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Sex and the Suffrage Movement

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Sex can be understood in a multitude of ways as it allows us to think about how sexual stereotypes, sexuality, and homophobia impacted the suffrage movement. During the nineteenth century, fears of gender disruption had roots in the idea that if women did not care for their homes and families, the nation would collapse. For most people, the function of the state depended almost entirely on sexual difference, to the extent that it determined private, social, and political action; women who demanded the vote seemed deviant and dangerous. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, changing fashions and the beguiling sexiness of the “New Woman” suffragist—educated, physically active, and more visible in public than women of the past—drew observers’ criticism. Then, developments in the scientific studies of eugenics and sexology heightened the hostility of anti-suffragists toward suffragists and their movement. They especially condemned the many suffrage activists who had long-standing live-in relationships with other women. Onlookers encountered women in public, demanding the extension of political rights, and living with other women discomforting, frightening, even contemptable.
Accepting that people of the past interpreted gender differently than we do today can help us to understand just why the demand for rights for women, including the right to vote, shocked critics, and prevented votes for women for decades.

During the nineteenth century, virtually everyone expected women to be satisfied with a submissive role in life. Women remained under the protection of men—first their fathers, then their husbands or their brothers, or even their sons if widowed—their entire lives. The legal identity of *feme covert*, or coverture, meant that, although the details differed regionally, a married woman had no legal existence separate from men; in the eyes of the law, she existed in a state of “enforced dependence.” The nineteenth century ideology of separate spheres, sometimes referred to as the cult of domesticity, demanded that women be pious, pure, and passive, that they should care for their husbands, children, and homes, while men braved the rapidly industrializing public realm. Realistically, of course, despite the power of the ideology of domesticity, it did not accurately describe the lived experience of most women. Many middle-class women felt the need to extend their responsibilities outside their homes to care for widows, orphans, and the poor of their communities. As they did so, and as they gravitated to the anti-slavery movement, they began to see the need for greater civil, personal, and political rights for themselves.

A recognizable women’s rights movement (predating the movement for the right to vote) began rather organically in the late eighteenth century with the publication of books like Mary Wollstonecraft’s provocative *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). A few came to believe that the ideas of equality touted during the American Revolution—meant to apply to white men—should apply to women as well. Maria Stewart, the first woman to speak before racially mixed “promiscuous” audiences (meaning they were composed of women and men),
lectured about women’s rights and against slavery in the early 1830s. Within the decade, the freethinker Fanny Wright voiced her disregard for all constraints on human freedom, urging reason, education, an end to blind obedience to authority, as well as a celebration of sexual passion, even for women. She presented these dangerous ideas before mixed audiences, further shocking a public as she tantalized them with exciting possibilities they feared to consider.

Free love, a nineteenth-century term for sexuality outside of marriage, would undermine the family. To most people of the time, individualism in women would lead to the destruction of the family and would eventually destroy the state. A woman too selfish to make the necessary sacrifices for motherhood and domesticity could not claim to really be a woman. Disobedience to her husband resembled adultery to the people of the time; she put her love elsewhere and rejected domesticity. Deviating from the prescribed roles for women disrupted the nation in ways most people dared not even contemplate. Women should, as Sarah Josepha Hale, arbitrator of good taste through her position as editor of *Godey's Ladies’ Book*, be satisfied with their “secret, silent influence” on the men in their lives.

By 1848 women began holding conventions in Seneca Falls and in Rochester, New York and they continued organizing increasingly popular gatherings in many states, especially east of the Mississippi River, throughout the century. These public events upset people because women’s rights activists and suffragists challenged the dominant gender roles believed to be ordained by God. Susan Fenimore Cooper, the daughter of the popular novelist James Fenimore Cooper, who opposed rights for women, articulated the foremost view of society when she wrote in 1870 that the proper functioning of the state required women to adhere to their role as helpmeet to man, just as God intended. Women who would disrupt the home would disrupt the
nation. A nation without the sacrifices of women would surely fail. The notions about women’s role as Cooper described it remained consistent throughout the suffrage movement.

As the nineteenth century waned, challenges to entrenched ideas about sexuality and proper gender roles heightened the controversy over woman suffrage, especially among white, middle-class women and men. They saw an important link between separate sexual spheres and class reproduction and attempted to limit women’s agency. As more women earned higher levels of education and entered the workforce as professors, doctors, lawyers, and journalists, the “New Woman” appeared. She moved more freely because of changing fashions in corsets and the length of her skirts, and she reveled in her athleticism as she enjoyed physical activities such as playing tennis and riding bicycles. The new styles indicated that women had more physical, social, and economic autonomy. This new generation of suffragists had a wider array of life choices, contradicting the image of activists as “frumpy” or unattractive.

