



Module 2 focuses on the experiences of American women reformers from 1800 to 1860, a period that stretched from the early republic to the outbreak of the Civil War. The story begins at the turn of the nineteenth century, with female-run benevolent societies that provided care to society's neediest people without threatening accepted gender roles. It continues into the tumultuous antebellum years, when women increasingly joined and sometimes led movements to fundamentally change American society.

This module examines the lives and work of reformers who challenged a number of different social issues: church hierarchy, Native American rights, temperance, abolition, and women's rights. In the process, these women often violated what scholars today call the cult of true womanhood, an ideology that celebrated the submissive woman at home, out of the public eye, focused on family and religion. The conflicting but intertwined narratives—of restriction and reform—are presented in a set of life stories and resources as well as the timeline entitled *Could and Should*. They offer students a chance to explore the role women played during a particularly crucial period of American history.

Suggested Activities

- ★ Whenever you introduce a women's history component into your lessons, ask the students to consider both how this changes their understanding of the event and why it is important to have multiple perspectives.
- ★ Lead a discussion comparing how **Nancy Ward** and Catharine Beecher (**Resource 11**) each tried to martial resistance to the policy of Indian removal. What are the similarities and differences in their reasoning and approach? Why were they both unsuccessful?
- ★ Compare and contrast the women's clothing depicted in the life story of **Amelia Jenks Bloomer**, **Resource 14**, and **Resource 18**. Lead a class discussion on the symbolic meaning of each style. Ask the students to conduct research on the meaning and debate that surrounds specific articles of clothing today. (To explore the politics of fashion in the early republic, use the life stories of **Dolley Madison**, **Margaret Bayard Smith**, and **Resource 5**.)
- ★ Ask the students to use **Resources 10**, **12**, and **15**, and other materials they choose, to build an argument for why the women's movement gained momentum through the mid-nineteenth century.
- ★ Compare the New York State Married Women's Property Law (**Resource 16**) with the description of coverture in **Resource 1**. Why were property laws a major milestone in the fight for women's rights?
- ★ The backlash and violence faced by women reformers is often overlooked in history books. Use the life story of **Lydia Maria Child** and **Resources 13** and **17** as starting points for a research project about the extremes women faced, and the range of ways they responded.
- ★ Use the life stories of **Jarena Lee** and **Mary and Emily Edmonson** to introduce the concept of intersectionality. How were their lives shaped by two different systems of oppression: race and gender?
- ★ Ask students to select one life story and one or two resources, and identify how the women in these materials began their reform efforts, and how their goals or tactics may have changed over time. How did they remain committed to their causes?

Discussion Questions

- ★ How did the role of American women evolve as the U.S. government stabilized and the economy grew?
- ★ How did race and class differences affect the experiences of women during the antebellum period?
- ★ Why was there resistance to women speaking in public and participating in political movements?
- ★ In the nineteenth century, how did fashion represent the rules women were supposed to follow? Does it still?
- ★ How did the Second Great Awakening contribute to the rise of the women's rights movement?

- ★ What causes were considered appropriate for women reformers and why?
- ★ What were the consequences for a woman who broke the rules of behavior? How did the consequences differ for women of different races and social classes?
- ★ How did the actions of women shape the overall course of U.S. society and government during the decades before the Civil War?
- ★ What issues do students care about today? What rules or unfair situations would they like to change? What could they do to make things better? Would some actions involve risk? How are their concerns and choices different from those of nineteenth-century female reformers?

Unit Wrap-Up Activity

Introduce the structure of the Declaration of Sentiments (**Appendix B**), which includes both grievances ("sentiments") and demands ("resolutions"). Ask students to select one or two sentiments and one or two resolutions, and find precedents for them in the curriculum materials in Module 1 and Module 2. For example, "He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead" is the coverture law (**Resource 1**), and links directly to the life stories, especially **Eliza Brock's**. Lead a class discussion about how women's experiences informed the Declaration of Sentiments, and why suffrage became the focus of women's efforts for the next seven decades.