



In this painting, women are represented in traditional ways—shy, in the background, or serving men. During the Era of Reform, many women began to work to change and expand the way women were viewed.

18.6 Equal Rights for Women

Women abolitionists were in a strange position. They were trying to convince lawmakers to make slavery illegal, yet they themselves could not vote or hold office. They worked to raise money for the movement, yet their own money and property were controlled by their fathers and husbands. They spoke out against slave beatings, yet their husbands could discipline them whenever they wanted.

Even wealthy women like the Grimke sisters started to see that women and slaves had much in common. “What then can woman do for the slave,” asked Angelina, “when she herself is under the feet of man and shamed into silence?”

The Struggle Begins The organized movement for women’s rights was sparked by the friendship between Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two women met in 1840 at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. When they arrived, they were outraged to discover that women were not allowed to speak at the meeting. The men who ran the convention even made women sit in the balcony, behind a curtain!

The men’s decision may have backfired, because it was in the balcony that Mott and Stanton met. At first glance, the two women seemed quite different. Mott was 47 years old, the mother of four children, and an active reformer. Inspired by the Grimke sisters and her own Quaker faith, she had preached against slavery in both white and black churches. She had also helped Prudence Crandall try to find students for her school for black girls.

Stanton was 25 years old and newly married. She had never spoken in public. As a young girl, she had overheard women beg her father, a judge, to protect them from husbands who had beaten them. He had to tell them that there was no law against it. Later, she attended Troy Female Seminary, the nation's first high school for girls. She knew from her studies in history that America did not treat women fairly. When she met Lucretia Mott in London, she readily agreed that something had to be done about the injustices suffered by women.

Unequal Treatment of Women Even a fine education like Stanton's did not assure women equal treatment. When Lucy Stone graduated from Oberlin College, the faculty invited her to write a speech. But a man would have to give the speech, since the school would not allow women to speak in public! Stone refused. After graduation, she spoke out for women's rights. Because women could not vote, she refused to pay property taxes. "Woman suffer taxation," she said, "and yet have no representation."

Stone's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Blackwell, wanted to be a doctor. She knew mathematics, science, and history. She had even been tutored by a helpful doctor. Yet she was rejected by 29 medical schools before one finally accepted her. She graduated at the top of her class, becoming the country's first female doctor. Still, no hospitals or doctors would agree to work with her.

To overcome such barriers, women would have to work together. By the time Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott left London, they had decided "to hold a convention...and form a society to advocate the rights of women."

Declaration of Sentiments
A formal statement of injustices suffered by women, written by the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention. *Sentiments* means "beliefs" or "convictions."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention. The image below shows her reading the Declaration of Sentiments to the participants at the convention.

