

## The Status of Woman – Susan B. Anthony

The status of woman, past, present, and future. By: Anthony, Susan B., published in the Arena, May 1897.

A REQUEST from THE ARENA to state what really has come of our half-century of agitation, and what is sure to come in the near future, will be used as the basis of this article.

Fifty years ago woman in the United States was without a recognized individuality in any department of life. No provision was made in public or private schools for her education in anything beyond the rudimentary branches. An educated woman was a rarity, and was gazed upon with something akin to awe. The women who were known in the world of letters, in the entire country, could be easily counted upon the ten fingers. Margaret Fuller, educated by her father, a Harvard graduate and distinguished lawyer, stood preeminently at the head, and challenged the admiration of such men as Emerson, Channing, and Greeley. In those days the women of the family were kept closely at home, carding, spinning, and weaving, making the butter and cheese, knitting and sewing, working by day and night, planning and economizing, to educate the boys of the family. Thus the girls toiled so long as they remained under the home roof, their services belonging to the father by law and by custom. Any kind of a career for a woman was a thing undreamed of. Among the poorer families the girls might go about the neighbors and earn a miserable pittance at housework or sewing. When the boy was twenty-one, the father agreed to pay him a fixed sum per annum, thenceforth, for his services, or, in default of this, he was free to carry his labor where it would receive a financial reward. No such agreement ever was made with the girls of the family. They continued to work without wages after they were twenty-one, exactly as they did before. When they married, their services were transferred to the husband, and were considered to be bountifully rewarded by food, shelter, and usually a very scanty supply of clothes. Any wages the wife might earn outside of the home belonged by law to the husband. No matter how drunken and improvident he might be; no matter how great her necessities and those of the children, if the employer paid the money to her he could be prosecuted by the husband and compelled to pay it again to him.

Cases were frequent where fathers willed all of their property to the sons, entirely cutting the daughters out. Where, however, the daughters received property, it passed directly into the sole possession of the husband, and all the rents and profits belonged to him to use as he pleased. At his death he could dispose of it by will, depriving the wife of all but what was called the "widow's dower," a life interest in one-third of that which was by right her own property. She lost not only the right to her earnings and her property, but also the right to the custody of her person and her children. The husband could apprentice the children at an early age, in spite of the mother's protest, and at his death should dispose of the children by will, even an unborn child. The wife could neither sue in legal decisions was, "The wife is dead in law," or, "Husband and wife are one, and that one the husband." According to the English common law, which then prevailed in every State in the Union except Louisiana, a man might beat his wife up to the point of endangering her life, without being liable to prosecution.

Fifty years ago no occupations were open to women except cooking, sewing, teaching, and factory work. Very few women were sufficiently educated to teach, but those who could do so received from \$4 to \$8 a month and "boarded round," while men, for exactly the same

service, received \$30 a month and board. Every woman must marry, either with or without love, for the sake of support, or be doomed to a life of utter dependence, living, after the death of parents, in the home of a married brother or sister, the drudge and burden-bearer of the family, without any financial recompense, and usually, looked upon with disrespect by the children. Women might work like galley slaves for their own relatives, receiving only their board and clothes, and hold their social position in the community; but the moment they stepped outside of the home and became wage-earners, thus securing pecuniary independence, they lost caste and were rigidly barred out from the quilting bees, the apple-parings, and all the society functions of the neighborhood. Is it any wonder that a sour and crabbed disposition was universally ascribed to spinsterhood, or that those women should be regarded as most unfortunate, doomed to a loveless, aimless, and dependent existence,--universally considered as having made a failure of life?

Scarcely less under the ban was the woman who, dared venture into the field of literature. No pen can depict the scorn and derision that expressed themselves in that word "bluestocking." The literary woman placed herself forever beyond the pale of marriage, for no man would be brave enough to take for a wife a creature who had thus unsexed herself. If she could write, it followed without question that she could not cook, sew, manage a house, or bring up children, and her name in such connection suggested at once an appalling scene of disorder and discomfort. This belief prevailed, to a great extent, in regard to a woman who attempted any vocation outside of domestic service, that by so doing she became at once and forever unfitted for the duties of wife and mother. Of all the old prejudices that cling to the hem of the woman's garments and persistently impede her progress, none holds faster than this. The idea that she owes service to man instead of to herself, and that it is her highest duty to aid his development rather than her own, will be the last to die.

