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Column: Women led way in Kingdom of Hawaii

By Ann S. Freed and Juanita Mahienaena Brown Kawamoto • Aug. 22, 2021

Women's Equality Day is celebrated this year on Aug. 26, celebrating the achievements of women activists since the right to vote was enacted on Aug. 18, 1920. But in Hawaii that right only partially restored what had been the birthright of women in the Kingdom of Hawaii when it was a constitutional monarchy.

As Healoha Johnston, curator of women's cultural history at the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Center (APAC), explains, Hawaii's women didn't realize that the right to vote didn't automatically guarantee they could also hold office. Before annexation, they experienced a different reality. In 1898, in the independent kingdom Hawaii, women were chiefesses, ambassadors, judges on the Supreme Court, governors and monarchs. By 1890 there were more than 80 Hawaiian embassies worldwide and many of the ambassadors were women.

What is also not well known is that the constitutional monarchy was created with the strong influence of Hawaiian matriarchs. The mission of the monarchy was to preserve Hawaiian culture and independence through diplomacy. In addition Hawaii's queens were acknowledged internationally as heads of state.

In 1866, Queen Emma visited President Andrew Johnson's White House to promote Hawaii as an independent nation. Then in 1887, Queen Kapiolani returning from an official visit to the English monarchy, donated a wa'a, or canoe, "as a gift between two nations."

But the "right to vote" in the territory of Hawaii created a paradox. Under this new system, women in positions of power, such as Judge Emma Nakuina, could no longer vote on territorial matters.

This paradox was even more ironic given the history of the suffrage movement in Hawaii. Shortly after the overthrow, Nakuina and her protégée Wilhelmina Dowsett began organizing for women's right to vote on the islands. Dowsett, the daughter of a German immigrant and a Native Hawaiian woman with royal ancestry, spearheaded the fight for suffrage in Hawaii. As a member of a wealthy family with ties to high society, Dowsett leveraged her connections to create the National Women's Equal Suffrage Association of Hawaii in 1912.

In the following decade, Dowsett and a multiethnic coalition of Hawaii's women organized speeches in churches, created petitions and held rallies. They wrote countless columns in Hawaiian newspapers and became a key space for communicating about the suffrage debate.

These women saw suffrage as one key part of a larger fight for Hawaiian independence, and the ability of women to participate in their home's future. This was a way to once again have a voice in determining the rights of the people. They thought that political clout would be restored with the vote.

Sadly, not so much. Clearly, with women in Hawaii earning 80% of what men make and the estimated even-larger pay gap for Native Hawaiian women, we still have a long way to go, both in the restoration of Native Hawaiian rights and the rights all Hawaii's women.

Ann S. Freed is with the American Association of University Women, Hawaii; Juanita Brown Kawamoto is with the Hawaiian Affairs Caucus of the Democratic Party of Hawaii.

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