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Introduction

I. Approach and Rationale

Women in the Progressive Era is one of over seventy teaching units published by the National Center for History for the Schools that are the fruits of collaborations between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific issues and "dramatic episodes" in history from which you and your students can delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying crucial turning points in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, private correspondence, literature, contemporary photographs, and paintings from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of "being there," a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

II. Content and Organization

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 9–12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific "dramatic moment" to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

Teacher's Background

I. Unit Overview

One of the most important (and least appreciated) aspects of industrialization and urbanization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the appearance of a new American woman who challenged deeply rooted traditions about the role of women and the family. Women appeared in growing numbers among American wage-earners, in higher education, in the professions and the lively arts, and in politics. As activists and social reformers, women significantly shaped the culture of a period historians have labeled "the Progressive era."

II. Unit Context

The history of women from 1890 to 1920 is inextricably tied to the larger frame work of the history of the labor movement and social reforms of the Progressive era. This unit should follow the study of the economic and social changes brought on by industrialization, immigration, and the rise of the cities.

III. Correlation with the National Standards for World History

Women in the Progressive Era provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, Basic Edition, (National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 1996), **Era 7**, *The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930).* Lessons with this unit assist students in attaining **Standard 1A** by evaluating Progressive attempts at social and moral reform.

This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duation in which historical developments have unfolded (**Standard 1**, **Chronological Thinking**); draw upon visual and literacy sources (**Standard 2, Historical Comprehension**); examine the influence of ideas, consider multiple perspectives (**Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation**); interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created (**Standard 4, Historical Research**); and, formulate a position or course of action on an issue (**Standard 5, Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision making**).

IV. Unit Objectives

- To examine the social conditions which led to women's assumption of wider roles in the public arena during the Progressive era.
- To examine the impact of higher education for African American women and for white middle-class women.

- To investigate the methods women used to exert influence in the public arena, including the women's club movement, settlement houses, and labor organizations and to identify areas of social reform in which women's activism resulted in significant changes.

- To identify the differences and resulting tensions between middle-class women reformers and their working-class clients.

- To identify individuals, organizations, and events that led to popular acceptance of birth control and suffrage.

IV. Unit Background Materials

In the 1890s the character of American reform movements changed. Although Americans had always been intent on correcting society's failings, turn-of-the-century reform displayed a new attitude toward change and new methods by which women and men improved their society. An increasing acceptance of the Darwinian account of a universe of chance and accident began to replace religious faith in a purposeful universe and stimulated debates on the positive or progressive nature of some forms of conflict and change. As religious leaders and philosophers constructed a new philosophy to accommodate faith and science, a new generation of professionally trained reformers (which included an exceptional group of women, the first generation of American college women) were in the vanguard of a national reform movement.

Among the more visible signs of the changes brought on by industrialization and urbanization was the appearance of a new woman in the late nineteenth century. Elite women, the wives and daughters of middle-class families, and working-class women—both native-born and immigrant—entered the public arena with greater self-assurance and determination to attain recognition of their status as citizens and wage-earners.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, large numbers of women actively pursued a variety of social reform programs through organized activities. Drawing on the traditions of female charitable and reform associations of the earlier years of the century and the movements of the 1840s and 1850s to advance their own position in American society by a call for equal rights, women's organizations of the late nineteenth century targeted specific social goals—suffrage, child-labor legislation, pure food and drug acts, labor organizing, consumer protection, prohibition, and expanded educational and career opportunities.

A passionate commitment to the cause of social justice fueled the new reform movement. The reformers had faith in the ability of reformed social institutions to correct abuses caused by the corruption of power in both government

and business. Efficiency, organization, cooperation, and a search for order were the hallmarks of Progressivism. Progressive reformers, motivated by religious faith and moral outrage, openly challenged accepted attitudes towards the rights of workers; the privileges and legal protections enjoyed by large corporations; the role of women in the workplace, home, and body politic; public education; municipal government; race relations; and morals in their effort to preserve capitalism and democracy.

While women in the northern cities and western regions fought for equal rights and a wide range of social reforms, African American women in the South and in northern cities organized to fight for these same causes— but also fought against a rising tide of racism that was disenfranchising male voters, replacing slave codes with oppressive Black codes, establishing segregation as a rule, and creating an unprecedented climate of violence against free African Americans.

Since emancipation, African-American women, struggling to organize family life, had been active in their communities through the formation of mutual aid societies, benevolent associations, educational and literary societies, and church groups. Black club women shared common Protestant Christian values with white women, although as documents will show, they consciously avoided identifying their organizations as "sister" organizations.

The disappointing struggle over the Fifteenth Amendment exposed the racism of many white feminists' programs as well as the sexism of some leading abolitionists. White women leaders often claimed that white women were more deserving of the vote than black men. In the end, the Fifteenth Amendment granted the vote to all men, regardless of race, and excluded all women. Nevertheless, women never abandoned the struggle for woman's suffrage but turned their attention to the grim labor situation facing the majority of black working women.

Similarities between the black women's club movement, white middle-class reform organizations, and working-class women's activism are limited, despite the rhetoric of common purposes, claims of feminist solidarity, and the sentiments of many individual members, or the efforts of the socialist movement to overcome the divisions of class, race, and gender. Alliances between organizations were preempted by the movements' separate programs based upon each one's subordinate role in relation to the dominant culture.

There were many contradictions in the reform programs of the Progressive era. The purpose of this unit is to expose students to the broad and diverse movements in which women played a central role. Students should understand how groups of women fought against a dominant culture, yet at the same time drew upon the assumptions of that culture to exclude other women. In short, there was no unified women's outlook during this period. Instead, women's perspectives varied across lines of race, class, and religion.

VI. Lesson Plans

1. Women Get Organized
2. Education and the Modern Woman
3. Rebel Girls: Working Class Women
4. Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement
5. The Debate Over Women's Suffrage