

The Twenties Woman

MAIN IDEA

American women pursued new lifestyles and assumed new jobs and different roles in society during the 1920s.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Workplace opportunities and trends in family life are still major issues for women today.

Terms & Names

• flapper

• double standard

One American's Story

When Zelda Sayre broke off her engagement with would-be writer F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925, she told him that he would have to become successful on his own. Later, she wrote about how a woman can achieve greatness.

A PERSONAL VOICE ZELDA SAYRE FITZGERALD

“Rouge means that women want to choose their man—not take what lives in the next house. . . . Look back over the pages of history and see how the loveliness of women has always stirred men—and nations—on to great achievement! There have been women who were not pretty, who have swayed hearts and empires, but these women . . . did not disdain that thing for which paint and powder stands. They wanted to choose their destinies—to be successful competitors in the great game of life.”

—“Paint and Powder,” *The Smart Set*, May 1929

Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald



Zelda Sayre and F. Scott Fitzgerald married one week after Scott published his first novel, and Zelda continued to be the model for Scott's independent, unconventional, ambitious female characters. He even copied from her letters and other writings. Ironically, Zelda's devotion to her marriage and to motherhood stifled her career ambitions. Nevertheless, she became a model for a generation of young American women who wanted to break away from traditions and forget the hardships of the war years.

Young Women Change the Rules

By the 1920s, the experiences of World War I, the pull of cities, and changing attitudes had opened up a new world for many young Americans. These “wild young people,” wrote John F. Carter, Jr., in a 1920 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, were experiencing a world unknown to their parents: “We have seen man at his lowest, woman at her lightest, in the terrible moral chaos of Europe. We have been forced to question, and in many cases to discard, the religion of our fathers. . . . We have been forced to live in an atmosphere of ‘tomorrow we die,’ and so, naturally, we drank and were merry.” In the rebellious, pleasure-loving atmosphere of the twenties, many women began to assert their independence, reject the values of the 19th century, and demand the same freedoms as men.



THE FLAPPER During the twenties, a new ideal emerged for some women: the **flapper**, an emancipated young woman who embraced the new fashions and urban attitudes of the day. Close-fitting felt hats, bright waistless dresses an inch above the knees, skin-toned silk stockings, sleek pumps, and strings of beads replaced the dark and prim ankle-length dresses, whalebone corsets, and petticoats of Victorian days. Young women clipped their long hair into boyish bobs and dyed it jet black.

Many young women became more assertive. In their bid for equal status with men, some began smoking cigarettes, drinking in public, and talking openly about sex—actions that would have ruined their reputations not many years before. They danced the fox trot, camel walk, tango, Charleston, and shimmy with abandon.

MAIN IDEA

Evaluating

A How was the flapper like and unlike women of today?

Attitudes toward marriage changed as well. Many middle-class men and women began to view marriage as more of an equal partnership, although both agreed that housework and child-rearing remained a woman's job. **A**

THE DOUBLE STANDARD Magazines, newspapers, and advertisements promoted the image of the flapper, and young people openly discussed courtship and relationships in ways that scandalized their elders. Although many young women donned the new outfits and flouted tradition, the flapper was more an image of rebellious youth than a widespread reality; it did not reflect the attitudes and values of many young people. During the 1920s, morals loosened only so far. Traditionalists in churches and schools protested the new casual dances and women's acceptance of smoking and drinking.

In the years before World War I, when men “courted” women, they pursued only women they intended to marry. In the 1920s, however, casual dating became increasingly accepted. Even so, a **double standard**—a set of principles granting greater sexual freedom to men than to women—required women to observe stricter standards of behavior than men did. As a result, many women were pulled back and forth between the old standards and the new.

▲ Flappers compete in a Charleston dance competition in 1926.

Women Shed Old Roles at Home and at Work

The fast-changing world of the 1920s produced new roles for women in the workplace and new trends in family life. A booming industrial economy opened new work opportunities for women in offices, factories, stores, and professions. The same economy churned out time-saving appliances and products that reshaped the roles of housewives and mothers.



▲ A young woman works as a typesetter in a publishing house in 1920.

NEW WORK OPPORTUNITIES Although women had worked successfully during the war, afterwards employers who believed that men had the responsibility to support their families financially often replaced female workers with men. Women continued to seek paid employment, but their opportunities changed. Many female college graduates turned to “women’s professions” and became teachers, nurses, and librarians. Big businesses required extensive correspondence and record keeping, creating a huge demand for clerical workers such as typists, filing clerks, secretaries, stenographers, and office-machine operators. Others became clerks in stores or held jobs on assembly lines. A handful of women broke the old stereotypes by doing work once reserved for men, such as flying airplanes, driving taxis, and drilling oil wells. **B**

By 1930, 10 million women were earning wages; however, few rose to managerial jobs, and wherever they worked, women earned less than men. Fearing competition for jobs, men argued

that women were just temporary workers whose real job was at home. Between 1900 and 1930, the patterns of discrimination and inequality for women in the business world were established.

THE CHANGING FAMILY Widespread social and economic changes reshaped the family. The birthrate had been declining for several decades, and it dropped at a slightly faster rate in the 1920s. This decline was due in part to the wider availability of birth-control information. Margaret Sanger, who had opened the first birth-control clinic in the United States in 1916, founded the American Birth Control League in 1921 and fought for the legal rights of physicians to give birth-control information to their patients.

