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Exploring the evolution of women's rights from 1840 to 1920

Historians generally see the start of the suffrage movement in 1848 at the Seneca Falls convention where activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton delivered her Declaration of Sentiments, demanding action for women's rights. Historians also generally see the end of the first wave of feminism in 1920, when women gained their hard fought right to vote through the Nineteenth Amendment. In this period of reform, women did so much more than demanding voting rights; they demanded education, self ownership, the right to bodily autonomy, greater economic opportunities and equality; they fought for the escape from legal domestic violence, dress reform, and the right to be heard in a society that had always held men over women. This paper seeks to discuss the dramatic evolution of the fight for reform. From women having little to no rights in the early 1840s, to having the rights that allowed a freer way of life for women across America by the end of the 1920s, it's clear that between the periods of 1840 to the end of the 1920s, the feminist movement and the women's suffrage evolved drastically.

Life for American women in the 1840s was constricting and tough, a woman's job in society was to marry well, tend to the house, and bear children. Where the limited education for a young girl would hardly get her anything but the knowledge on how to be the perfect wife. When, after her whole adolescence that trained her to be perfect for her husband, she would be thrust into a marriage that would lose her everything. Marriage in the 1840s was also not commonly for love, but rather a business deal that benefited the family's success. A woman was merely a pawn; to be moved around and sacrificed for the wellbeing of others successes.

Education for women was limited, in fact, prior to 1837, higher education wasn't even an option for women. Before the 1840s, children would receive only a rudimentary education, where they'd learn only how to read and cipher (Eisenmann 3). Women weren't allowed the privilege of learning the same subjects that were taught to their male counterparts, because society believed that the female brain was too weak to handle knowledge that came from a good education. Reform speakers like Horace Mann encouraged widespread access to education; regardless of sex (Eisenmann 3). When colleges started allowing entrance to women, the subjects they had access to were still often limited, and opportunities after graduation were scarce. With limited options of subject choice, and even fewer open colleges, Elizabeth Stanton writes in her Declaration of Sentiments (1848), "He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education - all colleges being closed against her" (Stanton). Because of these many limitations, women could hardly get as far in life on their own compared to men.

The American economy in the 1840s led to huge differences in gender roles in society; marking men for the public world of politics and business, and marking women as only fit for the private world of their household (Auslander 166). Women were meant to be seen, but not heard. The constrictions of societal expectations on women were brought by men of power who didn't believe in a future of independent women in society. Of course, when there's an argument for something, there is always a counter argument as well. These arguments for women's rights were brought by women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who organised the first woman's rights convention in 1848, Seneca Falls, where she, alongside other strong feminists, demanded action for women's political and social rights. The convention was a needed call for reform.

The Seneca Falls Convention was the start of the socioeconomic and political reform of women's rights in America. Elizabeth Stanton delivered her Declaration of Sentiments to an audience of men and women in Seneca, New York, 1848. Mirroring the introduction of the Declaration of Independence, "We

hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (Declaration of Independence), Stanton highlights the importance of women in the Declaration by writing “and women”; “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal” (Stanton). She argues that there were three major ways of how men and women were unequal under the law after the Revolution; women weren’t allowed to vote, they were forced to be dependent on their fathers and their husbands, and they had limited availability of divorce (Kerber 116-120). This dependency on men was a substantial issue brought up throughout history, as Stanton argued, “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” (Stanton). By the 1840s, the social role of women in society had already begun to visibly change towards a more liberating future.

Before the introduction of the Married Women's Property Acts, coverture was the norm that husbands legally owned their wives and their value (Geddes 1079). Married women risked losing all their belongings, property and person to their newly wedded husbands. Before marriage, a single woman had similar property rights as men, but once married, those rights were lost and the husband gained ownership of all the wife’s property (McDevitt 256). A married woman could not own anything including personal property, earnings, person or even possession. Their life was thrown at the mercy of their husbands. Because the United States tied property ownership to voting rights and citizenship so significantly, early feminists were constantly surrounded in legal and economic restraint (McCammon 225).

One of the most important Married Women’s Property Acts was in 1848, when New York State legislature ruled that, “The real and personal property of any female who may hereafter marry, and which she shall own at the time of marriage, and the rents issues and profits thereof shall not be subject to the

disposal of her husband, nor be liable for his debts, and shall continue her sole and separate property, as if she were a single female” (“New York Married Women's Property Law”). Under this law married women were allowed the same privileges they had before marriage, but the Married Women’s Property Act of 1848 was hardly the end of coverture; solely the start.

In 1882, another major Married Women’s Property Act was passed. It extended the rules to all previous acts, and gave women more liberating laws in the eyes of marriage. Although it was a major contributor to women’s rights, as well as offered protection to the poor that was only before offered to the rich, it was not the same as giving them the rights of a man (Griffin 81). The 1882 Act set twenty three laws, including “Married woman to be capable of holding property and of contracting as a feme sole”, “Property acquired after the Act by a woman married before the Act to be held by her as a feme sole”, and “The Married Women's Property Act, 1870, and the [37 & 38 Vict. c. 50.] Married Women's Property Act, 1870, Amendment Act, 1874, are hereby repealed” (“Married Women’s Property Act” (1882)). Along with those, there were many others ensuring the clarity of the Act, and protecting women from further injustices in the eyes of the law and marriage.

