

RIGHTS COME FROM UNDERSTANDING THE WRONGS OF THE PAST: USING A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE TO EXAMINE THE STRUGGLE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN AMERICA

by Silvija Meija*

INTRODUCTION

After teaching a class entitled “Women in America” at Michigan State University, I was surprised how little young, college women know about women’s past struggles to gain equality in American society. Most women take for granted the status quo and think that the rights women have now have always existed. In 2005, women have access to higher education; more than half of student enrollment in law schools and medical schools are women. Engineering degrees still lag in graduation rates for women, but the numbers are rising. There are now many successful women who own businesses, and work at high level management and administrative jobs, although there is still a disproportionate lack of CEO’s in major corporations.

There is one woman remaining on the United States Supreme Court after the retirement of Sandra Day O’Connor, several senators and governors and women are serving as Representatives in Congress and in the upper echelons of government. In addition, young women have role models in the entertainment field as well as in sports and popular culture. For example, there are Madonna, Britney Spears and countless other entertainers who have made millions of dollars and have become an “industry” with their marketing and products. Super models are featured on covers of many magazines, in television advertisements, gaining success and popularity. There are many young actresses who have gained popularity and demand millions of dollars for each film. This is the culture we live in today. Women who do not make an attempt to understand women’s struggle for equality in past generations may be surprised if there is a reversal, with equality being attacked or destroyed. In 1908, Supreme Court Justice David Brewer’s statement was a good example of society’s views on gender roles; that women were incapable of surviving in their own right, should be guided by men and legislation should be passed to protect them. As he stated, “The two sexes differ in the structure of the body, in the functions to be performed by each, in the amount of physical strength, in the capacity for long continuing labor....(in) the self reliance which enables one to assert full rights, and in the capacity to maintain the struggle for subsistence.”¹ Is it possible that the pendulum will swing backwards, gender roles will again be strictly delineated and women will be relegated to a lesser status?

The purpose of this study is to examine various women in American history who were not afraid to question why their roles were limited and why they were considered lesser in a social context. None of these women thought they were creating a pathway for future generations; they were only concerned

* Assistant Professor, Michigan State University

with improving present conditions, were not afraid to speak out, and they acted on their beliefs.

A SELFLESS WOMAN

Most historians agree that the American Indian migration began about 20,000 years ago with peoples coming from the Asian continent across the land bridge that now is the Bering Strait. The groups moved southward until they found suitable land for subsistence. There was a great diversity of cultures as each of the groups formed tribes and adapted to the varied environmental circumstances and conditions. As Sara Evans, a noted scholar of women's history explains, "The archaeological record indicates that 2,000 years ago some North American cultures lived nomadically, hunting and gathering plants and animals. Others settled in villages and subsisted on domesticated plants as well as wild resources. Still others built complex, hierarchically organized societies centered in large cities or towns."² There were a multitude of tribes, including the Iroquois, Hidatsa, Algonquian, Montagnais-Naskapi, Navaho, Pawnee, and so on.

A common element in most tribes was that gender roles were delineated. Men were the warriors and hunters and women were the gatherers and processors of food as well as nurturers of small children, hence essential for the continuance of tribal work methods as well as instilling culture and education in the next generation. Thus in most Indian tribes women had a great deal of power because they traded with the Europeans and most importantly, controlled the food source. In some tribes, women were even in charge of picking suitable male council members and chiefs.

There are many myths and fictitious stories written about individual Indian women. Most were depicted as good hearted princesses or others who were stolen from their tribes and taken as brides for the Europeans. An Indian woman who stands out for her initiative, influence and skill was Sacagawea.

In 1803, President Jefferson authorized the Louisiana Purchase and recruited a group of men to explore the area, to make maps and charts, and record information so the area could be differentiated. He hired Captain Meriwether Lewis and Captain William Clark to lead the expedition. In addition, there were volunteers, soldiers and river men who would assist in the arduous trek. The expedition left the Wood River base up the Missouri River in May 1804. After several months, they hired an interpreter, Charbonneau, who brought his three Indian wives, including the sixteen year old, pregnant Sacagawea. This woman was intelligent, and knowledgeable of the territory. She became the expedition's guide, helped them survive in the wilderness, worked as a translator and helped with countless domestic duties. Historians see this young woman as a great asset to the success of the expedition. She spoke many different languages; English, some French, her native Shoshone, Hidatsa, Siouan and also used sign language³. Knowing all these languages made it possible to communicate with the tribes they encountered on the

journey^{3a}. In addition, Sacagawea with her newborn son in her arms gave the skeptical tribes a visual sign that the group was considered “peaceful scientists, not an invading army.”⁴ She guided them through the wilderness that she remembered from her childhood, taught the men how to gather food from the forests, made clothing and moccasins, warned them of poisonous plants and showed the men how to use the native plants as medicine. She was a brave woman for when one of the ships capsized, with the infant tied to her back; she jumped in the water and rescued the instruments and valuable charts and papers from the water⁵.

