

## WOMEN IN 19TH-CENTURY AMERICA

In the nineteenth century, in many countries, it was a common belief that women should be completely dependent upon men. Women were supposed to spend their time raising children and caring for their homes. They were excluded from most occupations. In addition, there were many legal restrictions placed upon women. They were, in fact, second-class citizens. Many Americans worked to raise women from the lowly position they held in the United States. The following items show some of the problems, solutions, and methods used to bring about reforms in the area of women's rights.

- Until 1839, in no state could a married woman own property. All of her property legally belonged to her husband.
- Until the 1870's, in most states a father had the legal right to make a will appointing a guardian for his children. Thus, at her husband's death a mother could have her children taken away from her.
- Until 1850, in most states, it was legal to beat one's wife. In New York, the courts agreed that a man had the right to beat his wife with a horsewhip every few weeks in order to keep her from nagging.
- Before 1869, no state or territory permitted women to vote in state or federal elections. Women were told that it was not their business to be concerned with politics.
- It was thought that education was not as necessary for women as for men. In colonial times, especially, it was felt that education would actually harm a woman. Until 1837, no women were accepted as regular students in any American college or university.
- In 1853, the World's Temperance Convention was held in New York. A number of women were representatives. One woman was invited to speak before the convention. An uproar broke out. The woman stood on the platform for an hour and a half while the rest of the delegates, almost all men, yelled and screamed at her to leave. One minister yelled over and over, "Shame on the woman!"
- In 1839, Mississippi became the first state to permit married women to own property. Maine followed Mississippi's lead in 1844. By 1900, married women could own property in two-thirds of the states.
- The United States was the first country to admit women into the professions. By the 1840's women were allowed to teach in public schools. Between 1820 and 1890, all states allowed women to become lawyers, even though few were admitted to law school. In 1849 Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman qualified by her education to be a doctor. By 1890 three schools offered medical training for women only. However, the number of women doctors in the United States is still very small, since few go to medical schools.
- Women were nurses in hospitals and homes throughout most of the 1800's, but it was not until the early 1870's that nursing schools were established. Many of the early nursing schools were founded and headed by women.
- As cities grew near the turn of the century, feminist activism flourished. Millions of women began working outside of the home, and continued to demand voting rights. Many women became active in social reform movements such as the prohibitionist Women's Christian Temperance Movement, planned parenthood, human societies, anti-prostitution crusades, and equal rights for all regardless of gender, race, and class.
- Women were not allowed to vote in all the states until 1920. However, Wyoming gave women the right to vote in 1869, the first time women gained full voting rights.