

Introduction

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<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- the article that you can listen to in the podcast
- an optional comprehension activity based on the article
- links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (women's rights).

Read the article

Sojourner Truth

by Linda Baxter

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The name Sojourner may be familiar to you. It was the name of the wheeled robot that was sent on the expedition to Mars in 1997 to explore the surface of the planet. The name was chosen after a world-wide competition, in which students were asked to choose a heroine, and write an essay explaining why her name should be given to the Mars Pathfinder. And Sojourner, which means a temporary resident or a traveller, was the winner.

But who was Sojourner Truth?

She was an African-American anti-slavery campaigner and a champion of women's rights. She lived during the time of the American Civil war, a time when African-Americans were seen as inferior to white people, and slavery still existed. At the same time, women were seen as inferior to men. They did not have the vote, and a 'real' woman was supposed to stay at home, be protected by her husband, and not have an opinion on issues of the day. As a black woman, Sojourner Truth experienced both types of discrimination, and she was one of the first people to make the connection between the rights of slaves and black people and the rights of women. And she was the first African-American woman to make public speeches about it.

A slave

Sojourner was born into slavery in 1797. Her parents named her Isabella. She was one of ten or twelve children but they were all sold as slaves except for Isabella and her older brother Peter. When she was nine, her owner died and his property, including Isabella, was

sold. She had to leave her family and go to a new owner. When she was 14, she was forced to marry another slave called Thomas. They had children who were also sold into slavery. In 1826, she ran away to New York, just a year before slavery was abolished in New York State. After gaining her freedom, Isabella worked as a domestic servant, which was one of the only jobs that freed black women could do. She was always deeply religious and attended church regularly. An important part of her religious belief was a strong conviction that God had created all human beings as equals.

A preacher

In 1843, Isabella had a religious experience. She believed that God told her to change her name to Sojourner Truth, and become a travelling preacher. So that's exactly what she did. For a year she travelled around America, singing and preaching at prayer meetings. She supported herself with odd jobs, and slept wherever she could, often in the open air. After a year of preaching, Sojourner joined the Northampton Association. This was a predominantly white co-operative community, where property and resources were shared, and the members tried to find new and better ways of living together. The Northampton Association believed in liberal concepts such as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, freedom of expression, and socialism. Sojourner's eyes were opened and she began speaking publicly about the abolition of slavery and the rights of women, to mainly white and often very hostile audiences.

A speaker

Sojourner Truth was an impressive speaker and she soon became well known for her common

sense, courage and quick sense of humour. Her experience of preaching was useful to her, and she was able to talk about her first hand experiences of slavery. Her physical presence was compelling too - she was over six feet tall with a strong deep voice. She was often accused of being a man dressed up as a woman. So, to prove that this was not the case, she once lifted her blouse and showed her breasts to the audience at a public meeting.

A writer

Sojourner couldn't read or write. But she dictated her memoirs to a woman friend, and they were published in 1850 as 'The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave'. This was one of the first accounts ever published of the life of a female slave, and the book was a success. Sojourner was able to buy her own house and she became even more popular as a speaker for the abolitionist cause, travelling around America through the 1850s.

A feminist

Sojourner was unusual in the abolitionist movement because of her insistence on the links between racism and sexism. In one of her speeches at the time she said:

"There is a great deal of stir about coloured men getting their rights but not a word about the coloured women's theirs. You see, the coloured men will be masters over the women, and it will

be just as bad as it was before." That was a radical statement, both for the women's movement and the abolitionist movement. The women's rights movement at that time was mainly middle-class and white. Sojourner spoke at women's meetings and conferences, insisting that black and poor women were 'women too', and that they had to be included in any vision of social reform. Her most famous speech (known as 'Ain't I a Woman?') pointed out that while white middle class women were trying to gain the right to work, Sojourner, and thousands of women like her, had known nothing but hard work and poverty all their lives.

A campaigner

Sojourner moved to Washington in 1863 when she was in her sixties. She worked to raise money for African-American Civil war soldiers, worked as a nurse and taught domestic skills to freed female slaves. She continued to be active in the women's movement, and also in relief associations for freed slaves. She was even invited to visit President Lincoln. While she was living in Washington, her arm was dislocated by a conductor who refused to let her get on to a 'white' streetcar. She started and fought the campaign that ended segregated public transport in Washington.

Sojourner Truth died in 1883.

Glossary

abolish (v): to end (an activity, custom, etc.) officially

abolition (n): act or state of ending (an activity, custom, etc.) officially

campaigner (n): a person who takes part in organized activities which are intended to change something in society.

cause (n): a socially valuable principle which is strongly supported by some people

coloured (adj): If someone is described as coloured, they belong to a dark-skinned race. This word is considered offensive by many people.

compelling (adj): *forceful and able to persuade*

discrimination (n): act of treating a person or particular group of people differently, esp. in a worse way from the way in which you treat other people, because of their skin colour, religion, sex, etc.

dislocate (v): to force (a bone) suddenly out of its correct position

hostile (adj): showing strong dislike; unfriendly

movement (n): those people whose social and political aims are to change something.

odd jobs (n): a variety of jobs, esp. in the house or garden.

preacher (n): a person, usually a priest, who gives a religious speech.

predominant (adj): being the most noticeable, important or largest in number

segregate (v): to cause to become separate or to keep apart, often for social reasons and esp. because of race or sex

slavery (n): the activity of someone legally owning another person, who works as a servant for that person, and who has no personal freedom

streetcar (n) (American – British English = tram): : an electric vehicle that transports people, usually in cities, and goes along metal tracks in the road

After reading**Exercise 1**

Put these events from Sojourner Truth's life in chronological order.

- 1) She began speaking publicly about abolition and women's rights.
- 2) She campaigned against segregated public transport.
- 3) She changed her name.
- 4) She got married.
- 5) She joined a co-operative community.
- 6) She preached at prayer meetings.
- 7) She published her life story.
- 8) She ran away.
- 9) She was sold to a new owner.
- 10) She worked as a domestic servant.

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More activities on this topic

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of women's rights at:
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-womens-rights.htm>

- **Magazine article: International Women's Day.** "*In Russia, International Women's Day is a serious name for a not-very-serious holiday*".
- **Word game: Women's rights.** Match words about women's rights to their definitions.
- **Story: Why I Want a Wife.** This text by Judy Syfers explains in great detail what many husbands see as a wife's role, and has been described as a "classic piece of feminist humor".
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about women's rights.
- There is also a women's rights-related cartoon and some carefully selected external links.

Answers to comprehension activity: 1. (9); 2. (4); 3. (8); 4. (10); 5. (3); 6. (6); 7. (5); 8. (1); 9. (7); 10. (2)