In that day not even woman herself had so much as a dream of entering the professions of law, medicine, and theology. When the genius of Harriet Hosmer impelled her to take up sculpture, she travelled from one end of the country to the other begging for an opportunity to make the necessary study of anatomy. When Elizabeth Blackwell determined to consecrate her life to medicine, not one of the standard medical colleges would admit her as a student, and society ostracized her. After Antoinette Brown had graduated with high honors from Oberlin College, even that institution placed every possible obstacle in the way of her entrance into the Theological Department, and one of the faculty said: "If there were any by-law, Miss Brown, by which you could be shut out, you would not be admitted."

As for the profession of law, nobody lived in those times who had even a vision of a day when woman would enter that domain which seemed so sacredly the exclusive possession of man. Politics seemed a great deal farther away than paradise, and the most radical reformer had not the prophetic eye which could discern the woman politician.

Such was the helpless, dependent, fettered condition of woman when the first Woman's Rights Convention was called just forty-nine years ago, at Seneca Falls, N. Y., by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Half a century before this, Mary Wollstonecraft had written her "Vindication of the Rights of Woman," that matchless plea for the equality of the sexes. A quarter of a century before, Frances Wright, in connection with addresses upon other subjects demanded equal rights for women. In 1835, Ernestine L. Rose and Paulina Wright Davis circulated the first petition for property rights for women, and during the next ten years Mrs. Rose addressed the Legislature during this period. In 1847, Lucy Stone, on her return from Oberlin College, made her first woman's rights address in her brother's church in Gardner, Mass.

While there had been individual demands, from time to time, the first organized body to formulate a declaration of the rights of women was the one which met at Seneca Falls, July 19-20, 1848, and adjourned to meet at Rochester two weeks later. In the Declaration of Sentiments and the Resolutions there framed, every point was covered that, down to the present day, has been contended for by the advocates of equal rights for women. Every inequality of the existing laws and customs was carefully considered and a thorough and complete readjustment demanded. The only resolution that was not unanimously adopted was the one urging the elective franchise for women. Those who opposed it did so only because they feared it would make the movement ridiculous. But Mrs. Stanton and Frederick Douglass, seeing that the power to make laws and choose rulers was the right by which all others could be secured, persistently advocated the resolution and at last carried it by a good majority.

The proceedings of this convention were ridiculed by the press and denounced by the pulpit from one end of the country to the other. Its demands were considered the most absurd and preposterous that could be made, and so severe was the storm which raged that many who had signed the Declaration made haste to withdraw their names. Now, at the end of half a century, we find that, with few exceptions, all of the demands formulated at this convention have been granted. The great exception is the yielding of political rights, and toward this one point are directed now all the batteries of scorn, of ridicule, of denunciation that formerly poured their fire along the line. Although not one of the predicted calamities occurred upon the granting of other demands, the world is asked to believe that all of them will happen if this last stronghold is surrendered.

There is not space to follow the history of the last fifty years and study the methods by which these victories have been gained, but there is not one foot of advanced ground upon which women stand to-day that has not been obtained through the hard-fought battles of other women. The close of this nineteenth century finds every trade, vocation, and profession open to women, and every opportunity at their command for preparing themselves to follow these occupations. The girls as well as the boys of a family now fit themselves for such careers as their tastes and abilities permit. A vast amount of the household drudgery, that once monopolized the whole time and strength of the mother and daughters, has been outside and turned over to machinery in vast establishments. A money value is placed upon the labor of women. The ban of social ostracism has been largely removed from the woman wage-earner. She who can make for herself a place of distinction in any line of work receives commendation instead of condemnation. woman is no longer compelled to marry for support but may herself make her own home and earn her own financial independence.

