

Woman's Right to the Ballot

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Essay included in *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer* by Dexter C. Bloomer
1895

It is a principle of all free governments that the people rule. Each member of the community, in theory at least, is supposed to give assent to Constitution and laws to which he is subject; or, at least, it is assumed that these were made by a majority of the people. And this assent is given according to forms previously prescribed. The people vote directly upon the adoption of the Constitution, and by their representatives in making the laws. And since all the people must be subject to the Constitution and laws, so all the people should be consulted in their formation; that is, all who are of sufficient age and discretion to express an intelligent opinion. No one who claims to be a republican or lover of freedom at heart can dispute these positions. They are in substance the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Independence, and they form the common basis upon which our national and state governments rest. When they shall cease to be recognized and respected by the people and by our lawmakers, then free institutions will cease to exist.

But I presume their correctness, when applied to man, will be doubted by none; for man is willing enough to claim for himself the full recognition of all the high prerogatives I have shown him to be entitled to. But I hold more than this to be true. I hold that these rights belong, not to man alone, but to the race, and to each individual member of it, without regard to sex. I hold that woman has as good and rightful a claim to them as her brother, and that the man who denies this claim is not only no good democrat, and much less a good republican, but that in being guilty of this denial he commits an act of the grossest injustice and oppression. And I insist, not only that woman is entitled to the enjoyment of all these rights which God and nature have bestowed upon the race, but that she is entitled to the same means of enforcing those rights as man; and that therefore she should be heard in the formation of Constitutions, in the making of the laws, and in the selection of those by whom the laws are administered.

In this country there is one great tribunal by which all theories must be tried, all principles tested, all measures settled: and that tribunal is the ballot-box. It is the medium through which public opinion finally makes itself heard. Deny to any class in the community the right to be heard at the ballot-box and that class sinks at once into

a state of slavish dependence, of civil insignificance, which nothing can save from becoming subjugation, oppression and wrong.

From what I have said you will of course understand that I hold, not only that the exclusion of woman from the ballot-box is grossly unjust, but that it is her duty - so soon as she is permitted to do so - to go to it and cast her vote along with her husband and brother; and that, until she shall do so, we can never expect to have a perfectly just and upright government under which the rights of the people - of all the people - are respected and secured.

It is objected that it does not belong to woman's sphere to take part in the selection of her rulers, or the enactment of laws to which she is subject.

This is mere matter of opinion. Woman's sphere, like man's sphere, varies according to the aspect under which we view it, or the circumstances in which she may be placed. A vast majority of the British nation would deny the assumption that Queen Victoria is out of her sphere in reigning over an empire of an hundred and fifty millions of souls! And if she is not out of her sphere in presiding over the destinies of a vast empire why should any woman in this republic be denied her place among a nation of sovereigns? There is no positive rule by which to fix woman's sphere, except that of capacity. It is to be found, I should say, wherever duty or interest may call her, - whether to the kitchen, the parlor, the nursery, the workshop or the public assembly. And, most certainly, no narrow contracted view of her sphere can suffice to deprive her of any of those rights which she has inherited with her being.

Again, it is objected that it would be immodest and "unbecoming a lady" for women to go to the ballot-box to vote, or to the halls of the capitol to legislate.

This, too, is mere matter of opinion, and depends for its correctness upon the particular fashions or customs of the people. In deciding upon what is appropriate or inappropriate for individuals or classes the community is exceedingly capricious. In one country, or in one age, of the world, a particular act may be considered as entirely proper which in another age or country may be wholly condemned. But a few years ago it was thought very unladylike and improper for women to study medicine, and when Elizabeth Blackwell forced her way into the Geneva, N. Y., medical college people were amazed at the presumption. But she graduated with high honors, went to Europe to perfect her studies, and now stands high in her chosen profession. She let down the bars to a hitherto proscribed sphere. Others followed her lead, and now there are several colleges for the medical education of women, and women physicians without number; and the world applauds rather than condemns.

