

SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT: WOMEN GAINING THE RIGHT TO VOTE

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Ida B. Wells, a women's suffrage activist, wrote: "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them."<sup>1</sup> In the 19th and early 20th centuries, women in the United States had to emphasize the truth as it related to prominent debates surrounding the right to vote. Women fought extensively to obtain the same voting rights that they have today. African American women faced an even more difficult path to obtain their right to vote because of the racism that was hurled their way. Through countless protests and many years of fighting, women gained the right to vote in the 20th century. The involvement of American women, both black and white, in the temperance movement, sanitary movement, and civil rights movement created the necessary momentum, coalitions, and ideological framework to ensure the success of the suffrage movement, which established the right to vote for every citizen in the United States.

In the 1860s, northern women played an influential role during the Civil War by supporting the Union war effort on the home front. They worked as laborers, nurses, and caretakers of families. The positions that women held during the Civil War gave them an insightful vision of gaining the same rights as their male counterparts. Women were also engaged in the war effort to abolish slavery, which influenced them to fight for their own rights. In particular, they wanted the right to vote.

After the Civil War, African Americans gained citizenship in the United States with the 14th Amendment.<sup>2</sup> While African Americans were free, they had not obtained the right to vote yet. The white American man was the only individual who held the right to vote. African Americans fought for the right to vote as well, and they received this right with the 15th Amendment. Although the right to vote was established for the first time for some African Americans, it was specifically designated for African American men, excluding African

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<sup>1</sup> Kam Williams, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (Baltimore: Afro-American Company of Baltimore City, 2014), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Granted Citizenship to all persons who are born or naturalized in the United States.

American women. White women were already excluded from maintaining the right to vote, making this an act of excluding any woman from voting, regardless of their race or color. The word “men” in the Constitution upheld the assertion that voting was a right granted to males only. At a birthday reception, women’s rights activist Susan B. Anthony described how the fight to abolish slavery created a path for her to gain the right to vote, saying:

I have received letters and telegrams from all over the world, but the one that has touched me most is a simple note which came from an old home of slavery...Nothing speaks so strongly of freedom as the fact that the descendants of those who went through great agony—which, thank Heaven, has passed away—have now full opportunities and can help celebrate my fifty years’ work for liberty...I am glad above all else that the time is coming when all women alike shall have the full rights of citizenship.<sup>3</sup>

Many women like Anthony saw how the Civil War abolished slavery, and they were influenced to fight to receive the same rights as a man, creating a new movement called the suffrage movement.

One of the most prominent movements of that time was the temperance movement in the early 1800s. It addressed the significant problem of excessive alcohol consumption. Many temperance advocates, especially from churches, argued that the issue was expanding, and that it was linked to elevated levels of poverty and physical abuse from husbands. Physical abuse towards women was common during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, partly as a result of the lack of legal repercussions against husbands unless their wife died or was severely injured. In some cases of repeated abuse, women responded by killing their husbands as a form of self-defense, but the court acknowledged otherwise, stating that they committed murder.<sup>4</sup> Men used beatings as a way to maintain power over their wives. At this time, education became an important factor for

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<sup>3</sup> Ida Husted Harper, *The Life & Work of SBA* (North Stratford: Ayer Company Publishers Inc, 1988), 1188.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn B. Ramsey, *The Exit Myth: Family Law, Gender Roles, and Changing Attitudes toward Female Victims of Domestic Violence* (Michigan: Michigan of Gender & Law, 2013), 5.

women. More women were pursuing education due to the growing demand for teachers and the need for women to fill the vacancies. Co-educational colleges became common in Western states where smaller populations existed with more financial viability. Many women who wanted a higher education came from farms and worked in the cities to pay for their education.<sup>5</sup> Through education, women began to understand these demanding issues that needed reform. Women formed groups such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Total Abstinence Society, which encouraged women to join the fight towards the abstinence of alcohol because they could gain more control of their homes and society.<sup>6</sup> Those women who joined the temperance movement quickly became motivated and used prohibition to demand their right to vote.

Women yearned for the right to vote, and they were not going to stop until they earned this right. Women were seen as people who assumed that they did not require the right to vote because husbands and fathers were believed to be sufficient representation. Delegates like Samuel Moore justified and argued that women had never received the right to vote because they had never before fought for or wanted that right.<sup>7</sup> In 1848, the suffrage movement was initiated in Seneca Falls, New York when female activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony rallied up at the Women's Rights Convention.<sup>8</sup> In this convention, both African American men and women were collaborating because initially they were both seeking systemic justice. Frederick Douglass, a supporter of the suffrage movement and former slave,

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<sup>5</sup> "The Education of Women: Mid 1800s," *The University of Richmond* (Suffolk, MA), 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Richard H. Chused, "The Temperance Movement's Impact on Adoption of Women's Suffrage," *Akron Law Review*, no. 3 (2019): 363.

