
Changes Of Attitudes Toward Sex, Marriage, And Family Over The Period 1900-1980

Throughout westernized history, the traditional concept of family always consisted of a husband, wife, biological children and extended family [1]. Both men and women had societal roles and social expectations within society, with women's roles consisting of serving their husbands, looking after their children and housekeeping. Men, on the other hand, had different roles and expectations; men traditionally were the providers within the family unit and men also traditionally 'owned' and had full power and control over their wives, with women having no individual identity because they were only viewed as the property of their husbands. However, these attitudes have slowly developed and changed over time, with this essay focusing on how the traditional family unit developed in the early the 20th century and how women slowly gained individuality, along with the more progressive attitude towards women and the role of women within society, specifically during the 1920s, and the differing changes to marriage along with the sexual liberation of women and what was socially acceptable for women in the 1900s in comparison to the traditional social norms that have been in place throughout history. [1: 'The Evolution Of American Family Structure', Concordia University, St. Paul Online, 2015.]

Before the progressive movements in the early 1900s, a family consisted of a husband, a wife and biological children along with the extended family [2]; there was not a differing definition as to what a family consisted of and the father figure within a family was the only person who was legally recognised by law and was the only one with legal rights. Women were not seen to have their own legal rights such as the right to vote, everything was in the hands of their husband and the husband had the right to all decisions that were made within a family unit; the traditional family unit was extremely patriarchal.[3] The traditional family unit was very nuclear, consisting of a mother, father and children and there were rarely any different variations of a family that we would see in the modern era such as a homosexual couple with children or an unmarried heterosexual couple with no children. [2: 'The Evolution Of American Family Structure', Concordia University, St. Paul Online, 2015.] [3: Willystine Goodsell, 'The American Family In The Nineteenth Century', The Annals Of The American Academy Of Political And Social Science Vol. 160, The Modern American Family, Vol. 160 (1932), pp. 13-22.]

Traditionally, women had no rights over property because they were not recognised as individuals in the eyes of the law, but this slowly started to change in the early 19th century with the implementation of the Married Women's Property Law in 1839. This early enactment is often viewed as the first step in the women's rights movement and meant that women slowly started to have their own rights over property and contracts but were still seen as subordinate beings in comparison to their husbands. This key enactment was the beginning of a movement towards women's rights and individuality from their husbands in the 1900s.

Enactments such as the Married Women's Property Law paved the way for other changes to the traditional family unit in which a husband had full authority over his wife in the early 20th century, such as the 19th amendment which was passed in congress in 1919 and ratified in 1920 [4] which ultimately gave women the right to vote and guaranteed their right to vote within the United States; suffragettes had worked tirelessly from the 1800s [5] for changes in regards to women's rights. The 19th amendment is particularly important in assessing changes to the

traditional family unit because it meant that women started to have their own individuality away from their husbands and meant that women now had some rights in the eyes of the law which were previously bound to their husbands. The 19th amendment also meant that there was an increase of voters across the nation who were concerned with women's issues and therefore were more likely to vote for politicians who proposed changes to the rights that women had and who would support the suffrage movement. Women also slowly became more involved in politics and therefore strayed away from their traditional role within society of serving their husbands and looking after children by the election of 11 women into congress which allowed for the disruption of social norms and meant that women also had more independence from their husbands who previously 'owned' their wives and had full control over their wives. This also meant that the previous traditional perspective of women not being able to have a career and a family at the same time was quashed which gave women a new found freedom to choose whether they wanted a career or a family or both. [4: 'Our Documents – 19th Amendment To The U.S. Constitution: Women's Right To Vote (1920)'.] [5: 'Our Documents – 19th Amendment To The U.S. Constitution: Women's Right To Vote (1920)'.]

Traditionally, marriage in the United States was viewed as a union between a man and a woman in the presence of God. This meant that a family was something that could only be achieved through marriage because, as mentioned previously, a traditional family consisted of a husband, wife and children. Marriage was something monogamous and children were essential and central to a marriage [6] which meant that you could only have a family through marriage and that marriage was synonymous with family. Typically, once you were married there was no question or opportunity of divorce which meant that those who got married were with their partner until death [7]. However, divorce started to become more widely accepted in the beginning of the 20th century because women started to gain more freedom through acts such as the 19th amendment which enabled women to slowly be able to make their own decisions away from their husbands and have their own voice which lead to an increase in divorce because many men likely still felt as though they should be the only one with an opinion within a marriage. In addition, many young women respectively were deciding to focus on a career rather than marriage and having a family which lead to a decrease in marriages within the early 20th century, [8] in comparison to previous years. [6: Jessica Feinberg, 'Exposing The Traditional Marriage Agenda', Scholarlycommons.Law.Northwestern.Edu, 2012.] [7: 'The Evolution Of American Family Structure', Concordia University, St. Paul Online, 2015.] [8: 'Marriage & Divorce In The 1920s', Leestraussbooks.com.]

