

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On the Woman Question

In the early 1900s, the issue of women's political, economic, and social rights was hotly debated in the press and in the U.S. Congress.

As you read the following passages on the “woman question,” try to identify the arguments for and against women's rights.

FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Are Women Human Beings,” Harper's Weekly, May 25, 1912

When we were all hunters, fishers, and root-gatherers, we were men and women, just as efficiently and completely as we are now. When we kept cattle we were not any the less, or more, men and women. When we developed agriculture, we were still men and women. When we specialized in industry, we remained men and women. Men were males and women females at any time in the whole long story.

But while remaining unchanged in these respects, we have changed enormously in our social features, our common human attributes.

Specialization has given us a thousand trades, arts, crafts, and professions. Organization has multiplied our power myriad-fold. Invention and discovery have enriched and enlightened the world. Religions have changed. Governments have changed. Society evolves from age to age. All these are human processes. They belong to our race. They are common to both male and female. They have no faintest connection with any sex distinction. . . .

The woman of our age in most countries of the same degree of development are outgrowing the artificial restrictions so long placed upon them, and following natural lines of human advance. They are specializing, because they are human. They are organizing, because they are human. They are seeking economic and political independence, because they are human. They are demanding the vote, because they are human.

Against this swelling tide stands the mere mass of inert old-world ignorance, backed by the perverse misconception of modern minds, which even science fails to illuminate. . . .

[T]hese things the women want to do and be and have are not in any sense masculine. They do not belong to men. They never did. They are departments of our social life, hitherto monopolized [up till now controlled] by men, but no more made masculine by that use than the wearing of trousers by Turkish women makes trousers feminine. . . .

FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Mary Putnam-Jacobi, “Common Sense” Applied to Woman Suffrage

No matter how well born, how intelligent, how highly educated, how virtuous, how rich, how refined, the women of today constitute a political class below that of every man, no matter how base born, how stupid, how ignorant, how vicious, how poverty-stricken, how brutal. The pauper in the almshouse may vote; the lady who devotes her philanthropic thought to making the almshouse habitable may not. The tramp who begs cold [food] in the kitchen may vote; the heiress who feeds him and endows universities may not. The half-civilized hordes pouring into our country through the open gates of our seaport towns, the Indian on [his own land], the negro on the cotton plantation—all now, or in a few years, have a vote. But the white woman of purest bloods, and who, in her own person, or that of her mother or grandmother, has helped to sustain the courage of the Revolutionary war, to fight the heroic battle of abolition, and to dress the wound of the Rebellion—this woman must keep silence. . . . The women—who embrace half the education, half the virtue, and but a fraction of the illiteracy or crime of the community—remain excluded from the franchise, buried behind this dense cloud of often [stupid] ignorance.