

Reconstructing the Early Feminist Movement

By Maggie Marks

A woman stands outside her home, her hands covered in dirt after a morning spent planting flowers in the family garden. Her eyes wander toward her husband, who is engaging in a discussion of politics with a group of neighbors, their voices rising over one another as they debate the nation's emerging constitution. She knows her own insights could be sharp. After all, she has spent years managing a household and contributing to her family's survival, experiences that have honed her intellect. Despite her depth of knowledge, she remains silent, excluded from the vote, let alone discussion that will shape *all* of their futures. Though the country recently won its independence, her own freedom remains constrained by social customs and law. In post-Revolutionary War America, the shadow of liberty's triumph, this woman's existence is defined by limitations: she cannot own property under her own name as a married woman, cannot vote, and her legal identity is bound to her husband's. She can hear her daughter playing in the trees nearby, unaware that the dreams she holds for herself will likely be tempered by the same constraints her mother faces. There is a sense of irony hanging low in the air: the irony of freedom for some and subjugation for others after a war on the principles of liberty for all.

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Over the next 150 years, women like her will fight in a nation-wide feminist movement for the same inalienable rights granted to white men. The movement will be unforgettable—sweeping across the country while demanding that change be made. It will not be until 1920 that women are granted the right to vote, and even in 2024, women are not guaranteed full autonomy of their bodies. The feminist movement is everlasting and ever-growing, but when we look back in its earliest stages, who gets the credit of starting it? Who is *really* represented in this movement? And most importantly, who *actually* benefited from it?

The most well-known “start” of the feminist movement was in post-Revolutionary War America in the mid-1800’s, as the idea of equality that fueled the war carried over limited or even nonexistent change for women. Women had virtually no legal identity and were unable to sign contracts, own property, access education, or easily obtain divorces; these were liberties that only extended to white men (Kerber 116). These misalignments with the fundamentals of the country led to a two-day convention in Seneca Falls, New York, where 300 women and men gathered to discuss Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “Declaration of Sentiments” (1848). At the convention on July 19th and 20th of 1848, Stanton read her drafted declaration, which argued that women in the United States were under a constant state of oppression by the government and patriarchal society of which they were a part. It began by affirming the equality of all men and women through their “inalienable rights” to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and then goes on to address 16 affronts to women’s freedom and dignity at the hands of men. These include the lack of women’s participation and representation in the government, lack of property rights in marriage, inequality in divorce law, and

inequality in education and employment opportunities. The document cohesively ends by demanding that women be seen as full, equal citizens of the United States and that women be granted all equal rights and privileges that were granted to men upon the institution of the Declaration of Independence.

This document served to echo consciously the language of the Declaration of Independence and to acknowledge and parallel the struggles of the Founding Fathers with those of the women's movement. The format of Stanton's argument is what makes it so persuasive and effective. The Declaration of Sentiments borrows heavily from the United States Declaration of Independence, and it changes words where appropriate to highlight this document's specific concerns for women's rights. This format allows for the comparison of women's struggle for increased rights to the struggle the American revolutionaries faced against the British empire. For example, the document states that "Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government..." (Stanton par. 2). Similar to the manner in which revolutionaries rose up against the tyrannical power of the British, this section argues that it is the right of women to rise up against the oppressive, male-run government of the United States and insist on change. Connecting the requests of women to arguably the most politically prominent statement made by the United States implies the women's demands were no more radical than the Revolution had been and that they were an implicit fulfillment of the commitments already made (Kerber 115).

While the Declaration of Sentiments has been consistently praised for its evaluation of gender inequality following the revolution, it also concealed the different living experiences of

women across different races and classes. There were black women advocates of the women's rights movement, but no evidence shows that they were invited to Seneca Falls. Of the 300 people who attended, only one was black, which makes it clear that the intended audience of the convention and document were primarily white elites. As an idea, the Declaration of Sentiments was significant in opening a space for the discussion and articulation of the rights women deserved. Nonetheless, these discussions were not limited to the one convention, which had a primary focus on wealthy white women. Although the Declaration of Sentiments boldly asserted the need for women's rights and equality, it primarily reflected the experiences and priorities of white women, largely excluding black individuals from its vision. This omission underscores the limitations of early feminist advocacy and the supposed "start" of the women's rights movement, which failed to address the intersecting injustices of race and gender, perpetuating racial divides within the broader struggle of liberty for all.