With but few exceptions, the highest institutions of learning in the land are as freely opened to girls as to boys, and they may receive their degrees at legal, medical, and theological colleges, and practise their professions without hindrance. In the world of literature and art women divide the honors with men; and our civil-service rules have secured for them many thousands of remunerative positions under the Government.

It is especially worthy of note that along with this general advancement of women has come a marked improvement in households methods. Woman's increased intelligence manifests itself in this department as conspicuously as in any other. Education, culture, mental discipline, business training develop far more capable mothers and housewives than were possible under the old regime. Men of the present generation give especial thought to comradeship in the selection of a wife, and she is no less desirable in their eyes because she is a college graduate or has learned the value and the management of money through having earned it.

There has been a radical revolution in the legal status of woman. In most States old common law has been annulled by legislative enactment, through which partial justice, at least, has been done to married women. In nearly every State they may retain and control property owned at marriage and all they may receive by gift or inheritance thereafter, and also their earnings outside the home. They may sue and be sued, testify in the courts, and carry on business in their own name, but in no State have wives any ownership in the joint earnings. In six or seven States mothers have equal guardianship of the children. While in most States the divorce laws are the same for men and women, they never can bear equally upon both while all the property earned during marriage belongs wholly to the husband. There has been such a modification in public sentiment, however, that, in most cases, courts and juries show a marked leniency toward women.

The department of politics has been slowest to give admission to women. Suffrage is the pivotal right, and if it could have been secured at the beginning, women would not have been half a century in gaining the privileges enumerated above, for privileges they must be called so long as others may either give or take them away. If women could make the laws or elect those who make them, they would be in the position of sovereigns instead of subjects. Were they the political peers of man they could command instead of having to beg, petition, and pray. Can it be possible it is for this reason that men have been so determined in their opposition to grant to women political power?

But even this stronghold is beginning to yield to the long and steady pressure. In twenty-five States women possess suffrage in school matters; in four States they have a limited suffrage in local affairs; in one State they have municipal suffrage; in four States they have full suffrage, local, state, and national. Women are becoming more and more interested in political questions and public affairs. Every campaign sees greater numbers in attendance at the meetings, and able woman speakers are now found upon the platforms of all parties. Especial efforts are made by politicians to obtain the support of women, and during the last campaign one of the Presidential candidates held special meetings for women in the large cities throughout the country. Some of the finest political writing in the great newspaper of the day is done by women, and the papers are extensively read by women of all classes. In many of the large cities women have formed civic clubs and are exercising a distinctive influence in municipal matters. In most of the States of the Union women are eligible for many offices, State and County Superintendents, Registers of Deeds, etc. They are Deputies to State, County, and City Officials, notaries public, State Librarians, and enrolling and engrossing clerks in the Legislatures.

It follows, as a natural result, that in the States where women vote they are eligible to all offices. They have been sent as delegates to National Conventions, made Presidential electors, and are sitting to-day as members in both the Upper and Lower Houses of the Legislatures. In some towns all the offices are filled by women. These radical changes have been effected without any social upheaval or domestic earthquakes, family relations have suffered no disastrous changes, and the men of the States where women vote furnish the strongest testimony in favor of woman suffrage.

There is no more striking illustration of the progress that has been made by woman that that afforded by her changed position in the Church. Under the old regime the Quakers were only sect who recognized the equality of women. Other denominations enforced the command of St. Paul, that women should keep silence in the churches. A few allowed the women to lift up their voices in class and prayer meetings, but they had no vote in matters of church government. Even the missionary and charity work was in the hands of men.

Now the Unitarians, Universalists, Congregationalists, Wesleyan and Protestant Methodists, Christians, Free-Will Baptists, and possibly a few others ordain women as ministers, and many parishes, in all parts of the country, are presided over by women preachers. The charitable and missionary work of the churches is practically turned over to women, who raise and disburse immense sums of money. While many of the great denominations still refuse to ordain women, to allow them seat in their councils or a vote in matters of church government, yet women themselves are, in a large measure, responsible for this state of affairs. Forming, as they do, from two-thirds to three-fourths of the membership, raising the greater part of the funds and carrying on the active work of the church, when they unite their forces and assert their rights, the small minority of men, who have usurped the authority, will be obliged to yield to their just demands. The creeds of the churches will recognize woman's equality before God, as the codes of the States have acknowledged it before man and the law.

