Summary of Gender Norms 1900-1950

Suffragettes, the 'first wave' of feminism, won the landmark right to vote for women (for over 21s) in USA in 1920, in the UK 1928. Why was this significant? It meant that women's opinions and experiences mattered. In order to be elected, politicians had to appeal to women as well as men. This meant listening to their experiences, answering their questions, and representing their ideas when they wanted things changed.

There were pioneering women in a number of areas: first female engineers (1905 US), MPs (1908 Finland), police (1914 UK), and Nobel Prize scientists (Marie Curie, 1903). However, still prevalent was the 19th century ideal of the family, where a woman's role is domestic and the man is the 'breadwinner'.

Key dates:

1914-18 - First World War devastates European, mostly male population. High female employment in key roles across the classes.

1916 - Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger opens clinic in New York, then is forced to flee to the UK

1919 - In Britain the Sex Disqualification Act allows women to become lawyers, vets and civil servants. The Women's Engineering Society is formed. Britain also gets its first female MP.

1940s - World War II: Start of first 'women's culture'?

As the majority of the men had been sent away to fight, women were encouraged to take up the job roles they had left behind. During the war years, women kept the economy running - in factories, on farms, in dockyards, and in offices. During this time, they were also able to talk to each other outside of the home, and recognise common experiences; some critics (incl. Barbara Ehrenreich) have said this is where the 'feminist' culture of late 20th century began.

For some young women, their first experience of adulthood meant taking on responsibility in a job and earning enough money to live independent lives.

When the men returned, the expectation was that they would take over the roles from before the war, and that women would return to domestic responsibilities. Returning soldiers were often psychologically scarred by their experiences; though this challenged the image of men as tough, invulnerable and resilient, few felt comfortable discussing their experiences and emotions. Instead, there was a sense that British and American culture wanted to return to 'safe', traditional values including gender roles. Unsurprisingly, many women didn't want to give up the independence they had grown used to, and this helped to fuel the 'Second Wave' of feminism in the 60s.

Can you think of any other key events that affected gender norms:

5 Minute Task (with 5-7 min extrapolation) - Quickfire Historical Research

Note: this could be a starter activity that is repeated over a number of lessons, each time students sharing their findings to build a 'bigger picture'.

The Blitz	Pearl Harbour	Dunkirk	Hiroshima	The Holocaust	Women's Army/Air Force

VE Day	Creation of NHS	Jesse Owens

Divide the following keywords and find out what they mean then fill in chart below.

Would you classify these as historical (h), social and cultural (sc), economic (e) or political (p) events?

Event / Keyword	Date	How might this affect audiences' values and beliefs?

10 Minute Task (plus 5-7 mins plenary/extrapolation) - Cultural Contexts

Note: this would be good for a series of home or independent learning tasks

Look at some of these other media products from the time. What audience pleasures do they offer? Why do you think they were popular at this time? What values about gender do they share with your set products?

Advertising:

Early 1940s	Late 1940s

Audience pleasures?

Why was each of these popular at the time (link to historical events)?

How have the representations of gender changed between the early and late 40s?

Film: *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) - clip
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8lzyaMZ-mA

Audience pleasures?

Why was this popular at the time (link to historical events)?

How is gender being represented? What representations are traditional or progressive?

Comparison to Set Products

In what ways are the representations of men and women similar to those in your set products?

In what ways are they different?

How might the contexts have influenced these representations?