Famous Speeches: Cady Stanton's Address on "The Destructive Male"

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Editor’s Note: In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton created the first organized demand for women’s suffrage in the United States. Suffrage is the right to vote. She worked closely with Susan B. Anthony, another woman fighting for suffrage. Together, they fought for the rights of women. Stanton was also against slavery. In 1868, she gave this speech at the Women’s Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C.

I urge a sixteenth amendment, or change, to the Constitution to give women the right to vote. I do this because 'manhood suffrage,' or a man's government, is not a civil, religious and social organization. It is disorganization. Masculinity or manliness is a destructive force. It is stern, selfish and thinks only of itself. It loves war, violence and is concerned with taking things. It breeds disagreement, disorder, disease and death in the world. See what a record of blood and cruelty the pages of history show us! The soul of humanity has struggled for the centuries. It has struggled through slavery, murder and sacrifice. It has struggled through interrogations, imprisonments, pains and persecutions. It has struggled through punishing laws and dark beliefs. Meanwhile, mercy has covered her face. All hearts have been dead to love and hope!
Men have been in control so far. Men have taken over from the beginning. Males and masculinity have overpowered the ways of the female everywhere. It has crushed out all the highest qualities in human nature. Now we know little of true manhood and womanhood. We know the least about womanhood. Womanhood has hardly been recognized as a power until within the last century. Society is just the reflection of man himself. It is unaffected by woman’s thought. We feel its hard iron rule in the church, the state and the home. There is no need to wonder why there is so much disorganization or why everything seems to be in pieces. The answer is that man represents just half a complete being. He has only half an idea on every subject. Yet, it is man who has taken complete control of all earthly matters.

People object to women making demands. They say they are too strong-minded. They say 'the right of suffrage will make the women masculine.' That is just the difficulty we have today. We have few women in the best sense. Many women are reflections, or weak copies of men. The strong, natural qualities of womanhood are pushed away. They are ignored. For so long as man feeds woman she will try to make him happy. She will try change herself to fit his needs. To keep a foothold in society, woman must be as much like man as possible. She must reflect his ideas, opinions, good points and bad points. Woman must respect man’s laws, though they take from her every natural right, and conflict with that higher law written by the finger of God on her own soul.

Woman must look at everything from the point of view of money. If she does not, she is said to be dreaming. She must accept things as they are and make the best of them. If she is sad over the miseries of others she is said to be sentimentalizing. She is not supposed to worry about the poor, or their hardships in jails, prisons and mental hospitals. Woman must not worry about the horrors of war, and cruelty and brutality in the world. She is being too emotional if she protests against the secret schemes, bribery and dishonesty of public life. A woman may wish that her sons will work in some business that does not ask for lying, cheating and a hard, grinding selfishness. That wish is considered total nonsense.

In this way man has been molding woman to his ideas by direct influences. At the same time she has used indirect means to control him. In most cases she has developed the same qualities in both him and herself that needed repression. And now man himself is shocked at the results of his own bad behavior. He mourns in bitterness that lying, selfishness and violence are the law of life. What we need at this time is not more land, gold mines, railroads or more money. What we need is a new praise of womanhood, and to respect virtue, morality and true religion. This is needed to lift man up into the higher kingdoms of thought and action.

We ask for the right to vote for women, as the first step toward a way of thinking that is needed in government. It is the only idea that can secure the health, strength and success of the nation. Whatever is done to lift woman to her true place will help to bring a new day of peace and perfection for all people.
I do not mean to say that all men are hard, selfish and cruel. Many of the most beautiful spirits the world has known have been part of manhood. I am talking about some qualities that men have. They are thought to be more common qualities in men than in women. These are qualities such as the love of acquiring things and of taking over places. Such qualities can be pioneers of civilization when they are used on the earth, the sea and the riches and forces of nature. However, they are destructive when they are used by men to control or enslave each other, or by nations to control other nations.

Woman’s love is a great caretaker. If it were allowed to speak out freely, it would speak out against oppression, violence and war. It would keep all these destructive forces under control. This is because woman knows the value of life better than man does. She would not allow one drop of blood to be shed. Woman would not allow one life to be sacrificed in vain.

When there is violence and confusion in the natural world, we see there is always an effort to keep a balance of forces. Nature is like a loving mother. It is always trying to keep balanced land and sea, and mountain and valley. Nature tries to keep each of these in its place. It tries to hush the angry winds and waves. There is a balance between extreme heat and cold, and rain and drought. It works so that peace, harmony and beauty may rule. There is a similarity between the natural world and our minds. The present disorganization of society shows us what has happened because power was taken away from women. We have let loose violence and ruin into the world. Only woman has the power to stop these things. Our time calls for suffrage for women. Surely a government of the most virtuous educated men and women would better represent the whole and protect the interests of all than either man or woman could do alone.