

Connecting the Place of Woman and Education in the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals to the Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902)

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Abstract

In the American Nineteenth Century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, through the women's rights movement, raised the issues of women's access to quality education and gender equality in a male-dominated society where women's lives were controlled by deep-seated beliefs, customs and laws. Stanton's concerns were pointed out in 2000 in the Millennium Development Goals Summit and in 2015 in the Sustainable Development Goals Summit. The purpose of this article is to show that Stanton and the leaders of these two summits share the view that the world will not reach a harmonious, a more equitable and sustainable development if the challenges of women's access to quality education and gender equality are not met.

Keywords

Education, Development, Gender, Equality, Representation, Empowerment, Political, Women, Autonomy, Decision-Making, Sustainable, Society

1. Introduction

In 2000, leaders of 189 countries of the world came together at the United Nations headquarters in New York, USA, to create an ambitious plan called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in order to face the challenges of the future. In 2015, 193 world leaders decided to build on the many successes of the past 15 years, and go further by setting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Promoting gender equality, empowering women, achieving universal education, and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education are some of

the 25 goals targeted by the two programs. From the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 to her death in 1902, Elizabeth Cady Stanton; one of the most radical thinkers of the Nineteenth Century American feminist movement raised the same issues in her long and fascinating struggle for the recognition of American women's civil and political rights.

The Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals are a set of shared aspirations that rehabilitate to a certain extent the political thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton during the Nineteenth Century. Stanton and the leaders of these two programs share the view that women and girls are affected through two main channels. One is the limits on their access to quality education and employment opportunities, which jeopardize their economic autonomy and hampers their position within the family and outside. Two is related to gender inequality which negatively impacts on women's political representation in decision-making instances.

This paper intends to examine how, the question of gender equality and women's access to quality education set in the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals corroborate the political thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton during the nineteenth century. The article especially investigates the way in which, Stanton's political thought and these goals can contribute to creating a more equitable, sustainable and peaceful world.

2. Women's Access to Education: A Key to Future Autonomy

Women's access to quality education is both at the heart of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's political thought and an important pillar for achievements of the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. Like Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton demands the education of girls in order to counteract their inequality with boys and stimulate their intellectual development: "*if the girl was allowed all the freedom of the boy in romping, climbing, swimming, playing whoop and ball... Physically, as well as intellectually, it is use that produces growth and development*" [1]. Stanton believes that the equal education of the sexes is a pre-condition of the improvement of society as a whole, since properly educated women in turn raise their children to be virtuous citizens.

In her famous 1892 speech "*The Solitude of Self*" Stanton sets forth her most profound philosophical account of the paramount importance of female autonomy through quality education. Among her known intellectual influences, Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill emerge in particular as models for her passionate defense of "*self-sovereignty*". Stanton writes:

The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, her forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition... is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life [2].

In this perspective, Stanton advocates the moral, intellectual, physical, economic, and political autonomy of women by arguing that women would not gain power over men but rather over themselves by becoming enlightened citizens and earning their own subsistence and independent from men. The leaders of the MDGs and SDGs also believe that the education of women and girls has a positive multiplier effect on progress across all development areas. Driven by national and international efforts and the MDGs campaigns, many more girls are now in school compared with 15 years ago. Gender disparity has narrowed substantially at all levels of education since 2000. According to the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, the developing regions as a whole have achieved the target to eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education, with a gender parity index of 0.98 in primary and secondary education and 1.01 in tertiary education in 2015.

Stanton advocates equal education for women and men in order to remove all the hindrances to woman's elevation in the scale of being and let her receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers. A step that will make her enter the active business of life. She shares Wollstonecraft's view of the moral and social goals of reform of female education. Stanton believes that a more rational education will help women better fulfill their fundamental moral duties and vital social roles as wives and mothers. According to her, quality education increases women's sense of self-respect and personal autonomy. Stanton supports Wollstonecraft's appreciation of the moral dimension of women's intellectual development. Women educated according to Wollstonecraftian principles will realize their inherent dignity and equality with men and achieve full standing as human beings.

Stanton's views on the historical causes of the subjugation of women and its educational remedies parallel the arguments of the MDGs and SDGs. Stanton contends, "*Our laws and constitutions, our creeds and codes, and the customs of social life are all of masculine*" [3]. Stanton argues that male control over customs and education what Wollstonecraft calls "*the male aristocracy*" produces a false education that indoctrinates male superiority and stunts the physical, moral, and intellectual abilities of women. Stanton joins Wollstonecraft in concluding that the equal education of the sexes would dismantle the supposedly natural differences in intelligence and physical strength that men use to assert their superiority. "*When there is a demand for healthy, happy, vigorous, self-reliant women,*" Stanton states "*they will make their appearance.... Woman, as she is today, is men's handiwork*". She furthermore argues that "*Man's intellectual superiority cannot be a question until woman has had a fair trial,*" echoing Wollstonecraft's suggestion, "*Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same*" [4]?

