inseparable from racial progress.

With few exceptions, black women were excluded from the white-dominated suffrage groups. Racism, as well as a fear that black participation in the movement would confirm southern perceptions that the amendment would disrupt well-established black disenfranchisement in that region, led white suffragists to rebuff black women’s overtures at cooperation. Undeterred, even before the amendment passed, black women’s organizations had embarked on voter registration campaigns in states that had adopted the suffrage. It was not coincidental that New York State sent its first black legislator to Albany and Chicago elected its first black alderman shortly after women gained the vote in New York and Illinois. After the amendment was ratified, black women redoubled their efforts, focusing especially on the South, where the majority of blacks, male and female, were disenfranchised. For example, spurred on by the Nineteenth Amendment, Florida black women outregistered white women, who responded by forming the white supremacist Duval County League of Democratic Women voters, which vowed to register white women voters. More typically, white Southerners resisted black female registration through official channels that had long been used to deny suffrage to black men—tax qualifications, educational tests, grandfather clauses, and harassment. Black women, through the National Association of Colored Women, assisted by the NAACP, fought back. They assembled evidence, which the NAACP presented to Congress, along with a call to pass the Tinkham bill, designed to reduce congressional representation of states which restricted women’s suffrage. When this tactic failed, black women approached white women’s organizations to elicit some support for enforcing the Nineteenth Amendment.

But neither the League of Women Voters, the successor to NAWSA, nor the Woman’s Party was willing to support the reform efforts of black women voters in the South. The Woman’s Party indifference was typical of what black women encountered. At its 1921 convention, the National Association of Colored Women worked persistently to get the party to establish a committee to “bring pressure to bear on Congress for the appointment of a Special Congressional Committee to investigate the violation of the intent and purposes of the Nineteenth Amendment.” Alice Paul, arguing that this was a racial rather than a woman’s issue, refused to give the women specific convention time, even after a delegation of sixty black women called upon her. In the end, the frustrated black women presented the resolution from the floor, reminding the convention that “five million women in the United States cannot be denied their rights without all the women of the United States feeling the effect of that denial. No women are free until all women are free.” The resolution failed to pass.

It is not surprising, then, that black women pulled away from addressing specifically women’s issues that concerned white women and concentrated more on racial ones that they viewed as part of black women’s agenda for improving the lives of all African Americans. One

outspoken woman who explicitly criticized organizations like the Woman's Party and the League Of Women Voters was Amy Jacques Garvey, Marcus Garvey's wife and a leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in her own right. Garvey, a strong believer in women's capabilities, shared the black nationalism of the UNIA, but she did not let her racial agenda obscure her interest in advancing the cause of black women. She called for equality with men within the organization and argued that women should be at the forefront of the struggle for black liberation.

Other African American women in the 1920s increasingly worked within male-dominated black organizations to pursue their common racial interests. Black women's organizations had been leaders in the anti-lynching campaign of the late nineteenth century. In 1922, Mary B. Talbert established the Anti-Lynching Women Crusaders as a division of the NAACP, and organized over 700 state workers, who compiled statistics about lynching and conducted research. As they concentrated on lynching and economic improvement, black women backed away from white women's organizations, as well as from their own campaign to obtain the vote for blacks in the South. In 1928, the National Association of Colored Women's official program did not include the suffrage issue as one of its priorities. In a 1925 article published in *The Crisis* ("The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Race and Sex Emancipation"), Elsie J. MacDonald summed up the disaffection concisely by explaining that black "feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization Of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming a subordinate place." The white/black division among women was striking and it points to the tremendous difficulty facing women pursuing feminist goals. In emphasizing a common ground of shared gender, white women tended to have a more narrow sense of women's issues than did black women. Moreover, they did not agree among themselves on the appropriate agenda for newly enfranchised citizens.

The best-known division was the split among white activists over the question of a federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The Woman's Party, still dominated in the twenties by Alice Paul, was the key proponent of the ERA, which its members viewed as a means of achieving complete equality. In opposition were a variety of women's reform organizations, which feared that an ERA would damage long-standing efforts to secure or maintain sex-based labor legislation governing wages, hours, and conditions of women workers that had been designed to protect working women from exploitation. Although not the only point of dispute among women activists, the issue is especially important because not only did it create ill feeling but it also exposed conflicting opinions about women's nature and the meaning of equality, problems that hampered the maintenance of a strong women's movement in the 1920s.

The Woman's Party based its support of the ERA on the realization that although suffrage represented a major breakthrough for political equality, many limitations persisted, including women's representation on juries; their ability to execute contracts and deeds and to be executors and trustees; inequities in married women's property rights; and discrimination in wages. While the Women's Party initially promoted laws redressing specific inequities, eventually it focused on the idea of winning a comprehensive constitutional amendment. Following its tactics in the suffrage campaign, the party devoted most of its energies to a federal Equal Rights Amendment ("Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its Jurisdiction"), which it first introduced in Congress in 1923. The party viewed the ERA as a

quicker solution to women's disabilities and the only way to produce change in states in which legislators still resisted women's legal equality. As it pushed for an ERA on the national level, it also hardened its resistance to sex-based or, as it was often called, "protective" labor legislation for women. Its spokeswomen argued that these laws treated women as invalids and set up the possibility for limiting their economic opportunity. "Labor laws for women only are vertical," as Lavinia Dock, a Woman's Party leader, put it in 1926, "and like a wall, may be so built as to shut out as many as they shut in."

THE NEW WOMAN

The rhetoric of Woman's Party leaders emphasized the bond between women, but their activities and tactics tended to drive women apart. The elite-run organization did not build up a grass-roots following. It made relatively little educational effort to bring in young women, who in the 1920s were increasingly indifferent to the feminist movement. The decision to pursue the ERA exclusively also shut down broader possibilities for promoting female solidarity. The 1921 Woman's Party convention was a turning point. Alice Paul organized it ostensibly as a forum for discussing the direction of the movement, but she structured the convention's agenda so as to suppress advocates of birth control and black women's call for suffrage rights. The convention also voted down a disarmament plank and overwhelmingly defeated socialist Crystal Eastman's proposal for a broad-ranging program that encompassed birth control and aid to dependent mothers, thus disaffecting radical feminists who had been attracted to the party before the war and who had offered the most far-ranging definition of feminism, addressing issues of sexual, economic, and political freedom. By the mid-twenties, the term "feminism" had been appropriated by the Woman's Party, which insisted that its meaning was synonymous with the pursuit of equality through the ERA.

The Woman's Party also alienated the great majority of activists in a variety of women's organizations such as the National Consumers League, the Women's Trade Union League, and the League of Women Voters, which supported sex-based labor legislation. These social reformers, who had a broader agenda than ensuring women's equality, felt that the NWP abandoned poor and working-class women to their own devices. The NWP's stance on protective legislation reflects in part the class interests of its leaders. The same narrowness that figured in the party's rebuff of black women's request for commitment to black women voters in the South shaped its belief that women's issues did not include the specific problems of working-class women. The focus of the party's struggle—legal discrimination—addressed primarily the interests of white, middle-class, propertied women. For example, they often assumed that the married woman worker whom they championed had adequate child care and servants. Moreover, they did not really address the problems of women who combined work and responsibilities at home. In response to the difficulties faced by industrial women workers, the NWP was sympathetic, but insisted that their problems were due not to gender but to class and suggested unionization and industrial legislation for all workers. They denied that these issues were appropriate for an organization devoted to women's rights. Thus despite rhetoric about the bond

between women, the NWP's narrow vision contributed to the splintering of the women's movement in the 1920s.

Ironically, regardless of the deep differences between the two groups, the women who supported sex-based labor legislation were in many ways similar to their adversaries in the Women's Party. They, too, were upper and middle class and had been active in the suffrage movement. They, too, addressed the problem of women's legal disabilities and lobbied for corrective legislation. However, unlike the NWP leaders, whose rhetoric tended to underplay the differences between men and women in the pursuit of equal rights, women social reformers like Julia Lathrop and Frances Perkins stressed the distinctiveness of women. They stressed the biological differences that required protective legislation. Moreover, their sense of women's moral superiority and special maternal qualities, a remnant of the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres, shaped their commitment to social reform. Their notion of women's special sensitivity as mothers and of their superior moral nature that elevated them above politics informed many women's deep involvement in the peace movement in the interwar years. They fought against universal military training and for arms limitation, a naval treaty, and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which pledged nations to renounce war. They also supported a gamut of domestic reforms that included, in addition to protective legislation for women and children workers, a variety of good government reforms, especially city management, for which women claimed a special affinity because they viewed themselves as above partisan politics. Early in the decade, most women reformers were also strong supporters of prohibition. Although these women worked through a number of diverse institutions, one of the most significant was a new one, the League of Women Voters, which emerged out of NAWSA when suffrage was achieved. The League was never as numerically strong as its parent. In 1920 NAWSA had 2 million members, but in 1930, after a decade of building, the League's rolls consisted of only 100,000 women. The League's leaders debated what role women should play now that they were enfranchised. Rejecting partisan politics, including the idea of a separate women's party, with the argument that the appearance of a women's voting bloc would alienate public opinion and produce a backlash, they concluded that women should maintain a position above party politics and planned to pursue women's goals through civic education and lobbying.

