One of the four young garment industry workers whose organizing activities emerged so vividly in Annelise Orleck’s account, Pauline Newman had started out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, which became the scene of one of the great industrial tragedies in New York City’s history. Although the factory contained several elevators and two staircases, the eight-story wooden building had no sprinkler system; the doors to the fire escapes were locked to prevent outdoor relaxation. When fire broke out in 1911, 500 employees—many of them young Jewish and Italian women—were trapped behind locked doors. Some on the upper floors jumped to their deaths; others burned or asphyxiated while trapped inside. Altogether, the fire claimed the lives of 146 women. Viewing their charred bodies on the street, one reporter recalled that some of these same women had gone on strike only the year before to demand decent wages, more sanitary working conditions, and safety precautions.

The young women who died at the Triangle fire were buried together under a single monument. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers walked in the funeral procession in a driving rain. Not until 2011, one hundred years later, were they identified. The last living survivor of the fire, Rose Freedman, died in 2001 at the age of 107. She had saved herself by asking: what are the executives doing? She headed for their offices on the tenth floor, and then to the roof by way of the freight elevator, from which firefighters pulled them to safety. She never forgave the executives for saving themselves but leaving the doors locked or, later, attempting to bribe her to testify that the doors were unlocked.

Unsafe buildings, blocked exits, and inadequate sprinkler systems threaten garment workers again today. The mass-market clothes that American women wear are often made in substandard conditions—in the United States where minimum wage, maximum hour, and occupational health and safety laws are unenforced, and abroad, in places where such standards barely exist. In an eerie reprise of the Triangle Fire, almost exactly 102 years later, in April 2013, the Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed, killing 1,129 workers, mostly women, who made cheap clothes for Western markets. (The United States suspended trade preferences for Bangladesh in recognition of labor rights violations and the persistence of safety problems, but unsafe factories continue to be used in that country and elsewhere.)[\*](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9780190945763/epub/OEBPS/Chap13.xhtml?favre=brett#fn55-1)

Educational director for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union until her death in 1986, Newman conveys in her own words what it was like to be a garment worker in the early twentieth century. What does she feel has been gained by organized labor? What does she feel has been lost over the years?

A cousin of mine worked for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company and she got me on there in October of 1901. It was probably the largest shirtwaist factory in the city of New York then. They had more than two hundred operators, cutters, examiners, finishers. Altogether more than four hundred people on two floors. The fire took place on one floor, the floor where we worked. You’ve probably heard about that. But that was years later.

We started work at seven-thirty in the morning, and during the busy season we worked until nine in the evening. They didn’t pay you any overtime and they didn’t give you anything for supper money. Sometimes they’d give you a little apple pie if you had to work very late. That was all. Very generous.

What I had to do was not really very difficult. It was just monotonous. When the shirtwaists were finished at the machine there were some threads that were left, and all the youngsters—we had a corner on the floor that resembled a kindergarten—we were given little scissors to cut the threads off. It wasn’t heavy work, but it was monotonous, because you did the same thing from seven-thirty in the morning till nine at night.

Well, of course, there were [child labor] laws on the books, but no one bothered to enforce them. The employers were always tipped off if there was going to be an inspection. “Quick,” they’d say, “into the boxes!” And we children would climb into the big boxes the finished shirts were stored in. Then some shirts were piled on top of us, and when the inspector came—no children. The factory always got an okay from the inspector, and I suppose someone at City Hall got a little something, too.

The employers didn’t recognize anyone working for them as a human being. You were not allowed to sing. Operators would have liked to have sung, because they, too, had the same thing to do and weren’t allowed to sing. We weren’t allowed to talk to each other. Oh, no, they would sneak up behind if you were found talking to your next colleague. You were admonished: “If you keep on you’ll be fired.” If you went to the toilet and you were there longer than the floor lady thought you should be, you would be laid off for half a day and sent home. And, of course, that meant no pay. You were not allowed to have your lunch on the fire escape in the summertime. The door was locked to keep us in. That’s why so many people were trapped when the fire broke out.

