

Lecture Four: The People: Women and Minorities

Introduction:

Discrimination has given women and some minorities a special status in American society. For much of American history, male-dominated society in the USA has forced women, Native-Americans, African-Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos into inferior categories. As a result, these groups have their own histories as subjects of changing opinion and government policy even though their experiences are integral parts of the nation's history. They have molded American history through their struggles for equality and resistance against discrimination. Inequality has led to group differences in attitudes, class, occupation, income, health, housing and crime. The gap between national ideals and the realities of prejudice has agitated the nation's conscience and prompted a very uneven but persistent progress toward greater equality. There has been constant debate over the proper means of creating a more just society. Neither policy-makers nor the subjects of policy have agreed on the course to follow. Over a century of federal civil rights laws has proved that changes in the law often do not function as intended, nor do they ensure changes in attitudes. Defining what equality means has proved difficult. Most Americans have supported equality of opportunity (an equal chance to develop one's abilities and to be rewarded for them) but not equality of results (an evening-out of economic, social and political power).

I. Women in America

Numerically a majority, women today experience unequal treatment in significant ways. They are assigned (or are socialized to choose) prescribed roles and do not as often work in the most prestigious occupations, earn as much money or enjoy positions of equal social status as men. Popular attitudes continue to keep too many women in their traditional place. Mostly working in poorly paid service jobs, they remain severely under-represented in the highest levels of politics and business management. Nevertheless, great changes in their position have occurred and continue to take place in the twenty-first century. Historically, women's legal status in America was determined by English common law. Until the mid-1800s, a woman experienced a 'civil death' upon marriage, which meant she stopped to exist legally except through her husband. She had no right to own property, control her wages or sign contracts. Divorce, granted only in extreme cases, was easier to obtain for men than for women. Women could not vote until 1920. A single woman was expected to submit to her father's or

brother's will until she married. Claiming they were by nature physically weak and mentally limited, men kept women dependent.

The nineteenth century

The first movement for women's rights was closely related to female reformers' experiences in abolitionist (anti-slavery) campaigns. In 1848 two abolitionists, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, led the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. In language taken from the Declaration of Independence, the convention's 'Declaration of Sentiments' called for property and divorce rights, educational and employment opportunities and the vote.

The twentieth century

The movement united behind efforts for ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote in all elections in 1920. Women strongly supported campaigns to deal with political corruption and urban social problems at the turn of the century. Other feminist activists proposed another constitutional change as early as 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), to remove the remaining legal inequalities between men and women. The turning point in women's employment came after World War II. Many married women who went to work during the war continued to work after it, and many more joined them in the following decades. While 15 percent of married women were employed in 1940, by 1970 almost 50 percent had jobs outside the home.

Husbands accepted the change with little protest because most wives did not take jobs until the children entered school and then earned wages that kept the family in the middle class. Not only were larger numbers of women of all classes, married and single, working, but a larger percentage of them were getting a higher education. Thus, when a new women's movement blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, challenging the view that women's place was keeping house, many Americans agreed. The more radical feminists of the 1970s rejected conventional gender roles and family life as stifling, patriarchal and frequently dysfunctional. By mid-decade, women's lobbying had helped pass laws that promised women equal treatment in the job market and admission to higher education, equal pay for equal work and equal availability of loans and credit. In 1973 the Supreme Court legalized abortion.

Evaluating the contemporary situation for women

Today, court action has reduced the legal hindrances to equality between the sexes. 'Protective' laws based on sexual stereotypes have been repeatedly overturned. Employment ads cannot ask for applicants of only one sex. Most large private organizations that prohibit female members are banned. In 2005-6, close to six out of ten bachelor's degrees were awarded to women, who now earn about that proportion of higher degrees as well. These are mostly in fields traditional for women that offer lower earnings (such as the fine arts, foreign languages and nursing), but today women are making unprecedented inroads in highly paid 'male' professions (such as engineering, medicine and the law).

II. Native Americans

Native Americans became a small minority as a result of a long history of successful invasion, military conflict and pressure by Europeans and then white Americans. The conflict was always an uneven one. In the very early days, Native Americans outnumbered the invaders at the point of contact, but their opponents possessed insurmountable technological advantages, including metal weapons, textiles, written languages and books. Epidemics caused by a lack of immunity to European diseases, moreover, reduced the Native-American population drastically while the influx of Europeans became enormous. European and white-American cultures were also more aggressively expansive and acquisitive than indigenous cultures.

Relations between the natives and the English were marked by distrust, resentment and disastrous wars. A predictable sequence of events set the pattern for almost three hundred years of contact. First was a short period of relative peace when the settlers exchanged technology for land, furs and knowledge of the Native Americans' survival techniques. Then conflicts caused by trade disagreements, expanded white settlement and cultural misunderstanding escalated into full-scale war. In the 1620s and 1630s the natives tried, by war, to expel the intruders and threatened the existence of the Virginia and New England colonies. Often the colonists received help from tribes that were the traditional enemies of those that attacked the settlements. In fact, Anglo-American policies aimed at easing the expansion of settlement while minimizing the 'Indian threat'. The natives were moved to distant lands that (the colonists promised) would be reserved for them permanently. In short, the 'Indian reservation' system dates back to the 1630s and 1640s.

