

The First Wave of Feminism: A Movement Created by and for Americans

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore how Stanton, Anthony, and their peers' social and legal activism led to the ratification of the 19th amendment. The first wave of feminism began in New York in 1848 when a group of abolitionists, feminist women met at the Seneca Falls Convention to discuss the social and civil rights of women in the United States. The first wave of feminism was the pursuit of greater liberty for women through suffrage, the right to an education, and the right to paid labor, without which women were treated as second-class citizens dependent on men and circumstance. The first wave authenticated the United States of America's founding principle of democracy. Stanton and Anthony laid the foundational agenda for the first feminist movement by publishing speeches, articles, and books that served to educate all Americans on the necessity of women's rights and their equal place in society. Examining first and secondary sources revealed that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, along with their peers, reconstructed the American identity to encompass women by demanding that Americans recognize the rights of women and their equal place in society through their social and legal activism, which demanded they be given the right to vote, the right to an education, and the right to paid labor.

On July 19th, 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton stood before hundreds of Americans at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York and declared, "The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation, because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source" (Stanton). This declaration laid the foundation for the first wave of feminism, which began in New York in 1848 when a group of abolitionists, feminist women met to discuss the social and civil rights of women in the United States. Their tireless activism and pursuit of greater liberty for women in the U.S. led to a nationwide cultural shift. The first wave of feminism was the pursuit of greater liberty for women through suffrage, the right to an education, reproductive autonomy, and the right to own property, without which women were treated as second-class citizens dependent on men and circumstances. The first wave authenticated the United States of America's founding principle of democracy by finally including women in the decision to elect representatives and vote on laws. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony inspired women all over the Northeast to join the protest against the United States' patriarchal legal system before their influence quickly reached a national level. Stanton and Anthony paved the way for the first feminist movement by publishing speeches, articles, and books that served to educate all Americans on the importance of feminism and the benefits of creating a more egalitarian society. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, along with their peers, reconstructed the American identity to encompass women by demanding that Americans recognize the rights of women and their equal place in society through their social and legal activism, which demanded they be given the right to vote, the right to an education, and the right to paid labor.

Prior to first-wave feminism, American women's involvement in politics was viewed as inappropriate by American men because the obligations of women were in the home. In *Women and Politics in the Era Before Seneca Falls*, Anne M. Boylan explains how even in the mid-1700s, women were involved in forming the political agenda through organizing boycotts, fundraising, and local campaigning (3). While contributing a great deal to the culture of American politics, this organizational "women's" work was not perceived as political. The style of activism ultimately

allowed benevolent, charitable organizations to enter politics without extreme backlash at a time when women in politics were not socially acceptable. By providing humanitarian and philanthropic services to the city, benevolent, wealthy women's associations formed relationships with powerful government officials. Using their reserved mannerisms to their benefit, many more conservative women's groups accumulated great political influence solely through their connections. Although the Seneca Falls Convention was the first official convention held to discuss women's rights in America, it was the product of countless political discussions regarding the role of women in society decades prior.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, women lacked rights to higher education, the right to own property, and the right to control their earnings. In her article, Lange explains how following the Civil War, many women's rights activists questioned why women were not included in the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted suffrage to African American men. Suffragettes such as Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton fought for the rights of women but also the rights of African Americans. There was a significant overlap between the fight for gendered and racial equality. That same year in 1869, two distinct women's organizations emerged with two separate ideas for the future. The National Woman Suffrage Association, which was led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, called for a constitutional amendment to be ratified, granting suffrage, divorce reform, and property rights for women. The American Woman Suffrage Association led by Lucy Stone, another abolitionist and suffragette, wanted a state-by-state approach that solely focused on the issue of suffrage. While these organizations were divided, 1869 was a year of tremendous growth for the feminist movement. Wyoming was the first ever government to grant women the same right to vote as men (Mintz 47). Many other states in the West quickly followed, such as Colorado, Idaho, and Utah. Just over a decade later in 1890, The National Woman Suffrage Association and The American Woman Suffrage Association merged and formed The National American Woman Suffrage Association. In *The Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment*, Steven Mintz explains how the leaders of the organizations put their differences aside in order to focus on their common goal of granting women suffrage and improving American politics as a whole (2). Elizabeth Cady Stanton became president in 1890 before Susan B. Anthony took over as president from 1892 until 1900. NAWSA (National American Woman Suffrage Association) coordinated the woman's suffrage movement locally and nationally (Lange 1). The association consisted of state-level and local groups that made changes by fundraising, writing, donating, and protesting the oppressive U.S. government's policies toward women, establishing the initial steps of the movement (2). Although feminist organizations had opposing opinions on how to spread the suffrage movement, all were united in their demand for change. With these initiatives, the leaders of the feminist movement demanded equality for people of all genders and races, manifesting the evolved American identity. Through fervent and determined political activism spread over the years, the feminist movement gained continual support in the decades following the Seneca Falls Convention and reached national awareness which became impossible to ignore.

