

American Women,
American Womanhood,
1870s to the Present

Prof. Rebecca Jo Plant

<http://rjplant.net>

Why U.S. women's history?

- Do American women have a distinctive history, the way that African Americans or Mexican Americans have a distinctive history?
- Does it make sense to study the “history of women,” given how much has divided women historically? Why?

Our main concerns

- Women's lived experiences
 - Factors that shaped experience
 - legal codes, religious beliefs, cultural practices, economic systems, racial ideologies
- Gender ideology
 - Difference between “sex” and “gender”
 - Sex is biological: it involves anatomical and hormonal differences that differentiate male and female
 - Gender is social and cultural: it refers to the social and cultural meanings are attributed to sexual difference
 - Gender identity as a subjective sense of oneself
 - Gender as a relational category
 - Gender ideals are complex and contested

Key insights

- Gender ideology and gender roles often seem “natural” but are in fact highly changeable
- American women’s acquisition of greater rights and freedoms has been neither linear nor inevitable
 - Must reject a Whiggish view of the past
 - Must avoid the dangers of “presentism”

History of Women's History

- Women's/gender history is the product of two developments
 - Women's gradual movement into the historical profession
 - “Second wave” feminism (1960s and 1970s)
- Prior to the 1970s
 - Very few women professors; hence, very few women historians
 - Very few references to women in historical works

Development of the field of women's history

- “Compensatory” history
 - Focus on exceptional women
 - Inserting women into standard historical narratives
- “Contributionism”
 - Looking at how women contributed to certain events already viewed as key to an understanding of American history
- Challenging and reconfiguring historical narratives
- From women to gender