

Women's rights in the american revolution essay

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



In Charles Brockden Brown's article "The Rights of Woman", Mrs. Carter states that "Even the government of our country, which is said to be the freest in the world, passes over women as if they were not [free]. We are excluded from all political rights without the least ceremony". Mrs. Carter represents the condition that most American women were in after the Revolution, angry at the contradictory society in which they live in. The American Revolution had been fought to gain equality and rights for American citizens, but in actuality, these rights did not seem to apply to the women of the country. Throughout history, the idea of women as equals has been a conflicting argument.

Some believed that women were inferior to men, both physically and mentally, while others argued that women were only held back by their circumstances; that they too could succeed in society. In John Locke's Essay on Human Understanding he supports the belief that women are equal to men, saying that "the mind is a blank slate shaped by the environment and education rather than innate ideas" and that women's "deficiencies were the result not of inherent incapacity but of the failure to receive adequate educational opportunities" (Zagarri 12). Despite the immense amount of evidence of women's achievements throughout history, many people were still not convinced of their equality. Up until the American Revolution, women had restrictions laid upon them, limiting their success in society. But during the Revolution, men realized that women should not always be seen as a threat, but rather can lend a hand to the cause. The start of the Revolution marked a change in the popular perceptions of women and state. Men began

urging women to join in on the cause, realizing that their support could be used to fight against the British in several different ways.

Although they still could not directly participate in politics, there were plenty of indirect ways to help the cause. They boycotted goods and did not drink British tea, made homemade clothing to save money for the war, and many wives had to take over their husband's roles at home, on the farm, or in the business allowing the men to more fully participate in the war effort. In addition to these contributions, women were a great addition to advertising different political views because they had great influence over their husbands and sons. Some women even made it as far as being "female politicians", a term coined for the women who "assumed their political role with an independence of spirit and intellectual assertiveness" (Zagarri 5). Despite their inability to vote, they still functioned as independent political people. All of women's contributions helped the war effort in innumerable ways and helped bring a sense of American nationalism to the newly united country, but women were still often seen as a threat.

Many feared that women's newfound sense of power would inevitably lead to them wanting to extend these "natural rights and equalities" to women. This new taste of independence and power would only lead to them wanting more, a transformation that most men in America were not willing to negotiate. One groundbreaking development that occurred during the Revolution is New Jersey's new state constitution. In 1790, their constitution stated that "all inhabitants of this colony of full age, who are worth fifty pounds...shall be entitled to vote". Although this did not apply to all women

and mostly widows, it proved that women were beginning to be given more responsibility and respect in the political sense. Although the right to vote for women in New Jersey soon ended, it “ made the imaginable a reality” (Zagarri 37). Before the Revolution, women lacked independent identity, belonging either to their fathers or husbands, but now they were beginning to hold their own position in society. Even for some time after the war, women were able to participate in the celebration of Independence Day.

Participation of women in the celebration was prevalent all throughout America. Some women even had the prestigious role of speaking in public, an area thought to be only in the realm of men. Women continued to be encouraged to express their patriotic views.

However, this encouragement did not endure for very long. Many people began to resist the new development of women in politics. Ridiculing women and their desire for involvement in politics became very popular.

In one article, a fictional female character is asked her opinion on women's roles in politics and she responded by saying “ women are less qualified to decide on the affairs of government” (Zagarri 77). A popular fear within America was that women would soon want to extend the formal political rights to women, and that the right to vote would lead to their desire to obtain the right to hold public office. This notion was unimaginable for most men, fearing most importantly that women may even want to have the same political roles as men. There was much alarm that the progress in women's rights was fading the distinction between the sexes and breaking down the barriers of the social hierarchy. The potential seen in women throughout the

revolutionary era did not carry over into the post-revolutionary era. All of the progress they had made through those years was slowly reversing and taken away from them. One act to ensure the safety of men's superiority over women was political propaganda. Propaganda was used to ridicule the idea of women being equal to men.

They portrayed women "as masculinized threats who might usurp men's power" or on the contrary, "as helpless victims who seemed incapable of political thought, much less political action (Zagarri 113). In the years after the American Revolution, some women made "the barriers for their reentry into politics more formidable than ever" because they began to disassociate themselves from politics. Women's lack of support during the Panic of 1819 created a bad image for them. They were not there to assist the men when they were needed. Unable to freely involve themselves in the political realm of society, they began to focus their attention on charities or organizations. They centered their efforts on social reform. Although some people questioned their exclusion from politics, many women went to great lengths to separate themselves from the political society. Their goal was to assist their country, not add to the tension between the sexes.

In an atmosphere that is hostile or resistant to woman's actions, female reformers were able to achieve many successes" (Zagarri 145). They switched their focus from a political standpoint to a more religious or moral standpoint. Despite the good the social reformers brought about, their rejection of politics made it more difficult for any other women to involve themselves in the political efforts, emphasizing the separation between the

sexes. Overall, women's hardwork and loyalty to the cause throughout the American Revolution did not suffice when their progress started to be seen as a threat to the superiority of men. Before the Revolution, the idea of women's rights was an idea that was merely discussed, but after, Americans then needed to answer for themselves and women's desire for equality was unavoidable for the future of America. Although women would have to go to great lengths to achieve this, it was inevitable. Works Cited Zaggarri, Rosemarie.

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