

*The worst and best are both inclined
To snap like vixens at the truth;
But, o, beware the middle mind
That purrs and never shows a tooth!*

Elinor Wylie
Nonsense Rhyme

Section VII: Attitudinal Trends

Women have influenced their time in history in both subtle and overt ways. In this section, we will examine a variety of areas where attitudes are more indicative of trends than data.¹

Women and Politics: Although American women did not attain universal suffrage until passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, women were interested and active in the public arena to one degree or another from the earliest days of the Republic.

In March, 1776, while John Adams was serving as a delegate to the Continental Congress, his wife, Abigail, urged him only half-seriously in a letter to “remember the ladies” when fashioning a “new code of laws” for the fledgling nation:

[I]n the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs, which treat us only as the vassals of your sex.²

John Adams’ response reveals that, although he was among those who had “willingly [given] up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend,” he did not seriously entertain her proposal to explicitly address the rights of women in the Declaration of Independence. The exchange also reveals that one of the most prominent of America’s “Founding Mothers,” far from being unaware or uninterested in politics, desired that women have a stake in the new nation.

Women and Revolution: Women have been active in public life throughout American history. During the Revolutionary War, for example, they supported the troops by providing clothing and other supplies, and they organized boycotts of British goods. For example, on October 25, 1774, in Edenton, North Carolina, a group of 51 ladies, in response to the British government’s refusal to lift the tax on tea, held what has become known as the “Edenton Tea Party.” They drank tea made from a local plant and signed a pledge declaring, “We, the Ladys of Edenton, do hereby solemnly engage not to conform to the Pernicious Custom of Drinking Tea,” and that “We, the aforesaid Ladys will not promote ye wear of any manufacture from England until such time that all acts which tend to enslave our Native country shall be repealed.”³ The incident was depicted in British news accounts accompanied by a very unflattering cartoon of the “Ladys of Edenton.”

Women and Social Movements: Throughout the 19th century women were active in various social movements that altered the political landscape of America, including the Abolitionist Movement, the movement for free public education, and the movement to create better working conditions for men and women and to pass child labor laws. Women did, in fact, have the right to vote in certain limited cases even before the 19th century, and several states granted women the right to vote in school board elections.⁴

Women and Voting: Even after passage of the 19th Amendment, women did not immediately begin voting in large numbers, though women who reached voting age after 1920 were more likely to vote than older women.⁵ Voter turnout was lower among women than men in every presidential election until 1980, when pollsters began to detect what has become known as a “gender gap.” In every presidential election since then, voter turnout has been higher among women than among men.⁶

Differences among men and women with respect to party preference also began to emerge in the early 1980’s. According to Gallup Poll data, in 1981, for example, the Democrats held a 19 percentage point lead over Republicans among women, compared with only 12 percentage points among men.⁷ Women have been more likely ever since to support Democrats than Republicans.⁸

In 1996, President Clinton received 54 percent of the women’s vote, compared with Dole’s 38 percent and Ross Perot’s 7 percent. Among men, the difference between Clinton (43 percent) and Dole (44 percent) was marginal. (Perot received 10 percent of the male vote.) Further, Clinton received a *majority* of the women’s vote in every age group.⁹

The gender gap is most pronounced among men and women who are college educated. In the 1992 election, 52 percent of college-educated women leaned Democratic, whereas 51 percent of college-educated men preferred Republicans. Among men and women with no college, both men and women leaned Democratic, but the gender gap was insignificant.¹⁰

Although the voting patterns of American women as a group do differ from those of American men as a group, a closer look at the numbers reveals more subtle divisions among women, especially when it comes to married vs. single women. Married women are more likely to vote for Republicans, while single women tend to vote for Democrats.¹¹ Feminists have used the gender gap very effectively to persuade politicians to address “women’s issues,” as defined by feminists. But there is often a disconnect between this definition and that of the average American woman about what constitutes “women’s issues.”

Women and Feminism: Despite the claims of women who call themselves “feminists” to speak for American women as a whole, most American women are not particularly comfortable with the title. Part of the explanation may be the lack of consensus about the very meaning of the term, but many women simply do not find any common ground between their lives and the agenda of radical feminist groups like the National Organization for Women.

