



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“There is only one thing worse than coming home from the lab to a sink full of dirty dishes, and that is not going to the lab at all!”

Chien-Shiung Wu, Physicist

The First Lady of Physics

Although she was eventually known as the [First Lady of Physics](#), Chien-Shiung Wu fought to overcome gender and racial prejudice her entire life. She was born in China in 1912, in an era when it was unusual for girls to attend school. With her parents' support, Wu received the equivalent of a high school education. In 1936, she immigrated to the U.S. and earned a coveted spot in the graduate physics program at U.C. Berkeley. Wu received her PhD in the emerging field of radiation and nuclear physics in 1940, and was immediately hired as a research assistant at Berkeley.

In 1942, Wu married a fellow Chinese scientist. The surge in anti-Asian discrimination in California during World War II drove the pair to the East Coast. Wu became the first woman to join the all-male faculty at Princeton. Within a year, she was recruited to the team of senior scientists working to develop the atom bomb at Columbia University. Her contribution to the [Manhattan Project](#) was critical to its success. Wu's research identified a process that enabled the separation of uranium metal through a gaseous infusion.

After the war, Wu remained at Columbia where much of her work involved proving or disproving theories of other scientists. In what became known as “[Wu's Experiment](#),” she famously disproved what had been considered to be a fundamental principle of physics: the [law of conservation of parity](#). In doing so, Wu's research confirmed the revolutionary



discoveries of two male colleagues. In 1957, the two men were awarded the Nobel Prize. [Wu's contribution](#) was not acknowledged.

Undaunted, Wu continued her groundbreaking studies and in 1964 she became the first woman to receive the [Cyrus B. Comstock Award in Physics](#). In 1975, she won the [National Medal of Science](#). Three years later, she became the first recipient of the prestigious [Wolf Prize](#).

Throughout her career, [Wu encouraged women](#) to pursue opportunities in science and technology while also speaking openly about the sexism and racism she had encountered. She retired in 1981, but continued her efforts to bring more women into the field. She died in 1997. A U.S. [commemorative stamp](#) in her honor was issued in February 2021.



Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Chien-Shiung Wu left her family, friends, and her country to pursue her dreams. She battled gender and racial discrimination throughout her life, but always with both honesty and humor.

Ask Yourself: Would you be willing to do the same to pursue your dreams?

Ask a Friend: What is the greatest sacrifice you've made to follow your heart?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex-ed and reproductive rights activist, after she married Dennett's greatgrandson. Last year, [Time magazine](#) included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon has spent ten years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her journalism has appeared in BOLD and Utah Stories. She lives near Salt Lake City with her family and dog, Gus.

Sharon is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements in the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com