Colonial authorities promised to protect the rights of reservation natives. Some colonists also encouraged them to adopt European ways and Christianity. Native Americans resented and resisted attempts to assimilate them. Thus one cycle of violent conflict followed another, and Native Americans were continually pushed further west. When the American Revolution came, most tribes remained loyal to Britain. The US therefore treated several tribes as conquered nations after the war and demanded their lands without payment.

Conquest and removal, 1783-1860

Congress sent teachers and missionaries to the natives to transform them into farmers who could live in American society. The Native Americans were not asked whether they wanted to be 'civilized', and those who favored harsher policies said their resistance was proof that assimilation was impossible. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act.

Influenced by the society around them, some Cherokees (mostly those who had intermarried with Americans) were slaveholders. The Cherokee appealed to the US federal courts to fight removal plans and the state of Georgia's seizure of their lands. The Supreme Court ruling in this case set a

precedent for later decisions concerning Native Americans' rights and status, even though it had little immediate effect. President Jackson and Georgia ignored the court's rulings. Federal troops and state militia in the winter of 1838 'escorted' the Cherokee to Indian Territory. Because of the weather, harassment by Americans and poor government planning for food and shelter, a quarter of the Cherokees died during the march along the path called 'The Trail of Tears'. By 1840 nearly 100,000 Native Americans had been forcibly removed to Indian Territory.

Tribal restoration and termination, 1934-70

By the 1930s studies had repeatedly blamed **allotment** for the extremely poor health, poverty and low educational levels of Native Americans. Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Indian New Deal' attempted to correct the mistakes of the past. The relief and employment programs available for other Americans suffering from the depression were extended to Native Americans. New better-staffed hospitals for Native Americans were built. Most boarding schools were replaced with local schools offering religious freedom, bilingual education and programs to nurture native culture. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 supported the return of considerable 'surplus' land and farms to communal ownership and provided federal money for further adding to tribal lands.

The situation of Native Americans in recent history

In 2007 most 'reservation Indians' lived in appalling conditions. Of all American ethnic groups, they had the highest unemployment, alcoholism, poverty and suicide rates. Many cases of malnutrition and mental illness as well as an exceptionally short life expectancy indicate that much remains to be done to improve the situation. Yet, at the 2000 census, over four million Americans identified themselves as wholly or partly native. By 2007, after many claims and counterclaims had been settled, the census estimated the whole or partly Native-American population at about 3 million.

III. African Americans

The somewhat over 40 million African Americans who in 2007 composed the country's second-largest minority group (13 percent of the population) are mostly old-stock Americans, but include growing populations from Caribbean and African countries. When Africans first arrived in the American South in 1619, they did not come as slaves. By the late 1600s, however, hereditary slavery had become the rule and African Americans were degraded to the status of property. Some owners treated their slaves better than others, but all had ultimate power over what was theirs. For black people, slavery meant hard work, poor living conditions and humiliation. Slave labor was especially important on large tobacco and rice plantations in Virginia and Maryland. When the USA became independent, slaves made up about 20 percent of the population.

Between 1820 and the Civil War, several compromises were reached in Congress to keep the number of slave and free states equal. Anti-slavery supporters felt this policy condoned slavery, while slave-owners thought each state should be able to decide whether it wished to be 'slave' or 'free'. Compromise finally failed, and the Civil War began in 1861. Abraham Lincoln, the USA president of the time, freed the slaves in the undefeated parts of the south in early 1863 through the Emancipation Proclamation and, after Union victory, Amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery, granted the former slaves citizenship and gave black men the right to vote.

Southerners did not accept black people as equals; they passed laws which denied them social, economic and political rights, and they segregated almost every aspect of public life. These 'Jim Crow laws' remained in effect in most southern states until the 1960s. On the Supreme Court a southern majority interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment to mean no government should deny equal protection, but private persons could.

In 1909 a group of black and white people founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to fight for African Americans' civil rights in general and to win repeal of the separate-but-equal doctrine in particular. By the 1920s, black people's bitter disappointment over their limited freedom in northern centers resulted in protest movements, some demanding integration (like the NAACP) and others, such as Marcus Garvey's, promoting self-help in preparation for a return to Africa. In 1955, Rosa Parks, a black woman from Montgomery, Alabama, who had attended a seminar encouraging her to defend her civil rights, was arrested and fined for refusing to give up a seat in the white section at the front of a bus. This incident sparked a black boycott against the city's bus system led by the young Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr. One year later the federal courts ruled that segregated transportation violated the Fourteenth Amendment. The African-American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was under way. King was one of the organizers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which coordinated civil-rights activities. His 'I Have a Dream' speech to more than 250,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 is regarded as one of the most inspiring calls for racial equality in American history.

