

Cult of True Womanhood

First described by Barbara Welter in 1966, the Cult of True Womanhood is a name given by historians to nineteenth century gender ideologies that describe woman's nature and proper place as the moral protector of her home. The four values of True Womanhood were domesticity, piety, purity and submissiveness. Society judged women based on their adherence to these four virtues. Poor women and black women, particularly slave women, could not hope to meet these gender standards, a fact that allowed society to categorize them as substandard women. White middle and upper class women might have subscribed to the ideologies, though scholarship suggests there was considerable resistance from even those women who could fulfill the ideas.

True womanhood focused on the idea that womanliness was intricately connected with domesticity, which included both housework and childrearing related work. Nineteenth-century Americans believed that women were designed by nature and God to be domestic, and that un-domestic women were unnatural and an offense against God. Often called the Cult of Domesticity, true women were supposed to be the creators of a stress-free home, where men might retire from the rigors of waged labor in the public sphere. Women then were seen as belonging in the domestic or private sphere. Accordingly, nineteenth century gender ideology held that not only were women unsuited for the public spheres of elected service, politics and waged labor, but that the public sphere could corrupt and ruin women.

Nineteenth century Americans also believed that women were naturally more pious or moral than men. Piety was said to supply the religious core of strength and dignity for a woman. A True woman guided both her husband and her children in matters of morality. Immorality in women was thus seen as worse than immorality in men. While piety might be considered an ideology that constrained and controlled women (for indeed it was), women used ideas of female moral superiority to make claims on public power. Nineteenth century women joined moral reform movements (like the antislavery, temperance, utopian and women's rights movements) in multitudes, using their claims to greater morality to justify the imposition of moral reform on the larger society.

Nineteenth century Americans spent a great deal of time worry about and controlling sex. True Womanhood held that a woman's purity was her greatest virtue. Before she was married she was to protect her virginity. After marriage women were supposed to tolerate their husband's sexual demands in return for the promise of children. No where did this ideology account for female sexual pleasure. Instead women were supposed to be passionless, either disinterested in or actively repulsed by sexual contact. Women who broke the code of "passionlessness" were viewed as ruined or fallen women.

True women were also submissive. Before a woman was married she was supposed to submit to her father on all decisions. Once a woman was married, she was to be submissive to her husband's desires and needs; submissiveness was said to fulfill a woman by making her the perfect dependent companion. Women were supposed to willingly and cheerfully submit to the powerlessness of their lives. Indeed, ministers and other commentators claimed that it was only in willing submission to a man could a woman find true happiness.

Poor white women, who had to work for wages to support themselves and their families could not fulfill the domestic component of true womanhood because they worked outside the home. Moreover, many working class women recognized that True Womanhood ideologies were designed to valorize middle and elite class women, whose husbands could afford a stay-at-home wife. As a result, many working class women consciously rejected notions of submissiveness, moral superiority and passionlessness.

Slave women were particularly oppressed by nineteenth century gender ideologies. They did not have homes to take care of so little opportunity to enact domesticity. They had little or no control over their own bodies and were routinely sexually assaulted by masters. Indeed, proslavery advocates used the ideas of True Womanhood to “prove” that slave women deserved their bondage by promoting the notion that slave women were sexually licentious and aggressive. These ideas, which fall under the “Jezebel” stereotype proved powerful motivators in continuing slavery and the abuse of slave women.

Even middle and elite class women could encounter difficulties in fulfilling the strictures of True Womanhood. For example, not all women had stable, supportive, or nonviolent husbands. Wives whose husbands who drank away the family income or beat them had little recourse in a society that often refused to recognize problems and often blamed for wives husbands’ failings.

Anti-suffragettes Catherine Beecher’s book *Principle of Domestic Science*, provided nineteenth century Americans with a supportive doctrine of patriarchy, mixed in with the proper division of public and private spheres. However, many women were quick to realize that achieving the goals of true womanhood was impossible. Most women, regardless of class status cooked, cleaned, did laundry, grew gardens and did an almost uncountable amount of small domestic tasks. All this work was (and still is) unwaged labor. Complicating the unwaged nature of women’s work was the reality that society began to see “work” as waged and male, making women’s domestic work invisible as real work.