My pay was $1.50 a week no matter how many hours I worked. My sisters made $6.00 a week; and the cutters, they were skilled workers, they might get as much as $12.00. The employers had a sign in the elevator that said: “If you don’t come in on Sunday, don’t come in on Monday.” You were expected to work every day if they needed you and the pay was the same whether you worked extra or not. You had to be there at seven-thirty, so you got up at five-thirty, took the horse car, then the electric trolley to Greene Street, to be there on time.…

I stopped working at the Triangle Factory during the strike in 1909 and I didn’t go back. The union sent me out to raise money for the strikers. I apparently was able to articulate my feelings and opinions about the criminal conditions, and they didn’t have anyone else who could do better, so they assigned me. And I was successful getting money. After my first speech before the Central Trade and Labor Council I got front-page publicity, including my picture. I was only about fifteen then. Everybody saw it. Wealthy women were curious and they asked me if I would speak to them in their homes. I said I would if they would contribute to the strike, and they agreed. So I spent my time from November to the end of March upstate in New York, speaking to the ladies of the Four Hundred [the elite of New York’s society] and sending money back.…

We didn’t gain very much at the end of the strike. I think the hours were reduced to fifty-six a week or something like that. We got a 10 percent increase in wages. I think that the best thing that the strike did was to lay a foundation on which to build a union. There was so much feeling against unions then. The judge, when one of our girls came before him, said to her: “You’re not striking against your employer, you know, young lady. You’re striking against God,” and sentenced her to two weeks on Blackwell’s Island, which is now Welfare Island. And a lot of them got a taste of the club.…



*There was no morgue in New York City large enough to hold the bodies of the young women who had jumped from the burning buildings of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911. They were laid out on a pier for families to identify. Six of the victims were so badly burned that even relatives could not recognize them. (Courtesy of UNITE Archives, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.)*

After the 1909 strike I worked with the union, organizing in Philadelphia and Cleveland and other places, so I wasn’t at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory when the fire broke out, but a lot of my friends were. I was in Philadelphia for the union and, of course, someone from here called me immediately and I came back. It’s very difficult to describe the feeling because I knew the place and I knew so many of the girls. The thing that bothered me was the employers got a lawyer. How anyone could have *defended* them!—because I’m quite sure that the fire was planned for insurance purposes. And no one is going to convince me otherwise. And when they testified that the door to the fire escape was open, it was a lie! It was never open. Locked all the time. One hundred and forty-six people were sacrificed, and the judge fined Blank and Harris seventy-five dollars!

Conditions were dreadful in those days. But there was something that is lacking today and I think it was the devotion and the belief. We *believed* in what we were doing. We fought and we bled and we died. Today they don’t have to.

You sit down at the table, you negotiate with the employers, you ask for 20 percent, they say 15, but the girls are working. People are working. They’re not disturbed, and when the negotiations are over they get the increases. They don’t really have to fight. Of course, they’ll belong to the union and they’ll go on strike if you tell them to, but it’s the inner faith that people had in those days that I don’t see today. It was a terrible time, but it was interesting. I’m glad I lived then.

Even when things were terrible, I always had that faith.… Only now, I’m a little discouraged sometimes when I see the workers spending their free hours watching television—trash. We fought so hard for those hours and they waste them. We used to read Tolstoy, Dickens, Shelley, by candlelight, and they watch the *Hollywood Squares*. Well, they’re free to do what they want. That’s what we fought for.

[\*](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9780190945763/epub/OEBPS/Chap13.xhtml?favre=brett#fni55-1) “100 Years Later, the Roll of the Dead in a Factory Fire Is Complete,” *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2011; “Rose Freedman, Last Survivor of Triangle Fire, Dies at 107,” ibid., Feb. 17, 2001; “Manufacturers in Bangladesh Resist Closing Garment Factories,” ibid., June 26, 2014, B1, B7.

