

Stanton's Letter to the Women's Rights Convention



Many women were active in reform movements throughout the 19th century, including the Foreign Mission Movement, the Temperance Movement (anti-alcohol) and the Abolition Movement (anti-slavery). Out of their activism in these other movements grew women's desires for their own rights, including suffrage (the right to vote, here called "the elective franchise"). In the letter below, women's rights leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton answers the opponents to women's suffrage. Note how the issue of slavery also emerges in Stanton's letter.

Letter from Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Read before the 1850 Woman's Rights Convention, Worcester.

My Dear Friend:

As you have handed over to me the case of those women who have fears in regard to the propriety of woman's exercising her political rights, I would gladly embrace this opportunity to address them through your Convention.

No one denies our right to the elective franchise, unless we except those who go against all human governments, and the non-resistant, who condemns a government of force, though I think the latter might consistently contend for the right, even if she might not herself choose to exercise it. But to those who believe in having a government - to those who believe that no just government can be formed without the consent of the governed - to them would I appeal, and of them do I demand some good reason why one half of the citizens of this Republic have no voice in the laws which govern them.

. . . . Some tell us that if woman should interest herself in political affairs, it would destroy all domestic harmony. What, say they, would be the consequence, if husband and wife should not agree in their views of political economy? Because, forsooth, husband and wife may chance to differ in their theological sentiments, shall woman have no religion? Because she may not choose to worship at the same altar with her liege lord, must she of necessity do up all her worshipping in private, in her own closet? Because she might choose to deposit her vote for righteous rulers - such as

love justice, mercy, truth, and oppose a husband, father, or brother, who would, by their votes, place political power in the hands of unprincipled men, swearing, fighting, leaders of armies, rumsellers and drunkards, slaveholders and prating northern hypocrites, who would surrender the poor panting fugitive from bondage into the hands of his blood-thirsty pursuers -- shall she not vote at all? It is high time that men learned to tolerate independence of thought and opinion in the women of their household.

. . . Much of this talk about domestic harmony is the sheerest humbug. Look around among your whole circle of friends, and tell me, you who know what transpires behind the curtain, how many truly harmonious households have we now. Quiet households we may have, but submission and harmony produce very different states of quietness. There is no true happiness where there is subordination -- no harmony without freedom.

But, say some, would you have women vote? What, refined, delicate women at the polls, mingling in such scenes of violence and vulgarity! By all means, where there is so much to be feared for the pure, the innocent, the noble, the mother surely should be there to watch and guard her sons who are to encounter such stormy, dangerous scenes at the tender age of twenty-one. Much is said of woman's influence: might not her presence do much toward softening down this violence, refining this vulgarity? . . .

But if woman votes, would you have her hold office? Most certainly would we have woman hold office. We would have man and woman what God intended they should be, companions for each other, always together, in counsel, government, and every department of industry. If they have homes and children, we would have them stay there, educate their children, provide well for their physical wants, and share in each other's daily trials and cares. Children need the watchful care and wise teachings of fathers as well as of mothers. No man should give up a profitable business, leave his wife and children month after month, and year after year, and make his home desolate for any false ideas of patriotism, for any vain love of display or ambition for fame and distinction. The highest, holiest duty of both father and mother is to their children and each other, and when they can show to the world a well-developed, wisely-governed family, then let the State profit by their experience. Having done their duty at home, let them together sit in our national councils. The violence, rowdyism, and vulgarity which now characterize our Congressional Halls, show us clearly that "it is not good for man to be alone." The purifying, elevating, softening influence of woman is a most healthful restraint on him at all times and in all places. We have many noble women in our land, free from all domestic incumbrances, who might grace a Senate chamber, and for whose services the country might gladly forego all the noise, bluster, and folly of one-half the male dolts who now flourish there and pocket their eight dollars a day.

The most casual observer can see that there is some essential element wanting in the political organization of our Republic. The voice of woman has been silenced, but man cannot fulfil his destiny alone -- he cannot redeem his race unaided. There must be a great national heart, as well as head; and there are deep and tender chords of sympathy and love that woman can touch more skillfully than man. The earth has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation, for woman has never yet stood the equal with man. . . .

Yours truly,
E. C. STANTON.