In her book, *Feminism is Not the Story of My Life*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it this way:

The story of a woman’s life lies at the core of the discomfort with feminism, because most women still hope to fit their new gains at work and in the public world into some version of the story of marriage and family that they have inherited from their mothers. Thus, many women who shudder at the mounting reports of sexual abuse and violence against women favor a strengthening of marriage and family rather than an increase in sexual permissiveness. And the growing numbers of working mothers especially worry about what is happening to children in a world in which most mothers work

outside the home. Women who still see marriage and children as central to their sense of themselves have retreated from feminism because they do not believe that feminists care about the problems that most concern them or because they believe that feminists favor policies they cannot support, such as abortion, affirmative action, or women in combat.¹²

In fact, the views of most American women on issues that form the cornerstone of the radical feminist agenda do not follow the feminist line at all.

Women and Abortion: Increased sexual autonomy and unrestricted access to abortion have remained at the heart of feminist orthodoxy since the 1960's, yet the views of most Americans have remained fairly conservative about such matters since the mid-1970's. When the Gallup Organization asked Americans in 1975 if abortions should be "legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances or illegal under all circumstances," about 20 percent of Americans favored either the "legal under any circumstances" or the "illegal under all circumstances" view.

Although in the years since the permissive view (legal under any circumstances) has topped 30 percent in some recent years, the majority of Americans, including a majority of women – has consistently supported the middle view – that abortion should be legal only under certain circumstances. And the number of men and women who favor some restrictions goes up sharply when the discussion turns to abortions performed after the first three months of pregnancy.¹³

In one survey from 1992, some 68 percent of women who fit a "feminist" profile believed that abortion is purely a "matter of personal choice," while only 25 percent of women who fit the "non-feminist" profile held a similar position. Similarly, only 5 percent of "feminist" women versus 21 percent of "non-feminist" women believed that abortion "should never be permitted."¹⁴

Women and Sexual Freedom: Remarkably, despite the overwhelming increase in sexual permissiveness during the 1970's and 1980's, women's attitudes about premarital sex have not reflected the feminist vision of radical sexual individualism, either. When asked, "Do you think it is wrong for people to have sex relations before marriage, or not?" exactly the same majority—53 percent of American women said that it was "wrong" in 1973 and in 1987.¹⁵ In recent years, however, the percentage of all Americans who say it is "wrong" has dropped to only 40 percent; 56 percent of Americans surveyed in 1998 said it was "not wrong."¹⁶

Women and Work: In 1936, when Gallup first began asking the question, "Should a married woman earn money if she has a husband capable of supporting her?" a solid majority—82 percent of Americans responded, "No."¹⁷ In 1993, when Americans were asked "Do you approve of a married woman holding a job in business or industry if her husband is able to support her?" the percentage of Americans expressing *approval* was even higher—86 percent.¹⁸

It would seem that the question of whether or not women should have a career has long since been put to rest, at least as far as American public opinion is concerned. Yet many American women, especially once they become mothers, struggle with competing demands of home and work, and most wind up feeling caught in a "time crunch" that often leaves them less and less time with their families.

A recent survey of American adults, "Women's Voices 2000," conducted for Lifetime Television and the Center for Policy Alternatives, found that the most often-cited solution to the decline in moral values was spending more time with their children, yet 59 percent of women respondents with children under 6 said it is harder than it was 4 years ago to balance family and work demands. Moreover, this was true of women in every subgroup.¹⁹

The standard feminist solution to the problem of competing work and family demands is expanded access to “quality, affordable child care.” The reasoning goes that, if only women had access to quality professional day care, they would feel free to leave their children with caring, qualified professionals and expand their professional horizons unencumbered by the guilt of leaving their children with someone else. Further, in the feminist model of quality childcare, the burden for seeing to it that good day care is available falls heavily – even primarily – on the government.