Under the guidance of the MDGs, the primary school net enrolment rate in the developing regions has reached 91 per cent in 2015, up from 83 per cent in 2000. The number of out-of-school children of primary school age worldwide has fallen by almost half, to an estimated 57 million in 2015, down from 100 mil-

lion in 2000. Sub-Saharan Africa has had the best record of improvement in primary education of any region since the MDGs were established. The region achieved a 20 percentage point increase in the net enrolment rate from 2000 to 2015, compared to a gain of 8 percentage points between 1990 and 2000. The literacy rate among youth aged 15 to 24 has increased globally from 83 per cent to 91 per cent between 1990 and 2015. These satisfying results show that the gap between women and men in quality education has narrowed in many countries.

Surely, the leaders of the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals are convinced that it is only through quality education that women and girls are going to impose themselves in the intellectual, cultural, political and economic spheres. In other words, they firmly believe in education as a lifting power or a magic weapon for emancipation, self-accomplishment and social integration. They eloquently stress that for the world to reach a harmonious development, there is no other alternative than empower women and diversify their competences so as to be valuable assets for the whole society. To fulfill the purpose in view, women should not only attend vocational schools in order to acquire pragmatic know-how, as advocated by Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915) in his *Up from Slavery* (1901), but also have access to good higher education like men and boys for them to get sound knowledge, rewarding positions or become influential decision-makers, as is the ideology of William Edward Burghart Du Bois (1868-1963) in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Nowadays, more girls are in school now compared to in 2000. Most regions have reached gender parity in primary education. The percentage of women getting paid for their work is on the rise. The Sustainable Development Goals aim to build on these achievements to ensure that there is an end to discrimination against women and girls everywhere.

In 1868, Stanton urged fathers to allow their daughters to have access to the world of education. She argues that by educating their daughters fathers would grant them the surest of all fortunes and the full development of their immortal powers¹. In that eloquent extract, Stanton's ideas clearly parallel those of Murray, as she demands that women should have access to all levels of education so that they can create a secure future for themselves. She takes her argument a step further encouraging women to demand entrance to some of the best male-dominated educational institutes in America. She states that there is nothing to prevent them from gaining access: "*It is important for the girls now knocking at the doors of these venerable institutions to know that they have a right inside. There is no law, human or divine, nothing in their charters that forbids*" [5]. Stanton's demands for female education began to reflect her maturing belief that it is acceptable for women to assert their autonomy as they battle for equality.

Higher Education was not considered an attribute for wives and mothers. Therefore, the institutes of higher learning remained closed to women. Through

¹Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Revolution*, vol.1-no.25, (New York) 25 June 1868, in *Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, series 1, reel 1.

her writings and speeches, Stanton often addresses the importance of access to a good education that would grant equal choices and opportunities for both women and men. Stanton asks for the opportunity for women to expand their minds in order to reach their full potential:

Let woman then go on—not asking favors, but claiming as a right the removal of all hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being—let her receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers, so that she may enter profitably into the active business of life; employing her own hands in ministering to her necessities, strengthening her physical being by proper exercise and observance of the laws of health [6].

Access to education is one of the key topics of the women's rights movement since its conception. Stanton recognizes that women would never possess an alternative to their status as housekeepers until they have access to further education and the ability to become fully independent. Mary Livermore's speech "*What shall we do with our daughters*" continues to be a real concern for the twenty first century leaders, exposing women around the world to Stanton's belief that women should possess the tools to allow them to select their future careers². As Stanton's goal seems to be achieved and an increasing number of women are able to receive a higher level of education, the purpose of education for women begins to shift. Women begin to justify their desire for education by seeking access to the traditionally male preserve of professionalism. As the male standard of professionalism is equated with careers in medicine, higher education and especially the law, Catharine McCulloch's desire to be a lawyer is placed in the context of the forces that are shaping the new women.

The analysis of the *United Nations Millennium Development Goals 2015 Report* shows that in secondary education, gender parity has been achieved in 2015 in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Eastern Asia, Northern Africa, South-Eastern Asia and Southern Asia. In Oceania, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia, girls remain at a disadvantage, while in Latin America and the Caribbean, boys are at a disadvantage. Gender parity in secondary education had been achieved in 36 per cent of countries with available data in the developing regions in 2012.

