

SOJOURNER TRUTH'S AKRON SPEECH

At the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered one of the most powerful and influential speeches about civil rights. Born into slavery in 1797, she was named Isabella Baumfree but changed her name to Sojourner Truth after running away from her "master" and undergoing a religious conversion (see Stetson & David 1994).

The most famous line from the speech, repeated within it to great rhetorical effect, was Truth's question "ain't I a woman?" Developing, in essence, an intersectional critique of the anti-slavery (also known as abolitionist) campaigns that focussed on the rights of African-American men, she was also concerned that black women would be excluded from feminist approaches because of racist views that rendered black women "unwomanly".

The speech has inspired black feminist scholars (See Chapter 7), and leading writer bell hooks titled her own 1981 book *Ain't I a Woman?* in honour of it. This book was an early contribution to the genre of writing often described as black feminist thought, and it examined the effects of racism and sexism on African American.

Excerpts of Truth's speech are reproduced below and we encourage you to read it carefully, and consider both the radicalism of the speech for its time and the way it highlights profound social problems that are still of relevance today.

I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect!"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

References

Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Stetson, E. & David, L. (1994). *Glorying in Tribulation: The Life Work of Sojourner Truth*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.