

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: The Fight for Women's Suffrage and Beyond

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AP US History

June 10, 2019

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a radical feminist who lived during the late 19th and early 20th century. She fought for equal rights for those who had none and changed the way feminism is viewed today. Throughout her life, she fought for the rights of women and spent the majority of her life working towards making women equal to men in the eyes of society and the government. Growing up, Stanton and her sisters were exposed at a young age to the limits and challenges they faced because of their gender. Her parents only ever saw them as just 'women.' Her father was a lawyer, so Stanton would spend time with him learning about the law. In one of his cases in particular, a woman named Flora Campbell's husband bought property using her money. He then gave away her property and she was attempting to sue him to get her property or her money back. However, because Campbell had very few rights as a woman, there was nothing she could do. This case began Stanton's quest to gain equality for women.¹ Throughout her life, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a part of many reform movements. She was one of the biggest names in the beginning of the fight for women's suffrage, organizing the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and giving many speeches. She was a fighter for other parts of women's rights as well, such as the establishment of property rights and rights for mothers. She was a part of the temperance movement, believing that if she could stop alcoholism it would decrease the amount of drunken beatings given to wives. While she had mixed viewpoints, she also fought in the abolitionist movement for a time, but the increasing success of the abolitionist movement compared to the lack of results in the women's rights campaign caused Stanton to develop questionable views on race. While Elizabeth Cady Stanton is primarily known for her work in the women's suffrage

¹ Papke, David Ray. "Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Women's Natural Rights and the Revolt against Gendered Legalism." In *Heretics in the Temple: Americans Who Reject the Nation's Legal Faith*, 51-75. NYU Press, 1998. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfq56.7>.

movement, she also played a significant role in the temperance and abolition movements, as well as other areas of the women's rights movement.

GENDER LIMITATIONS

At an early age, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was exposed to the limitations she faced because of her gender, especially brought on through her parents. When girls were young, they were taught to live afraid and uneducated, being raised only to live at home and get married.² They did not yet know or understand the implications their gender would have on their lives, and because of the restrictions they face, they will never be truly satisfied or happy living in their sphere.³

In one of her most famous speeches, "Our Girls", Elizabeth wrote:
They [girls] are simply to revolve round some man, to live only for him, in him, with him, to be fed, clothed, housed, guided and controlled by him, to-day by Father or Brother, tomorrow by Husband or Son, no matter how wise or mature, they are never to know the freedom and dignity that one secures in self-dependence and self support.⁴

The worst part, Stanton wrote, was that woman could read the signs that prevented them from living a purposeful life, and the humiliation they faced because men could read the signs too, they just chose to ignore it and follow their own pursuits.⁵ Stanton's own father could never see her as more than a girl, and especially after the passing of her brothers, he was never able to see her as a person. All of her brothers died before adulthood, and the fact there would be no male heir devastated her parents. Stanton desperately tried to be the son her parents never had, which

² Thomas, Tracy A. "Raising "Our Girls"." In *Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Feminist Foundations of Family Law*, 186-226. New York: NYU Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bj4qfb.11>.

³ Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Our Girls." Speech, Winter 1880. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/stanton-our-girls-speech-text/>.

⁴ Stanton, "Our Girls."

⁵ Stanton, "Our Girls."

inspired her to take interest in her father's law practice. However, despite her father's teachings and guidance, there were not enough opportunities to match her abilities.⁶

ABOLITION

As was common amongst feminists at the time, Stanton fought side-by-side with the abolitionist movement. Feminists believed that if they could gain equal rights, specifically black suffrage, it would also create a window to give universal suffrage to women as well. During the time Stanton was an abolitionist, she worked off of the philosophy that "in settling the question of the negro's rights, we find out the exact limits of our own, for rights never clash or interfere; and where no individual in a community is denied his rights, the mass are the more perfectly protected in theirs".⁷ Slavery was not only just about whites enslaving blacks, but the elite and powerful enslaving those who were limited in their rights and abilities. While it was terrible to capture a black man in Africa and enslave him in the rice fields of Georgia, Stanton argues, the more terrible thing was the legislation put into place that made it legal and how man's mindset was transformed to defend those actions. She believed that the anti-slavery movement was not simply about releasing the African slaves, but also releasing the slaves of sex, custom, and religious beliefs.

In a speech Stanton delivered to the American Anti-Slavery Society, she wrote:
To you, white man, the world throws wide her gates; the way is cleat to wealth, to fame, to glory, to renown; the high place of independence and honor and trust are yours; all your efforts are praised and encouraged; all your successes are welcomed with loud

⁶ Papke, 54-56

⁷ Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Speech to the Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society." Speech, New York, Cooper Institute, May 08, 1860. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/speech-to-the-anniversary-of-the-american-anti-slavery-society-may-8-1860/>.

hurrahs and cheers; but the black man and the woman are born to shame. The badge of degradation is the skin and sex- the “scarlet letter” so sadly worn upon the breast.⁸

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Stanton worked in many aspects of the women’s rights movement, though she is most well known for her work in the suffrage movement. Alongside Lucretia Mott, Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, which aroused support for amending the Constitution and including women in the rights it provided.⁹ However, another large part of Stanton’s work for equal rights for women included equal rights for mothers, and “she worked to transform the existing social and legal structure of maternity from one of subordination into one of power”. To do this, women would have to gain the rights to custody of their children and authority in their home, which would displace common law of the father being legally in control of the house and the children. In order to do this, childhood gender roles had to be reconstructed and the religious subordination of gender had to be challenged and changed. Stanton also worked to abolish the idea of men and women being in separate ‘spheres,’ isolating women to only a domestic role and the men to be a part of the world of government and work.¹⁰

“The Solitude of Self”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton revolutionized the idea of a “Solitude of Self,” in which a woman was responsible for her own being and should not receive an extensive amount of help from any

⁸ Stanton, “Speech to the Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society.”

