

Mormon Women of the 1870s Speak on "THE WOMAN QUESTION"

By Carol Lynn Pearson

Being a Mormon woman and a student of Mormon women, I have a vested interest in what's happening to them. What are they doing and feeling? What do they want to be? What do they think they ought to be? I've asked a number of Mormon women these questions and wished fervently that I could also ask our pioneer foremothers. But it seemed I would have to postpone those interviews for the next world.

However, a short time ago I met some of those magnificent Mormon women of the last century, not in person but in print. They were tucked away in the pages of the *Woman's Exponent*, the first journal for Mormon women, and the tenets it espoused are as applicable to our own day as they were when they were written a century ago.

One of the big social issues of that day was the emancipation of women. The feminine "sphere" was undergoing enormous shifts. There were many heated debates nationally about what women could, could not, should, and should not do; and the pioneer women took a strong and enlightened stand. Many of the issues of that time are current today. And then, as now, not everyone was in agreement on these emotionally charged issues.

When the Relief Society was organized in Nauvoo in 1842, the Prophet Joseph Smith said to the sisters:

"I now turn the key in your behalf in the name of the Lord, and this society shall re-

joice, and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time henceforth."¹

Commenting on that action by the Prophet, Sister Belle S. Spafford, general president of the Relief Society today, has declared:

"The turning of the key for women by the Prophet was, in my judgment, the initiatory action that made possible the opening of the great so-called 'woman's movement' of the world. Six years after the above words were uttered by the Prophet, the first woman's rights convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York. It was practically a small assembly of neighbors, but it thrashed out the first public 'Declaration of Independence for Women' calling for equal educational, social, industrial, and political rights."²

From that time until today, women have gained an enormous number of benefits. But with those gains there has been an accompanying misuse of privilege.

Brigham Young once stated: "I call evil inverted good, or a correct principle made an evil use of."³ And I am convinced that the "correct principle" in this case is that woman is as valuable a creature as man. The "evil uses of" existed a hundred years ago and certainly exist today, in both manifest and subtle forms.

The pioneer Mormon women wrote on many topics and were forthright in their views. The *Woman's Exponent*

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was one of three "women's papers" of that time in the West; the other two were the *New North West* of Portland and the *Pioneer* of San Francisco. It was claimed that these three publications were "more than the East can boast of."⁴

One of the major aims of the *Exponent* was "to discuss every subject interesting and valuable to women. . . .

"It will aim to defend the right, inculcate sound principles, and disseminate useful knowledge."⁵

In the fourth semimonthly issue of the *Exponent*, July 15, 1872, appears an essay by Eliza R. Snow, then general president of the Relief Society and one of the leading Mormon writers of the day. A paragraph from this essay, entitled "Woman's Status," shows an incisive grasp of the problems with which women were contending:

"The status of women is one of the questions of the day. Socially and politically it forces itself upon the attention of the world. Some who are so conservative that they oppose every change until they are compelled to accept it, refuse to concede that woman is entitled to the enjoyment of any rights other than those which the whims, fancies or justice, as the case may be, of men may choose to grant her. The reasons which they cannot meet with argument they decri and ridicule; an old refuge for those opposed to correct principles which they are unable to controvert. Others, again, not only

recognize that woman's status should be improved, but are so radical in their extreme theories that they would set her in antagonism to man, assume for her a separate and opposing existence; and to show how entirely independent she should be would make her adopt the more reprehensible phases of character which men present, and which should be shunned or improved by them instead of being copied by women. These are two extremes, and between them is the 'golden mean.'"⁶

That "golden mean" was sought and cultivated by Eliza and other highly informed Mormon women.

They were well acquainted with the lot that traditionally had been woman's. Eliza goes on to say:

"We do not have to go back very far in the history of the Anglo-Saxon race to find a time when women were viewed and treated as chattels. The father had absolute power in everything, except in the matter of life and death, over his daughter. The husband had equal power over his wife. She was his property, to the last article of raiment worn by her.

