

Nineteenth Century Reform Movements: Women's Rights

Author: Courtney Hoffberger, Arundel High School, Anne Arundel County Public Schools

Grade Level: Middle

Duration of lesson: 1-2 Periods

Overview:

In 1848, at the Seneca Falls Convention, the women's rights movement formalized its position with the publication of the "Declaration of Sentiments." The document listed a series of economic, political, and social grievances, pointing out women were not allowed to own property and earned less money than men. As the 19th century progressed, organizations like the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) were founded to promote suffrage. Meanwhile, the role of women in society began to change as the country dealt with the Civil War, Reconstruction and later, World War I. Many women's rights advocates worked closely with the abolitionist cause to secure suffrage for African Americans. African American men were granted the right to vote in 1870 with the passage of the 15th Amendment. However, it was not until 1920 that women earned the right to vote after the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

It might be difficult for students to envision a time when women were not allowed to vote in the United States. This lesson lets students examine primary and secondary source documents from the 19th and early 20th centuries, which illustrate some of the commonly held beliefs among those who supported and opposed women's suffrage. Students will be asked to discuss some of their own opinions about women's role in society and will write their own amendment for women's rights.

Content Standards:

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.

D. Consider multiple perspectives.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

B. Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances and contemporary factors contributing to problems and alternative courses of action.

· Students will be able to create a Constitutional amendment for women's rights through an analysis of the women's rights movement in the United States.

The role of women and their political, economic, and social opportunities in American society shifted greatly from the pre-Revolutionary War era to the early twentieth century. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, women were viewed as “subordinate to males” and were therefore subject to the laws and regulations imposed upon them by men.¹ They were expected to marry, raise families, and perform the duties of diligent wives and mothers.² Because of the male-dominated organization of society, women frequently did not have legal rights, such as the ability to vote or own property.³

However, as the years progressed toward the Civil War and Reconstruction, the social, economic, and political roles of women began to change. Women’s clothing became more fashionable, even for rural and working-class women. Their clothing, which began to “display their figures to best advantage,” demonstrated the desire and ability of women to remove themselves from the strict mandates of the patriarchal society.⁴ Although the majority of married women still worked in the home—and their “burden was growing heavier” due to the increase in non-agricultural jobs for men—it was not uncommon for women, particularly those who became widows during the Civil War, to earn working wages.⁵ Although the social and economic changes brought about greater rights for women, perhaps the most significant shift during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was comprised of the political changes

¹ David Donald, *An Excess of Democracy: The American Civil War and the Social Process*, (Oxford, England: 1960) in Kenneth M. Stampp, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War*, (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1991), 128.

² Marla Miller, *Rebecca Dickinson: A Life Alone in the Early Republic* in Kriste Lindenmeyer, ed., *The Human Tradition: Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives Women in American History*, (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2000), 5.

³ Kriste Lindenmeyer, ed., *The Human Tradition: Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives Women in American History*, (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2000), 2.

⁴ Daniel E. Sutherland, *The Expansion of Everyday Life: 1860-1876*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 56-57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

brought about by the various reform movements pertaining to women's rights, such as abolition, suffrage, temperance, and education.

Due to societal and economic changes, reform movements gained tremendous momentum in the mid-1800s. Population shifts and demographic inequalities impacted the development of women's reforms: "In Massachusetts...which in 1850 had 17,480 more females than males, many women could no longer look to their normal fulfillment in marriage...It is not altogether surprising that so many reform movements had their roots in New England."⁶ Women began to view their own rights as significant and advocated for the realization of these rights.

In the 1870s, after the movement for women's rights had gained considerable strength, a "Women's Declaration of Independence" was read at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876.⁷ The new "Declaration," which was modeled on the 1776 document, was originally created in 1848 for the Seneca Falls Convention and was spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.⁸ Stanton was a women's rights activist and social reformer who was committed social justice.⁹ Her work with the "Women's Declaration of Independence" (also known as the "Declaration of Sentiments") included a list of political, economic, and social grievances. Stanton and the other women working on the document declared that women lacked the right to own property, frequently earned less money than men (and often did not have control over their wages), and had limited educational opportunities.¹⁰ The "Declaration" blamed men for the position of women in society and, "in a lengthy series of resolutions, Cady Stanton and the others

⁶ Donald in Stamp, 128.

⁷ Thomas J. Schlerth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1975*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 4.

⁸ Lois W. Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Woman's Rights*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰ Banner, 40.

called for an end to all discrimination based on sex.”¹¹ Although the “Women’s Declaration of Independence” did not achieve the equal rights status that reformers desired, it did help encourage the era of reform and women’s rights.