It is not a great many years since women sculptors were unknown, because woman's talent was not encouraged. Some years ago a match girl of Boston fashioned a bust of Rufus Choate in plaster and placed it in a show window, hoping some benevolent lover of art might be so attracted by it as to aid her to educate herself in the profession of sculpture. A gentleman who saw great merit in it inquired who was the artist, and when told that it was a young girl, exclaimed, "What a pity she is not a boy!" He saw that such talent in a boy would be likely to make him famous and enrich the world. But a girl had no right to such gifts. It would be an unladylike profession for her and so she must bury her God-given talent and keep to match selling and dish washing. A few years later Harriet Hosmer overleaped the obstacles that stood in her way and went to Rome to undertake the work of a sculptor. The world now rings with her praises and is enriched by her genius. She, too, removed barriers to a hitherto proscribed sphere and proved that the All-Father in committing a talent to woman's trust gave along with it a right to use it. Vinnie Ream and others have followed in the way thus opened, and no one now questions the propriety of women working in plaster or marble.

And so of many other departments of trade, profession and labor that within my recollection were not thought proper for woman, simply because she had not entered them. Women are debarred from voting and legislating, and therefore it is unfashionable for them to do either; but let their right to do so be once established, and all objections of that kind will vanish away.

And I must say I can conceive of nothing so terrible within the precincts of the ballot-box as to exclude woman therefrom. Who go there now? Our fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. And do they act so badly while there that they dare not suffer us to go with them? If it is really so bad a place surely they should stay away from it themselves, for I hold that any place that is too corrupt for woman to go to is also too corrupt for man to go to. "An atmosphere that is too impure for woman to breathe cannot but be dangerous to her sires and sons." We mingle with our gentlemen friends elsewhere with safety and pleasure, and I cannot think it possible that the exercise of the right of franchise turns them at once into ruffians.

Yet we are gravely told that woman would be treated with rudeness and insult should she go to the polls in the exercise of a right guaranteed to her by the laws of her country.

And would you, sir objector, be the one to do this? Would you insult the wife or mother or sister of your neighbor? I think not. Then judge other men by yourself and believe that, as each man, the low as well as the high, would have some female relative or friend with him there, each would be equally careful for the safety of those belonging to him and careful also of his own language and deportment. And should

one dare to offer insult would there not, think you, be a score of stout arms to fell the insulter to the earth?

Men will behave as well I verily believe at the polls as at other public assemblies, if they will permit woman to go with them there; and if they have behaved badly heretofore, which from their continual asseverations we must believe to be the case, it is because woman has not always been there with them.

The idea advanced that woman would become debased by participating in so important and sacred a duty as the selection of those who are to be placed in power, and to whom are to be committed the interests and happiness of the whole people, comes with a bad grace from men, who are ever claiming for her superior natural virtues. They should remember that God made her woman, that He gave her equal dominion with man over the world and all that is therein, and endowed her with high moral faculties, keen perceptions of right, and a love of virtue and justice, and it is not easy to change her nature. Her delicacy and sensitiveness will take care of themselves, in any exposure, and she will be as safe at the polls as at political and other conventions, at state and county and church fairs, at railroad and Fourth of July celebrations, and the various other crowds in which she mingles freely with men. That virtue is little worth which cannot bear itself unharmed through a crowd, or awe and frown down impudence whenever it meets with it. The true woman will be woman still in whatever situation you place her; and man will become elevated just so far as he mingles in her society in the various relations of life.

In fact this argument that it would be unsafe for woman to go to the polls is one that man, at least, should be ashamed to bring forward, inasmuch as it impeaches his own gallantry and instinctive regard for woman. But, if it be true that it would really be unsafe for us to go to the polls with our husbands and fathers, all danger could be avoided by our having separate places for voting apart from theirs.

