

Women: the Key to Human Progress

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On August 26th, the day in 1920 when the United States certified the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which granted women the right to vote, Americans observe Women's Equality Day.

In other words, the country sets aside one day out of 365 days in each year to celebrate equality for half of humanity. Somehow it just doesn't seem quite proportional, does it?

The Baha'i teachings call on mankind to implement full equality for womankind. In fact, the Baha'i teachings say that humanity itself cannot progress until both genders have equal rights:

Now in the two lower kingdoms of nature we have seen that there is no question of the superiority of one sex over the other. In the world of humanity we find a great difference; the female sex is treated as though inferior, and is not allowed equal rights and privileges. This condition is due not to nature, but to education. In the Divine Creation there is no such distinction. Neither sex is superior to the other in the sight of God. Why then should one sex assert the inferiority of the other, withholding just rights and privileges as though God had given His authority for such a course of action? If women received the same educational advantages as those of men, the result would demonstrate the equality of capacity of both for scholarship. – Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, p. 161.

The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment. When the two wings or parts become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of man will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary. Therefore, woman must receive the same education as man and all inequality be adjusted. Thus, imbued with the same virtues as man, rising through all the degrees of human attainment, women will become the peers of men, and until this equality is established, true progress and attainment for the human race will not be facilitated. – Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 375.

When we celebrate Women's Equality Day, we often don't realize that it took the American women's suffrage movement almost seventy-five years of committed, painful struggle to achieve voting rights for women. A half-century before women could vote, a chance meeting on a train set the 19th Amendment in motion.

At that point, the famous suffragettes Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had just drafted the simple, 29-word text of what would become the 19th Amendment:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Then, in 1872, Susan B. Anthony—Quaker, suffragette, anti-slavery activist and internationalist—met a Congressman from Nevada City, California, Aaron Sargent, and his wife Ellen Clark Sargent. Anthony’s fervent desire for a women’s suffrage movement convinced the Sargents to become supporters of the movement, and Aaron Sargent subsequently became the first person to ever utter the word “suffrage” in the United States Congress. Since women could not vote or hold office, it took a man to advance the 19th Amendment:

God’s Bounty is for all and gives power for all progress. When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights! – Abdu’l-Baha, Paris Talks, p. 164.



Susan B. Anthony

Elected to the Senate in 1873, Sargent interceded with President Grant when Susan B. Anthony was jailed for registering to vote—his efforts secured her release. In January of 1878 Senator Sargent introduced the “Susan B. Anthony” Amendment—and for the next 40 years it would annually be introduced unsuccessfully in Congress, until it finally passed during Woodrow Wilson’s administration in 1919, forty-one years later.

From their home in Nevada City, the Sargents carried on the long battle for suffrage. A year after Aaron Sargent’s passing, in 1888, when the famed abolitionist, pacifist and suffragette Julia Ward Howe (the author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*) visited California, Ellen Clark Sargent hosted an important meeting in San Francisco that brought together some of the nation’s most powerful and influential women’s suffrage advocates—Phoebe Hearst, Sarah Dix Hamlin, Emma Sutro Merritt, M.D., and several others. Phoebe Hearst, one of the wealthiest American women and a strong supporter of women’s rights, became a Baha’i a decade later, in 1898. In that 1888 meeting the women formed the Century Club of

California, often noted as the fulcrum of emerging female power in the West, and a major supporter and funder of the campaign to pass the 19th Amendment.

During that same period, when most civic, political and religious organizations opposed, fought against or even criminalized the women's rights movement, the Baha'i Faith strongly advocated the equality of men and women.

Abdu'l-Baha, who met with many suffragist leaders and spoke encouragingly to suffragette groups in Europe and America, clearly enunciated the Baha'i teachings on the question when he addressed a women's suffrage meeting in New York City in 1912. He questioned, in fact, the underlying premise of any attitude that opposed the equality of the sexes:

Woman must be given the same opportunities as man for perfecting herself in the attainments of learning, science and arts. God has created the man and the woman equal, why should she be deprived of exercising the fullest opportunities afforded by life? Why should we ever raise the question of superiority and inferiority? In the animal kingdom the male and female enjoy suffrage and in the vegetable kingdom the plants all enjoy equal suffrage. In the human kingdom, which claims to be the realm of brotherhood and solidarity, why should we raise this question? – The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 167.

The great global movements for freedom, the Baha'i teachings say, never take place in a spiritual vacuum. Instead, Baha'is believe that the civil rights and women's rights movements; the various movements for justice for workers; the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements and every other mass uprising that has called for peace, justice and equality since the mid-19th Century all have their genesis in the deep spiritual principles revealed by Baha'u'llah:

Every age requires a central impetus or movement. In this age, the boundaries of terrestrial things have extended; minds have taken on a broader range of vision; realities have been unfolded and the secrets of being have been brought into the realm of visibility. What is the spirit of this age, what is its focal point? It is the establishment of Universal Peace, the establishment of the knowledge that humanity is one family. – Abdu'l-Baha, Star of the West, Volume 3, p. 4.

In the Baha'i Faith, the equality of women and men forms one of the great pillars of the oneness of humanity, the central prerequisite for peace.