

Reading

“On the Equality of the Sexes” by Judith Sargent Murray, 1790

At the dawn of the American Revolution, as ideas about natural rights and equality circulated widely, the notion that women were as entitled to these rights as men was still a radical proposition. After American independence, women were denied the right to vote everywhere except New Jersey. The state temporarily permitted widowed white women to vote before taking that right away in 1807. Overall, women, no matter their class or racial background, had few legal or economic rights in the early republic, and very little access to formal education.

Judith Sargent Murray was born in 1751 to a wealthy family in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Although she was not allowed to go to school because she was a girl, Murray was a self-taught intellectual who was very familiar with the philosophical arguments of the day. A student of the Enlightenment, Murray believed in the idea that both women and men are entitled to a set of “natural rights” that cannot be taken away by governments.

Murray first wrote her essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” in 1770, when she was just 19 years old. But it was not published until 1790, when she had already made a name for herself as a writer. In the essay, originally published in *The Massachusetts Magazine*, Murray asserted women’s natural equality with men, arguing against the widely held view that women were intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior. Murray was part of a broader movement in America and Europe that used Enlightenment thought to argue for expanded rights and opportunities for women.

In her essay, Murray wrote:

Is it upon mature consideration we adopt the idea, that nature is thus partial in her distributions? Is it indeed a fact, that she [nature] hath yielded to one half of the human species so unquestionable a mental superiority? I know that to both sexes elevated understandings, and the reverse, are common. But, suffer me to ask, in what the minds of females are so notoriously deficient, or unequal . .

Are we deficient in reason? We can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be deduced . . .

May we not trace its source in the difference of education, and continued advantages? How is the one [boys] exalted, and the other [girls] depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! The one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science . . .

Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature *equal* to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us . . . For *equality only*, we wish to contend.