

Old Lesbians Organizing for Change End White Dominance March 25, 2022

Women of Color Suffragists: Racism and the Right to Vote

There is a history of suffrage that does not start with white women and one that really deals with the racism of the movement. African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas, and Asians were denied being involved in the suffrage movement.

Most women suffrage histories begin in 1848, the year Elizabeth Cady Stanton convened a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. While Seneca Falls remains an important marker in women's suffrage history, the fact is, women, including women of color had been agitating for this basic right of citizenship even before the first stirrings of revolution in the colonies. Propertied women did have the vote in the colonies, but after the American Revolution, state laws declared it illegal. John Addams did not "remember the ladies."

Despite their dedication to equal rights, with many of them starting out in the abolition movement, white suffragists shared the outlook of their times regarding race and were unwilling, or felt unable, to speak out against flagrant racism and political exclusion. As the National American Woman Suffrage Association began gaining support for its cause, the members realized that the exclusion of African American women would gain even greater support. The leaders relied on racist rhetoric in order to further their cause. They used racism to appeal to white Southern legislators because southern whites feared that African Americans would gain more political advantage and thus power.

Like the men in government who failed to back the voting rights of Black women and men in the South, many white suffrage movement leaders refused to condemn white supremacy despite repeated pleas from Black suffragists.

Even though women of color were denied the democratic process and were excluded, African American, Native American, Latina, and Asian activists organized within their own communities to fight for the right to vote. From social clubs in New York's Chinatown to conferences for Native American rights, in African American newspapers, and in pamphlets demanding equality for Spanish-speaking New Mexicans, these women struggled to build a movement that would truly include all women.

Native women were highly visible in the early 20th century suffrage activism but excluded even though white suffragists were fascinated by Native matriarchal power and lineage, sometimes inviting some Native women to speak at conferences, join parades and write for their publications.

Latinas played a major role in the women's suffrage movement. The Latina advocacy for the vote grew out of their insistence that Spanish Americans, as they called themselves at the time, were equal citizens. Some Latina suffragists provided suffrage materials in Spanish and campaigned for the vote on behalf of the Latin community.

Black women spoke to women's rights at least twenty years before the women's convention in Seneca Falls in 1848. For African American suffragists the link between racial justice and women's rights were central to their activism. Relatively few Black women participated in the primarily white women's suffrage associations due to racism. Instead, they organized within the National Association of Colored Women; in religious organizations such as the Women's

Convention of the National Baptist Convention; and local women's clubs and suffrage leagues. African American women fought for the right to vote while facing discrimination from many white suffragists who did not want their movement associated with women of color.

Asian women

An often-underrepresented group in the dialogue surrounding the suffrage movement, the Asian American and American Pacific Islander women played a critical role in advocating for women's equality in the United States and in Hawaii. Japanese feminists started "The True New Women's Association" and published a magazine entitled "The New True Women" where they promoted female liberation.

There is so much more history on the MANY Women of Color Suffragists that was blatantly left out for years, and today, we are only touching on a small sampling.

Looking at the broader picture - while the 19th Amendment, celebrated on August 26th itself guaranteed the right to vote for many women, it took several more decades for that right to be fully protected by the United States constitution for women of color.

For Native American Women: The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 granted citizenship to Native Americans, but many states made laws and policies that prohibited them from voting. In 1947, legal barriers to Native Americans voting were removed.

For Latina Women: The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 ends the Mexican American War and guarantees citizenship to Mexicans living in the territories conquered by the United States. However, a 1790 immigration law declared that only "free white" people could become citizens. Federally, this meant that Latinas were legally "white" because they were naturalized but many white US citizens still considered them their social inferiors. English language requirements and violent intimidation limited access to their voting rights.

For Asian Women: The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 granted all people of Asian ancestry the right to become citizens and eligible to vote.

For Black Women: In much of the country, hurdles like poll taxes and literacy tests kept Black voters disenfranchised until the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act which forbids states from imposing discriminatory restrictions on who can vote and provides mechanisms for the federal government to enforce its provisions.

The **Voting Rights Act of 1965** and subsequent laws passed in 1970, 1975, and 1982 built stronger voting protections to allow **all** people to vote without intimidation, violence, literacy tests, poll taxes and fraud.

The suppression of voting rights by federal, state and even local officials continues to this day.