

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The USA in the 20th century

Episode 8 – The lives of women in the USA

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And this is Bitesize GCSE History. And in this eighth episode of nine, we're turning our attention to American women whose lives were about to undergo considerable change.

Datshiane: We'll look at how things were before the 1920s and how and why these changed over the following decades.

Katie: So get those writing devices at the ready to make notes. Here goes. Let's start our journey in the 1920s, a time of wealth for many Americans. Fashionable women called flappers wore decorative clothing with bows and fancy fabrics like crepe, georgette, and chiffon and partied through the night. As Kitty, our time-travelling reporter, is about to tell us.

Kitty: I'm all dressed up because I'm going dancing. Today I find myself in the heart of New York City surrounded by the vibrant energy of the 1920s. Flappers are breaking boundaries sporting knee length dresses, bobbed hair and loads of makeup. The novelist and painter Zelda Fitzgerald wrote that, 'The one thing I love is to be myself and I have never ceased to be myself.' And that is certainly a sentiment that captures the spirit of young women today as they flock to jazz clubs, smoke in public and dance the night away, often drinking alcohol in speakeasies. While some women enjoy their new freedom, not all women are able to do the same. Many poor women can't afford the fashionable styles. The 1920s is a thrilling time filled with change, excitement and most importantly empowerment. But as ever, it's for some not all. This is Kitty reporting for Bitesize. Back to the studio.

Katie: Thanks Kitty. Remember, if we're asked to write in an essay about how something changed, like the lives of women, we need to see how it was before, then go on to say how it was different, to show the change.

Datshiane: Right, but I think to understand the change, Katie, we need to set out how things were for women in the USA before the First World War.

Katie: Most women led very restricted lives revolving around the home and family. Middle- and upper-class women had an expectation to dress modestly with skirts no more than six inches from the ground.

Datshiane: There were even books offering advice to women on how to be a good wife and mother, and on etiquette and how to behave in the right way. We can use the content of these books as sources for lovely quotes to support our argument in an essay.

Katie: This is from De La Banta's 'Advice to Women Concerning Beauty' in 1878. 'Women may be well assured that the surest pathway to the highest happiness and honour lies through the peaceful domain of wifehood and motherhood. To the true woman, home is her throne.'

Datshiane: It's not just that. Relationships with men were controlled. So if you went out, you were chaperoned by an older or married woman. And things like playing energetic sport were frowned upon. Also, women didn't have the right to vote. So there was less incentive for politicians to make changes for women.

Katie: Women's work outside the home was in jobs such as a seamstress, nanny or nurse. Working class women did work, but they had to take low paid jobs like factory work, cleaning work and few had opportunities for promotion.

Datshiane: But some of these limitations were done away with by wider political developments.

Katie: Change was on the horizon. Let's look at what these were, when they happened and what caused or contributed to it.

Datshiane: So first up is the First World War.

Katie: Yes, the war brought important change. Women took up the jobs of the men who had gone away to fight, including jobs that required physical resilience - like factory work.

Datshiane: By 1929, around ten and a half million women had jobs. And get this, that's about twenty-five percent more than in 1920. And a lot of these jobs were office jobs, such as typists, telephonists, clerks and secretaries.

Katie: Womens' lives inside the homes were also improved by the new electrical goods that were becoming cheaper in the mass production era.

Datshiane: You're so right. Women were still expected to do the chores, whether they worked or not. So imagine how helpful a vacuum cleaner or a refrigerator would be if it was the first time you'd ever had one.

Katie: Critically and partly thanks to their war work, after decades of campaigning, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave American women the right to vote in 1920, meaning politicians had to listen to them.

Datshiane: And you know what? Earning money gave women a newfound sense of autonomy. They began to acquire a taste for independence outside the home and financially.

Katie: And they were less likely to stay in a marriage if it wasn't working out. The divorce rate increased by a whopping seventy percent between the end of the First World War and the end of the 1920s.

Datshiane: But not everyone approved. This is a recurring theme. The more traditional sections of society were shocked by this liberal attitude. For them, it was permissive or loose behaviour. Some women formed an anti-flirt league to protest the flapper's behaviour, but also to warn against predatory men as society's rules relaxed.

Katie: Their intentions were also to protect young girls. Listen to their advice on the pamphlets they handed out. 'Don't flirt in haste. Don't accept rides from men who flirt. Don't wink at men. Don't smile at strangers who flirt. Don't fall for men who are slick and dandified.'

Datshiane: Dandified, that means they were over-concerned with how they dressed.

Katie: Also, 'Don't let elderly men pat you on the shoulder. Don't ignore the man you are sure of while flirting with another.'

Datshiane: You might want to consider what this source reveals about society and the aims of the anti-flirt league.

Katie: Well, it tells us how the perception of women's behaviour was changing and that this was enough to cause alarm in some circles.

Datshiane: The aims of the league suggest a divide was opening up between the conservatives and progressives.

Katie: And not just those who objected to flapper culture, but those who resisted or opposed modernising the role of women to give them more choice in life.

Datshiane: Remember, it was only women from upper and middle-class backgrounds who had more independence. For the rest, life was much the same. But the change was significant enough to warrant pushback by traditionalists.

Katie: The creation of an anti-flirt league also shows that there were fears about the way men and women were socialising and interacting.

Datshiane: Exactly. The league's aims also expressed concerns for women's welfare at the hands of those men who were predatory or abusive. Next, the Second World War.