Get-out-the-vote campaigns formed an important part of the League's efforts to improve political life. The low turnout during the 1920 election (53 percent), which some observers attributed to the disinterest of new women voters rather than realizing that it was part of a broad trend toward political apathy, prompted the League to set up citizenship classes and establish local campaigns to get women to the polls. Ironically, after its exhaustive efforts, the percentage of voters in 1924 continued to decline, although there were some spectacular local successes after League campaigns. Voting records by sex are unavailable, but scattered statistics suggest that although women's voting increased during the decade, women probably still did not vote in as high a proportion as men. Nor is there much evidence for discernible bloc voting among women. By mid-decade contemporary assessments assumed that most women were indifferent to the franchise.

On the state level, the League supported much of the same type of equalitarian legislation, with the exclusion of the ERAs, as the Women's Party. But unlike the Women's Party, the League also pursued a wide variety of reform legislation not specific to women. As part of their

program to clean up politics, state leagues were especially active in municipal reform and were one of the major forces behind the city manager movement, which was viewed as a means to enhanced efficiency and the elimination of the power of urban machines. Child welfare laws, touching on work, school attendance, and child custody, were another important arena for social reform. The League also lobbied for women's protective labor legislation, while at the same time it vigorously fought the state and national ERAs that the Women's Party supported. On the national level, the League worked primarily through an organization it had been instrumental in establishing in 1920, the Women's Joint Congressional Committee. It counted as one of its major successes the Sheppard-Towner Maternity Act of 1921, which provided matching federal funds for states to provide health care and other services for mothers and children. Women not only were instrumental in passing the bill but also were crucial in assuring its implementation in the states by agitating for the state appropriations required.

Although women reformers had important early successes on both the state and the national level, there were sobering defeats as well. Throughout the decade, devoted lobbyists failed to achieve a national department of education, with matching state funds to tackle illiteracy and other educational deficiencies. The drive to eliminate the exploitation of child labor also failed. In 1921, the Supreme Court found Congress's second national child labor law to be unconstitutional. In response, Florence Kelley, working through the National Consumers' League and the Women's Joint Congressional Committee, succeeded in pushing Congress to pass the Child Labor Amendment in 1924, which would have authorized Congress to pass legislation regulating the labor of children under eighteen. But despite the exhaustive efforts of the Organizations Associated for Ratification of the Child Labor Amendment, composed primarily of women's groups, the amendment received little support in the states. By 1930, a mere six states had ratified.

Other disappointments followed. In 1929, federal appropriations for the Maternity Act ceased and the program was phased out. Failures on the federal level were mirrored in the states. Both social reform and women's rights legislation had foundered by the late 1920s. Moreover, women had made relatively few inroads into the power structure of the political parties. Women formed an important part of the party cadres, especially in the Democratic camp, but relatively few were rewarded with power. As an article in *Current History* put it: "Where there is dignity of office but little else, or where there is routine work, little glory, and low pay, men prove willing to admit women to an equal share in the spoils of office." In addition, many of the women who did achieve positions of prestige within the parties were party loyalists, who did not have any background in the women's movement and were not interested in social reform.

Thus, after the auspicious beginning in the first years after suffrage, women had not been able to translate their voting power into meaningful, sustained political power. What were the sources of this failure? One important factor was the oppressive political climate of the 1920s. Despite women activists' persistent efforts, the decade was increasingly characterized by hostility to reform. Young college women, once the mainstay of women reformers, were largely indifferent to social reform or women's rights. Their lack of interest in politics stemmed in part from their enthusiasm for their personal pursuits of courtship and consumerism. Their indifference to politics and reform was, of course, shared by many men. Resentment of federal power, increased by the resistance to prohibition, was a widespread sentiment that politicians and

business interests, eager to keep private enterprise unfettered, manipulated to oppose specific reform legislation. The lingering of the Red Scare also made it relatively easy to portray measures such as the Sheppard-Towner Maternity Act and the Child Labor Amendment as the beginnings of socialism. Pacifism and efforts to promote disarmament and to oppose military spending and Universal military training were similarly branded as part of an international Bolshevik plot. Not surprisingly, given women's sympathies with reform and the peace movement, critics of reform explicitly linked women's organizations to the Bolshevik threat.

The Red Scare hurt women's efforts at reform, and it also helped to widen divisions among women. Red baiting caused some women's groups to disassociate themselves from the Women's Joint Congressional Committee. Pacifist organizations tended to moderate their stance out of self-defense, and become more conservative. Support for the peace movement, one of the few arenas where women were united in the early part of the decade, became controversial. Red baiting points to another division as well. Preeminent among the opponents of reform were right-wing women's organizations. The Women Sentinels of the Republic was a small but vocal group that opposed social reform as the forerunner of Bolshevism. The Daughters of the American Revolution, initially interested in women's social reform efforts, had by mid-decade also taken up the red-baiting hysteria.

The polar opposition of the Women Sentinels and the Women's Joint Congressional Committee suggests another source for the rout of the women's movement. Both supporters of the ERA and women who backed a wide range of social reforms had believed that women's moral sensibilities linked all women, both in a sense of sisterhood and in programs for improving the public arena and expanding their rights. But by mid-decade it became clear that women leaders in the major organizations had not been successful in galvanizing the mass of women voters to rally behind their cause. Moreover, the activists themselves were not politically united. The Women Sentinels and the Women's Joint Congressional Committee; the National Woman's Party, and the League of Women Voters; African American women and southern white women; party regulars and bipartisan women; prohibitionists and antiprohibitionists—all suggest the diversity of public women's agenda.

The ideas of the leaders who had assumed a bond between women based on shared gender identity had been forged by the existence of a distinct women's political culture in the nineteenth century that grew out of the idea of separate spheres that had posited rigid roles for men and women and had relegated the latter exclusively to the private arena. Women's exclusion from the public sphere, especially the arena of politics, had helped to define their unity. This unity was to some extent, of course, fictive. Class, race, and ethnicity were largely insurmountable barriers in the nineteenth century. But as historian Estelle Freedman has argued, within the upper and middle classes there was a separate political culture that gave an apparent cohesion to women activists. In the 1920s both the cohesion and the separatism began to erode. Both the vote and, as we will see, changes in the workplace and the personal realm narrowed the great gap between male and female experience. With more access to the public arena, with more options to choose from in their personal lives, other distinctions that divided women came more obviously to the fore. There was not a new woman, but many new women. In the political sphere, women achieved more rights and became more integrated into the mainstream political culture.

But women's widely varying agendas made it difficult for them to translate political enfranchisement into political power.

THE NEW WOMAN AND WORK

Since it was popularly believed that suffrage had led to a new equality and freedom for women, it was assumed that women were becoming economically independent in the early twentieth century, especially after World War I. As Frederick Lewis Allen put it in the popular history *Only Yesterday* (1931), women "poured out of schools and colleges into all manner of occupations." Allen assumed that these new jobs brought the financial independence that led to the "slackening of husbandly and parental authority," which in turn had set in motion a moral revolution that encouraged both divorce and women's "headlong pursuit of freedom."

This view of women, work, and liberation is distorted and inaccurate. To begin with, the war had little permanent impact on female employment—only a small percentage of women working during the war were new workers. And although during the war women could be found working in traditionally male occupations such as mail carriers, streetcar conductors, skilled factory workers, and government-employed physicians, after the war most women lost these more desirable jobs. As one contemporary observer, Constance Green, commented: "The brief interlude...which some enthusiasts heralded as launching a new era for women in industry...came and went with astonishingly little permanent effect upon women's opportunities." Although there were significant differences in the experiences of working women in the 1920s that centered on marital status, race, ethnicity, and class, they shared a narrow and highly sex-segregated labor market which classified their jobs as "women's work," and thereby devalued them.

Although the war itself was not necessarily a transforming experience for most women, nonetheless in the first decades of the twentieth century there were important changes that permanently affected American women's working lives. Beginning with 1900, the percentage of females over sixteen who worked rose, from 20.6 to 25.3 percent, in 1930. The increase in women's employment signaled the erosion of the traditional women's sphere in the home, but it did not necessarily mean that women enjoyed enhanced equality or liberation. In 1930, almost a third of working women were employed in the decidedly unglamorous field of domestic service, and more than half were either black or foreign-born whites, whose need was greatest and whose job opportunities were the most limited. In the 1920s, 86 percent of women were clustered in ten occupations, in jobs in which they made less money and had lower status and lower levels of skills than men.

More startling to contemporaries than the increase in the number of women working was the change in wives' participation in the workforce. In 1900, 15 percent of working women were married; in 1930, the percentage was 29. The jobs of most working wives and single mothers tended to be among the least desirable. Only a fraction of married workers were in professional or semiprofessional work; the vast majority of those not in agriculture were in manufacturing, retail trade, and domestic and personal service. A significant proportion of working wives were African Americans whose poverty pushed them into the Workforce. Some remained at home,

taking in boarders, but most of the jobs available to black women were in the most devalued field, that of domestic service.

