New Professional Opportunities for Women: Nursing, Teaching, Clerical

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New Professional Opportunities for Women—Nursing, Teaching, Clerical

In the nineteenth century, women in urbanized societies sought new employment in white-collar work and professions that required education and training. The rise of industrial capitalism and the introduction of compulsory schooling in many European countries, women were eager to compete for jobs newly created by the expansion of the service sector of the economy. The important sites for women’s work in this tertiary sector included government offices, banks, postal offices, telephone and telegraph exchanges, schools, hospitals, and department stores. Women’s entry into nursing, teaching, and office work feminized these fields, also contributing to the dismantling of gender inequalities.

Women’s desire and need to work clashed with the prevailing view that most women should make marriage their primary occupation. In France, school curriculum throughout the nineteenth century encouraged girls to prepare for a life of domestic duties, while many boys aspired to university study or skilled work. Yet many women were obligated to work to assist the family economy. Necessity and opportunity led to the doubling of women’s participation in the workforce in Britain between 1851 and 1901. Simultaneously, feminists challenged the ideology of domesticity that sought to limit women to a smaller sphere of society. Europeans gradually came to accept female employees in nursing, teaching, clerical, and office jobs because such work was less well paid and less prestigious than the male-dominated professions such as medicine, law, science, and academia. Moreover, discrimination limited the numbers of women in the higher ranks of all occupations. At the end of the nineteenth century, most governments regulated women’s labor, restricting their hours in certain industries to protect women from harm and to enhance men’s wages and work opportunities. In the Middle East and Asia, women entered new professions later than in Europe and North America, typically after 1914.

The professionalization of nursing was one of the major developments shaping the medical field and women’s job opportunities during the second half of the nineteenth century. Previously, unpaid nursing was performed by family members, religious orders, or charitable institutions. In hospitals, nursing was traditionally associated with manual labor performed by the uneducated working classes. Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) professionalized nursing by elevating it to a scientific and medical practice. The

During the 1890s, the term “new woman” emerged in vocabularies to signify the women who were pursuing lives of their own in a broadening public sphere. In most respects the new type of woman seemed to reject Victorian concepts of home and domesticity by asserting a life independent of marriage, engaging previously all-male professions, and pursuing an inner lifestyle. Literary figures mirrored real women’s lives as innovators and activists. Playwright Henrik Ibsen’s protagonist Nora walked out on her stifling bourgeois marriage in A Doll’s House (1879) to seek self-actualization. Career women were emblematic of this modern trend. When law graduate Jeannine Chauvin (1862-1908) demanded that the hitherto all-male bastion of the Paris bar admit qualified women, she stirred up a vociferous controversy about the future of gender relations, work, and family. Her successful entry into the profession in 1900 was rightly seen as a triumph of feminism. While critics warned that women would abandon the home and forsake children, bringing an end to society as they knew it. The modern urban working woman was conspicuous in her consumption-defying clothes to smoke, ride a bicycle, and wear minimal dress, notably pants. While pursuing new fashions in attitude and lifestyle, women also became participants in an expanding consumer market that fostered desire for individual pleasures and the means of gratification through consumption.

Sara Kimble

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introduction of her exacting hygiene practices to reduce infections led to the dramatic reduc-

tion in preventable deaths in military hospitals during the Crimean War (1854–1856). On the
opposing side of this conflict, at least 150 Rus-

sian women volunteered as nurses. Nightingale's re-
forms changed the perception of nursing into a
respectable field eagerly pursued by daughters of
the educated middle and lower classes.

By the 1880s, large hospitals employed for-
mally trained nurses. The rising popularity of
nursing was evident in the British census. In
1851 nurses numbered fewer than 2,300. In
1901 their ranks swelled to more than 25,000.
In France, competition between Catholic sis-
ters and lay nurses resulted in a greater propor-
tion of secular staff by 1911. European women also
joined colonial missions to provide medical
aid while reinforcing imperialism. Whether at
home or overseas, nursing remained a low-pay,
labor-intensive field employing youthful, doc-
ic, and unmarried women. During World War I
(1914–1918), tens of thousands of women from
countries served their country out of a sense of
duty, a desire to be useful, and for the promise of
adventure. Nursing at the front lines exposed
women to the same dangers and hardships as men,
and women performed with slac-
true and won the respect of the public. Nursing
in war was seen as a young woman's obli-
gation to the nation, the virtuous counterpart
to men's duty in soldiering.

Teaching became a prototypical feminine job
with the development of public schools. Teaching
was seen as an extension of women's traditional
roles as educators and also served as prepara-
tion for motherhood. In 1800 a few girls entered
a classroom, yet by 1914 nearly all attended school
if they lived in Northern or Western Europe.

At the end of the nineteenth century, women
tocked to educational institutions such as Girton
College at Cambridge University for advanced
study or served in France for teacher training.
American Catherine Beecher (1800–1878) facili-
tated women's entry into teaching by arguing
that their nature suited them to care for youths.
In 1867 female teachers held 70 percent of all
positions in public primary schools in Italy and Spain.

