

Professor Brianna Kuhn

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Women in the World

Since the pre-suffrage era in America, women's rights have come a long way. Women are now able to vote, have gained extensive rights to do with their bodies as they wish through major court cases, and have even become some of the most recognized figures of modern society. Whereas a century ago women would be pigeonholed into either working in menial secretarial positions that men didn't hold or being wives and homemakers, this is no longer the case, and we see that women occupy many different roles in the workforce and have the freedom to choose any sort of lifestyle they want. This change did not come overnight however, and envelops a long history of the oppression of women; any and all victories were met with extreme opposition. The single story of women has indeed changed.

One of the major issues with the struggle for women's rights was that it had to be granted by the will of men. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" had to make such an appeal by echoing the American Declaration of Independence. This was successful in that equating these two documents legitimized and formalized the argument for women's rights: describing elective franchise as "inalienable," recalls the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Declaration of Independence). If life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are so precious that it is impossible for them to be taken away from all people, so too is the right of women to elective franchise. Though it came seventy-two years after the convention at which

the “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” was introduced, women eventually were guaranteed the right to elective franchise, and thus their voice was a political equal to men in the eyes of the law. One point they stress within this document is that when a man marries a woman “He has made her...in the eye of the law, civilly dead” (Stanton). A married woman at this time has no ability to go against her husband’s will; if he demanded that she stayed home and took care of the children, or apply for a job to earn extra money on top of her motherly duties, that is what she would have to do. A woman could not have opposed her husband in any sort of political or public manner, or her family would have faced persecution and she could have faced punishment by her husband. At this time, women were seen as servants to their husbands rather than recognized as people capable of independent thought and action - they were given only as much free reign as their husbands allowed. Now women have the ability to separate themselves from their partner by divorce, and are also seen as independent legal entities instead of a sort of “property” of the husband. The single story of woman as a wife is no longer applicable in modern society.

For a long time, women were not recognized as intellectual equals to men. Susan Glaspell’s play *Trifles* explores this concept to great length. In the play, inspectors and their wives investigate a home which is the scene of a murder, the husband being murdered and his wife being the primary suspect. When the two women had discovered Mrs. Wright’s unfinished and frayed quilt, which might have provided insight into her mental state and possibly been evidence, the Court Attorney dismissed the women as being silly for looking at her quilt. The male characters believed that only they could find some worthwhile piece of evidence for the case, and that the women were largely concerned with small observations of the home. This is

demonstrative of the attitudes which women of the day faced as contributors to intellectual observation and discussion; they are largely written off as incapable. The women in Glaspell's play are more than capable of finding evidence pertinent to the investigation, at a level equal to or above that of the men. Society still struggles to break the implicit bias and tendency to believe that men are more capable at some jobs than women are, and though it has changed slightly, the subject requires more than one story to change. Glaspell compares the suspect, Mrs. Wright to a bird, exuberant and full of life, and the bird that the two women find in the Wright's house appeared to have been killed. This is symbolic of Mr. Wright's oppression of Mrs. Wright; in his treatment of his wife, and literal killing of the bird, he had crushed the "life" within her, which presumably led her to murder him. In the same way the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" described women as "civilly dead" under their husbands, Glaspell's play illuminates the struggle and oppression that women faced as wives. This has shifted dramatically and women have become freed from the social tradition of marriage and a life of domestic servitude. Women are no longer valued solely for the purposes of being a wife in modern society.

One thing that has always been a barrier to women is advanced positions and recognition for work in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematic fields. The film *Hidden Figures* is about three women of color who work for NASA, and the adversity they face because of their gender and race. Each woman had to fight against their own single stories: Katherine is fighting against the single story of black women being incapable of doing math at a higher level than white men. Dorothy fought against the single story that black women were incapable of being a supervisory, and that they were incapable of having a greater mastery over new technology than

white men were. Mary fought against the single story that a black women couldn't be an engineer. They fought against traditional gender roles by being the best at what they do: Katherine corrected and calculated the flight paths of some of the rockets when no answer seems to exist, Dorothy mastered the computing system and technology when others hadn't bothered to learn it, and functioned as a supervisor long before her title was awarded, and Mary petitioned the court for the ability to take the classes necessary for her to receive her engineering degree and won the position. Even though they were extraordinary at their jobs, they had to go above and beyond to be recognized and rewarded for their efforts, or even treated fairly at the workplace. Though women's ability to work at NASA was already a step forward from pre-suffrage status, these three women boldly showed that they were capable of equal-level feats as men. Women and people of color now have a greater ability to join STEM programs and work in those fields, though many people still are not doing so. For women, there is a sort of social stigma against STEM fields that still exists and it is perceived by the public to be a "man's job." While this is not a traditional "closed door," it has dissuaded many girls from studying STEM fields in school and choosing those fields as career paths. The jobs available to women then were mostly secretary positions and were not regarded very highly, it is visible in the movie that white women were awarded supervisor positions among their groups much sooner than women of color; and they also faced a tremendous difference in pay. There are still visible inequalities between men and women that have yet to be identified and rectified. The stories of Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary provide alternative stories to show the power of women to accomplish incredible things even in the face of a system that favors men; they again revise the single story that women are incapable of acting equally with men.

Women have battled through much legislation and prejudice in acquiring basic human rights and equality with men, and they are no longer reducible to a single story - women exist in all aspects of society equally with men. Stanton's "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," Glaspell's *Trifles*, and the stories of the *Hidden Figures* all recognize this struggle of women against the social standards of their own times. Though many recognize that there is still much to be done across the world, Women have cemented into history that they are equal to men.

Glaspell, Susan. *Trifles*. *Current Issues and Enduring Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Argument, with Readings*, 11th ed. Eds. Sylvan Barnet, Hugo Bedau, and John O'Hara. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017. 718-727. Print.

Hidden Figures. Directed by Theodore Melfi, performances by Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, and Janelle Monae, 20th Century Fox, 2016.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions." *Current Issues and Enduring Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Argument, with Readings*, 11th ed. Eds. Sylvan Barnet, Hugo Bedau, and John O'Hara. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017. 655-657. Print.