<sup>7</sup> Sally Gregory McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Meeting that fought for the social, civil and religious rights of women.

came to the convention understanding that if women were bold and gained the right to vote, they could guarantee many other rights for others, such as for African Americans.<sup>9</sup> He said:

Observing woman's agency, devotion, and efficiency in pleading the cause of the slave, gratitude for this high service early moved me to give favourable attention to the subject of what is called "Woman's Rights," and caused me to be denominated a woman's-rights-man.<sup>10</sup>

If people believed women were uninterested in their right to vote, this convention would demonstrate that women were fighting for a cause, suffrage. At the Seneca Falls Convention, the attendees composed a Declaration of Sentiments, which resembled the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Sentiments declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."<sup>11</sup> Many suffragists signed this document to share their grievances and declare the repeated injustices women had endured. Women no longer wanted to suffer discrimination on the basis of their sex, leading to the advent of the suffrage movement.

On February 26, 1869, the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, granting African American men the right to vote. At the time, many African Americans supported the women's suffrage movement but once this amendment passed women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton went against many black allies such as Frederick Douglass who supported the suffrage movement for many years. Many white women were outraged because they believed that white educated women should have obtained the right to vote before what they viewed as uneducated African American men. They saw African Americans as unworthy of receiving the right to vote, which was indicated when Stanton said there was a "serious question whether we had better

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<sup>9</sup> Faye E. Dudden, *Fighting Chance: The Struggle over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: From 1817-1882* (London: Christian Age Office, 1881), 574.

<sup>11</sup> "Declaration of Sentiments," *National Park Service* (Seneca Falls, NY), 1848.

stand aside and see 'Sambo' walk into the kingdom [of civil rights] first.”<sup>12</sup> She used the word “sambo” as a racist term to degrade every African American from receiving the right to vote. The problem with some white women fighting for the right to vote was they tended to prioritize white women’s rights rather than the rights of all women.

Although there was some whose only focus was fighting for white women's rights, people like Lucy Stone believed that African American men receiving the right to vote was a gradual process for women to eventually obtain their freedom to vote. She was previously an agent for the Anti-Slavery Society before she had become a woman activist. She and her husband Henry Black Well created the American Woman Suffrage Association ensuring all women were included in gaining the right to vote. She saw that the right to vote for women would make them become “more useful.”<sup>13</sup> When women were going to receive suffrage, she believed in inclusivity, so all women, even those of color would be able to vote.

In February 1870, Lucy Stone gave a lecture in Hyde Park, where many women like well-known abolitionists and women’s rights advocates Sarah Grimke and her mother Angelina Weld attended. At their side was Theodore Weld, Angelina Weld’s husband, who made one of his old-time famous speeches at this caucus. He encouraged women to assert themselves and continue to persist to demand their political rights.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the opposition against the suffrage movement, on March 7, 1870, Sarah Grimke and Angelina Weld led women to assemble at a hotel near a polling station where they stood their ground. They were escorted to the polls where they deposited their votes and left.<sup>15</sup> Although to anti-suffragists this action was simply seen as a joke since their votes were not counted towards the election, women knew this

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<sup>12</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Dudden, *Fighting Chance*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine H. Birney, *The Grimké Sisters: Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Woman’s rights* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1885), 296.

<sup>15</sup> Birney, *The Grimké Sisters*, 297.

first step had left a strong impression on the public, demonstrating that they would eventually gain the right to vote.

To further demonstrate reform, Sarah Grimke went through New York to find people who would sign a petition for female suffrage. Grimke expressed how difficult this was when she said people were “often subjecting me to rudeness and coldness; but we are so frequently taunted with: ‘Women don't want the ballot,’ that we are trying to get one hundred thousand names of women who do want it, to reply to this taunt.”<sup>16</sup> This process was extensive, especially with some women who did not believe a vote was necessary because their husbands or fathers adequately represented their interests. Newspapers even became a contributing factor that encouraged women not to vote because they emphasized that the wealth that was provided by the men was already enough and “good for her.”<sup>17</sup> Additionally, many women did not feel any sort of inferiority towards a man and believed they were simply fine without suffrage.<sup>18</sup> To refute these remarks, suffragists used their voices to ensure women's suffrage was granted.

With many individuals who could not comprehend why women suddenly wanted the right to vote, women’s efforts to persuade the public were not easy. To help people understand, women began writing their reasons why they needed the right to vote. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, immigration began to rise, causing an increase in industrialization, westward expansion of cities, and a shift from a farming economy to an industrial one.<sup>19</sup> Due to the population increase, hygiene became an issue with risks of disease, unsanitary streets, hazardous evacuation systems, and the sale of rotten food. In 1910, The New York State Woman Suffrage Association released a paper explaining women oversaw the household yet lacked any ability to

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<sup>16</sup> Birney, *The Grimké Sisters*, 297.

