

## Sex & Citizenship in Antebellum America

In *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* Isenberg argues women's rights experienced a second rebirth during the two decades prior to the Civil War. Contrary to the current thought that women in antebellum America only sought "the vote," Isenberg brings attention to the driving forces behind these early activists. Her argument widens the lens that has often been looked through pertaining to the women's rights movement. Highlighting more than just the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, Isenberg focuses on the citizenship inequalities between men and women, the unwritten laws of the church and its influence on how women were perceived, and the impact the family structure had on their rights.

The Seneca Falls Convention was one of the most recognized women's rights conventions that took place in the 1840's and 1850's. It became increasingly evident to activists that conventions offered the needed platform for their cause. Conventions focused on three goals: (1) the right to have rights (entitlement), (2) the desire for rights and privileges in the political sphere (national citizenship), and (3) the right to be treated equally with full protection of the law (equality under the law). (21) Isenberg looked at what equality meant for both men and women in antebellum America, and draws a direct parallel between the rights, or lack thereof, of both women and slaves. She talks at great length about the commonalities between the fugitive slave laws and how women were treated and viewed in both the public and private sphere. Women advocated reform in married women's property rights, prostitution, Sabbath laws, slavery, and equal protection under the law.

Isenberg attempts to further explain the mindset of the social and political contexts when she discusses the impact of the "code of laws" originated in the church. She looks extensively at the impact the biblical story of Eve's error in the Garden of Eden, and how it attempts to explain

why women were viewed as “weaker” or “incapable” of making decisions, both publically (political) or privately (inside the home). “For their mother’s transgression, women had forfeited the right to citizenship.” (103) Arguing that this directly caused women to be “civilly dead,” it placed women in the same category as other castaways: slaves, children, and Indians- people viewed as civilly unimportant or expendable. (105)

Furthermore, much discussion is placed on the lack of protection women had in the eyes of the law. Not viewed as citizens worthy of the same protection a man would have, women were at the liberties of their husbands will. Viewed as their property, husbands had the legal right to act authoritatively over their wives both publically and privately. Home life for women in antebellum America also suffered from what Isenberg calls “man-ocracy,” where women were put in another place of subordination to their spouses. The lack of property rights and a lack of political identity including fair protection under the law fired the early activists’ demands for reformation.

Isenberg presents the arguments of women’s rights activists in a way that takes the attention off of the suffrage initiative and focuses the reader’s attention on the other “evils” of social discourse and political discrepancies between man and women. Although it is not a linear account of the women’s rights movement, it does attempt to shed light on the “mood” of the nation and tries to explain why it would take an additional thirty years after the end of the Civil War for women to gain the right to vote, and more importantly, become a little more equal in the eyes of the law.