

The Women Who Changed the World

Throughout history, women have overcome challenges to bring social, scientific and political change. Read about 11 of the most influential here. **By Jason Teich**



Women have gotten a raw deal since the dawn of humanity. It's taken courageous pioneers to shake the world out of its sexist doldrums and create a society

where all genders can thrive. The women covered here have laid waste to barriers and made astonishing contributions in fields ranging from literature to science, aviation, politics, education, business, sports and social justice. These renegades have paved the way for a world where women can assert their power and find a voice.

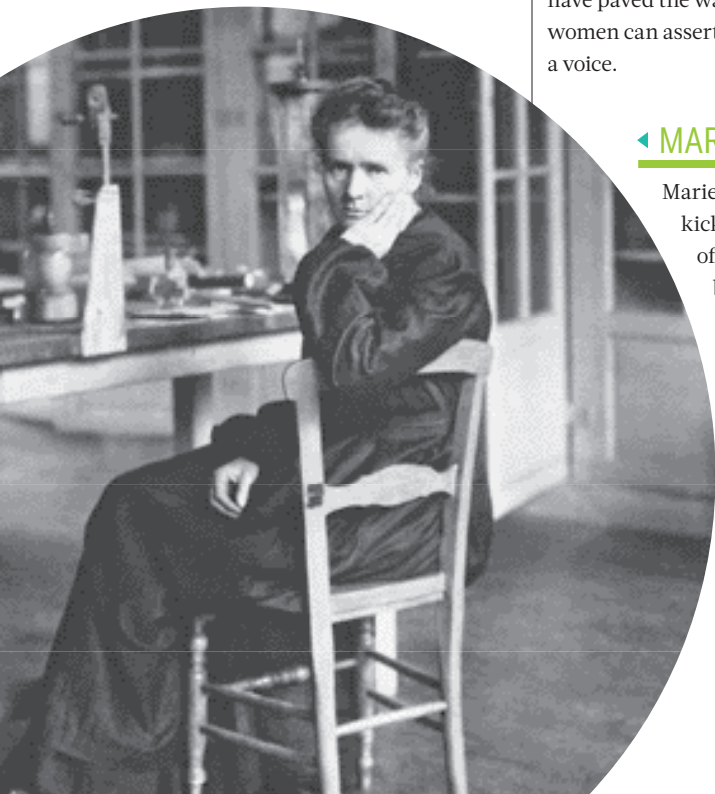
◀ MARIE CURIE

Marie Curie (1867-1934) kicked down the doors of science for women, becoming the only person to ever win the Nobel Prize in two different scientific disciplines. She won her physics Nobel in 1903 alongside her husband, Pierre, and physicist Henri Becquerel, when they developed the theory of radioactivity

(a term Marie coined). She then directed the world's first experiments using radiation to treat cancer and even designed mobile X-ray machines for battlefield use during World War I. "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less," Curie famously said, and she lived by those words. Though she was the brains behind the operation, for years she had to work for free in her husband's lab, under his sponsorship. When he was killed by a speeding carriage while crossing the street in 1906, she took over, doing breakthrough science even when radiation made her sick. Curie became an inspiration for women emerging from the shadows in a host of fields.

OPRAH WINFREY

Philanthropist, mogul and media behemoth Oprah Winfrey rose from extreme rural poverty and overcame years of childhood sexual abuse to become the world's first black





Billie Jean King (shown here at Wimbledon, 1964) was a trailblazer for women in tennis.

multibillionaire, opening doors for black women everywhere. Winfrey landed a radio job in high school and became a local news anchor by age 19. In 1986, she created *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the highest-rated talk show in history. “You don’t become what you want, you become what you believe,” Oprah has said, proving that talent, courage and faith in oneself can take you the distance despite impossible odds.

CLEOPATRA

Smart, ruthless and sexy, she was the original female power player 1,500 years before Elizabeth I came along. Cleopatra (69-30 BC) murdered two siblings,

outlasted the siege of Alexandria and seduced two of the most powerful men in history (Julius Caesar and Mark Antony), bearing their children and enlisting their support en route to becoming the queen of Egypt. Originally cast as history’s ultimate femme fatale, Cleopatra has been resurrected as a feminist icon. “Like all lives that lend themselves to poetry, Cleopatra’s was one of dislocations and disappointments,” writes biographer Stacy Schiff. “She grew up amid unsurpassed luxury, to inherit a kingdom in decline,” but she kept it going when others would have failed. How? She “knew how to build a fleet, suppress an insurrection, control a currency, alleviate a famine,” Schiff says.

