VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE

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KOLKATA-700063

NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE

Topic: **Women's Rights Movement (1848 – 1920)**

Course Title: **GE2**

Paper: **International Women's Movement**

Unit: **2**

Semester: **ii**

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Name of the Department: **Women's Studies**

WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT – (1848-1920)

The beginning of the fight for women's suffrage in the United States, which predates Jeannette Rankin's entry into Congress by nearly 70 years, grew out of a larger women's rights movement. That reform effort evolved during the 19th century, initially emphasizing a broad spectrum of goals before focusing solely on securing the franchise for women. Women's suffrage leaders, moreover, often disagreed about the tactics and whether to prioritize federal or state reforms. Ultimately, the suffrage movement provided political training for some of the early women pioneers in Congress, but its internal divisions foreshadowed the persistent disagreements among women in Congress and among women's rights activists after the passage of the 19th Amendment.

The first gathering devoted to women's rights in the United States was held July 19–20, 1848, in Seneca Falls,

New York. The principal organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a mother of four from upstate New York, and the Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott. About 100 people attended the convention; two-thirds were women. Stanton drafted a “Declaration of Sentiments, Grievances, and Resolutions” that echoed the preamble of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal.” Among the 13 resolutions set forth in Stanton’s “Declaration” was the goal of achieving the “sacred right of franchise.’’

The sometimes-fractious suffrage movement that grew out of the Seneca Falls meeting proceeded in successive waves. Initially, women reformers addressed social and institutional barriers that limited women’s rights, including family responsibilities, a lack of educational and economic opportunities, and the absence of a voice in political debates. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, a Massachusetts teacher, met in 1850 and forged a lifetime alliance as women’s rights activists. Like many other women reformers of the era, they both had been active in the abolitionist movement. For much of the 1850s they agitated against the denial of basic economic freedoms to women. Later they unsuccessfully lobbied Congress to include women in the provisions of the 14th and 15th

Amendments (extending citizenship rights and granting voting rights to African-American men, respectively).

In the wake of the Civil War, however, reformers sought to avoid marginalization as “social issues” zealots by focusing their message exclusively on the right to vote.[3] In 1869 two distinct factions of the suffrage movement emerged. Stanton and Anthony created the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which directed its efforts toward changing federal law and opposed the 15th Amendment on the basis that it excluded women. Lucy Stone, a one-time Massachusetts antislavery advocate and a prominent lobbyist for women’s rights, formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). Leaders of the AWSA rejected the NWSA’s agenda as racially divisive and organized with the aim to continue a national reform effort at the state level. Although California Senator Aaron Sargent introduced in Congress a women’s suffrage amendment in 1878, the overall campaign stalled. Eventually, the NWSA also shifted its efforts to the individual states where reformers hoped to start a ripple effect to win voting rights at the federal level.

During the 1880s, the two wings of the women's rights movement struggled to maintain momentum. The AWSA was better funded and the larger of the two groups, but it had only a regional reach. The NWSA, which was based in New York, relied on its statewide network, but also drew recruits from around the nation largely on the basis of the extensive speaking circuits of Stanton and Anthony. Neither group attracted broad support from women or persuaded male politicians or voters to adopt its cause. For instance, suffrage movement leaders knew that this was a significant impediment to achieving their goal. Susan B. Anthony and Ida H. Harper cowrote, "In the indifference, the inertia, the apathy of women, lies the greatest obstacle to their enfranchisement." Historian Nancy Woloch described early suffragists' efforts as "a crusade in political education by women and for women, and for most of its existence, a crusade in search of a constituency."

