

DISAPPOINTMENT IS THE LOT OF WOMEN

1855

----- *Lucy Stone* -----

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Lucy Stone (1818–1893) earned money as a teacher to pay for her college education. Her participation in the abolitionist movement and other moral reform efforts gave her experience as a political activist and public speaker which carried into the struggle for women’s rights. In 1848, she delivered this speech at the Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, to rally support for the women’s rights struggle.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Identifying problems

How did Stone define “rights” in this speech?

From the first years to which my memory stretches, I have been a disappointed woman. When, with my brothers, I reached forth after the sources of knowledge, I was reprov'd with “It isn’t fit for you; it doesn’t belong to women.” Then there was but one college in the world where women were admitted, and that was in Brazil. I would have found my way there, but by the time I was prepared to go, one was opened in the young State of Ohio—the first in the United States where women and Negroes could enjoy opportunities with white men. I was disappointed when I came to seek a profession worthy an immortal being—every employment was closed to me, except those of the teacher, the seamstress, and the housekeeper. In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman’s heart until she bows down to it no longer. I wish that women, instead of being walking showcases, instead of begging of their fathers and brothers the latest and gayest new bonnet, would ask of them their rights.

The question of Woman’s Rights is a practical one. The notion has prevailed that it was only an ephemeral idea; that it was but women claiming the right to smoke cigars in the streets, and to frequent bar rooms. Others have supposed it a question of comparative intellect; others still, of sphere. Too much has already been said and written about woman’s sphere. Trace all the doctrines to their source and they will be found to have no basis except in the usages and prejudices of the age. This is seen in the fact that what is tolerated in woman in one country is not tolerated in another. In this country women may hold prayer meetings, etc., but in Mohammedan countries it is written upon their mosques, “Women and dogs, and other impure animals, are not permitted to enter.” Wendell Phillips says, “The best and greatest thing one is capable of doing, that

is his sphere.” I have confidence in the Father to believe that when He gives us the capacity to do anything He does not make a blunder. Leave women, then, to find their sphere. And do not tell us before we are born even, that our province is to cook dinners, darn stockings, and sew on buttons.

We are told woman has all the rights she wants; and even women, I am ashamed to say, tell us so. They mistake the politeness of men for rights—seats while men stand in this hall tonight, and their adulations; but these are mere courtesies. We want rights. The flour merchant, the house builder, and the postman charge us no less on account of our sex; but when we endeavor to earn money to pay all these, then, indeed, we find the difference. Man, if he have energy, may hew out for himself a path where no mortal has ever trod, held back by nothing but what is in himself; the world is all before him, where to choose; and we are glad for you, brothers, men, that is so. But the same society that drives forth the young man, keeps woman at home—a dependent—working little cats on worsted, and little dogs on punctured paper; but if she goes heartily and bravely to give herself to some worthy purpose, she is out of her sphere and she loses caste. Women working in tailor shops are paid one-third as much as men. Someone in Philadelphia has stated that women make fine shirts for twelve and a half cents apiece; that no woman can make more than nine a week, and the sum thus earned, after deducting rent, fuel, etc., leaves her just three and a half cents a day for bread. Is it a wonder that women are driven to prostitution? Female teachers in New York are paid fifty dollars a year, and for every such situation there are five hundred applications. I know not what you believe of God, but I believe He gave yearnings and longings to be filled, and that He did not mean all our time should be devoted to feeding and clothing the body. The present condition of woman causes a horrible perversion of the marriage relation. It is asked of a lady, “Has she married well?” “Oh, yes, her husband is rich.” Woman must marry for a home, and you men are the sufferers by this; for a woman who loathes you may marry you because you have the means to get money which she can not have. But when woman can enter the lists with you and make money for herself, she will marry you only for deep and earnest affection.

I am detaining you too long, many of you standing, that I ought to apologize, but women have been wronged so long that I may wrong you a little....I have seen a woman at manual labor turning out chair-legs in a cabinetshop, with a dress short enough not to drag in the shavings. I wish other women would imitate her in this. It made her hands harder and broader, it is true, but I think a hand with a dollar and a quarter a day in it, better than one with a crossed ninepence....The widening of woman’s sphere is to improve her lot. Let us do it, and if the world scoff, let it scoff—if it sneer, let it sneer.

Source: “Disappointment Is the Lot of Women” by Lucy Stone. Reprinted in *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1922), pp. 165–167.