

Emma Goldman's Perspective on Women's Right to Vote

Supplement to page 32.

CONTEXT: *Female suffrage was a major reform goal of the Progressive Era. Emma Goldman, however, did not believe that the ballot would secure equality for women. She rejected the idea, which many suffragists held, that by voting women would clean up politics.*

Excerpt from “Woman Suffrage” by Emma Goldman (1910)
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[<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Curricula/WomensRights/suffrage.html>](http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Curricula/WomensRights/suffrage.html)

The poor, stupid, free American citizen! Free to starve, free to tramp the high-ways of this great country, he enjoys universal suffrage, and, by that right, he has forged chains about his limbs. The reward that he receives is stringent labor laws prohibiting the right of boycott, of picketing, in fact, of everything, except the right to be robbed of the fruits of his labor. Yet all these disastrous results of the twentieth century fetish have taught woman nothing. But, then, woman will purify politics, we are assured.

Needless to say, I am not opposed to woman suffrage on the conventional ground that she is not equal to it. I see neither physical, psychological, nor mental reasons why woman should not have the equal right to vote with man. But that can not possibly blind me to the absurd notion that woman will accomplish that wherein man has failed. If she would not make things worse, she certainly could not make them better. To assume, therefore, that she would succeed in purifying something which is not susceptible of purification, is to credit her with supernatural powers. Since woman's greatest misfortune has been that she was looked upon as either angel or devil, her true salvation lies in being placed on earth; namely, in being considered human, and therefore subject to all human follies and mistakes. Are we, then, to believe that two errors will make a right? Are we to assume that the poison already inherent in politics will be decreased, if women were

to enter the political arena? The most ardent suffragists would hardly maintain such a folly.

The American suffrage movement has been, until very recently, altogether a parlor affair, absolutely detached from the economic needs of the people. Thus Susan B. Anthony, no doubt an exceptional type of woman, was not only indifferent but antagonistic to labor; nor did she hesitate to manifest her antagonism when, in 1869, she advised women to take the places of striking printers in New York. I do not know whether her attitude had changed before her death.

There are, of course, some suffragists who are affiliated with working women – the Women’s Trade Union League, for instance; but they are a small minority, and their activities are essentially economic. The rest look upon toil as a just provision of Providence. What would become of the rich, if not for the poor? What would become of these idle, parasitic ladies, who squander more in a week than their victims earn in a year, if not for the eighty million wageworkers? Equality, who ever heard of such a thing?

Questions on the Woman Suffrage:

1. Is Goldman opposed to women gaining the right to vote?
2. What does she say about the idea that women will “purify” politics and government?
3. Why does she describe the suffrage movement as a “parlor affair”?
4. Does Goldman see equality within the suffrage movement? Explain.
5. If you were a suffragist, how would you answer Goldman’s criticism?

General Questions on This Exhibit:

1. In your school, are there an equal number of males and females in elected offices? What positions do the females hold? The males?
2. If a candidate in your school ran a campaign focused on women’s issues, what would those issues be?
3. Would a candidate’s gender influence your decision to support him or her?
4. Is there such a thing as a “woman’s vote”? How would you define it?
5. How would more women in public office make a difference?