Years after the Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony continued to lead the women's rights movement into the Reconstruction era. However, racial tensions in post-Civil War America negatively shaped their activism, highlighting the racial exclusions that lay in the early women's movement. At this time, Stanton and Anthony advocated for women's suffrage through the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), which had a goal of achieving voting rights across racial and gendered lines. That being said, when the Fifteenth Amendment prioritized black male suffrage over universal suffrage, Stanton and Anthony reacted with staunch opposition, arguing that gender should not be overlooked in favor of race (Bickell 686). Their resistance to a

paramount change in accessible liberty revealed underlying elitist and even nativist biases that would eventually influence the next step of their suffrage strategy: the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Established in 1869, the NWSA's mission was to advocate for a federal amendment on women's suffrage. Their advocacy, nevertheless, continued to prioritize the needs of white women, often silencing the voices and rights of black women. This divergence reflected fractures that were evident since the Declaration of Sentiments back in 1848, underscoring the ways in which the movement's racial limitations ultimately perpetuated social divides and complicated the path to true universal suffrage.

It is in fact possible that the tensions surrounding which oppressed group would gain suffrage first slowed the progress of *both* movements, and women may have won suffrage years earlier had they not fought competitively against the progress of black suffrage. After Anthony and Stanton created the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which only accepted women as members and rejected the Fifteenth Amendment, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell created the rival American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), which accepted the Fifteenth Amendment and allowed both male and female members. These two organizations competed for members, attention, and resources at a crucial time when consolidation efforts would have been more productive for both women and black individuals (Parker 346-347).

At the same time of Stanton and Anthony working to solely push the feminist movement forward, the abolitionist movement was actually enhancing the development of women's suffrage. In 1837, both black and white women met at the National Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in New York City. This biracial meeting "challenged prejudices

about sex and race as black and white women asserted their right to be equal participants in the public, political movement to end slavery” (Parker 343). The Grimké sisters and other abolitionists defended women’s rights to participate in reform movements, and their demands for the right to a public role in the abolition movement would eventually lead to women’s overall assertions of their deserved rights.

While the abolitionist movement advanced the fight for women’s suffrage through biracial collaboration and advocacy, black women’s unique activism “successfully articulated alternative discourses of womanhood” (Bickell 687) before and during the Seneca Falls convention, making up for the lack of advocacy for the inalienable rights for *all* Americans. Black women’s activism from the 1830’s onward illustrated that experiences of gender and race could not be separated. Figures like black feminist lecturer Maria Stewart were vocal about the dual oppressions of race and gender, broadening the scope of the fight for equality. Her speeches, delivered well before the Seneca Falls convention, highlighted the urgency of addressing both racial and gender injustices, laying a foundation for intersectional thinking in feminist activism. Stewart’s influence extended to Sojourner Truth, another significant black feminist figure, who further denounced limiting the focus of the movement on gender alone. Stanton and Anthony frequently used slavery as a metaphor for women’s oppression. Truth objected to this analogy, emphasizing that her lived experience of enslavement was no mere metaphor. Her “multi-axis frameworks” compared to Stanton and Anthony’s single-axis lens of gender highlighted the importance of including race within feminist discourse (Bickell 688).

