Women And American Revolution

The American Revolution was an important event marking may different changes in the lives of Americans. Specifically, it was a changing time for women. Although it was an influential period in history for women, different authors who have conducted research on the lives and experiences of women at this time, argue differently about what these changes entailed and how important they were. Mary Beth Norton, Gordon Wood, and Clara A. Lyons each discuss their findings on the lives of American women before and after the American Revolution, each with similarities and differences amongst their arguments. Norton and Wood similarly argue that the American Revolution brought positive changes to women's private sphere, while Lyons argues that women had more sexual autonomy and access to pleasure culture before the Revolution and the war created more restriction and boundaries for women.

In the book Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800, Mary Beth Norton draws from women's writings in diaries and letters to discuss the experiences on American women before, during, and after the American Revolution. In the book as a whole, Norton argues that American women did not experience revolutionary changes brought about by the war in areas visible for the public, but changes and effects of the war can be seen in the private realms of these women's lives. Norton sates that,

"The Revolution had an indelible effect upon American women, but its consequences cannot for the most part be discovered in the public world of law and politics, where they have previously been sought. The postrevolutionary years brought no widespread reform of legal codes, no universal enfranchisement of women, no public feminist movement. Instead, the 1780s and 1790s witnessed changes in women's private lives—in familial organization, personal aspirations, self-assessments. In short, the Revolution's impact is more accurately revealed in an analysis of women's private writings than in an examination of formal actions implemented by men (Norton, p. xix)".

Before the revolution, women were seen as having limited control within the patriarchal hierarchy of the household, had limited to no choice in decision making in their lives, had a specific "feminine" image society expect them to portray, and were confined to such little feelings of daily freedom and excitement that they displayed very low self-esteem. It was the American Revolution and ideas of republicanism that changed the lives of these women to feeling a new sense of authority within their household, having more choices in their life direction open to them, and a new sense of pride and high self-esteem.

Before the Revolution, Norton argues that women usually experienced very boring, repetitive, and unfulfilling day-to-day lives. As the mistress of the household, the role of the women was to direct the household's day-to-day activities. A woman's role was in the private realm and domestic, while the husband was more in the public realm (p. 3). Amongst their domestic duties, women were confined to conducting the same work every day, that of taking care of the children, cleaning the household, cooking, spinning/weaving, etc. One farm wife, Mary Cooper, wrote in her journal about the feelings of drudgery and boredom her daily life brought her. No less physically demanding or difficult, men's tasks varied considerably from day to day and month to month (p. 12). Christian Barnes acknowledged the drudgery in her life by describing it

as “a continual sameness [that] reigns throughout the year” (p. 35). Common adjectives different women used to describe their work were, “my narrow sphere”, “my humble duties”, “my little domestic affairs” (p. 38).

Beyond their restricted and repetitive domestic roles as wives and mothers, Norton argues that women before the American Revolution were not given any choice in the trajectory of their future or path. It was a universally accepted norm and expectation for a woman to transition from her dependency under her father to a different form of, but still restricting dependency of her husband. Norton states that, “Then, as a married woman, a feme covert, her dependence was legal as well as actual. In a good marriage, her status under the law would mean little, but in a poor one the consequences could be serious” (p. 41). Along with the expected experience of marriage, women were socially expected to bear and raise numerous children. According to Norton, “… a colonial woman usually had dependent children in her home almost until the day of her death. Child rearing consequently occupied much of her time and attention, competing directly with her household chores for her limited resources of energy” (p. 71). These women lived in a society where they were expected to marry, were then legally dependent on their husbands, and were to have children almost until they could not anymore.

Lastly Norton explains how the lives of women before the American Revolution were strongly ruled by their lack of a positive self-image and the “feminine” image they were supposed to display to society. It was commonly viewed that women were “much more pure, tender, delicate, irritable, affectionate, flexible, and patient than men. They were in addition, modest, chaste, cheerful, sympathetic, affable, and emotional” (p. 110). Because this was the common understanding of what it meant to be feminine and therefore how a woman should act and show herself, it created an additional weight amongst women to constantly fit themselves into this mold. Additionally, “They assumed the burden of negative female attributes. For example, women, widely said to be irrational creatures, frequently complained in their letters and diaries of an in ability to reason properly” (p. 118). Norton also noticed that these women also constantly belittled their writings, calling their letters “insipid scribbles,” “Poor Productions,” “stupid,” …etc. (p. 118). They were also very self-deprecating which showed, “that women had internalized the inferior self-image eighteenth-century social norms impressed upon them” (119). These women at this time were living difficult lives where had to fit a specific mold of femininity and had a negative self-image.

Norton then argues that these aspects of American women’s lives were greatly affected and changed following the American Revolution. Firstly, there was a change in women’s education and exposure to the public sphere. White women who previously would not dare discuss politics in the mid 1760s, “were by the 1780s reading widely in political literature, publishing their own sentiments, engaging in heated debates over public policy, and avidly supporting the war effort in a variety of ways” (p. 156). The importance of women’s education was also emphasized as the new image of American women were that of “an independent thinker and patriot, a virtuous wife, competent household manage, and knowledgeable mother” (256). This required women to have formal instruction, which opened their access to some form of education. When many men were off taking their part in war effort, women were placed in situations where they had to step out of their domestic role and handle unfamiliar tasks that still needed to be in the men’s absence. This showed women their sex’s true capapbility of work and skills, which they previously were under the impression they did not have. Women who had competently managed the family estates during the Revolution, no longer accepted the standard belief of femininity, which included “weakness, delicacy, and incapacity” (p. 228). Their daughters

watched their mothers work independently with a variety of difficulties during the war, then did not feel pressure “to marry quickly; some decided not to marry at all and others chose to limit the size of their families” as they wanted to feel and show their own abilities of independence (p. 228).