Even before women began advocating for the own independence and equality, they were fighting for the abolition of slavery. Women such as Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown, “whose abolitionism predated their feminism and long remained their primary commitment,” desired to end slavery.¹² Other women, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, promoted abolition as a secondary reform movement; she felt that “prejudice against sex is more deeply rooted and more unreasonably maintained than that against color.”¹³ Nevertheless, Stanton worked for abolition for decades.¹⁴ While at the London Anti-Slavery Convention, Stanton met Lucretia Mott, an abolitionist and reformer who advocated for “woman’s equal participation in the antislavery societies.”¹⁵ At the convention, the women were segregated from the male speakers and were resigned to hope that the men would speak for them.¹⁶

The realization that women could not take action, even at a convention promoting the rights of a group of people, ultimately led Stanton and Mott to organize the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.¹⁷ The convention drew 300 audience members, the majority of which were women, but did include a significant number of men. Many speakers addressed the audience, including Stanton, Mott, and Frederick Douglass, the famed slave-turned-abolitionist. At the convention, Stanton read the “Declaration of Sentiments” and the members of the convention voted on the resolutions of the “Declaration,” the most significant of which being female

¹¹ Ibid., 40-41.

¹² Ibid., 69.

¹³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1860, in Banner, 69.

¹⁴ Banner, 68-69.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Banner, 26-27.

suffrage. Unfortunately, Stanton's push for suffrage was not successful at the Seneca Falls Convention: "All other resolutions passed unanimously. But only a bare majority voted in favor of suffrage and only after an eloquent speech by Frederick Douglass."¹⁸

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were not the only women's rights supporters in the 1800s. Organizations campaigning for suffrage sprang up around the country and supporters of the movement were as diverse as the areas of the country that they reached. The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) were both created in an effort to promote suffrage, although the two groups worked independently and seemingly in conflict with one another until 1890.¹⁹

Many black women supported the NWSA, including Harriet Tubman, who was an integral component of the Underground Railroad. Tubman was once honored by the New England Woman Suffrage Association and she fully supported the idea of universal female suffrage.²⁰ Sojourner Truth also supported the movement and she, along with Stanton, believed in universal suffrage "at a time when other reformers believed that suffrage for black men was the more urgent goal."²¹ Suffrage was also an issue in the western areas of the United States. Suffrage was viewed "as a practical movement" in the west, where women had seemingly more freedom than their eastern counterparts.²² In Kansas there was an attempt to allow women's suffrage, as well as "ensure the enfranchising of black males."²³ While the Kansas amendments

¹⁸ Ibid., 41-42.

¹⁹ Ibid., 115.

²⁰ Dorothy Sterling, ed., We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 41.

²¹ Ibid., 411.

²² Donald in Stampp, 128-129.

²³ Banner, 98-99.

passed in the state legislature, the voters did not ratify the suffrage amendment, which would have been the first of its kind.²⁴

Women's rights and abolition were joined by education reform and temperance as significant social and political changes in the 1800s. In education, women were seen "as the paragon of moral virtue" and "their role was defined as being moral and loving teachers, supervised and managed by male principals and superintendents."²⁵ The place of women (mainly as teachers) in educational society was not their only concern. Many women wanted to the opportunity for advancement via higher education. For many years, Oberlin College was the only liberal arts institution to admit women.²⁶ In the second half of the nineteenth century, women's colleges began to emerge and "numerous midwestern state universities opened their doors to both sexes."²⁷

Other education reformers sought to improve the educational opportunities for younger women; Susanna Haswell Rowson is credited with opening schools for girls and young women in Boston, Massachusetts.²⁸ Another reform, the temperance movement, gained momentum in the years surrounding the Civil War, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was founded as a means to prohibit men from consuming alcohol in excess quantities.²⁹ (Alcoholism was a significant issue during the time because it impacted the family budget and often caused a safety hazard for industrial workers.) The WCTU allowed a "woman's postwar interest in broader public roles" outside of suffrage, while still affecting change in the important social issues of the day.³⁰

²⁴ Ibid., 98-101.

²⁵ Schlereth, 245.

²⁶ Banner, 40.

²⁷ Sutherland, 105.

²⁸ Patricia L. Parker, *Susanna Haswell Rowson: America's First Best-Selling Author*, 2000, in Lindenmeyer, 25.

²⁹ Sutherland, 94.

³⁰ Banner, 143-144.

The relentless work of countless women's rights reformers culminated in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which provided women with the legal right to vote. Although there were and still are obstacles for women to overcome in politics, economics, and society, the work and accomplishments of these reformers cannot be denied. Instead they should be lauded as pioneers and victors in the women's rights movement.

Bibliography:

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Abolition- the legal prohibition and ending of slavery.

Reform- to change to a better state.

Suffrage- the right to vote, esp. in a political election.

Motivation:

1. Show the students an overhead copy of “Women’s Rights—Agree or Disagree?” (RS #1). The students will read and discuss the statements. (This can be completed in small groups, pairs, or individually. If it is necessary, the teacher may model the discussion for the first quotation.)
2. Using their own copy of “Women’s Rights—Agree or Disagree?” students should indicate whether they agree or disagree with the statements and why they feel this way. Discuss the student responses. After discussing their responses, introduce the students to the topic of women’s rights (specifically the topic of suffrage, but also include the work for abolition and education). (10 minutes)

Procedures:

1. Cooperative Learning Strategies- Organize students into groups of 3-4. Distribute a copy of “Women’s Rights DBQ” (RS #2) to each student. The students will analyze the documents and respond to the questions and prompts for each document (25-30 minutes).
2. Discuss the DBQ with students as necessary. Through the discussion, prompt students to answer the following questions:
 - a. Who generally supported women’s rights?
 - b. How did the women’s rights advocates gain support?
 - c. What methods of propaganda were utilized by either pro- or anti-women’s rights advocates?Encourage students to support their responses with evidence from the documents (7 minutes).
3. Distribute “Women’s Rights Amendment” (RS #3) to the students. The students will create a Constitutional amendment allowing for the inclusion of women’s rights. Working in their groups, students will determine which rights will be included in the amendment. They will also create a plan for the implementation of the amendment (20 minutes).

