

Women's Rights Before the Civil War

by Laura Donnaway

To me, the sun in the heavens at noonday is not more visible than is the right of women, equally with man, to participate in all that concerns human welfare . . . <1>

These words were penned in 1866 by Frederick Douglass, a former slave and avid rallier for abolition and women's rights. This was no small task. Women's struggle for equality was and is a long and hard battle. Though suffrage was gained in 1920, the struggle for equality continues into the present time. The women who embarked on this crusade in the mid-1800s were courageous, defying most respectable standards of their time to stand up for what they believed.

In the nineteenth century, most Americans assumed that there was a natural order in society which placed men and women in totally different spheres. The ideal woman was submissive; her job was to be a meek, obedient, loving wife who was totally subservient to the men around her.

Between 1750 and 1850, women's roles in America changed somewhat. In an agrarian society, it was necessary for both husband and wife to put in a full day's labor, for the success of the farm depended on them both.

Industrialization produced further changes. As factories began to do many of the things women had done at home previously, such as spinning and weaving, women were left with a little more time to devote to other projects. Clergymen began to recruit them for various reforms but always they, the women, would work in their proper sphere, influencing only the men in their family.

By the early 1800s women were ready to branch out from their families and make an impression on the world. Numerous women's organizations were formed, some social, but many bound on doing social work. "Female associations . . . ran charity schools, and refuges for women in need." <2>

One of the first movements in which women took an active hand was the female seminary movement which began its serious phase about 1815. <3> The leaders were Emma Willard, Catherine E. Beecher, Zilpah P. Grant, Mary Lyon and Joseph Emerson. They intended to improve the quality of women's education so that they could be good citizens and "mothers of future statesmen." <4> They felt that young men and women should be educated separately and in a different fashion. While these leaders worked for improvements for women, they only worked for education and otherwise accepted the notion of the "appropriate sphere of women." <5> They never became involved in the women's rights movement but they still contributed something important. The seminary movement proved that women had minds capable of serious study and opened the way for women to teach and manage institutions. This was an important, although small, step toward equality for women.

The American Revolution was fought for independence and equality. However, these ideals only applied to white males. As time went on this became the slogan of many oppressed groups.

The Jacksonian movement for democracy during the 1820s and 1830s furthered the idea of equality. As many northern businessmen began a push for abolition, women joined in the cause and were exposed to politics. Both the abolitionist movement and the upsurge of unionism were sources of the women's movement.

The rise of industrialization in the 1830s and the increasing numbers of working women prompted women to become involved in the labor movement. The women's labor unions which were formed worked mostly for better pay and better working conditions. The Female Labor Reform Association in New England, begun in 1844, was one of the nation's most significant. It eventually failed however, when the workers could not stand up to their employers.

Unlike the sisterhoods of religious benevolence or female seminaries, which complemented the efforts of male leaders, sisterhoods of labor threatened the authority and economic power of corporate leaders and investors. <6>

One of the first female lecturers in the United States was Frances Wright. She spoke out for not only the political rights of working men but for equality for women, emancipation of the slaves, free religious inquiry, free public education for everyone, birth control, and equal treatment of illegitimate children. <7>

In 1825, Wright bought land in western Tennessee to form a model community to help pave the way for the emancipation of the slaves. The community was called Nashoba. Donated slaves and those she bought with her own funds would be brought there to live. Each slave would be charged with his price and upkeep which was to be worked off on a credit system. Older slaves would learn a trade while younger ones would go to school. At the end of five years, they would be freed.

In 1826, Wright decided to make Nashoba not only an "example of gradual emancipation," but also "a pilot project for world reform." <8> People would come from around the world to join them in the search for happiness, liberty, and "the emancipation of the human mind." <9>

Frances Wright's lecturing career was marked by opposition. She devoted her lectures to Nashoban ideals, attacking the clergy and speaking out for women's rights.

Until women assume the place in society which good sense and good feeling assign to them, human improvement must advance feebly. . . <10>

Eventually Nashoba failed. Wright's vision of the community never materialized. The slaves were unhappy and Nashoba became a financial disaster. Frances Wright spent her

fortune, "ruined her reputation, (and) violated all codes of respectability," <11> but she left her mark and became a symbol to the feminists who came after her.

Wright was not the only woman to fight for emancipation, many women became involved in the movement in the 1830s and the 1840s.

In 1833, the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed. William Lloyd Garrison, one of the leaders of the society, was fervently for women's rights. Unfortunately the other members were not. When women were not allowed to sign the Declaration of Purposes, they formed the Female Anti-Slavery Society as an answer. The society spread and it became the target of much criticism. There was strong opposition to abolition and even stronger opposition toward the female abolition societies. Meetings were often mobbed and the hall was burnt down where the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was being held. <12>

In 1836, Angelina Grimke wrote the pamphlet "An Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States" urging women to work for abolition. Though rejected in the South, the pamphlet was well received in the North. That same year Angelina and her sister Sarah arrived in New York as the first female abolitionist agents in the country. They were brought by the Female Anti-Slavery Society and assigned to give parlor talks to women. Their lectures soon began to attract larger and larger audiences so the meetings were moved to public auditoriums. The sisters were denounced by the clergy for going beyond women's "God-given place." <13> As the Catholic spokesman Orestes Brownson put it:

We do not believe women . . . are fit to have their own head. Without masculine direction or control, she is out of her element and a social anomaly -- sometimes a hideous monster. <14>

In response to this attack, the sisters began to speak out not only for abolition but also for women's rights. Sarah Grimke published a series of letters which drew a parallel between the conditions of women and slaves.