The largest gender disparities in enrolment ratios are found in tertiary education, with only one developing region, Western Asia, achieving the target. The most extreme disparities are those at the expense of women in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia and at the expense of men in Eastern Asia, Northern Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Only 4 percent of countries with available data in the developing regions had achieved the target for tertiary education in 2012.

When Stanton designed her intended vision of an expanded role of women, education was a key component. Her initial focus on an education for women centered on women's "*special duties*," but as she developed her view of educa-

²Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, pp. 39-40; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Declaration of Sentiments," *A History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1 (Rochester, N.Y.: Fowler and Wells, 1889), pp. 70-71.

tion for women she demands that women should have the right to attend colleges that already existed so that women may possess not only the freedom to learn what they choose, but also have the ability to support themselves³. Stanton's writings and speeches reflect her belief that higher education is the key to future autonomy for women and the construction of an independent woman that she has fully developed in her later work the *Solitude of Self*. She argues that education for women is a necessary step if women have to be awarded the right to vote. In order for women to fully participate in society they need to be equipped with an education and the right to vote to create a progressive society. Stanton has recognized that such measures would lead women to become autonomous and to control their own roles in society. Stanton determined that women who were educated and enfranchised would have broader options than just the roles of wife or mother "to serve a higher purpose in life than she has heretofore known" [7]. Stanton carefully crafts the position of girls to reflect her view on how they should be permitted to develop and the "equal place" they would hold with men in the world of work, the colleges, in the state, in the church, and in the home. She continues by remarking that a woman's sphere is "no longer bound by the prejudices of a dead past, but her capacity to go wherever she can stand. A girl is to be an independent, self-supporting being" [8].

Stanton's focus on the independence of women is made visible and through her influence, her daughters were shaped according to her ideology. One of the most lasting legacies that Blatch inherited from her mother was the desire and the ability to achieve self-sovereignty. Stanton was denied the opportunity to pursue higher education that her brother was allowed. She determined that her daughters would not be so restricted in their choices. Stanton ensured that Blatch was equipped with the education and ideological background that she felt was necessary for women to break out of their traditionally restrictive spheres. Stanton's actions were part of her continuing battle for the women's rights movement. She also propelled Blatch and the generation that she represented into place as her heirs in the continuing conflict for women's equality.

3. Political Representation and Women's Empowerment

Advancing women's political participation is fundamental prerequisite for gender equality, democracy and achieving the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. This vision of the leaders of the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals is similar to what Elizabeth Cady Stanton proposed during the Nineteenth Century in the USA. Stanton believes that political representation is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Leaders of the MDGs and SDGs also sustain the idea that for women to become change agents,

³Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Coming Girl" Lecture in Sunday Lecture Society Course, Milwaukee Sentinel (WI), 16 April 1877, in *Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, ed. Patricia G. Holland and Ann D. Gordon (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1991, microfilm), series 3, reel 19.

they have to fully participate in the political life of their respective countries. They join Stanton's standpoint that strong participation of women in political decision-making processes can help ensure the eventual elimination of inequality faced by women.

Since 1995, when the Beijing Platform for Action on women's empowerment was adopted, we notice that the global average proportion of women in parliament has nearly doubled, growing from 11 per cent in 1995 to 22 per cent in January 2015. The number of women in parliament has gained ground in nearly 90 per cent of the 174 countries for which data are available for 1995-2015. The number of single or lower houses of parliament where women occupy more than 30 per cent of the seats has increased from 5 to 42, while those with more than 40 per cent have jumped from 1 to 13. In January 2015, there were four countries with more than 50 per cent of parliamentary seats held by women, and in Rwanda, women hold more than 60 per cent of such posts. These praise-worthy achievements are symbolically loaded with meaning. They illustrate the world leaders' belief that in a true democratic society, all citizens, regardless of sex, are equal of value and have an unfathomable potential for self-development.

These successes also highlight the view that "*true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant*" [9]. In this perspective, the leaders of the MDGs and SDGs agree that without political representation, the notion of self-reliance and empowerment for women will not be fully achieved. In 1995, Europe dominated the top 10 spots in world rankings of women in parliament. As of January 2015, 4 of the top 10 countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, while the Americas and Europe each have 3 countries in the top 10. The biggest gains in women's representation during the last 20 years have been made in Rwanda, with an increase of 60 percentage points; Andorra, 46 percentage points; and Bolivia, 42 percentage points. The number of male-only parliaments has also dropped, from 10 to 5.

