

**Topic:**

The Question of Women's Rights

**Time:**

2 class periods

**Historical****Period:**

Colonial to 1920

**Core:**

US I 6120 - 0403  
6120 - 0702  
US II 6250 - 0203  
6250 - 0502  
6250 - 0301  
6250 - 0702  
6250 - 0901  
Gov. 6210 - 0301

**Objectives:**

1. Students will understand attitudes toward equal rights for women and minorities through United States history.
2. Students will compare contemporary and historical views of equal rights.

**Procedure:**

1. Distribute Handout 1 and have students read Alice Miller's argument.
2. Solicit student comments and discuss the questions that follow the argument. Or divide the class into groups of four or five students. Tell students to imagine a society in which women are the only persons allowed to vote, to hold political office, and to occupy positions of economic power. Have the small groups consider the following questions:
  - a. Would everything be turned around, with men being discriminated against as women have been?
  - b. Would things be pretty much the same as they are now?
3. Distribute Handout 2 and have students read the three letters and discuss the questions that follow them.
4. Distribute Handout 3 and as a class, read the introductory history, song, and poem. Discuss the questions and quote.

**Handouts/Worksheets:**

1. Should Men Have the Vote?
2. An Exchange of Letters Between John and Abigail Adams
3. Suffrage in the West

**Author:**

Adapted from *Law in U. S. History* by Becky Anderson

## INTRODUCTION

The struggle for equal rights for women in the United States has been an issue for over 200 years. The following activities can be used in a study of women's suffrage and the Nineteenth Amendment. The short introductory activity on reverse sex stereotyping will provide an opportunity for class discussion. The second activity presents an exchange of letters between John and Abigail Adams, and this will give students a sense of the long historical struggle for women's rights in the United States. The third activity will give students an awareness of the political activities and ideas behind the struggle for equal rights in the West.

## HANDOUT 1

### SHOULD MEN HAVE THE VOTE?

#### Why We Oppose Votes for Men

1. Because man's place is in the army.
2. Because no really manly man wants to settle any question otherwise than by fighting.
3. Because if men should adopt peaceable methods, women will no longer look up to them.
4. Because men will lose their charm if they step out of their natural sphere and interest themselves in other matters than feats of arms, uniforms, and drums.
5. Because men are too emotional to vote. Their conduct at baseball games and political conventions shows this while their innate tendency to appeal to force renders them particularly unfit for the task of government.

Alice Duer Miller, 1915.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. Why is Miller's argument so effective?
2. Do you think sex stereotyping of women is as extreme as the sex stereotyping of men in Miller's argument?
3. What is a "stereotype?"

## HANDOUT 2

### EXCHANGE OF LETTERS BETWEEN JOHN AND ABIGAIL ADAMS

At the time our nation was born — and for a long while afterward — women were not allowed to vote, manage property, sign contracts, serve on juries, or act as legal guardians for their children. However, some women advocated equal rights for women as far back as 1776. One of these women was Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, a Patriot and delegate to the Continental Congress (and later President of the United States). In letters to her husband, Abigail Adams expressed her views on equal rights for women. Read the following exchange of letters and discuss the questions that follow.

Abigail Adams to John Adams  
March 31, 1776

. . . I long to hear that you have declared an independency — and, by the way, in the new code of laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than (were) your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to (instigate) a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by laws in which we have no voice or representation.

That your sex are natural tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute. But such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity . . . ? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex. Regard us then as beings, placed by providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power for our happiness.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. What was Abigail Adams' view toward men? Do you agree or disagree with her views?
2. In her letter, Abigail Adams wrote that "(we) will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation." What does she mean? Compare her views with the attitudes of the Patriots toward the British government during the Revolution.

John Adams to Abigail Adams

April 14, 1776

As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere. That children and apprentices were disobedient — that schools and colleges were grown turbulent — that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest (had) grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a compliment, but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.

Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obligated to go far and softly, and in practice, you know, we are the subjects. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave heroes would fight . . . a fine story indeed. I begin to think the ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, landjobbers, trimmers, bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholics, Scotch, . . . at last they have stimulated the (women) to demand new privileges and (to) threaten to rebel.

