

VOTE
THIS
SESSION

100-year anniversary

of women's right to vote in the USA 1920 - 2020

by Susan Morales Guerra,
writer and facilitator, Oslo Norway

EDITOR'S NOTE: Passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920, the 19th amendment granted women the right to vote. August 18, 2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, guaranteeing and protecting women's constitutional right to vote.

In order to transform law, you need a political voice. In order to have a political voice, you need to exercise the right to vote. —Anne D. Gordon, Professor of History, Rutgers University, 2016.

Last March, while I was attending an international seminar outside of Oslo, there were seven American women present. I asked them to share their thoughts with me about the centennial anniversary of the right to vote for women in the USA. Five of these were students in their twenties from a small mid-western liberal college. Each one responded with: "Really?. I wasn't aware. I haven't thought about it." Their professors who were also there, mentioned that it gets more difficult to arouse attention to women's issues alone but they integrate this into their classes of history, political science, literature and media studies, among other disciplines.

The fact that the fight for women's right to vote for women took nearly 100 years and hard struggles by many women did not occur to the young women. This is not a surprise as this story is overlooked unless you are a political science or women's studies student / scholar it seems.

After one hundred years, it can be that women's right to vote is taken for granted. For young people, it has always been there and we women do use this right, right?



Above: Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Below: Lucretia Mott

In recent elections, voter turnout rates for women have equaled or exceeded voter turnout rates for men. Women, who constitute more than half the population, have cast almost ten million more votes than men in recent elections.

Particularly in every presidential election since 1980, the proportion of eligible female adults who voted has exceeded the proportion of eligible male adults who voted. In all presidential elections prior to 1980, the voter turnout rate for women was lower than the rate for men.

When it comes to numbers, the number of female voters has exceeded the number of male voters in every presidential election since 1964. (<https://bit.ly/cawp-pdf>)

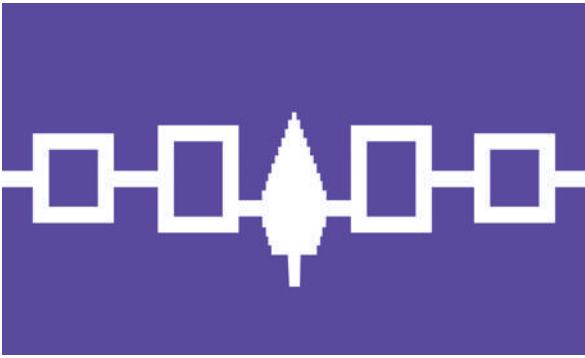
It is logical to assume that due to the increase of women in the work force, the issues brought up by the feminist movements and civil rights legislation can be accredited with this increase of female voter activity. This implies that as an electorate voting group, women have exercised their power and that may be a reason for attempts to revise voter accessibility in another manner.

I realized how little I knew about suffragette history as well. One thing I do know is that women's right to vote and women's rights in general are not an isolated gender issue. Women's access to the right to vote is directly tied to the issues of personal economics, personal education, personal health, our laws' interpretations of law and practice of what the laws allow.

There have always been very clear threats to this right from its ratification until today, through the revisions and reversal of policies and through national and state amendments and laws. So, we can celebrate this centennial by learning some history and gain awareness of what systems and policies affect the right to vote for women, and others today.

100 hundred years of the fight for voting rights for women

The women's suffrage movement is known as a decades-long fight to win the right to vote for women in the United States, having its official beginnings at the first public gathering for



Flag of the Iroquois Confederacy



Matilda Joslyn Gage, honorary member of its Wolf Clan

women's rights at a convention in Seneca Falls, New York in July, 1848.

The leaders of this convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, became politically engaged through their work for the abolition of slavery. But as women, they were not able to take part in public meetings or organizations. They later realized how the law considered slaves and married women "dead" as citizens, and defined them only as property of man, without any personal privilege or rights. They were, under the law, forced to obey their "masters" (read "owners") at the risk of punishment for disturbing domestic life. Stanton and Mott, with other activists, believed this was wrong thinking about any human being, including women.

In a recent anthology from 2019, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, (Penguin Classics), the scholar Sally Roesch Wagner extends the timeline of suffrage in this part of the world by nearly a thousand years. She begins with the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, when the Onondaga, Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, and Cayuga nations, later joined by the Tuscarora, gathered in the land around the Great Lakes to form an egalitarian society that afforded women political power. Haudenosaunee women helped select the chiefs who together governed by council, and they had a say in matters of war and peace. Political historians have long described the Haudenosaunee Confederacy as the oldest continuously functioning democracy in the world; Wagner reminds us that those democratic principles extended to women, called a Matriarchate. The platform of the Matriarchate is recognized in this anthology as to where the concepts of inherent rights, natural equality of condition and the establishment of a civilized government based upon these practices is found.