In Britain by 1911, three-quarters of all teachers were female. Teaching was also

an important path for social mobility. In Russia, 40 percent of all female teachers in rural schools
came from economically modest backgrounds.

The marriage bar cut short women's careers in

academia. In many countries, including Britain,
Germany, and Russia. However, France permitted
women to continue working after marriage, and

the state encouraged married couples to seek po-
sitions together in rural schools. Female teachers
were typically paid less for the same work until
unionization eliminated wage differentials be-
 tween men and women. In France, female teach-
ers won the right to equal pay for equal work in
1909. Only rarely, however, did women become
university professors, such as did the Nobel Prize
winning Marie Curie (1867–1954).

The growth of government bureaucracies,
an evolution in the nature of white-collar work,
and an expansion of educational opportunities
for women all encouraged women to enter

the tertiary sector. Middle-class women sought
respectable and meaningful work in offices,
shops, and professions that could provide them
with the means to support themselves if they
could not or chose not to marry. Female work-
ers could be paid a third to a half as much as
men and were subject to paternalistic rules and
sexual harassment, but they were less likely to
complain about conditions.

Job opportunities for women expanded

across the European continent during World
War I as men abandoned their jobs for the front.
While the majority of women worked in war in-
dustries, women broke into other white-collar
occupations hitherto closed to them due to exi-
gencies of the war. Women's participation in
traditionally masculine work was intended for
the duration of the war only. In fact, the war re-
sulted in the long-term destabilization of conser-
vative views of women's abilities and changed
young women's expectations for the future.

Under the Russian Empire, women were for-

mally prohibited from working in civil service.
However, in the 1880s and 1890s, women found
work in minor government positions, banking,
and railroads and as office secretaries. Liberal

feminists were victorious in bringing about
equal employment opportunities and political

dights during the Russian Revolution of 1917.
By 1930s, the Soviet Union led the world with

the numerically successful integration of female
professionals into all major fields.

—Sara Kimble

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Housework

Housework has been a consistent, while often
overlooked, aspect of labor history, though its
scope and meaning have changed over time. In
the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth
centuries housework was mainly undertaken
by women, with or without the help of servants,
and was centered on three main tasks: laun-
dry, cooking, and general cleaning. Most histori-
rians agree that aside from regional variations,
housework was relatively static prior to the mid-
nineteenth century. Changes occurred during

the Industrial Revolution as a result of techno-
logical innovation; however, many historians
argue that these innovations actually created
more work by raising standards of cleanliness.
Yet these modifications were not adopted evenly
although a change in the work of women was
seen by social reformers in order to utilize
new products, and the poor could not always
afford them. For many, modern conveniences
were not available until the 1920s and 1930s.

Laundry remained for the for the most part one
household task well into the late nineteenth
century, as few houses had indoor plumbing.
Most rural houses received their water supply
from wells or streams, and urban residents re-
died on communal taps. This meant that women
had to haul their water before even beginning
to wash their clothing. However, in some ar-
areas such as rural France, Ireland, and Scotland,
women preferred to construct freestanding
washhouses near streams. The washing pro-
cedure consisted of forcing the water, mixed
with a cleaning agent, through the clothing by
beating it, scrubbing it, or even stomping on it.
Soap was expensive and rarely used until the
eighteenth century. Instead, stale urine, due
to its ammonia content, and lye were the main
cleaning agents. After washing, linens were
given a blue rinse made from powdered glass and
then were starched before being wrung out and
hung to dry. Finally, most clothing and linen had
to be ironed with solid iron of varying weights,
which were heated on the fire or, later, the
stove. Laundry remained a time-consuming and
difficult chore until the invention of the electric
washing machine in 1914, though innovations
such as the wringer and the electric iron did al-
leviate some of the burden. Consequently, many
households chose to send some of their laundry
out to a local washerwoman.

In contrast, cooking underwent several
changes during this time period. Prior to the mid-
nineteenth century the majority of cooking

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

SPRING CLEANING

The term "spring cleaning" has a historical basis. When houses were heated by a central fire pit or
stove and lit by rush lights, candles, or lamps, heat
and grime accumulated throughout the winter
months. When spring finally arrived the household
was turned upside down, as carpets were pulled
up and beaten outside and the underlying floor
was swept and the ashes cleaned. Curtains were
taken down and washed, walls were wiped down,
and grime was polished, and the house was gener-
ally aired out. Even individuals not directly in-
volved in the endeavor had to put up with missed
meals, blocked-off rooms, and exhausted housewives
and servants. However, spring cleaning was also a
relief, as it heralded the warmer weather; the return
of laundry drying outside instead of inside, where it
was usually stored, and the return of privacy, as the
household no longer had to crowd around the fire
and heat stoves.

