|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | **TR on Equal Rights for Women, 1880**  **by Natalie A. Naylor** | |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  |  |   The May issue of the *Rough Writer* included my article “TR on Women’s Equality in Marriage, 1880,” based on an essay he wrote as a senior at Harvard. His views on other rights for women in his essay, “Practicability of giving Men & Women Equal Rights,” continue below. (1)    Roosevelt’s main concern – expressed in his title and opening sentence – was practicability. He readily asserted that “women should have equal rights with men,” but qualified this statement as being “in the abstract” or “in an ideally perfect state of society.” One obstacle he saw was that women were generally “physically inferior to men.” For the working classes, he wrote, a result of this was that women were paid less than men. Even for women engaging in mental work, he felt their domestic responsibilities made their efforts less effective.  One of Roosevelt’s strongest statements regarding the “distinctions” between men and women was his belief that women cannot fight in “defense of their rights,” while men can, referring to military combat. None of the armed services at that time accepted women in their ranks. To his credit, TR did envision a time when women might be as “effective combatants as men.”  TR recognized that what he called society’s “artificial distinctions” affected women’s situation. He gave two examples – how an old maid and an old bachelor were regarded by society and the widespread belief that even equally good woman’s work should be paid less than a man’s. Equal pay and pay equity are still issues in 2020, when the gender gap for women is about 80 percent.  The most surprising statement in his essay was, “I see no reason why quakers should vote.” This unexpectedly appears in his paragraph on women being physically weaker than men. It is at the end of a sentence that states, “All these objections [to women voting] would apply just as well if one caste of males were weaker than another caste.” Quakers (members of the Society of Friends) were pacifists and most refused to join the military service. Perhaps he had intended to include this statement later with his argument that women did not fight in the military. Regardless, years later, he would reiterate this view in the midst of World War I, suggesting that Quakers and other conscientious objectors should lose their right to vote. (2)  In his final paragraph, Roosevelt supported giving women “absolutely equality with men before the law.” However, he did not think this could happen until women were able to become lawyers, both in terms of the law and public opinion. In 1880, when he was writing, the number of women lawyers was very limited. Belva Lockwood, one of the first woman lawyers in the United States, faced discrimination in the 1870s in law school as well as admission to the bar and courts. An additional obstacle TR mentioned to legal equality becoming effective was women’s being admitted to juries. In 1880, no state permitted women to serve on juries. Jury duty historically has been tied to voting and increased after women’s suffrage was achieved. Women’s participation on juries was limited for decades, however, since many states allowed women to opt out of jury duty or gave exemptions for childcare.  Roosevelt espoused equality in principle in his essay, but thought it was not practical at that time. However, earlier in his essay he had stated it was both feasible and advisable to make “women equal to men before the law,” in marriage and in regard to inheritance and property rights. He left out “for the time being,” the issue of her franchise. Although votes for women had been first proposed at the women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848, it had achieved limited success by the time Roosevelt was writing. New York State granted women the right to vote in school elections in February 1880. The territories of Wyoming and Utah had granted women full voting rights in 1869 and 1870, but a women’s suffrage referendum in the new state of Colorado was defeated in 1877, so women at the time Roosevelt was writing his essay did not have full voting rights in any state.  When governor-elect of New York, TR wrote to Susan B. Anthony, “I have always favored allowing women to vote,” although this was an exaggeration. In his first annual message to the New York State legislature in 1899, he did urge gradually extending “the sphere in which suffrage can be exercised by women.” (3) Roosevelt was referring to partial suffrage at the local level (e.g., by expanding beyond voting in school elections). As president, TR did *not* publicly support women’s suffrage, despite ardent lobbying by Susan B. Anthony and other suffragists. After the Progressive Party platform in 1912 endorsed women’s suffrage, TR ardently supported women’s voting as the party’s presidential candidate and thereafter. He died before Congress passed the 19th Amendment in June 1919, which was ratified in August 1920. Roosevelt’s evolving position on women’s suffrage is another article, perhaps for a future issue.  \_ \_ \_ \_  (1) The handwritten manuscript is in the Roosevelt Collection at Harvard University, HUC 6879, no. 62.  (2) Dalton, Kathleen. *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life,* 2002, p. 486.  (3) Sherr, Lynn. *Failure is Impossible: Susan B. Anthony in Her Own Words,* 1995, p. 271; Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds*., History of Woman Suffrage*, 4 vols., 1902 (Reprint; 1970), 4:861. | |