Katie: From 1939 to 1945.

Datshiane: This also had an impact on women's lives and experiences.

Katie: Like the First World War, the Second World War had the effect of loosening restrictions on women's lives and expanding freedoms even further.

Datshiane: Exactly. The demand for labour meant women were needed in the workforce and this was symbolised in a patriotic poster campaign using the character Rosie the Riveter and the strapline, 'We can do it.' She was strong, even muscular, a symbol of female empowerment with a knotted scarf over her hair, and she took on engineering jobs to aid the war effort.

Katie: As millions of men joined up to serve in the forces, women again took their places, but this time in factories, railways and even shipyards.

Datshiane: Women even joined sections of the armed forces.

Katie: African-American women were allowed to become nurses in the military, but only to treat black soldiers. An example of the intersection of race and gender.

Datshiane: So, by the end of the Second World War in 1945, women made up a third of all America's workforce, up from around one in five in 1920.

Katie: During the 1950s, women began to protest about their role in society. Many had lost jobs due to men returning from war, but they began to raise their voices to demand equality of opportunity.

Datshiane: Many American women wanted the right to have a professional career in any sphere. By 1960, nearly forty percent of the USA's workforce was female.

Katie: But women were still discriminated against in the workforce.

Datshiane: Women could be legally dismissed from their job if they got married.

Katie: Ninety-five percent of managers were men, only a small fraction of professionals like doctors and lawyers were women.

Datshiane: But there was some progress. The government passed the Equal Pay Act of 1963, requiring women and men to be paid the same for the same job. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 then banned discrimination on the basis of race and sex.

Katie: Campaigners even took companies to court who paid women less than men.

Datshiane: A groundbreaking bestseller by Betty Friedan called 'The Feminine Mystique' describes how well-qualified women felt depressed, undervalued and unfulfilled.

Katie: Friedan's book demanded equality between men and women beyond the economic sphere. Campaigners set up the National Organization for Women, NOW.

Datshiane: NOW demanded greater rights for women in their lives, including making reproductive decisions for themselves.

Katie: The North American Indian Women's Association and the National Black Feminist Organization joined in the cause of women's rights. The umbrella term for protesters campaigning for women's rights was the Feminist Movement.

Datshiane: And they had success in a spate of laws passed. Married couples were allowed to use contraceptives and divorce got easier with the no-fault divorce law. Laws also required girls to be able to study the same subject as boys at school.

Katie: And the Women's Liberation Movement, or Women's Lib for short, protested against the treatment of women through direct action such as by disrupting the 1968 World Beauty Contest because they argued women should not be objectified by such pageants.

Datshiane: In 1973, the feminist campaign won a key battle in the famous Roe vs Wade court case, which led the same year to the Supreme Court ruling that women in all states had the right to safe and legal abortion.

Katie: This overrode the anti-abortion laws of many states at the time.

Datshiane: But in 2022, the Supreme Court overturned this, permitting individual states to ban abortion again.

Katie: There had always been divided views in American society about women and their freedoms, from the time of the Anti-Flirt Manifesto, through to the campaigns of the Feminist Movement in favour of women's rights in the 1960s.

Datshiane: This difference of opinion came to prominence again in 1972, when the Equal Rights Amendment, or ERA, was approved for Congress.

Katie: It stated that the equality of rights under the law shall not be denied by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Datshiane: It was poised to become an amendment to the American Constitution.

Katie: But was derailed by the Stop ERA campaign by the conservative female campaigner, Phyllis Schlafly.

Datshiane: She argued that it would lead to more women in combat, a higher abortion rate, unisex bathrooms, and homosexual marriages.

Katie: Schlafly persuaded enough states not to vote for the amendment.

Datshiane: As a result, equality of rights for women and girls under the law was never enshrined in the American Constitution. Okie dokie, lots of information in this episode, so here's some quick questions to see if you remember, Katie.

Katie: I'm ready, go for it.

Datshiane: What was the name of the woman in the propaganda posters in World War II, which encouraged women to be strong in work and play their part in the war effort?

Katie: That would be Rosie the Riveter.

Datshiane: What was the name of the group who opposed the behaviour and liberal attitudes of some women, especially the Flappers, in the 1920s?

Katie: Oh, that would be the Anti-Flirt League.

Datshiane: When and what was the ruling that stated that women in all states had the right to safe and legal abortion, but was overturned in 2022?

Katie: That was Roe vs Wade in 1973.

Datshiane: So, it's time for a quick summary of this episode. Freedoms for women greatly expanded in the 1920s, partly as a result of their taking on men's work during the First World War.

Katie: More women worked outside the home and had greater financial independence.

Datshiane: But many American women were excluded from these changes, especially in rural areas and black women still faced discrimination.

Katie: Flapper culture was all the rage for young women with money, but conservative society criticised what they saw as loose morals.

Datshiane: And the Second World War brought more change still with women entering the workforce.

Katie: An umbrella group called the Feminist Movement campaigned to improve women's rights with notable achievements.

Datshiane: Girls could study the same subject as boys. All married couples were allowed to use contraceptives. California became the first state to allow divorce by mutual consent.

Katie: Women gained the right to safe and legal abortions in any state, but the law was changed to give states the right to ban abortion in 2022. Head over to the Bitesize website for more GCSE history.

Datshiane: See you in the final episode on the civil rights movement. Bye!