Thus, we see one of the first women in our society who went against the standard norms that gender roles dictated for that time. She transcended all expectations for women, and did this without ulterior motive; she was a truly selfless woman concerned only with being an effective assistant and facilitator. As James K. Homer stated, “it is doubtful if the expedition could have pushed its way through without her.”⁶

FOLLOWING THE NORTH STAR TO FREEDOM

As most of the world knows, America’s worst choice in history was the decision to introduce slavery into the states. Beginning in the 1700’s, hundreds of thousands of black people were forcefully taken from their African villages, sold into bondage and purchased by large land owners to toil in their fields and homes. Men were often more desirable because of their physical strength and stamina to withstand the grueling field labor. But, women were also purchased for domestic duties. Most slaves were sold to large plantations in the Southern states, but the Northern colonies had a fair share as well. Historians have noted that the younger, prettier black women were purchased first, often because the master saw not only a laborer but a potential concubine. The black slaves were ill fed, beaten and often families were separated because a member would be sold for a profit.

The Civil War was a clash of not only anti- slavery theories between the Northern and Southern colonies but of economic and political ideological differences. Again, during this time, the mistreatment of black slaves was rampant. Women were bought to care for the home; cook, clean and care for the master’s children. Many times, slaves were victimized by their owners; if an order was not carried out or a chore was not done adequately, they would be beaten or whipped. There were also many instances in which a female slave was sexually abused or raped by the owner. Using superiority to force their slaves into what seemed to be compliance, slave owners found it easy to manipulate and take advantage of their slaves. Since black people were not allowed to testify in court against their white owners, there was little they could do to stop the mistreatment⁷. A black slave woman who refused to withstand physical abuse and chose to change the course of her life was Harriet Tubman. Also, not only did she save herself, but she was concerned for others and performed countless, selfless acts in assistance.

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery. Her family belonged to a tolerant slave owner and she worked at various jobs while growing up, such as weaving, working with animal traps and eventually was given to another mistress as caretaker for children and home where she experienced many brutal beatings. Later she was returned to her original owner and at twenty four she was ordered to marry a freed slave, John Tubman. Her new husband felt that he had done enough work and “paid his dues”, thus Harriet had to support both of them. She became curious about free Negroes and “...investigated her own status and to her dismay discovered that her own mother had been freed but never informed of her freedom”⁸. This outraged her and she began her quest for freedom. Thus, in 1849, she began her trek to the North, “she would take the North Star as her outward guide and the Lord would be her inward consolation”⁹. After a grueling trek she reached Philadelphia where she found housing and employment, but felt that she had to return to the South to help lead others to freedom. She eventually returned to the South nineteen times to bring to freedom her family and countless others; she had become a conductor for the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was a term used to apply to a network of paths that provided slaves the opportunity and assistance for escape; the routes started in Southern states and moved northward. They included passages through woods, fields, rivers and modes of transportation such as boats ships, trails and wagons. The Railroad also involved people who hid the escapees. After several trips to assist other slaves to escape, she became well known and a bounty was put on her capture. “To all, she was a deliverer of her people, a figure that inspired hope and confidence, a new ‘Moses’ “¹⁰. But, Harriet Tubman did not stop with this; she became active in assisting the Northern troops during the Civil War. “She was possibly the first American woman to visit or work on the battle fields of the civil war”¹¹. She became a spy for the Union Army as well as a scout and nurse for soldiers and taught escaped slaves how to care for themselves. It was said that Tubman was often on the battle field and “... the shots {were falling} like hail, and the bodies of dead and wounded men were dropping around her like autumn leaves; but the thought of fear never {seemed} to have had a place for a moment in her mind”¹².

Harriet Tubman was a woman who had little education, but she was obstinate, determined and stood out in her society; she refused to fit the gender role that was assigned to most black women who were to be subservient slaves? She sought new avenues and paths for betterment not only for herself, but for others in despair. She risked her life countless times during the Civil War because she was working for a higher goal - to rid America from the bondage of slavery and suffering.

