



Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Stand for Justice

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, a Second Great Awakening, or religious revival, swept through the United States. The evangelical fervor spawned numerous reform movements such as abolitionism, temperance, and prison reform. Reformers sought to alleviate harsh conditions, work for equality for all, eliminate vice, and create a utopian society. In general, they wanted to bring about a more just society.

These reform movements created organizations that engaged in politics and civil society. They sent out speakers to raise awareness, spread knowledge through pamphlets and newspapers, lobbied politicians in various levels of government, and learned how to create strong organizations. Many of the reform movements were controversial because of the change they sought. For example, the abolitionists had many detractors and were often the victims of mob violence.

Women were able to enter public life and participate in all of the reform movements because of the perception that they possessed an inherent moral quality that men lacked. Women, however, generally suffered inequality in most social and political institutions. They could not vote, could not own property, and could not serve on juries. Women did not have the same educational or economic opportunities as men. When women engaged in other reform movements for equality and justice, they began to gain a greater understanding of their own inequality. Moreover, women even experienced discrimination in the reform movements they joined.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the pioneers for women's rights. She was the guiding force behind the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which argued for equal rights, including women's suffrage. Although the goal of women's suffrage would not be achieved until decades later, when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified after World War I, the struggle for justice for women began with Stanton's courageous actions.

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In the spring of 1840, twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth Cady Stanton sailed to London on her honeymoon with her new husband, Henry Stanton. They were among forty Americans who were traveling across the Atlantic to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Besides getting to know his wife better, Henry took advantage of the trip to provide her with a reading list in abolitionist tracts and to tutor her on the fundamentals of the anti-slavery movement.

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On Friday, June 12, the meeting of some 500 abolitionists convened in Freemasons' Hall. Elizabeth and dozens of other women bristled when they were seated behind the bar and therefore not seated on the floor of the convention as official participants. Some American men spoke up to protest the unequal treatment of women. One said his credentials were no more important than any of the women. Another praised women for being the first leaders of the abolitionist movement. Wendell Phillips, a famous abolitionist, stated that excluding women was akin to excluding black delegates. William Lloyd Garrison, who had not yet arrived, later averred that, "If women should be excluded from its deliberation, my interest in [the convention] would be about destroyed." Nevertheless, the English hosts were adamant that the women would not be seated however high the regard they had for the ladies because it was the custom of the country. It was a turning point in Stanton's life.

Stanton soon struck up a friendship with women's rights advocate Lucretia Mott. Stanton revered the older Mott and was struck by her oratorical ability when she preached at a London Unitarian Church. "Mrs. Mott was to me an entire new revelation of womanhood," Stanton recalled. During a sightseeing walk, the two women agreed to hold a convention and organize a society dedicated to women's rights. After lingering in London on their honeymoon, the newlyweds sailed home in December with Elizabeth dedicated to a new cause for justice.

Over the next few years, the couple had several children and moved to Boston, where Henry practiced law. Stanton's time was largely consumed by domestic affairs, though she was still very interested in women's rights. When Elizabeth's father offered her a piece of property with a farmhouse in her own name in 1847, the family moved to the smaller Seneca Falls in upstate New York. The humble town would soon be the site of a historic meeting for women's rights.

On July 19, a blistering hot summer day, more than 100 women assembled in Wesleyan Chapel in their long skirts. Their goal was to "discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women," and their leaders included Stanton and Mott. During the first day, Stanton and others delivered speeches on the subordination of women and their inequality.

The following day was just as hot, but more than 300 women and men squeezed into the crowded church to consider the Declaration of Sentiments and a series of resolutions. Henry Stanton had warned his wife that if she planned to bring up women's suffrage, he would stay away. "You will turn the proceedings into a farce," he told her. Knowing his wife's strong spirit and that she would still advocate women's suffrage, he spent the day in another town.

The assemblage heard the Declaration of Sentiments and listened to familiar words, as it was modeled after the assertion of universal rights in the Declaration of Independence, though with a significant alteration. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal," the document proclaimed. Just as the original Declaration had a list of grievances against George III, the Declaration of Sentiments included a list of grievances and stated that the "history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman."

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The list of grievances included examples of political, civil, economic, and educational inequality. Men had compelled women to follow laws “in the formation of which she had no voice.” It continued, “He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.” Moreover, “He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.” Men had allowed women “but a subordinate position” in church affairs. Most importantly, and most controversially, their declaration asserted: “It is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.”

Although the Declaration of Sentiments was a document ahead of its time in proposing women’s equality, few of its proposals were as radical as suffrage. Mott told Stanton to not press for passage of the resolution, warning, “Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous.” However, Stanton pressed forward and demanded a vote. The Quaker women attending, who were not interested in civil affairs, demurred. Frederick Douglass was the only man to support the resolution. In the end, the resolution barely passed; as predicted, it became the center of ridicule in the press. Of the 68 women and 32 men who signed the convention’s statement, several were cowed by the public clamor and removed their names.

Stanton never considered withdrawing her signature. The individual right to vote was at the core of citizenship and political participation in the republic. She believed that women’s suffrage was the “stronghold of the fortress” of women’s equality. The long struggle for women’s suffrage began with the unflagging fortitude of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her dedication to the cause of justice for women.