<sup>17</sup> “Votes for Women,” *El Cosmopolita* (Imbabura, Ecuador), Jan. 2, 1915.

<sup>18</sup> “Woman's Protest against Woman Suffrage,” *Nineteenth Century Collections Online* (New Haven, CT), 1886.

<sup>19</sup> “19th-Century America in Art & Literature,” *National Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC), 2023.

choose how to confront and resolve household issues. They wrote “it is the men and not the women who are really responsible for the Unclear Houses Bad Plumbing Unwholesome Food Danger of Fire Risk of Tuberculosis and Other Diseases Immoral Influences of the Street.”<sup>20</sup> Hygiene was an issue but was not addressed because women were not allowed to vote. The document argued that women needed a say to address these public issues rather than having no one representing them. If men were not going to do the jobs they worked and understand the circumstances they saw in the household, then women needed the right to vote to elect government officials that would better address them.<sup>21</sup> Women emphasized that with the right to vote, they would become better housewives. Acknowledging women would become better housewives played into the logic of men. If men felt that they would get the benefit of receiving better wives, they would be willing to give women the chance to vote. The hygiene movement became one of the suffragettes’ reasons why Congress should grant women the right to vote.

There were issues women saw that needed to be resolved but there was opposition by anti-suffragists towards women for their fight to vote. Alice Chittenden believed that giving women the right to vote would only be a disadvantage, giving women less power in society. In her eyes women were already gaining power by obtaining government positions by being appointed on the local school board and various state boards. She even said that state boards were finally allowing women to investigate the wages of women to help address the wage gender gap. Chittenden did not believe that being able to vote was going to be the solution to hygiene and would risk the positions they already obtained. Instead, she saw that women leaders in office would be able to change these regulations. Anti-suffragists believed in social reform but

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<sup>20</sup> “Women in the Home,” *National American Woman Suffrage Association* (New York, NY), 1910.

<sup>21</sup> “Women in the Home,” *National American Woman Suffrage Association*.



understood that it could be accomplished by stepping away from pursuing the right to vote.

Chittenden explained:

As non-partisan citizens, untrammelled by party affiliations or obligations, they can go before any legislative committee or municipal organization and ask for the passage of any measure, and their request will be listened to on the merits of the case, and not because they have any political axe to grind or because they voted with this or that party at the last election.<sup>22</sup>

Being unrelated to any political organization group would allow women to not only organize themselves to maintain political action but also accomplish more without the need to vote. Anti-suffragists may have had different perspectives on the suffrage movement, but one thing was clear, both groups wanted to address the issues of the public and fix them with power.

To gain the right to vote women made many sacrifices including being abused or even jailed by opponents. If they were seen protesting, guards would arrest them for “obstructing traffic.” On March 4, 1917, during the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson, around a thousand women stood in front of the White House as a petition for suffrage. Just like their abolitionist predecessors, women questioned why the granting of rights took so long, asking the same question repeatedly: “How long must women wait for liberty?”<sup>23</sup>

In the early 1900s, some states began to adopt many suffrage acts while other states were still challenged by all-male voting laws. In 1916, all suffrage organizations had officially organized themselves with the goal to initiate an Amendment that would grant women the right to vote. Once New York officially became a state that adopted the Women Suffrage Acts in 1917, Woodrow Wilson started to shift his support toward the ratification of the Nineteenth

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<sup>22</sup> Alice H. Chittenden, *Ballot Not a Panacea for Existing Evil* (New York: Historical Society Library, 1913), 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Women's Suffrage Protests and National Woman's Party Expenditure and Promotional Materials,” *National Woman's Party* (Washington, DC), 1917.

Amendment.<sup>24</sup> This political shift allowed the Nineteenth Amendment to be passed June 4, 1919, and ratified August 18, 1920, by Congress granting the right to vote with no discrimination based on sex. This Amendment led to the end of the suffrage movement with women finally being granted the right to be seen and heard.

Looking back to the suffrage movement, although women received the right to vote in 1920, African American women were excluded from this ratification. Prominent white figures such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott are remembered today as those advocates who became the leaders towards the ratification of the 19th Amendment. This ratification was “only partially correct, as Black women’s votes were only fully federally protected with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, 45 years after the ratification of the 19th Amendment.”<sup>25</sup> Black women were segregated from the suffrage movement and had their own fight for justice and outlaw discrimination.

Many black women had to step up during this time to not only fight for their vote but to also abolish racial segregation. Mother Sojourner Truth was one of the earliest and most influential black leaders of the suffrage movement who gave a speech at the Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio in 1851. She pressed upon the issue of why they should also be given equal rights, as black women were as equal to men.<sup>26</sup> Although the 19th Amendment passed saying regardless of sex any citizen would be granted the right to vote, African American women had a longer process to fight to finally use their voting privileges. This led to the start of the civil rights movement.