ANGEL OF THE BATTLEFIELD

No discussion would be complete without examining Clara Barton. She was roughly a contemporary of Harriet Tubman, worked from a different perspective but on similar battlefields. At the age of 18, she began working as a teacher in Bordentown, New Jersey. The town had no free public education

and children were running “lawless” in the streets. She founded a school with six students and in two years it had grown to six hundred. The city council thought that a woman could not effectively run such a large school, and the directorship was given to a man! After this she obtained a job in the United States Patent Office, but again, women working in government positions were frowned upon and soon thereafter she was dismissed. Miss Barton spoke for women’s suffrage as well as for the rights of freed slaves. Scholar William A. Updike quoted Barton as saying, “I must have been born believing in the full right of women to all privileges and positions which nature and justice accord her common with other human beings. Perfectly equal rights – human rights. There was never any question in my mind in regards to this”¹³.

Her next endeavor to help mankind was to serve as a nurse on the battlefield during the Civil War. First she organized charitable contribution efforts to acquire much lacking supplies for wounded soldiers. The response was tremendous and she then focused on the battlefield. She assisted wounded soldiers in many dangerous battles including the Battle of Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Wilderness and Spotsylvania, among others. At the Battle near Antietam a bullet ripped through her dress and ended up killing the soldier she was tending¹⁴. Also, there was no systematic way to locate and identify the soldiers who had been killed. Again, Barton took it upon herself to identify graves and send word to more than 30,000 men’s families of their death¹⁵. One would think that she had exhausted her energies and quest for societal improvement, but she proceeded to found one of the most humanitarian organizations in America, the American Red Cross. After many years of coaxing Congress to pass a bill, in 1881, she founded the organization in Washington D. C. and was elected the first president, a position she held for twenty two years¹⁶.

One can only marvel at Clara Barton’s drive and unwillingness to settle for the status quo in her quest for social improvement. She was faced with a society that felt women were unfit and incapable of making social change, but by examining her life and endeavors, one can answer with a resounding acclaim for her accomplishments. Again, she did not allow gender roles and expectations to stand in the way of her drive to fulfill her quest for improving mankind.

A TRUE REBEL

In the essay, “Abortion in America,” James C. Mohr traces how perceptions regarding abortion and contraception changed during the 1800’s. Childbirth was a time of “terror” and many women died while giving birth; women had little or no knowledge about controlling the number of children they had. In the beginning of the 1800’s, abortions were performed under the auspices of being a needed medical service but in later years laws were written by governing bodies (comprised of men) to stop abortions in response to the growing willingness of married women to request the procedure and thus control the number of children. Women who attempted family planning or requested

abortions were deemed “domestic subversives”¹⁷. Thus, by 1900, most states had laws preventing abortions. Women’s roles were defined as homemakers and caretakers, and they were subservient in a male - dominated society. Enter Margaret Sanger!

Many historians feel that Margaret Sanger’s desire to introduce family planning and birth control to American women stems from watching her mother endure eighteen pregnancies and eventually die because of complications from this grueling ordeal of childbearing. Sanger was born in 1879, and received her education in nursing. She saw that women were yearning for information about contraception and encountered “dying women and distressing instances of women weakened by childbirth and poverty – induced substandard living conditions”¹⁸. She felt that women should have the right to control their bodies, decide when or whether to have a child, and that every child should be wanted and loved. She also believed that women are as entitled as men to sexual pleasure and fulfillment.

In the early 1900’s Sanger began to write a column in a socialist newspaper called *The Call*. In each issue of the newspaper she wrote about anatomy and sexually transmitted diseases. At that time, the Comstock Law (passed in 1873) prohibited the distribution of “obscene material”, including birth control information through the U. S. mail. She continued to challenge the system and published eight newsletters entitled *The Women Rebel*, which dealt with such topics as child labor, social hygiene, population growth and the exploitation of women in industry. Her objective was “to make women more rebellious about having to work long hours in factories, to bear so many children, and to be subservient to men”¹⁹. She was accused of violating federal statutes and fled to Europe where she learned progressive methods for birth control. Returning several years later, the term “birth control” had become a common word and she had gained even more supporters for her quest. Eventually the charges against her were dropped and she continued to tour the country giving speeches about family planning. On October 16, 1916, Sanger and her sister opened a clinic in Brooklyn, New York, but nine days later the establishment was raided, and Sanger was jailed for thirty days. After her release she published *The Birth Control Review* and *Woman and the New Race* and soon after established the American Birth Control League. In 1923, she opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in New York City. This was the first birth control clinic in the United States that was staffed by doctors but again it was forced to close a few years later. In 1939, the American Birth Control League and the Birth Control Clinic Research Bureau merged to form the Birth Control Federation of American. In 1942, this organization changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. From its founding it has pursued beliefs “in the fundamental right of each individual, throughout the world, to manage his or her fertility. It further believes that such self determination will contribute to a better quality of life, strong family relationships, and a stable population”²⁰.