Abigail Adams to John Adams

May 7, 1776

I cannot say that I think you very generous to the ladies. For, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives. But you must remember that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard — very liable to be broken; and, notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims, we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet . . . .

### Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think John Adams takes his wife's concern seriously?
2. Who does he think holds the real power? How do his views compare with current attitudes about the power of men and women?
3. Why would a period of revolutionary activity encourage many different groups to demand rights and privileges?

### SUFFRAGE IN THE WEST

The first woman's rights convention in the United States was held in July, 1848, at Seneca Falls, New York. Between 1850 and the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, a number of woman's rights conventions were held. Many political issues were debated and demanded. During the nation's history, many determined women fought for equal rights even through their efforts did not meet with much success.

The first major victories for woman's suffrage came in the Western territories. In 1869, the territorial legislature of Wyoming gave women the vote and the following year, 1870, women gained the vote in the Utah Territory. Western women received the vote 50 years before the women in the Eastern states. Women could not vote in the Eastern states and were arrested and fined \$100 if they tried to vote.

Utah women lost the right to vote in 1887 when Congress passed a law, the Edmunds-Tucker Act, which outlawed plural marriage in Utah and also stated that women in Utah could no longer vote. Utah women and other women across the nation were outraged. Utah women joined forces with the national suffrage leaders in the fight for national and local suffrage legislation. Woman's rights leaders had earlier protested the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

The Fourteenth Amendment gave all "male inhabitants of the states" the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony stated, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I ever work for or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman." The Fifteenth Amendment stated that a citizen's right to vote could not be denied or taken away "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Women felt "sex" should have been included in the Amendment.

Suffrage associations were organized across the territory of Utah and rallies for women's rights were attended by both men and women. The following tune was often sung at the local Utah suffrage meetings to the hymn, "Hope of Israel."

Freedom's daughter, rouse from slumber;  
See the curtains are withdrawn,  
Which so long they mind hath shrouded,  
Lo! Thy day begins to dawn.  
Woman, rise thy penance o'er,  
Sit thou in the dust no more,  
Seize the scepter, hold the van,  
Equal with thy brother, man.

Utah women also published many articles and poems in their newspaper, the *Woman's Exponent*, to increase women's awareness of political inequality. The following is a poem from the *Exponent* of October 1894.

### EQUAL RIGHTS

Now the voice of womankind is startling all the world  
    Woman must have equal rights with man.  
Everywhere beneath the sun her banner is unfurled,  
    Woman must have equal rights with man.  
We but ask for freedom and the right to live and be,  
    What we are designed in God's great plan;  
And we're sure all thinking men will very shortly see,  
    Woman must have equal rights with man.

Should it be that in the land o'er which our standard waves  
    And our eagle soars so proud and free,  
Mothers, sisters, daughters should all be held as slaves,  
    Should they have to beg for liberty?  
We must pay our taxes, and the laws we must obey.  
    And it's time an era now began  
When in the elections we can also have a say  
    Woman should have equal rights with man.

Come my sisters, let us rise and educate our minds,  
    Put aside our follies great and small;  
Work with heart and soul to help all womankind,  
    Gather round our standard one and all.  
Do not pause nor falter, but be valiant in the fight  
    And the flame of liberty we'll fan.  
Till it spreads o'er all the land, then hail the time of right  
    When woman shall have equal rights with man.

Utah women were again given the right to vote in the Utah State Constitution ratified in 1896 after much controversy and debate in the territorial legislature.

By 1900, more and more women were concerned with gaining equal rights with men. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a national leader in the women's rights movement and chairman of many women's rights conventions, delivered a speech in which she said:

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of men toward women, having as direct object the establishment of tyranny over her.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. For what were the Utah women asking?
2. What do you think they meant by equal rights?
3. Why did Congress take the vote away from Utah women?
4. Compare Stanton's view with the letters written by Abigail Adams, Utah women and present day women's issues.