Not surprisingly, a few anti-suffragists now linked suffragists with hypo-sexuality, sexual “deviancy,” and homosexuality. As early as 1872, suffrage supporter Sarah Cooper, writing in the *Overland Monthly*, argued that both lower and upper classes of women suffered from a “carnal appetite,” and fell prey to “moral vertigo,” questioning how suffrage would change that. Suffrage cartoons and postcards often brazenly suggested that women’s suffrage would destroy the natural order of sexual relations; that women would wear the pants in the family. Havelock Ellis, a British sexologist, argued that suffragists defied “definitions of ‘femininity’ and ‘citizenship’ through their actions and their appropriations of ‘masculine’ spaces, words, and actions.” Ellis’s popular *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Sexual Inversion* (1897) supported the widespread idea that suffragists represented the “most degenerate sort,” and would undermine proper womanhood. He correlated the activists of the women’s movement with sexual inversion
and a decrease in marriage, which would, of course, lead to the birth of fewer children and “race suicide.”

Anti-suffragists observed that many of the women who led the suffrage movement had long-term relationships with other women rather than marrying and having children. Long-term pairings of women such as Susan B. Anthony and Emily Gross; Frances Willard and Kate Jackson, then Anna Gordon; Alice Stone Blackwell and Kitty Barry; Anna Howard Shaw and Lucy Anthony; Carrie Chapman Catt and Mary Garrett Hay; Mary Elisabeth Dreier and Frances Kellor; and speculation about Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, opened all suffragists to the distractions of criticism about their sexuality. At the same time, anti-suffragists could undermine the movement by discrediting its leadership. Realistically, suffragists would have been unable to devote their lives to women’s rights if they had to face the distractions of family and domestic life. Birth control remained unreliable, especially during a period marked by obscenity laws that prevented the dissemination of information, such as that presented by Margaret Sanger and her clinic, to prevent pregnancy. Women distrusted marriage as they feared being under the control of husbands. Tellingly, when her colleagues first learned of Catt’s marriage to George Catt, they assumed the movement had lost her. Instead, Catt and her husband agreed that she should have four months a year to campaign for women’s suffrage. Most people could not conceive of an activist career for a married woman—at that time, virtually all women had to choose between one or the other.

It may be difficult to acknowledge that people of the past actually had such serious anxieties about issues related to sex roles, “new women,” and female couples. Still, people of the past wholeheartedly believed that women who challenged the dominant ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were disgraceful, sexual, and dangerous. The press
argued that women who spoke in public “unsexed” themselves, becoming something awful, something other than “normal” females. Anti-suffragists used the term “sex antagonism” to describe the deviance of women who resisted societal mandates.\textsuperscript{xiv} Charlotte Perkins Gilman defended Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party from criticisms of the “old bogey sex antagonism,” urging readers to accept that women’s rights did not mean harm to men.\textsuperscript{xv} Yet, as more women held positions in authority and even political office, it fell out of fashion to argue that women must stay in the home to contribute to society. Worlds of possibilities opened for women as they won more of their social and political rights.

\textsuperscript{ii} DuBois, \textit{Woman Suffrage}, 45.
\textsuperscript{iv} Lori D. Ginzberg, \textit{Women in Antebellum Reform} (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2000), 16-32.
\textsuperscript{v} Fought, “Female Women,” 49-51.
\textsuperscript{vi} Lori D. Ginzberg, “The Hearts of Your Readers will Shudder”: Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought,” \textit{American Quarterly} 46, no. 2 (June 1994), 195-266.
\textsuperscript{vii} Gail Underwood Parker, \textit{More Than Petticoats: Remarkable New Hampshire Women} (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2009), 33.
\textsuperscript{ix} Havelock Ellis, \textit{Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Sexual Inversion}, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1901), 202. The militant feminist Doris Stevens, once a prominent member of Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party, knew of the association between feminism and lesbianism, and by the 1940s outspokenly affirmed her heterosexuality.
\textsuperscript{x} Lillian Faderman, \textit{To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America – A History} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 20-41.
\textsuperscript{xii} Faderman, \textit{To Believe in Women}, 15.
\textsuperscript{xiv} Ethel Colquhoun, “Modern Feminism and Sex Antagonism,” \textit{Woman’s Protest} 4, no. 2 (December 1913): 5. Colquhoun, an avid anti-feminist and anti-suffragist—and served Southern Rhodesia as the first female parliamentarian in the British overseas empire—continued writing about this and similar topics for years, reviewing nine books on the topic for \textit{Lotus Magazine}. \textit{Lotus Magazine} 9, no. 2 (November 1917), 63-71.
\textsuperscript{xv} Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “A Woman’s Party,” \textit{Suffragist} 8, no. 1 (February 1920), 8.