Although not quite as limited, European immigrant married women workers' occupational horizons were also circumscribed. In the nineteenth century, because of the paternalistic nature of their cultures, relatively few wives had worked outside the home for wages. They contributed to the family income by taking in boarders and by doing piecework. In the 1920s, few married immigrant women worked outside the home, although there was a small increase during the decade. By mid-decade, immigration restriction had reduced the number of new immigrants seeking lodging, and changes in the structure of mass production industries had begun to shrink the demand for piecework. Moreover, compulsory school attendance and child labor laws forced some children out of the workforce, and their mothers took jobs in their stead. Despite the increased visibility of working wives, only 10 percent of all wives worked in the 1920s. The vast majority of employed women were single, and although there was a rise in the age of women workers in this period, the female workforce was preponderantly young. Some lived alone. Statistics are hard to come by, but surveys for the period 1900-30 give estimates of "women adrift" ranging from 10 to 25 percent of working women. While some of these single women had no choice, others sought out an independent existence that gave them freedom from family restraints and obligations. Although many may have achieved some personal autonomy, their poor pay compelled most lone women to live under harsh conditions, barely making ends meet.

Most working-class daughters, like their brothers, were expected to contribute to the family income. In 1923, a study of poverty-level families revealed that while almost all fathers, sons, and daughters worked for wages, only around 25 percent of wives or mothers did. The types of jobs available to young women varied according to race and ethnicity. Not surprisingly, the white working class had the most options. In the twenties most European immigrant daughters continued patterns set in the late nineteenth century. Family need forced them to leave school at a young age to contribute to the family income. In the 1920s, young women stayed in school longer, but by age sixteen they were likely to be in the labor force, and remained in it until marriage. Daughters, unlike their brothers, turned over their entire pay packet to their mothers and then received a small expense allowance, a practice that became a source of contention in many families by the 1920's. Eager to participate in the consumer culture, and encouraged by the rising prosperity of their families, working-class daughters demanded more of the fruits of their labor. The possibilities of consumption, as well as congenial work groups consisting of other adolescent women, made tedious work tolerable.

In the late nineteenth century, immigrant women had worked primarily in factories, performing unskilled or semiskilled "light" labor such as assembling, packing, and garment sewing. This continued into the twentieth century, although there were changes. The hours declined to an average of forty-eight a week; technology and social reform had made the labor somewhat less arduous; and wages improved, although they remained on average a bit more than half of what men earned. In addition, by the 1910s the daughters of European immigrants increasingly were able to win white-collar jobs, as increased demand and their improved education level offered new opportunities. But in the white-collar field immigrant daughters had to compete with "old stock" women, who may have had more education and were certainly

preferred by employers for their perceived refinement and status. In stores, native-born older women sold the high-priced goods, while immigrants and young women were at the counters selling cheaper items. At the office, too, immigrant daughters clustered at the bottom of the job hierarchy.

The increase in white-collar work was of great importance for white women in the early twentieth century. Nineteenth-century clerical work had been primarily a male preserve and often served as means of advancement up the office ladder, but by the 1920s the lower rungs of the ladder, stenographers and file clerks, had become feminized, and young women poured into America's offices. Clerical work was the second-largest field for female workers: by the end of the decade, 19 percent of working women over sixteen, the vast majority of them single, were in these jobs. Saleswomen and clerks in stores represented around 6 percent of the female labor force in the 1920s. These new jobs not only widened the opportunities of immigrant daughters but also brought in middle-class workers who would have found factory work and domestic service demeaning. Middle-class young women in white-collar work stood out and contributed to the sense of a new working woman, and undoubtedly prompted the media to glamorize them. They appeared in fiction and advertising, but especially in movies.

In the early part of the decade movies were rarely concerned with the nature of women's work itself. Rather they featured salesgirls and clerks who found in their jobs the environment for meeting desirable husbands. In addition to emphasizing the life of working girls, films also pictured work as a means of acquiring consumer goods and enjoying the new urban pleasures, and a few films linked consumption and marriage by presenting some working women as "gold diggers." By the late 1920s, as historian Mary Ryan has pointed out, the glamorous and unrealistic depiction of young working women became somewhat muted, perhaps because by then the novelty had worn off. Later films began to portray some of the more mundane aspects of white-collar work. In *Ankles Preferred* (1930), actress Madge Bellamy played a bored department store clerk, impatiently awaiting closing time. Superimposed on her face was a large clock, graphically suggesting the routinization of her work.

Later films more accurately reflected reality. For the most part, office workers put in long stretches of monotonous work, typing, filing, and other routine tasks. In some offices, the routine was made more oppressive by the introduction of scientific management techniques designed to measure and increase output. For the most part, office jobs meant specialized work with limited variety and responsibility. Sales work—where skill in interaction with customers was crucial—gave saleswomen a less regimented environment. As Susan Porter Benson has noted, a strong female work culture of sociability and solidarity helped saleswomen resist much of management's efforts to control them. But here, too, work could be arduous, with the combined frustration of pleasing the boss and the customer, while staying on one's feet all day.

As a rule, white-collar work—despite its appeal as a clean job with higher status than most women's work—was not well paid. Clerical workers' average annual wage in the 1920s was less than \$1,200 (about \$10,000 in 1990's dollars). There was much variation within the retail industry. Most saleswomen earned less than clerical workers, with salaries ranging from \$688 in Kentucky to \$1,085 in New Jersey, but their salaries were still not high. And there was a large wage differential between men and women: women earned 42 to 63 percent of male

salesmen's salaries. In neither sales nor office work could many women expect to support themselves in a comfortable manner.

White-collar work did not lead to major changes in women's power in the workplace. Similar limits are evident in the experiences of the more fortunate women—the small cadre of professionals. The professional woman generated much publicity in the 1920s as an exemplar of the new woman, yet the percentage of women in professions was quite small. In 1910, 9 percent of working women were professionals. There was a steady increase in the next twenty years, so that by 1930 they constituted 14 percent. Enthusiastic about their status and optimistic about the future, these women represented the new women most likely to enjoy autonomy and personal satisfaction from their work. But a closer examination suggests the limited nature of their gains. The vast majority of female professionals were clustered in teaching, nursing, and a relatively new field, social work. Even in these “feminized” fields, women met with discrimination. Throughout the decade, the percentage of working women who were lawyers remained steady and small: 3 percent. Physicians lost ground: in 1920, they represented 5 percent of the female workforce; in 1930, 4.4 percent. Women interested in medicine were thwarted by minute medical school quotas and the widespread refusal of hospitals to accept women doctors as interns. In the 1920s, eight out of ten teachers were women, but women constituted only one in sixty-three superintendents. Thus in an arena which women might hope to achieve a degree of personal and economic autonomy, their numbers and opportunities were limited. Since well-educated white women in both clerical and professional fields had relatively limited options, it is hardly surprising that women of color met with even greater difficulty in earning their living. For African Americans and women of Japanese and Mexican descent, gender and race were powerful determinants that graphically illustrate the limits to the new woman in the workplace.

For African American women, the wartime migration had held out tremendous promise. Like men, they had sought better conditions in the North. They hoped to escape the discrimination and sexual exploitation of the South, where black women had little protection from the demands of white men. Above all, they sought better jobs. In the South, they were limited to agriculture, domestic service, and marginal, poorly paid jobs in factories and industry. Initially, their northern quest met with success, as work in railroads, the garment industry, government munitions, and a variety of other factory jobs became available to them during the war emergency.

But even during the war years, black women's jobs were the least desirable in the industrial sector, usually, as the *New York Age* put it, “doing work which white women will not do.” And even these limited gains were not to last. Although some black women did maintain a toehold in industry, again in the worst jobs, after the war they were overwhelmingly concentrated in domestic service, laundry work, and agricultural labor. Domestic and laundry work was hard, debilitating labor for poor pay. Increasingly in the 1920s, black women refused jobs as live-in servants. As Elizabeth Clark-Lewis' oral history of Washington, D.C., domestic workers suggests, this small change, symbolized by their refusal to wear uniforms in day jobs, allowed these women to carve out a small degree of control over their work lives and their private time. But while day work offered an improvement over live-in situations, nonetheless domestic work continued to be highly exploitative.

Those few women who had factory jobs encountered harsh conditions and discrimination. A Women's Bureau investigator, Emma L. Shields, found in 1922 that black tobacco workers in the South were barred from the manufacturing of cigars and cigarettes, a white women's job; instead they did the preparatory work on the tobacco: "Tens of thousands of Negro women in the South are employed ten hours daily in old, unclean, malodorous buildings in which they are denied the most ordinary comforts of life. Either standing all day, in some occupations, or, in others, seated on makeshift stools or boxes with no back support, they toil incessantly throughout the long, tedious hours of the work day." For this seasonal labor, they earned only two dollars a week. The North was little better. In 1920, researcher Alma Herbst surveyed Chicago packing plants and slaughterhouses and found black women seasonally employed in the hog-killing and beef-casing section, "the most unattractive and disagreeable department," where they worked "under repulsive conditions." In both North and South, black women were segregated from white women, who generally refused to work with African Americans. Invariably, these white women had rest rooms, cleaner jobs, and better pay.