⁹ Parker, Alison M. "The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848: A Pivotal Moment in Nineteenth Century America." *Reviews in American History* 36, no. 3 (2008): 341-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40210932>.

¹⁰ Thomas, 186-187

man. In her speech, "The Solitude of Self," Stanton explains the reasoning behind her belief. Women, she believed, needed to be dependent on only themselves. It was only through self-dependence that a woman could truly be able to live. Without a dependence on men, women could develop an instinct in the face of danger and give her a right to choose her surroundings.¹¹

To accomplish a self-dependence for women, Stanton argues that a higher education of women is the most important. An educated woman is free from all forms of bondage and gives her a personal responsibility for her own life. This would also give women the ability to have a place in the government and change the policies that restricted the rights of women.¹²

'Sphere' Ideology

One of the problems of society Stanton sought to change was the idea of putting men and women into different 'spheres.' Men were dominant in the sphere of working and participating in the government. Women were forced into the domestic role, not allowed to participate in government or join the workforce. Challenging this ideology, Stanton claimed three major problems caused by spheres; a limit to women's action within their community, it took away a woman's right of choice, and it made women designated as inferior.¹³

A woman's action within her community was severely limited by her designation as the domestic role of the family, and therefore her designation as inferior to the men surrounding her. Stanton argues that the problem of subordination comes from a religious connotation that women are not equal to men. Men, however, have taken that religious connotation and bent it to their

¹¹ Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "The Solitude of Self." Speech, Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Congress, House of Representatives, Washington D.C, January 19, 1892

¹² Stanton, "The Solitude of Self."

¹³ Thomas, 187-188

will, further limiting the abilities of women to do anything but take on a domestic role. She believed that people's claims of women being inferior in the moral, intellectual, and physical capacity was not justified as it stemmed from women being limited previously from taking any roles of action.¹⁴

While Stanton was severely critical of women's oppression into the domestic role, she made sure to recommend alternative approaches that would remedy a woman's isolation within her sphere. Three ideas that she proposed, residing in apartment houses, joining associations, and enlisting fathers to assist within the home, which were all about "reorganizing the home." Stanton supported feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's idea of living in apartments, which would bring down the amount of house work needed and would decrease the amount of inefficiency in homes. Joining associations of women would decrease the workload on each woman and would promote cooperation amongst women. Finally, by giving the father responsibilities the home would be co-managed. If the father and the mother both decide to have children, Stanton stated, they should both be responsible for taking care of the home and the children.¹⁵

Reconstruction of Gender Roles

Elizabeth Cady Stanton proposed radical ideas of feminism, ideas that were outlandish at her time. She knew that in order to change the oppressive policies, she also needed to reconstruct the gender roles assigned from birth. She argued that women had every qualification necessary to

¹⁴ Thomas, 188-189

¹⁵ Thomas, 190

be legal voters, except for their sex.¹⁶ Sex, she argued, should not be the deciding factor in a person's legal status or rights. To do this, she went back to children, and argued that by changing the way girls and boys see gender, it would change the way gender would be treated when they reach adulthood. To do this, Stanton supported teaching girls, as well as boys, to live to be courageous, educated, self-supporting, and to eliminate ideas of privilege and separate classes. In many of her speeches, Elizabeth argues that autonomy, physical strength, courage, and independence were virtues that belonged to women. Girls should be educated to the same capacity of entering a professional or political field as boys were.

LEGACY

Through her work as a reformer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton touched many lives and shaped the way feminism and women's rights are viewed today. After her death in 1902, Helen H. Gardner wrote in a tribute, "she [Stanton] worked for the welfare of the [human] race, here and now, and believed that any possible future could and would take care of itself."¹⁷ This is a testament to the way Stanton went about fighting for policies of reform, specifically for women's rights reform. She believed that the most important reason for women to have the same rights as men was because women needed to be able to live their own, independent lives in order to truly be human. She fought for the responsibilities of life to be imposed on both men and women, and to stop

¹⁶ Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Address to the Legislature of New York." Speech, State Women's Rights Convention, New York, Albany, February 1854. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/address-to-the-new-york-legislature-1854.htm>.

¹⁷ "Death and Legacy of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1902–1903)." In Stanton in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates, edited by Baker Noelle A., 204-20. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q23z4.13>.

society from allowing women to lean on men for help.¹⁸ After she died, she left her brain to Cornell University to provide the world with the brain of an influential and strong woman, something the world did not yet have.¹⁹ Throughout her work, she fought not only for women, but for the hope that making women better would make men, and the world, better as well.

¹⁸ Stanton, "The Solitude of Self."

¹⁹ "Death and Legacy of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1902–1903)." 207

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