

## 9-15 Catherine Beecher, *A New England Woman Describes the Responsibilities of American Women* (1847)

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*Catherine Beecher was a member of one of the most influential families of nineteenth-century America, including her father the Reverend Lyman Beecher, her brother the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin. In 1847 Catherine wrote an influential book, Treatise on Domestic Economy for Young Ladies at Home and at School, in which she promoted a domestic ideal for American women, an ideal that has since become known as "the cult of true womanhood." Women's subordination to men, she argued, sheltered them from the harshness of the world of the marketplace and politics and enabled them to work for moral uplift at home. SOURCE: Catherine Beecher, Treatise on Domestic Economy for Young Ladies at Home and at School (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847).*

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...There must be the magistrate and the subject, one of whom is the superior, and the other the inferior. There must be the relations of husband and wife, parent and child, teacher and pupil, employer and employed, each involving the relative duties of subordination. The superior, in certain particulars, is to direct, and the inferior is to yield obedience. Society could never go forward, harmoniously, nor could any craft or profession be successfully pursued, unless these superior and subordinate relations be instituted and sustained.

But who shall take the higher, and who the subordinate, stations in social and civil life? This matter, in the case of parents and children, is decided by the Creator. He has given children to the control of parents, as their superiors, and to them they remain subordinate, to a certain age, or so long as they are members of their household. And parents can delegate such a portion of their authority to teachers and employers, as the interests of their children require.

In most other cases, in a truly democratic state, each individual is allowed to choose for himself, who shall take the position of his superior. No woman is forced to obey any husband but the one she chooses for herself; nor is she obliged to take a husband, if she prefers to remain single. So every domestic, and every artisan or laborer, after passing from parental control, can choose the employer to whom he is to accord obedience, or, if he prefers to relinquish certain advantages, he can remain without taking a subordinate place to any employer.

And the various privileges that wealth secures, are equally open to all classes. Every man may aim at riches, unimpeded by any law or institution which secures peculiar privileges to a favored class, at the expense of another. Every law, and every institution, is tested by examining whether it secures equal advantages to all; and, if the people become convinced that any regulation sacrifices the good of the majority to the interests of the smaller number, they have power to abolish it...

It appears, then, that it is in America, alone, that women are raised to an equality with the other sex; and that, both in theory and practice, their interests are regarded as of equal value. They are made subordinate in station, only where a regard to their best interests demands it, while, as if in compensation for this, by custom and courtesy, they are always treated as superiors. Universally, in this Country, through every class of society, precedence is given to woman, in all the comforts, conveniences, and courtesies, of life.

In civil and political affairs, American women take no interest or concern, except so far as they sympathize with their family and personal friends; but in all cases, in which they do feel a concern, their opinions and feelings have a consideration, equal, or even superior, to that of the other sex.

manners, they have a superior influence. In such concerns, it would be impossible to carry a point, contrary to their judgement and feelings; while an enterprise, sustained by them, will seldom fail of success.

If those who are bewailing themselves over the fancied wrongs and injuries of women in this Nation, could only see things as they are, they would know, that, whatever remnants of a barbarous or aristocratic age may remain in our civil institutions, in reference to the interests of women, it is only because they are ignorant of them, or do not use their influence to have them rectified; for it is very certain that there is nothing reasonable, which American women would unite in asking, that would not readily be bestowed....

The success of democratic institutions, as is conceded by all, depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people. If they are intelligent and virtuous, democracy is a blessing; but if they are ignorant and wicked, it is only a curse, and as much more dreadful than any other form of civil government, as a thousand tyrants are more to be dreaded than one. It is equally conceded, that the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of the future man; the sister bends the fibres that are hereafter to be the forest tree; the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured.

If this be so, as none will deny, then to American women, more than to any others on earth, is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, which are to renovate degraded man, and "clothe all climes with beauty."

No American woman, then, has any occasion for feeling that hers is an humble or insignificant lot. The value of what an individual accomplishes, is to be estimated by the importance of the enterprise achieved, and not by the particular position of the laborer. The drops of heaven which freshen the earth, are each of equal value, whether they fall in the lowland meadow, or the princely parterre. The builders of a temple are of equal importance, whether they labor on the foundations, or toil upon the dome....

[The] greater difficulty, peculiar to American women, is, a delicacy of constitution, which renders them early victims to disease and decay.

The fact that the women of this Country are unusually subject to disease, and that their beauty and youthfulness are of shorter continuance than those of the women of other nations, is one which always attracts the attention of foreigners; while medical men and philanthropists are constantly giving fearful monitions as to the extent and alarming increase of this evil. Investigations make it evident, that a large proportion of young ladies, from the wealthier classes, have the incipient stages of curvature of the spine, one of the most sure and fruitful causes of future disease and decay. The writer has heard medical men, who have made extensive inquiries, say, that a very large proportion of the young women at boarding schools, are affected in this way, while many other indications of disease and debility exist, in cases where this particular evil cannot be detected.

In consequence of this enfeebled state of their constitutions, induced by a neglect of their physical education, as soon as they are called to the responsibilities and trials of domestic life, their constitution fails, and their whole existence is rendered a burden. For no woman can enjoy existence, when disease throws a dark cloud over the mind, and incapacitates her for the proper discharge of every duty....

It would seem as if the primeval curse, which has written the doom of pain and sorrow on one period of a young mother's life, in this Country had been extended over all;

so that the hour seldom arrives, when “she forgetteth her sorrow for joy that a man is born into the world.” Many a mother will testify, with shuddering, that the most exquisite sufferings she ever endured, were not those appointed by Nature, but those, which, for week after week, have worn down health and spirits, when nourishing her child. And medical men teach us, that this, in most cases, results from a debility of constitution, consequent on the mismanagement of early life. And so frequent and so mournful are these, and the other distresses that result from the delicacy of the female constitution, that the writer has repeatedly heard mothers say, that they had wept tears of bitterness over their infant daughters, at the thought of the sufferings which they were destined to undergo; while they cherished the decided wish, that these daughters should never marry.

1. Beecher argued against those “bewailing themselves over the fancied wrongs and injuries of women in this Nation.” Who might she have had in mind? How does she answer them?
2. Beecher believed that the greatest problem for American women was their “delicacy of constitution” due to their neglect of “physical education.” Is this argument similar to ones you hear today?