President Kennedy addressed the problem for the first time from the White House and called fighting racism a moral issue. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in jobs and public accommodations, and the following year the Voting Rights Act led to black-voter registration drives that transformed politics in the south. This has been called the non-violent revolution. However, peaceful protestors, both black and white, were killed and, while Martin Luther King, Jr. was advocating non-violence, other black people felt changes were too slow in coming. African Americans' expectations had been raised enormously, and they were disappointed with how little change civil-rights laws brought to their daily lives. The frustrated residents of the black ghetto in Los

Angeles exploded in riots in 1965. Detroit and Newark witnessed massive property destruction and dozens of deaths from race riots in 1967.

Black radicals wanted to establish an alternative African-American culture inside the USA. Some of these formed the Black Power and Black Panther movements. Malcolm X became one of the most famous black Muslims, a leader of the Nation of Islam, which created its own variant of Islam and rejected America's lifestyle and politics. These movements became involved in violent conflicts with the police. For many black people, non-violence seemed defunct as a means of winning civil rights. Malcolm X was killed in 1965 and three years later, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, 168 American cities erupted in racial conflict.

The message was heard, nonetheless, by some inspiring leaders and their supporters in this reform-minded period in US history. President Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty were contested packages of reforms and took time to reach many of the people who needed assistance, but his dedicated staff spread out across the nation and hired tens of thousands to implement programs of assistance through relief (Supplemental Security Income), education (Head Start and Upward Bound), job training (the Job Core), medical help (Medicaid and Medicare) and public housing. African Americans have benefited greatly from these initiatives from the time they were fully operational at the end of the 1960s. In the next two decades these efforts gained wider scope. Following President Richard Nixon, who instituted affirmative-action minority preferences for federal contracts in the early 1970s, private industry and business began hiring blacks for professional, managerial and skilled jobs, instituting affirmative-action employee searches and on-the-job training as need be.

The contemporary situation for African Americans

In retrospect, it is clear that passing laws was the easy part. Neither the civil rights nor the black power movements of the last century succeeded in achieving racial equality. The nation has still not found a way to enforce civil rights laws. In 2005 when the mainly black communities of New Orleans' poorest districts faced death and disease in the floodwaters of hurricane Katrina, the state and federal authorities were very slow to react. Despite the Fair Housing Act of 1968, most black people still face discrimination when they buy or rent housing. Residential desegregation has been minimal and equal standards in the schools have therefore not been achieved. In the 2008 presidential election Barack Obama seemed to rise above the prejudice and divisive partisan politics of the past, never running as a black man and winning a clear electoral victory on the theme of being the candidate of all the people in the United States.

Exercises:

1- Explain and examine the significance of the following names and terms:

Minority - Gender Roles - Civil death - Discrimination - Patriarchy - The Cherokee - Removal - Boarding schools - Abolitionist - Emancipation - Segregation.

2- In a short paragraph discuss the struggle of women to achieve equality with men in the United States.

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Classroom Activity: American Muslim Minorities: The New Human Rights Struggle

The ramifications of the attacks of September 11, 2001 are felt throughout the United States. However, no minority community is as deeply affected as the American-Muslim minority. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, Muslims residing in the United States have experienced violations of economic and political liberties, as well as ongoing social discrimination. Media stereotypes and government legislation continually exacerbate these human rights abuses and entrench institutional, social, and economic discrimination deeper in American society. At the heart of this discrimination are clear misunderstandings about Islam and those who practice the faith. In an effort to combat these challenges, Islamic organisations are fighting to protect the community's civil liberties.

Six million Muslims live among an American population of about 300 million. This small minority is the subject of deep social anxiety towards Islam, known as Islamophobia. Muslim minorities in the United States are seen through the sphere of "otherness," which many Americans relate to stereotypes that are perpetuated through popular media and literature. Many polls conducted between 2001- 2009 echo American misconceptions regarding Islam. A 2003 Pew poll shows that nearly 45 percent of Americans believed that Islam is more likely than other religions "to encourage violence among its believers." In addition, a 2009 survey indicated that 36 percent of Americans could not recall basic facts about Islam.

The reasons behind the American misunderstanding of Islam can be traced to media stereotypes that have permeated American pop culture. The two most typical Muslim stereotypes are the images of the Muslim-Arab, terrorist male and the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman. In most media, Muslim men are portrayed in traditional Arab dress indicating fundamentalism. Almost all Muslims are portrayed as Arabs, despite the fact that only about 20 percent of the worldwide Muslim population identify themselves as Arabs. Muslim women are most often portrayed wearing the veil, *burqa*, or *niqab*. These images conjure ideas that Islam subjugates and oppresses women. These stereotypes fail to account for the pluralistic character of the Muslim community. In fact, American Muslims have their own unique nature illustrated by varying origins, ethnic and racial make-up, and political beliefs. Islam itself is pluralistic; for example, veiling often comes from a woman's cultural background. However, despite the pluralism of the Muslim community, Muslims continue to face different prejudices.

➤ **In an essay, discuss how can American Muslims effectively meet the challenges facing them in the USA.**