By far the larger part of the progressive movements just enumerated have taken place during the last twenty-five years, and the progress has been most rapid during the last half of this quarter of a century. With the advantages already obtained, with the great liberalizing of public sentiment, and with the actual proof that the results of enlarged opportunities for women have been for the betterment of society, the next decade ought to see the completion of the struggle for the equality of the sexes. The hardest of the battles have been fought, and, while there is still need for both generals and soldiers, the greatest necessity is for the body of women to take possession and hold the ground that has been gained. It is not sufficient that women should fill positions as well as men, they must give vastly better satisfaction in order to prove their claims. There is an urgent demand for women of the highest character and intelligence, because the whole sex will be judged by the few who come forward to assume these new duties.

While by the momentum already gained the reforms demanded would eventually come, women have learned the value of organization and united, systematic work in securing the best and speediest results. It is no longer necessary to make an effort for further educational facilities. The few universities which still close their doors to women will ultimately be compelled to open them by the exigencies of the situation. There are no longer any fences around the industrial field, although men will continue to have the best pickings in the pasture so long as women are disfranchised. There will be a gradual yielding of the laws in recognition of woman's improved position in all departments, but here also there never will be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect law-makers. In view of this indisputable fact, the advanced thinkers are agreed that the strongest efforts should be concentrated upon this point.

From that little convention at Seneca Falls, with a following of a handful of women scattered through half-a-dozen different States, we have now the great National Association, with headquarters in New York City, and auxiliaries in almost every State in the Union. These State bodies are effecting a thorough system of county and local organizations for the purpose of securing legislation favorable to women, and especially to obtain amendments to their State Constitutions. As evidence of the progress of public opinion, more than half of the Legislatures in session, during the past winter, have discussed and voted upon bills for the enfranchisement of women, and in most of them they were adopted by one branch and lost by a very small majority in the other. The Legislatures of Washington and South Dakota have submitted woman-suffrage amendments to their electors for 1898, and vigorous campaigns will be made in those States during the next two years. For a quarter of a century Wyoming has stood as a conspicuous object-lesson in woman suffrage, and is now reinforced by the three neighboring States of Colorado, Utah, and Idaho. With this central

group, standing on the very crest of the Rocky Mountains, the spirit of justice and freedom for women cannot fail to descend upon all the Western and Northwestern States. No one who makes a careful study of this question can help but believe that, in a very few years, all the States west of the Mississippi river will have enfranchised their women.

While the efforts of each State are concentrated upon its own Legislature, all of the States combined in the national organization are directing their energies toward securing a Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. The demands of this body have been received with respectful and encouraging attention from Congress. Hearings have been granted by the Committees of both Houses, resulting, in a number of instances, in favorable reports. Upon one occasion the question was brought to a discussion in the Senate, and received the affirmative vote of one-third of the members.

Until woman has obtained "that right protective of all other rights -- the ballot," this agitation must still go on, absorbing the time and the energy of our best and strongest women. Who can measure the advantages that would result if the magnificent abilities of these women could be devoted to the needs of government, society, home, instead of being consumed in the struggle to obtain their birthright of individual freedom? Until this can be gained we can never know, we cannot even prophesy, the capacity and power of woman for the uplifting of humanity. It may be delayed longer than we think, it may be here sooner than we expect, but the day will come when man will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in the councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union between the sexes, that shall result in the highest development of the race. What this shall be we may not attempt to define, but this we know, that only good can come to the individual or to the nation through the rendering of exact justice.

The Essential Documents of American History was compiled by Norman P. Desmarais and James H. McGovern of Providence College.

[Also The Education of Women](#)

[Also Who Will Fight for the Worth of Women's Work](#)

~~~~~

BY SUSAN B. ANTHONY