Whatever a person's views are on birth control, one must acknowledge and admire Sanger's perseverance and undisputed bravery to question all societal norms and pursue her quest for bringing family planning information to women in American society. She fled the country on several occasions, was tried, had numerous publications banned, clinics closed and she was even jailed for pursuing her beliefs. She was not afraid to push the limits imposed on the "lesser" gender, or to insist on women's quest for equality in America.

A WOMAN OF COURAGE

In the beginning of the 1900's, America entered World War I and the Great Depression was soon to follow. After the Civil War black men had the right to vote, but many restrictions and requirements made it difficult. Women's suffrage had gained momentum and they asked for equal say in politics and to be treated as equal citizens. Many women were still relegated to the societal norms of being subservient to their husbands, raising children and maintaining a home.

With the influx of a great number of immigrants, especially on the East coast, some women entered the workforce, working in the many factories. However, they were discriminated against in the workplace, having to suffer harsh working conditions, low pay and long hours. This treatment outraged many, but few took action in an attempt to improve their conditions. It was a very unstable time in American history, a time when a change was inevitable and a leader for this change was needed. Eleanor Roosevelt took a stand against the many injustices in our society, turning her anger into amazingly powerful strides in a positive direction for all mankind. She was involved in politics, reconstructed the role of the first lady, worked for a multitude of causes to create social reform, supported American troops during World War II, and finally was an essential asset to her ailing husband.

Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 to a wealthy New York City family. After losing both of her parents at a young age she was raised by her grandmother, sent to boarding schools and at the age of twenty one married Franklin D. Roosevelt, a distant cousin. It is interesting to note that during the first years of her marriage, she spent most of her time raising her children, for she felt this was one of the most important roles a woman has. Raising good, hard working citizens would strengthen the country.

When her husband was elected President of the United States, she was not interested in the traditional role of First Lady, throwing lavish parties and socializing with politicians. At state dinners she mixed people of various backgrounds and invited people who normally would not have been allowed at these exclusive parties, thus shocking the socialites. It is clear that "more than anyone in the White House, she brought the cause of the oppressed to her husband's attention"²¹. She understood the struggles of the American people and did her best to represent them.

In 1920, women in America received the right to vote and Eleanor Roosevelt felt it was her duty to educate women on voting and political issues. She joined the League of Women Voters and always encouraged women to choose their own stand in politics, not merely follow their husbands' directives. She worked diligently to stop segregation and discrimination in our society. She dropped out of organizations and groups which did not accept black members and worked with the NAACP to lobby to pass a law against lynching. At a Human Welfare conference, famous pictures were taken showing Black people sitting on one side of the aisle and white people on the other; Mrs. Roosevelt was appalled by this and placed her chair in the center of the aisle, showing her disgust for such blatant ignorance. One historian has stated that Mrs. Roosevelt believed that "the government existed for only one purpose; to make things better for all people"²³ⁱ. She saw that women were taken advantage of in the work place; especially the unsanitary, poorly lit factories where countless women slaved for a pittance of a salary. She supported and joined labor unions, fought for minimum wage laws, maximum hour regulations and improved working conditions. During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt created many social relief programs under the New Deal and the first lady published countless articles to help the American people know what assistance was available in her column "My Day."

During World War II, President Roosevelt had already been stricken with polio and was confined to a wheel chair. The First Lady traveled around the world in a multitude of capacities and on many missions for her husband. She went to Australia and New Zealand and made many trips to Europe to support American troop morale and to visit wounded soldiers. After her husband died, then vice – President Truman asked if there was anything he could do for her and she replied, "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now"²³. After the war ended, although she was no longer the first lady, she worked tirelessly to help refugees and returning veterans. She wanted to make sure they could get jobs and pursue educational opportunities.

After her husband's death and the end of WWII, Eleanor Roosevelt continued her labors of service to the world as a United States Delegate to the United Nations. President Truman appointed her to this position in December 1945, when she was sixty - one years old. During her work as a delegate she worked on drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She dedicated three years lobbying and debating over this document, which was finally passed on December 10, 1948. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a great personal achievement, but Eleanor was both modest and realistic about the work she had guided and pushed to completion"²⁴. She spent four more years in the United Nations before resigning and for the remainder of her life, traveled the world speaking out on civil rights, women's rights and the improvement for mankind.

