**Fighting for Identity: Women before and after the Civil War**

Throughout history, women faced tremendous hurdles as they struggled for acknowledgment of their invaluable role in American society. Following the establishment of the nation and into the early part of the nineteenth century, women began advocationg for their right to vote, as well as for the abolition of slaves. The nineteenth century also saw women continue to advocate for their right to vote, as well as take part in the watime effort throughout the Civil War. Furthermore, the turn of the twentieth century highlighted the racial divide between the various groups of women, such as African Americans, White, Chinese, and Japanese women, despite sharing equal goals. Despite the existing division, this time period continued to show women’s determination to better their roles and place in everyday life.

During the nineteenth century, women continued to fight to improve their own roles as well as the rights of others. The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, which met in New York City in May of 1837, demonstrated the combined belief in the injustices of slavery, as well as the subserviant nature they were forced to endure. For example, during the conference, sisters S.M. Grimké and A. E. Grimké, referenced the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act, which stated that run-away slaves be returned to their masters.[[1]](#footnote-1) They stated that this law contradicted the principles of liberty that had given the United States the moniker of being “the freest nation in the world,” since a large group of people living within the United States were enslaved.[[2]](#footnote-2) A.E. Grimké also posed that slavery was religiously immoral. For example, she stated, “[slaves being returned to their masters was] a daring infringement on the divine commands, ‘Thou shalt *not* deliver unto his master, the servant that is escaped from his master unto thee.’[[3]](#footnote-3) However, throughout the convention, speakers also questioned and challenged beliefs within their religious texts; A.E. Grimké and Lucretia Mott, both argued that women were entitled to the moral rights within society, and should not have to be subservient to their husbands, which had been written within their scripture.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Another event that showed women’s actions to secure rights for all women was the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Mimicking the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, the convention put forward a “Declaration of Sentiment” that stated the grievances made against women in society.[[5]](#footnote-5) For example, the declaration stated, “He [man] has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This grievance describes women’s legal inability to vote within elections. According to a video by Eric Foner, this was “the first, organized women’s suffrage gathering,” which directly highlighted these issues within American society.[[7]](#footnote-7)The declaration further assesses other injustices women had been subjected to throughout history such as the inability to own their property, being denied educational opportunities, and laws regarding divorce.[[8]](#footnote-8) Women continued to conduct conferences and fairs in order to promote their agenda. For example, women continued to promote for both abolitionists ideals and rights through these fairs, which were helped funded by abolitionist supporters.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The experiences of women of color during this time period demonstrated the racial and gender differences existing within society. For example, Harriet Jacobs described her experience of being sexual abused by her master. Jacobs recounted, “My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Jacobs’ experience highlights the inability of enslaved women to escape, as well as the psychological torment they were subjected to. Additionally, Jacobs described that enslaved women were unable to disclose that their masters were fathers of their children, and that her master had fathered eleven slaves.[[11]](#footnote-11) Native American women were also forcibly placed within slavery. For example, Nancy, a Cherokee woman, was taken from her family and wrongly enslaved.[[12]](#footnote-12) In addition to being enslaved, Nancy also faced discrimination on both fronts for being both Native American and African, since both groups were negatively viewed.[[13]](#footnote-13)

