

The years of 1880-1920 witnessed the Second Industrial Revolution. The Gilded Age then faded into its reaction, progressivism. During the Gilded Age, “robber barons,” sometimes called “captains of industry,” monopolized the countries’ industries through both vertical and horizontal integration. These individuals, such as John D Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and JP Morgan, accumulated grandiose amounts of wealth. The overall standard of living rose for all, but the masses did not share equally in the wealth accumulation and the gap between classes rose. Rapid urbanization created urban sprawl as well as slums in bifurcated cities, causing many middle-class whites to move to the suburbs. Progressivism entered the scene as a reaction to the Gilded Age’s blights, and the labor movement picked up steam as both craft unions (ie American Federation of Labor) and labor unions (ie the Knights of Labor) formed to advocate for better wages, hours, and conditions. In this context of a changing America, the role of American women changed—despite strong resistance—as they fought to improve the world around them and finally won suffrage.

Patriarchy is deeply rooted not only in American society, but in most civilizations in general. Thus, many were resistant to change, especially men. This perspective can be seen in Document 2A, in which Senator George Vest contends that women are unfit for politics. As a senator, Vest firstly represents someone who has high stakes to maintain the status quo. He is an elite, a senator. He wishes to exclude women, possibly because he enjoys the status quo in which he and other men retain all power. Moreover, in his statement, he argues that he wishes to return home to a companion, not a politician. This reasoning reveals a selfish perspective—he never once considers the issue from a woman’s perspective—and also reflects a common sentiment at the time. Women were often considered faithful companions, not much unlike how a dog would be described today. One popular magazine at the time was even titled, “Woman: Man’s Best Friend.” Even women sometimes bought into the cult of domesticity. In Document 1A, Catherine Beecher advocates that women should act in such a delicate way that men will want to yield to women. Beecher is from a family of prominent activists, and thus her perspective reveals that even progressives of the day sometimes internalized patronizing and repressive ideologies.

Despite resistance to the women’s movement, women continued to fight for equal rights. Many, such as Dorthea Dix and Jane Addams, even used the cult of domesticity argument to their own advantage. Dorthea Dix was a trailblazer in this moral crusading, and she visited prisons around the country, pushing for prison reform. Jane Addams established the Hull House in Chicago, paving the way for a string of other settlement houses around the country (for example, New York settlement houses in New York, established by Lillian Wald) as well as the idea that social work could be women’s work. Addams and Dix both successfully expanded the idea of the cult of domesticity and republican motherhood, which had previously had been used to constrain women to the home, in order to become active participants in reform movements under the guise of “moral and social housekeeping” for the whole country.

This can be seen in Document 2C, which discusses the role of women in fighting for improved education and protected child labor. Indeed, many women, such as Florence Kelly, recognized their power as consumers. Kelly formed the National Consumers’ League to weaponize this power and boycott sweatshop labor. Further corroborating the role of women in social work is Document 2B. This document is about the work of an African American woman’s

club and the effort they have made in Kindergartens, education, and the fight against Jim Crow laws. This perspective is significant because African American's have often been marginalized in American society, so their point of view reveals a perspective suffering from multiple layers of oppression (gender and race).

This idea of social housekeeping can be seen in the Temperance and Prohibition Movements. In 1874, Frances Willard formed the Women's Christian Temperance Union. By 1890, membership had skyrocketed, and the WCTU became a potent organization, strengthened by its alliances with other anti-saloon leagues across the country. The Temperance Movement strongly represented women's interests. They desired a stop to their alcoholic husbands, who frequently turned violent and drained their families' money on drinks. One woman in outrage, Carry Nation, even took a hammer to saloons. These actions demonstrate that women had fully entered the political stage. They were prepared to agitate for legal changes to bring about temperance and prohibition.

In many ways, the temperance and prohibition movement also led to the women's suffrage movement because, in order to bring about this change, women would need the vote. The women's suffrage movement can be traced back to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, in which women, led by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wrote a Declaration of Sentiments (Document 1C). The document, reminiscent of the Declaration of Independence, highlights the inconsistencies of America's ideal of freedom. Leaders Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had previously been to London with their husbands to an abolitionist convention but had been barred because they were women. This personal perspective shows that the women's suffrage movement, in many ways, began as women worked for other marginalized groups (such as slaves) and began to recognize that they were not too different from the oppressed groups they sought to help. America, the land of the free, was not free for them either, they realized.

This fight that Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began was later continued in the 20th century. Organizations, such as the National American Women's Suffrage Association and Alice Paul's more radical National Women's Party, agitated for the vote. Paul, who had been in Great Britain from 1907 to 1910, had witnessed the more radical methods used by the British. She sought to employ them in the US, picketing at the White House, chaining herself to the White House Fence, analogizing Wilson to Kaiser, and going on a hunger strike. Protests such as these eventually helped women win the vote: the 19th amendment.

In many ways, the evolution of women's role in American society can be compared to the role of children and teenagers in the 21st century. Children traditionally were considered to be a kind of property to their parents. Children today, however, have taken an active role in politics, fighting in the Climate Strikes and the March For Our Lives gun control movement. Just as children have been traditionally constrained to the backseat throughout history and are now asserting a political voice, women from 1880-1920, despite strong resistance, similarly attained their political voice, the vote, through social work.