By focusing on a woman's role in her home, some American women could support the notion that a proper woman's sphere was taking care of her husband and children. The Cult of Domesticity created women’s commercial markets, such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book* magazine. Civic domesticity and moral reform movements led to the women’s rights movement, which began in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York.

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See also: Abolition/Anti-slavery Movement; Beecher, Catherine; *Godey’s Lady’s Book*; Mammy and Jezebel Stereotypes; Republican Motherhood; Seneca Falls Convention; Separate Spheres; Slave Women; Temperance Movement; Utopian Movement; Women’s Rights Movement;

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Seneca Falls Convention

The Seneca Falls Convention, held on July 19-20, 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, was the first American conference on women's rights. Participants were both female and male. The scope of the conference included not only the treatment of women but also how women's rights were connected to both abolitionism and the temperance movement. A document which was ratified at the conference was called the "Declaration of Sentiments," becoming a cornerstone of the women's rights movement. Its most controversial resolution was women's right to vote.

Seneca Falls is a small town in western New York. Along with the nearby town of Waterloo, it was home to a large number of people who were members of the Religious Society of Friends, otherwise known as Quakers. Many in the Seneca Falls area were Hicksite Quakers, named for the liberal Elias Hicks. This group espoused simplicity, temperance, opposition to war, abolition of slavery, and the rights of all women and men.

In 1840, the World Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London. Two attendees from America were Quaker minister Lucretia Mott and the young Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They became friends. Since women were excluded from the convention floor and forced to sit in a sectioned-off area, their conversation turned to the issue of women's rights and the possibility of there being a women's rights conference in the United States.

In the summer of 1848, with political revolutions swirling in Europe, Lucretia Mott was visiting her sister in Waterloo, New York. One of the people invited to a social gathering with the sisters was Elizabeth Cady Stanton from nearby Seneca Falls. Over tea, the group of women discussed a radical idea: mounting a convention to focus on the social, civil, and religious rights of women. They decided to schedule it while Mott, a powerful orator, was in town. This meant organizing the convention in just five days' time.

They placed a small notice in the local newspaper, but most of the promotion was by word of mouth. Keeping their expectations low, they anticipated a small turnout, but Mott assured Stanton that it would at least "be a start." Stanton began itemizing grievances for a document to be based on the Declaration of Independence, which would be debated and ratified by the attendees.

At that time, American women were denied access to higher education, almost all professions, and many jobs. In the few careers they could enter, they were paid less than men for doing the same job, and if they were married, their wages legally belonged to their husbands. If they brought property into a marriage, they lost all claim to it, even if they divorced; if a husband divorced her, the wife could also lose custody of their children. Women were legally bound to endure abuse of all kinds by their husbands and to tolerate the basest behavior. The legal system, government, and elective process were composed entirely of males.

The "Declaration of Sentiments" which was to be brought forward listed eighteen grievances and eleven resolutions demanding the rights of women as equal members of the human race. Resolution Nine was the most radical. It called for "elective franchise." Without the vote, reasoned Stanton, nothing would change. It was such a provocative notion that even Mott told Stanton, "Thee will make us ridiculous!"

Meanwhile, word of the conference spread. Nineteen-year-old Charlotte Woodward, who worked as a glove maker, rode forty miles in a wagon to Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls for the Woman's Rights Convention. When she and the organizers arrived on July 19, they found more than two hundred women and about forty sympathetic men locked out of the church. They boosted Stanton's young nephew through a window to open the door.

Though it was a Women's Rights Convention, it was considered improper for a lady to conduct a public meeting. James Mott, Lucretia's husband, chaired the conference. Women were, however, allowed to speak. Stanton stated that the purpose of the event was to address civil and political rights. She read the Declaration, invited comments, and amended the document based on suggestions.

As predicted, the most contentious issue was Resolution Nine, calling for women's right to vote. It barely passed after former slave Frederick Douglass urged its passage. Stanton later wrote that she believed those who opposed it did so out of fear that it would overshadow and compromise the others. But she decried the fact that women did not have the same right to vote as "drunkards, idiots, [and] horse racing rum-selling rowdies."

About three hundred people attended the Seneca Falls Convention. Of that number, the final draft of the Declaration of Sentiments was signed by one hundred: thirty-two men and sixty-eight women, including the young Charlotte Woodward.

