

On July 19, 1848, Frederick Douglass, a famous abolitionist, stood before a crowd at the Seneca Falls Convention to declare his support for women's rights. Both the Abolition Movement and Women's Rights Movement believed in the inherent rights of all people, regardless of race or gender. It was this similarity that drew women into the abolitionist cause. Just two decades later, though, Douglass and other abolitionists would argue that suffrage for Black men came above all else, and that women would have to wait. Unfortunately, it wasn't until the 20th century that the women's suffrage movement would finally succeed. Although the abolitionist and women's rights movements initially came together out of shared ideals, they were ultimately forced to develop independently because the abolitionists were hesitant to assist the Women's Rights Movement in fear of losing their own support, prioritized only Black suffrage even after accomplishing abolition, and sided with the Republicans, essentially cutting women out of the movement.

Historically, the role of a woman was defined by her position in the family. Under the doctrine of coverture, a married woman had no right to own property, sign contracts, or speak in public forums.¹ Historian Louise Michele Newman writes, "Abolitionist-suffragists like Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others had argued before the Civil War that white women and black men shared an analogous type of bondage. Black men were enslaved through the institution of slavery, white women through the institution of patriarchal marriage."² It was through the Abolitionist Movement that many women realized they too were being denied basic rights and began to confront this injustice directly.

¹ Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle : The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 64.

² Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights : The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 80.

The technological advancements that boosted the industrial economy and expanded public life through the Civil War transformed women's roles in practice; while the men were away at the front, women ran businesses, staffed hospitals, and led relief organizations.³ This level of autonomy gave women a chance to collaborate to create change. Women's rights activists from across the country began to work closely with abolition movements to stress the common humanity of all people, regardless of race and gender. Following the Civil War, the Reconstruction era, a period focused on redefining social standards, gave them a chance to pursue radical change. The reality of slavery's defeat accelerated reformers' hopes for even greater changes in the future. For the progress of the women's rights and abolition movements, achieving suffrage was now at the forefront of their goals. Yet, less than five years after the war ended, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments granted citizenship and voting rights to Black men while excluding all women. This betrayal pushed the women's rights movement further. Although the Union's victory significantly enhanced abolitionists' political influence, it did not automatically benefit the women's suffrage movement.

Even though the abolitionists initially inspired early feminists, in reality they offered minimal support for the women's rights movement. At the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, Elizabeth took inspiration from the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's anti-clerical evangelicalism. The women realized that the clergy was the major force that controlled women's moral energies and kept pietistic activism from becoming political activism.⁴ Stanton recalled in her speech at the 1860 anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, "The darkness and gloom of a false theology, I was slowly sawing off the chains and my spiritual bondage, when,

³ Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 57.

⁴ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage : The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 32.

for the first time, I met Garrison in London. A few bold strokes from the hammer of his truth, I was free!”⁵ This demonstrates the spirit the abolitionist movement provided to suffragists, and with that small burst of motivation and hope, Stanton and other passionate women held the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Falls.

Frederick Douglass, the only African American attendee at the Seneca Falls convention in New York, saw many similarities between the goals of his own abolition movement and the women’s, and praised women for their activism. Yet, he wrote in reflection, “While it is impossible for us to go into the subject at length and dispose of the various objections which are often urged against such a doctrine as that of female equality, we are free to say that in respect to political rights, we hold women to be just entitled to all we claim for men.”⁶ This reveals Douglass’s reluctance to fight for women’s rights. While the women had been actively fighting for racial equality, many abolitionists shared the same mindset as Douglass⁷; they appreciated the idea of gender equality, yet were hesitant in creating change for it. Douglass, continuing his reflection, noted, “Eight years ago, a number of persons...actually abandoned the anti-slavery cause, lest by giving their influence in that direction, they might possibly be giving countenance to the dangerous heresy that woman, in respect to rights, stands on an equal footing with man.”⁸ He believed the freedom for Black men was the more urgent and achievable goal, and that attaching women’s rights to it risked its success. People giving up the fight for anti-slavery in fear of helping the women further justified his worries that many more supporters would leave. The very movement that gave women inspiration to stand up contradicted itself; the abolitionists

⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Address By ECS To The American Anti-Slavery Society,” in *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 409.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, “The Rights Of Women,” *The North Star*, New York, July 28, 1848.

⁷ DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*, 54.

⁸ Douglass, “The Rights Of Women.”

were willing to involve women in the cause, but not share the cost of fighting for them in fear of hindering their own movement.

