

The Influence of Women of Color in the Women's Suffrage Movement

Suffragists of color in the late 1800s and early 1900s shaped the movement for women's rights by having a complex narrative that broadened the contemporary definition of equality. They advocated for racial equity as they fought alongside white counterparts for gender equality. As we reflect on the last 100 years, it is important we shed a light on their lost stories and influences.

One such example is the early suffrage leaders' visits with Iroquois and Haudenosaunee Confederation women, who greatly influenced the mothers of the movement. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Matilda Joselyn Gage spent some time in the Cattaraugus, Oneida and Onondaga communities, they observed the leadership roles and authority exercised by women. They became animated and inspired as they watched native women participate in decision-making discussions and forming complex farming techniques. They generated the basis of their movement watching and learning from these indigenous women.

As the movement picked up steam, women of color from various races joined the fight. Activist and attorney Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin was one of such women who fought alongside Alice Paul, Mott and Stanton, among others. Baldwin, along with Zitkala-Sa, Sioux writer and prominent violinist, wrote about the preservation of Native American culture and advocated against the assimilation of Native American children in addition to supporting the suffrage movement.

In the African American community, activists such as Mary Church Terrell, along with Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Josephine Ruffins and others formed the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), similar to the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Despite the empowering nature of the movement, women of color did not always feel included. The NACW was one of the few ways they exerted their influence to fight the unique issues they faced. Women like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee still advocated and fought in the movement, even when the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented Chinese immigrants from voting until the 1940s.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. As we celebrate, we look at the women that began the groundwork, we analyze their influences, their actions and the narratives they carved out to create the evolution of the gender equality as we know it. Leaders such as Stanton, Moss, Paul, and Gage are who we remember of the movement. It is important to remember that women of color were also integral in expanding the diversity and complexity of being free.

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Information gathered from: Sally R. Wagner's "Is Equality Indigenous: The Untold Iroquois Influence on Early Radical Feminists" in *On the Issues*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1996; "19th Amendment at 100: Mary Louise Bottineau Baldwin," U.S National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/>); Cathleen D. Cahill's "Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin: Indigenizing the Federal Indian Service" in *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 37 no. 3, 2013; Liz Webber's "Women of Color Were Cut Out of the Suffragist Story. Historians Say it's Time for a Reckoning" in *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2019; "Suffrage at 100: A Visual History" in *The New York Times* ([nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/)); and "Mabel Ping-Hua Lee: How Chinese-American Women Helped Shape the Suffrage Movement" in *Women's Vote Centennial* (<https://www.womensvote100.org/>).