Adapted from “Pauline Newman,” in *American Mosaic: The Immigrant Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It*, ed. Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), 9–14. Copyright © 1980 by Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

[*Crystal Eastman*, Now We Can Begin](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9780190945763/epub/OEBPS/Contents.xhtml#ts56)

Crystal Eastman charts an agenda for feminists after the achievement of suffrage. For all humankind, what should we think of as being embraced by her observation that “freedom is a large word”? Most of her short essay focuses on how to achieve “woman’s freedom” as she saw it through her particular early twentieth-century feminist frame. Do you agree that the issues she identifies needed to be prioritized in the 1920s? Are these issues still relevant today?

We invite you to do background research on Crystal Eastman and *The Liberator*, a magazine published in New York City starting in 1918 and named for William Lloyd Garrison’s legendary abolitionist newspaper of the early nineteenth century. What things do you find most striking about Eastman’s life? Who published *The Liberator* and for how long? Take a moment to open the link to the digitized December 1920 issue so that you can see her short essay alongside other essays, artwork, and advertisements, imagining yourself as someone who moved in Eastman’s circles in the 1920s.

Most women will agree that August 23, the day when the Tennessee legislature finally enacted the Federal suffrage amendment, is a day to begin with, not a day to end with. Men are saying perhaps “Thank God, this everlasting woman’s fight is over!” But women, if I know them, are saying, “Now at last we can begin.” In fighting for the right to vote most women have tried to be either non-committal or thoroughly respectable on every other subject. Now they can say what they are really after; and what they are after, in common with all the rest of the struggling world, is *freedom*.

Freedom is a large word.

Many feminists are socialists, many are communists, not a few are active leaders in these movements. But the true feminist, no matter how far to the left she may be in the revolutionary movement, sees the woman’s battle as distinct in its objects and different in its methods from the workers’ battle for industrial freedom. She knows, of course, that the vast majority of women as well as men are without property, and are of necessity bread and butter slaves under a system of society which allows the very sources of life to be privately owned by a few, and she counts herself a loyal soldier in the working-class army that is marching to overthrow that system. But as a feminist she also knows that the whole of woman’s slavery is not summed up in the profit system, nor her complete emancipation assured by the downfall of capitalism.

Woman’s freedom, in the feminist sense, can be fought for and conceivably won before the gates open into industrial democracy. On the other hand, woman’s freedom, in the feminist sense, is not inherent in the communist ideal. All feminists are familiar with the revolutionary leader who “can’t see” the woman’s movement. “What’s the matter with the women? My wife’s all right,” he says. And his wife, one usually finds, is raising his children in a Bronx flat or a dreary suburb, to which he returns occasionally for food and sleep when all possible excitement and stimulus have been wrung from the fight. If we should graduate into communism tomorrow this man’s attitude to his wife would not be changed. The proletarian dictatorship may or may not free women. We must begin now to enlighten the future dictators.

What, then, is “the matter with women”? What is the problem of women’s freedom? It seems to me to be this: how to arrange the world so that women can be human beings, with a chance to exercise their infinitely varied gifts in infinitely varied ways, instead of being destined by the accident of their sex to one field of activity—housework and child-raising. And second, if and when they choose housework and child-raising, to have that occupation recognized by the world as work, requiring a definite economic reward and not merely entitling the performer to be dependent on some man.

This is not the whole of feminism, of course, but it is enough to begin with. “Oh, don’t begin with economics,” my friends often protest, “Woman does not live by bread alone. What she needs first of all is a free soul.” And I can agree that women will never be great until they achieve a certain emotional freedom, a strong healthy egotism, and some unpersonal sources of joy—that in this inner sense we cannot make woman free by changing her economic status. What we can do, however, is to create conditions of outward freedom in which a free woman’s soul can be born and grow. It is these outward conditions with which an organized feminist movement must concern itself.