And there are not wanting instances within a comparatively recent date where women have been sold with a halter around the neck, and passed quietly and almost uncomplainingly into the possession, of their purchasers."⁷

The more subtle damages also were perceived by Eliza. Woman, she says, is also mistreated in that she "must be preserved from the slightest blast of trouble, petted, caressed, dressed to attract attention, taught accomplishments that minister to man's gratification; in other words, she must be treated as a glittering and fragile toy, a thing without brains or soul, placed on a tinselled and unsubstantial pedestal by man, as her worshipper. This elevation of status is by courtesy, not by right. Let one of those idols choose to step beyond the bounds which society prescribes, and she is hurled from her position, and flung in the mire of social degradation."⁸

Before we read their testimonials on what improvements they would have made, we must first of all be assured that the progressive pioneer women were not abdicating their responsibilities to their families.

They believed strongly in being loving, pleasant, supportive wives and in running cheerful and efficient households. They admonished each other that above all a woman should enjoy the right to "fill the noblest, holiest and most exalted position occupied by humanity

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Similarly, from an article entitled "And Murders Increase in the Land," we read:

"Then, mothers, pause and consider, for one moment, the magnitude of the power and responsibility resting upon you. Remember, each one, you are arbitress of the destiny of an immortal being; and try by every means in your power to plant germs of integrity and purity, instead of death and destruction. Cultivate your own mind and heart in the knowledge and admiration of all things lovely and of good report, that the blessing may descend to those you leave behind you."¹⁰

The Brethren at that time also had high regard for motherhood. At a meeting of the 16th Ward Relief Society, June 15, 1872, Elder Joseph F. Smith, then a member of the Council of the Twelve, said to the sisters:

"Mothers have a better chance to lead their children in the proper way than the fathers. They have opportunities afforded for cultivating the blessings of faith. I love to hear a woman pray. They can approach nearer to the Lord than men can, as a general thing; or my mother did."¹¹

Motherhood, with its attendant responsibilities, then, was not regarded as something to be avoided, but as a great blessing and opportunity. Still, the women felt that there were many privileges they should be

enjoying that would not only make more qualified mothers, but also more fulfilled and contributive individuals.

The sisters indulged in some good-natured skirmishes in the traditional "battle of the sexes," as this humorous anecdote suggests:

"'Madam,' said a husband to his young wife in a little altercation which will spring up in the best regulated families, 'when a man and his wife have quarreled and each considers the other at fault, which of the two ought to advance towards reconciliation?' 'The best natured, and wiser of the two,' said the wife, putting up her mouth for a kiss, which was given with unction."¹²

But when it came to things they felt deeply about, the Mormon women were quite serious. Of the various "rights" being debated at the time, three major ones that they endorsed most heartily were woman's right to "enjoy and exercise the elective franchise," her right to "all avenues and levels of education," and her right, if it were wise, to "earn her living by any means of industry open to man for which she has capacity."

The women of the territories of Wyoming and Utah were the only women in America who enjoyed the elective franchise. Mormon women were given the religious vote with the founding of the Church, and this at a time when few men and no women enjoyed that privilege. For this the women

of Utah were very grateful, and they were intent on doing all in their power to insure the suffrage to their sisters everywhere in America. They wrote in the *Exponent*:

"Rev. James Freeman Clark claims 'that if it is an advantage to vote, women ought to have it; if a disadvantage men ought not to be obliged to bear it alone.' Speaking from experience we feel safe in affirming that the Rev. gentleman is right. . . ."¹³

And in the June 1, 1873, issue we read: "The trial of Susan B. Anthony and fourteen other women, who cast their votes last Presidential election, and of the inspector of election who received the votes, is set for June, to be tried before the Circuit Court, at Canandaigua, New York. And the United States, which has raised the late slaves to the dignity of political sovereignty, proposes to punish, as criminals, a few of the most intelligent women in the country for exercising the right of political citizenship."¹⁴

The battle for suffrage, of course, went on for many years, and Mormon women exerted distinguished influence toward the final victory, which did not come until 1920.

