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"Women Do Not Want It"

By ALICE STONE BLACKWELL

It is often said that when the majority of women want the ballot, they will get it. Every improvement in the condition of women thus far has been secured not by a general demand from the majority of women, but by the arguments, entreaties and "continual coming" of a persistent few. In each case the advocates of progress have had to contend not merely with the conservatism of men, but with the indifference of women, and often with active opposition from some of them.

When a merchant in Saco, Me., first employed a saleswoman, the men boycotted the store, and the women remonstrated with him on the sin of placing a young woman in a position of such "publicity." When Lucy Stone began to try to secure for married women the right to their own property, women asked with scorn, "Do you think I would give myself where I would not give my property?" When Miss Anthony in 1854 circulated a petition to give married women the control of their own wages, "Many women slammed the door in her face, with the statement that they 'had all the rights they wanted.'" When Elizabeth Blackwell began to study medicine, the women at her boarding-house refused to speak to her, and women passing her on the street held their skirts aside. Mary Lyon's first efforts for the higher education of women were received with ridicule, not only by the majority of men, but by the majority of women as well. When Vassar College was opened, a woman of more than ordinary education and intelligence voiced the general feeling when she said, "The mere fact that it is called a college for women is enough to condemn it. Of one thing, we may be sure: no refined Christian mother will ever send her daughter to Vassar College!"

Mrs. Alice Freman Palmer wrote: "The objections to the political woman and to the educated woman present some instructive analogies. Fifty years ago it was seriously believed that knowing the classics would ruin her morals, philosophy her religion, and mathematics her health. In general a college education would take away her desire to be a good wife and mother. To protect a being so frail, the colleges were carefully closed against her."

When the Oxford examinations were thrown open to women, the Dean of Chichester preached a sermon against it. He said: "By the sex at large, certainly, the new curriculum is not asked for. I have ascertained, by extended inquiry among gentlewomen, that, with true feminine instinct, they either entirely distrust, or else look with downright disfavor on so wild an innovation and interference with the best traditions of their sex."

In Eastern countries, where women are shut up in zenanas and forbidden to walk the streets unveiled, the women themselves are often the strongest upholders of these traditional restrictions, which they have been taught to think add to their dignity. The Chinese lady is as proud of her small feet as any American anti-suffragist is of her political disabilities. Pundita Ramabai tells us that the idea of education for girls is unpopular with the majority of Hindoo women that when a progressive Hindoo proposes to educate his little daughter, it is not uncommon for the women of his family to threaten to drown themselves.

All this merely shows that human nature is conservative, and that it is fully as conservative in women as in men. The persons who take a strong interest in any reform are generally few, whether among men or women, and they are habitually regarded with disfavor by most of those whom the proposed reform is to benefit.

Before the suffrage movement in England began, but when an agitation had arisen against woman's exclusion from education and the professions, and (if married) from personal and property rights, Mrs. Taylor, afterwards the wife of John Stuart Mill, published in the *Westminster Review* of July, 1851, a noteworthy article, describing the lamentable position of women as regarded civil rights. Mrs. Taylor wrote: "A few words must be said on one plea which in England is made much use of for giving an unselfish air to the upholding of selfish privileges, and which, with unreflecting people, passes for much more than it is worth. Women, it is said, do not desire what is called their emancipation. On the contrary, they generally disown such claims when made in their behalf, and fall with *acharnement* upon any one of themselves who identifies herself with the common cause. The literary class of women, especially, are ostentatious in disclaiming the desire for equality, and proclaiming their complete satisfaction with the place which society assigns them." This was a place which the most extreme anti-suffragist would today regard as intolerable. Mrs. Taylor added: "Custom hardens human beings to any kind of degradation; and submission is inculcated on women from childhood as the peculiar attraction and grace of their character."

It is a simple historical fact that the majority of women have never rebelled, no matter how unfair the conditions in which they have been placed. James Bryce says, in "Transcaucasia and Ararat":

"Nothing strikes a Westerner with more disgust than the way he sees women treated in Mohammedan countries. It is not so much the enforced seclusion that revolts you as the tacit assumption that women are inferior creatures altogether, unfit to be companions for man, but rather to be reckoned a link between him and the brutes, and treated with little more regard than the latter. That they acquiesce uncomplainingly in this view, and assert their power in hidden and crooked ways, does not make the sight less offensive, or the results less mischievous."

Many changes for the better have been made during the last half century in the laws, written and unwritten, relating to women. Everybody approves of these changes now, because they have become accomplished facts. But not one of them would have been made to this day if it had been necessary to wait till the majority of women asked for it. The change now under discussion is to be judged on its merits. In the light of history, the indifference of most women and the opposition of a few must be taken as a matter of course. It has not more rational significance now than it has had in regard to each previous step of women's progress.

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