Yet for a majority of working parents, though childcare is often a necessity, it is not their first choice when it comes to what they regard as best for their children. This was what the nonprofit organization Public Agenda found recently when it conducted a survey of working parents on the subject.

Labor Department statistics indicate that almost two-thirds of mothers with preschool children worked at least part time in 1997, in contrast to 80 percent of mothers who stayed home with their children in 1960.²⁰ Yet the Public Agenda report, “Necessary Compromises,” found that parents still believe that having a parent stay at home with young children is the best possible arrangement for the care and development of young children. Where this isn’t possible, most parents said that care by a close relative is the next best solution. Moreover, a majority of parents surveyed believe that they should bear most of the responsibility for childcare. Only 22 percent believe that the government should bear this responsibility. And 74 percent of parents believe that they should foot the bill for childcare as well.²¹

In short, parents believe they are best equipped to impart a sense of moral values to their children. Deborah Wadsworth, President of Public Agenda, puts it this way:

...[P]arents talked again and again about their desire to raise “good kids,” and their need to arm their child against a world filled with casual temptations, careless role models, and dangers that seemed a distant threat to previous generations. To do this – to implant the values, the moral sensibilities, and the sense of self-respect they believe their children need – they trust no one as much as themselves.²²

Women and Religion: One of the most enduring subjects of public opinion polls over the past few decades has been the religious beliefs of Americans, and most polls tend to indicate that an extremely high number of Americans believe in God. In fact virtually all Americans answer yes to the question whether they “believe in God or a universal spirit.”

The figure was 96 percent in 1996, according to Gallup’s Princeton Religious Research Center, and this percentage has changed little in half a century.²³

According to a number of other broad measures, religious faith in America appears to be alive and well:²⁴

- 9 in 10 Americans say they have never doubted the existence of God.
- 8 in 10 believe in a Judgment Day.
- 8 in 10 believe God still works miracles
- 7 in 10 believe in life after death
- Weekly attendance rates for religious services in America have remained relatively stable over the past 30 years, hovering around 40 percent since about the late 1960’s.
- Bible reading appears to have made a comeback in recent years fueled, apparently, by greater commitment among blacks, low-income individuals, and men.²⁵
- Slightly more than half of adults (54 percent) give money to a church in any given month, including 61 percent of adults over 55.²⁶

On the other hand, by some other measures, America's spiritual health may not be as robust as it could be:

- Americans who describe religion as "very important" in their lives declined from 75 percent in 1952 to 54 percent in 1987.²⁷
- The percentage of Americans who express absolute certitude about the existence of God has declined in recent years from 87 to 72 percent in the period from 1952 to 1996, according to one measure.²⁸
- Church attendance rates, though relatively stable over the long term, have declined since the early 1990's from about 50 percent to about 40 percent.²⁹
- Despite the emergence of the Christian men's movement in recent years, by a number of measures – church and Sunday school attendance, Bible reading and church volunteerism – men's overall involvement in the church has declined in recent years.³⁰

Men & Women: By several measures, American women tend to be more involved in church life than men, serving as the "backbone" of the American church:³¹ Leon Podles' *The Feminization of the Church*, laments this over-dependence upon women and sees the trend as ominous and self-perpetuating – as the church becomes more feminine and seems to repudiate masculinity, he believes it increasingly will be less appealing to boys and men.

- Women are 29 percent more likely than men to attend church services in any given week.
- Women are 33 percent more likely to volunteer at a church.
- Women are 57 percent more likely to participate in adult Sunday school.
- Women are 56 percent more likely to disciple others.
- Women are 23 percent more likely to read the Bible.

A recent survey by Barna³² shows the importance of women to the spiritual climate of the United States. Nearly half (48 percent) of all women in the U.S. report that they are "born again" and 9 out of 10 identify themselves as Christian (compared to 83 percent of men who say that they are). This means that while most (9 out of 10) Protestant churches and all Catholic churches are headed by a male senior pastor, the congregations are overwhelmingly female and these women are shouldering the day-to-day church responsibilities (teaching classes, discipleship, leadership, etc). There are disturbing cracks in women's undergirding of the church. Burnout among women is becoming a major problem and over the past year, Barna reports that there has been a 21 percent decline in the percentage of women who volunteer to help. At the same time, personal Bible study has increased and nearly 90 percent of women profess being "deeply spiritual."