The privilege of receiving a first-class education was another goal the Mormon women were working toward. They lamented the fact that all too often, if a woman "attempts to advance in the scale of practical education any higher than to have an understanding of how

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to knit and sew, or scrub and cook, she is growing 'strong minded,' and that is 'awful.'"¹⁵

"A wife will be a better wife, a mother more a mother," they wrote, "if intellectually her husband's equal. . . ."

"We affirm that she who cultivates virtue, and dares to exercise all her mental powers, from the very symmetry of her being, is a 'lady,' or better still, a 'noble woman.'"¹⁶

Answering arguments that the attainment of an excellent and even a specialized education would damage the attractiveness of the feminine character, they printed an extract from Grace Greenwood's address in behalf of the lady graduates of the Washington Business College, June 17, 1870:

"It is now pretty generally admitted that a woman may know something of business--of bookkeeping, banking, and even law--without losing the peculiar charm and beauty of her womanhood. . . . True womanhood is not to be essentially changed by changed pursuits and conditions. There is a tough vitality about tender womanhood. It is a tree, whose roots take hold on eternal life."¹⁷

Henry Ward Beecher was writing at the time in defense of the expanding sphere of women. The *Exponent* printed some of his words, saying, "The following ideas are sound and correct, and it is a pity that all men do not think with Beecher on the subject in question:

"People fear the effect

upon the family if women should vote and think. They think that the tenderness and sweetness of the family relation has something to do with weakness. It has much to do with fineness, but not with weakness. . . . Does it take away taste and destroy refinement to ponder deeply? Make mothers more and you make their children more. You will not make them coarse by giving them power. Is God coarse because he is infinite? That which the family needs more than anything else is a higher state of womanly development."¹⁸

The Mormon women were deeply concerned as to how their new powers of education and expanded opportunity would benefit them. One contributor to the *Exponent* answered the question this way:

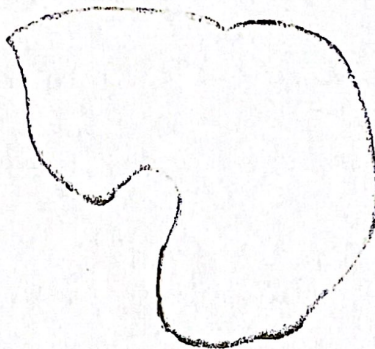
"Now that there is such ample room opened for our present, as well as future, profit and usefulness, . . . What should be woman's aim? Some ladies use the plea, that the requirement of those callings (which have been heretofore man's exclusive privilege) will strip them of their delicacy, refinement, and of their feminine attractiveness. Genuine worth need not fear discovery. If a lady has a knack at numbers, and would make an excellent book keeper, where is the harm? If her abilities fit her for a position behind the counter, let her skill be tried; or if blessed with sufficient natural talent to become an artist, her endowments must not be hid under a

bushel. . . . How often do we hear the phrase, a 'strong minded woman,' sneeringly uttered? Shall we devote our admiration to weak minded women? Is the feeble proselyte to society to be preferred to the girl who is bent on nobly fashioning the character God gave her, and gaining a profession that will fill her purse as well as her mind? Woman's true nature is not thoroughly alert until aroused by the wish to do something that is independent. Do not mistake my meaning. There is a vast difference between a silly, conceited and arrogant independence, and the honorable desire to be helpful and useful. May the ladies of our Territory improve the rich advantages laid before them!"¹⁹

Is it possible for women to be successful wives and mothers and also contributors to worthwhile social or professional fields? Eliza answers:

"Let your first business be to perform your duties at home. But inasmuch as you are wise stewards, you will find time for social duties, because these are incumbent upon us as daughters and mothers in Zion. By seeking to perform every duty you will find that your capacity will increase, and you will be astonished at what you can accomplish. . . . God bless you, my sisters, and encourage you, that you may be filled with light. . . ."²⁰

What an inspiring challenge from the leading Mormon lady of the day! The challenge was given also by President



Handwritten signatures and notes, including 'Pearson' and '1870'.

