

Gender & Racial Equity Issues — and Our Own Dark Past

White supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by women’s suffrage,” insisted Carrie Chapman Catt, founder of the League of Women Voters in 1920.

The racism that stained the battle for women’s suffrage and the earliest days of the LWV is well documented if not well known. From Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s openly racist statements to Alice Paul’s insistence that Ida B. Wells and her black suffragists walk in the rear of a 1913 march in Washington D.C. to Carrie Catt’s refusal to allow a consortium of black women’s clubs to become cooperative members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, only months before that organization became the LWV — the failure of the white women leaders to include black women in the struggle was blatant. It must be looked at squarely; it is part of the picture, even as we approach with excitement the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment and the 100th birthday of the LWV, and celebrate the success of the long, dramatic, and painful fight for women’s suffrage.

Now the LWV is engaged in a nationwide effort to emphasize diversity, inclusion, and equity in the League’s internal make-up, and the LWVSC, at its recent State Convention in Charleston, adopted a position stressing our current convictions: “The LWVSC supports gender and racial equity, including ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the promotion of fairness in hiring, advancement, pay, and in representation in public appointments.”

Since the early 1970s the League of Women Voters has supported ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and continues to do so. But, as the new position’s wording takes into account, the ERA would grapple with only part of the problem women face in South Carolina.

As Frederick Douglass said when asked if it was not true that black women suffer the same injustices as black men and therefore should be given the vote, “yes, yes, yes, it is true of the black woman, but not because she is a woman, but because she is black.” This comment still resonates.

Ratification of the ERA will not help equalize the educational opportunities offered to white and African-American girls in South Carolina’s de facto segregated public schools.

It will not touch the large inequities in employment, housing, public health, and education highlighted in the College of Charleston's Avery Research Center's 2017 report on racial disparities in Charleston County.

It will do nothing to address the appalling inequity in maternal mortality in this country — black mothers dying at a rate 3.3 times greater than whites, and Native American or Alaskan Native women at a rate 2.5 times greater than whites, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

With humble awareness of the glories, and the shames, of past battles, we will continue to work for women's rights — for both racial and gender equity. Not either/or.

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