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BBC

WORLD-CHANGING WOMEN

To accompany the BBC2 series *The Ascent of Woman*



WORLD-CHANGING WOMEN

The women featured in this booklet represent different time periods, geographical locations and spheres of action. What they have in common is that, in their different ways, they challenged or overcame the restricting gendered norms of the societies in which they lived. By refusing to be bound by the social, legal, political or domestic conventions of their time, they helped shape the modern world.

World-changing women in history

Some of the names here may be familiar and others less so. They stand for the countless women whose important roles, in a range of fields, had tended to be overlooked by recorded history. Over the past fifty years historians have been asking questions about women's absence from the historical record and have begun to set this record straight. The result has been a rich and new way of looking at the past, in which the restrictions put on women by past societies are not taken at face value. In uncovering these stories, the intention is not to write a separate 'women's history', but to begin to write women back into mainstream history where they belong.

World-changing women now

The women featured here might have been surprised if they could have guessed the limited extent of their legacy in the second decade of the twenty-first century. While women account for **49.6%** of the world's population, they comprise **22%** of Members of Parliament, **17%** of Government Ministers, **11%** of Heads of State, **30%** of scientific researchers and **30%** of published academic authors. They might also have been dismayed to know that, following New Zealand's lead in 1893, women would have to wait until 1918 in Russia, 1920 in the United States, 1928 in Britain, 1945 in Italy, 1950 in India and 1975 in Angola to be given the vote on the same basis as men. Women's quest to change the world continues.

'WOMEN, WITH A FEW NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS, HAD BEEN DENIED A HISTORY'

(Professor Olwen Hufton, 1995)

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

1872 – 1952 : RUSSIA

REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS



In pre-revolutionary Russia, aristocratic women's lives were expected to revolve around domesticity and family responsibilities. Alexandra Kollontai, however, who was inspired by Marxist ideas to join the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party at the age of 27, showed that it was possible to follow a different path. She was eventually to become the most prominent woman in the Soviet administration following

the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, when she was appointed People's Commissar for Social Welfare.

Kollontai was born into St. Petersburg nobility; she married in 1893 and bore a son but soon felt constrained by married life. Her political interests were triggered following a visit to a textile factory where she witnessed the appalling conditions endured by women workers. She turned to study the history of working movements and led a campaign to encourage women workers to fight for their own interests against their employers, against middle-class feminism and, as she saw it, against the male conservatism of socialist organisations. ▶



ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI
1872 – 1952 : RUSSIA

Alexandra Kollontai was the only woman to be elected to full membership of the Soviet Executive Committee in revolutionary Russia. She improved maternity care and women's working conditions.

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IMAGE: The first ever woman ambassador, Alexandra Kollontai with the Norwegian St Olaf order.



As a member of the revolutionary government Kollontai was able to implement the reforms she had long advocated. She was best known for founding the 'Women's Department', an organization that worked to improve the conditions of women's lives in the Soviet Union, fighting illiteracy and educating women about the new marriage, education, and working laws brought about by the Revolution. However, Kollontai became increasingly critical of the Communist Party and eventually lost political influence. She was appointed to various diplomatic positions from the 1920s, preventing her from influencing policy related to women at home.

Kollontai saw marriage and the traditional family as legacies of the past. She believed that, under communism, these would give way to stronger ties between the individual and wider society. Alexandra Kollontai died in Moscow in 1952, less than a month away from her 80th birthday.

LEARN MORE ABOUT the impact and aftermath of revolution in Russia, see Open University module *A327: Europe 1914–1989: War, Peace, Modernity.*

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QUEEN NZINGA

c. 1581 – 1663 : LUANDA

STATE LEADERSHIP



In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, city states along the Central African coast began to be of interest to Portuguese Atlantic slave traders who established a fort and settlement at Luanda (in present-day Angola) in 1617. African rulers were faced with a dilemma; submission meant sacrificing nominal independence whereas resistance risked losing established trading relations and

potential advantage over rival African neighbours. One leader who handled this dilemma shrewdly was Queen Nzinga.

Born into the royal family of Ndongo in central West Africa, Nzinga became Queen of the Mbundu people in 1626, having served both as her brother's envoy and as regent following his death. Initially, Nzinga made accommodation with the Portuguese. In so-doing she gained an ally in the struggle against her African enemies and, at the same time, called a halt to Portuguese slave raids in her own kingdom. She converted to Christianity, adopting the name Doña Anna de Souza. ▶



QUEEN NZINGA c.1581 – 1663 : LUANDA

Queen Nzinga used her hereditary position to defend her country against the encroachment of colonial and commercial European powers. She was a military strategist and a shrewd diplomat.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT the trading relationships between West Africa and Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, see Open University module AA100: *The Arts Past and Present*.