The national press wrote scathingly about the conference. Some of the signers of the Declaration of Sentiments feared reprisals and asked that their names be removed from the document. But other women's rights conferences were held, and when Elizabeth Cady Stanton published her *History of Woman Suffrage* she identified the Seneca Falls Convention as the beginning of the fight for women's suffrage in the United States.

Seventy-two years after the Seneca Falls Convention, the Nineteenth Amendment gave American women the right to vote, which they did for the first time in 1920. Among the original signers of the Declaration of Sentiments, only one was left alive. Charlotte Woodward Pierce, age 92, was in poor health and unable to go vote, but she lived long enough to see the culmination of what had begun in Seneca Falls.

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See Also: Declaration of Rights and Sentiments; Mott, Lucy; Quakers; Stanton, Elizabeth Cady

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Tubman, Harriet (c. 1820-1913)

Famed as an Underground Railroad conductor, Harriet Tubman was also an abolitionist, a Civil War (1861-1865) nurse, scout, and spy and a women's rights advocate. She was born a slave, but she escaped and helped hundreds of others to escape. Her abolitionist activities made her famous in the north and infamous in the south. After the war, she worked for black civil rights and women's rights.

Araminta Ross Tubman was born into slavery on a Maryland plantation in 1820 or 1821. From a young age, she was forced to work both outdoors cultivating crops and indoors as a maid and nanny. She was often beaten particularly when the white baby she was minding cried. On one occasion an overseer beat her on the head rendering her unconscious for several hours. The head trauma caused her blackouts and seizures for the rest of her life. In 1844 she married free black John Tubman and changed her first name to Harriet. After Tubman's master died in 1849, she heard rumors about plans to sell all the slaves on the plantation to southern slaveholders. She fled the plantation with her brothers Ben and Harry, but they forced her to go back. The next time she escaped she went by herself and made her way through the Maryland woods and eventually to Philadelphia, where she became her life as a fugitive slave (because technically she was not free, but still owned by her master).

Tubman had been unable to convince her husband to escape with her, but within a year of gaining her freedom, she returned to the south to free family members and many others using the Underground Railroad, a network of routes and safe houses used by abolitionists to help slaves escape. Once she located slaves she could help, she disguised herself as an old woman or old man, and she sang spirituals with secret messages

imbedded in the lyrics that identified her and provided instructions for the escape. Although Tubman was illiterate, she was good at recognizing landmarks. She was well aware that her activities placed her own freedom and life in jeopardy. Consequently, Tubman often carried a concealed handgun to protect her party against possible slave catchers and to prod escaping slaves along when necessary. She made approximately nineteen trips to the south and she freed about 300 slaves. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law she escorted runaway slaves all the way to Canada. “Black Moses,” as she was known, later boasted that she never lost a single “passenger.”

In 1851 several southern slaveholding planters posted a \$40,000 reward for Tubman’s capture, which made her the most wanted African American woman in the south. Her fame provided her an audience, and she began speaking at abolitionist meetings in the late 1850s. During that time, she met radical abolitionist John Brown who was so impressed with her that he nicknamed her “General Tubman.” Brown wanted to lead a slave revolt, and Tubman helped fundraise and plan for Brown’s attack on the American arsenal at Harper’s Ferry in 1859, though she was not present for the actual event.

During the American Civil War Tubman volunteered as a nurse tending to wounded Union soldiers. In 1863, Tubman worked under General David Hunter as a scout and a spy for the Union in South Carolina. Due to her efforts, the Union liberated more than 700 slaves, of which more than 400 men volunteered to serve in black regiments. In 1863, Tubman witnessed the all African American 54th Massachusetts regiment’s attack on Fort Wagner (depicted in the motion picture, *Glory*), and she tended to their casualties after the battle.

After the war Tubman struggled with poverty. The publication of her life story, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, in 1869 provided her with some income. She spent thirty years unsuccessfully petitioning the federal government for a military pension. Finally in 1899, the government agreed to provide her with twenty dollars a month for the rest of her life. She used the proceeds from her book and the small pension to fund a facility for elderly and indigent African Americans where she lived the rest of her life. She died on March 10, 1913.

Rolando Avila

See also: Craft, Ellen; Free Black Women; Mammy and Jezebel Stereotypes; Slave Women, Antebellum; Truth, Sojourner

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