

Activities



- 1 'The Weimar Republic brought an improvement in living standards for the German people'. In groups, make a list of evidence to support this statement and a list to oppose it.
- 2 Debate this statement in class: 'Weimar Germany brought social change for women'. Note down the key evidence for each side. Write your own view on paper and justify it.
- 3 Draw four boxes in the corners of a sheet of paper. Put these headings in the boxes: changes in standards of living, changes for women in politics, changes for women at work, changes for women at leisure. Draw lines between the boxes where there are links between the changes. Label the lines to explain what the links are.

Interpretation 2

From an article on women in Weimar Germany, written by Rudiger Graf in 2009.

Because of women's improved position in the workforce and their newly acquired rights as citizens... women themselves seemed to have changed... Magazines... presented a new generation of women that differed fundamentally from their mothers.

Changes for women in the Weimar Republic

Women in politics

The Social Democrats, who came to power in 1918, believed in giving women the right to vote. Many others agreed. Women had worked hard for the war effort, so there were strong arguments for rewarding women by treating them equally with men. As a result, in November 1918, in the first week of the new Republic, the government gave women the vote and the right to stand for elections.

Women took full advantage of these rights. In the Weimar elections, the turnout of women voters was 90%. By 1932, 112 women had been elected to the Reichstag. In 1932, almost 10% of members were female.

The Weimar Republic also strengthened the rights of women. Article 109 of the new constitution stated that:

- women had equal rights with men
- marriage was an equal partnership, with equal rights on both sides
- women should be able to enter all professions on an equal basis with men.

Women at work

During the First World War, with so many men involved in the fighting, more women went into paid work. By 1918, 75% of women were in work, often doing jobs previously performed only by men.

In some ways, under the Weimar Republic the lives of women returned to the way they had been pre-war. By 1925, for example, only 36% of women were in work – about the same as pre-war levels. Furthermore, women were not treated equally in the workplace, despite Article 109.

- In jobs where women and men did the same work, women were paid, on average, 33% less than men.
- Women were normally expected to give up work once they married.
- Few women entered high-status professions. By 1933, there were only 36 female judges in Germany.

However, there was some progress for women at work.

- The booming retail and service sectors produced plenty of part-time jobs in shops and offices.
- In some more liberal professions, like education and medicine, women made more progress. For example, the number of female doctors rose from 2,500 to about 5,000 between 1925 and 1932.

So, change for women at work was a mixed picture. The limited changes which did take place stirred up some negative feelings. In industry, trade unions were strong and male-dominated. They opposed women workers and equal pay and conditions for those women that did work. They were especially hostile to 'double earners' (married women bringing a second wage into the home).

Women at leisure

For some women, especially young, unmarried working women living in cities, where there were job opportunities, the 1920s brought greater financial independence. Growing up during the war, they were also used to greater social independence. Many of these became 'new women'.

'New women' bought more clothes and went out more. They expressed their independence by their behaviour. They wore short hair, more make-up, more jewellery and more revealing clothes. They smoked and drank more and went out unaccompanied. Some seemed less interested in marriage and families and took advantage of liberal sexual attitudes which had developed during the war.

Source A

A magazine cover from 1925, comparing a woman from the past (in the foreground) with a 'woman of today' (at the back).



Images of these 'new women' became common in advertisements and films, but they were not popular with all Germans. Many Germans – mainly men, but also many women – believed that the growing equality and independence of women threatened to change traditional aspects of society, such as motherhood, family and good housekeeping. As evidence, they pointed out that:

- the birth rate was falling. In 1913, there were 128 live births each year per 1,000 women. By 1925, this had fallen to 80. Many people felt that Germany needed women to be mothers.
- the divorce rate was rising. In 1913, there were 27 divorces each year per 100,000 people. By the 1920s, this had risen to 60. Many people felt that Germany needed women to be wives.

Society divided

These limited improvements for women were a source of worry to many people in Weimar Germany – though some people welcomed them.

For example:

- some women felt liberated by new opportunities and freedoms; however, other women found the expectation that they should change a scary or daunting challenge
- some men accepted changing roles for women, while others thought that the changes were inappropriate; there were some men who even thought that these 'new women' threatened the role of men in society
- conservatives and traditionalists in society complained loudly that women should concentrate on being mothers and wives, and not challenge the male-dominated society (these traditionalists included members of the clergy)
- some people blamed the economic instability in Germany in the 1920s on women upsetting the labour market.

Because of these attitudes, changes for women in the Weimar Republic was the source of many social tensions.