Closure:

1. Have students present their amendments to the class. (10-15 minutes depending on size of the class).

*Modification: If students need an activity to keep them focused during presentations, have them take notes about each group’s amendment. They should jot down the significant points and the potential pros/cons of each amendment and implementation plan.

RS #4- Graphic Organizer evaluating the amendments.

2. The class will vote on the amendment that would be the most realistic and/or feasible (3 minutes).

Assessment:

The completion of the DBQ and subsequent discussion will serve as an informal assessment. The completion and presentation of “Women’s Rights Amendment” (RS #3) will be a formal, formative assessment.

Extension Activities:

- Have students read and analyze the 19th amendment after the students create their own amendment.
- Create a political cartoon regarding women’s rights.

An Account of the Proceedings on the Trial of Susan B. Anthony, on the Charge of Illegal Voting, at the Presidential Election in Nov., 1872 (Rochester, N.Y., 1874; JK1899.A6 A5 Anthony).

<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/images/anthony.gif>> accessed June 25, 2007.

Susan B. Anthony is perhaps the most well known suffragist in American history. Anthony was arrested and tried for illegally voting during the 1872 presidential election and she was fined \$100. The cover of Susan B. Anthony’s trial transcript will help students understand the regulations that women faced in the days before suffrage. Students will also learn that the reformers faced severe consequences for their actions.

American Press Association. “Suffrage Parade, New York City, May 6, 1912.” 1912.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3g00000/3g05000/3g05500/3g05585r.jpg>> accessed June 25, 2007.

Parades and peaceful marches were visible indications that women were fighting for equality and they were ready to make a change in politics and society. The picture of the suffrage parade shows students who were involved in the women’s rights movement. This photograph shows white women, most likely of high socio-economic status. However, there is one woman who appears to be of non-Caucasian decent (woman on the right with her hand in front of her mouth); this might lead to an interesting discussion among the classmates as to who the woman was as well as her social status.

Coffin, George Yost. “The Apotheosis of Suffrage.” Published *Washington Post*, January 26, 1896.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3a10000/3a13000/3a13200/3a13267r.jpg>> accessed June 25, 2007.

This cartoon shows two prominent suffragists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, sitting on either side of George Washington. The students will infer that these women in particular were very influential in the women’s rights movement based on their proximity to President Washington and the “angels” next to them.

Gustin, E.W. “Election Day.” c1909.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3a50000/3a51000/3a51800/3a51845r.jpg>> accessed June 25, 2007.

In this cartoon, the mother is leaving the family to vote, while the husband is at home with the children. The cartoon demonstrates the shifts in society due to the women’s rights movement. Students should pay close attention to the expressions on both the man and woman in the cartoon in order to infer how a woman’s right to vote would impact the family.

Harris & Ewing. “National Anti-Suffrage Association.” c1911.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3a20000/3a26000/3a26200/3a26270r.jpg>> accessed June 25, 2007.

The movement for women’s rights and suffrage divided the nation along gender lines. This picture illustrates the perspective of many males during the time period—they are at the headquarters for the National Anti-Suffrage Association. The students will notice that there is a woman walking past the men, and they pay little or no attention to her.

National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. “Some Reasons Why We Oppose Votes for Women.” 1894.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/rbc/rbpe/rbpe13/rbpe130/1300130c/001dq.gif>> accessed June 25, 2007.

This document outlines reasons why some Americans were opposed to female suffrage, including the idea that women’s suffrage would force the society to take a step backwards. This document is contradictory to the “Votes for Women!” document. Students should pay close attention to the specific reasons for the opposition to suffrage which are listed in the document.

National American Woman Suffrage Association. “Votes for Women!” New York: 1912.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/rbc/rbpe/rbpe13/rbpe132/13200400/001dq.gif>> accessed June 25, 2007. This document clearly expresses the reasons that women should be able to vote. The students will be able to identify the political, economic, and social impact that women would have if they were allowed to vote. The document conflicts with the document “Some Reasons Why We Oppose Votes for Women.”

“The First Picket Line—College Day in the Picket Line.” 1917.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3a30000/3a32000/3a32300/3a32338r.jpg>> accessed June 25, 2007.

The women’s suffrage movement attracted young women, who were often observed fighting for their rights. This image shows women from American colleges and universities picketing for suffrage outside of the White House; high school students might be able to identify themselves with the picketers due to the proximity of their ages or possible activism. The students will be able to identify images in the photograph, such as the White House and some of the colleges as prominent institutions.