History has long overlooked the role of African American women in the fight for women’s suffrage. The six-volume History of Woman Suffrage almost completely ignores their contributions.

Both before and after the Civil War, African American women had to struggle not only with the entrenched sexism faced by White women, but also with racism. They met the challenge, engaging in significant reform efforts and political activism from the earliest years of the suffrage movement.

As early as 1830, women active in anti-slavery advocacy embraced the idea of pushing for women’s rights as well. A group of formerly enslaved African American women, including Sojourner Truth, Frances Watkins Harper and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, joined with Frederick Douglass and other African American men collaborating with White abolitionists. Free Black women started to organize women’s clubs to help their communities and to raise money for Douglass’s anti-slavery work.

**Suffrage Activists from the Start**

Following the 1848 women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, NY, prominent African American women abolitionists and suffragists participated in many women’s rights gatherings. In 1851 Sojourner Truth delivered her famous “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech at the Ohio Woman’s Rights Convention. Sarah Redmond and her brother Charles were featured speakers at the 1858 National Woman’s Rights Convention in New York City.

During the Civil War, the suffrage battle paused in favor of efforts to eradicate slavery. In 1865, with the war’s end and the adoption of the 13th Amendment, ending slavery in America, arguments for women’s suffrage became intertwined with debates over the rights of former slaves and the meaning of citizenship. African American and White women had different views.
African American Women and the Fight for the Vote

Frances Watkins Harper gave a moving speech before the 1866 National Women’s Rights Convention demanding equal rights for all, including Black women. This speech had repercussions throughout the movement and demonstrated African American suffragists’ desire for equality not just with White men, but also White women.

White women saw the vote as proof of parity with men. Black women, most of them Southerners, viewed the vote as a means of empowering African American communities, especially those being newly oppressed by the Southern states following the 1868 ratification of the 14th Amendment. That amendment granted citizenship and equal civil and legal protection to African Americans, including formerly enslaved people.

The 15th Amendment Creates a Split

As Congress discussed the proposed 15th Amendment, which would give African American men the vote in 1870, the women’s suffrage movement was again divided. Some White women, even those who had been strong abolitionists, felt it was a betrayal of the women’s rights movement for them to support the vote for Black men but not women.
African American women were in a difficult position. Elizabeth Cady Stanton embraced fairness in the abstract, but -- in front of her friend Frederick Douglass -- called African American men “Sambos” and potential rapists. Susan B. Anthony is said to have sworn, “I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman.” Black women, even when allowed to join “White” suffrage groups, felt spurned and treated disrespectfully.

Frances Watkins Harper, Lucy Stone and others founded the American Woman Suffrage Association in 1869, in part as a rejection of the racist comments of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

**Fighting for Equality**

Mary Church Terrell, a nationally known civil rights and suffrage activist, participated in meetings of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and came to know Susan B. Anthony -- which Terrell described as “delightful, helpful friendship.” As one of the few Black women allowed to attend NAWSA’s meetings, Terrell spoke out about the injustices and issues faced by the African American community.

African American women exhibited immense courage in the fight for equality.

As the 19th century drew to a close, prominent Black women such as Mary Church Terrell, Frances Watkins Harper and Anna Julia Cooper saw the power of organizing their communities. In 1896, they and others formed the National Association of Colored Women, the first secular national organization dedicated to the livelihoods of African American women in America, aiming to unite them while combating racial discrimination.
African American Women and the Fight for the Vote

But as the women’s suffrage movement gained traction in the late 19th century, African American women were increasingly marginalized. African American women dealt not only with sexism but also the political concerns of White suffragists, who knew they needed the votes of Southern states and Southern U.S. senators and congressmen to ratify an amendment.

Nevertheless, in the early 20th century, more and more African American women joined the ranks of suffragists. In a 1912 column in The Crisis, an NAACP publication, Adella Hunt Logan noted,

“The fashion of saying ‘I do not care to meddle with politics’ is disappearing among the colored woman faster than most people think, for this same woman has learned that politics meddle constantly with her and hers.”

The 1913 Women’s Suffrage March and African American Suffragists

The massive 1913 Women’s Suffrage Procession was the first women’s march on Washington and the very first large, organized political march on the capital. It was organized by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns to include women’s (and some men’s) groups nationwide. Howard University and its Delta Sigma Theta sorority chapter were assigned to the college section of the parade, led by Mary Church Terrell. Virginian Helen Hamilton Gardener tried to persuade Alice Paul that Southern White women would strongly object to the presence of African American women. But the official position of the organization was “to permit Negroes to march if they cared to” – and many did so.

That day, prominent African American social activist and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett was told – possibly by Alice Paul -- to march with the segregated African American group at the back of the parade. Instead, she joined the Illinois group as it went by.
In the end, Black women marched in several state delegations, including New York and Michigan, and others joined colleagues from professional groups. The NAACP’s The Crisis reported that after the segregation order was issued, “telegrams and protests poured in and eventually the colored women marched according to their State and occupation without let or hindrance.” There were no reports of spectators treating the African American marchers any differently from their White compatriots.

Pushing toward ratification of the 19th Amendment

African American women continued their dual battle – as NACW and NAACP leader Mary B. Talbert wrote in The Crisis in 1915, “With us as colored women, this struggle becomes two-fold, first, because we are women, and second, because we are colored women.”

In 1919, the 19th Amendment passed in Congress and required ratification by 36 states. Many White suffragists continued their racially discriminatory practices toward African American suffragists, claiming that Southern states would not ratify the amendment if it was too obviously going to enfranchise Black women.

Even once the 19th Amendment was ratified and became law in August 1920, however, African American women, especially in the Jim Crow South, encountered the very same disenfranchisement strategies and anti-Black violence that Black men had faced since the passage of the 15th Amendment 50 years earlier.

African American women continued to fight for civil rights for both men and women. Almost 100 years later, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was required to remove the legal barriers that states (not only in the South) had erected to keep African Americans and immigrants from voting. And yet, voter suppression, in various ways, continues in some states.