▲ BILLIE JEAN KING

Legendary tennis champ Billie Jean King won 39 Grand Slam titles and changed the way women are valued in sports. Shamed and forced to deny her homosexuality for most of her life, she nonetheless was a tireless advocate for women. When the ATP refused to pay women players what they’re worth, King founded the WTA – the tennis association in which all professional female tennis players now compete. She thwarted attempts to delegitimize her league and defeated showboating misogynist Bobby Riggs in the famed “Battle of the Sexes,” establishing the skill of women tennis players for good.

▶ HELENA RUBINSTEIN

The first self-made female millionaire, Helena Rubinstein (1872–1965) started with nothing, yet she broke glass ceilings in business and cosmetics. As a Polish immigrant to Australia, she began creating skin cream from wool wax and selling it for a profit to sun-damaged locals. Within five years, she'd established an empire from Sydney to London. When she arrived in America at the start of World War I, she knew her fortunes would soar. "All the American women had purple noses and gray lips and their faces were chalk white from terrible powder. I recognized that the United States could be my life's work," she said. Her integrated promotion of clothing, cosmetics and interior design revolutionized the beauty industry and brought a culture of style to the States, but she always gave credit to her mother, whose homemade face cream she adapted to launch her line.

JANE AUSTEN

The 19th-century British novelist Jane Austen (1775–1817) is known for witty social critiques in her six published works, including *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. A feminist ahead of her time, Austen explored themes about marriage and independence, persuading readers that women could be more than mere social ornaments. "We live at home, quiet, confined..." she wrote in *Persuasion*. But Austen herself defied convention by publishing her books as a woman (her byline was "A Lady") without a male pseudonym like others of the day. Her heroines broke boundaries in their quest for love and independence, two goals that eluded Austen herself. Above all, she carved a spot in the literary landscape for the female voice, establishing that women could travel in the world of letters and write about themselves.

SUSAN B. ANTHONY

No one has done more for women's rights in the United States than





Helena Rubinstein said that every woman could be beautiful if she tried.



◀ HELEN KELLER

At a time when most blind and deaf people were institutionalized, Helen Keller (1880-1968) defied the odds and learned to speak, write and read braille thanks to her teacher, miracle worker Anne Sullivan. Keller became the first deaf-blind person to finish college or write books – including her famed autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, which forever changed the way people viewed and interacted with the disabled. “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision,” she said.

ROSA PARKS

When Rosa Parks (1913-2005) was growing up in rural Alabama, she witnessed lynchings and terrifying night rides of the Ku Klux Klan. As an adult, she lit the flame of the African American community’s ferocious civil rebellion, refusing to yield her seat for a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on Dec. 1, 1955, leading to her arrest. Not just courageous but also politically adept, Parks helped lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott by 17,000 black citizens for 381 days, until a federal court overturned segregation laws in the state.

Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), the driving force behind the women’s suffrage movement and a fierce abolitionist. Leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Anthony ignored the law in 1872 and voted in her hometown of Rochester, N.Y., getting arrested and initiating a widely publicized trial. “There never will be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect lawmakers,” Anthony said. The 19th Amendment, giving women the vote, passed in 1920, 14 years after her death. Almost 100 years later, Anthony’s efforts have paved the way for the largest group of female politicians in U.S. history.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

She was the poor little rich girl, born to great wealth but unlucky enough to lose both parents by age 10. Thereafter, Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) was raised by a critical grandmother and then, after marriage to future president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, tormented by a controlling mother-in-law and her husband’s affair. Yet she found a voice: Not only did Roosevelt help her husband prepare responses to The Great Depression and World War II, she tirelessly advocated for women’s rights, civil rights and refugees. After FDR’s death, she became America’s first delegate to the U.N. “A woman is like a tea bag,” Roosevelt said. “You never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water.”

AMELIA EARHART

“Everyone has oceans to fly, if they have the heart to do it. Is it reckless? Maybe. But what do dreams know of boundaries?” Amelia Earhart (1897-1937) said. The first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, she was an aviation pioneer who opened up the skies for women. Sadly, when Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan embarked on an around-the-world flight on July 2, 1937, they lost radio contact with ground control and vanished without a trace. Their last communique was issued just 800 miles into the flight. No one knows what happened to Earhart, but her inspiring achievement has served as a call to bravery, adventure and freedom for women ever since.