But here I am answered that it is not men whom we have to fear so much as the bad of our own sex, who will rush to the polls while the good women will stay away. To this I have to say that I have never yet met a woman that I was afraid of, or from whom I feared contamination. In the theatre and concert and festival halls, the Fourth of July gatherings, in the cars, on the fair grounds, and any day upon the street or in the stores we meet and pass by the coarse, the frail, the fallen of our sex. They have the same right to God's pure air and sunshine as we, and we could not deprive them of it if we would and would not if we could. I see not how these are going to harm us any more at the polls than at all these other places.

The good women will vote as soon as the exercise of the right is granted them, and they will outnumber the bad more than a hundred to one. Instead then of the pure

woman being contaminated, the vile woman will be awed and silenced in her presence, and led by her example into the right paths. Even those called low and vile have hearts that can be touched, and they will gladly seize the aid which the ballot and good women will bestow to raise themselves from the degraded condition into which bad men, bad laws and bad customs have plunged them.

This objection, then, which assumes such proportions in the minds of many, looks very small when viewed in the light of truth and Christian charity. I think no man would consider it good reason for depriving him of rights because a bad man also enjoyed the same rights.

This arguing that all women would go to the bad if allowed to vote because some women are bad now when none of them vote is the most absurd logic ever conceived in the brain of man, and if those who use it could see their silly reasoning in the light that sensible men and women see it there would be less of it. If the ballot makes people bad, if it is corrupting in its tendencies and destructive of virtue and goodness, then the sooner men are deprived of it the better.

All men, good and bad, black and white, corrupt, debased, treacherous, criminal, may vote and make our laws, and we hear no word against it; but if one woman does or says aught that does not square with men's ideas of what she should do and say, then she should not have the right of self-government, and all women everywhere must on that account be disfranchised and kept in subjection!

Such reasoning might have answered once, but the intelligence of the present day rejects it, and women will not long be compelled to submit to its insults.

But, again, one says votes would be unnecessarily multiplied, that women would vote just as the men do, therefore the man's vote will answer for both. Sound logic, truly! But let us apply this rule to men. Votes are unnecessarily multiplied now by so many men voting; a few could do it all, as well as to take the mass of men from their business and their families to vote. My husband votes the republican ticket, and many other men vote just as he does; then why not let my husband's vote suffice for all who think as he does, and send the rest about their business? What need of so many men voting when all vote just alike?

Again, another says: "It has always been as now; women never have had equal rights, and that is proof that they should not have." Sound logic again! Worthy emanation from man's superior brain! But whence did man derive his right of franchise, and how long has he enjoyed it?

It is true that women never have had equal rights, because men have ever acted on the principle of oppressors that might makes right and have kept them in subjection, just as weaker nations are kept in subjection to the stronger.

But must we ever continue to act on such principles? Must we continue to cling to old laws and customs because they are old? Why then did not our people remain subject to kings? How did they dare to do what was not thought of in the days of Moses and Abraham? How dared they set aside the commands of the Bible and the customs of all past ages and set up a government of their own?

It is the boast of Americans that they know and do many things which their fathers neither knew nor did. Progress is the law of our nation and progress is written upon all its works. And while all else is progressing to perfection, while the lowest may attain to the position of the highest and noblest in the land, shall woman alone remain stationary? Shall she be kept in a state of vassalage because such was the condition of her sex six thousand years ago? Clearly, my friends, when the prejudice of custom is on the side of wrong and injustice in any matter we are not to be governed by it.

But again it is objected that if women should be enfranchised it would lead to discord and strife in families. In other words, to come down to the simple meaning of this objection, if women would not vote just as their husbands wanted them to the husbands would quarrel with them about it! And who are the men who would do this? Surely, not those who consider and treat their wives as equals. Not those who recognize the individuality of the wife and accord to her the right to her own opinions, the right to think for herself, and to act as her own sense and judgment may dictate. With such there would be no cause for quarrels, nothing to contend about. In such families all is harmony.