All I ask our brethren is that they take their feet from off our neck and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God destined for us to occupy. <15>

Sarah felt that women should not have to ask for equal rights because they should belong naturally and morally to women. Many people felt that the crusade for women's rights would only damage the abolitionist movement. In 1840, the movement split into two factions -- one for and one against women's rights. At last, the question of women's status in society had become an issue upon which much attention was focused.

In 1840, in London, the World Anti-Slavery Convention was held. Women delegates who attended were denied seats and forced to sit in the gallery. Two of the delegates, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, met there and became friends. Their efforts would eventually lead to the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.

The year 1848 was a "year of revolutions." <16> Besides the Seneca Falls Convention, New York State passed the first Married Woman's Property Act. Anesthesia was used in childbirth for the first time despite the clergy claiming that women and doctors were ignoring the decree of God who said that "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." <17> A new political party, the Free Soil Party, was formed. Its slogan of "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men." <18> reflected the idealism of the times.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a dominant force behind the Seneca Falls Convention. As a 33-year-old housewife and a mother of three, she could identify with women of the times. While having tea with Lucretia Mott and some other women, Stanton began to complain about the position of women in society. It was her idea to call the convention and she suggested a declaration to be modeled after the Declaration of Independence. In the declaration were listed all the forms of discrimination against women. These women pledged to use every means available to end discrimination. The demand for the right to vote passed by a small majority and only then because of the work of Stanton and Frederick Douglass. Many women wanted legal rights but believed that they weren't entitled to the vote because of their dependent state.

After the convention, the movement began to spread rapidly as conventions and meetings were held in many parts of the country during the 1850s. This activity was restricted, however, to the North and the West before the Civil War.

The white woman slave owners were supposed to be on a pedestal, but they were (metaphorically) chained to it and supposed to be silent. <19>

In the West, where women had to work full-time on the farm the same as men did, suffrage was received better. In the North, women were treated as weak and less intelligent than men. Women began to be admitted to some Midwestern universities in the 1850s and 1860s, but only when the universities were short of students. This shortage was particularly obvious when many men went off to fight in the Civil War.

In the 1850s, Susan B. Anthony became involved in the women's movement. She became its best organizer. During the 1850s, Anthony became involved in the temperance movement. She believed that the only influence women had was in their own homes. She wished to bring (the temperance issue into politics but was frustrated by the lack of a role for women.

Amelia Bloomer, the publisher of the women's rights newspaper, *The Lily*, introduced Anthony to Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Together they formed the New York State Women's Temperance Society in 1852. Stanton wished to incorporate a women's rights program into the society but many of her radical ideas were hard for the women to accept, especially her advocacy of divorce reform. When the rule that men could not vote in the society was overturned, Stanton was deposed from the presidency. Anthony decided to retire from the society.

Anthony used the skills and contacts she had gained from the temperance movement to begin a campaign for women's rights during 1853-1854. Within a few months, she had secured over 10,000 signatures for her petition to the New York Legislature. This campaign culminated in the women's rights convention in Albany, New York, in 1854. The central event was Elizabeth Stanton's "Address to the Legislature" in which she argued that women's position under the law denied the fundamental truth that men and women are alike. <20>

In 1860, after six years of hard work, New York passed the "first comprehensive reform in women's legal status, including full property, parental, and widow's rights, but no enfranchisement." <21>

Also in 1860, Elizabeth Stanton delivered her "Speech to the Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society" where she again illustrated the parallels between slavery and the oppression of women:

Herein is woman more fully identified with the slave than man can possibly be, for she can take the subjective view ... For while the man is born to do whatever he can, for the woman and the Negro, there is no such privilege. <22>

During the Civil War, the women's movement died out as the women concentrated on abolition. After the war, they expected equality for both blacks and women but were disappointed when the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments restricted the right to vote to male citizens. The abolitionist and women's movements split after this. The male abolitionists had been northern businessmen who wanted the black vote to ensure Republican victories in the South and the expansion of business in the North. Once satisfied, they quit as they saw nothing to gain from women's suffrage. <23>

In spite of this major setback, the women's movement went on. It had been given a steady foundation by women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony whose work was rewarded with the gain of women's suffrage when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 21, 1920.

Notes

1 Philip S. Foner, editor, *Frederick Douglass on Women 's Rights* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 78.

2 Nancy Woloch, *Women and the A American Experience*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 169.

3 Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 15.

4 Melder, p. 15.

5 Melder, p. 1.

6 Melder, pp. 46-47.

7 Miriam Gurko, *The Ladies of Seneca Falls: The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 32.

8 Woloch, p. 155.

9 Woloch, p. 155.

10 Woloch, p. 163.

11 Woloch, p. 164.

12 Gurko, p. 35.

13 Barbara Deckard, *The Women's Movement: Political, Socioeconomic and Psychological Issues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 253.

14 Gurko, p. 9.

15 Woloch, p. 184.

16 Gurko, p. 95.

17 Gurko, p. 95.

18 Gurko, p. 95.

19 Deckard, p. 257.

20 Deckard, p. 260.

21 Woloch, p. 185.

22 Gurko, p. 96.

23 Deckard, p. 259.

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