However, during this time period, women also fought against these struggles in order to obtain and escape their harsh living conditions. Enslaved women were among a large number of women who would runaway, known as truants and absentees. Louisiana possessed the larges percentage of female runaways, at twenty-nine percent.[[14]](#footnote-14) Other enslaved women would help runaways survive and stay hidden. For example, Aunt Fanny of Virginia would prepare food that she would give to runaways.[[15]](#footnote-15) Women also legally fought their freedoms in court. For example, two Native American women, coincidently named Nancy, fought for their liberties citing that they had wrongfully been enslaved.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some women used their religious devotion in order to persevere during this period. For example, Elizabeth, a former slave from Maryland, exemplified the struggle and determination to survive. Despite the psychological abuse of being taken from her family and physical torment for running away to find them, Elizabeth found solace in faith. After having a religious revelation, Elizabeth described herself as a “new creature in Christ” and dedicated her life to spreading his message, regardless of her living situation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Civil War and Reconstruction periods redefined the role of women within the United States. The war resulted in many women from the North and the South assuming roles traditionally held by men that needed to be attended. Within the South, particularly in Virginia and Tennessee, the war reached the home front of many women. Although there a large majority of woman in disbelief that the war had come to their doorstep, women who had once lamented, “if only I were a man and could fight,” were now able to assist their cause.[[18]](#footnote-18) Sarah Morgan from Louisiana, expressed joy in the Confederacy cause by exclaiming, “I confess my self a rebel, body and soul. *Confess?* I glory in it!”[[19]](#footnote-19) thus demonstrating her enthusiasm for the war despite the negative connotation of being associated with the Confederacy. Women within these communities formed soldiers’ aide societies, known, as “angels of the confederacy,”[[20]](#footnote-20) were to provide supplies to men at the front and shifted to areas where soldiers needed assistance.[[21]](#footnote-21) Mary Boykin Chestnut, a Southern author and observer in Richmond, Virginia, noted, "One [an observer] saw a man too weak to hold his musket. She took it from him and helped the poor wounded fellow along.”[[22]](#footnote-22) They were able to transform homes and churches into hospitals, where women also provided food and nursed the wounded.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Most women on the Northern home front did not directly experience the war’s violence at their doorstep. However, many struggled financially after their male relatives or spouses went away to war.[[24]](#footnote-24) Similarly to Southern woman, Northern women found jobs in cities and towns in war-related industries, such as munitions factories.[[25]](#footnote-25) In Washington, D.C., women took desk jobs, once held by men, in departments of the federal government.[[26]](#footnote-26) Like women in the South, Northern women assisted the war effort from the home front by making and gathering supplies for the troops, albeit more materials were produced in the North, thus Northern women were able to supply more supplies to the Union army.[[27]](#footnote-27) Women also worked as nurses on the home front. For example, Clara Barton became a well-respected nurse, who aided soldiers in Massachusetts. This experience would ultimately lead her to founding the American Red Cross.[[28]](#footnote-28) Cornelia Hancock, a Union nurse, described her surroundings at the Battle of Gettysburg; despite the difficult and disturbing scenery, in which she would “cry” when writing to the wives of wounded soldiers, her efforts still helped save lives.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Following the Civil War, women’s evolving role continued as they advocated for their own rights as citizens. For example, many women would petition for suffrage, or the right to vote. In an 1866 petition to the Senate and House of Representatives, women argued that as a group they “represent[ed] fifteen million people,” within the United States that did not have the right to vote.[[30]](#footnote-30) Furthermore, since the Constitution recognizes everyone within the United States as “free people,” they were entitled to the same rights as men under the law.[[31]](#footnote-31) African American women also played a prominent role in advancing women’s roles following the Civil War. For example, Harriet Tubman, who served as a nurse during the war, sent a petition to the United States Congress arguing for payment for her services, which demonstrated that women were entitled to compensation for services, similar to their male counterparts.[[32]](#footnote-32) Furthermore, in the essay written by Hannah Rosen, *How Southern Black Women During Reconstruction Claimed Citizenship by Testifying to Violence,* discussed that the sexual abuse of freed, African American woman by white, southern men would no longer be tolerated. Freed women would argue their cases in court, albeit unsuccessfully due to the increasing racial divide, but also through self-defense.[[33]](#footnote-33) These events showcase the changing gender role identity within Southern society.

