

6e - Struggle within a Struggle



Although the leading suffrage organizations worked for equal rights under the law, they did not have the rights of all American women in mind. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) spurned African American women's attempts to join the movement.

A mixture of racism, resentment and base political strategizing led to this shameful chapter in American women's struggle for the right to vote.

The White suffragists' rejection of Black women was a particularly bitter irony in light of the fact that the women's rights movement had grown out of the abolition movement. In the mid-1800s, many White women had been fierce opponents of slavery.

However, they split from the abolition movement to create women's rights organizations when they found themselves shut out from leadership roles. After slavery was abolished and African American men gained the vote in 1870 by way of the 15th amendment, White suffragists perceived Black men to be making political gains at their expense and their bitterness intensified.

Around 1900, growing numbers of White southern women joined the suffrage movement. To appease them and win support for women's suffrage throughout the South, northern suffragists began espousing racist ideas.

They pointedly reminded White southerners that giving women the vote would prevent Blacks from gaining too much political power, since there were more White women in the southern states than Black men and women combined. Even Sara Bard Field used this racist argument.

Unwelcome in the mainstream suffrage movement, African American women formed their own suffrage organizations. They viewed the ballot as a powerful tool for improving their lives and communities. They also wanted to reclaim the political power lost by Black men in Southern states that were violating their constitutionally protected right to vote.

By the early 1900s, Black women's suffrage clubs had sprung up across the country, from New York and Massachusetts to Texas. Club members organized voter-education campaigns in their communities, circulated petitions calling for women's suffrage, worked in political campaigns and voted in states where they had the ballot.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a journalist and anti-lynching crusader, was a guiding spirit in the African American women's suffrage movement. Petite in stature but a powerhouse of courage and determination, she lectured up and down the East Coast, establishing anti-lynching organizations and Black women's clubs.

In 1913, she organized the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago, the first African-American women's suffrage group in Illinois, where Wells-Barnett lived. She firmly believed that Black women would use the ballot to end lynchings and other injustices against African Americans.

"With no sacredness of the ballot there can be no sacredness of human life itself," Wells wrote in one article. "For if the strong can take the weak man's ballot, when it suits his purpose to do so, he will take his life also. Having successfully swept aside the constitutional safeguards to the ballot, it is the smallest of small matters for the South to sweep aside its own safeguards to human life."

In 1913, the Alpha Suffrage Club chose Wells-Barnett to march in a suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., sponsored by NAWSA. The parade drew suffrage organizations from around the country and thousands of spectators.

Eager to placate White delegates from the South, White suffrage leaders urged Wells-Barnett to march at the back of the procession with the other Black delegates. But she firmly refused, declaring, "I shall not march at all unless I can march under the Illinois banner."

When the parade started, Wells-Barnett was nowhere to be seen, and the other delegates from Illinois assumed she had given up and joined her Black sisters in the back. But as the marchers proceeded down Pennsylvania Avenue, Wells-Barnett slipped out of the crowd of spectators and marched with her state delegation.

Three years later, she proudly led her suffrage club in a parade through Chicago, when 5,000 suffragists marched to the 1916 Republican National Convention to demand the party's support for women's suffrage. When American women finally received the right to vote in 1920, Wells-Barnett urged Black women to exercise this right as a means of achieving social and political equality for all African Americans.