Freedom of choice in occupation and individual economic independence for women: How shall we approach this next feminist objective? First, by breaking down all remaining barriers, actual as well as legal, which make it difficult for women to enter or succeed in the various professions, to go into and get on in business, to learn trades and practice them, to join trades unions. Chief among these remaining barriers is inequality in pay. Here the ground is already broken. This is the easiest part of our program.

Second, we must institute a revolution in the early training and education of both boys and girls. It must be womanly as well as manly to earn your own living, to stand on your own feet. And it must be manly as well as womanly to know how to cook and sew and clean and take care of yourself in the ordinary exigencies of life. I need not add that the second part of this revolution will be more passionately resisted than the first. Men will not give up their privilege of helplessness without a struggle. The average man has a carefully cultivated ignorance about household matters—from what to do with the crumbs to the grocer’s telephone number—a sort of cheerful inefficiency which protects him better than the reputation for having a violent temper. It was his mother’s fault in the beginning, but even as a boy he was quick to see how a general reputation for being “no good around the house” would serve him throughout life, and half-consciously he began to cultivate that helplessness until today it is the despair of feminist wives.

A growing number of men admire the woman who has a job, and, especially since the cost of living doubled, rather like the idea of their own wives contributing to the family income by outside work. And of course for generations there have been whole towns full of wives who are forced by the bitterest necessity to spend the same hours at the factory that their husbands spend. But these bread-winning wives have not yet developed homemaking husbands. When the two come home from the factory the man sits down while his wife gets supper, and he does so with exactly the same sense of fore-ordained right as if he were “supporting her.” Higher up in the economic scale the same thing is true. The business or professional woman who is married, perhaps engages a cook, but the responsibility is not shifted, it is still hers. She “hires and fires,” she orders meals, she does the buying, she meets and resolves all domestic crises, she takes charge of moving, furnishing, settling. She may be, like her husband, a busy executive at her office all day, but unlike him, she is also an executive in a small way every night and morning at home. Her noon hour is spent in planning, and too often her Sundays and holidays are spent in “catching up.”

Two business women can “make a home” together without either one being over-burdened or over-bored. It is because they both know how and both feel responsible. But it is a rare man who can marry one of them and continue the homemaking partnership. Yet if there are no children, there is nothing essentially different in the combination. Two self-supporting adults decide to make a home together: if both are women it is a pleasant partnership, more fun than work; if one is a man, it is almost never a partnership—the woman simply adds running the home to her regular outside job. Unless she is very strong, it is too much for her, she gets tired and bitter over it, and finally perhaps gives up her outside work and condemns herself to the tiresome half-job of housekeeping for two.

Cooperative schemes and electrical devices will simplify the business of homemaking, but they will not get rid of it entirely. As far as we can see ahead people will always want homes, and a happy home cannot be had without a certain amount of rather monotonous work and responsibility. How can we change the nature of man so that he will honorably share that work and responsibility and thus make the home-making enterprise a song instead of a burden? Most assuredly not by laws or revolutionary decrees. Perhaps we must cultivate or simulate a little of that highly prized helplessness ourselves. But fundamentally it is a problem of education, of early training—we must bring up feminist sons.

Sons? Daughters? They are born of women—how can women be free to choose their occupation, at all times cherishing their economic independence, unless they stop having children? This is a further question for feminism. If the feminist program goes to pieces on the arrival of the first baby, it is false and useless. For ninety-nine out of every hundred women want children, and seventy-five out of every hundred want to take care of their own children, or at any rate so closely superintend their care as to make any other full-time occupation impossible for at least ten or fifteen years. Is there any such thing then as freedom of choice in occupation for women? And is not the family the inevitable economic unit and woman’s individual economic independence, at least during that period, out of the question?

The feminist must have an answer to these questions, and she has. The immediate feminist program must include voluntary motherhood. Freedom of any kind for women is hardly worth considering unless it is assumed that they will know how to control the size of their families. “Birth control” is just as elementary an essential in our propaganda as “equal pay.” Women are to have children when they want them, that’s the first thing. That ensures some freedom of occupational choice; those who do not wish to be mothers will not have an undesired occupation thrust upon them by accident, and those who do wish to be mothers may choose in a general way how many years of their lives they will devote to the occupation of child-raising.