Some African American women were able to escape and achieve some spectacular successes. Madame C. J. Walker, who died in 1919, became a millionaire manufacturing and selling hair and cosmetic preparations to black women. Maggie Lena Walker (not related) was the founder and president of what became the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, a black-owned and black-run bank. But most black women entrepreneurs were independent dressmakers or hairdressers. With the help of migration, black businesses in the North did expand in the 1920s, and thus opened a few clerical jobs to women. But opportunities were few—African Americans owned only 20 percent of Harlem businesses, and black women were almost completely shut out of clerical or sales work for white employers. The federal government largely excluded them after President Wilson had resegregated civil service. This exclusion from clerical work was especially egregious because many black women had attained educational equivalency to native white women in the 1920s.

Well-educated black women had some professional opportunities. Social work was expanding in the twenties, and organizations like the YWCA and the Urban League hired trained black women to serve their own community. Teaching was open to African Americans, but unlike white women, they had difficulty finding jobs, especially in the North. In 1920, for example, Chicago employed only 138 black female teachers. Nurses faced similar discrimination: they found it difficult to get public health jobs, and when they did, they were paid significantly less than white women. White nurses' organizations, then in the process of professionalizing the field, denied African American nurses membership. Repeatedly black nurses found, as their sisters in factories had discovered, that white women were unwilling to work with them.

Mexican immigrant women and their daughters shared with African Americans the experience of migration. In the early twentieth century, Mexican migration to the United States increased dramatically. Almost 10 percent of Mexico's population, over a million people, emigrated to the United States between 1910 and 1930. Some traveled to midwestern cities, but most congregated in the South and Southwest. Although many of these migrants worked in the expanding "factories in the field," the increasingly large agribusinesses of the West and Southwest, by 1930 half of the Mexicans in the United States lived in urban areas.

We know relatively little about Mexican women workers. Until 1930, the census did not enumerate people of Mexican descent as a group. In that year, the statistics for Mexicanas and Chicanas employed was among the lowest of all groups, around 15 percent, a figure that undoubtedly undercounted the most common form of female employment, agricultural labor. Most Mexican migrant women, continuing a tradition of a family economy, worked in agriculture as part of the family unit, and did not receive an individual wage. Throughout the West and Southwest, wages were so poor that families were dependent upon the labor of everyone—women and children—to maintain the minimum essentials of life. While these women worked in the fields, they struggled to raise their families in dismal conditions and dire poverty.

Although there was strong Mexican cultural resistance to married or single women working for wages, the necessity of supplementing the wages of men, who were often seasonally employed and whose wages were invariably low, led urban Mexicanas and Chicanas into the workforce. Historian Albert Camarillo found that in the small community of Santa Barbara, California, the large majority of women labored in unskilled or semiskilled jobs as servants, seamstresses, and so forth. The 1910s, however, saw a slight expansion of job possibilities. In 1920, 29 percent of working women of Mexican descent had clerical or sales jobs, mostly working for Mexicans or Anglos who owned businesses that required bilingual employees for their Spanish-speaking clientele. A 1928 study by economist Paul S. Taylor offered some details of women employed in industrial jobs in Los Angeles. Taylor reported that “in some cases the wife or mother sought the work; in others, the young daughters. In either case, poverty was the immediate incentive.” Nine-tenths of the workers surveyed were unmarried young women, who despite cultural resistance to female employment “looked upon some sort of industrial work as they complete their basic education as in the natural course of events” before marriage. The greatest proportion “were employed in packing houses and canneries of various kinds, followed by the clothing, needle trades, and laundries,” with relatively few working in manufacturing. Like black women, they were heavily concentrated in domestic labor: in 1930, 44 percent were servants.

Yet another group, Japanese women, found their opportunities severely circumscribed by racial discrimination and economic marginality, with domestic service their major form of employment. Next to black women, the Japanese were the most likely group of women to work outside the home: of the 25,000 Japanese women in America, 30 percent worked for wages. Most of these were Issei, or first generation, because the second generation, Nisei, were as a rule too young to work outside the home in the 1920s. And since most Issei women were married, most of these working women were also wives. A significant proportion of these employed women were engaged in agricultural labor, primarily on family farms. They and their children provided the unpaid labor that was crucial to the remarkable success of Japanese farmers on the West Coast who specialized in labor-intensive agriculture.

In the cities, the Issei women, limited by their lack of skills, difficulties with English, and racial prejudice, found few jobs open to them. As a rule, they sought positions that could be combined with their family responsibilities. Relatively few worked in manufacturing, the least flexible type of job. Some women worked as clerks or assistants in small family-owned enterprises. Others did piecework, especially garment sewing, in their homes. Sociologist Evelyn

Nakano Glenn reported on a Japanese couple in San Francisco's Chinatown who sold handmade kimonos in their gift shop. The wife cut out the fabric for each kimono, which was then distributed to women pieceworkers, who were paid three dollars for the completed garment.

The most significant employment for Issei women outside agriculture was domestic service. In 1920, 27 percent were servants; the figure dropped to 18 percent in 1930, probably reflecting an increase in employment in Japanese-owned retail establishments. Domestic labor, although difficult work that often required demeaning subordination to an employer, nonetheless had advantages. Women sought out day work, with relatively flexible schedules that would allow them to maintain their families and work at the same time. Those who worked did so primarily to supplement their husband's inadequate wages. Even wives of small entrepreneurs often found it necessary to help out. There were two main tracks for domestic employment. Some began as apprentices before they were married and continued to work most of their lives. Others began after marriage, when the financial pressures of children required additional income.

Domestic service was isolating and provided no avenue to better, more lucrative jobs. It was also difficult labor. According to the women Glenn interviewed, however, there were some advantages. Working in American homes gave them an opportunity to learn the English language and American ways. These women also expressed pride in their ability not only to work hard but also to figure out how to please each employer. In addition, they took satisfaction from their contribution to their family's welfare. Keeping their children in school was an important priority. Almost all Nisei did in fact graduate from high school, and their mothers' efforts surely were important to their achievement.

For all women of color, even the educated, the double burden of race and gender translated into few job options. In contrast, white women, especially native-born ones, had cleaner, better-paying, less demanding work. But despite the significant differences among women, all experienced the labor market as hierarchical, with women's labor largely devalued and poorly paid. As Emily Blair put it at the end of the decade, summarizing her and other feminists' disappointment over women's failure to make significant economic advances in the 1920s: "The best man continued to win, and women, even the best, worked for and under him. Women were welcome to come in as workers, but not as co-makers of the world. For all their numbers they seldom rose to positions of responsibility or power."

Women's work had changed and they had moved into the public sphere in greater numbers, but the belief that women's primary role was in the home had undergone less transformation. This persistence came out especially clearly in the heated debates over working wives. Throughout the decade, periodicals and books addressed the desirability of wives working outside the home. The attention was out of proportion, given the actual number of wives working, and clearly indicates that the issue struck a sensitive nerve in the American public. The climate was generally hostile. One of the most popular novels of the period was A.S.M. Hutchinson's *This Freedom*, a book extremely critical of the career woman as "a traitor to her sex." A 1924 survey of white-collar men found them resistant to the idea of wives working. Sixty-five percent said they should not work; 31 percent said it was acceptable for married women to work, but not mothers. These beliefs were echoed by marriage experts, such as Ernest Groves, who in 1925 declared: "When the woman herself earns and her maintenance is not entirely at the mercy of her husband's will, diminishing masculine authority necessarily follows."

Even observers supportive of working wives were ambivalent about the issue. Many commentators drew invidious distinctions between women who had to work out of need and those who did so out of choice. Social reformers who clustered around organizations such as the Women's Trade Union League, the National Consumers League, and the U.S. Women's Bureau were highly sympathetic to the working-class wife when she believed she worked out of necessity, yet regarded her as unfortunate. The Women's Bureau conducted over twenty-five studies during the decade, designed in part to demonstrate that these women did not work for "pin money," but were instead permanent workers, who deserved equal pay. It was concern for these women that prompted the intensity of these reformers' support of protective legislation and opposition to the ERA. Although these reformers recognized the legitimacy of working-class wives' work, their insistence that these wives worked because of an absent husband, or one unable to earn sufficient income, made it clear that they did not consider wives' work desirable or normal. These reformers might work for improved conditions for working women, but ideally an income provided by a male wage adequate for a family's support would solve the dilemma by taking wives out of the workplace altogether.

