

Gender and Empowerment in American History and Politics

Published: March 4, 2021

One hundred years ago, the United States ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, thus enfranchising 26 million women after years of struggle for their voting rights. While closing the divisive issue of women's suffrage, the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment gave rise to numerous questions and set in motion new forms of activism for the liberation of all women, including those of racial minorities and working-class women. Over time, it became clear that advancing gender justice did not mean simply providing formal access to representation, but it required transforming gender relations as a whole, beyond traditional male-female categories. Moreover, this meant recognizing the overlapping identities of all those involved and overcoming the systemic and substantive barriers that prevented—and still prevent—many women and gender minorities from acquiring a distinct voice.

When we launched the call for papers, “Gender and Empowerment in American History and Politics,” for our fourth monographic issue, in March 2020, the American presidential campaign was still ongoing. We opened our call by stating that witnessing a race between two white men running for the highest office in the United States exemplified how gender equality in American politics was far from being achieved. Almost one year after the call was sent out, Kamala Harris was sworn in as Joe Biden's vice-president, becoming the first woman in this office. The Biden-Harris cabinet is the most gender-diverse as well as ethnic-diverse in American history, and women's rights and gender issues have been included among the top priorities of the new administration's agenda. While all this cannot be underestimated, a closer look at this picture—and one that addresses problems from a historical perspective—indicates that gender equality in the United States is still far from being achieved, both at political and social levels.

Political representation of women and people in the LGBTQ+ community is only one of the many unsolved questions that the essays in this monographic issue analyze. The broad spectrum of themes includes intertwining between institutional change, political change and processes of empowerment as well as the role of ideas and culture in shaping the understanding of gender and gender roles in American society. While gender is the main focus of the issue, our goal has been to include essays that have used intersectionality as a framework, thus looking at the interplay of gender and race, class, religion, and social background in shaping individuals' and groups' activism and empowerment processes.

Howard Ashford's “Not Another Master: African American Women, Divorce, and Establishment of Black Women's Independence in Central Mississippi, 1890–1940” uses the intersectional lens of gender, race and social status to investigate the practice of divorce from the perspective of African

American women in Attala County, Mississippi, from the late nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. In their broader quest for equality, justice and inclusion, African American women have also fought a parallel struggle within the narrow boundaries of their private family lives, using divorce as a tool for achieving emancipation in the domestic realm.

Gender and class are central in Tommaso Reborà's "From Turin to Boston (and back) Translations and cultures of protest in transnational feminist networks of the 70s," which offers an innovative transnational perspective on feminism and political consciousness in the context of Second-wave Feminism, thus shedding light on the complex issue of the reception of American feminism in Italy. The article closely follows the overseas activities of the *Collettivo Cr*, (Revolutionary Communications Collective), a Turin-based Italian left-wing group dedicated primarily to the diffusion of material produced in the context of the American New Left. From 1970, women activists in the *Collettivo* became involved in the translation and diffusion of articles and reflections about the American feminist movement, introducing their experience into a wider transnational system of networks.

Intersectional theory is pivotal in Anna Nasser's "Borders as Crisis: Gloria Anzaldúa and women of color feminisms in the 1980s United States," which explores Gloria Anzaldúa's contribution in combining multiracial feminism with borderlands theory. Analyzing the very notion of *border* in Anzaldúa's thought, Nasser underlines its importance in the shaping of a new vision of resistance and challenge to racial, ethnic and sexual inequality. This "chaotic intertwining of different systems of oppression," which deeply reflects Anzaldúa's experience as a Chicano woman living on the border between Mexico and Texas, challenges us to rethink every possible border as a place for encounter and reflection. The ultimate goal, as Nasser illustrates, is identified by Anzaldúa as a need to create a new identity across those many borders. This call to rethink the concept of border as space of resistance, and to identify the political stance for multiracial feminism, is particularly important in the political context of the United States during the 1980s.

In "'Stop Taking Our Privileges:' Phyllis Schlafly's Traditional Womanhood and the Fight for Sociocultural Domination in the 1970s–80s" Amélie Ribieras analyzes Phyllis Schlafly's leading role in guiding white women in their attack on Second-wave Feminism. Ribieras frames her work within a relatively recent strand of research that emphasizes the intersection of women's history with that of right-wing conservative movements. Class, in conjunction with gender, is also an important element of Ribieras' analysis. Borrowing the concept of "gendered class interest" from Susan Marshall, the author investigates conservative women's quest to preserve the status quo and their (alleged) privileged position within society. The results emphasize the complexity inherent within these women's activism, which also involves an underlying paradox; which is, while advocating for the maintenance of traditional gender roles, they were also claiming "a voice for themselves," effectively stepping into the political arena and, consequently, moving outside the same traditional domestic boundaries that they proposed as ideals.

In this issue's column, *Bringing the History Back in*, Raffaella Baritono's "From 2020 to 1920 and back: One hundred years from the 19th Amendment" examines the actual meaning of Kamala Harris' election as vice-president of the United States. While Baritono sees it as the outcome of years of women's struggle for representation in the political arena, she also questions the very idea of linear progress in this domain. Providing ground for broad reflection on the struggle for women's political participation, and cross-examining the issues of gender, race, social condition and political affiliation, the essay concludes that the actual possibility for a woman to reach the highest level in national politics is far from being the obvious next step in women's political representation in the United States.