NEA's early years included very little official work for women's rights. Charl O. Williams, Association president in 1921-1922, was a significant figure in the United States women's suffrage movement. She kept scrapbooks and journals documenting her work to pass the 19th Amendment, as well as her work with NEA and the Democratic Party of Tennessee. Nevertheless, most of that work was done outside of her role within NEA, which offered no official endorsement on behalf of women's right to vote.

By the early 1970s, it was supporting legislation meant to ensure women were given an equal chance to get an education. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the Association handled the legacy of women being mostly excluded from positions of leadership within the Association itself.

By 1977, NEA was helping members comply with Title IV, part of a series of changes to the Civil Rights Act known as the Education Amendments of 1972. During an address to the Representative Assembly, Catherine Barrett said that the bill to pass the amendments implements more than 20 resolutions and NEA's work was crucial in getting the law passed. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the records providing any detail on this campaign. In general, the experience of women fighting for and achieving equal recognition within the Association is not well documented.