Attention was also focused on middle-class women who sought careers. These were few in number, probably less than 4 percent of all working women, but they had high publicity value. Many feminists insisted upon women's rights, whether married or not, to careers. Mabel Schwartz, of the Women's Trade Union League, argued that for professionals work provided "a development of their personalities, an enlargement of their lives." But many supporters of careers for wives revealed their reservations about combining a career and a home. In 1922, *The Literary Digest*, prompted by the tremendous success of *This Freedom*, wrote to married women listed in *Who's Who in America* to ask "Can a Woman Run a Home and a Job, Too?" Only a fifth of the answers were negative—not unexpectedly, given that most of the women they contacted had careers. The vast majority thought it was possible to do both, but many emphasized that the home must come first, and moreover, that it took an unusual woman to succeed in both arenas. As the *Digest* summed it up, most respondents believed "that, if a woman has brains, she can keep her place in the home and swing a bit of a career, too."

Many defenders of middle-class working wives invoked the "nervous housewife" syndrome. In a 1929 essay, social scientist Lorene Pruette noted particularly the sexual problems that arose between "the inattentive, hard-working husband and the idle, over-eating wife who fills many hours with erotic daydreams about that perfect lover who shows, alas, little resemblance to the husband." Pruette's solution for this bored, neurotic woman, however, was not a full-fledged career, but rather part-time work for wives: "Typing, sewing, preparation of gift cards, painted lamp shades and the like offer the advantages of a fixed return to be determined by the amount of time invested. Similarly, the wives of the faculty are often employed in college to read the class papers and examinations, payment being by the hours or a lump sum for the year."

Not surprisingly, the issue of careers and marriage was raised in women's colleges, where women for two decades had been trained for careers. In the nineteenth century, many college-educated women had not married, or done so late in life, choosing instead to pursue careers or social reform. By the 1920s, that trend had been reversed and educated women increasingly married. Many hoped to have both career and homes. As one Smith College student put it: "We

cannot believe it is fixed in the nature of things that a woman must choose between a home and her work, when a man may have both. There must be a way out and it is the problem of our generation to find the way.” At Smith, Ethel Puffer Howe directed the Institute to Coordinate Women’s Interests, which hoped to do just that. The institute experimented with cooperative facilities—nurseries and kitchens—to devise means of simplifying housework and child care. But like Pruette, Howe emphasized part-time work and freelance activities as appropriate jobs for wives. And as limited as the view of the Smith plan was, it was far more progressive than what Vassar offered its students. In 1924 it set up a School of Euthenics to channel “education for women along the lines of their chief interests and responsibilities, motherhood and the home.” Despite the existence of the Smith institute and the handful of champions of wives with careers, public sentiment in the 1920s was hostile to wives working out of a sense of personal fulfillment, rather than dire need. As historian Nancy Cott has pointed out, wives who pursued such an individualistic course were labeled “the enemies of society.”

Clearly, ideas about women’s primary duty to the home were intensifying in the face of underlying changes to the contrary. Husbands and wives often viewed the latter’s work, whatever the reality, as temporary, and legitimate because it assisted the family. These powerful ideas affected the work experience of young single women as well. Although young women, especially those in the middle class, undoubtedly were taking a more individualistic approach to work than the nineteenth-century working daughter, most expected to quit work when they married or bore children, either out of preference or because of societal pressures.

This sense of women’s work as a temporary removal from the home had been crucial in creating sex segregation in industrial labor in the nineteenth century, as women clustered in the lower-paid, unskilled jobs. Both employers and male employees had reinforced this view of women as marginal workers. For men, women co-workers could present a psychological threat; keeping women out of men’s jobs helped maintain the linkage between male wage earning and masculine identity. Male workers also viewed women as economic threats and resisted their employment, especially in skilled trades. Many women, despite handicaps, were often eager to be organized, but they found most unions resistant or indifferent. Unions welcomed women primarily when they might otherwise threaten male unionists by working for lower wages. American Federation of Labor officials persistently insisted that men should be paid a family wage, which would keep women out of the workforce and allow men to be manly. Since women workers’ marginal status made them a readily exploitable, plentiful source of cheap labor, employers encouraged sex-segregated labor; they had a vested interest in the notion of women as temporary workers whose major commitment was to the domestic sphere.

Relatively little had changed by the 1920s. Unions, with some notable exceptions such as those in the garment industry, continued their indifference to organizing women, and male workers were hostile to the idea of women in men’s jobs. The sex segregation evident in factories in the nineteenth century was carried forward into the clerical fields and professions, with its accompanying wage differentials. The work that women did continued to be devalued. Although there were striking differences among women, based on class, race, and ethnicity, there were also important similarities. The social attitudes that circumscribed women’s opportunities affected domestics, factory hands, clerks, and professionals. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris summed up

the decade of the 1920s: “Women were invited into the work force and again invited not to expect too much of it.”

But if women could not expect much from work, that did not mean that the experience had no impact on them. Although wage work had its limitations, as Julie Matthaei has argued, working for wages could provide “a woman with an individual public existence, a public identity of her own, and a sense of her own worth.” While working for wages may not have encouraged women to challenge the domestic ideal, this enhanced sense of identity could affect patterns of authority in the family, although probably not as dramatically as social observers of the time who worried about the emasculated man feared. In many instances, wage earning allowed women to challenge the patriarchal structure of the family. Observers of immigrant families noted this phenomenon repeatedly. Evelyn Nakano Glenn found that until World War II, the rigid patriarchal Japanese family was still firmly in place in rural areas where Issei women worked on family farms and did not earn separate wages. In contrast, Issei women who worked as domestics for wages gained a sense of independence that gave them more leverage with their husbands. Rosalinda González found that Mexican migrant men interviewed in the twenties were sometimes critical of Mexican women who had worked in America and were too much “‘like American women,’ independent, sassy, and no longer content to remain submissively at home.” This challenging of the traditional family may have been particularly true for young women. Paul Taylor uncovered a significant number of Mexican daughters in Los Angeles who wanted to work in order to be independent of their parents, “with the clear implication of dissatisfaction with parental authority, old customs, and mode of living.” Similarly, many young European immigrant women workers interpreted wage work as an Americanizing experience which helped them to break away from old traditions of female subordination and demand more social freedom for themselves as they sought to participate in the heterosocial culture of dating and urban amusements.

Thus work could engender a break from parental authority. It also increasingly meant a means to participate, to the extent that their low wages would permit, in the consumer culture. Studies of working women repeatedly emphasize their interest in “Putting on style.” In Flint, Michigan, the Department of Labor found that women were eager to earn money for “Independence and material gratification,” and in particular they placed “an extremely high priority on buying new clothes to keep up with the latest fashions and they often went into debt to stay in style,” and even in the remote, financially depressed Appalachian South, young women textile workers on strike appeared on the picket lines turned out in fashionable clothes. Thus, although women found limited economic reward or autonomy in the workplace, some sought compensation in the consumer culture, with its emphasis on leisure, pleasure, urban amusements, and acquisitions. This development was part of a broader change that transformed women’s private lives. Far more so than in the public arena of politics and work, the new, modern woman emerged in the personal sphere of the home, courtship, and marriage.

THE NEW WOMAN IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE

It is clear that women (and the American public) persisted in traditional values: women's primary duty was to the home. As one might expect one of the most popular songs of the 1920s was "My Blue Heaven," an ode to domestic bliss: "Just Mollie and me / And baby makes three / We're happy in my blue heaven." But although old ideals remained, there were nonetheless significant changes in the home, family, courtship, and marriage that had important ramifications, especially for the white middle-class woman.

For most homemakers in the 1920s, caring for the home was much easier than it had been for their grandmothers or even their mothers. The middle class had fewer servants, but technology stepped in to make housework less arduous. Electrification of the home was crucial: in 1907, only 8 percent of American homes had electricity; by 1920, more than half did. Electric lights in themselves tremendously simplified daily maintenance and kept homes cleaner. But in addition, there was a wide range of appliances available to the housewife: irons, toasters, sewing machines, refrigerators, washing machines, and percolators. The introduction of cheap mass-produced cast-iron enamelware in bathroom fixtures made bathrooms relatively easy to keep clean. Food preparation was simplified by new appliances and the widespread use of canned goods. Manufacturers touted these new products, from canned foods to refrigerators, as a means of providing the housewife with new leisure, and featured in their advertisements elegantly dressed women golfing, playing bridge, or enjoying their children with the spare time the products they bought saved them.

But although housework was made easier, it was not necessarily less time-consuming, because standards of cleanliness increased dramatically. In "Selling Mrs. Consumer," a *Ladies' Home Journal* author summarized the new demands: "Because we housewives of today have the tools to reach it, we dig every clay after the dust that grandmother left to a spring cataclysm....If our consciences don't prick us over vacant pie shelves or empty cookie jars, they do over meals in which a vitamin may be omitted or a calorie lacking." Nor did the new technology mean that housekeeping became less important in the wifely duties. Women's magazines, abetted by home economists, elevated homemaking to a career in this period. They glamorized the role of housewife, and depicted housework and cooking as an essential means to nurture her family while proving her self-worth. Emphasis on scientific management among home economists encouraged the wife to think of herself as a modern professional, relying on expert advice. The good wife and mother needed to have scientific knowledge of vitamins, food groups, and calories in order to feed her family properly. She needed to be a skilled hostess in order to promote her husband's career and her own social expectations. If she was not, advertisements offered assistance in proper etiquette and home style. Rogers Brothers Silverplate was not unusual in offering a free pamphlet, "Etiquette, Entertaining and Good Sense," which was full of "suggestions for successful entertaining."