Chinese immigrants faced serious struggles as the economy slumped in the later nineteenth century, and many Americans blamed the Chinese for stealing their jobs. Many labeled the Chinese as, “un-assimilable aliens,” or foreigners who could not conform to the culture within the United States.[[34]](#footnote-34) This anti-Chinese sentiment reached into politics, ultimately leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers.[[35]](#footnote-35) This significantly impacted Chinese women, who depended on their male counterparts for income and thus were forced into position. Furthermore, many women entering the country were forced into prostitution, as it was assumed that those who did not enter the country with bound feet, a symbol for wealth in Chinese society, were prostitutes.[[36]](#footnote-36) Some of these women were kidnapped and sold into prostitution. For example, one woman in 1892 described that she had been kidnapped in China, brought to America, and sold to a sex-slave dealer in San Francisco.[[37]](#footnote-37) A large percent of Chinese women were reported to work as prostitutes in California by the U.S. population consensus: In 1880 alone, 50 percent of Chinese women reportedly worked as prostitutes.[[38]](#footnote-38) Although some Chinese women within the profession were treated well, some who were viewed as not profitable were forced to work in shacks and were highly susceptible to venereal disease. [[39]](#footnote-39)Additionally, many women also had to work as prostitutes in order to pay off debts. For example, a woman named Yut Kum was forced to work as a prostitute in order to pay off a debt she had borrowed within four years and could not attempt to escape, or she would have to work under the woman, Mee Yung, forever.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Although the situation for Chinese women seemed bleak, many women were able to escape due to a number of factors. For example, some were able to marry their lovers or Chinese laborers who saved enough in order to afford a wife.[[41]](#footnote-41) However, it was the efforts of Protestant and Presbyterian followers that significantly helped Chinese women escape their harsh environment. For example, Protestant missionaries opened rehabilitation homes for Chinese women to escape. They viewed these women as a “symbol of female powerlessness,” and thus needed help in order to escape their abuses.[[42]](#footnote-42) Furthermore, the efforts by Presbyterian women, such as Margaret Culberton, devised plans such as forming connection with the police to raid brothels when a woman requested help. Women such as Donaldina Cameron were able to use this method to rescue 1,500 girls.[[43]](#footnote-43) Establishments such as the Presbyterian Mission Home were also able to help these women and other Chinese women in abusive marriages by providing them with housing and help in order to obtaining divorces.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Women during the later half of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century continued to strive for better opportunities within society. However, this time period was also filled with intense, racial divide, with different groups attempting to reach separate goals. For example, African American women established The Illinois Federation of Colored Women’s Club that formed instrumentality schools to help “truant” girls encouraged collaboration amongst parents and teachers, as well as aid other troubled women and girls.[[45]](#footnote-45) African American women during this period also strongly advocated for the rights and fair treatment of all women and children. For example, both African American and white women during this time period strongly desired the regulations of working hours and better working conditions. African American women hardly spent time at home with their children since they suffered economically and were forced to work, which often lead to children not attending school and juvenile delinquency.[[46]](#footnote-46) African American groups wanted better working hours in order create welfare activities, such as the creation of day nurseries and playgrounds, recreation centers, and implementing probation officers to watch and guide their children.[[47]](#footnote-47) Despite these efforts, women still entered anti-black groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. However, many of these women joined these groups in order to promote Christian tolerance,[[48]](#footnote-48) as well as for a sense of community and to form better church and social circles.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Women continued to face many hardships, especially during the Great Depression. For example, the *New York Times* article, *Destitute Women on Increase Here,* described that women with college degrees who had the necessary training eligible for jobs were forced and struggled to find shelter and food, due to the increasing unemployment resulting from job closures, as well as the inability of opened jobs to pay their workers on time or much at all.[[50]](#footnote-50) Furthermore, women also struggled due to the climate issues depending on which region they lived within the United States. For example, Ann Marie Low, a woman living within the Great Plains, described that the Dust Bowl which resulted in a large number of negative factors, such as dust covering food and supplies, and disrupting visibility when attempting to travel resulting in deaths. [[51]](#footnote-51) Additionally, Low discussed the pressure of being unable to attend school, since she had to work with her father in order to lessen the financial burden caused by the Great Depression; this, combined with the added pressure of the prospect of marriage, also hindered women during this time period, as they were pressured to marry before reaching an older age but would be unable to attend college.[[52]](#footnote-52) Women continued struggling to be treated as equal citizens when trying to qualify for new federal programs created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. For example, part of the National Recovery Administration set lower minimum wages for women than men performing the same jobs, and New Deal agencies like the Civil Works Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps offered jobs almost exclusively to men.[[53]](#footnote-53) Women, who were viewed as “too fragile” for heavy construction related jobs, on relief, were placed into sewing rooms. In addition to these issues, black and Mexican American women faced racial discrimination as well.