Lucretia Mott stayed in a Seneca community while doing relief work with the Quakers, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed the Oneida Nation around Seneca Falls, and activist Matilda Joslyn Gage not only met with people of the Mohawk Nation but was an honorary member of its Wolf Clan. These early activists saw firsthand that Haudenosaunee women could own property, initiate divorces, and voted in community matters and leadership. The comparative equality they discovered among these neighboring societies most likely influenced the first leaders of

the USA as a nation and the first generation of suffragists. (ref. The Women's Suffrage Movement)

Seneca Falls - first women's rights convention:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, together with others, penned the amendment to the declaration of independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." – re-write of The Declaration of Independence, 1848.

Disagreements over strategy threatened to cripple the movement more than once and the campaign was not easy. In 1890 two groups merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the organization's first president.

By then, the suffragists' approach had changed from before the Civil War. Instead of arguing that women deserved the same rights and responsibilities as men because women and men were "created equal," the new generation of activists argued that women deserved the vote because they were different from men. They could make issues of domesticity into a community of interest for mobilization and organizing. (bit.ly/women-suffrage)

The diversity of the voting-rights advocates is less shocking than the diversity of voting rights themselves. One of the last, and most telling objects in another recent book covering the suffrage movement, *Why They Marched*, (Belknap Press, Harvard); is a handbill titled, "*Seeing Is Believing*" which features three maps of the United States.

The first map is from 1869, when Wyoming was the only state that allowed women to vote. The second is from 1909, when, after four decades, just three other states had enfranchised women:



Suffragettes known as the Silent Sentinels picket holding banners in front of the White House. One banner reads: "Mr. President How Long Must Women Wait For Liberty". (Photo/Library of Congress) ©1917

Colorado, Idaho, and Utah. The last, from 1919, shows a complicated patchwork of the various voting rights held by women around the country. By then, fifteen states had passed constitutional amendments allowing full female suffrage; others had partial suffrage, allowing women to vote in school or local elections. The handbill, along with many other artifacts from the time, demonstrates the steady advance of women's suffrage while also complicating the standard portrait of it: the right to vote is less a switch than a dial, one that can be turned up or dimmed down. (ref. Why They Marched)

The generation of suffragettes, in early 20th century, had many issues on the agenda like ending child labor, worker's rights in industries where most workers were women, curbing corruption, and equal quality education for children. Without the right to vote, there was no power to influence policymakers. They therefore organized militant protests and, mobilization was done by holding parades, pickets, marches, town hall meetings gathering a broad sphere of women through state-by-state organizing of working women and also women-of-color, as well as those not employed were able to be reached. A fraction group, known as the Silent Sentinels, held their tongues while they held their banners. Some had taken to burning Woodrow Wilson's speeches in tiny urns and even burn an effigy of him, too.

Criticized and condemned as "aggressive militants," women who stood vigil in front of the White House were the first people ever to stage a protest there, and dozens of them were sent to prison. Many more were heckled or spat upon by passersby, had their banners and sashes torn to pieces by mobs, and were knocked down by police.

Although the Civil War was a period which put the struggle for women's rights on hold, World War



Suffragettes marched up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to Fifty-Ninth St. on October 23, 1915 in New York City demanding voting rights for women. Part of the George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).



Woman Suffrage Monument in Centennial Park, Nashville, TN dedicated on August 18, 2020. Tennessee was the 36th and final state needed to ratify the 19th Amendment. Artist: Alan LeQuire.

I strengthened awareness of the value of the contributions of women during the war, thus lending power to their argument.

Activists presented their case by using the experiences of women during World War I as a major part of the continued political pressure, which in 1918, forced President Woodrow Wilson's endorsement of women's right to vote.

"We have made partners of women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of sacrifice and suffering, and not to a partnership of privilege and of right?" – Wilson, speech before congress 1918. (ref. www.crusadeforth-evote.org/wilson)

Finally, on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. On November 2nd of that year, more than 8 million women across the United States voted in elections for the first time.

The 19 Amendment granted women the right to vote, and reads: *"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."* [1687]

New organization for women

The League of Women Voters (LWV), a civic organization; was formed to help women take a larger role in public affairs after they won the right to vote. It was founded in 1920 to support the new women suffrage rights and was a merger of National Council of Women Voters, founded by Emma Smith DeVoe, and National American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, approximately six months before the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution gave women the right to vote.

The League of Women Voters began as a "mighty political experiment" aimed to help newly enfranchised women exercise their responsibilities as voters. Originally, only women could join the league; but in 1973 the charter was modified to include men. LWV operates at the local, state, and national level, with over 1,000 local and 50 state leagues, and one territory league in the U.S. Virgin Islands. (ref. www.bit.ly/women-voters)

With this centennial, it is worth consideration of not only what women were fighting for then but why they had to fight so hard, and who, exactly, was fighting against them.