Clearly an important component of the expert housewife's function was as consumer. Contemporaries estimated that women's purchases of consumer goods represented two-thirds of the \$44 billion spent annually. Not surprisingly, advertisers wooed middle-class women shoppers assiduously. Photoplay ran an ad that summed up the sense of the new woman in the home: "Home Manager—Purchasing Agent—Art Director—Wife." Whether young or old, she had a tremendous responsibility. "She is the active partner in the business of running a home. She buys most of the things which go to make home life happy, healthful and beautiful. Through her

slim, safe fingers goes most of the family money....Advertisements are the wise counsellors in the spending of money that the clever housewife needs.” Advertisements thus encouraged women to identify themselves with the products they bought. In addition, by exaggerating the importance of the choices women made when purchasing, advertisements gave a false sense of women’s freedom, and trivialized the more significant arenas of women’s choice, as this *Chicago Tribune* ad indicates: “Today’s woman gets what she wants. The vote. Slim sheaths of silk to replace voluminous petticoats. Glassware in sapphire blue or glowing amber. The right to a career. Soap to match her bathroom’s color scheme.”

The new woman’s importance as a consumer was linked to a broader pattern of changes in the family. In the twentieth century, family size continued the dramatic decline seen in the nineteenth century. In 1900, the average family consisted of 4.7 persons; in 1910, 4.5 persons; and in 1920, 4.3. Although family size shrank for the population as a whole, the change was especially noticeable among the urban middle class, who were likely to limit their families to one to three children. Beyond changes in size, at least for the middle class and perhaps some working-class people, the nature of families was shifting as well toward the “affectionate family.” Smaller families, tending to emphasize the individual potential of each child, were less authoritarian and more democratic. Family functions also changed: by the twentieth century, not only did most families cease to exist as productive economic units but the social and educational activities associated with the family were absorbed by outside agencies. The family’s main economic activity became consumption. In addition, the family became increasingly privatized, with the affectionate focus the psychological nurture of its members. By the 1920s, there was also a tremendous emphasis on expert child rearing. The U.S. Children’s Bureau reported requests for hundreds of thousands of pamphlets on child care; *Parents’ Magazine* got its start; and psychological experts wrote books and articles on proper child rearing, revealing an emphasis on child-centeredness and individuality that typified the new family.

Just as important as the changes in child-rearing advice were the new conceptions of marriage emerging in the early twentieth century. Although the age of marriage was dropping for both men and women and the percentage of married Americans was increasing, divorce rates also rose in the twenties, indicating a significant challenge to traditional views of the sanctity of marriage. The number of divorces began to accelerate in the late nineteenth century, when in 1880 one in every twenty-one marriages ended in divorce. By 1890, the figure was one in twelve, and by 1924, one in seven. Not surprisingly, disturbed observers placed the blame on the new woman and her new freedoms. While changes in women’s experiences may have influenced divorce rates, there are other compelling explanations. One is the growing secularization of American society that was evident in the early twentieth century. Certainly religious faith persisted, but religion was less important in the public arena of American life. At the same time there was a decrease in the number of marriages sanctified by religious authority. In Middletown, the Lynds found that religiously sanctioned weddings accounted for 85 percent of the marriages in 1890, but only 63 percent in 1923. As marriage itself became less sacred, there was a rise in marriage dissolutions.

But perhaps the most crucial factor influencing divorce was the emergence of the affectionate family. As historian Elaine Tyler May has argued, popular ideals increasingly emphasized marriage as the source of personal satisfaction, in contrast to the Victorian ideal

which had posited marriage as a matter of public duty. The changing nature of work, its increasing bureaucracy and regimentation, placed heavy emotional demands on marriage and the family as a source of personal fulfillment. Although many recognized this process and applauded it as in adaptation to modern times, great expectations, as May puts it, undoubtedly contributed to the rising divorce rate.

The growing assumption on the part of both experts and the general public that sex was a vital part of a good marriage signaled another source of changing expectations about marriage. Phyllis Blanchard and Carolyn Manasses, in a 1930 sociological study appropriately titled *New Girls for Old*, summarized the new way of thinking: “After hundreds of years of mild complaisance to wifely duties, modern women have awakened to the knowledge that they are sexual beings. And with this new insight the sex side of marriage has assumed sudden importance.” At the root of the new weight given to sexuality in marriage was a changing notion of female sexuality. The Victorian moral code did not permit respectable middle-class women to admit to sexual appetites. Although it is possible to overstate the repressiveness of the Victorians, nonetheless it is true that they rigidly held that men were animalistic, aggressive creatures whose passions must be kept in bounds by chaste, genteel wives. For men, sexual intercourse was a necessary release; for women, it was a duty.

Many observers in the twenties, noting the emphasis on the new woman’s sexuality, argued that the dislocations of war had turned traditional morals upside down. The causes, however, are far more complex and, moreover, predate the war. An emerging new morality was already evident in the 1910s. As one journal put it in 1913, the nation “has struck sex o’clock.” The emphasis on women’s sexuality coincided with the trend of women seeking more freedom in their social life. At the forefront of this change were the working-class young women who by the turn of the century were seeking, in historian Kathy Peiss’s words, “cheap amusements.” Looking for an escape in part from parental authority and in part from the harsh conditions of work, many young women took advantage of the new urban amusements—dance halls, amusement parks, theaters. This unchaperoned, relatively anonymous environment inevitably led to more sexual experimentation. Relaxing sexual standards may also have stemmed from the widespread practice of “treating.” Poorly paid and often contributors to family incomes, these women had little left to pay for their entertainments. Men could and did “treat” them, but frequently with the implicit assumption of sexual favors as part of the exchange. These voting women, then, lived in a society with more relaxed sexual standards than those of their parents.

By the 1910s those elite, radical women who clustered in bohemian centers like New York’s Greenwich Village were also promoting a more sexualized personal life that included a rejection of bourgeois marriage. Many were self-styled feminists. Not all women’s rights advocates embraced female sexuality, and indeed many shared a repressive Victorian sense that sexual freedom for women should mean freedom from sexuality. But for a small cadre of radical women, a commitment to women’s equality included the right to both economic independence and sexual satisfaction. These women were heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, Ellen Key, and other intellectuals who provided evidence that women were sexual beings. In this early period, Freud was less important than writers like Ellis and Key, who tended to romanticize sexuality by investing it with mystical qualities, and who also insisted that sexual gratification was necessary for emotional health. These sexual radicals who embraced the

sexologists' ideas about women's capacity for eroticism had great influence: they wrote novels, plays, and magazine articles that reached the middle-class parlor. These women, along with academic social scientists who were teaching the new sexual ideology in college courses, helped to spread a new ideal of womanhood.

By the twenties, these changes evident in both working-class, women and elite sophisticates had filtered to large numbers of women. The legitimacy of female sexuality was furthered in part by the increased acceptability and availability of birth control devices, particularly the diaphragm. Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger had begun her drive for contraception in 1913, primarily, out of concern for poor women whose lives were overburdened by excessive childbearing. By the 1920s, she had become more conservative politically and, well aware of eugenics, now sought to reach poor women as a means of social control. Moreover, she increasingly targeted as her audience middle-class and elite women, who proved very receptive to means of controlling their fertility and exploring eroticism. Heavily influenced by Havelock Ellis's romantic notion of sexuality, Sanger promised that birth control made sex "a psychic and spiritual avenue of expression." Although many legal restrictions still limited the dissemination of birth control information or devices in the 1920s, Sanger persisted throughout the decade. Abandoning her early efforts to put birth control in the hands of poor women through public clinics, in part because it met with so much opposition, she strove to legitimate contraception by dispensing it through physicians. This was a successful technique, but one that limited easy access to birth control to patients with private doctors. It is not surprising, then, that the Lynds found in Middletown that all of the business wives whom they interviewed practiced birth control (27), but only 34 of the 77 working-class wives did so, and many of them used "primitive" practices. The Lynds listed a wide range of reasons working-class wives gave for not using contraception, including ignorance of methods, resistance by husbands, and personal repugnance. Whatever the reason, the class nature of contraceptive use suggests that the married women most likely to experience sexuality as liberating may have been middle-class and elite women whose matter-of-fact use of birth control allowed them to divorce sexual pleasure from reproduction.

