Chapter 15 Lesson 3

The Women's Movement

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How do new ideas change the way people live?

Women began the long quest for expanded rights, including the right to vote, in the mid-1800s.

Reform for Women

SS.8.A.1.2, SS.8.A.4.8, SS.8.A.4.14, SS.8.C.1.4, SS.8.C.1.6, SS.8.E.2.1, LA.8.1.6.1, LA.8.1.6.2

What did women do to win equal rights?

For women such as Lucretia Mott, causes such as abolition and women's rights were linked. Like many other women reformers, Mott was a Quaker. Quaker women enjoyed an unusual degree of equality in their communities. Mott was actively involved in helping runaway enslaved workers. She organized the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. At an antislavery convention in London, Mott met Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two found they also shared an interest in women's rights.

The Seneca Falls Convention

In July 1848, Stanton and Mott helped organize the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. About 300 people, including 40 men, attended.

A highlight of the convention was debate over a Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. These resolutions called for an end to laws that discriminated against women. They also demanded that women be allowed to enter the all-male world of trades, professions, and businesses. The most controversial issue, however, was the call for woman suffrage, or the right to vote in elections.

Elizabeth Stanton insisted the resolutions include a demand for woman suffrage. Some delegates worried that the idea was too radical. Mott told her friend, "Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous." Standing with Stanton, Frederick Douglass argued powerfully for women's right to vote. After a heated debate, the convention voted to include in their declaration the demand for woman suffrage in the United States.

The Seneca Falls Declaration

The first women's rights convention called for women's equality and for their right to vote, to speak publicly, and to run for office. The convention issued a Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions modeled on the Declaration of Independence. Just as Thomas Jefferson had in 1776, women are announcing the need for revolutionary change based on a claim of basic rights:

"When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto [before] occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course."

In this passage, two important words—and women—are added to Thomas Jefferson's famous phrase:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . ."

The women's declaration called for an end to laws that discriminated against women. It demanded that women be free to enter the all-male world of trades, professions, and businesses.

"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and [wrongful takings of power] on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. . . .

Now, in view of this entire [withholding of rights] of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation,—in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States."

—Seneca Falls Convention Declaration of Sentiments

The Women's Movement Grows

The Seneca Falls Convention helped launch a wider movement. In the years to come, reformers held several national conventions, with the first taking place in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850. Both male and female reformers joined the cause.

Among the movement's leaders was Susan B. Anthony. Anthony was the daughter of a Quaker abolitionist. She called for equal pay and college training for women, and coeducation (coh • eh • juh • KAY • shuhn)—the teaching of males and females together. Anthony also organized the country's first women's temperance association, the Daughters of Temperance. Anthony met Elizabeth Cady Stanton at a temperance meeting in 1851. They became lifelong friends and partners in the struggle for women's rights and suffrage.

Opportunities for women increased greatly in the late 1800s. Beginning with Wyoming in 1890, several states granted woman suffrage. Yet not until 1920 and the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution did women gain the right to vote everywhere.

Describing What is suffrage?

Women Make Gains

SS.8.A.1.3, SS.8.A.4.8, SS.8.E.2.1, LA.8.1.6.3

In what areas did women make progress in achieving equality?

Pioneers in women's education began to call for more opportunity. Early champions such as Catherine Beecher believed that women should be educated for their traditional roles in life. The Milwaukee College for Women used Beecher's ideas "to train women to be healthful, intelligent, and successful wives, mothers, and housekeepers."

Other people thought that women could be trained to be capable teachers and to fill other professional roles. These pioneers broke down the barriers to female education and helped other women do the same.

One of these pioneers, Emma Willard, educated herself in subjects considered suitable only for males, such as science and mathematics. In 1821 Willard set up the Troy Female Seminary in upstate New York. Willard's seminary taught mathematics, history, geography, and physics, as well as the usual homemaking subjects.

Mary Lyon, after working as a teacher for 20 years, began raising funds to open a women's college. She established Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts in 1837, modeling its curriculum on that of nearby Amherst College. Lyon became the school's first principal, believing that "the great secret . . . is female education."

Marriage and the Family

Prior to the mid-1800s, women had few rights. They depended on men for support. Anything a woman owned became the property of her husband if she married. She had few options if she was in an unhappy or abusive relationship.

During the mid- to late-1800s, women made some gains in marriage and property laws. New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Wisconsin, Mississippi, and the new state of California recognized the right of married women to own property.

Some states passed laws allowing divorced women to share guardianship of their children with their former husbands. Indiana was the first of several states that allowed women to seek divorce if their husbands abused alcohol.

Breaking Barriers

In the 1800s, women had few career choices. They could become elementary teachers—often at lower wages than a male teacher received. Jobs in professions dominated by men were even more difficult. Women had to struggle to become doctors or work in the ministry. Some strong-minded women succeeded.

Elizabeth Blackwell tried and failed repeatedly to get into medical school. Finally accepted by Geneva College in New York, Blackwell graduated first in her class and achieved fame as a doctor.

Maria Mitchell was another groundbreaking woman. Mitchell received an education from her father. In 1847 she became the first person to discover a comet with a telescope. The next year, she became the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1865 Mitchell joined the faculty of Vassar College.

Women's gains in the 1800s were remarkable—but far from complete. Women remained limited by social customs and expectations. In fact, women had just begun the long struggle to achieve their goal of equality.

Describing What gains did women make in the field of education?

Connections to TODAY

Women's Colleges

Mount Holyoke is one of the Seven Sisters—a group of outstanding colleges founded to educate women. Today, Mount Holyoke and several of the Seven Sisters still provide a woman-only educational experience. Some of the Seven Sisters now admit men. SS.8.A.1.3