

Activity 2: Exploring Diverse Perspectives Through World's Fair Speeches

Perspective 3: Bertha Honoré Palmer



Bertha Matilde Honoré was born in Kentucky in 1849. After marrying Chicago millionaire Potter Palmer in 1870, she became a fixture in the city's elite social scene. She was an active philanthropist and a leader of the Chicago Woman's Club, an organization of mostly wealthy and middle-class white women who pursued social reforms to improve the health and education of the city's women and children (the first Black member, Fannie Barrier Williams, was inducted in 1896).

Although lobbying from the women of Chicago had helped lead to the city's selection as the site of the World's Columbian Exposition, women were excluded from representation on the main governing board of the fair. Chicago women continued petitioning for official planning roles until U.S. Congress established a Board of Lady Managers in 1890. The National Exposition Commission appointed 117 women to the Board, including two from each state, territory, and the District of Columbia, in addition to members-at-large. Bertha Palmer was elected president. Most women's exhibits were not incorporated within the main exhibition halls. Instead, the Lady Managers were given control over the Woman's Building, the first building dedicated to women at a world's fair. As president, Palmer led the Board's efforts to select a woman architect for the building and secure the work of women artists and inventors for display.

No Black women were appointed to the Board of Lady Managers. Outspoken suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were also passed over for appointments. Although they were not able to influence the content of the Woman's Building, they were able to participate in the Congress of Representative Women, a week-long convention of around 150,000 women held on the fairgrounds in May. The Congress was sponsored and promoted by the Board of Lady Managers. Nearly 500 women from 27 countries gave speeches, including six African American women. Themes included education, science and religion, moral and social reform, civil law and government, and industries and occupations. Several speeches from women's rights activists called for women's suffrage and other social and political rights. When the Woman's Building closed in October 1893, Bertha Palmer delivered a closing address, excerpted below.

Following her husband's death in 1902, Palmer went on to become a successful businesswoman in her own right as a real estate developer in Florida, before passing away in 1918.

Excerpts from Palmer's Address

"Mingled with our regret at seeing this great Exposition and this unprecedented opportunity for women drawing to a close, is a feeling of satisfaction that the aims proposed to be reached by the Board of Lady Managers have been carried to a successful conclusion.

Not only have the material exhibits drawn attention to the skill of women and shown the degree of development which has been reached by them, but their interests, their capabilities, their needs and their hopes have been brought before the public and thoroughly discussed from every point of view...

It has been the means of opening new and congenial lines of work, and as woman is the acknowledged home-maker, to her hands will be entrusted more largely than heretofore not only the atmosphere and the influence of the home, but also its place, construction, sanitary arrangements, decorations, furnishing and all practical features. The general appreciation and commendation of the Woman's Building have greatly hastened this result, and the exhibits contained within it of designs by women for the weaving of carpets and textiles, for wall paper and hangings, as well as architectural plans for the construction of houses, show that they are already alert and equipped to take possession of this newly acquired territory...

Perhaps the most remarkable result obtained by the efforts of the Board of Lady Managers was the unprecedented official co-operation secured from women of every country and of every race; from women who are interested in charitable, educational, religious and ethical and reform work, as well as those desiring to make practical exhibits of their skill in industrial arts...

No attempt has been made to demonstrate any theory, or to realize Utopian ideals which we would wish to see prevail. Our only desire has been to present the actual conditions existing, which will give us a basis to build upon for future improvement. This conservative course may have caused us to be censured by many holders of the two opposite extremes of opinion. Many 'advanced' women have become impatient when contemplating the evidences of infinite detail and elaborations shown in the marvelous webs and stitchery of other days; they resent the confining and infinitesimally painstaking drudgery of arts which formerly were the only outlet among women for originality of taste and the desire to create beauty. On the other hand are those who disapprove heartily what has been accomplished by the adventurous spirits who lead in invention, manufactures, literary and professional pursuits, etc. These pessimistic souls see with dismay the walls of the old 'sphere' being battered down; walls within which women have been held for centuries willing prisoners; the light of a new day and a new common sense shining upon the inmates, revealing their antiquated and ignorant helplessness and their incapacity to meet the many demands pressing upon them from the new needs of today.

It is evident that the tendency of modern life is to remove women more and more from the seclusion of the home. The theory that the following of industrial and commercial pursuits may make her less domestic, lessen the charm of family life and the home atmosphere, may have truth for its foundation.

If women be withdrawn largely from the home and placed in the steady conflict of life, a great source of inspiration will be lost to her, her ideals may be lowered, her perceptions become dulled, and she may cease to be the great conservative and regenerative agency which has helped to hold the world to high standards. Undoubtedly, the home and the privacy of domestic life is the chosen sphere of every woman. There is only one here and there who would prefer any other career than that of the happy wife and mother, but alas for my sex, there is, unfortunately, not a home for each woman to preside over, most men are unable to maintain one... [Their] labor must generally be supplemented by that of their wives, and too often that of their children, to maintain their homes.

It would seem that the only way to assist in the rapid solution of the problem is to put within the reach of women technical training and the education which is necessary to promote their ends, and to hope that the unreasonable conditions which force them to work, yet condemn them for doing so, and withhold from them proper training as well as just compensation for their labor, may be swept away. We hope that no woman may henceforth be forced to conceal her sex in order to obtain justice for her work..."

Excerpts from Mrs. Bertha Honoré Palmer, "Closing Address," in *The Congress of Women: Held in the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition*, ed. Mary Kavanaugh Oldham Eagle (Chicago: Monarch Book Company, 1894), 820-824, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/eagle/congress/congress.html>.

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bertha_Palmer_\(Updated\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bertha_Palmer_(Updated).png).