¹ The author expresses appreciation to Heide Trask Wood, BLI's Research Fellow, who researched this section of the report.

² Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 3-4.

³ *Edenton, N.C.* - pamphlet (Edenton, N.C.: Chowan Herald Print, 1937).

⁴ M. Margaret Conway, Gertrude A. Steuernagel and David W. Ahern, *Women and Political Participation: Cultural Change in the Political Arena* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997), 8-9.

⁵ Conway, 8.

⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November, 1992*, Series P-20, no. 466, Table A; and Bureau of the Census, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996*, Series P-20, no. 504, Table 1.

⁷ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1982* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc.: 1982), analysis by Andrew Kohut, President, The Gallup Organization, Inc., 35.

⁸ Barbara Norrander, "The Evolution of the Gender Gap," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63 (Winter 1999): 566+.

⁹ Exit polls reported in "Portrait of the Electorate," *New York Times*, November 10, 1996, 16, cited in Conway, 139.

¹⁰ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1992*, Survey #GO 322010, July 24-26, 134-135.

¹¹ Charlotte Hays, "Showdown at Gender Gap: Guys and Gals and Votin'," *The Women's Quarterly*, Spring 2000.

¹² Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism is Not the Story of My Life: How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with the Real Concerns of Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 16-17.

¹³ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1975*, Survey 927-K, April 4-7; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1980*, Survey 159-G, July 11-14; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1988*, Special Telephone Survey; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1992*, Survey GO 222035, January 16-19.

¹⁴ Conway, 69; Table 4-4, calculated from data in the 1992 American National Election Study.

¹⁵ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1973*, Survey 874-K, July 6-9; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1987*, Survey 287-G, July 10-13.

¹⁶ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1998*, Survey GO124977 (CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll), Nov. 20-22.

¹⁷ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1936*, Survey 45, August 3-8.

¹⁸ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1993*, Survey GO 422008 (CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll), August 23-25.

¹⁹ "Women's Voices 2000," A project of the Center for Policy Alternatives and Lifetime TV, Lake Snell Perry & Associates, American Viewpoint, Linda Faye Williams of the University of Maryland at College Park, and Insight Research (September, 2000), 4, 6, and 11.

²⁰ "Survey Finds Parents Don't Trust Day Care," *Washington Post* (Reuters report) 8/23/00, A2.

²¹ Steve Farkas, Ann Duffett and Jean Johnson, etc., "Necessary Compromises: How Parents, Employers and Children's Advocates View Child Care Today" (New York: Public Agenda, Aug. 2000), 10-13.

²² "Necessary Compromises," 39.

²³ George Bishop, "Americans' Belief in God," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63 (Fall 1999): 421+.

²⁴ George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 1990's* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 3-4, 31.

²⁵ "The State of the Church, 2000," Report by Barna Research Group Ltd., Ventura, California, posted on Barna Research Online website, March 21, 2000.

²⁶ "The State of the Church, 2000."

²⁷ Gallup and Castelli, 36. According to more recent reports from the Barna Research Group, however, two thirds of Americans say that their faith is very important to them (Barna, 2000).

²⁸ This question was first asked in a survey conducted by Ben Gaffin and Associates in 1952. The question was asked again in 1965 by Gallup in a survey sponsored by *Catholic Digest*, and again in 1996 by Princeton Survey Research Associates in a survey sponsored by the Pew Research Center. However, another long-term trend that reported the number of Americans who said they "never doubt the existence of God" went up from 60 percent in 1987 to 71 percent in 1997, according to a report by the Pew Research Center. (Bishop, 1999)

²⁹ Barna, 2000.

³⁰ Barna, 2000.

³¹ "Women Are the Backbone of the Christian Congregations in America," Report by Barna Research Group Ltd., Ventura, California, posted on Barna Research Online website, March 6, 2000.

³² Barna, 2000.