

The Intimately Oppressed: Howard Zinn on Women's Rights

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Considering the tense matter of women's rights in the historical discourse of the United States, one may point out an unprecedented relevance of the sixth chapter of Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* titled "The Intimately Oppressed," which articulates the subject of women's rights, gender relations, and the roots of resistance movements. The entire chapter of the book is dedicated to a detailed depiction of how women's rights were severely undermined and disregarded throughout the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. By comprising an extensive majority of primary sources, Zinn efficiently raises awareness over women's issues in the researched time frame by paying attention to the matter of human rights' most topical element, which is the field of women's rights. Since the chapter aims to determine the ways through which women were oppressed, Zinn makes a claim by pointing out that the historical roots of injustice in gender relations trace back to the emergence of private property and "civilizational development." Consequently, the chosen chapter of Zinn's book allows one to research the issue of women's rights in the historical perspective, and at the same time, to examine the misconceptions of modern historiography related to women's rights in the US throughout the centuries. Although it may be suggested that the subject of women's liberation should be studied more profoundly, a thorough analysis of Zinn's piece is valuable for enlarging the scope of research based on women's rights by reviewing subjects in various domains—namely historical, economic, and social ones.

#### **Historical Domain of Women's Rights**

In the discourse on women's rights, the question over the ways in which women were oppressed is exceptionally important, which may be best answered by reviewing Zinn's passages

concerning the first signs of injustice. As pointed out in the book, the original root of oppression was the settlement of America, which was conducted entirely by men, whereas women were imported as “sex slaves, childbearers, companions” (Zinn, n.d.). With regards to the epoch of settlement, another vital historical episode should be examined, which was the establishment of the slavery institution. Zinn underlines that most women came to the modern territory of the U.S. as servants, who were fully obedient to their masters and mistresses (Zinn, n.d.). Thus, women were treated rudely and harshly, which further provoked the sense of resistance by enslaved individuals. What is more, the author also points out that the sexual abuse of servant girls by masters was believed to be a common practice, eventually becoming a topical issue concerning the human rights of transported individuals.

The colonial period, according to the book, was also harsh in terms of the legal position of women, who were fully controlled by their men. Also, women in the colonial period were prohibited from obtaining property or having a child out of wedlock (Zinn, n.d.). Presumably, one of the most striking moments in the history of women’s rights was the comprehensive ignorance of women’s achievements in the context of the American Revolution, meaning that women were similarly oppressed in terms of respect for their efforts. By that time, the Declaration of Independence was believed to be a potential panacea for reassessing the role of women, coupled with the continually debated subject of women’s rights. However, a famous passage from the Declaration, which prescribed that “all men are created equal” eventually led to the unwillingness of created states to grant women rights to vote. Consequently, under no circumstances should the role of the historical legacy be neglected in the discourse on women’s rights in the U.S., which is best identified by Zinn’s work.

### **Economic Perspective**

The subject of women's rights throughout the history of the U.S. is a particular research field for the examination of the economic side of oppression, which genuinely had adverse implications for economic development. One of the most sophisticated analyses was conducted in the study by Fernández (2013), which examined the correlation between the expansion of women's rights and the economic development of the U.S. According to the findings of the empirical study, the merger of the legal, economic, and political accomplishments in relation to women became a crucial determinant for the growth of the American economy (Fernández, 2013, p. 75). The most relevant outcome of the research is that oppressive systems of the past resulted in the considerable underdevelopment of human capital, which crucially backpedaled the macroeconomic rates of economic growth.

With regards to Zinn's piece, it would be reasonable to trace similar findings which emphasize that even the educational system favored men, and at the same time, portrayed women as submissive tools for accomplishing the common good. Therefore, the economic implications must not be disregarded, especially when reviewing the continuous pressure against women to make them more passive, even in the field of working relations (Zinn, n.d.). As the economy progressed and developed, men dominated as tradesmen and mechanics, whereas women were commonly asked to pursue the role of childbearers. According to the text, the elimination of the domesticity cult had an immense impact on the employment opportunities for women, which was believed to be the most dominant achievement of women's rights defenders during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Social Perspective**

A considerable focus on the social perspective by Zinn allows for tracking social issues, coupled with the women's rights that were most detrimental for the changes within American society. As it was partially depicted above, the incorporation of the economic and educational dominance of men was the crucial determinant that disabled the social progression of American society. Thus, the turning point concerning women's rights took place when women began to monopolize the profession of primary-school teaching (Zinn, n.d.). As teachers, women opened the social perspectives for education, self-development, and the elimination of former frames of premium men's education.

In this particular context, the widespread participation of women in education was presumably the most significant factor for fostering education on women's rights and possible ways of resistance. Even though the vast majority of noticeable women's rights movements emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, researchers often point out the shared collaboration of male and female activists during the 17<sup>th</sup> century in France and the U.S. (Garbaye, 2015, p. 216). In some sense, the increased social awareness regarding the injustice in gender relations was constantly developing and progressing, meaning that certain achievements were needed to maintain the passive resistance of women. Since the vast majority of cases when women were oppressed were focused on gender, the reassessment of the status quo during the mid-1850s occurred, which was required for the development of women's rights (Zinn, n.d.). Although the accomplishments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were minor in the structure of the broader women's movement for the establishment of equal rights, the role of the epoch, and Zinn's work, in particular, should not be disregarded.

### **Final Remarks**

The sixth chapter of Zinn's book regarding the oppression of women reveals an array of insights concerning women's rights in the historical perspective, especially considering the historical, economic, and social domains of human rights. Consequently, the recollection of data from primary sources, coupled with the analyses by Zinn stands out as an excellent source for researching the 17<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to the information given, the oppression against women has been deeply rooted in the socioeconomic structure of American society throughout the centuries. Although certain accomplishments of women were perceived as considerable victories, public awareness concerning women's rights rapidly developed only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Notwithstanding, the analysis of how the oppression against women was institutionalized by Zinn may be further utilized to research women's rights in each particular era of American history.

Judging from what Zinn's chapter presents to the audience, one may point out the necessity to reassess women's rights prior to the boom of legal reconfiguration. The historical perspective of Zinn's textual analysis represented the ways through which American ideologies and agendas were enhanced by intentionally revising the role of women during these processes. According to the economic framework of the issue, the underestimation of women and exclusion from the vast majority of political processes resulted in a remarkable backpedaling of the American economy. Lastly, the social perspective through Zinn's piece allows for shedding light on the tense social issues of American society. Having scrutinized the cross-perspective approach, one may underline the relevance and significance of Zinn's chapter titled "The Intimately Oppressed," which is among the most comprehensive recollections of how women's rights developed throughout American history.

## References

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