At the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth delivered her famous “Ain’t I a Woman?”

speech, which added a new layer to the feminist discourse by challenging existing assumptions about gender, race, and strength. At the time, most suffragists framed women's oppression in terms of fragility and being confined to the domestic sphere. Truth, in turn, rejected these notions through anecdotes of her own lived experiences. She dismissed equating womanhood with weakness, pointing out the physical labor and endurance required of her as a formerly enslaved woman (Truth par. 2). In doing this, she redefined womanhood to include those outside the white, middle/upper-class ideal often centered in early feminist narratives. It is even evident in the title of the speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," as this rhetorical question works to reject the exclusive standards of what it means to be a woman and forces the listeners to confront the racial bias which taints their activism. In its entirety, Truth's speech did more than just call for gender equality; it demanded an intersectional (or "multi-axis") understanding of what oppression means, ultimately setting the stage for a more inclusive feminist movement.

Furthermore, Truth made a powerful critique of the ways in which power and privilege dictated the allocation of rights, specifically those between white and black women. She revealed how both class and race intersected with gender to shape her own experiences, highlighting times when she was excluded from the societal protections and social courtesies extended to white upper-class women. She contrasts her lack of access to somewhat basic dignities, such as being helped over mud puddles or into carriages and being treated with respect, with the privileges that white women were able to experience (Truth par. 2). In doing this, Truth directly exposes the hypocrisy of a movement that championed *equality* for women

but did not fully confront the *inequities* experienced by all women.

In examining more racial limitations of Stanton and Anthony's movement, it is crucial to consider the magnitude of the contributions of black women given the greater risks they endured in their fight for gender and racial equality. Martha S. Jones's *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* discusses the ways in which black women challenged intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism, emphasizing the multitude of risks that "became part of the bargain" (Cohn-Postar 139). Many black women, including Jarena Lee, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Mary Church Terrell fought for change in a society that unfortunately sought to marginalize them. The pressures against them, such as the newly-enforced racial segregation through Jim Crow laws, failed to affect their persistence, and they ultimately served as large contributors in shaping the abolitionist, suffragist, and civil rights movements. Though their work is often omitted and overlooked from traditional feminist narratives, they played a crucial role in advancing equality in a world that was actively working against their identities in more than one way. With a greater understanding of these women's experiences in the fight for universal liberty, one can visualize how the strength of black women's activism pushed the boundaries of what equality would eventually mean.

Black women's contributions extended beyond the fight for political representation. In battles for social and religious equality, they often used the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church as an arena for critical change. One example of their successful efforts is that they gained ordination in the AME Church in the late 1800's, asserting their right to spiritual leadership in a space historically dominated by men. This

parallels their broader fight for liberation in public spaces, such as resisting segregation on public transportation (Cohn-Postar 140). In addition, black women employed a certain language of “equality, liberation, and freedom from tyranny” (Cohn-Postar 140), which tied their struggles to universal ideals of justice while also articulating the lived experiences of oppression. This rhetoric was consistent across different movements in which black women engaged, such as abolitionism, suffrage, and civil rights. All of these movements tie to inherent justice, similar to that foundational to the American Revolution. By connecting their specific oppressions to broad ideas of liberation, they shaped the language of the rest of the suffrage movement and the civil rights campaign in the 20th century.

The everlasting legacy of the early women’s rights movement reveals remarkable achievements and lasting flaws shaped by the single-axis approach of its most well-known leaders. While Stanton and Anthony played crucial roles in the advancement of women’s suffrage, they limited their focus to gender, often excluding race and class, and as a result, this influences how the movement is remembered today. Their narrow lens unfortunately contributed to a memory of feminism that centers around the experiences of white women and marginalizes the contributions of other diverse voices who were persistent in the fight for equality. Acknowledging the limitations of Stanton and Anthony does not diminish their achievements; rather, it calls attention to the need for a more holistic view of feminism that reflects the diversity of all women. Intersectionality remains critical in discussions of equality, as modern feminism must account for the intersecting oppressions of different parts of one’s identity. The imagery of the post-Revolutionary War woman is representative of both past inequities and ongoing struggles, and she urges us to

pursue a vision of equality that recognizes and advocates for all experiences. While it is surely still a work-in-progress, using inclusive approaches pushes the movement closer and closer to achieving the unfulfilled promise of universal justice and equality.

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