

## **On Woman's Suffrage (1902)**

Carrie Chapman Catt

Carrie Chapman Catt's life (1859–1947) bridged two centuries in the development of women's rights. After having helped to achieve suffrage for women, she then worked to make them effective voters. She also advocated world peace and supported the establishment of the United Nations.

A native of Iowa, Catt began her professional life as a schoolteacher. She then became one of the first women to serve as a district superintendent of schools. She joined the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association in 1887. In 1895, she was selected to head the field committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). In 1900, she became president of that group, succeeding Susan B. Anthony. In 1915, NAWSA adopted Catt's plan to campaign for a constitutional amendment for women's suffrage. Women's right to vote was finally ratified in 1920 as the Nineteenth Amendment. In the same year, Catt launched the League of Women Voters to educate women—and men—about public policy issues.

The following excerpt is from a speech given by Catt 18 years before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. It is from an address to NAWSA members in 1902.

### **Review Questions**

1. According to Carrie Chapman Catt, how did gender prejudice affect (a) men? (b) women?
2. According to Catt, how did the women's movement aim to change the male-female relationship?
3. Why did Catt feel that the right to vote was necessary to equalize the relationship between men and women?
4. What other arguments did Catt make in favor of women's suffrage?
5. Why did Catt establish the League of Women Voters?

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... Woman suffrage ... must combat sex-prejudice, the oldest, the most unreasoning, the most stubborn of all human idiosyncrasies [peculiarities]. What is prejudice? An opinion, which is not based upon reason; a judgment, without having heard the argument; a feeling, without being able to trace from whence it came. And sex-prejudice is a pre-judgment against the rights, liberties and opportunities of women. A belief, without proof, in the incapacity of women to do that which they have never done. Sex-prejudice has been the chief hindrance in the rapid advance of the woman's rights movement to its present status, and it is still a stupendous [tremendous] obstacle to be overcome. ...

Four chief causes led to the subjection of women, each the logical deduction from the theory that men were the units [basis] of the race—obedience, ignorance, the denial of personal liberty, and the denial of right to property and wages. These forces united in cultivating a spirit of egotism and tyranny in men and weak dependence in women. ... In fastening these disabilities upon women, the world acted logically when reasoning from the premise [idea] that man is the race and woman his dependent. The perpetual tutelage [constant guardianship] and subjection robbed women of all freedom of thought and action, and all incentive [motive] for growth, and they logically became the inane [silly] weaklings the world would have them, and their condition strengthened the universal belief in their incapacity [lack of ability]. This world taught woman nothing skillful and then said her work was valueless. It permitted her no opinions and said she did not know how to think. It forbade her to speak in public, and said the sex had no orators. It denied her the schools, and said the sex had no genius. It robbed her of every vestige [trace] of responsibility, and then called her weak. It taught her that every pleasure must come as a favor from men, and when to gain it she decked herself in paint and fine feathers, as she had been taught to do, it called her vain. ...

The whole aim of the woman movement has been to destroy the idea that obedience is necessary to women; to train women to such self-respect that they would not grant obedience and to train men to such comprehension of equity [justice] they would not exact [demand] it.

... [T]he average civilized woman [now] enjoys the right of individual liberty in the home of her father, her husband, and her son. The individual woman no longer obeys the individual man. She enjoys self-government in the home and in society. The question now is, shall all women as a body obey all men as a body? Shall the woman who enjoys the right of self-government in every other department of life be permitted the right of self-government in the State? It is no more right for all men to govern all women than it was for one man to govern one woman. It is no more right for men to govern women than it was for one man to govern other men. ...

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