STANTON, ELIZABETH CADY
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Women's Rights Advocate

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a founder of the organized women's movement in the United States. Stanton, who rarely shied from controversy, considered the political, social, and religious aspects when discussing or writing about the oppression of women. As a theorist, Stanton established the broad concerns of the women's rights movement, achieving a position of preeminence within the movement.

Abolitionist Background

Stanton, the daughter of a lawyer, was given the best education available to women at the time. Influenced by her cousin Gerrit Smith, a prominent abolitionist, she joined the antislavery movement and met her husband, Henry B. Stanton, an officer in the New York State Anti-Slavery Society. They married in 1840, partly so that they could travel together to London for the international anti-slavery convention. There Stanton became acquainted with Quaker reformer Lucretia Mott, who introduced her to women's rights issues.

Seneca Falls and the Beginning of the Women's Rights Movement

In 1847, Stanton moved to Seneca Falls, New York, and, with Mott's help, organized the first women's rights convention the following year. For the convention, Stanton, with input from Mott and several others, developed the Declaration of Sentiments, which became the founding document of the women's rights movement. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, it described women's frustrations with their status and, at Stanton's insistence, included a resolution calling for woman suffrage. The right to vote, which briefly some New Jersey women held, did not exist for women anywhere in the United States and even Mott feared inclusion of the suffrage proposition would outrage the public. While some at the conference hesitated, Stanton argued her point. Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass spoke out in support of Stanton and ultimately the two convinced the audience that the resolution should be passed. In the end, 68 women and 32 men signed the document.

Partnership

In 1851, Stanton met reformer Susan B. Anthony, who was then focusing her energy on temperance reform. When Anthony founded the Women's State Temperance Society of New York in 1852, she asked Stanton to serve as the first president, thus beginning a long partnership of advocacy. Stanton's skills as a writer and thinker, combined with Anthony's organizational skill, were a formidable combination. Even so, Stanton's controversial stands often put the two at odds with more conservative reformers. In her inaugural address for the Temperance Society, Stanton articulated a women's rights
platform, advocating, among other rights, the right to divorce for those married to alcoholics. The following year, she was deposed as president by conservative members who wanted the organization to focus again exclusively on temperance. Stanton left the organization as did Anthony.

During the 1850s, Stanton turned her attention to the rights of married women. In 1854, she became the first woman to address the New York State Legislature, arguing for an omnibus women's rights bill. When the legislature failed to act, she again addressed that body in an 1860 speech that equated the situation of married women with that of slaves. With the exception of suffrage, the legislature ultimately adopted the legal reforms she requested, including improved inheritance laws and the recognition of mothers as joint guardians of their children.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Stanton increased her commitment to abolition; in 1863, she and Anthony founded the Woman's National Loyal League, which called for immediate emancipation of all slaves, not just those in states at war with the Union as provided in the Emancipation Proclamation. Once slavery was abolished by Amendment XIII, the organization considered its work complete. Stanton was optimistic about gaining more rights and greater equality for women after the war—basing some of her hope on the loyalty that had been shown to the Union by women's and antislavery organizations and activists.

### Reconstruction and Controversy

Stanton resumed her work on women's rights following the war, but in her quest for woman suffrage, she would again find both disappointment and controversy. In 1866, she helped found the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) in an effort to push for equal rights for both women and blacks. When it became apparent that woman suffrage and black male suffrage would not be achieved concurrently, Stanton spoke out against Amendment XV, which proposed universal male suffrage. Despite Stanton's strong abolitionist background, she believed that former slaves should not receive the vote before educated white women. In 1869, Stanton left the AERA, based on their support of Amendment XV, and cofounded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) with Anthony. Women's rights activists who had backed the amendment founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA)—for more than twenty years the suffrage movement was split.

The NWSA allowed Stanton to continue to make the intellectual and reasoned case for women's rights. Stanton provided the ideological framework for the organization while Anthony managed the group's daily operations. The women also began a newspaper, the *Revolution*, in 1868. As the main writer and editor, Stanton provoked controversy through her criticism of the Republican Party's weak stance on women's rights, her support of labor's right to strike, and equal pay for equal work. Stanton developed her views on a range of women's rights issues in the newspaper; however, maintaining its financial viability proved too difficult—in 1870, the *Revolution* ceased publication. In addition to writing, Stanton spent eight months of each year between 1870 and 1880 lecturing. Suffrage was always an important issue for Stanton, but her lectures often gave attention to other elements of women's rights, including sexuality, education, and liberalization of divorce laws.

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Stanton also made a symbolic gesture for women's rights when she became the first female candidate for Congress. Women could not vote but could hold office if elected. In 1866, Stanton announced her candidacy for the congressional seat of New York City's 8th district. Stanton ran as an independent on a platform of free speech, free trade, and universal suffrage. While she received only 24 votes, her candidacy gave renewed visibility to the struggle for women's rights and the inequities still present within the United States.

Stanton's strong opinions led her to be somewhat marginalized by her colleagues, especially by those activists concerned exclusively with suffrage. Increasingly dissatisfied by criticism from within the movement, Stanton largely avoided women's rights conventions, preferring to lecture or write. Stanton, along with Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage, composed the Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States for the 1876 centennial celebration in Philadelphia. This document found a major source of women's oppression within the government. In the same year, Stanton, Anthony, and Gage began an ambitious project to write about the struggle for equality in a multivolume work, *The History of Woman Suffrage*.

In 1890, at the behest of Anthony, Stanton accepted the position of president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, a group formed from the merger of the NWSA and the AWSA. Stanton proved to be too radical for conservative women in the organization and retired in 1892. She was further marginalized after the 1895 publication of *The Woman's Bible*, which refuted the common perception that the Bible sanctioned the subordination of women. Although Stanton considered it to be one of her greatest intellectual achievements, the NAWSA distanced itself from the book and from the author.

Stanton died in 1902, without living to see women enfranchised. However, her theories about women's rights would serve as a framework for later activists.

**Bibliography and Further Reading**


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