But is there any way of insuring a woman’s economic independence while child-raising is her chosen occupation? Or must she sink into that dependent state from which, as we all know, it is so hard to rise again? That brings us to the fourth feature of our program—motherhood endowment. It seems that the only way we can keep mothers free, at least in a capitalist society, is by the establishment of a principle that the occupation of raising children is peculiarly and directly a service to society, and that the mother upon whom the necessity and privilege of performing this service naturally falls is entitled to an adequate economic reward from the political government. It is idle to talk of real economic independence for women unless this principle is accepted. But with a generous endowment of motherhood provided by legislation, with all laws against voluntary motherhood and education in its methods repealed, with the feminist ideal of education accepted in home and school, and with all special barriers removed in every field of human activity, there is no reason why woman should not become almost a human thing.

It will be time enough then to consider whether she has a soul.

The persistent expansion of married women’s property acts and the increasing popularity of woman suffrage make it tempting to conclude that the practice of coverture—women’s legal and civic subordination to men—steadily dissolved over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But although it is true that some aspects of coverture eroded, others were sustained and even strengthened.

Although chief justice Morrison R. Waite had been right when he observed in *Minor v. Happersett* (1874) that “there is no doubt that women may be citizens,” he was wrong when he went on to claim that “sex has never been made one of the elements of citizenship.… Men have never had an advantage over women.” According to the common law and early American practice, white women, like men, became citizens either by birth or by their own choice to be naturalized. But in 1855, following practices established in France by the conservative Code Napoleon (1804) and in Britain in 1844, the US Congress extended the principle of marital unity to provide that “any woman who might lawfully be naturalized under the existing laws, married, or shall be married to a citizen of the United States shall be deemed and taken to be a citizen.” That is, foreign women who married male citizens did not need to go through a naturalization process or even take an oath of allegiance. The law did not explain what should happen when a woman with US citizenship married a noncitizen man. For the next fifty years, there was little consistency in how courts dealt with related cases that came before them. Often the principle of “marital unity” prevailed, meaning that women who were American citizens lost their citizenship by marrying a foreign national. In 1907, Congress passed a statute explicitly providing that women take the nationality of their husbands when they marry.

Expatriation—the loss of citizenship—traditionally has been a very severe punishment, usually reserved for cases of treason. If a married woman had to assume the nationality of her husband, she might become the subject of a king or czar in a political system that offered her even less protection than did the United States. She might even become stateless. If Americans claimed to base their political system on the “consent of the governed,” could women’s “consent” be arbitrarily denied? In time of war, the American woman who married, say, a German national could change her status overnight from a citizen to an alien enemy. President Ulysses S. Grant’s daughter lost her citizenship when she married an Englishman in 1874; it required a special act of Congress to reinstate her citizenship when she returned from England as a widow in 1898.

Ethel Mackenzie, who had been born in California, married Gordon Mackenzie, a British subject, in 1909—two years after the passage of the Citizenship Act of 1907. She was active in the woman suffrage movement in California, and when it was successful in 1911 she worked in the San Francisco voter registration drive. It is not surprising that she herself would try to register to vote. When the Board of Election Commissioners denied her application, holding that upon her marriage to a British subject she had “ceased to be a citizen of the United States,” she refused to let her husband apply for citizenship and instead challenged the law, claiming that Congress had exceeded its authority. She could not believe that Congress had actually *intended* to deprive her of the citizenship she understood to be her birthright. Why did the Supreme Court deny her claim? What “ancient principle of jurisprudence” did they rely on? Why did the Court think that the marriage of an American woman to a foreign man should be treated differently from the marriage of an American man to a foreign woman?

