

Sojourner Truth: Address to the Women's Rights Convention (1851)

Enslaved people, of course, had no rights, but among the free people of color, black women faced double discrimination based on race and gender. One black woman named Isabella (1797–1883), who was born a slave to a master of Dutch descent in the state of New York, served a number of masters before gaining her freedom in 1827. She then moved to New York City, worked as a house servant, and became involved in evangelical activities. In 1843 she experienced a mystical conversation with God in which she was told to "travel up and down the land" preaching the sins of slavery and the need for conversion. After changing her name to Sojourner Truth, she began crisscrossing the nation, exhorting audiences to be born again and take up the cause of abolitionism. Although unable to read or write, she was a woman of rare intelligence and uncommon courage. During the late 1840s she began promoting the woman's rights movement and in 1851 attended the convention in Akron, Ohio. There she discovered that many participants objected to her presence for fear that her abolitionist sentiments would deflect attention from women's issues. Hisses greeted the tall, gaunt woman as she rose to speak: "Woman's rights and niggers!" "Go it, darkey!" "Don't let her speak!" By the time she finished, however, the audience gave her a standing ovation.

From Frances D. Gage's reminiscences in *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. I, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds. (1881; New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969)

"Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin' out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout?"

"Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibbs me any best place!" . . . "And a'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! . . . I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And a'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a'n't I a woman?"

"Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?" ("Intellect," whispered someone near.) "Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do wid womin's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

And she pointed her significant finger, and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.

"Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wan't a woman! Whar did your Christ come from?"

Rolling thunder couldn't have stilled that crowd, as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated, "Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him." Oh, what a rebuke that was to that little man.

Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of Mother Eve. I cannot follow her through it all. It was pointed, and witty, and solemn; eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she ended by asserting: "If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder (and she glanced her eye over the platform) ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let 'em." Long-continued cheering greeted this. "Bliged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner han't got nothin' more to say."

Review Questions

1. How did Sojourner Truth equate the treatment of slaves with the treatment of women?
2. Did she suggest that laboring women, working-class women, had been ignored by the movement for women's rights?
3. How did she justify rights for women?
4. What factors made her presentation so effective?