The 1920s, or the more commonly known 'roaring twenties' were particularly poignant for the changing attitudes to sex and the sexual liberation of women for a number of reasons. Traditionally, women were expected to be extremely conservative regarding sex, what they wore or what they discussed. Women were always expected to be modest and docile, with sexuality only being acceptable within marriage [9]; sex was always only viewed as an act for procreation in a private setting between a husband and wife, not as something that was done for fun or showcased within society. Sex was viewed as a necessary form of evil within traditional American society [10] that was reserved only for a married man and woman, with the foundation of these beliefs coming from religion and the church. However, these attitudes started to change and develop in the 1920s due to newly emerging prosperity and consumerism after the end of World War One, along with the implementation of the 19th amendment which allowed women to vote and therefore have more of a voice within society away from their husbands, allowing for a more open conversation about sex and other affairs that were previously viewed as private matters between a married man and woman. [9: Shellie Clark, 'The

Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu, 2016.] [10: Shellie Clark, 'The Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu, 2016.]

Prosperity and consumerism played a huge role in the changes in attitudes towards sex during the 1920s because it provided a foundation for changes within popular culture via the television and new inventions such as the cinema [11]; people were more interested in sex and sexual behaviour than ever before [12]. As sex became more of an open topic and more glorified within society in the 1920s, women also started to become more sexually liberated and less conservative about sex. This led to the emergence of flappers who were typically single, young women who held steady jobs within the American economy [13], but who also had a carefree attitude towards sex within society. Flappers were women who broke away from the traditional, conservative dress sense of previous years which would have consisted of long skirts, corsets and long hair with no skin showing. The conventional flapper would have had short cut hair, higher dress hem lines and roller stockings, [14] something that was completely different to the traditional, conservative and modest dress sense that was expected of women in the 19th century. Flappers allowed for the disruption of gender norms as women started to become more independent through their own careers which lead to many women becoming valued workers within the American economy which therefore essentially liberated women from the gender norms that had been in place for centuries. [11: Shellie Clark, 'The Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu, 2016.] [12: Shellie Clark, 'The Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu, 2016.] [13: 'Flappers [Ushistory.Org]', Ushistory.Org.] [14: 'Flappers [Ushistory.Org]', Ushistory.Org.]

As sex became more of a widely discussed topic within society, so did contraception. Due to deeply rooted religious beliefs within society about sex being an act of necessary evil only for procreation [15], contraception was obviously prohibited because sex was not viewed as an activity to do for fun. However, as sex became more of an open topic that was accepted within society, so did contraception, especially as more women were looking to have a career rather than getting married and having children; sex slowly became an act that was no longer seen as sinful, but as something for fun between whomever wanted to experiment within society and not necessarily for a married man and woman. [15: Shellie Clark, 'The Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu, 2016.]

Previously, women who called for the legalisation of contraception were radical feminists who were concerned with women's rights [16], especially as contraception had formerly been illegal throughout the 19th century as it was thought to promote prostitution and sexual activity outside of marriage. However, this changed in the 1920s as contraception started to become more widely accepted and was viewed as a respectable, non-radical cause. [17] Contraception started to become extremely important for women who were looking to build a career rather than to have children but it was not until the 1970s after World War Two that all forms of contraception became fully legalized in the United States [18], with contraception accounting for more than 30% of the increase of women in skilled careers from 1970-1990. [19] The legalisation of contraception was a monumental change for the attitudes towards sex within society because it meant that sex was starting to be viewed as something for fun and something that was normal within society and that it did not necessarily have to happen within marriage between a man and a woman; the legalization of contraception changed the idea that sex was sinful and a necessary evil. [20] [16: Linda Gordon, 'The Politics Of Birth Control, 1920-1940:

The Impact Of Professionals', *International Journal Of Health Services*, 5.2 (1975), 253-277.] [17: Linda Gordon, 'The Politics Of Birth Control, 1920–1940: The Impact Of Professionals', *International Journal Of Health Services*, 5.2 (1975), 253-277.] [18: John K. Amory, 'A History Of The Birth Control Movement In America', *Journal Of Clinical Investigation*, 121.10 (2011), 3782-3782.] [19: 'Birth Control Became Legal 50 Years Ago — And Here Are Our 5 Favorite Things About It', *Plannedparenthoodaction.Org*, 2015.] [20: Shellie Clark, 'The Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', *Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu*, 2016.]

In conclusion, attitudes towards sex, marriage and family changed exponentially throughout the 20th century, with some of the biggest and most poignant changes happening in the 1920s. Attitudes started to change because women started to have more of an opportunity to voice their opinions and to make decisions for themselves due to acts such as the 19th amendment, something that was previously bound to their husbands or men. This also therefore meant that women were slowly starting to choose having a career over marriage and family because of their changing rights within early 20th century America. This was something unprecedented because it was expected that women would marry and have children rather than their own career because having a career or working was not seen as a woman's conventional role within society. In addition, attitudes towards the previously conservative topic of sex started to change in the early 20th century due to new prosperity and consumerism after World War One which provided the foundations for more open conversations about sex through popular culture and new inventions such as the television and cinema [21] which ultimately paved the way for the sexual liberation of women in the 20th century and therefore a change in attitudes towards sex, family and marriage. [21: Shellie Clark, 'The Sexual Revolution Of The 'Roaring Twenties': Practice Or Perception?', *Digitalcommons.Brockport.Edu*, 2016.]

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