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Maria Miller

## Women in the Late Nineteenth Century: Involvement in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair

The nineteenth century in America was full of changing ideals. In this period, women began to push for a larger role in society. The Columbian Exposition of 1893 held in Chicago is a clear example of the progression of women's rights in the period. It exemplified the inclusion of women in male-dominated fields and gave female visitors hope for a future with expanded rights. Despite this, women at the Exposition struggled to maintain legitimacy in their roles, mostly because the period's leading women were unable to work together as a cohesive group.

### **A History of Women's Rights Activism in the Nineteenth Century**

The early nineteenth century was mostly occupied with abolition ideals, but women became involved in the abolitionist movement and other social reform-focused groups. In 1833, the first women's society was formed in Salem, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> In many cases during this period, white and African American women worked together to promote social reform.<sup>2</sup> Lucretia Mott worked with Elizabeth Cady Stanton to set up the first women's rights meeting at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.<sup>3</sup> The Seneca Falls Convention served to recognize and promote female "self-sovereignty" in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Today, the event is widely recognized as the first major step towards women's rights.

The mid-1800s saw a shift in the women's suffrage movement, featured a primarily white-led women's suffrage movement.<sup>5</sup> Women were angered that they had been left out of the Reconstruction-era policies that extended rights to African American citizens. In addition, there was a split between black men's suffrage activists and women's suffrage activists after the Fifteenth Amendment granted the

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Stansell, "Missed Connections: Abolitionist Feminism in the Nineteenth Century," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Feminist as Thinker*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Richard Candida Smith. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Stansell, "Missed Connections," 35.

<sup>3</sup> Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen C. Dubois and Richard C. Smith, introduction to *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Feminist as Thinker*, ed. Dubois and Smith, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Stansell, "Missed Connections," 40, explains that African Americans were hesitant to contribute toward social movements following the 1838 murder of Elijah Lovejoy.

right to vote to all men but ignored women.<sup>6</sup> Having lost some support from African Americans, it became more important for white women to work together to push for women's rights.

By the late nineteenth century, there were several groups that worked toward women's rights. Some groups focused on moral issues, such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, while others, like Woman's Tea Party in New York, worked toward political goals.<sup>7</sup> Not all of these groups agreed, and, thus, conflict arose. Suffragists disagreed with those women who supported the free love movement of the 1870s.<sup>8</sup> Although all of these women's groups worked toward the same end goal, the groups were unable to work together.

In the nineteenth century, the women's rights movement served as a period of brainstorming with few actual examples of progress. Women began to work together in groups and organize, but most groups tended to focus on a single way to improve the condition of women, not recognizing the importance of collaborating. The racial, class, and ideological divides between women in this era subsisted, keeping women from working together. Women may have been able to accomplish more of their goals in the nineteenth century, had they worked together as one cohesive group.

### **Women at the Columbian Exposition of 1893**

The Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair, took place in Chicago in 1893. The Fair included a Woman's Building, women's departments in the state buildings, and some women were granted positions of leadership through the Board of Lady Managers.<sup>9</sup> This was an opportunity to showcase American women. It served as a time for women to visit a space that featured female professionals to be recognized in the press by the many journalists that wrote about the Fair.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, 80-83.

<sup>8</sup> Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, 90 explains further why suffragists disagreed with free love movement.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Flinn, comp., *The Official Guide to the Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: The Columbian Guide Company, 1893), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Ann E. Feldman, "Women and the Press and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition," in *World's Fair Notes: A Woman Journalist Views 1893 Columbian Exposition*, by Marian Shaw, (The Pogo Press, 1992), 86-88.

Despite this, the women exhibitors and patrons of the Fair were not included as much as they could have been. They also faced conflict with male executives and with the white, upper class women that oversaw the Woman's Building exhibits.

### **Women's Progress at the Exposition**

Perhaps the clearest example of women's progress in the Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the establishment of the Board of Lady Managers (BLM). The BLM helped plan, oversee, and design the exhibits of the Woman's Building at the Fair. The 117 members first met in 1890 when they elected Bertha Palmer, a prominent white woman from Chicago, as their president.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the BLM, the Woman's Building at the Chicago World's Fair was, itself, an integral piece of supporting women's rights. The Building served as a source of "femininity within a male-dominated exposition."<sup>12</sup> This was not the first example of a female display space at a Fair<sup>13</sup>, but it was the first building entirely dedicated to displays by and about women. There was national and international support for the Woman's Building. Congress allotted \$36,000 of the Fair building budget solely to the Woman's Building.<sup>14</sup> There were contributions to the Woman's Building exhibits by many different nations from around the world, including France, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Italy, Bohemia, and Spain.<sup>15</sup> By exhibiting these women's displays, the Woman's Building showed that men and women were different, but it reinforced the idea that women and men should be treated equally.<sup>16</sup> It showed that women were able to accomplish things.