On July 4th, 1876, the National Woman Suffrage Association published an article titled, "Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States," arguing for the civil and political rights of women in the name of justice and democracy. The article was published exactly 100 years after the birth of the United States of America and the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. The co-founders of the organization, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, chose to publish the article on this momentous anniversary to remind Americans of how even after a century, women in this country were still treated as second-class citizens by not having the same constitutionally protected rights that men have such as voting. They quote former first lady Abigail Adams and state:

To all these wrongs and oppressions woman has not submitted in silence and resignation. From the beginning of the century, when Abigail Adams, the wife of one president and the mother of another, said, "We will not hold ourselves bound to obey laws in which we have no voice or representation." Until now woman discontent has been steadily increasing, culminating nearly thirty years ago in a simultaneous movement among the women of the nation, demanding the right of suffrage (Stanton).

The excerpt of the letter written by Abigail Adams serves as an irrefutable reminder that gender inequality had disappointed women since the beginning of this nation's history. Stanton and Anthony clarify that they are not asking for any special favors or privileges when asking for suffrage, but rather justice and their rightful place in society. They closed their piece by asking that all civil and political rights given to American citizens be granted to them and to generations of women to come. This article was a first-hand account of the specific oppressive legal policies targeting women and what rights women were lacking in the 19th century. It confronted the U.S.'s patriarchal government on its unconstitutional and undemocratic legislature. By excluding women from voting, the government ignored fifty percent of the population's political opinions, thus creating a more potent male-dominated culture in the United States of America. Stanton deconstructs the American identity in order to reveal how federal law failed to uphold the values upon which the United States of America was built. Our government could not claim to be democratic or equitable when women continued to be dismissed and disregarded in our country's cultural and political sphere.

In "The Declaration of Rights of the Women in the United States," Stanton and Anthony educate Americans on the hardships and lack of opportunities women are subjected to in American society. To commence, Stanton and Anthony compare the 19th century United States to "the old war," meaning an undemocratic society (1). By comparing the 100-year-old capitalist, democratic U.S.A to an old-world empire where women's voices were completely silenced, Stanton sheds light upon the aspects of society which have not had substantial improvement, such as the treatment of women. The article proceeds to discuss the concept of faith, an undeniable American founding principle. It states, "Our faith is firm and unwavering in the broad principles of human rights, proclaimed in 1776, not only as abstract truths but as the cornerstones of a republic" (1). Stanton and Anthony proceed to explain that while the Constitution has granted men full rights of citizenship, women continue to suffer while being just as loyal to the nation as men. Being able to vote is a tangible way to show one's citizenship and cement a part of one's identity as an American. Although they are loyal, devoted citizens, women do not enjoy the same freedoms as their male counterparts. In 1886, women did not have the right to self-govern, control their own inheritance, or control their property. Stanton and Anthony prove that the United States of America had violated its core principle of democracy by continuously disregarding the commitment women have to the United States of America.

