



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.2. 2020 (Apr-June)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: HOW A SLAVE EVOLVED INTO A WOMEN'S RIGHTS MAN

SHAMA SULTANA

Email: mdshama2727@gmail.com



Article information

Received:27/05/2020

Accepted: 28/06/2020

Published online: 30/06/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.2.276](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.2.276)

ABSTRACT

Frederick Douglass was one of the few male writers who ardently supported women's rights during the 19th century, the time when women were shunned from political and civil rights. Douglass was prominently known for his impactful speeches, as a campaigner for the abolitionist movement, and for his famous autobiographies, but little light was shed on his stance for the women suffrage movement. His journey from a slave to a stern women's rights man is incredible and inspiring. He became a voice for the unvoiced not just for the slaves but for the women as well. The paper aims to dwell on Douglass's liberal ideas and his quest for women emancipation. His intellectual development and knowledge of the sexes originated from the women around his life

**Keywords:** women emancipation, women suffrage, slavery, racial inequality

Introduction

Frederick Douglass, the most celebrated Afro-American writer was born in 1818 in Tuckahoe, Maryland to a slave mother and an unknown white man. He endured as a slave in his childhood and was ruthlessly flogged by his masters. As a slave, he also caught the attention of merciless torture of his fellow female slaves. He tried to escape this brutality several times and it was in 1838, he made a brave escape only to be a great abolitionist and a successful author.

The seed for empowering women was started within his surroundings. As a child, he lived in the cabin of his grandmother Betsy Bailey, who was a midwife. Though a slave herself, she was given certain privileges that most of the rural slaves lacked. She enjoyed the little freedom she had and was less scrutinized by her masters. He learnt gardening from her and her affection enlivened him as he was devoid of it in his early childhood.

At a tender age of 6, he was coerced to leave his grandmother's cabin and was sent to work with Hugh Auld in Baltimore. Hugh's wife Sophia had a great impact on her. With the help of Sophia's Bible lessons, he was able to master the alphabets that bolstered his further education. With his sheer persistence, he trained himself to read and write. He started teaching his fellow slaves and enraged by this, Auld sent him to Edward Covey. There, he was whipped severely leading him to escape.

In 1838, he married Anna Murray, a free black woman who helped him escape. Anna worked as a servant in the middle-class homes and was also indulged in antislavery work. She too wished for a better life like other black women. She was illiterate and so wanted her children to be educated and independent that she

longed for. Douglass was proud of her that she was working and assisting him. They both opposed racism and slavery.

In the later years, he got immersed in the meetings of the abolitionist movement and travelled with proficient women. There, he befriended William Lloyd Garrison, a famous abolitionist who greatly influenced his beliefs and shaped his early career. They became part of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Together, they also worked for the cause of women's rights. Douglass was also a regular writer for Garrison's paper 'The Liberator' which published his famous autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* in 1845. However, the two found themselves at loggerheads, when Douglass started his newspaper *The North Star* and stopped lecturing at American Anti-Slavery society. The animosity grew when Douglass shared a contrasting political ideology to that of Garrison's.

### **Crusader for Women's Rights**

In his third autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, he emphasized on the noble movement that grew out of the anti-slavery:

"When the true history of the antislavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages, for the cause of the slave, has been peculiarly woman's cause."

Although he was actively participating in abolitionist movements and equally supporting women to empower themselves, it was Elizabeth Cady Stanton who formally introduced him to the concept of women's rights. Stanton showed him the injustices that women were facing in the name of patriarchy. With Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Douglass aimed to bring women's rights resolution to the state legislatures and drive the women to a greater arena.

In July 1848, Douglass attended the Seneca Falls Meeting, the first women's rights convention in the U.S. The meeting covered a wide range of burning issues like women's education, wages inequality, and most importantly their rights. Douglass was the only African American and also one of the few men to defend women's rights in the meeting. Stanton eulogized him as "he was the only man to stand with her". According to her, Douglass answered the opposition eloquently in the defence of women's rights and their equality.

Shortly after this, he published an editorial in *The North Star* entitled 'THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN'. His view on the equality of the sexes was revolutionary:

"In respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for men. We go further, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for men to exercise, it is equally so for a woman. All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being is equally true of woman, and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering the law of the land."

He wanted to reverberate his advocacy to a larger extent that he put the slogan of the newspaper as: "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are brethren."

Even at the Rochester Convention in 1853, he agitated for the equality of women with the same fervour at a larger scale than Seneca. Though few white men insisted "women's sphere was home", he "succeeded in amending a resolution defining delegates so that it would be "understood 'to include women,'" an amendment that was carried "with three cheers for women's rights!"

In 1867, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass together founded an organization American Equal Rights Association (AERA), with the sole purpose of bringing abolitionists and feminists together to advocate for black and women suffrage equally.

With the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, 1896, black men heaved a sigh of relief as they acquired the voting rights that they were yearning for over decades. But a great tumult surrounded on this amendment for it excluded women from voting. Though Douglass was quite happy for Afro-Americans, he still

was on a pursuit to include women. However, the AERA forums became more agitated as only one would be enfranchised.

Douglass insists that women should be delegates and spokespersons rather than men. He left no stone unturned in fostering women's rights. In a speech at International Council of Women, in Washington, D.C., he voiced out the women's ability:

"When a great truth once gets abroad in the world, no power on earth can imprison it, or prescribe its limits, or suppress it. It is bound to go on till it becomes the thought of the world. Such a truth is woman's right to equal liberty with man. She was born with it. It was hers before she comprehended it. It is inscribed upon all the powers and faculties of her soul, and no custom, law or usage can ever destroy it."

His call for freedom is an unprecedented act and his comprehensive views about women have amassed a great following for him:

"A woman can do anything a man could do, and so by doing could assimilate herself to man".

Though he was labelled as women's rights man, Douglass insisted that he was "never been ashamed to be thus designated". Instead, he once declared, " I belong to women".

### Conclusion

Though he was often exposed to the public ridicule, he never wavered in his opinions. The women in his life made him the man that he hankered for. As a child, the slave mistresses offered him food, clothing, and shelter while in his adulthood, white women brought him to the world of literature. He faced a lot of backlash for accompanying white women and working with them. All Douglass wanted is to maintain coherence between the black men and white women. He wanted to desist the racial inequality that was recurring in his time. Being a male advocate for female rights and fighting for the end of slavery, Douglass has not just carved his name in history but also paved the way for future generations to unveil their opinions vehemently.

### References

1. Fought, Leigh. Women in the World of Frederick Douglass. Oxford UP, 2017.
2. Davis, Angela. Women, Race, & Class. New York: Random House, 1981.
3. DOUGLASS, FREDERICK. LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS. BLURB, 2018.
4. Giddings, Paula J. When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America. HarperCollins E-book, 2008.
5. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-americanhistory/1888-frederick-douglass-woman-suffrage>