Historians often analyze a connection between the early suffrage movement and the abolitionist movement, and in many ways, they can be seen as intertwined. Historians often compare the civil difficulties of women to free blacks in the mid nineteenth century because of the harsh restrictions placed on them by society (Tsesis 1656). There’s also been the observation that the Fourteenth Amendment included the first constitutional discrimination and differentiation between the sexes (Tsesis 1643). It read, “the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such State” (Fourteenth Amendment sec 2). The choice to use language excluding women was compared to the Thirteenth Amendment, where it used gender-neutral terms, as did all prior writing in the Constitution. This has been brought up as a hugely problematic shift towards inequality. In 1866, the

Civil Rights Bill was ratified as a protection to both blacks and women as it read, “One such law was the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which declared that all people born in the United States were U.S. citizens and had certain inalienable rights, including the right to make contracts, to own property, to sue in court, and to enjoy the full protection of federal law.” (“The Civil Rights Bill of 1866”). This insured opportunities to all citizens that weren't available prior to the bill, and marked another step towards equality.

Domestic violence was still legal, and wife beating was a common occurrence for centuries. Divorce was extremely limited, and really only available to the rich (Griffin 62). With divorce being difficult to acquire, stakes high, and potentially violent husbands, it comes to no one's surprise that with all the inconveniences and hardships marriage brought, it became an increasingly unpopular choice for wealthy women (McDevitt 276). An alternative solution to a typical marriage was a “Boston Marriage”; a marriage-like bonding of two wealthy women; it allowed women to share property and wealth, without actually giving it up. Typically, these were not for the purpose of romantic bondings; although they certainly could be. Instead, it was a method to avoid a man taking control of your property, wealth and belongings.

Along with the call for socioeconomic and political reform came the development of dress reform, and women like Amelia Bloomer advocated for a more liberating way of dress in the 1850s. She became a strong voice because of her early advocacy in favour of women's pants. The struggle for women to gain the right to wear pants was a great factor to the early feminist movement (Auslander 156). In the next eight or so decades, you can see a huge evolution of fashion shifts; from the crinolines and bloomers of the 1850s (Appendix 1), through bustles and natural form to the noteworthy change to the loose 1920s fashions. Fashion, although not always directly related to reform, does play an important role in socioeconomic advancement. After all, the dress advancement from the 1840s to the 1920s was drastic. By the 1860s, the popular shape was achieved with an elliptical crinoline, which went out of

fashion in the late 1860s, and changed to a bustle throughout the 1870s through mid 1880s (Appendix 2). By the 1890s, rigid supports like bustles and crinolines were completely gone and it was left by elegant and intricate dresses with emphasis on mainly the sleeves (Appendix 3). This slow and gradual shift is seen as styles from the 1920s emerge.

What historians see in the 1920s is a significant reform in all nature; political, social, economical and physical as well. Fashion, and self expression plays a significant role in the way society sees someone. Women embraced a new look; combating the rigid, and feminine styles from the past centuries with a more casual, loose look (Appendix 4). Dress historians also interpret the loose 1920s style with the increasing freedom in women's social and political roles (Gray 68).

On August 18, 1920 the 19th Amendment was ratified, reading "The right 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 sex." ("Nineteenth Amendment"). This ratification allowing women to vote in politics was a significant advancement in the move towards gender equality. With it, it brought a sense of renewed hope for the future of women in society.

Brought by the 19th Amendment and the increasing opportunities for women in the new world of political and economic moderate equality, women started searching for equality in terms of sexual and social identity (Freedman 386). Historians see an increase in boundary testing, particularly during and after the first world war. By the end of the 1920s, there's also a growth in women attending social scenes like bars that were priorly seen as a male only activity. With the help provided by the new legislation, women were finally able to achieve self ownership and an economic independence from men that was not possible for centuries.

By the end of the 1920s, and after eighty years since the beginning of the suffrage movement in Seneca Falls, the first wave of feminism had come to an end. Suffragettes had worked so persistently, and

finally they were heard, little did they know that what they had fought for would become the base for the continuous expansion of women's rights up until today. The evolution of feminism and women's rights had changed so much in those eighty years, despite it being an exceedingly slow and gradual process. The feminist movement did not, however, end in the 1920s; since then so much more has changed for women's rights, and the world is still changing today for a more economically equal society. The fight for gender equality will continue on for another hundred years since the 1920s, and that has taken us to today, where women's rights continue to spread and evolve daily. This paper illustrates just the beginning of an everlasting evolution of reform.

Appendix

Appendix 1 (Gray 33)

Image of 1857 dress examples.



Appendix 2 (Gray 35)

Image of 1880s bustle dresses.



Appendix 3 (Bradford 1897 *Day dress recreation*)

Image of a recreation of a dress from 1897.



Appendix 4 (Bradford 1923 *Day dress recreation*)

Image of a 1920s dress recreation.



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