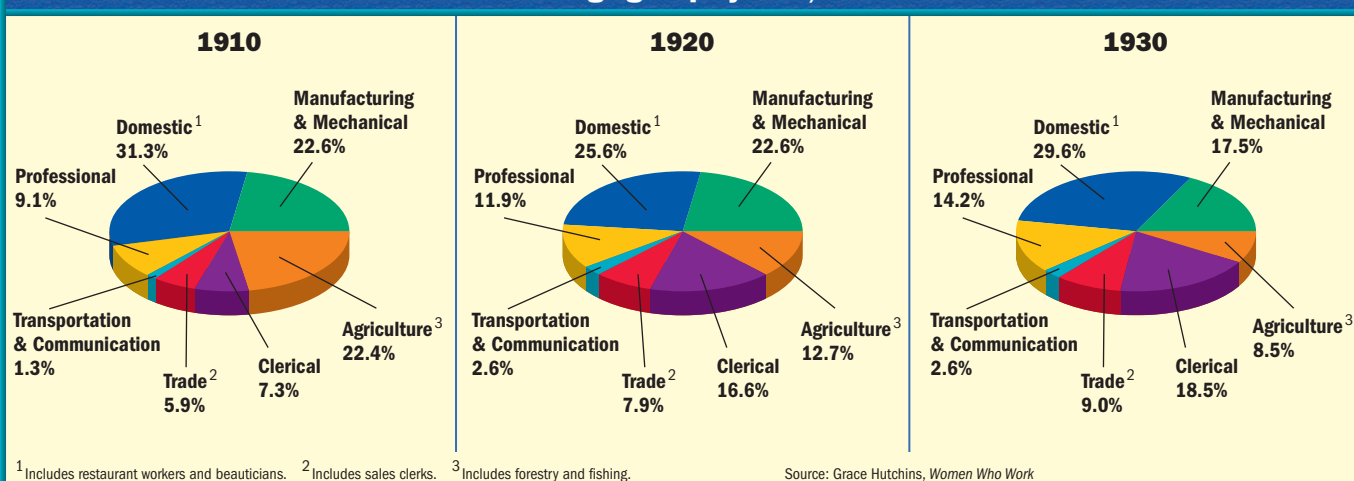
At the same time, social and technological innovations simplified household labor and family life. Stores overflowed with ready-made clothes, sliced bread, and canned foods. Public agencies provided services for the elderly, public health clinics served the sick, and workers’ compensation assisted those who could no longer work. These innovations and institutions had the effect of freeing homemakers from some of their traditional family responsibilities. Many middle-class housewives, the main shoppers and money managers, focused their attention on their homes, husbands, children, and pastimes. “I consider time for reading clubs and my children more important than . . . careful housework and I just don’t do it,” said an Indiana woman in the 1920s.

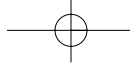
MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

B How did the growth of business and industry affect women?

Women’s Changing Employment, 1910–1930





As their spheres of activity and influence expanded, women experienced greater equality in marriage. Marriages were based increasingly on romantic love and companionship. Children, no longer thrown together with adults in factory work, farm labor, and apprenticeships, spent most of their days at school and in organized activities with others their own age. At the same time, parents began to rely more heavily on manuals of child care and the advice of experts.

Working-class and college-educated women quickly discovered the pressure of juggling work and family, but the strain on working-class women was more severe. Helen Wright, who worked for the Women's Bureau in Chicago, recorded the struggle of an Irish mother of two.

A PERSONAL VOICE HELEN WRIGHT

"She worked in one of the meat-packing companies, pasting labels from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. She had entered the eldest child at school but sent her to the nursery for lunch and after school. The youngest was in the nursery all day. She kept her house 'immaculately clean and in perfect order,' but to do so worked until eleven o'clock every night in the week and on Saturday night she worked until five o'clock in the morning. She described her schedule as follows: on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday she cleaned one room each night; Saturday afternoon she finished the cleaning and put the house in order; Saturday night she washed; Sunday she baked; Monday night she ironed."

—quoted in *Wage-Earning Women*

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

C What changes affected families in the 1920s?

As women adjusted to changing roles, some also struggled with rebellious adolescents, who put an unprecedented strain on families. Teens in the 1920s studied and socialized with other teens and spent less time with their families. As peer pressure intensified, some adolescents resisted parental control, much as the flappers resisted societal control. **C**

This theme of adolescent rebelliousness can be seen in much of the popular culture of the 1920s. Education and entertainment reflected the conflict between traditional attitudes and modern ways of thinking.

2

ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

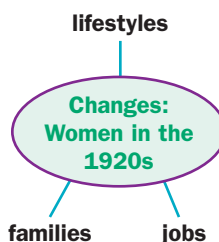
•flapper

•double standard

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Copy the concept web shown below and add to it examples that illustrate how women's lives changed in the 1920s.



Write a paragraph explaining how you think women's lives changed most dramatically in the 1920s.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING

During the 1920s, a double standard required women to observe stricter codes of behavior than men. Do you think that some women of this decade made real progress towards equality? Support your answer with examples. **Think About:**

- the flapper's style and image
- changing views of marriage

4. ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

In 1920, veteran suffragist Anna Howard Shaw stated that equality in the workplace would be harder for women to achieve than the vote.

"You younger women will have a harder task than ours. You will want equality in business, and it will be even harder to get than the vote."

—Anna Howard Shaw

Why do you think Shaw held this belief? Support your answer with evidence from the text.