

If Early Mormon Women Supported Women's Rights. Why Can't You?  
By Sarah Young

Women don't get a fair shake here in Utah. For several years running, Utah has been ranked by WalletHub as the worst state in the nation for women's equality based on wage disparity, education, and political empowerment. However, that was not always the case. Utah actually has a more feminist history than it cares to acknowledge, and women were largely the driving force in the fight for their rights.

If Mormon women banded together for women's rights today, they could use the same collective power that their forebearers did and create positive change for all women. However, except for some select groups, it seems that the majority of women choose not to actively stand up for their own rights due to their religious and cultural beliefs.

Many may not realize that early Utahns supported women's rights long before the rest of the country. The most notable evidence of this is women's suffrage. Even Brigham Young endorsed a woman's right to vote – his grandniece (who shares the namesake of this writer) cast the first vote in a municipal election in 1869.

Unfortunately, women's voting rights were eventually revoked, and women's suffrage became entangled in the fight over polygamy- something which the LDS church and the state of Utah have tried hard to erase from collective

memory. But in doing so, they have also covered up the fascinating lives of Mormon women in Utah.

Because their husbands were often away taking care of other matters, polygamous women were rather independent and self-sufficient compared to their Victorian counterparts. Many polygamous households operated entirely without a husband for long periods of time. Having multiple women in one home allowed sister-wives to do what suited them best. One wife could take care of the children, one could manage the house, and one could even march for women's suffrage.

East-coast supporters of women's suffrage assumed that if they introduced suffrage to polygamous women they would use their new power to break free of polygamy. They were successful in getting them to join the fight, but the women chose instead to attempt to protect their religion, their families, and their way of life. For them, their faith made their passion to fight for women's rights stronger than ever.

Church support for women's rights started to decline beginning with stripping the Women's Relief Society of financial backing and revoking its members' right to give healing blessings and peaking when the church took a firm stance against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. These actions greatly weakened the support network for Mormon women and effectively silenced many Mormon women who stood for equality.

Though less prominent and organized, a strong network of Mormon women still exists and its power could be revived by its members. I believe that the indomitable spirit of early Mormon women still lives on in the hearts of Utah women today. Through such organizations as Utah Women Unite, Mormon and non-Mormon women are coming together to fight for women's social, legal and economic equality. If more women were informed about their ancestors' rich and fascinating history here in Utah, they might be persuaded to follow their hearts and join the movement.

Anyone who has spent much time around Utahns knows that we love genealogy. So, take a look at yours. Any Utah suffragettes?