After examining Eleanor Roosevelt's many accomplishments, deeds and selfless acts of kindness for the improvement of mankind, one can only marvel at her spirit and unflinching determination. While her accomplishments

were of heroic proportions, Mrs. Roosevelt kept a modest attitude about her acts when she stated, "About the only value the story of my life may have is to show that one can, even without particular gifts, overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable if one is willing to face the fact that they must be overcome"²⁵.

A BUNNY'S TALE

During WW II many men were sent to fight in the war and women were needed to work in the factories to produce the war goods. Gender roles suddenly changed and women were asked to leave the house and venture into the working world. After the war ended there was a confusion in gender roles; men returned from the war and wanted their positions back in the work force. Women were confused because they had tasted an independent life style and many did not want to return to the homemaker and subservient wife role. Beginning in the late 1950's the American social scene began to change and this proceeded for a couple of decades. Major trends of the nineteen sixties were a growing disillusionment with the government, civil rights protests, increased demand for equality for women and the escalating war in Vietnam. Boundaries were challenged. The government was confronted head on for its policies in Vietnam and the cause of civil rights was embraced by the young. There were numerous marches, rallies, strikes, riots and violent confrontations with police. The chaotic events of the sixties seemed destined to continue into the seventies and profound changes were taking place in society. In the early 1960's, the birth control pill was introduced for married women and by the end of that decade it was available to all women which, combined with the youthful rebellious nature of the times, spurred a "sexual revolution" as well. Women were now free to engage in sexual activities without facing the chance of pregnancy. Also, in the 1970's, the national media "discovered" the women's movement. One woman in particular who committed herself to this movement was Gloria Steinem. She changed the way women were viewed and strove to educate Americans on how vital it is that people should be treated equally. She was a journalist and editor, active in politics, and women's and civil rights.

After a difficult childhood, Steinem graduated from Smith College with a degree in government. Her first job was for a small political satire magazine called *HELP!* and soon after she moved to a position with *Esquire* magazine. Her first article was entitled, "The Moral Disarmament of Betty Coed" which clearly showed that Steinem was a progressive thinking female journalist with a social conscience. In the article, she examined the prevailing attitudes regarding sex. The article declared that "the real danger of the contraceptive revolution may be the acceleration of woman's role change without any corresponding change in man's attitude toward her role"²⁶. For *Show Magazine* she was sent "undercover" and worked as a Playboy bunny to expose how women were treated; the article was entitled "A Bunny's Tale"²⁷. After this early period of writing about women's issues she began to delve into politics, both writing articles and becoming an activist supporting several Democratic presidential

candidates (campaigning for Eugene McCarthy, Sen. Robert Kennedy and George McGovern). Soon after, the national legislative chairperson for the National Organization for Women (NOW) asked Steinem to join in the feminist fight; however, she responded to the request by stating that “although she sympathized with feminist ideals, she considered herself a humanist”²⁸.

By the late 1960’s, the struggle for women’s equality had become very popular in American culture. Steinem became involved with a New York women’s liberation group called the Redstockings, who protested abortion hearings in New York. Here she forged her bond with the Women’s Movement and she clearly saw how women were oppressed as a class and as a sex. This led her to blend her journalism talents with political activism and quest for equality for women. Throughout the 1980’s, she was a vocal supporter for women’s rights and continues to speak today for equality.

Again, we see a woman who was not afraid to speak out and question societal norms and set standards. Steinem saw the gender discrepancies and worked with any tools she could find to improve equality for women. According to Deena Peterson, after Steinem’s work with the Redstockings she “immediately knew she was a feminist,” and later stated that, a feminist, “can be a woman or a man, who believes in the full social, economic and political equality of women and men”²⁹.

CONCLUSION

We have examined several creative, hardworking, obstinate and individualistic women throughout American history. There are countless others who worked to change gender roles, to obtain the right to vote, to demand equal pay and job stability and to lift the social status of women. This struggle never ends as it confronts the prejudice of persons who are advantaged by the control and domination of women. We can aid in this effort by encouraging girls and young women to excel in all areas of human endeavor including the sciences, business and the professions. Moreover, in order to keep what equality has been gained and even reach for higher levels, both men and women must know of past struggles that women faced in our society. As Gloria Steinem stated, everyone should believe in full social, economic and political equality for women and men. Let the work proceed!

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