

The Changing Behavior of Women

The years between 1900 and 1930 were years of change for many women. Attitudes toward jobs changed somewhat, and middle-class women were freer to work outside the home if they wanted to. However, in 1930 the percentage of women working—about 20 percent of the labor force—was almost the same as it had been in 1900. (In contrast, today about 40 percent of the labor force is female.)

The greatest changes during the 1920's were in social customs. It became acceptable for women to go out with men without chaperones; women's clothes became less confining and less modest. Women became active in sports, and began to smoke and drink in public.

The following items, most of which are from the 1920's, show how the traditionally accepted behavior of women was changing in the early part of the twentieth century. Keep in mind, however, that not all women changed or liked the changes, and many of them lived happily much as their mothers had.

On a separate sheet of paper, write down the number of each item. If you feel that the item reflects the traditionally accepted behavior of women, write TRADITIONAL next to the number. If you feel that the item reflects the changing behavior of women, write CHANGING. Then write down why you made the choice you did.

A forty-two-year-old woman with two high-school boys worked six days a week as a cleaning woman in a public building. She explained:

I began to work during the war when every one else did; we had to meet payments on our house and everything else was getting so high. The mister objected at first, but now he don't mind. I'd rather keep on working so my boys can play football and basketball and have spending money their father can't give them. We've built our own home, a nice brown and white bungalow We have it almost all paid off and it's worth about \$6,000.

No, I don't lose out with my neighbors because I work; some of them have jobs and those who don't envy us who do. I have felt better

since I worked than ever before in my life. I get up at five-thirty. My husband takes his dinner and the boys buy theirs uptown and I cook supper. We have an electric washing machine, electric iron, and vacuum sweeper. I don't even have to ask my husband any more because I buy these things with my own money. . . . The two boys want to go to college, and I want them to. I graduated from high school myself, but I feel if I can't give my boys a little more all my work will have been useless.

Many people began to limit the size of their families during the 1920's. But many others disapproved of birth control. The following comment is typical of their arguments:

God told Eve to be fruitful and multiply and if he had wanted her to regulate the number of children he would have told her so. I have had eleven children and there ain't nobody has better health than I have.

A woman with seven children started working because her married daughter had left her husband and returned home with two children. The woman's husband could not support eleven people. She explained:

My daughter and her husband—he's a machinist—didn't know anything about birth control, and they had a second baby and then she insisted that they keep apart until his work was regular enough to support a larger family. He wouldn't and she left him and came home to us here while she was still nursing her second baby. I certainly believe in birth control! But I don't know anything about it. I never even heard of it until a little while ago. I sure wish I had known of it when I was young, for then he wouldn't be slaving away to support this big family and my daughter wouldn't be in all the trouble she's in.

A foreman's wife whose children were in high school said to an interviewer:

Marriage ought to be a partnership, but we started out wrong by not sharing money matters. My husband doesn't believe in telling such matters. I don't know either how much he is earning or how much we save. I just know we are saving and that's all. It was because of this that I went to work. I liked having my own money and my husband hated my having it. Men are to blame for women going out to work. They haven't treated their wives fairly.



Celebrating the end of Prohibition, 1933

The following comments were voiced by women of both the working and business classes:

"Girls aren't so modest nowadays; they dress differently." "It's the girls' clothing; we can't keep our boys decent when girls dress that way." "Girls have more nerve nowadays—look at their clothes!" "Girls are far more aggressive today. They call the boys up to try to make dates with them as they never would have when I was a girl." "Last summer six girls organized a party and invited six boys and they never got home until three in the morning. Girls are always calling my boys up trying to make dates with them." "Girls are bolder than they used to be. It used to be that if a girl called up and asked a boy to take her somewhere she meant something bad by it, but now they all do it." "My son has been asked to a dance by three different girls and there is no living with him." "When I was a girl, a girl who painted was a bad girl—but now look at the daughters of our best families!"

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that *all* jobs should be open to women? Do you think that there are some jobs that only men can do? Are there some jobs that only women can do? Explain.
2. Today the women's liberation movement is working to end discrimination against women. What kinds of discrimination still exist today?