The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, patterned after the American Declaration of Independence, asserted that "*all men and women are created equal*" and captured the nation's attention by linking woman's rights directly to the founding ideals of the United States. It set through the resolutions an agenda including demands for women's equality in politics, law, work, education, religion, family life, and moral authority and outlined methods including hiring lecturers, circulating tracts, signing petitions, enlisting help from churches and newspapers, and holding conventions that dominated the woman's movement for generations.

Historians who studied rural women found that, like many signers of Seneca Falls such as the members of the M'Clintock family, rural women and men often worked in gender-specific groups, but they were also bound together in male-female networks. As Nancy Grey Osterud found in her 1991 study of New York farm women, for example, "*the strategies that rural women adopted, like the problems they confronted, were the inverse of those followed by urban middle-class women*". Defined in relation to men rather than as distinct from them,

rural women tried to transform the bonds of kinship and labor into sources of sharing and strength, renegotiating the terms of gender relations and modifying them in a more symmetrical and egalitarian direction. She concluded, “*Instead of elaborating a distinct women’s culture, rural women nurtured respect and reciprocity between women and men in their families and kin groups* [10].

Gilman’s focus on the economic independence of women took Stanton’s search for self-sovereignty in a new direction as she argues that women’s labour in the home is not only restrictive but the lack of payment is indicative of its importance. Gilman’s theories reveal an expansion of Stanton’s original ideas. Gilman supports Stanton’s earlier viewpoint that women should have access to the political decision-making instances to assert their independence. However, Gilman recognizes that by embracing new careers women would inevitably now have the problem of balancing their traditional roles of wife and mother with their professional duties which would only be solved by regarding duties of wives and mothers as a business that can be completed by others⁴. Gilman’s position had advanced as she believed that women had to totally redesign their traditional roles to achieve the level of self-sovereignty that Stanton advocated. In an effort to restructure the traditional “family environment” and to “enhance the freedom of women to expand their... place in society,” Gilman moves beyond Stanton’s desire for access to equal opportunities for women by providing another standard by which independence could be judged and obtained, the aspect of economic freedom⁵.

While many American women’s rights advocates distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft’s argument for women’s economic and political independence from men, Stanton seizes the opportunity to side with her controversial predecessor. Stanton and Wollstonecraft share the view that the independence of women can not end with equal education. It rather must extend to self-sufficient employment outside the home and full political citizenship.

While much progress has been made towards women’s and girls’ equality in education, employment and political representation over the last two decades, many gaps remain, particularly in areas that were not addressed in the MDGs. To achieve universal realization of gender equality and empowerment of women, it is critical to address the key areas of gender inequality, including gender-based discrimination in law and in practice; violence against women and girls; women’s and men’s unequal opportunities in the labour market; the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work; women’s limited control over assets and property; and women’s unequal participation in private and public decision-making. Gender perspectives should be integrated fully into all goals of the post-2015 development agenda.

⁴Falguni A. Sheth and Robert E. Prash, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman: reassessing her significance for feminism and social economics,” *Review of Social Economy*, 54 (Fall 1996), pp. 323-335; For an example of a serial fiction in which Gilman explores the idea of hiring others to complete domestic tasks leaving other women to focus on their work see Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “What Diantha Did,” *The Forerunner*, vol.1, November 1909-December 1910, microfiche 1 - 5.

⁵Margaret G. O’Donnell, “Early Analysis of the Economics of Family Structure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Women and Economics,” *Review of Social Economy*, 52 (Summer 1994), p.86. (pp 86-95).

Electoral quotas in more than 120 countries have underpinned this success. However, a significant slowdown in progress since 2014 could be an indicator that the “fast-track” impact of gender quotas has reached its peak. This calls for additional measures to advance women’s political empowerment. Progress in leadership positions has been slow. Just 16 per cent of parliamentary leaders (speakers of parliament) are women, while women represent 18 per cent of all government ministers in the world, an increase of only 4 percentage points since 2005.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton points out that vision when she addressed in 1892 the USA Congressional Committee of the Judiciary Hearing in these clear-cut terms:

The point I wish plainly to bring before you on this occasion is the individuality of each human soul; our protestant idea, the right of individual conscience and judgment our republican idea, individual citizenship. In discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny, an imaginary Robinson Crusoe with her woman Friday on a solitary Island.

We have noticed from this quotation that the enlightenment thinkers understanding of human nature is not quite different from that of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The following phrases “individuality of each human soul”, “the right of individual conscience”, “in a world of her own” “the arbiter of her own destiny” clearly showed the extent to which women want to live their lives according to their understanding of the world or in line with the philosophy of natural rights in order to satisfy their daily yearnings in society.

