

Women's Rights

Throughout the 1800s, American women gained rights in nearly all areas of life. The United States of America became the world leader in the amount and kinds of rights women had. Although at the founding of the United States women did not have equal rights with men, the principles the country were founded on eventually extended to all people. In parts of the country, women gained property rights, and access to schools and professions. Women became key leaders in the temperance movement, which aimed to make alcohol illegal. In 1851, Maine prohibited alcohol in large part because of women's campaigns.

Feminism in America originated in the first half of the 1800s. Sarah and Angeline Grimke, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and others gathered in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 and issued the "Declaration of Sentiments," a document that declared women should have equal rights with men. Key feminist issues can be found in this important document, including women's lack of education, economic opportunities, legal rights, marital power, and the right to vote. This also set the agenda for future feminists.

The one feminist issue today that was not part of the Seneca Falls Convention is abortion. Feminist leaders in the 1800s saw abortion as murder. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a mother of seven, wrote, "There must be a remedy for such a crying evil as this." Victoria Woodhull wrote, "Wives deliberately permit themselves to become pregnant of children and then, to prevent becoming mothers, as deliberately murder them while yet in their wombs." Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the country's first woman to earn a medical degree, wrote, "The gross perversion and destruction of motherhood by the abortionist filled me with indignation."