Challenges then and today

Challenges to voting rights, as women and others experience in our country today, are hardly a 21st-century invention.



Irene L. Moorman

Black Suffragettes

After the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, Black women voted in elections and held political offices. However, many states passed laws that discriminated against African Americans and limited their freedoms. Black women in the Women's Suffrage Movement often found themselves excluded in conferences. And, while Black suffragettes worked for issues such as anti-lynching laws, the women's suffrage movement did not. Full voting rights for African Americans were not achieved until the 1965 Voting Rights Act passed.



Sarah Jane Smith Thompson Garnet

In the late 1700s the right to vote began when only white male landowners were granted this right. All others were not considered in position to have this right. Since those times, the women's suffrage movement broke open the path for the 19th amendment, to remove barriers to voting rights for all citizens over the age of eighteen.

The book, *"The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote"* (Viking), by the journalist Elaine Weiss, describes the steps forward and back again, that took place in the weeks leading up to the suffrage victory. Political strategic considerations of how the female vote could sway political agendas and policies, was done by members of both parties in government. These political agendas became more important than the vote to enfranchise women as full-fledged citizens with inherent rights. The book also gives account to the other ideas which prevailed causing opposition, many recognizable even today. Opponents invoked the ideas of women's supposed emotional instability and intellectual deficiencies, the danger to society of anything that distracted them from their domestic duties as wives and mothers, and the threat to the moral order should they bother themselves with politics. "Some argued that most women did not even want the right to vote, others that the expanded electorate would be an expen-

sive burden on municipalities." (ref. *The Woman's Hour*)

These new histories; as told in the books, *The Woman's Hour*, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, *Why They Marched*; suggest that the struggle for women's suffrage does not just extend further into the past than we thought; it also extends to the present, and the future.

The struggles behind the suffrage victory foreshadows the vulnerability of voting rights today, when even those who have the right are often prevented from exercising it. Disenfranchisement can take many forms, and its manifestations are unfortunately common: purging voter rolls, passing voter-identification requirements, understaffing or closing polling places, gerrymandering voting districts. Under the circumstances, perhaps the best way to celebrate the anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment is to remember all those who cannot vote, not only those who can. After all, it is only through our privileged right to vote and to organize that we can keep up with democracy.

In 1919, the Senate passed the Nineteenth Amendment and it was officially ratified on August 26, 1920.

BIO: Susan M. Guerra a native of San Antonio, Tx and a founder of the Esperanza lives in Oslo, Norway where she is an author and facilitator for social sustainable community development.

Androcentrism

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with their wives, a decree which was mostly ignored in Great Britain. Benedict VIII (1112-1124) added such decree to the Canon Law and justified the selling of the priests' children as slaves. The Synod of Clermont (1130) stated that priests are "God's temples," adding that to lay in the conjugal bed offended their dignity and made them impure. The Second Lateran Council (1139) made celibacy mandatory in the West. The clergymen who resisted were to have their children sold as slaves. Many of these children were, then, sold to members of the clergy. One can see why priestly celibacy is being defended to this day and the trashy arguments used to deny women equal rights in the Church and in society at large.

Furthermore, women were the main targets of the Inquisition, mostly because they were charged with being the major source of witchcraft. So Exodus 22: 18 ("Thou shall not allow a witch to live") was applied to them and they were burned at the stake. That's how the Inquisition ended up, during the 16th and 17th centuries, killing women in the proportion of 50 to every one male. In Central Europe, 83% of its 100,000 victims were women.

Yet, a proper reading of the true meaning of the Old Testament tells a rather different story.

Keep in mind that the male monotheism of ancient Israel grew out as a reaction against its neighbors' worship of the goddesses of fertility that were identified with nature, the earth, the moon, fertility, etc. However, the Old Testament presents God with many feminine traits. His mercy, for instance, is spelled out as "rahamim," a term derived from "rehem," i.e., the woman's uterus. Even Pope John Paul II used the term "rahamim" in reference to God's unbound mercy (encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* 8: 23-31).

We shall see, in my following article, how a proper reading of all the Old Testament contradicts the androcentrism of ancient Israel, then how the example of Jesus and of the Apostle Paul present a quite different and positive view of women and of their role in Church and society.

BIO: Tarcisio Beal, STL, PHD, Professor Emeritus of the University of the Incarnate Word, where he taught for 41 years was also co-founder of the old Archdiocesan Justice & Peace Commission headed by Rev. Bill Davis, then Pastor of St. Mary's Parish.

NOTE: Opinions expressed here are solely the author's own.