The turning point came in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the nation experienced a surge of volunteerism among middle-class women—activists in progressive causes, members of women's clubs and professional societies, temperance advocates, and participants in local civic and charity organizations. The determination of these women to expand their sphere of activities further outside the home helped legitimize the

suffrage movement and provided new momentum for the NWSA and the AWSA. By 1890, seeking to capitalize on their newfound "constituency," the two groups united to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Led initially by Stanton and then by Anthony, the NAWSA began to draw on the support of women activists in organizations as diverse as the Women's Trade Union League, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the National Consumers League.
For the next two decades the NAWSA worked as a nonpartisan organization focused on gaining the vote in states, although managerial problems and a lack of coordination initially limited its success. The first state to grant women complete voting rights was Wyoming in 1869. Three other western states—Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896)—followed shortly after NAWSA was founded. But before 1910 only these four states allowed women to vote. "Why the West first?" remains a contested question.

Some scholars suggest that the West proved to be more progressive in extending the vote to women, in part, because there were so few of them on the frontier. Granting women political rights was intended to bring more women westward and

to boost the population. Others suggest that women had long played nontraditional roles on the hardscrabble frontier and were accorded a more equal status by men. Still others find that political expediency by territorial officials played a role. They do, however, agree that western women also organized themselves effectively to win the right.

Between 1910 and 1914, the NAWSA intensified its lobbying efforts and additional states extended the franchise to women: Washington, California, Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon. In Illinois, future Congresswoman Ruth Hanna McCormick of Illinois helped lead the fight for suffrage as a lobbyist in Springfield when the state legislature granted women the right to vote in 1913. This marked the first such victory for women in a state east of the Mississippi River. A year later Montana granted women the right to vote, thanks in part to the efforts of another future Congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin.

Despite the new momentum, however, some reformers were impatient with the pace of change. In 1913 Alice Paul, a young Quaker activist who had experience in the English suffrage movement, formed the rival Congressional Union, later

named the National Woman's Party. Paul's group freely adopted the more militant tactics of its English counterparts, picketing and conducting mass rallies and marches to raise public awareness and support. Embracing a more confrontational style, Paul drew a younger generation of women to her movement, helped resuscitate the push for a federal equal rights amendment, and relentlessly attacked the Democratic administration of President Woodrow Wilson for obstructing the extension of the vote to women.

In 1915 Carrie Chapman Catt, a veteran suffragist since the mid-1880s and a former president of the NAWSA, again secured the organization's top leadership post. Catt proved to be an adept administrator and organizer whose "Winning Plan" strategy called for disciplined and relentless efforts to achieve state referenda on the vote, especially in nonwestern states. Key victories—the first in the South and East—followed in 1917, when Arkansas and New York granted partial and full voting rights, respectively. Beginning in 1917, President Wilson (a convert to the suffrage cause) urged Congress to pass a voting rights amendment.

Another crowning achievement also was reached that year when Montana's Jeannette Rankin was sworn into the 65th Congress (1917–1919) on April 2. Elected two years after her state enfranchised women, Rankin became the first woman to serve in the national legislature.

Catt's steady strategy of securing voting rights state by state and Paul's vocal and partisan protest campaign coincided with the Wilson administration's decision to intervene in the First World War, a development that provided compelling rhetoric and a measure of expediency for granting the vote.

The NAWSA publicly embraced the war cause despite the fact that many women suffragists, including Rankin, were pacifists. Suffrage leaders embraced President Wilson's powerful argument for intervening in the war to bolster their own case: the effort to "make the world safe for democracy" ought to begin at home by extending the franchise. Moreover, they insisted, the failure to extend the vote to women might impede

their participation in the war effort just when they were most needed to play a greater role as workers and volunteers outside the home. Responding to these overtures, the House of Representatives initially passed a voting rights amendment on January 10, 1918, but the Senate did not follow suit before the end of the 65th Congress. It was not until after the war, however, that the measure finally cleared Congress with the House again voting its approval by a wide margin on May 21, 1919, and the Senate concurring on June 4, 1919. A year later, on August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to approve the 19th Amendment. Official ratification occurred on August 26, 1920, when U.S. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby certified the approval of the Tennessee state legislature.

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