

Women in Antebellum America

Document A: Excerpts from Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (1842), Chapter 1 – The Peculiar Responsibilities of American Women.

A daughter of preacher Lyman Beecher and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe (of Uncle Tom's Cabin fame), Catharine Beecher was one of the leading proponents of the ideal of domesticity in the nineteenth century. In this excerpt that introduces her popular guide book to homemaking and childrearing, Beecher outlines her beliefs about the place of women in American society.

There are some reasons why American women should feel an interest in the support of the democratic institutions of their Country, which it is important that they should consider. The great maxim,¹ which is the basis of all our civil and political institutions, is, "all men are created equal," and that they are equally entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But it can readily be seen, that this is only another mode of expressing the fundamental principle which the Great Ruler of the Universe has established, as the law of His eternal government. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" and "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," are the Scripture forms, by which the Supreme Lawgiver requires that each individual of our race shall regard the happiness of others, as of the same value as his own; and which forbid any institution, in private or civil life, which secures advantages to one class, by sacrificing the interests of another. The principles of democracy, then, are identical with the principles of Christianity. But, in order that each individual may pursue and secure the highest degree of happiness within his reach, unimpeded by the selfish interests of others, a system of laws must be established, which sustain certain relations and dependencies in social and civil life....

For this purpose, it is needful that certain relations be sustained, which involve the duties of subordination. There must be the magistrate and the subject, one of whom is the superior, and the other the inferior. There must be the relations of husband and wife, parent and child, teacher and pupil, employer and employed, each involving the relative duties of subordination. The superior in certain particulars is to direct, and the inferior is to yield obedience. Society could never go forward, harmoniously, nor could any craft or profession be successfully pursued, unless these superior and subordinate relations be instituted and sustained.

But who shall take the higher, and who the subordinate, stations in social and civil life? This matter, in the case of parents and children, is decided by the Creator. He has given children to the control of parents, as their superiors, and to them they remain subordinate, to a certain age, or so long as they are members of their household. And parents can delegate such a portion of their authority to teachers and employers, as the interests of their children require.

In most other cases, in a truly democratic state, each individual is allowed to choose for himself, who shall take the position of his superior. No woman is forced to obey any husband but the one she chooses for herself; nor is she obliged to take a husband, if she prefers to remain single....

In this Country, it is established, both by opinion and by practice, that woman has an equal interest in all social and civil concerns; But in order to secure her the more firmly in all these privileges, it is decided, that, in the domestic relation, she take a subordinate station, and that, in civil and political concerns, her interests be intrusted to the other sex, without her taking any part in voting, or in making and administering laws.

¹ Maxim means an expression of a general truth or principle.

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...it is in America, alone, that women are raised to an equality with the other sex; and that, both in theory and practice, their interests are regarded as of equal value. They are made subordinate in station, only where a regard to their best interests demands it...

In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergyman, in all benevolent enterprises,² and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence....

The success of democratic institutions...depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people. If they are intelligent and virtuous, democracy is a blessing; but if they are ignorant and wicked, it is only a curse... the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother writes the character of the future man; the sister bends the fibers that hereafter are the forest tree; the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured.

...The woman who is rearing a family of children; the woman who labors in the schoolroom; the woman who, in her retired chamber, earns, with her needle, the mite³ to contribute for the intellectual and moral elevation of her country; even the humble domestic,⁴ whose example and influence may be moulding and forming young minds, while her faithful services sustain a prosperous domestic state;-- each and all may be cheered by the consciousness, that they are agents in accomplishing the greatest work that ever was committed to human responsibility.

² Benevolent enterprises here means works of charity.

³ Mite here means small sum of money.

⁴ Domestic here means housemaid.

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Document B: The Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Convention, 1848.⁵

In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, two American activists in the movement to abolish slavery, called together the first conference to address women's rights and issues in Seneca Falls, New York. During this event, which came to be known as the Seneca Falls Convention, this Declaration of Sentiments was signed by sixty-eight women and thirty-two men.

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto⁶ occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

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. Prudence,⁷ indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

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.⁸

1. He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.⁹
2. He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
3. He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men--both natives and foreigners.
4. Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.
5. He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.
6. He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.
7. He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity,¹⁰ provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is

⁵ Although the Declaration of Sentiments was written and first published in 1848, this particular transcript comes from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *A History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1 (Rochester, N.Y.: Fowler and Wells, 1889), pages 70-71.

⁶ Hitherto means until now or up until this point in time.

⁷ Prudence means cautiousness.

⁸ Numbering of the "repeated injuries and usurpations" is not original to the document. Instructor has enumerated to aid in analysis.

⁹ Elective franchise means the right of voting in an election of public officers.

¹⁰ Impunity means exempt or free from punishment.

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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.¹¹

8. 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.
9. 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.
10. He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.¹² 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.
11. He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.
12. He allows her in church, as well as state, but a subordinate position, claiming apostolic¹³ authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church.
13. He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.
14. He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah¹⁴ himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.
15. 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 abject¹⁵ life.

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement¹⁶ of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation--in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

¹¹ Chastisement means scolding or punishment.

¹² Remuneration means money paid for work done.

¹³ Apostolic here means related to the teachings of the New Testament apostles.

¹⁴ Prerogative of Jehovah means the right exclusive to God Himself.

¹⁵ Abject means utterly hopeless or miserable.

¹⁶ Disfranchisement means the state of being deprived the right to vote.

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Document C: "Ain't I A Woman?" Speech by Sojourner Truth (1851)

Born a slave in New York, Sojourner Truth, then known as Isabella, secured her freedom in 1826. She joined a utopian community and, stirred by religious fervor, adopted her new name and became an itinerant speaker. She embraced abolitionism and eventually the cause of women's rights. Though illiterate, she became a famous orator whose unusual style and deep voice kept audiences spellbound. The following speech was delivered in 1851 at a woman's rights convention in Akron, Ohio.

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head¹⁷ me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

¹⁷ Head here means outdo or surpass.