

LESSON PLAN

Lesson 8: The Struggle Over Women's Rights

Essential Question

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

Guiding Question

What does it mean to be equal? Is equality essential for democracy?

Learning Objectives

- Students will acknowledge that progress in making a society more democratic is often slow and uneven. Rights provided to some groups often continue to be denied to others.
- Students will understand that members of social movements often struggle to create inclusive movements and can fracture along lines of identity such as race, class, and gender.

About This Lesson

In the previous two lessons, students examined the landmark legislation and amendments of the Radical Reconstruction era, and they learned about the unprecedented period of interracial democracy that resulted. In this lesson, students will learn about the debate that occurred within the women's rights movement over the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. They will also conduct a close reading of a speech from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an African American woman who was a leading activist in the fight for Black freedom and women's rights.

Additional Context and Background

Women's rights advocates had a long history as part of the abolition movement, but after the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, some members of the coalition diverged in their efforts for equality. As compromises in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments left women's suffrage off the agenda, some women's rights advocates—such as Frances Ellen

Watkins Harper, Frances Gage, Lucy Stone, and Frederick Douglass,—continued to support the amendments, while others, notably Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, strongly opposed them.

Gage and Stone argued that any expansion of rights, even if inadequate in scope, ought to be supported because it would make society more democratic. Anthony and Stanton argued that white women deserved the franchise before African Americans and other groups. Both activists opined about the “injustice” of giving Black men the vote before educated and wealthy white women, with Stanton making this racist assertion in her newspaper: “Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who never read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling book, making laws for Lydia Maria Childs, Lucretia Mott, or Fanny Kemble.”¹ Ultimately, the schism over the Reconstruction amendments led to the creation of two separate organizations. Stanton and Anthony formed the National Women’s Suffrage Association, while Stone and Julia Ward Howe founded the American Woman Suffrage Association. The two organizations would not be reunited until the twentieth century.

During this period, Black women such as Adella Hunt Logan, a Tuskegee Institute professor, were strong advocates of female suffrage, although their demands often differed from those of white suffragists. These activists framed suffrage for both Black men and women as a necessary form of repair for slavery. Hunt Logan summarized this demand: “If white American women, with all their natural and acquired advantages, need the ballot, that right protective of all other rights . . . how much more do Black Americans, male and female, need the strong defense of a vote to help secure them the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” Sojourner Truth added her voice to the conversation as well, pointedly noting: “There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored woman; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women get theirs, there will be a bad time about it.”

Scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw observes that although Black women were ultimately denied the franchise, they powerfully shaped the political agenda of Reconstruction. As leaders in churches and various civic and political organizations, Black women were tireless advocates of freedom, participating in key debates about how the Black vote should be cast and defending the rights of freedmen to vote, sometimes providing armed protection. As

¹ *The Revolution*, “Manhood Suffrage,” December 24, 1868.

students will see in this lesson, one of the central arenas for Black women activists during Reconstruction was the struggle for equal treatment in public accommodations.²

This struggle was part of a broader fight for dignity and equal treatment that emerged during Reconstruction. Williams Crenshaw writes that following the Civil War, “freedwomen directly and immediately contested the gendered norms of slavery that had long denied Black women the rights of womanhood, motherhood, and ladyhood.”³ For activists such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (see **Speech by Frances Watkins Harper: “We Are All Bound Up Together”**), securing Black women equal treatment in public spaces—such as the ability to travel in the ladies’ car on railway trains—was critical for securing full emancipation and inclusion in the reconstructed nation.

Notes to the Teacher

1. Preparing to Watch the Video “The Racial Divide in the Women’s Suffrage Movement”

In the first activity of this lesson, students will explore a video introducing them to the schism that occurred within the women’s suffrage movement over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The video [The Racial Divide in the Women’s Suffrage Movement](#) quotes Elizabeth Cady Stanton using the racist term “Sambo” to denigrate the idea that African American men should gain access to the vote before white, upper-class women. Before sharing the video, you may want to return to the class contract and expectations around encountering offensive language in class. In addition, you should explain that the term “Sambo” is a racist and derogatory term that was historically used to describe people of African descent, typically Black men. You might also want to give students reflection time after watching the video to emotionally process some of what they heard.