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<sup>11</sup> Judy Sund, "Columbus and Columbia in Chicago, 1893: Man of Genius Meets Generic Woman," *The Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 446, accessed November 11, 2016, doi: 10.2307/3045968.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew F. Wood, "Managing the Lady Managers: The Shaping of Heterotopian Spaces in the 1893 Chicago Exposition's Woman's Building," *The Southern Communication Journal* 69 (2004): 292-293, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/226939355?accountid=10610>.

<sup>13</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 2, discusses the Woman's Pavilion at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition, prior to the Columbian Exposition.

<sup>14</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Book*, chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> John Hutton, "Picking Fruit," 325.

The Woman's Building library, located in the Woman's Building, clearly shows how the Columbian Exposition exemplified women's progress. The library included over 7,000 books, all of which were written by women.<sup>17</sup> Documents from prominent females across the globe, including Queen Elisabeth, Catherine de Medici, and George Eliot, were on display in the Woman's Building Library.<sup>18</sup> There was such a push for books written by female authors to fill the library, that many volumes were written solely for the event.<sup>19</sup> The library did a great job showing how women were making positive progress in society, but also connected women to their traditional roles in society.<sup>20</sup> The Woman's Building library was a great example of women's progress because showed how accomplished women were in writing and that they were equal to men in this field.

The artistic displays in the Woman's Building featured famous female artists and female equality-based themes, further exemplifying female accomplishment. The building itself was designed by a woman: Sophia Hayden.<sup>21</sup> Tapestries, paintings, sculpture, carvings, and drawings by women were included in the Woman's Building.<sup>22</sup> Agnes Pittman, a female designer, served as chief decorator of the Assembly Hall and President's Reception Room.<sup>23</sup> Two large stained glass windows taking up a large wall in the Assembly Hall were designed by three women: Elisabeth Parsons, Edith Blake Brown, and Ethel Isadore Brown.<sup>24</sup> Even the roof of the Woman's Building featured artwork by women. Featuring only female artists in the Woman's Building reinforced the idea of progress in women's rights. It also gave female visitors confidence that they were able to be successful.

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<sup>17</sup> Leo J. Harris, "The Search for Marian Shaw," in *World's Fair Notes: A Woman Journalist Views 1893 Columbian Exposition*, by Marian Shaw, (The Pogo Press, 1992), 78.

<sup>18</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 5.

<sup>20</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> Flinn, *Official Guide to the Columbian Exposition*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Marian Shaw, *World's Fair Notes: A Woman Journalist Views Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition*, (The Pogo Press, 1992), 62.

<sup>23</sup> Shaw, *World's Fair Notes*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Charlene G. Garfinkle, "Progress Illuminated: Two Stained Glass Windows from the 1893 Woman's Building," *Woman's Art Journal* 33 (2012): 33, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24395265>.

The Fair allowed women to not only put their work on display, but also to share their ideas through public lectures. Female suffragists and other famous women addressed patrons of the Fair, the women's meetings, and other groups at the Exposition. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, although not in attendance at the Fair, sent speeches to be read for her, addressing the Women's Congress and the World's Parliament of Religions.<sup>25</sup> Susan B. Anthony was also a popular speaker at the Fair.<sup>26</sup> The Board of Lady Managers arranged for female activists, scientists, ministers, poets, and writers to speak in the Women's Building throughout the Fair.<sup>27</sup> Allowing for women speakers at the Fair was a more direct way to show the independence and accomplishment of modern women.

In addition to those women in the Board of Lady Managers, women held roles in other women's organizations at the Columbian Exposition. The World's Congress of Representative Women also met at the Chicago Exposition's Woman's Building. At their meetings, over two million signatures were collected on a petition to promote women's rights.<sup>28</sup> The presence of women's organizations at the Fair showed how much progress women had made in the nineteenth century. These women's groups were able to spread women's rights ideals and recruit membership in their organizations, allowing for increased female solidarity.

