

THE SPLIT IN THE 19TH CENTURY
WOMAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

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Beginning in the 1860s, the woman suffrage movement, though solidly united by a common goal, was fundamentally split on the means of attaining it. Particularly during the critical Reconstruction years of 1866-1870, disagreements divided leading suffragists into two distinct factions: the more radical, anti-Republican one led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony; and its opposition led by Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell. The principal issue that divided them was the relationship of the movement to the parallel struggle for black suffrage, with which it had been intertwined for more than a quarter century.

Though for years abolitionism had been intensifying women's feelings of their own grievances, the incident that sparked the first serious consideration of forming an organization to demand their legal rights occurred at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. Eight delegates from the United States were refused seating simply because they were women. Upset by the flagrant sexism, Lucretia Mott, one of the eight women delegates, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who attended as the wife of a delegate, resolved to hold a convention for women's rights. As

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Stanton remarked,

It was really pitiful to hear narrow minded bigots pretending to be teachers and leaders of men so cruelly remanding their own mothers with the rest of womankind to absolute subjection to the ordinary, masculine type of humanity. As the convention adjourned, the remark was heard on all sides, 'It is about time some demand was made for new liberties for women.'¹

Thus the women's rights movement was conceived. Another eight years passed before the meeting Stanton and Mott had discussed actually took place, but, inspired by the Married Woman's Property Act in New York, in 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention "set the ball in motion."²

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the women's movement was essentially put on hold to make room for more pressing wartime issues. It did not regain its momentum until Reconstruction when women realized the value of the vote, and "woman suffrage" replaced "women's rights."³

It was not long before black suffragists and woman suffragists realized they had been left in the same position and determined to unite behind a campaign for universal suffrage. In 1866, Lucy Stone, another leader of the movement, explained:

When the war came to an end...and those who had been our most professed friends forgot us, then we resolved to make common cause with the colored class—the only other disenfranchised class—and strike for equal rights for all.⁴

Aided now by Susan B. Anthony, who had joined the fight about 1850, Stanton attempted to convince abolitionists and Radical Republicans that the equal rights logic they used for blacks applied to universal suffrage as well. Stanton asked,

Would it not be wiser, when the constitutional door is open, [to] avail ourselves [women] of the strong arm and blue uniform of the black soldier to walk in by his side?⁵

At an 1866 anti-slavery meeting in Boston, Stone and Anthony proposed a merger of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the women's rights movement. Wendell Phillips, an officer of the society, was able to delay adoption of the request briefly by

arguing that “success was best obtained by doing one thing at a time”⁶ and that this was “the negro’s hour.”⁷ Nonetheless, at the first postwar women’s rights convention, in May of that year, the American Equal Rights Association, the AERA, was formed to demand universal suffrage.

Supported by the combined force of blacks and women, the AERA faced its first major challenge when, in March 1867, the Kansas legislature put two popular referenda on the November election ballot, one for black suffrage, the other for woman suffrage. The AERA viewed the referenda as an opportunity to prove to the Republicans that there was indeed popular support for woman suffrage, and that woman suffrage and black suffrage could be united successfully. They immediately concentrated all their efforts on the new Kansas campaign. Stone, Blackwell, Stanton, and Anthony each spent many months touring Kansas and speaking out for the referenda.

The reaction of the Republican party in Kansas, however, was a hostile anti-feminist countercampaign against universal suffrage. The party used its influence on the largely Republican state to impede the progress of the women’s movement by endorsing only black suffrage. Newspapers like *The Independent*, edited by Theodore Tilton, and *The Standard* and the *New York Tribune*, edited by Horace Greeley, also damaged the cause by delaying endorsement of the women’s referendum until September and October when it was too late. The Republicans justified their abandonment of the cause by claiming that woman suffrage was only succeeding in hurting the movement for black suffrage. As Horace Greeley, who was considered a friend of the women’s rights movement, wrote

However defensible in theory, we are satisfied that public sentiment does not demand and would not sustain an innovation [woman suffrage] so revolutionary and sweeping, so openly at war with a distribution of duties and functions between the sexes as venerable and pervading as government itself, and involving transformation so radical in social and domestic life.⁸

The Republican reaction left women in a difficult position. They were forced to choose between continuing their fight alone, without the aid of abolitionists and Republicans, and accepting working for black suffrage with the hope that Republicans would be true to their promise of focusing on women once blacks were enfranchised. Leaders of the women's movement disagreed on a new course of action, and as a result they split. Led by Stone and Blackwell, one faction remained with the Republicans, feeling that affiliation with the more powerful political party would benefit women's rights. The other faction, led by Stanton and Anthony, refused to yield, shifting their support to the Democrats and splitting away from the abolitionists completely.