Brigham Young, who urged the sisters to "enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large. In following these things they but answer the design of their creation."²¹

A larger sphere of action for women, the Mormon sisters felt, would benefit not only them and their children, but the brethren as well. "The good that is accomplished for the one sex," wrote Eliza, "will be felt and participated in by the other."²²

The sisters of that day recognized, as hopefully the sisters of today recognize, that there is a time when a higher calling must take priority over any calling in their profession. Many of them clearly sensed the truth that President David O. McKay later verbalized: "No other success can compensate for failure in the home."

Louisa Lula Greene, the first editor of the *Exponent*, added "Richards" to her name a few years after accepting the editorship. When her first child was born, she resigned her position, saying, "I have . . . decided that during the years of my life which may be properly devoted to the rearing of a family, I will give my special attention to that most important branch of 'Home Industry.' Not that my interest in the public weal is diminishing, or that I think the best season of a woman's life should be completely absorbed in her domestic duties. But every reflecting

mother, and every true philanthropist, can see the happy medium between being selfishly home bound, and foolishly public spirited."²³

What an inheritance today's Mormon women have received! It is an inheritance of balanced, God-inspired achievement. We need not subscribe to the world's unhappy choice of "either/or." Mormon women have proved time and again that if, as Eliza R. Snow says, we are "wise stewards," our capacity will increase, and we will be astonished at what we can accomplish.

Dr. Leonard J. Arrington, Church Historian and a devoted admirer of the early Mormon women, has said:

"Having made positive contributions in economics and business, in literature, in the professions, and in politics, the Latter-day Saint women set a record of which the area can be proud. Moreover, the Mormon tradition of womanly independence and distinction should inspire a later generation of women who are seeking their rightful place in the world. Our pioneer women's success in

combining Church service, professional achievement, and family life, while somewhat intimidating, should awaken modern Latter-day Saint women to their own opportunities and responsibilities."²⁴

Our pioneer foremothers did indeed give us a noble beginning. And I think Eliza and the others are watching today's foment, knowing that the Latter-day Saint women can, if they will, be an ensign to the nations. May we not disappoint them! □

FOOTNOTES

- ¹*Documentary History of the Church*, vol. 4, p. 607.
- ²"Woman in Today's World," talk given at Brigham Young University, March 3, 1970.
- ³*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 3, pp. 156-57.
- ⁴*Women's Exponent*, February 15, 1873, p. 137. (Hereafter referred to as *W.E.*)
- ⁵*W.E.*, June 1, 1872, p. 8.
- ⁶*W.E.*, July 15, 1872, p. 29.
- ⁷*Ibid.*
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹*W.E.*, May 1, 1873, p. 180.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 184.
- ¹¹*W.E.*, July 1, 1872, p. 18.
- ¹²*W.E.*, August 1, 1872, p. 34.
- ¹³*W.E.*, June 1, 1872, p. 1.
- ¹⁴*W.E.*, June 1, 1873, p. 1.
- ¹⁵*W.E.*, May 15, 1873, p. 187.
- ¹⁶*W.E.*, December 15, 1872, p. 110.
- ¹⁷*W.E.*, July 1, 1872, p. 22.
- ¹⁸*W.E.*, October 15, 1872, p. 78.
- ¹⁹*W.E.*, June 1, 1873, p. 7.
- ²⁰*W.E.*, July 15, 1873, p. 37.
- ²¹*JD*, vol. 13, p. 61.
- ²²*W.E.*, June 1, 1872, p. 5.
- ²³*W.E.*, August 1, 1877, p. 36.
- ²⁴"Blessed Damozels: Women in Mormon History," *Dialogue*, Summer 1971, p. 31.

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