It would be only those who desire to rule in their families, only those who regard and treat their wives as inferiors and subjects who would get up contentions and discord; and it is only these who bring forward this objection. No man who honors woman as he should do would ever offer so flimsy a pretext for depriving her of rights and enslaving her thoughts. I believe the enfranchisement of woman will bring with it more happiness in the marriage relation, and greater respect from the husband for his wife, because men are always more respectful to their equals than to those they deem their inferiors and subjects.

Another objection of which we hear much in these days, and to which men invariably resort when answered on every other point, is that women do not want to vote. They say when all the women ask for the right it will be granted them. Did these objectors take the same ground in regard to the negro? Did the colored men very generally petition for the right of franchise? No such petition was ever heard of and yet men

forced the ballot unasked into their hands. Why then must woman sue and petition for her God-giver right of self-government? If one human being only claims that rights are unjustly withheld, such claim should receive the careful attention and consideration of this government and people. Yet tens of thousands of women, subjects of their government, have made such claims and set forth their grievances from time to time during the last thirty years. They have come as suppliants before the people asking for rights withheld, and they have been met with sneers and ridicule, and told that they must wait till all the women of the nation humbly sue for the same thing! Would such excuse ever be offered for withholding rights from men?

Again, it is said that no considerable number of women would exercise the right it granted. This, if true, and men do not know it to be so, has nothing to do with the question. Give them the right and let them exercise it or not as they choose. If they do not want to vote, and will not vote, then surely there is no need of restrictions to prevent their voting, and no harm can come from removing the obstacles that now obstruct their way.

Men are not required to give pledges that they will vote. There is no compulsion in their case. They are left free to do as they please, or as circumstances permit. The right is accorded and there the matter rests.

There is no justice in requiring more from women. That thousands of women would vote is pretty certain. If all do not avail themselves of such privileges, it will be of their own choice and right, and not because of its denial. The ballot is the symbol of freedom, of equality; and because the right to use it would lift woman from a state of inferiority, subjection and powerlessness to one of equality and freedom and power we demand it for her. If properly educated, she will use it for the best interests of herself and of humanity.

Another objection that carries great weight in the minds of many is that if women vote they must fight. Even some of our friends are puzzled how to settle this question. But a few days ago a lady friend asked me how we could get around it. I reply that all men have not earned their right to the ballot by firing the bullet in their country's defense, and if only those who fight should vote there are many sick men, many weak little men, many deformed men, and many strong and able-bodied but cowardly men who should be disfranchised.

These all vote but they do not fight, and fighting is not made a condition precedent to their right to the ballot. The law requires that only those of physical strength and endurance shall bear arms for their country, and I think not many women could be found to fill the law's requirements. So they would have to be excused with the weak little men who are physically disqualified. If there are any great, strong women able to

endure the marching and the fighting who want to go to the front in time of battle, I think they have a right to do so, and men should not dismiss them and send them home. But as there are other duties to be discharged, other interests to be cared for in time of war besides fighting, women will find it enough to look after these in the absence of their fighting men. They may enter the hospitals or the battlefields as nurses, or they may care for the crops and the young soldiers at home. They may also do the voting, and look after the affairs of government, the same as do all the weak men who vote but do not fight.

And further, as men do not think it right for woman to bear arms and fear it will be forced upon her with the ballot, they can easily make a law to excuse her; and doubtless, with her help, they will do so. There is great injustice, so long as the ballot is given to all men without conditions, the weak as well as the strong, in denying to woman a voice in matters deeply affecting her happiness and welfare, and through her the happiness and welfare of mankind, because perchance there may come a time again in the history of our country when we shall be plunged into war and she not be qualified to shoulder a musket.

This objection, like many others we hear, is too absurd to emanate from the brains of intelligent men, and I cannot think they seriously entertain the views they express. But give us a voice in the matter, gentlemen, and we will not only save ourselves from being sent to the battlefield, but will if possible keep you at home with us by averting the difficulties and dangers, and so compromising matters with foreign powers that peace shall be maintained and bloodshed avoided.

