



Women's Rights in Catharine Beecher (1800–1878)

Therese Boos Dykeman

Catharine Beecher opposed the Women's Rights party's tenants that men and women have equal rights in all respects and that the Bible is opposed to the welfare of women. She believed that such was based on "false reasoning" and "false principles." The Divine created man as male and female. From this principle of difference are derived different rights and so "*distinctive divisions of responsibility*" except in extreme cases. The stronger sex works in the public sphere and is responsible for civil duties. The weaker sex works in the private sphere and is responsible for the household and educating and nursing the young. Beecher sees it as unfair to burden women with suffrage in addition to their proper responsibilities. With the mandate that the human race multiply, a man's duty is to establish a family, in which to form character for "life to come," children are educated and trained. To perform her duties, woman should have the right to be educated. When that does not occur, she will seek work outside the home, the family disintegrates, and family is sullied by "worldliness," advocating "free-love," "free divorce," and avoidance of "large families." The agitation for "woman's rights" results from lack of appreciation for and neglect of family duties. Yet, Beecher agreed with the movement's claims that "woman's happiness and usefulness are equal to that of man's," that such equality has been elusive, and that all women have the right to organize. But she disagreed with the method of the ballot for a more direct route with the same "practical results." That route is for women to exercise their right to educate their own sex, and to do so in more adequate institutions offering regular courses of diverse subjects with a view toward better homemaking, better citizenry, and better selves.

Primary Sources:

Beecher, Catharine E. 1831. *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy founded upon Experience, Reason, and the Bible*. Hartford: Peter Gleason and Co. (privately published).

Beecher, Catharine E. 1870. Address on Female Suffrage in 1871, in *Woman's Profession as Mother and Educator, with Views in Opposition to Woman Suffrage*. Hartford, Brown and Gross.

Beecher, Catharine E. 1871. Anti-Suffrage Petition, in Hale, Sarah J. (ed.): *Godey's Lady's Book*, Vol. 82, No. 491, 462-67.

Beecher, Catharine E. 1872. *Woman's Profession as Mother and Educator, with Views in Opposition to Woman Suffrage*. NY: Maclean, Gibson & Co.

Dykeman, Therese B. & Rogers, Dorothy G. (eds.) 2002. *The Social, Political and Philosophical Works of Catharine Beecher*, 6 vols. Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, vols. 1, 5-6.

Secondary Sources:

Grimké, Angelina 1969 [1838]. *Letters to Catharine E. Beecher*. NY: Arno Press.

Harveson, Elizabeth Mae 1932. *Catharine Esther Beecher: Pioneer Educator*. Philadelphia: Science Press.

Sklar, Katherine Kish 1973. *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*. NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

Keywords:

civil, duty, education, family, homemaking, private sphere, public sphere, suffrage, women's rights