The mass media proved to be as important as contraception in bringing about changed attitudes toward sexuality. If, in the 1910s, 23 percent of intellectual magazines had argued that sex was good for both men and women, now 40 percent of popular magazines did so as well. Moreover, sex adventure magazines like *True Confessions*, *Telling Tales*, and *True Story* proliferated, with suggestive story titles such as... "The Primitive Lover" ("She wanted a caveman husband"), "Indolent Kisses," and "Innocents Astray." Although advertising broadcast a variety of images of women, an important motif was the glamorous woman, whose sexual appeal was undisguised. In a 1924 *Picture Play* ad Palmolive featured a barely clad woman in an exotic Egyptian setting and promised the "beauty secret of Cleopatra hidden in every cake."

Above all, movies projected a new version of womanhood. Historian Mary Ryan has commented that the rising female stars of the twenties, Madge Bellamy, Clara Bow, and Joan Crawford, with their physical freedom, energy, and independence, represented the modern woman. The new style of vibrant physicality included an emphasis on sexual attractiveness. Increasingly, young stars had to have what British novelist Elinor Glyn had termed "It." Personified by Clara Bow, the "It" girl possessed, as Glyn put it, the "animal magnetism" that is

“‘the open sesame’ to success in life and love.” The movie industry promoted “It” by featuring displays of female flesh in lingerie and scenes set in opulent bathrooms. The plots invoked the new sexuality as well. Movie ads titillated fans with “brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp.”

Adultery and promiscuity were rarely condoned in the mass media, however. Movie adulteresses invariably paid for their sins, and heroines ultimately resisted temptation and were rescued by marriage or renewal of their marital commitment. Moral endings were also standard fare in the sex adventure magazines. There might be titillating stories of fallen women, such as “Her Morning After—Two Lives Transformed in One Night—Before the Volstead Act,” or “My Own Story of Love,” which asked, “Should a woman tell her husband all the secrets of her past? Should she uncover things gone—but not forgotten?” But at the end, the sexually active woman either paid a price for her lapse or achieved respectability through marriage. The purveyors of mass culture recognized changing sexual morality and, moreover, promoted it, but they nonetheless reveal a persistence of traditional values, especially the double standard.

That there were limits to the sexual revolution was also suggested by the lives of young unmarried women. The problem of wild, “abandoned” youth was a hotly debated topic in the 1920s. They had their defenders who welcomed their liberating influence, but traditionalists viewed modern youth as irresponsible, irreligious, and immoral. Invariably many placed the blame on the young woman, the flapper, who was such a vibrant symbol of the new generation. The flapper style entailed a minimum of undergarments, short skirts, filmy fabrics, and sheer hose. All this pointed to physical freedom and enhanced sexuality, even though the potential eroticism of their outfits was kept in bounds by the boyish look achieved by binding the breasts to make them appear flat. Bobbed hair, a release from the weight of tradition that required women to grow their hair long and then restrain it in chignons, buns, and the like, also represented female daring and eroticism. Smoking, drinking, and cosmetics, traditionally associated with prostitutes, further underscored young women’s insistence on their right to sexuality and personal liberty.

A final indication of youthful insistence upon sexuality was the new dancing. For men and women alike, jazz was the craze. This was the period when whites went slumming to Harlem, an environment they viewed as erotic and dangerous, to go to cabarets for dancing, music, and other amusements. Whites sanitized the jazz they heard there and brought it into mainstream popular culture, where it set the tone for new, less inhibited dancing that shocked the older generation. As a writer in *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, expressed it: “Anyone who says that ‘youths of both sexes can mingle in close embrace’—with limbs intertwined and torso in contact—without suffering harm lies. Add to this position the wriggling movement and sensuous stimulation of the abominable jazz orchestra with its voodoo-born minors and its direct appeal to the sensory center, and if you can believe that youth is the same after this experience as before, then God help your child.” Despite this lament, much of the new dancing, at least to present-day eyes, seems more boisterous than sexual. But to youth of the twenties, including young women, their dancing was symbolic, another badge of their rejection of traditional standards of behavior.

But it was not all symbolic. Rouged young women with bobbed hair, who smoked, drank, danced to jazz, and talked knowingly of sex, were also engaging in sexual activity. Charting something so private is difficult, but some concrete evidence exists. The Kinsey Report of the 1950s, which asked respondents for their sexual history, indicated an increase in premarital intercourse for the generation of the 1920s. Kinsey found that of the women born before 1900, 14 percent acknowledged premarital intercourse before the age of twenty-five, while those born after that date were two and a half times as likely (36 percent) to have had premarital intercourse. The latter group was also more likely to experience orgasm as well. Contemporary social scientists and sexologists, of whom there were many, also assumed a rise in premarital experience, further indicating that sexual norms and behavior were undergoing a significant transformation in this period.

This transformation had limits. The sexual double standard was still in place, with young women in the position of protecting their reputation by exercising discretion and restraint in their sexual activities. Moreover, it appears that according to prevailing norms, intercourse was still reserved as a prelude to marriage among engaged couples. Blanchard and Manasses found that the young women they interviewed approved of premarital sex, but only when a couple was deeply in love: "I disapprove of promiscuous relations on moral grounds; not, however, between a man and woman in love." As Blanchard and Manasses summed it up: "The code which the girls have worked out for themselves declares that sexual intercourse without marriage can safely be indulged in when it is a prelude to the more permanent arrangement of matrimony. Promiscuity is clearly differentiated, and largely condemned as 'cheap' and 'common.'"

As startling to contemporaries as changed attitudes toward premarital sex was the widely publicized form of sexual play known as petting, which included a variety of sexual activities short of intercourse. All contemporary sources indicate it was a widespread phenomenon. Advice columns frequently printed anguished letters in which young women bemoaned the fact that without petting they could not keep a boyfriend. In *Middletown*, the Lynds reported that in a survey of juniors and seniors in high school, 48 percent of the male students and 51 percent of the female students agreed with the statement that nine out of ten high school students had petting parties. That much petting apparently took place publicly during parties is significant. In her study of college sorority and fraternity youth in the twenties, historian Paula Fass has perceptively argued that the peer group was an important factor influencing new sexual standards among youth. It legitimated and even enforced new sexual norms. By sanctifying erotic play, while reserving intercourse for committed couples, the peer group set up guidelines for appropriate behavior that helped to keep erotic activity in check.

The new rules that took the place of old restraints nonetheless maintained some traditional standards. A letter to advice columnist Carolyn Van Wyck in *Photoplay* graphically illustrates both the changes in sexual patterns and the persistence of old ideas. As the young correspondent explained it: "Petting is my biggest problem. The boys all seem to do it and don't seem to come back if you don't do it also. We girls are at our wits' end to know what to do." So far she felt fortunate, because she had dated nearly fifty different boys, and "as yet I've never been out with anyone that got beyond my control." But her problem was not so much controlling young men as resolving her own confusion over what she wanted: "I don't seem to know what I want out of life. I want the thrills. I get a kick out of petting and I think all girls do no matter how

much they deny it. What's to be done?" The key question for her came down to whether petting would damage her reputation and affect her ability to marry. "It makes me wonder how on earth you are to get a husband who respects you because you don't pet if you get turned down every time because you won't, before they have time to appreciate your sterling qualities. I'm sure that I don't want to marry anyone who is too slow to want to pet. But I want to discover what is right. Please help me." As the letter suggests, as significant a change as petting represented, it nonetheless included the persistence of the double standard and was a form of courtship linked ultimately for women to obtaining a husband.

Despite very real changes, the extent of the sexual revolution is easily overstated. Movies with moral endings, the persistence of the double standard, the limits on erotic experimentation set by group-sanctioned petting, all suggest limits to cultural change. Moreover, the new woman did not describe all women. The tremendous to-do in the 1920s about the new sexual woman was really centered on the "respectable" white middle-class women, because it was changes among them that were the most dramatic. For many in the working class, sexual norms had changed years earlier. Still others remained largely untouched by the new morality. A very low rate of illegitimacy for Italian immigrant daughters persisted into the 1930s, suggesting that among that group, young women remained outside the peer culture that sanctioned sexual activity for unmarried women. Many women may have been influenced by changing standards even if they did not embrace them. Elaine May has written about divorce cases in which wives, traditionally reared, could not comfortably accept the new sexual code, much to the dismay of their husbands, who had anticipated a highly sexualized marriage. The legacy of the Victorian moral code was not easily dismissed.

The concentration on women's sexuality in the twenties also disconcerted many women's rights activists, for whom equality in sexual matters had never been an issue. They worried that the pursuit of social pleasures and sexual activity led women away from more serious concerns such as social reform and women's rights. These women, often shaped by Victorian notions of female sexuality, were critical of women's "abuse of New Freedom." Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1923 condemned the moral revolution, especially the misuse of birth control, which had become "a free ticket for selfish and fruitless indulgence, and an aid in the lamentable behavior of our times, affecting both men and women." Many older feminists, who came of age in a time when homosocial bonding was especially common among educated, professional women, were also disconcerted that the new psychology of sexuality made close relationships between women suspect as homosexual. It became increasingly common, moreover, for popular observers to analyze militant feminists as repressed lesbians. For homosexual women, sophisticated urban environments gave them more opportunities to live the lives they wanted, but the relentless celebration of heterosexuality could only have been disconcerting.