In justification of the exclusion of woman from a voice in the government we are told that she is already represented by her fathers, husbands and sons. To this I might answer, so were our fathers represented in the parliament of King George. But were they satisfied with such representation? And why not? Because their interests were not well cared for; because justice was not done them. They found they could not safely entrust their interests to the keeping of those who could not or would not understand them, and who legislated principally to promote their own selfish purposes. I wholly deny the position of these objectors. It is not possible for one human being to fully represent the wants and wishes of another, and much less can one class fully understand the desires and meet the requirements of a different class in society. And, especially, is this true as between man and woman. In the former certain mental faculties as a general thing are said to predominate; while in the latter, the moral attain to a greater degree of perfection. Taken together, they make up what we understand by the generic term man. If we allow to the former, only, a full degree of development of their common nature one-half only enjoys the freedom of action designed for both. We then have the man, or male element, fully brought out while the woman, or female element, is excluded and crushed.

It should be remembered too that all rights have their origin in the moral nature of mankind, and that when woman is denied any guarantee which secures these rights to her, violence is done to a great moral law of our being. In assuming to vote and legislate for her, man commits a positive violation of the moral law and does that which he would not that others should do unto him. And, besides all these considerations, it is hard to understand the workings of this system of proxy-voting and proxy-representation. How is it to work when our self-constituted representative happens to hold different opinions from us? There are various questions, such as intemperance, licentiousness, slavery, and war, the allowing men to control our property, our person, our earnings, our children, on which at times we might differ; and yet this representative of ours can cast but one vote for us both, however different our opinions may be. Whether that vote would be cast for his own interests, or for ours, all past legislation will show. Under this system, diversities of interest must of necessity arise; and the only way to remove all difficulty and secure full and exact justice to woman is to permit her to represent herself.

One more point and I have done. Men say women cannot vote without neglecting their families and their duties as housekeepers. This, to our opponents, is a very serious objection. Who would urge a similar one to man's voting and legislating, or holding office - that he would neglect his family or his business? And yet the objection would be about as reasonable in one case as in the other. In settling a question of natural and inherent right, we must not stop to consider conveniencies or inconveniencies. The right must be accorded, the field left clear, and the consequences will take care of themselves. Men argue as though if women were granted an equal voice in the government all our nurseries would be abandoned, the little ones left to take care of themselves, and the country become depopulated. They have frightened themselves with the belief that kitchens would be deserted and dinners left uncooked, and that men would have to turn housekeepers and nurses. When the truth is, mothers have as much regard for the home and the welfare of the children as have the fathers; and they understand what their duties are as well as men do; and they are generally as careful for the interests of the one, and as faithful in the discharge of the other, as are these watchful guardians of theirs who tremble lest they should get out of their sphere. God and nature have implanted in woman's heart a love of her offspring, and an instinctive knowledge of what is proper and what improper for her to do, and it needs no laws of man's making to compel the one or teach the other. Give her freedom and her own good sense will direct her how to use it.

Were the prohibition removed to-morrow, not more than one mother in a thousand would be required to leave her family to serve the state, and not one without her own consent. Even though all the offices in the country should be filled by women, which would never be likely to happen, it would take but a very small proportion of the

whole away from their families; not more than now leave home each year for a stay of months at watering places, in the mountains, visiting friends, or crowding the galleries of legislative halls dispensing smiles on the members below. There would, then, be little danger of the terrible consequences so feelingly depicted by those who fear that the babies and their own stomachs would suffer.

