

Famous Speeches: Cady Stanton's Address on "The Destructive Male"

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Women's rights pioneer Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave this powerful speech in 1868 at the Women's Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C. Vandeer/Library of Congress

Editor's Note: In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton created the first organized demand for women's suffrage in the United States. Suffrage is the right to vote. She worked closely with Susan B. Anthony, fighting for the rights of women, and was also against slavery. In 1868, she gave the following speech at the Women's Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C.

I urge a sixteenth amendment to the Constitution because 'manhood suffrage,' or a man's government, is civil, religious and social disorganization. The male element is a destructive force. It is stern, selfish and aggrandizing. It loves war, violence, conquest and is concerned with acquiring things. It breeds in the both the material and moral worlds disagreement, disorder, disease, and death. See what a record of blood and cruelty the pages of history reveal! The soul of humanity has struggled for the centuries. It has struggled through slavery, slaughter and sacrifice. It has struggled through religious persecutions and imprisonments, pains and persecutions, black codes and gloomy beliefs. Meanwhile, mercy has covered humanity's face and all hearts have been dead alike to love and hope!

The male element has held high carnival thus far. It has fairly run riot from the beginning, overpowering the feminine element everywhere. It has crushed out all the diviner qualities in human nature, until we know but little of true manhood and womanhood. Of womanhood we know comparatively nothing, for it has hardly been recognized as a power until within the last century. Society is but the reflection of man himself, unaffected by woman's thought. It is the hard iron rule we feel alike in the church, the state and the home. No one need wonder at the disorganization and the fragmentary condition of everything. We only need to remember that man, who represents but half a complete being, with but half an idea on every subject, has undertaken the absolute control of all earthly matters.

People object to the demands of those women whom they choose to call the strong-minded. They say 'the right of suffrage will make the women masculine.' That is just the difficulty in which we are involved today. Though women do not have the right to vote, we have few women in the best sense. We have simply so many women who are reflections, varieties and dilutions of the masculine gender. The strong, natural characteristics of womanhood are repressed and ignored in women's dependence on men. For so long as man feeds woman she will try to please the giver and adapt herself to his condition. To keep a foothold in society, woman must be as near like man as possible. She must reflect his ideas, opinions, virtues, intentions, prejudices and vices. She must respect his laws, though they take from her every inalienable right, and conflict with that higher law written by the finger of God on her own soul.

She must look at everything from its dollar-and-cent point of view. If she does not, she is said to be living in a romance story. She must accept things as they are and make the best of them. To mourn over the miseries of others, the poverty of the poor, their hardships in jails, prisons, asylums, the horrors of war, cruelty and brutality in every form, would all be just sentimentalizing. It would be sentimental to protest against the secret schemes, bribery and dishonesty of public life. To wish that her sons might work in some business that did not involve lying, cheating and a hard, grinding selfishness, is considered total nonsense.

In this way man has been molding woman to his ideas by direct influences. At the same time she has used indirect means to control him. In most cases she has developed the very characteristics both in him and herself that needed repression. And now man himself stands appalled at the results of his own excesses. He mourns in bitterness that falsehood, selfishness and violence are the law of life. The need of this hour is not territory, gold mines, railroads or money, but a new gospel of womanhood. It is necessary to praise purity, virtue, morality and true religion. It is needed to lift man up into the higher realms of thought and action.

We ask for the legal right to vote for women, as the first step toward the recognition of an essential element in government. It is the only element that can secure the health, strength and prosperity of the nation. Whatever is done to lift woman to her true position will help to bring in a new day of peace and perfection for humanity.

In speaking of the masculine element, I do not mean to say that all men are hard, selfish and brutal. Many of the most beautiful spirits the world has known have been clothed with manhood. I refer to those characteristics, though often present in woman, that make a man, a man. For example, the love of acquiring things and of conquest, which are most often male characteristics, are the very pioneers of civilization when they are expended on the earth, the sea, the elements and the riches and forces of nature. However, these things are powers of destruction when they are used by one man to oppress another, or to sacrifice nations to ambition.

Here, that great caretaker of women's love, if it were permitted to speak out freely, as it naturally would against oppression, violence and war, it would hold all these destructive forces in check. This is because woman knows the value of life better than man does. Not one drop of blood would ever be shed, or one life sacrificed in vain, with her consent.

With violence and disturbance in the natural world, we see a constant effort to maintain a balance of forces. Nature is like a loving mother. It is always trying to keep land and sea, mountain and valley, each in its place. It tries to hush the angry winds and waves, balance the extremes of heat and cold, of rain and drought, so that peace, harmony and beauty may reign supreme. There is a striking comparison between matter and mind. The present disorganization of society warns us that in the dethronement of woman we have let loose the elements of violence and ruin that only she has the power to stop. If the civilization of the age calls for suffrage for women, surely a government of the most virtuous educated men and women would better represent the whole. This sort of government would protect the interests of all better than one with the representation of either man or woman alone could.