### **Women at the Exposition: Lacking Equality**

The Columbian Exposition included women in a way that made the event appear to be supporting women's progress. Despite featuring women in the Woman's Building and elsewhere in the Fair, there was opportunity for women's roles to be expanded further in the event. In addition, the portrayal of women in various exhibits at the Fair showed that of interiority, not progress.

Although the Woman's Building seemed to support women's rights, the building was not as much a measure of equality as it was a compromise by the executive committee of the Fair. When

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Worship of God in Man," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Feminist as Thinker*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Richard Candida Smith, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 276.

<sup>26</sup> Shaw, *World's Fair Notes*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 5.

<sup>28</sup> Sewall, *The World's Congress of Represented Women*, 411.

Chicago was selected to be the location for the 1893 World's Fair, women were not included in the event. Susan B. Anthony called upon Congress to increase female involvement in the upcoming Fair.<sup>29</sup> The idea of female involvement was considered only after well-known female lawyer and suffragist Myra Bradwell and Emma Wallace approached the Fair's planning committee.<sup>30</sup> Then a Woman's Building was established. The Woman's Building was a step toward female inclusion in the Fair, but making a separate space for women further isolated them from the rest of the Fair.

Some women struggled to be included in the Fair because male-dominated groups suppressed female involvement. Female musicians at the Fair faced this more so than other female professionals at the Fair. The male members of the Bureau of Music disrespected female musicians, believing that women were not as talented as male musicians.<sup>31</sup> Amy Beach wrote a piece for the dedication of the Woman's Building, but was unable to have it performed, due to outrage of the Bureau of Music.<sup>32</sup> A music critic by the name of Tomlins wrote about the inferiority of the music written by women that was performed at the Chicago Exposition. He wrote that performing music by female composers went against "womanhood."<sup>33</sup> This conflict with men at the Columbian Exposition made it difficult for women to hold substantial roles in the Fair.

Furthermore, the BLM discriminated against other women, especially those who differed from the white, upper-class members of the BLM. President of the BLM Bertha Palmer stated that the Woman's Building would not discuss poverty and its effects on the female population in America, as she refused to recognize that there was inequality between sexes in the workplace.<sup>34</sup> The Lady Managers said that the progress of African American women did not belong in the Woman's Building, instead saying

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<sup>29</sup> Sund, "Columbus and Columbia in Chicago, 1893," 444.

<sup>30</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Feldman, "Being Heard," 12.

<sup>32</sup> Feldman, "Being Heard," 12.

<sup>33</sup> Feldman, "Being Heard," 19.

<sup>34</sup> Wood, "Managing the Lady Managers," 297-298

that it should be placed in the state exhibits.<sup>35</sup> The Woman's Building included one display on minority women, called "Woman's Work in Savagery," which presented information on Native American, African American, and Polynesian women.<sup>36</sup> Many of the displays in the Woman's Building were skewed by the white, upper-class women that made up the BLM.<sup>37</sup>

In the few exhibits in which women were included outside of the Woman's Building, they were displayed in ways that suggested female inferiority to men. The Virginia building showed female African American's acting as slave women.<sup>38</sup> The Midway Plaisance was the main source of the subjugation of women at the Fair. In the Plaisance, there was a Congress of Beauties—otherwise known as the "Forty Ladies from Forty Nations"—which was a beauty contest in which visitors to the Fair voted on which woman was best looking.<sup>39</sup> This focus on women's bodies and beauty undermined the idea of "progress" that was spreading through the nineteenth century.

### **Conclusions from the Fair**

The Columbian Exposition showed how women's rights had expanded throughout the nineteenth century. It also recognizes the struggles that women faced throughout the period because these struggles were also present at the Chicago World's Fair. From the present day, it is difficult to look back on the Columbian Exposition as exemplifying women's rights. The 1893 Chicago's World's Fair was a step in the right direction, in terms of female progress, though. The Columbian Exposition stressed female equality and accomplishment, while showing that further progress could be made in the future.

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<sup>35</sup> Wood, "Managing the Lady Managers," 298.

<sup>36</sup> Gullet, "Our Great Opportunity," 269.

<sup>37</sup> Wadsworth and Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, chapter 5.

<sup>38</sup> Gullet, "Our Great Opportunity," 270.

<sup>39</sup> Boyle, "Types and Beauties," 17.



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