

CAN MEN BE FEMINISTS? An example from 19th century USA

NO!

Introduction

Can men be feminists? Can they throw off the sexist shackles in their own minds and promote equality for all? Or should this job be left to women alone? This is often a bitter debate, and it can be swamped by personal opinion. Historical examples can be a great way of finding some answers.

One example comes from the 1860s, when men and women formed the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) to campaign for voting rights for all, regardless of sex or race. Examining the behaviour and attitudes of both sexes here shows that there can be a big difference between opinion and practice on this question.

YES!

Attitudes

At the time, some members of the AERA thought the answer was 'No'. Despite a general acceptance that both sexes could join this organisation, the attitudes of some leading members betrayed their principles.

Some women thought they had a monopoly on political activism:

– “No man sees or feels as we do”, wrote Susan B. Anthony.

Some women openly criticised *ALL* men:

– “History does not inspire us with confidence in man’s capacity to govern a nation with equity”, wrote Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Some men questioned their place:

– “It seems against the laws of logic that any man should stand upon the platform to advocate [women’s] cause”, said Rev. O.B. Frothingham.

These attitudes only served to reinforce a division between the sexes, helping them to overlook what they had in common.



Men and Women on a Political Parade © Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

It is clear that the facts of each situation must be taken into account, rather than just the opinions of those involved. In this particular case, there is no evidence to suggest that all men should be excluded from a campaign for equality for all. This just needs to be recognised. One’s sex does not determine one’s political nature.

Behaviour

However, if we look more closely, we can see that the actions of men and women were remarkably similar. Both engaged with the political process in ways that have been defined by historians as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.

Masculine forms of participation:

- Standing for and voting in elections
- Working through political parties
- Linking political rights to personal independence
- Using politics for self-advancement

Feminine forms of participation:

- Forming voluntary associations to pool strength
- Using petitions to get their voice heard
- Linking political rights to works of charity
- Using politics to advance the whole of society

Men used feminine forms, and women used masculine forms – there was no neat divide between the two, suggesting there was no reason why men should be excluded from such a campaign.