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Ultimately, women’s roles within society were changed as a result of the Great Depression. Despite the negative consequences resulting from the Depression, women continued to become advocates for their rights. For example, women such as American journalist, Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, strongly advocated for the use of birth control, since many families could not afford to maintain more children.[[55]](#footnote-55) Furthermore, since families could not afford housing or food, many wanted to avoid having more children which would increase infant mortality rates as well as the amount of children dying from malnutrition.[[56]](#footnote-56) Additionally, Bromley described that when this issue was introduced to the American Medical Association, birth control was one of the four major problems in gynecology and rejected the notion, thus, “refusing to study one of the four major problems affecting the women of America.” [[57]](#footnote-57) Furthermore, women continued to advocate for their rights in the work place. As the *New York Times* article, *Reports on ‘Indignant’ Women Who ‘Sieve’ City Hall in Pleasantville, New Jersey,* women who had worked as seamstresses under the Works Progress Administration demanded their pay at City Hall, where the state declared they could not afford to pay them.[[58]](#footnote-58) Another hurdle women encountered was the Married Persons Clause of the Economy Act. The act stated, “married women whose husbands have permanent positions… should be discriminated against in the hiring of employees.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Luckily, through the advocacy of women, such as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the act was repealed. Roosevelt stated that just because women wanted to work or needed to work for financial reasons, it did not make them any less a good wife or mother.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The United States’ entrance into World War II, in 1941 was a pivotal moment in history that shaped the lives of many within America. The war had both positive and negative affects for women in general. For example, since the war required mostly men to enter into the army, it resulted in a “tremendous” shortage of those who could work, severely impacting labor.[[61]](#footnote-61) There was a great demand for labor to build war machines necessary to fight, but the men who were viewed as more suited for heavy machinery were leaving civilian employment for military service.[[62]](#footnote-62) As a result, many women were required to take factory jobs. However, it was not just the necessity to fill the roles of their husbands that motivated women to take jobs; intrinsically, women were inspired by patriotism to join the war effort. For example, women volunteered in the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service and the Women’s Auxiliary Corps.[[63]](#footnote-63) However, this did not come without its concerns. For example, some were worried that women taking soldiers' jobs would affect their responsibilities towards the family and “anxiety about the breakdown” of social values.[[64]](#footnote-64) The war represented both freedom and change for some women.

Although women within society experienced liberation during this period, other groups, such as African American and Japanese women, faced discrimination throughout the war. At the start of the war, African American women recognized their need to advocate for their rights as citizens by also joining the wartime effort cause. African American women, such as those in Detroit, whose city became immersed economically within the war, were highly proactive and even wrote letters to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt advocating for civil rights.[[65]](#footnote-65) However, despite entering the work force, African American women still faced discrimination from their white counterparts. For example, Evelyn Scanlon, a representative of the United Auto Workers, referred to African American women as a “problem” and requested that they not have to work close to them.[[66]](#footnote-66) Although efforts were made by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Practices Committee and the NAACP to ensure the benefits of African American women, they still faced discrimination from automobile manufactures despite having the credentials. For example, Lillie Trim had 178 hours dedicated to her field and was still rejected from job opportunities.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Another group that faced discrimination were Japanese women. After the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were place in internment camps, as many were unsure if there were those secretly aligned with Japan. Two groups, the older Isei, primarily consisting of those who had immigrated to the United States in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and their children, the Neisei, were placed in these camps and were forced to work. For example, some women were forced to work on farms with poor working conditions.[[68]](#footnote-68) Many Neisei were able to escape these camps through programs created by the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, which assisted Nisei students with entering schools and colleges.[[69]](#footnote-69) By the beginning of 1945, the War Department ended the exclusion of Japanese Americans, which allowed many Japanese women to enter the workforce and contribute to the wartime effort.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Throughout countless centuries, the roles of women within society evolved. While faced with discrimination due to their sex and race, women still persevered to contribute to their respective society. For example, the plights of women who fought for abolition and suffrage highlighted their determination to not only change their status, but also improve the situation for future generations. Although the turn of the twentieth century was also marked by the discrimination of various groups of women, their continued advocacy for their rights continued to inspire women to take part in time periods of war and others in the future.

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66. *African American Women, Citizenship, and Workplace Democracy During World War II*, 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid, 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid, 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid, 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)