—Heather Stanley
opposed the Fifteenth Amendment (which guar-anteed blacks the right to vote) because it failed to give women the vote and also advocated for reform of divorce, an end of the trend of discrimina-tion in matters of work and pay. The less-militant American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was founded by staunch abolitionists who feared that the Fifteenth Amendment would be deceived if it included a provision on women's voting rights. They avoided issues other than gaining the vote for women, which they believed could best be achieved on a state-by-state basis rather than by a constitutional amendment. In 1890 the two groups reconciled and joined forces as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, the NAWSA oversaw the work of hun-dreds of smaller local and state groups that sup-porting women suffrage legislation in their states and communities. It was the most important su-frage organization in the United States and was instrumental in winning the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. With the achievement of this long-sought goal, first-wave feminism in the United States came to an end.

—Jennifer Janson

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Feminist Movements in Europe

Feminism is the critical response to the sys-tematic subordination of women as a group to men as a group within a given cultural setting. A feminist believes that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. The word feminism emerged first in France in the 1870s, yet the goal of enhancing the balance of power between the sexes dates from centuries earlier. As early as the fifteenth century, writers de-fended women's equality and called for ending women's subordination in the family, law, and so-cety. The Venetian-born French writer Christine de Pisan (1364-1431) authored a political tre-aise, The Book of the City of Ladies (1405), in which she condemned the demeaning remarks made about women by ancient authorities, such as Aristotle and Ovid, and defended women's capacity for intellectual achievement and their right to govern. Important humanists viewed women as spiritually equal to men, and the Carthusian theorist François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1723) pushed this notion into the secular sphere by arguing that "the mind has no sex." Enlightenment philosophers from Sweden to Spain engaged in rich intellectual debates about gender roles and developed a literary movement on the "woman question." While many authors denounced women's subordinate existence, oth-ers, most famously Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), developed an antifeminist resistance by denigrating women and prescribed for them a limited sphere of action in domesticity. The patriarchical worldview that women were uniquely suited for the private realm profoundly influ-enced European social structures during the nineteenth century.

The French Revolution was an extremely im-portant moment for the rise of a popular move-ment for women's rights. In France, women's activism existed alongside men's activism. How-ever, women's activism made monumental im-pacts at particular moments, including the march in October 1790 when women brought the king to Paris, in 1793 when women protested for po-litical rights, and during the insurrections of May 1793. The revolutionary government recognized women's civil rights but not their civic rights, permitting women equal inheritance and divorce rights but excluding them from political rights. A former actress turned writer, Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), enumerated the unpaid rights that belonged to women, including property, tax-ation, and citizenship, in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen (1791). Revolution-ary women could count on a few supporters such as the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), a mathematician and philosopher, who condemned sex and race discrimination as an injustice. De Gouges and other women's rights leaders were put to death by guillotine for their ideas. After the revolution, the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine (1737-1809) called for individual rights based on ca-pacity to reason rather than property. British author Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) claimed women's rights on the same basis in her essay A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). Wollstonecraft championed the most acceptable feminist ideas that women needed education and economic opportuni-ties to aid their families and live with dignity.

The counterrevolution and the rise of Na-poleon ushered in a culturally conservative era that narrowed the vision of women to that of subordinate wives who owed obedience to their husbands under strict laws. The dominant po-litics of liberalism left a constricted legacy, as lib-eral ideas legitimated challenges to traditional authoruty and served to enfranchise men but denied women's claims to citizenship on the basis of sex differences. In the early nineteenth century, married women had no legal right to property or to their earnings; no freedom of movement or conscience; no freedom regarding their bodies; and no rights in regard to their chil-dren. Feminists criticized the laws that stripped women of rights and demanded additional regulations that prohibited marriage, required women to take their spouse's nationality, and decreed adultery a crime only if committed by wives. Reformer Josephine Butler (1828-1906) in Britain and Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914) in France argued that under such laws matrimony more closely resembled slavery rather than the ideal of companionate love as de-scribed by romantics. Writer Caroline Sheridan Norton (1808-1877), falsely accused of adultery by her drunken husband and denied custody of her children, published critical pamphlets and thus helped secure a series of legal improve-ments achieved by parliamentary acts. Married women's property rights followed in England (1870), Germany (1900), and France (1907), pri-marily benefiting bourgeois women.

Mainstream feminists hoped to amelio-rate women's condition and to remake society.
Characterized by civil disobedience and hunger strikes.

In Germany, women were prohibited from attending political meetings, cautious leaders, including Louise Otto-Peters (1819-1870), initially focused on moderate demands for education and economic rights rather than the vote. The German women's movement was divided over class issues, whereby socialist leaders such as Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) espoused the belief that only the overthrow of capitalism could emancipate women. Women's suffrage was granted more readily in countries with less divisive women's movements including Finland (1906), Norway (1915), and the Soviet Union (1917). Over 20 nations granted women the right to vote after the First World War (1919-1919), partly in recognition of women's wartime patriotism. With few exceptions, formal constitutional equality for women hung in abeyance until after the Second World War (1939-1945).

—Sara Kimble

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