

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 4: Should Women Have Equal Treatment under the Law?

The Issue

The formal movement for women's rights began at a convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. The women who met there wrote a women's declaration of independence which, among other things, criticized the United States for being a male-dominated society and for assigning inferior roles to women. Many Americans—both men and women—rejected the ideas of these early feminists, sparking a long-running debate over what roles women should play in American society.

Background

Women played an important role in colonial America. With labor in short supply, women worked alongside men on farms and in craft shops to produce life's necessities. Although they did not enjoy the political rights of men, many women held responsible positions in commerce, medicine, agriculture, and the trades.

Economic and social factors in the early nineteenth century produced a new system of factories and commerce, a system that altered the role of women in American society. As industrial production flourished, the importance of women in home and craft businesses declined. Poor women were recruited to work as "mill girls" in the factories of New England. They were generally paid one third of men's wages to manufacture textiles, goods they had formerly helped to produce at home.

Meanwhile, society redefined the role of more affluent women. While their husbands were active in the world of business and politics, these women's proper role was thought to be at home, rearing children and managing the household. According to what some have called the "cult of true womanhood," these women were believed to be the moral guardians of family and home.

Denied access to college and the professions, some women rebelled against what they felt to be the narrow confines of the home. Many of these

women became active in the religious revivals and reform movements of the era, including temperance, educational reform, the abolition of slavery, and eventually, women's rights.

The Readings

The following debate begins with a women's declaration of independence. Written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1848, the "Declaration of Sentiments" lists the grievances of the delegates who attended the Seneca Falls Convention. Stanton helped to organize the convention after male abolitionists had denied her a seat as a delegate to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, England.

In a speech delivered in the United States Senate in 1867, Senator George Williams (Oregon) responded to feminist criticism directed against male legislatures. Founded in 1830, *Godey's Lady's Book* was the first American magazine for women. It offered advice to the wealthy on fashion, manners, and the efficient management of the household and reflected mainstream nineteenth-century values on the proper place of women.

Update

Many of the grievances raised by the Seneca Falls Convention have been resolved. Women have exercised the right to vote, for example, since the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920. Yet the rise of the Women's Movement in the late 1960s showed that many women continued to be concerned about their rights. Today the debate over women's rights focuses on such issues as discrimination in hiring, equal pay, access to day-care programs, sexual harassment, abortion, and the need for an equal rights amendment. Despite the profound changes of the last century, there is still strong disagreement about the role women should play in American society.

Should Women Have Equal Treatment under the Law?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, abolitionist and feminist, wrote this "Declaration of Sentiments" at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. 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, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. . . .

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men, both natives and foreigners. . . .

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her

master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes and, in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her. . . .

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her

self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life. . . .

. . . we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the state and national legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of conventions embracing every part of the country.

Source: Elizabeth C. Stanton et al., eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. I, New York, 1881, pp. 70–73.

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton

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George Williams, *Senator from Oregon*, delivered this speech to the United States Senate in 1867.

Sir, it has been said that "the hand that rocked the cradle ruled the world," and there is truth as well as beauty in that expression. Women in this country by their elevated social position, can exercise more influence upon public affairs, than they could coerce by the use of the ballot. When God married our first parents in the garden according to that ordinance they were made "bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh;" and the whole theory of government and society proceeds upon the assumption that their interests are one, that their relations are so intimate and tender that whatever is for the benefit of the one is for the benefit of the other . . . The woman who undertakes to put her sex in the adversary position to man, who undertakes by the use of some independent political power to contend and fight against man, displays a spirit which would, if able, convert all the now harmonious elements of society into a state of war, and make every home a hell on earth.

Source: Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University, 1966).

"How To Be the Perfect Housewife" appeared as an article in Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine in 1859.

Having before suggested what is or should be the position of a wife, let us next consider her province as a housewife. . . . What is her first duty?

To ascertain her husband's income, its resources, its limits, the amount beyond which she

cannot pass without entailing ruin upon him and misery on herself. . . .

But, alas! she has had no direction—no counsel—no lessons in household economy; she is at a loss what to do, save that she has a cook and housemaid . . .

It is a certain fact that servants are like soldiers in a field of battle: upon them depend the success of well-ordered arrangements. It is useless to expect regularity or good management if the orders are not properly executed, and, therefore, it becomes important to exercise the utmost care in taking any person into the family as a domestic. . . .

The servants having been chosen, and well

chosen, rather for their knowledge in the strict and economical performance of their duties—it will be understood that these remarks apply to one servant as to five, or ten, or more—the next thing will be to see that the kitchen is properly provided . . .

You will know how you can afford to live by the amount of your income; you will know your husband cannot expect to live beyond the amount

which he has allowed you to keep his house with; but it must be your ambition to know how to make the best appearance; with small means to appear—without improper assumption—richer than you are, or at least quite as rich as you are, . . . even at a *tête-à-tête* dinner with your husband, there is an air of clean comfort about it, while your own good looks, kind words, and tender smiles make him feel that he cannot by friendship or purchase obtain the felicity elsewhere he meets with at home. . . .

The direction of the table is especially the province of the lady, for it involves not only her judgment in expenditure, a respectability of appearance, but the comfort of her husband and those who may have a seat at her table.

Source: Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, March, 1859.

"Women . . . by their elevated social position can exercise more influence upon public affairs, than they could coerce by the use of the ballot."

Senator George Williams

GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 4

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 4 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. The first three grievances listed in the "Declaration of Sentiments" all concern the denial of what basic right?

2. Senator Williams states in his speech that "the hand that rocked the cradle ruled the world." Restate this idea in your own words.

3. On what document is the "Declaration of Sentiments" modeled?

4. List three activities that *Godey's Lady's Book* believes are the duties of a housewife.

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Identifying Central Issues:** Which grievances listed in the "Declaration of Sentiments" concern violations of women's economic freedoms? Which concern violations of their political rights?

2. **Predicting Consequences:** If women were to hold a second Seneca Falls Convention today, what grievances might be included in their "Declaration of Sentiments"?

3. **Identifying Assumptions:** On what basic assumption about men and women is Senator Williams's speech based?

4. **Making Comparisons:** Both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Senator Williams use religion as a justification for their position. Compare and contrast their use of religious arguments.

5. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