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IMAGE: Engraving showing Queen Nzinga of Matamba sitting on a kneeling man to receive a group of Portuguese, c.1626.

However, the treaty was short-lived and Nzinga escaped with her people further west, where they founded a new state at Matamba. In alliance with former rival states, Nzinga led an army against the Portuguese, initiating, a thirty year war. She achieved victory in 1647, aided by the Dutch, and encouraged rebellion within Ndongo, which was now governed through a puppet ruler. When the Dutch in turn suffered defeat at Portuguese hands and withdrew from Central Africa, Nzinga continued her struggle, leading her own troops into battle. She developed Matamba as a trading power by capitalising on its strategic position as the gateway to the Central African interior. Despite numerous attempts by the Portuguese and their allies to capture or kill Queen Nzinga, she died peacefully in her eighties, by which time Matamba had become a strong commercial state.

LAURA BASSI

1711 – 1778 : ITALY

WORLD OF SCIENCE



Laura Bassi was a science graduate, a university professor and possibly the first woman to hold down a professional career in the world of science. This achievement is all the more remarkable given that, in the 1700s, it was considered immodest and indecent for a young woman to engage in debate about aspects of the natural world with groups of men.

Bassi was born in the city of Bologna, Italy, known as a 'city of learning'. She was the daughter of a lawyer and, following an elementary education, received tuition in philosophy and physics from the family doctor who had been impressed by her remarkable aptitude for learning. In 1732, at the age of 21, she became the first female member of the Academy of Sciences of Bologna Institute and was appointed Professor of Anatomy at the University of Bologna, the first woman professor to be appointed at a European university. However, these positions were considered honorary and not intended to set a precedent for other women. ▶



LAURA BASSI
1711 – 1778 : ITALY

Laura Bassi was the first woman to be appointed professor by a European university. She was instrumental in introducing Newtonian physics to Italy in the eighteenth century.

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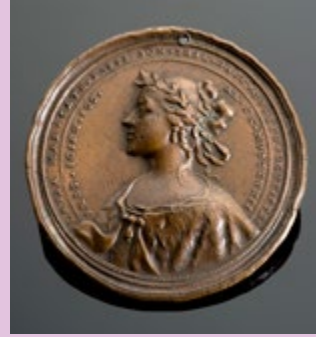
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LEARN MORE ABOUT the influence of enlightenment thinking on science, see Open University module A207: *From Enlightenment to Romanticism c. 1780–1830.*

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Bassi was made Professor of Experimental Physics, at the Bologna Institute two years before her death. Although she wrote extensively, she is hardly known today, possibly because only four of her papers appeared in print during or after her lifetime.

IMAGE: Medal commemorating Laura Maria Caterina Bassi, Italy, 1732.

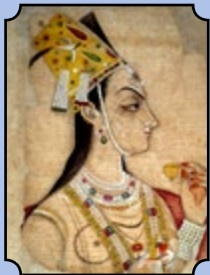
Bassi was expected not to participate in the day to day business of the academy, nor was she allowed to teach in public.

To get around this prohibition, in 1749 Bassi officially opened a 'domestic school' in her own home. Her eight-month long course offered a more comprehensive instruction than either the university or the Bologna Institute. Students came from all over Italy and from elsewhere in Europe to study with her, as her skill in combining the theoretical and experimental aspects of physics became well known. She was a key figure in introducing Newton's physics and philosophy to Italy and a gifted experimental physicist; she was drawn to investigating problems such as the nature of electricity and the composition of air.

EMPRESS NUR JAHAN

1577 – 1645 : INDIA

IMPERIAL RULE



In seventeenth-century northern India, upper-class women's movements were very much restricted by the rules of purdah, that is, the seclusion of women from public view behind high-walled screens and curtains within the home. It is all the more remarkable then, that during the reign of the fourth Mughal Emperor Jahangir, real power was known to be exerted by his favourite wife, Nur Jahan.

Born to a Persian family, Nur Jahan was brought to court as a widow in 1607, to serve as lady-in-waiting. Reputedly very beautiful, she attracted the attention of the Emperor and they were married in 1611; she would be Jahangir's twentieth and last legal wife. During the next ten years, assisted by trusted men like her father and brother, she assumed all the rights of sovereignty and government. It is said that Jahangir's addiction to alcohol and opium, and preference for artistic pursuits, made him dependent upon her to rule in his name. She controlled all matters of government and had coins struck in her name. ▶



EMRESS NUR JAHAN
1577 – 1645 : INDIA

Empress Nur Jahan overcame the rules of purdah in seventeenth-century Mughal India to exercise power on behalf of her husband. In doing so, she left a rich artistic legacy.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT gender and empire, see
Open University module A326: *Empire: 1492–1975*.