The underestimation of women's intellectual capabilities was further proven by their lack of opportunities regarding higher education. Oberlin College in Ohio was the first institution in the world to offer a college education to women (Stewart 1). It became coed in the late 1800s and was the start of a new era of education and opportunity for women. Pioneer of the first feminist movement, Lucy Stone attended Oberlin College and graduated in the mid-1840s, becoming the first Massachusetts woman to have a college degree (1). Although a few higher institutions soon became coed, most colleges did not offer higher education to women. As the first wave of feminism began in the 1840s, all women's colleges grew more popular than coed schools. There was segregation among male and female students with the belief that the brains of men and women were astronomically different. In "University Education for Women", Stevens explains that the main reason why women could not attend college with men was that many men believed their biological differences made the brains of women incompetent to understand higher intellectual endeavors (Steven 3). Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton rejected the cultural myths limiting the opportunities of women and insisted that women be given choice and personal autonomy regarding their educational and professional careers. They demanded that women be allowed to have their own personal identities which did not revolve around their husbands or fathers and that they be given the right to self-govern. The lack of opportunity limited women professionally and reform was needed in order to secure paid labor and protect their future professional endeavors.

The oppressive cycle that women in the United States faced began from the time of their birth and throughout their personal, academic, and professional lives. In "Women and the Labor Movement", Kelley argues that women were not seen as valuable assets to industrial production until the civil war. It was not until after the war in the 1860s when industrial changes in methods occurred, that women were viewed as valuable in economic affairs (Kelley 4). While the economic role of women was being reconsidered, cultural and social ideals were evolving simultaneously. As a result of first-wave feminists' social and political activism, the position of women in society was being questioned

and rethought, and further fueled by economic necessity. By the 1860s, the general public had gained interest in the legal circumstance of women, and labor rights became a pressing issue in mainstream media (5). As the feminist movement grew, public protest grew with it. Factories employed children, women, and men to work from before sunrise to past sunset every day for very low wages (6). Americans all over the country protested unethical working conditions and labor hours. In “Married Women’s Property Laws and Female Commercial Activity: Evidence from United States Patent Records, 1790-1895”, Khan argues that American women were subjected to additional labor injustice due to the fact that married women’s earnings were controlled by their husbands (Khan 2). During the 19th century, most women did not remain single, thus resulting in their husbands controlling their property and earnings. In the mid-1800s, states began to pass legislation that would separate accounts for women, allowing them to have independent property and businesses from their husbands (2). Factory workers around the country demanded they be treated humanely and eventually saw a change. Suffragettes used the American right of protest to alter American culture and identity into a more democratic and just institution. The feminist movement inspired and empowered Americans to fight for their rights and for each other.

Through their tireless social and political activism, first-wave feminists restored the American identity into a more authentic democracy by demanding the right to vote for women and the right to self-govern their personal and professional lives. These gains for gender equality allowed the American government to uphold the promises set in the Constitution and to prove the authenticity of our democracy. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony paved the way for future generations of American women through their work which left a revolutionary impact on American culture. Their tenacity led to reform which changed America’s identity entirely by finally including American women. The Seneca Falls Convention marked the beginning of the first feminist movement when hundreds of feminists came together to discuss the role and rights of American women in the 19th century. Stanton and Anthony, along with countless other dedicated and courageous Americans, dedicated their lives to transforming the United States into a country that supported and advocated for the rights and well-being of women. The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 signified the end of the first wave of feminism as it symbolized a new era of feminism and a new American identity. The right to vote cemented and recognized the larger legal identity of American women and their role in American society. Suffragettes changed the culture of the United States through their protest and public rejection of the government’s patriarchal legal system, which was a leading cause of political oppression for women. Their political activism sparked change in their North-Eastern community which quickly spread throughout the nation, inspiring and uniting American women to fight for their rights and for their futures. The first wave of feminism created a new America where all citizens are meant to feel recognized and included.

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