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<sup>24</sup> “19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote,” *National Archives and Records Administration* (Washington, DC), 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Shavonne R. Shorter, *Thank You, Foremothers; Thank You, Sisters: A Celebration of Black Women’s Work in the Suffrage Movement and Beyond* (Pennsylvania: Bloomsburg University, 2021), 327.

<sup>26</sup> Shorter, *Thank You, Foremothers*, 327.

Jim Crow laws discriminated against black women and black men. These laws were local and state laws that included segregation in schools, marriage, jobs, and of course exclusion from the right to vote. Woodrow Wilson may have ratified the 19th Amendment, but this did not mean he approved of the equality of race. He felt “anxiety” about how the public would react to white and black people working together in office so he began to discourage black people from being hired and even degraded them of their positions.<sup>27</sup> Not only were jobs lost but laws were enacted toward African Americans to neglect their right to vote with poll taxes, literacy tests, and forms of intimidation such as violence from hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan to keep them away from the polls. The right to vote that they finally had “received” with the 19th Amendment was unobtained because of the color of their skin. They had to fight once again not only for the right to vote but also to be treated equally as others.

Through this period many different communities of women came together to discuss the issue of racism. The beauticians<sup>28</sup> at Highlander Folk School in 1961 played a key role in the civil rights movement. These women were trained on civil disobedience, obtaining leadership skills, registering to vote, and facing challenges. Regardless of the punishments including arrest, jail sentences, fines, violence, and even death that would come from the disobedience of Jim Crow laws, these women were not afraid to challenge white power because of the support they received from their African American community.<sup>29</sup> Many early supporters and leaders of the suffrage and civil rights movement unfortunately did not live to witness the result. All the civil right activists that never stopped issued equality with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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<sup>27</sup> Cathleen D. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 122.

<sup>28</sup> Referring to independent women business owners of beauty shops who were persuaded by civil rights incentives.

<sup>29</sup> Nico Slate, *Beauty and Power: Beauticians, the Highlander Folk School, and Women’s Professional Networks in the Civil Rights Movement* (England: Oxford University Press, 2022), 753-754.

Acknowledging black women's advocacy through the 19th to 20th century is crucial to the society we live in today. African American women fought for rights, specifically racial equality. They faced Jim Crow laws, poll taxes, literacy tests, and physical violence, yet overcame and brought justice for black women and people of color in the United States. Like Kamila Harris said in her 2020 speech:

I want to speak directly to the Black women in our country. Thank you. You are too often overlooked, and yet are asked time and again to step up and be the backbone of our democracy. We could not have done this without you.<sup>30</sup>

From being individuals who could not vote, they became strong African Americans who brought the first elected African American Vice President Kamila Harria to the United States fifty-seven years later in 2021. The unity they had as a group never stopped because they knew they needed to obtain the same rights as U.S. citizens.

As we look back from the past, the country has grown but there is still substantially more that the country needs to change. Issues that still arise are women's representation in the judiciary, equal gender pay, reproductive rights, sexism, and much more. Furthermore, Saint John's Law Review speaks on the statistics of female representation in Congress and today's gender gap with regard to salary:

Our current Congress is the most diverse in our history and yet less than 25% of our congressional representatives are women, less than 5% are Black women, and less than 3% are Latina or Hispanic women. Despite federal legislation outlawing discriminatory pay practices, women still earn less than men for doing the same work. For every dollar a white man earns, a white woman earns 79 cents, a Black woman earns 62 cents, and a Latina or Hispanic woman earns just 54 cents.<sup>31</sup>

The United States has progressed, which can be seen through statistical evidence, but this does not necessarily mean there is no room for change. Much more progress is needed for women to

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<sup>30</sup> Shorter, *Thank You, Foremothers*, 329.

<sup>31</sup> Samantha Gagnon, "Symposium Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment Introduction," *St. John's Law Review*, no. 4 (2020): 896, accessed November 23, 2023. <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview/vol94/iss4/3/>.

obtain a balance with men in society. Women in the past suffered from discrimination, which has led to some unfortunate outcomes that exist today. But with time and reform, the United States has made significant progress from the past.

Women gained the right to vote through a long difficult journey of advocacy. Through literature, protests, speeches, marches, petitions, convened meetings, and civil disobedience, women achieved suffrage. Although there was a long way to go, the progression that women made toward the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment has continued to the present day. Although sexism persists, many women in the United States still take the initiative to advocate against unfair injustices. The past of the United States brought many downpours, but women of today are still willing to stand up to make a difference. By looking back at these past leaders, present generations understand that using their voices and acknowledging injustices can create impactful changes for future generations of women.

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