IMAGE: Empress Nur Jahan with
Emperor Jahangir and Prince
Khurram, c.1624–1625.

She has been portrayed as a schemer who gained power of the kingdom by exploiting her husband's addictions. But evidence also points to her physical strength and courage, a talent for administration, and responsibility for the many artistic, architectural, and cultural achievements of Jahangir's rule. She designed the gardens of Kashmir and Agra and was a patron of poetry. She took a special interest in women's affairs and provided land for women and opportunities for orphan girls.

Jahangir's failure to name an heir before his death in 1627 led to a power struggle amongst his sons. Nur Jahan's power weakened and she was confined by Jahangir's third son, Shah Jahan. Her imprisonment ended her influence at court, and she spent her final years in exile in Lahore.

LUCRETIA MOTT

1793 – 1880 : USA

SOCIAL REFORM



In 1830s America, some women identified a parallel between slavery and their own position in society. While many wished to play their part in fighting for social justice in the anti-slavery movement, others within the movement were opposed to them taking active roles and disapproved of them speaking in public. There were attempts to silence women at anti-slavery conventions. This led ultimately to the first Woman's Rights

Convention at Seneca Falls, N.Y, in June 1848, organised by Lucretia Mott and other women.

Born into a Quaker (Society of Friends) family in Massachusetts, Mott was married in 1811 and had six children. She began to speak at Quaker meetings in 1818, since the Quaker tradition of gender equality allowed women to speak in public. In 1821 she was made a minister in Philadelphia and in the 1830s was elected clerk of the Philadelphia Women's Yearly Meeting. Mott addressed various reform organisations such as the Non-Resistance Society and the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women and, in 1833, was ►



LUCRETIA MOTT
1793 – 1800 : USA

Lucretia Mott took advantage of the rare opportunity afforded women by the Society of Friends to speak in public. She campaigned tirelessly for the abolition of slavery.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT the trans-Atlantic slave trade between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Open University module *A200: Exploring History: Medieval to Modern 1400–1900*.

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IMAGE:
United States postage stamp featuring Lucretia Mott

instrumental in founding the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. In 1840 she was one of six American women delegates sent to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in England but there she and the other women were barred from entering. This incident undoubtedly encouraged her growing interest in women's rights and she was the first to sign the Declaration of Sentiments, a call for equal treatment of women. The women's movement's early leaders had learned from Anti-Slavery Societies how to organise, publicise and articulate a political protest.

Throughout the 1850s, Mott continued with anti-slavery and non-resistant activities; she took an active interest in the causes of school and prison reform, temperance, peace and religious tolerance. She was appointed the first president of the Equal Rights Association, an organisation formed to achieve equality for African-Americans and women, in 1866.

KATE SHEPPARD

1847 – 1934 : NEW ZEALAND

POLITICAL ACTIVISM



In late nineteenth-century New Zealand, as elsewhere in the world, women's roles were believed by many to have been assigned to them by nature; these consisted of managing the home, looking after their children and cooking. Yet, in 1893, New Zealand was to become the first country in the world to grant women the vote on equal terms with men.

Kate Sheppard, born in Liverpool, relocated with her family to Christchurch, New Zealand in 1868, following the death of her father. Following marriage, and the birth of a son, she became active in the church and in the temperance (alcohol prohibition) movement. Along with other women, she attributed many of the social problems that she saw around her to dependence on alcohol and helped to found the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union. It soon became clear that social and legislative reforms related to temperance and to women's and children's welfare could be more readily achieved if women had the vote. ►



KATE SHEPPARD
1847 – 1934 : NEW ZEALAND

Kate Sheppard was instrumental in persuading the New Zealand government to grant women the vote on the same basis as men in 1893. It was the first country to do so.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT nineteenth-century social problems and their remedies, see Open University module A105: *Voices, Texts and Material Culture*.



IMAGE: New Zealand 10 Dollar Bank Note featuring Kate Sheppard

This had previously been extended to men over 21 years. Since women were excluded, they argued that they were classed with the disenfranchised: juveniles, lunatics and criminals.

Sheppard travelled the country, wrote to newspapers, organised petitions, arranged public meetings and lobbied members of Parliament. She was a gifted public speaker and held strong humanitarian views. She believed that the differences between people, such as race, class, creed, or sex, should be overcome. Sheppard's final petition was the largest ever presented to Parliament and in 1893 women were finally given the right to vote. When the general election was held ten weeks later, 65% of New Zealand women over 21 used their vote.

Kate Sheppard continued to work for women's rights for as long as her health allowed and became editor of *The White Ribbon*, the first newspaper in New Zealand to be owned, managed and published solely by women.

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