WOMAN'S EXPONENT

The Woman’s Exponent (1872–1914) was the first publication owned and published by Latter-day Saint women. An eight-page, three-column, quarto (10 inch x 13½ inch) newspaper, it was issued bimonthly, or in later years, monthly. During the forty-two years of its publication, Louisa Lula Greene (1872–1877) and Emmeline B. Wells (1877–1914) served as editors. Although not owned by the Church, the Exponent had the approval and encouragement of the General Authorities of the Church.

First discussed among Relief Society leaders, the idea of a newspaper exclusively for women came to the attention of Edward L. Sloan, editor of the Salt Lake Herald. Not only did he agree with the prospect, but he actively promoted it, suggesting twenty-two-year-old Louisa Lula Greene as editor and the Woman’s Exponent as a possible name, and offered help in the form of editorial advice and actual printing until the paper could become established. Reluctant to become the editor because of her lack of experience, Greene said she would consent if her great-uncle, President Brigham Young, would call her to the position as a mission. This he did and gave her a blessing as well.

The number of Exponent subscribers is uncertain (perhaps reaching to one thousand or more). However, its influence within, and sometimes outside, the Church was greater than its circulation figures would suggest. One writer declared that it wielded more power in state politics “than all the newspapers in Utah put together” (Tullidge’s Quarterly Magazine, p. 252). If not quite that important, the paper was widely read and much quoted. Without question, it was a forceful voice for women.

Loyal to the Church and its leaders, the Exponent often carried editorials defending the practice of polygamy. The paper’s independence made its case the more persuasive since, as one outsider observed, the writers were obviously not “under direction” or “prompted by authority” (Bennion, p. 223).

To the editor of a Chicago paper who wrote of her “amiable and liberal spirit,” then-editor Greene responded, “Had we treated it in any other spirit than that of womanly frankness and courtesy we should have done discredit to our home education as well as to the religion we profess, and consequent injustice to our own conscience” (Woman’s Exponent 2 [Aug. 15, 1873]:44). While this reply may have been of some benefit to Chicago readers, such editorials undoubtedly had their greatest value among LDS women who, reading their own feelings articulated with such surety, were fortified in their sometimes difficult roles.

Principally under the direction of Emmeline B. Wells, the paper vigorously supported woman suffrage and often wrote about it, although the women of Utah had initially been granted voting rights two years before the Woman’s Exponent began publication. The Exponent was also a force in the successful effort to have the voting franchise included in the 1896 Utah constitution. Many other items also found their place, but the topic most often discussed was women’s roles, with a closely allied subject of education for women: “the brain should also be instructed how to work, and allowed to expand and improve” (Woman’s Exponent 1 [Oct. 1, 1872]:69).

Woman’s Exponent was not a single-cause paper, unless that cause might have been women and their families. The first edition stated: “The aim of this journal will be to discuss every subject interesting and valuable to women” (Woman’s Exponent 1 [July 15, 1872]:32). A detailed index of items published during its forty-two years in print reveals how remarkably this purpose was followed.

Along with editorials and articles, the paper published original poems, short stories, and essays written by LDS women and others. It carried regular reports of the Primary, Retrenchment/M.I.A., and Relief Society activities throughout the Church, and published a number of the Society’s histories, one written by Emmeline Wells.

Just before the turn of the century, the Exponent began having financial problems. In 1914, Wells offered the paper to the Relief Society as its official organ, but was turned down, and the Exponent ceased publication in February of that year. It had fulfilled its role in “speaking for women,” as it promised it would in the first issue. For forty-two years, Woman’s Exponent was the voice for women in the Church. The Bulletin, and subsequently the Relief Society Magazine (1915), became the official organ of the Relief Society.
WOMAN SUFFRAGE

Though far removed from the centers of agitation for woman suffrage, LDS women were neither strangers to it nor indifferent about it. They were aware of efforts for a national suffrage act and of several unsuccessful congressional bills between 1867 and 1869 that urged adoption of woman suffrage in the territories. The first organized effort to secure woman suffrage in Utah occurred on January 6, 1870, when a group of LDS women met in the Salt Lake City Fifteenth Ward to protest a proposed congressional anti-polygamy bill. Asserting their right "to rise up . . . and speak for ourselves," the women voted to demand of the territorial governor "the right of franchise" and voted also to send representatives to Washington with a memorial defending the free exercise of their religion (Fifteenth Ward Relief Society minutes, Jan. 6, 1870; Deseret News, Jan. 11, 1870). This preliminary meeting precipitated a mass rally of more than five thousand women in Salt Lake City a week later to protest publicly against proposed anti-polygamy legislation. Spurred by congressional inaction on woman suffrage and no doubt impressed by this demonstration of female political acumen, the legislature of Utah Territory, with the approval of the acting non-Mormon governor, enfranchised Utah women a month later, on February 12, 1870.

The response of LDS women to their new political status varied. One comment expressed at a subsequent Fifteenth Ward Relief Society meeting was that women were already surfeited with rights. Another urged caution to avoid "abusing" their new political power. Sarah M. Kimball, president of the ward Relief Society, rejoiced in announcing that she had always been a "woman's rights woman" (Fifteenth Ward Relief Society minutes, Feb. 19, 1870; Tullidge, pp. 435–36). Immediately thereafter, the Relief Societies initiated programs of instruction to educate women in the political process. In reviewing these events some years later, Eliza R. Snow distinguished Latter-day Saint women from women activists elsewhere who "unbecomingly clamored for their rights." Asserting that Mormon women "had made no fuss about woman suffrage," she explained that they were given the vote only when God "put it in the hearts of the brethren to give us that right" (Senior and Junior Cooperative Retrenchment Association minutes, Aug. 8, 1874).

Mormon women did fuss in 1880, however, about extending their political rights to include holding public office, and they lobbied the legislature to amend the voting act accordingly. Though the legislature approved, the governor refused to sign the amendment. This action was followed by several attempts by local non-Mormons to disfranchise Utah women, whom they viewed as so oppressed by the Church patriarchy that they would vote as their husbands instructed. This, they argued, would further entrench Mormon political hegemony and perpetuate plural marriage. These efforts were similarly unsuccessful.

An alliance of LDS and eastern suffragists was forged in 1879 when Emmeline B. Wells and Zina Young Williams represented Mormon women at the national woman suffrage convention in Washington. From the time of the first congressional attempt in the 1860s to repeal woman suffrage in Utah as an antipolygamy measure, eastern suffragists had lobbied against each congressional effort to do so. Though strongly opposed to polygamy, eastern suffragists were equally opposed to linking suffrage with attempts to eradicate polygamy. With help from prosuffrage congressmen, their effort delayed federal antipolygamy legislation and earned them a measure of condemnation for their support of the unpopular Latter-day Saints.

The Edmunds Act of 1882 withdrew the vote from polygamists, and the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 disfranchised all Utah women. The false logic and injustice of disfranchising all women in Utah territory in order to attack polygamy were repeatedly asserted by the suffragists and other sympathizers. For Utah women, this withdrawal of rights after they had had them for seventeen years ignited their determination to regain the vote permanently with Utah statehood.

In 1889 Utah women for the first time initiated a campaign to obtain the ballot. Within four