For many African American women, the 1920s' emphasis on sexuality was also problematic. Middle-class black women reformers traditionally had been eager to protect black women from sexual exploitation and to counter stereotypes of them as sexually permissive. Women authors of the Harlem Renaissance, unlike men, tended to be uncomfortable with the emphasis on the "primitive," especially when it touched on sexuality, because it seemed to reinforce unwanted stereotypes. Jessie Fauset's novels invariably featured light-skinned, upper-class, genteel women, with the underlying message that African Americans could be people of

culture and propriety. Nella Larsen's characters were more complex and spoke to the dilemma many black women faced. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, a well-educated mulatto, struggles with her relationship to the white world and the black world. Her sense of her sexuality is linked with this struggle, and for the most part she represses her erotic feelings. White society, as represented by Danish relatives of her white mother, lionizes her as an exotic, sensuous creature. A Danish painter, who executes her portrait, after first attempting to seduce her, offers marriage. Helga rejects him and the white society that has dehumanized her: "But you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you." After returning to New York, Helga's sexual reserve is broken in an orgiastic religious conversion scene. She surrenders herself to an uncouth southern minister, whom she marries and follows to the rural South. There the novel leaves her, burdened by seemingly endless childbirth and the responsibility of her children, presumably trapped by her own body.

Helga's story by and large speaks to a rare dilemma, of a woman caught between two societies, whose sexuality was shaped in part by white society and its expectations of her. Turning away from novelists to blues singers, as Hazel Carby has done, can illuminate a strikingly different view of African American women's perception of their sexuality. Blues singers like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters sang their music in vaudeville and carnivals throughout the North and South. By the late 1920s, "race records" and later the radio disseminated this music even farther. While many blues songs entailed descriptions of a masochistic woman clinging to the man who "done her wrong," a significant body of songs, often written by the performers themselves, painted a different picture. Some evoked an exuberant sense of women's enjoyment of their sexuality that spoke of resistance to sexual objectification and domination by men. There were songs that featured a woman demanding that her lover pay attention to her needs, such as "One Hour Mamma," in which Ida Cox reminded her man that

*I want a slow and easy man
He needn't ever take the lead,
Cause I work on that long time plan
And I ain't a looking for no speed.*

*I'm a one hour mamma, so no one minute papa
Ain't the kind of man for me.
Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's proper
Then love me like I like to be.*

Others, like Ethel Waters' "No Man's Mamma Now," expressed independence from men: "I can say what I like, I can do what I like. / I'm a girl who is on a matrimonial strike; / Which means, I'm no man's mamma now." The blues, then, reveal a forum in which black women could not only celebrate their sexuality but claim to control it. Whether prescriptive or descriptive, these blues songs gave expression to black female desire that was distinct from that of their novelist sisters who focused on the burden of battling racial stereotypes.

As in work and politics, then, the new woman's sexuality did not resonate for all women. And as in politics and work, the question of how much liberation social change brought women is crucial. At the time most women identified the new sexuality as a form of freedom and equality, but a closer look paints a more complex picture. Film treatment of white women in this period is suggestive, for the new sexuality was often expressed through consumption. Indeed, most heroines attracted the opposite sex not through the body but through the clothes, jewelry, and cosmetics that adorned it. Film such as *Charge It* and *Gimme* underscored the point. In keeping with this theme of sexuality and consumption, many movies employed the "makeover plot" in which a dowdy, restrained matron traded her old-fashioned clothes for flapper attire to regain her husband. The makeover movies reveal the limits of women's film transformation. Films might feature sexuality, even infidelity, but women's goal in most movies was marriage or the maintenance of marriage. Despite the titillation these films offered, they, along with the other mass media, tended to tame sexuality and keep it from threatening the social fabric.

As the films suggest, physical attractiveness was a central component defining the new sexual woman. Beauty shops multiplied, expanding from 5,000 in 1920 to 40,000 in 1930. Similarly, the sales of cosmetics mushroomed, with sales in 1914 of \$17 million, and in 1925, \$141 million. And, inexorably, the purpose of these products was to produce a youthful appearance. The youth cult was pervasive. It appeared in films, books, magazines, and advertisements. Above all advertisements. The American Laundry Machinery Company used the appeal of youthfulness to promote commercial laundries, insisting that "the woman of America stays young because she keeps her mind young." The time she saves permits "the many things which bring happier days and longer youth." Metropolitan Life Insurance saluted the woman who concealed her age: "Through her determination to stay young—even to the point of denying the calendar—she has set up higher health standards." More predictably, clothing and cosmetics manufacturers promised a youthful look. Addressing a middle-aged woman, Charis corsets acknowledged that "within this woman's soul burns still the flame of her desire for charm and beauty." Charis corsets not only would provide a youthful silhouette but would also improve the strength of the wearer's internal organs so that she is "younger in fact as well as in appearance."

Women were encouraged to identify their youth, and thus their sexual attractiveness, with the goods that adorned their bodies. This sentiment came out in a remarkable letter to the editor of *Picture Play*. A Kansas wife wrote in protesting a man's letter in the previous issue in which he complained that a Bebe Daniels film had compelled his wife to spend eighteen dollars for a new hat. The Kansas woman explained that the impulse to buy a hat comes from a woman's sense that she is no longer young, and that "motion pictures have sharpened this instinct by putting beautiful women before us every day." But rather than criticize the influence of the media, she insisted that it was a healthy influence. "The extravagant hat is just one flash of a great power which is keeping the modern woman slim and healthy and keen, as young at forty as her mother was at thirty and her grandmother at twenty. More power to the Gloria Swansons, the Elsie Fergusons, the Irene Castles, and the Viola Danas!" This woman's enthusiastic letter offers telling evidence of how successful the media were in convincing women that their attractiveness and self-worth were linked to the products they bought.

The new sexuality that led women to the cult of beauty and consumption, also entailed a sexual objectification of women, an emphasis on their sexuality to the exclusion of other

qualities. Many of the psychological works which championed women's right to sexuality also contained the seeds of objectification. Havelock Ellis, who was very sympathetic to women, nonetheless said that "their brains are in their wombs." The early feminists who had promoted sexual freedom had also envisioned it as part of a broad process of liberation that included economic and political freedom. The enthusiasm for women's sexuality as it developed among intellectuals like Ellis, but especially in the mass media of movies, advertising, and periodicals, co-opted this emphasis on sexuality, with little of its egalitarian content. As Nancy Cott has argued: "Advertising and mass media took up Women's heterosexuality as their own agent, blunting the Feminist point that heterosexual liberation for women intended to subvert gender hierarchy rather to confirm it." The new woman's sexuality thus lost much of its radical potential. Most contemporaries may have viewed the changes for women as liberating, for many women did achieve more freedom in the personal arena, and in particular, the legitimation of their sexuality. However, enhanced freedom was within narrow boundaries. It was accompanied by sexual objectification and linked to consumerism, which ushered in the modern trend of defining women in terms of their sexual allure and adornment, both of which served to contain women's eroticism. Women's sexuality was also tamed, and its threat to male dominance reduced, by the persistence of the double standard and the insistence that marriage was a woman's ultimate goal.

The new woman's liberation was in some measure a cultural construct embroidered by movies, advertisements, and the popular press. To the extent that the image was accurate at all, it depicted white, relatively affluent women, and had relatively little meaning to poor women of color. Moreover, whatever a woman's race or ethnicity, significant limits to her freedom and autonomy were evident in politics, work, and the personal arena. Although minority women were the most exploited, almost all women confronted a labor hierarchy in which they faced discrimination and wage differentials. In the political world, the women's movement, beset by external constraints and internal divisions, was not able to construct an agenda that could provide the basis for expanding feminist consciousness to a wide range of women. In the personal sphere of home, marriage, and courtship, women may have rejected older notions of duty and sacrifice to demand independence and individualism, especially in sexual matters. But even in the private arena, their autonomy and freedom were circumscribed by widespread expectations that women's primary role was still as wife and mother.

But to minimize the liberation of the new woman is not to dismiss the significance of changes in women's lives. The rigidly separated spheres for men and women were being eroded. In politics, the existence of a separate women's political culture, based on the idea of women's special moral nature that put them above politics, was disappearing. Women activists, no longer part of a distinct separate sphere, became subsumed by the political parties, where they found little influence or power. In the workplace, the acceptability of employment for single women was a given by the 1920s. And despite the general disapproval of employed wives, the modern trend of their entering the workforce was well in place, with its long-range implications for women and the family.

Finally, another significant change in this decade was that, save for those in dire poverty, women became central to the consumer culture. The major purchasers of products, they constituted a crucial underpinning of the economy. Moreover, changing ideas about leisure and

personal satisfaction that were an integral part of the consumer culture were evident in women's private lives, especially in the new emphasis on female sexuality. The fusion of sexuality with consumption also led to women's sexual objectification, and encouraged women to measure their self-worth by the goods that adorned their bodies. The twenties, then, witnessed a coalescence of factors that did not make women free, but did give their lives a modern contour.