

Weekly Feedback

In “the Evolution of White Women’s Experience in America,” Mary Beth Norton argues that women in nineteenth century America did not lose the status they held in colonial times, but in fact progressed with a more defined public role with the only difference being that they worked from home. She explains that women were more subjugated by men during colonial days because family was more intricately connected to public life in the early days of the colonies and men, as Kathleen Brown attests to in *Goodwives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, claimed that divinity gave them the right to rule over women. As such, women in colonial days were forced to be more dependent on men.

However, this changed between 1660 and 1760 with a gradual shift in “economic, social, religious, and demographic patterns (614).” By 1760, century-old institutions were in place in America and the family was no longer needed to be the backbone that kept society together. With the expansion of the economy and more skilled men entering the workforce as wage laborers, women were looked on more to educate their children on religious matters and to teach skills to their daughters, such as spinning and weaving. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explains in “Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England” that the idea of woman weaving was progress in itself because it was a job that had previously been dominated by men. She adds that “if female weavers had simply taken the place of male weavers, this period of rising wages might well have given women new opportunities in an expanding market economy (12).” Instead of this occurring, however, weaving simply became domesticated and out of the public view. Nevertheless, this work helped to make women less dependent on men. Their status was also helped as a result of legislation that by 1760 allowed women in most colonies to purchase property. Additionally, their daughters were freer, as well, because they were allowed to learn trades from their mother and they were increasingly being allowed to select their own spouses. This gradual move towards self-dependence for women, however, did not come without problems.

Rumblings could be heard as early as the 1690s with the witch trials in Salem, where men accused women of being witches in an effort to regain some of the power they were slowly losing. It can also be seen with the double standard upheld against women for crimes of fornication, as Cornelia Hughes Dayton describes in “Taking the Trade: Abortion and gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village.” Dayton explains that by the 1740s, the courts stopped punishing men for the crime of fornication because they had a hard time proving paternity. But while men were not punished for their actions, women were in fact punished, being prosecuted and fined for their actions. Perhaps, this was an attempt by the male-dominated courts to regain some of the power that men were losing in society.

With the coming of the American Revolution, the status of women improved tremendously as men began to see them as patriotic individuals who were doing their part to support America’s war for independence. However, as Norton points out, that while women were seen more positively after the revolution, the revolution alone “presented no dramatic change with tradition, in spite of political elements...[but] its emphasis on republican motherhood were necessary prerequisites for nineteenth-century feminism (618).”