

Literature Review:
Women's Influence on America

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Historically considered the weaker sex, women proved over the centuries that they are anything but, as they steadily fought for their beliefs. While not always in agreement with each other, they worked both quietly and loudly to ensure their voices were heard. From the colonial era to the present, women have challenged their position in society by boldly expressing their political opinions and fighting for change on issues that were most important to them.



Note. (A History of Fighting for Change, n.d.) WCNC News
https://media.wcnc.com/assets/WUSA/images/9a2dd5a3-57aa-425d-8ab4-3d701a779972/9a2dd5a3-57aa-425d-8ab4-3d701a779972_1920x1080.jpg

Mercy Otis Warren was considered one of the first women to use her literary works to take a political stand. Born to an upper-class family and eventually married to James Warren, who was active in politics, Mercy often found herself taking part in political discussions with the men. She used her place in society and political knowledge to take a strong stand against the British during the American Revolution. In a letter that Warren writes to an unknown woman in Britain she says, “We have a well appointed brave and high spirited continental army. Consisting

of about twenty-two thousand Men commanded by the accomplished George Washington (Otis Warren, 1775).” This statement implied that America was ready to continue fighting for their independence and Mercy was clearly making this known to what seems to be an upper-class friend in England. In her letter she proclaims that they hope for “Reconciliation” from the King of England to signify a window was open for discussion, but they would fight for their rights to the death if they must.

Mercy Otis Warren



While upper class women like Warren encouraged American patriotism, middle-class women joined the fight in a more physical way on the front lines as cooks, seamstresses and nurses. There were even women, like Deborah Sampson, that dressed as men to take up arms and fight in the war themselves (Skemp, 2016, p.7). Women of all classes took part in protests against England, reduced imports by creating their own goods, and protected their households while their husbands were away at war. Many African American women viewed the Revolution, not as a time for patriotism, but as time to seek personal independence by running away from abusive masters and poor living conditions.



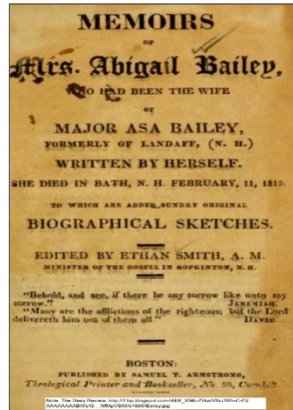
Women continued to forge new paths for themselves into the 19th century. During a period of coverture, where women were property of their husbands, one became the first to obtain divorce successfully. Abigail Bailey divorced her abusive husband during a time where it was unheard of in America. In her book *Memoirs of Mrs. Abigail Bailey* (1815) she states, “I begged of him to treat his family well, in relation to our property, and to treat all mankind, henceforth, well.” Bailey explains how she then took a more forceful stance by threatening her husband with the wrath of God. She was driven to separate from him not only for the sake of herself, but for the sake of her children, as illustrated in her memoir which alludes to her oldest daughter having undergone a traumatic event at his hands. Bailey secured her split by offering her husband 100 acres of land which “we could well spare”. She leveraged her race, upper-class standing, and wealth to obtain her divorce during a time when women had no rights. Bailey’s

ability to divorce her husband set an important precedent for future women of other classes and races who wished to escape abusive relationships.



Note. UNC. <https://hist259.web.unc.edu/marriedwomenspropertyact/>

Nineteenth century political cartoon on conditions under coverture.



Note. Conner Prairie. https://www.connerprairie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/file_marriage-cruelty-600x400.jpg

As seen by the bold words and acts of the 18th century and bold demands such as divorce in the early 19th century, it became clear that women would continue to use their influence to change their circumstances. Increased political power became an important sword to wield as women worked to change laws that could protect them and their children. Women decided that the right to vote was how they could establish themselves in this effort. A new breed of white, middle-class women, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, took confrontational approaches to equality through strategy and protests that demanded their suffrage. In parallel, African American women like Francis Harper, worked to gain Black suffrage so that their men could use political power to protect their lives and give them acceptable living conditions (Chapters, 2013d). By the turn of the century in 1903, working class women organized and fought for fair labor practices for the first time as the Women's Trade Union League (Chapters, 2013g). These events factored towards establishing women's right to vote, and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment finally came to be on August 18, 1920.



40 years after they met, Susan B. Anthony (left) and fellow suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton continued to work together to fight for women's right to vote.
PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES Note: National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/susan-b-anthony>



Frances E.W. Harper



Peoples World. <https://www.peoplesworld.org/wp-content/uploads/women-trade-union-league2.jpg>

The 20th century brought a new era in America where women contributed powerfully towards developing a country where equality and equity flourished through their continued protests and increased political presence. New faces like Pauli Murray, the first Black American to receive a law degree from Yale, helped establish Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which dictated gendered, racial, cultural, and religious equality in the workplace (Chapters, 2013j). In 1973, Norma McCorvey and her female attorneys won the right to choose abortion in *Roe vs Wade* in the Supreme Court.



Note. Wednesday's Women, Pauli Murray, <https://wednesdaywomen.com/pauli-murray-a-20th-century-historical-figure-you-never-heard-of/>

Pauli Murray as an orphaned teenager, a New York college student sculpted by her friend, and as the brilliant legal mind whose work played a key role in the court challenges of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

All women did not have the same views. Ultimately the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) failed largely in part due to women like Phyllis Schlafly that started a STOP ERA organization. In the 1970s, women were still largely not working outside of the home and many of them were concerned about their rights to stay at home with their children and protect their Christian values, if they were suddenly required to do things like register for the military draft.



Note. From American Yawp, <http://www.americanyawp.com/reader/28-the-unraveling/stop-era-protest-1977/>

As seen in in a photograph entitled Stop ERA Protest (1977), upper- and middle-class women (and some men) take to the streets with pickets to protest the passing of the ERA. Their

signs illustrated different perspectives and beliefs. The words “deception” and “draft” and “social security” illustrate topics that concerned them most about the passing of the amendment. Their Christian values and religion were also often cited in their views of other topics. They were opposed to progressive LGBTQ+ laws that were advancing in this time period, while more liberal women protested in support of laws providing sexual freedom. Whether pro or con, women changed America’s laws.



Thousands of abortion opponents march in the 15th annual Walk for Life across downtown San Francisco Saturday. WILLIAMS / AP

Note. From The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/alabama-abortion-law-targets-roe-v-w/>



Note. From The Tempest. <https://thetempest.co/2016/03/28/news/politics/indiana-governor-mike-pence-signs-r/>

Women of the past have provided women of the present access to politics, commerce, equality, and equity. The rights to land, fair wages, safety, voting, divorce, politics, position, their bodies and even the freedom to choose and support personal beliefs, was fought for by over four generations of women of all races, sexualities, cultures, and creeds. Ultimately it was women’s minds that proved more powerful than physical strength, as demonstrated through the laws they helped establish and the society we live in today.

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