After the Civil War, abolitionists abandoned the feminists almost entirely in order to concentrate most of their effort on Black suffrage, effectively betraying their alliance. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Stanton and the National Loyal Women's League pushed for a constitutional Amendment abolishing slavery, which, after ratification, immediately raised the issue of the political status of black people. This emancipation of slaves shook American politics and pushed abolitionists closer to the center of national political power and made them much more reluctant to support feminist demands than they had been before the war.⁹ Wendell Phillips, the abolitionist who replaced Garrison as president of the American Anti-Slavery Society after the Civil War, argued that if the ex-slaves did not have the political weapons to protect themselves against their former owners, the abolition of slavery would prove a worthless victory.¹⁰ Along with his repeated saying, "This is the Negro's Hour,"¹¹ he emphasized how important black suffrage was to the abolitionists, and further clarified that his immediate priority was not women's suffrage. The abolitionists were in a position to change the future of mankind, and they weren't going to throw that chance away. In response to Phillips, Stanton wrote:

For the last 30 years the representative women of the nation have done their uttermost to secure freedom for the Negro, and so long as he was lowest his scale of being we were willing to press his claims. We are asking ourselves where there would not be wiser in the Constitutional door is open, to push in by the negro's side, and thus make the gap so wide

⁹ DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*, 53.

¹⁰ Ibid, 56.

¹¹ Ibid.

that no privileged class could ever again close it against the humble citizen of the Republic.¹²

Here, she pleads to let the Fifteenth Amendment include women by detailing how hard they have worked to help black men. The female suffragists felt they were owed more support after all the effort they put in, which implies that instead of talking directly to the general American populace, they were speaking to freed black men and asking them for help in creating change for women. Ultimately, when the abolitionists pursued Black male suffrage over female suffrage, it was clear they wouldn't expend much energy on women's rights, regardless of the effort women poured into helping them.

The lack of Republican support eventually pushed the women to develop their own political independence, focusing more specifically on women's rights and suffrage instead of racial equality. Historian Ellen Carol DuBois writes, "Because the abolitionists worked for black suffrage mainly within the framework of the Republican party, remaining outside of partisan politics was impossible."¹³ This alliance with the Republican Party meant that once they decided the Fifteenth Amendment would only extend suffrage to Black men, women would be shut out of mainstream reform. This would force them to seek support somewhere else, no matter how morally compromising it would be. The abolitionists believed that the demand for women's enfranchisement was a burden they could not carry, and, because women had previously accepted the political leadership of the American Anti-Slavery Society, they expected them to do so during Reconstruction.¹⁴ This further silenced women's voices in the fight for suffrage and

¹² Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Letter to Wendell Phillips, "To Wendell Phillips," December 26, 1865, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, ed. Theodore Stanton (New York Times, 1969), 109.

¹³ DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*, 57.

¹⁴ Ibid.

infuriated women. “Garrison, Phillips, and Sumner, in a treatment of our question to-day, prove that we must not trust any of you,” Stanton writes furiously in a letter to T. W. Higginson, “My dear friend, we are right in our present position. We demand in the reconstruction, suffrage for all the citizens of the republic.”¹⁵ This shows her initiative to work separately from the abolitionists to secure equal rights for everyone, because she realizes that women weren’t going to achieve their reform if they kept waiting for the abolitionists to help.

To gain support, Stanton started working with the Democrats. In a letter to Martha C. Wright, she writes, “We have had a thousand petitions [for female suffrage] printed, and when they are filled they will be sent to democratic members who will present them to the House...to shame those hypocritical Republicans.”¹⁶ She criticises the hypocrisy of the abolitionists' actions and points out the importance of soliciting Democratic support because Republican cooperation seemed impossible. Interestingly enough, the Democrats opposed the Fifteenth Amendment because they didn’t want Black men to vote, and were a party made up primarily of white supremacists. Stanton’s commitment to working with them implies that she was desperate enough to completely contradict her morals, hinting that this bold decision was final. In this unexpected shift, Stanton would publicly predict that, “Enfranchising [Black men under the Fifteenth Amendment] would culminate in fearful outrages on womanhood especially in the southern states,”¹⁷ desperate to put Black men at a disadvantage by inciting fear in white people. Historian Faye E. Dudden also notes that, “[Stanton] would eventually write of ‘slender threads’ of logic that linked ‘hideous overt acts’ of rape to ‘creeds and codes that make an aristocracy of sex,’ but there were no threads and the logic was faulty.”¹⁸ So, not only did she seek white

¹⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Letter to T. W. Higginson, "To T.W. Higginson," January 13, 1868, 120.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Letter to Martha C. Wright, "To Martha C. Wright," January 6, 1866, 111.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Women and Black Men," *Revolution* (New York), February 4, 1869.

¹⁸ Faye E. Dudden, *Fighting Chance : The Struggle over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 206.

supremacists' help, but began to falsely victimize white women under Black men to instigate hate against the Republicans. Stanton's dramatic use of racist rhetoric signifies the extent to which the Republican Party drove its women supporters to compromise their abolitionist principles in an effort to gain political influence.

In summation, the extreme separation between the abolitionists and women's rights activists after the Civil War was a pivotal moment in American history. It demonstrated the necessity of independent movements when alliances faced the limits of shared beliefs. Although both movements were initially brought together with goals for equality, the abolitionists' reluctance to reciprocate support, their prioritization of Black male suffrage, and new political power left women's rights activists with no choice but to go against their morals and seek new support. The split between the abolitionist and feminist movements was necessary because this independence ultimately gave the women's rights movement the political autonomy and determination it needed to progress. In the eyes of women suffragists, if they were ever going to achieve equality, they would have to fight for it themselves, even if it was through racist extremes.

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