But I have no desire, nor does any advocate of the enfranchisement of woman desire, that mothers should neglect their duties to their families. Indeed, no greater sticklers for the faithful discharge of such duties can be found than among the prominent advocates of this cause; and no more exemplary mothers can be found than those who have taken the lead as earnest pleaders for woman's emancipation. Undoubtedly, the highest and holiest duty of both father and mother is to their children; and neither the one nor the other, from many false ideas of patriotism, any love of display or ambition, any desire for fame or distinction, should leave a young family to engage in governmental affairs. A mother who has young children has her work at home, and she should stay at home with it, and care well for their education and physical wants. But having discharged this duty, having reared a well-developed and wisely-governed family, then let the state profit by her experience, and let the father and the mother sit down together in the councils of the nation.

But all women are not mothers; all women have not home duties; so we shall never lack for enough to look after our interests at the ballot-box and in legislative halls. There are thousands of unmarried women, childless wives and widows, and it would always be easy to find enough to represent us without taking one mother with a baby in her arms. All women may vote without neglecting any duty, for the mere act of voting would take but little time; not more than shopping or making calls. Instead of woman being excluded from the elective franchise because she is a mother, that is the strongest reason that can be urged in favor of granting her that right. If she is responsible to society and to God for the moral and physical welfare of her son; if she is to bring him up as the future wise legislator, lawyer and jurist; if she is to keep trim pure and prepare him to appear before the bar of the Most High, - then she should have unlimited control over his actions and the circumstances that surround him. She should have every facility for guarding his interests and for suppressing and removing all temptations and dangers that beset his path. If God has committed to her so sacred a charge He has, along with it, given the power and the right of protecting it from evil and for accomplishing the work He has given her to do; and no false modesty, no dread of ridicule, no fear of contamination will excuse her for shrinking from its discharge.

Woman needs the elective franchise to destroy the prevalent idea of female inferiority. She needs it to make her the equal of her own sons, that they may not in a few years assume the power to rule over her, and make laws for her observance without her

consent. The fact that she is the mother of mankind - "the living providence under God who gives to every human being its mental, moral and physical organization, who stamps upon every human heart her seal for good or for evil" - is reason why she should occupy no inferior position in the world. In the words of Mrs. Stanton, "That woman who has no higher object of thought than the cooking a good dinner, compounding a good pudding, mending old clothes, or hemming dish-towels - or, to be a little more refined, whose thoughts centre on nothing more important than an elegant dress, beautiful embroidery, parties, dances, and genteel gossip concerning the domestic affairs of the Smiths and Browns - can never give to the world a Bacon or a Newton, a Milton or a Howard, a Buonaparte or a Washington." If we would have great men, we must first have great women. If we would have great statesmen and great philanthropists, we must have mothers whose thoughts soar above the trifling objects which now engage the attention of the mass of women, and who are capable of impressing those thoughts upon the minds of their offspring.

In conclusion the enfranchisement of woman will be attended with the happiest results, not for her only, but the whole race. It will place society upon a higher moral and social elevation than it has ever yet attained. Hitherto, the variously devised agencies for the amelioration of the race have been designed mainly for the benefit of man. For him colleges have been established and universities endowed. For his advancement in science and the arts professorships have been founded and lecture rooms opened. And, above all, for securing to him the widest field for the fullest display of his abilities republican institutions have been proclaimed and sustained at a great sacrifice of toil, of bloodshed and of civil commotions. Although the doctrine of the innate equality of the race has been proclaimed yet, so far as relates to women, it has been a standing falsehood. We now ask that this principle may be applied practically in her case, also; we ask that the colleges and universities, the professorships and lecture rooms shall be opened to her, also; and, finally, we ask for the admission to the ballot-box as the crowning right to which she is justly entitled.

And when woman shall be thus recognized as an equal partner with man in the universe of God - equal in rights and duties - then will she for the first time, in truth, become what her Creator designed her to be, a helpmeet for man. With her mind and body fully developed, imbued with a full sense of her responsibilities, and living in the conscientious discharge of each and all of them, she will be fitted to share with her brother in all the duties of life; to aid and counsel him in his hours of trial; and to rejoice with him in the triumph of every good word and work.