2. Understanding Reconstruction-Era Ideas about Race and Gender

This lesson explores nineteenth-century notions of equality, race, and gender that may feel unfamiliar or even strange to students today. For example, seeking to be understood and treated as a “lady” was an important goal for many middle-class Black women activists during this time, including Frances Watkins Harper. This may

² Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Legacies of Liberation” in *Make Good the Promises: Reclaiming Reconstruction and Its Legacies*, 163 (ebook).

³ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Legacies of Liberation” in *Make Good the Promises: Reclaiming Reconstruction and Its Legacies*, 165 (ebook).

seem counterintuitive for students who see breaking down gendered stereotypes and expectations as a key part of achieving gender equality today. To gain a better understanding of race and gender during the Reconstruction era, and of Black women's activism during this period, we encourage you to read the essay "Legacies of Liberation," by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, that appears in the book *Make Good the Promises: Reclaiming Reconstruction and Its Legacies*. The information in this essay will help you guide students to view the material in this lesson through a nineteenth-century, rather than twenty-first-century, lens.

3. Teaching Strategies

These teaching strategies are referenced in this lesson's activities. You may wish to familiarize yourself with them before teaching this lesson.

- [Think, Pair, Share](#)
- [Wraparound](#)

Materials

- **Video:** [The Racial Divide in the Women's Suffrage Movement](#)
- **Reading:** Speech by Frances Watkins Harper: "We Are All Bound Up Together"

Activities

Day 1

1. Provide Background about the Racial Divide over Voting Rights during the Reconstruction Era

Begin the lesson by sharing that in today's class, students will continue to explore the struggle to establish an interracial democracy during the Reconstruction era. Tell students that in this lesson, they will be examining one aspect of this history: the divide that occurred within the women's rights movement over passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Share the video [The Racial Divide in the Women's Suffrage Movement](#) (see Teaching Note 1 for information about racist language in the video). Have students watch the video and pause at the following time stamps to check for understanding using the questions below:

- What social movement gave rise to the women’s suffrage movement in the United States? (0:35)
- Why did the Fifteenth Amendment create conflict within the women’s suffrage movement? (2:20)
- How did the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment shape the perspectives of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony? What impact did it have on the women’s suffrage movement? (4:17)

2. Read a Speech from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Tell them that in this class period they will be reading an excerpt of an 1866 speech from an African American activist named Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. To provide background for the speech for students, share some details about Watkins Harper from the context section of this lesson. Make sure that students understand that she was a suffragist who sided with Frederick Douglass in the debate over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, supporting the passage of these amendments despite the fact that they left women’s suffrage off the table.

Pass out **Speech by Frances Watkins Harper: “We Are All Bound Up Together”** and read it aloud as a class, and have students annotate the text using the following key:

- Write an exclamation mark (!) in the margin alongside information that surprises you.
- Write a question mark (?) alongside passages in which the author assumes you know something you don’t.
- Write a “C” in the margin alongside information that challenges your thinking.

When students have finished reading and annotating, ask them to go back to the text and underline one word or phrase that resonates with them or that they would like to discuss with a classmate. In a [Think, Pair, Share](#), have students share with a partner the phrase they selected, and discuss why it resonated with them. Then have partners discuss the text-dependent questions that appear on the handout.

To give students a sense of how their classmates are responding to the speech, ask volunteers to share the phrases they selected with the class or, time permitting, have every student share in a [Wraparound](#). Then discuss some or all of the following questions as a class:

- What insights does Watkins Harper provide about the challenges for achieving equality during the Reconstruction era?
- How do you think her position as a Black woman in the United States informed her ideas? What unique perspectives did she bring to the discussion about African American rights? Women's rights?
- What insights can you take away from this lesson about the challenge of building inclusive social movements? How do you think those challenges can be addressed?