

DBQ - Women in the Gilded Age DBQ QUESTION

In what ways were women's lives in the "new middle class" changing? Be sure to focus your analysis on the period 1875 to 1920.

DOCUMENT A

College and professional women were increasing in large numbers. In the year 1889 -1890, a little more than 2,500 women had taken a bachelor of arts degree. The 90,000 or more women teachers of all kinds in 1875 had risen to almost 250,000 in twenty years; 544 women were physicians, surgeons, medical service workers in 1875 had risen to 4,500 by 1895. In 1900 74,000 women were employed as book keepers, accountants, and cashiers. Over 100,00 women were secretaries, typists, and other whit-collar jobs...Women workers were in rising demand, always for the lowest paying jobs; the 2,647,000 employed in 1880 grew to 5,319,397 in 1900 to 7,444,787 in 1910. 15.2% to 17.2% of women made up the total working labor force. 18% of females 14 and over filled the labor force. Source: Eleanor Flexnor, Century of Struggle, 1889-1890 Census.

DOCUMENT B

Whether a product of the working class or the middle class, she was always curious, rebellious, and high-spirited. If she discovered sweatshop conditions from first hand experience, she became outraged, joined a union, and began organizing other women.

If she became a reformer after learning about a particular social problem from a newspaper account, a friend's remarks, or a professor's outrage, she, too, became actively interested in doing something about it.

She was confident of her own powers as a person; she rejected the cultural definition of a woman and her parents generation goals for women.

She was better educated than her mother, convinced that she could control her own destiny, willing to experiment with life-styles. She sometimes tried marriage, often did not. If she had children, she tried to raise them while pursuing a social cause or a career. She struggled all her life with the problem of being involved in the world while maintaining a home. She never gave up fighting for the causes in which she believed.

Source: Portrait of a Feminist, 1910.

DOCUMENT C

In the late 1880s the average weekly wage for women was \$5.24, their weekly expenses were about \$5.51. Hours were from 7:45 a.m. 'til midnight, a few minutes off for lunch, no seats behind counters, a six day work week, no lockers, no vacations, and no place to eat lunch except in the toilets and stockrooms. If part of a staff, the woman received room and board, \$12.50 a year, and \$2.00 to learn. boarding conditions followed certain rules...with no free time.

Source: Susan Kleinberg, "Technology and Women's Work: The Lives of Working Class Women in Pittsburgh." Labor History.

DOCUMENT D

Source: The Bettmann Archive, 1916.

DOCUMENT E

Women in the growing middle class shaped a more affluent pattern which echoed the themes of work outside the home, youthful autonomy, and maternal commonwealth. The urban middle classes seemed to be devoted primarily to the elaboration of a life-style focused on domesticity and motherhood...With fewer children, more material resources, and longer lives than earlier generations, they had a modest degree of leisure and enough education to generate ambition. Women's clubs for the most part expressed the unmet needs of middle-class women both for intellectual stimulation and for mechanisms of upward mobility not totally controlled by their husbands. Clubs appealed to women who were too conservative for more radical reform groups, but whose new skills and drive...led them to turn to civic and whose new skills and drive...led them to turn to civic and philanthropic work established in the traditions of female benevolence.

Source: Robert Wells, "Family History and the Demographic Transition" Journal of Social History.

DOCUMENT F

... A married woman can hold her own property, if it is held or bought in her own name and can make a will disposing of it. A married woman can make contracts, carry on business, invest her earnings...and is responsible for her own debts. She can be executor, administrator, guardian, or trustee. She can testify in court for or against her husband...

Source: Gage, Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, eds., History of Women's Suffrage: 1878-1885.

DOCUMENT G

Fertility had dropped dramatically, from seven or eight children in 1800 to four or five in 1875. Falling fertility rates indicate deliberate family planning in middle class families...leading to abortion and "obscenity" which was defined to include information about contraceptives. Margaret Sanger, a leader in the use of birth control, provided these families with pamphlets and forms.

Source: James C. Mohr, Abortion in America.

DOCUMENT H

DOCUMENT I

We little had dreamed...that half a century later we would be compelled to leave the finish of the battle to another generation of women. But our hearts are filled with joy to know that they enter upon this task equipped with a college education, with business experience, with the full admitted right to speak in public--all which were denied to women fifty years ago. These strong, courageous young women will take our place and complete our work...Ancient prejudice has become softened and public sentiment liberalized. Women have demonstrated their ability to carry out our cause to victory.

Source: A letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton from Susan B. Anthony; October, 1902.

DOCUMENT J

Women should not and can not form a separate political party. Women who agree on social welfare programs and equal citizenship rights may well disagree on the tariff and the League of Nations. But women have, unfortunately, certain jobs to do that will never be done through the direct initiative of the political parties. Until the citizenship laws are changed; until maternity is protected and compensated; until illegitimacy is abolished and the care of all babies assured; until birth control is legalized-until these questions and a dozen more attended to, there must be a vigorous, nonpartisan organization of women.  
Source: "Are Women a Menace." The Nation, 9 Feb 1920.

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DBQ Question created by:  
Ms. Danielle Mastromarino  
Class of 2001  
Maria Regina H. S.  
Hartsdale, NY  
created in: April, 2000