### MR. JUSTICE MCKENNA:

… The question… is, Did [Ethel Mackenzie] cease to be a citizen by her marriage?… [Mackenzie contends] that it was not the intention [of Congress] to deprive an American-born woman, remaining within the jurisdiction of the United States, of her citizenship by reason of her marriage to a resident foreigner.… [She is trying to persuade the Court that the citizenship statute was] beyond the authority of Congress.… [She offered the] earnest argument… that… under the Constitution and laws of the United States, [citizenship] became a right, privilege and immunity which could not be taken away from her except as a punishment for crime or by her voluntary expatriation.…

[But the Court concludes:]… The identity of husband and wife is an ancient principle of our jurisprudence. It was neither accidental nor arbitrary and worked in many instances for her protection. There has been, it is true, much relaxation of it but in its retention as in its origin it is determined by their intimate relation and unity of interests, and this relation and unity may make it of public concern in many instances to merge their identity, and give dominance to the husband. It has purpose, if not necessity, in purely domestic policy; it has greater purpose and, it may be, necessity, in international policy.… Having this purpose, has it not the sanction of power?

… The law in controversy deals with a condition voluntarily entered into.… The marriage of an American woman with a foreigner has consequences… [similar to] her physical expatriation.… Therefore, as long as the relation lasts it is made tantamount to expatriation. This is no arbitrary exercise of government.… It is the conception of the legislation under review that such an act [marriage to a foreign man] may bring the Government into embarrassments and, it may be, into controversies.… [Marriage to a foreign man] is as voluntary and distinctive as expatriation and its consequence must be considered as elected.

The decision in *Mackenzie* angered suffragists and energized them; American women needed suffrage to protect themselves against involuntary expatriation and statelessness. The repeal of the Citizenship Act of 1907 was high on the suffragists’ agenda, and they returned to it as soon as suffrage was accomplished (see Equal Suffrage [Nineteenth] Amendment). The Cable Act of 1922 provided that “the right of a person to become a naturalized citizen shall not be denied to a person on account of sex or because she is a married woman,” but it permitted American women who married foreigners to retain their citizenship only if they married men from countries whose subjects were eligible for U.S. citizenship—that is, not from China or Japan. American-born women who married aliens from China or Japan still lost their citizenship. American-born women who married aliens not from China or Japan were treated as naturalized citizens who would lose their citizenship should they reside abroad for two years.

The Cable Act was extended by amendments well into the 1930s, but some exclusions remained, and the improvements were generally not retroactive. Thus, as late as the 1950s, some American-born women were denied passports because they had married foreign men before 1922. In 1998, 2001, and again in 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a practice of different rules for non-marital children born abroad. The child born to an unmarried citizen mother and a noncitizen man is a citizen at birth (so long as the mother has lived in the United States for at least one year). The child born to an unmarried citizen father and a noncitizen woman can be a citizen only if the father has met a number of requirements. Among them are that he must have lived in the United States for a specified number of years after he reached the age of fourteen. (The number of years changed when Congress revised the statute: until 1986 it was five years; then it was reduced to two years.) The father must also formally legitimize and financially support the child before the child reaches the age of eighteen.[\*](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9780190945763/epub/OEBPS/Chap14.xhtml?favre=brett#fn59-1)

In sustaining different rules for mothers and fathers, the Supreme Court majority emphasized the possibility of fraudulent claims of citizenship by unmarried noncitizen mothers and their children; the dissenting minority emphasized the ease with which men could avoid responsibility for the nonmarital children they had fathered.

[\*](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9780190945763/epub/OEBPS/Chap14.xhtml?favre=brett#fni59-1) *Miller v. Albright*, 523 U.S. 420 (1998); *Nguyen v. Immigration and Naturalization Service*, 533 U.S. 53 (2001); *Flores-Villar v. United States*, 564 U.S. \_\_\_\_ (2011). This note draws on Candice Lewis Bredbenner, *A Nationality of Her Own: Women, Marriage and the Law of Citizenship* (Berkeley, 1998).

*Mackenzie v. Hare*, 239 U.S. 299 (1915).