

How the Civil War (1861-65) changed (or did not change) American women's lives?

- As in WWI and WWII, wartime necessities transformed women's roles—causing a breakdown of rigid gender categories and sexual barriers.

Women worked on the front in medical service as **nurses** and **doctors**, or more unconventionally they **cross-dressed as men** to enlist or penetrated enemy lines as **confederate or union spies**. In cities white women founded limited number of respectable new paying jobs such as **clerks** in government administration and offices.

- The war caused a blurring of the boundaries between home front and battlefield as women found themselves caught up directly in the military struggle, as was the case when southern plantation homes were transformed into hospitals and White elite planter wives nursed the wounded.
- Land owning, non-slave owning White women assumed farm agriculture labour alone whereas planter wives learned to manage the plantation agriculture and remaining slaves without the benefit of White overseers.
- Like Black men, many Black slave women exploited the social chaos of the war to escape north to freedom—Black families therefore largely remained asunder until reunified in the post war era.

At the same time as conventionality was transgressed, during wartime women also assumed tasks akin to domestic roles. Under the bureaucratic auspices of the Sanitary Commission (in the north) hundreds of thousands of women participated in sewing circles, by wrapping bandages or selling homemade goods at local sanitary fairs, thus they contributed to the union cause with their sex-segregated labour. On the front, working class women (black and white) were the cooks and laundresses who made up the servant class for the army or worse used as prostitutes.

Selected general context & important political changes caused by the US civil war

Jan 1 1863 The Emancipation Proclamation

President Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves in states whose people “*shall then be in rebellion against the United States*” (identified as every confederate county or city that had fallen under Union control, not inclusive of border states). With the liberation of slaves declared “*a fit and necessary war measure*” the proclamation did little to clarify the status or citizenship of the freed slaves.

- Spring 1863 Union enacted **conscription** including African American men—many slave men escape north to join.
- April 1863 New York City draft riots-working class men & women.
- 1863 Richmond, Virginia bread riots staged by urban white women.

1865 13th Amendment “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude...shall exist with the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”

March 1865 creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau, an agency run by the War Department to aid former slaves in the transition to freedom, in the administration of relief and sponsorship of education.

1865-1877 Black reconstruction in the south when newly enfranchised African Americans participated prominently in state and local politics. Between 1869-77 14 Black men served in the national House of Representatives and two in the US senate.

1865 Black Codes: imposed by southern state legislatures in response to newly acquired rights of the Black man. Black codes

redefined the legal status of African-Americans, and restrained their freedom...annual employment contracts, mobility restrictions, forbade them from owning guns, restricted ownership of land and required those without employment to perform forced labour.

1866 formation of the Ku Klux Klan, a secret organization that aimed to restore white supremacy and end Republican rule using intimidation and by attacking African-Americans who failed to show deference to Whites. Klan nightriders burned black churches and schools. Women constituted a considerable part of the Klan membership.

1868 14th Amendment *”All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction...are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside...representatives shall be apportioned among the several states according to their respective numbers counting the whole number of persons in each state, excluding Indians not taxed...when the right to vote at any election...is denied to any of the male inhabitants of such State, being twenty one years of age and citizens of the United States...the basis of representation therein shall be reduced.”*

- The 14th Amendment raised the possibility of suffrage for black men but ignored female citizens. This caused suffrage activists like Cady Stanton and Anthony to end their alliance with abolitionists and create an independent women’s rights movement.

1870 15th Amendment. *“The right of citizens of the United states to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”*

- The 15th amendment left individual states free to restrict suffrage on other grounds so women’s suffrage and certain groups of men (Chinese, illiterates, too poor to pay taxes) were excluded.

1865-1890 Indian Wars of the Western Plains—after the end of the Civil War up until the incident at Wounded Knee war-tested military regiments enlisted against Plains Indians (Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches) to make way for expanding Euro-American settlement. From the removal Act till century's end (1830-1900) Indian women and men herded further and further west to accommodate settlers losing roots in ancestral territory, traditional food sites and dispersing family and kin.

1920 19th Amendment “*the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.*”