Well into the Kansas campaign, an openly racist Democrat, George Francis Train, offered to speak for woman suffrage. After deliberating for several weeks, Anthony accepted his offer. Her willingness to associate the AERA with a man who slandered freedmen and used women's rights as a weapon against black enfranchisement, was shocking to her former allies. Still she and Stanton defended him, saying "...you do not shut out all in favor of woman suffrage, why should we not accept all in favor of woman suffrage to our platform and association, even though they be rabid pro-slavery Democrats?"⁹ Stanton and Anthony went further, not only associating with racists, but, by the end, they began preaching black inferiority themselves. In *The Revolution*, the paper she started with Stanton and Train, Anthony wrote:

While the dominant party have with one hand lifted up TWO MILLION BLACK MEN and crowned them with the honor and dignity of citizenship, with the other they have dethroned FIFTEEN MILLION WHITE WOMEN—their own mothers and sisters, their own wives and daughters—and cast them under the heel of the lowest orders of manhood.¹⁰

From the beginning of the Kansas campaign, where they strongly advocated universal suffrage, to the end, when, motivated by anger, desperation, and resentment, Stanton and Anthony encouraged Train's racism, a tremendous change had taken place in their attitudes. The other obvious consequence of the Kansas campaign was the split it created in the leadership of the woman

suffrage movement. In the end, neither referendum succeeded. As Stanton remarked, "I believe both propositions would have carried but with a narrow policy of playing one against the other, both were defeated."¹¹ While Stone's followers blamed the Kansas loss and split in the movement on Stanton's and Anthony's racism, her opponents claimed they were caused by "...the stolid incapacity of all men to understand that woman feels the invidious distinction of sex exactly as the black man does that of color."¹²

To combat the force of *The Revolution*, the pro-Republican group formed the New England Woman Suffrage Association (NEWSA) in November 1868. Men played a dominant role at the founding convention in order to encourage Republican participation. Frederick Douglass, for example, attended the convention and represented many of the participants when he declared that "...the cause of the negro was more pressing than that of woman suffrage."¹³ Francis Bird, a leading Republican politician and member, agreed, saying, "Negro suffrage, being a paramount question, would have to be settled before woman suffrage received the attention it deserved."¹⁴ The women members, politically dependent on the Republicans and abolitionists, were forced to submit to these convictions. However, some of them, including Lucy Stone, believed that black suffrage was the priority for mostly political reasons, not because women's rights were any less important.

The breach in the woman suffrage movement expanded beyond repair during the debate over the 15th Amendment, the Republican's last Reconstruction program. The amendment was ultimately passed in 1868 with a proclamation that:

The rights of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.¹⁵

The absence of the word "sex," however, created a fierce argument against the amendment in the year before its passage. The debate was a continuation of the fight over the Kansas campaign, except that in this instance, the prize was much more valuable and the contest more intense.

The NEWSA endorsed the amendment as the first step to universal enfranchisement, leaving one less group without the vote. "...New England suffragism...considered it a virtue that its commitment to absolute justice superseded the vagaries of history and the details of women's condition."¹⁶ Also, there remained many male abolitionists who believed simply that blacks deserved the vote before women. As Frederick Douglass emotionally declared during an 1869 AERA meeting:

When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains are dashed upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.¹⁷

For many, once they realized that either, but not both, the black men or the women could vote, the issue came down to a judgment on which was the more oppressed class. In Gerrit Smith's opinion, shared by many NEWSA members, "the removal of the political disabilities of race is my first desire, of sex, my second."¹⁸ The support was not limited to men, however, as Frances Dana Gage wrote, "Could I with breath defeat the Fifteenth Amendment I would not do it. Keeping [the colored man] out, suffering as now, would not let me in all the sooner, then in God's name why stand in the way?"¹⁹

On the other hand, there was a solid argument against the 15th Amendment on the grounds that it ignored the rights of women. Stanton and Anthony repudiated the amendment because they interpreted it as a constitutional acknowledgement of the social and political superiority of men. Their simple reasoning was that "Every argument for the negro is an argument for woman and no logician can escape it."²⁰ The intensity of the fight increased steadily as Stanton and Anthony realized that the 15th Amendment was an opportunity for woman suffrage that was not likely to come again in that generation. As Stanton wrote in retrospect, "The few who had the prescience to see the long years

of apathy that always follow a great conflict, strained every nerve to settle the broad question of suffrage on its true basis while the people were still awake to its importance."²¹ Stanton went so far as to insinuate more than once that women were more worthy of the vote than poor, uneducated black men and immigrants. She said this realizing that most of her potential supporters were white, middle-class women who were often afraid of black men. Still, through these remarks, Stanton alienated a lot of pro-black activists.

One class, as yet not mentioned in this discussion, offers an interesting perspective on the question of black vs. woman suffrage. That group is black women. Faced with a more obvious dilemma than white women, they were forced to decide whether their primary allegiance would be to their race or their sex. Here, again, there was no real consensus. Though the majority of black women leaders followed Stanton and Anthony, there were arguments and supporters on both sides of the issue. Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, two of the leading black women of the time, agreed in their support of the rights of blacks and women, but disagreed on the 15th Amendment.