When Catherine Beecher, the educational reformer, rebuked the Grimké sisters for speaking in public and forsaking “*woman’s sphere*,” the home, Angelina replied by using Locke’s ideas of natural rights as the best of available theories to support her arguments. She replied as follow.

Now I believe it is woman’s right to have a voice in all the laws and regulations by which she is to be governed. Whether in the Church or State: and that the present arrangements of society, on these points, are a violation of human rights, a rank usurpation of power, a violent seizure and confiscation of what is sacredly and inalienably hers... If Ecclesiastical and Civil governments are ordained of God, then I contend that woman has just as much right to sit in solemn counsel in conventions, conferences, associations and general assemblies, as man—just as much right to sit upon the throne of England or in the Presidential chair of the United States.

Angelina Grimké’s words did not differ from what Pocock defined as “*civil humanism*” by which he meant “*a style of thought... in which it is contended that the development of an individual towards self-fulfillment is possible only when the individual acts as a citizen, that is, as a conscious and autonomous participant in the autonomous decision-taking community, the polis or republic*”.

Women continue to face discrimination in access to work, economic assets and participation in private and public decision-making. Women are also more

likely to live in poverty than men. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the ratio of women to men in poor households increased from 108 women for every 100 men in 1997 to 117 women for every 100 men in 2012, despite declining poverty rates for the whole region. Women remain at a disadvantage in the labour market. Globally, about three quarters of working-age men participate in the labour force, compared to only half of working-age women. Women earn 24 per cent less than men globally. In 85 per cent of the 92 countries with data on unemployment rates by level of education for the years 2012-2013, women with advanced education have higher rates of unemployment than men with similar levels of education. Despite continuous progress, today the world still has far to go towards equal gender representation in private and public decision-making.

Among the 1 billion people who were still living in extreme poverty worldwide in 2011, it is unknown how many were women and girls. In part this is because measures of poverty rely on income or consumption data collected at the household level, rather than at the individual level. This makes it difficult to differentiate poverty rates within households, and hence to understand gender differences in the incidence, severity and impact of poverty. A recent study used a wealth asset index as a proxy for household poverty to compare the percentage of women and men aged 20 - 59 who live in the lowest wealth quintile of all households. Using this measure, the study found that women are more likely to live in poverty in 41 out of 75 countries with data. Further analysis indicates that in countries where women are overrepresented in the lowest wealth quintile of households, the households are more likely to be headed by women or to have no male adults. This suggests a greater risk of poverty among separated women, widows and single mothers, including self-reported heads of household without a male partner.

Stanton was certain that the vote would prove to be a key tool that would allow women to overcome the imbalance in society. This conviction is the key to her ideology of achieving equal rights for women throughout society not just on the political stage. Stanton believed that enfranchised women would be able to attack traditional institutions that she perceived were keeping women in their subordinate position in society. She recognizes that without a political voice no group could encourage sweeping change and that this lack of political influence would continue to confine women to the private sphere where their husbands and fathers would continue to misrepresent them. For Stanton the vote was just the beginning of the changes that women needed to make. It was part of her strategy for the women's rights movement to achieve its goals. Stanton wanted women to be aware of the limitations of their lives in order to embrace both her ideas and the movement that she established.

4. Conclusion

Linking the place of woman and education in the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals to the political thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton is of paramount importance in gender studies. It enables us

to revisit the work and life of one of the pioneers of the first organized movement for the recognition of American women civil and political rights, but it is also an opportunity to show the universality and the timelessness of her political thought. By promoting quality education for all and gender equality in the headquarters of the United Nations in New York in 2000, the leaders of the MDGs and the SDGs in 2015 share the vision of Stanton who considers women's access to education as the first step to female autonomy which leads to the autonomy of society in the whole. Stanton's political thought shows that women will not have access to self-sovereignty when they are deprived of a quality education.

For Stanton and the leaders of the MDGs and the SDGs, social and cultural norms and the gendered division of roles women are imposed must be challenged. Empowerment of women is required. This means a greater role for women in decision-making at all levels, including the household, local communities, and national parliaments. Women's empowerment is not only a priority goal in itself but an intrinsic human right, already recognized as such in pledges and commitments by governments. It is recognized also because it has instrumental value and is a condition for society to benefit from the increased contribution of women to food security. Society urgently needs the full potential of women's contribution, but it can only materialize with wider recognition and acknowledgment by women and men alike of its benefits to all society, and the vital importance of reshaping social structures.

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