Harper believed that "The white women all go for sex, letting race occupy a minor position." But to her, "Being black means that every white, including every white working-class woman, can discriminate against you."²² Harper saw white racism as a more formidable obstacle than male sexism.

Led by Truth, many others opposed Harper's view. In a speech at the 1867 AERA meeting, Truth spoke out:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again.²³

Fanny Jackson Coppin took a similar stance. "During my entire life," she said, "I have suffered from two disadvantages. First, that I am a woman, second that I am a Negro."²⁴ Decades later, in a

biography of Sojourner Truth, Victoria Ortiz reminded supporters of the 15th Amendment of the plight of black women. She wrote:

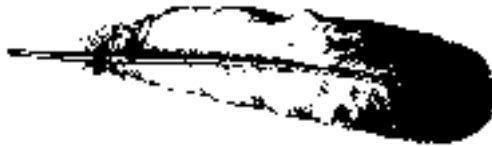
Those who withdrew from the fight for woman suffrage evidently did not realize that one-half of the black population whose political rights they championed would, when the battle for black male suffrage was won, continue to live in a position of powerlessness and dependence.²⁵

The 15th Amendment passed in 1868, granting black men, but not women, the right to vote. When the debate had subsided, Stanton and Anthony attempted to reunite the AERA behind a 16th Amendment for woman suffrage. Their effort was unsuccessful, however, because Douglass and others could not forgive the racism they had advocated in past years. Since the group could not resolve the question of suffrage priority, it was obviously not an appropriate vehicle for the woman suffrage movement. Two days after the May 1869 AERA meeting, Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), to fight for the right to vote on the national level. With Stanton as president, they declared their commitment to a 16th Amendment for woman suffrage and vowed to be the first movement defined and controlled by women. Six months later, the NEWSA responded by forming their own national organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), to continue the struggle for power. The NWSA became an organization that dealt with the social, economic, and political aspects of the movement. The AWSA, however, remained focused on woman suffrage and reliant on Republicans and abolitionists.

As Stanton had predicted, the years following the battle over the 15th Amendment were relatively uneventful regarding woman suffrage. In 1890, the NWSA and AWSA finally reunited as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The cause of woman suffrage was revived during the Progressive Era until in 1920, the 19th Amendment, enfranchising women in America, was finally ratified.

As is usually the case in extended, deeply held disagreements, no one person or group was the cause of the split in the woman suffrage movement. On both sides, a stubborn eagerness to enfranchise women hindered the effort to do so. Abolitionists and Republicans refused to unite equally with woman suffragists. Stanton and Anthony, blinded for a while by their desperation to succeed, turned to racism, pitting blacks and women against each other at a time when each needed the other's support most. The one thing that remains clear is that, while in some ways it helped women discover their own power, the division of forces weakened the overall strength of the movement. As a result of the disagreements within the woman suffrage movement, the 1860s turned out to be a missed opportunity for woman suffragists, just as Stanton had predicted. After the passage of the 15th Amendment, they were forced to wait another 50 years for the fulfillment of their dream.

Our liberal men counseled us to silence during the war, and we were silent on our own wrongs; they counseled us again to silence in Kansas and New York, lest we should defeat 'negro suffrage,' and threatened if we were not, we might fight the battle alone. But standing alone we learned our power; we repudiated man's counsel forevermore; and solemnly vowed that there should never be another season of silence until woman had the same rights everywhere in this green earth, as man.²⁶ (Stanton & Anthony)



¹ Pleck, Elizabeth H., and Rothman, Ellen K., The Audio-course Legacies: A History of Women and the Family in America, 1607-1870 (Washington, D.C.: The Annenberg /cpb Project, 1987) Program # 18

² Stanton, Ibid., Program # 18

³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Correspondence, Writings, Speeches, ed. by Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) p. 88

⁴ Ellen Carol DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848-1869 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978) p. 62

⁵ DuBois, p. 63 ⁶ DuBois, p. 63

⁷ DuBois, p. 62 ⁸ DuBois, pp. 87-8

⁹ DuBois, p. 264

¹⁰ We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century, ed. by Dorothy Sterling (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984) p. 66

¹¹ DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, p. 96

¹² DuBois, p. 102

¹³ DuBois, p. 167

¹⁴ DuBois, p. 169

¹⁵ The Random House Encyclopedia, ed. by James Mitchell (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983) p. 2083

¹⁶ DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, p. 176

¹⁷ Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984) p. 67

¹⁸ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Correspondence, Writings, Speeches, ed. by Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) p. 119

¹⁹ DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, pp. 173-4

²⁰ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Correspondence, Writings, Speeches, ed. by Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) p. 122

²¹ DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, p. 172

²² Giddings, p. 68

²³ Sterling, ed. pp. 411-412

²⁴ Sterling, ed. p. 411

²⁵ Victoria Ortiz, Sojourner Truth, A Self-Made Woman (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1974) p. 130

²⁶ DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, p. 14