
WOMEN, RACE & CLASS

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2 The Anti-Slavery Movement and the Birth of Women's Rights

When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages; for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly women's cause.¹

These are the words of an ex-slave, a man who became so closely associated with the nineteenth-century women's movement that he was accused of being a "women's rights man."² Frederick Douglass, the country's leading Black abolitionist, was also the most prominent male advocate of women's emancipation in his times. Because of his principled support of the controversial women's movement, he was often held up to public ridicule. Most men of his era, finding their manhood impugned, would have automatically risen to defend their masculinity. But Frederick Douglass assumed an admirably anti-sexist posture and proclaimed that he hardly felt demeaned by the label "women's rights man. . . . I am glad to say that I have never been ashamed to be thus designated."³ Douglass' attitude toward his baiters may well have been inspired by his knowledge that white women had been called "nigger-lovers" in an attempt to lure them out of the anti-slavery campaign. And he knew that women were indispensable within the abolitionist movement—because of their numbers as well as "their efficiency in pleading the cause of the slave."⁴

Why did so many women join the anti-slavery movement? Was

there something special about abolitionism that attracted nineteenth-century white women as no other reform movement had been able to do? Had these questions been posed to a leading female abolitionist such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, she might have argued that women's maternal instincts provided a *natural* basis for their anti-slavery sympathies. This seems, at least, to be an implication of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,⁵ whose abolitionist appeal was answered by vast numbers of women.

When Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the nineteenth-century cult of motherhood was in full swing. As portrayed in the press, in the new popular literature and even in the courts of law, the perfect woman was the perfect mother. Her place was at home—never, of course, in the sphere of politics. In Stowe's novel, slaves, for the most part, are represented as sweet, loving, defenseless, if sometimes naughty children. Uncle Tom's "gentle domestic heart" was, so Stowe wrote, "the peculiar characteristic of his race."⁶ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is pervaded with assumptions of both Black and female inferiority. Most Black people are docile and domestic, and most women are mothers and little else. As ironic as it may seem, the most popular piece of anti-slavery literature of that time perpetuated the racist ideas which justified slavery and the sexist notions which justified the exclusion of women from the political arena where the battle against slavery would be fought.

The glaring contradiction between the reactionary content and the progressive appeal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not so much a flaw in the author's individual perspective as a reflection of the contradictory nature of women's status in the nineteenth century. During the first decades of the century the industrial revolution caused U.S. society to undergo a profound metamorphosis. In the process, the circumstances of white women's lives were radically changed. By the 1830s many of women's traditional economic tasks were being taken over by the factory system. True, they were

freed from some of their old oppressive jobs. Yet the incipient industrialization of the economy was simultaneously eroding women's prestige in the home—a prestige based on their previously *productive* and absolutely essential domestic labor. Their social status began to deteriorate accordingly. An ideological consequence of industrial capitalism was the shaping of a more rigorous notion of female inferiority. It seemed, in fact, that the more women's domestic duties shrank under the impact of industrialization, the more rigid became the assertion that "woman's place is in the home."⁷

Actually, woman's place had always been in the home, but during the pre-industrial era, the economy itself had been centered in the home and its surrounding farmland. While men had tilled the land (often aided by their wives), the women had been manufacturers, producing fabric, clothing, candles, soap and practically all the other family necessities. Women's place had indeed been in the home—but not simply because they bore and reared children or ministered to their husbands' needs. They had been productive workers within the home economy and their labor had been no less respected than their men's. When manufacturing moved out of the home and into the factory, the ideology of womanhood began to raise the wife and mother as ideals. As workers, women had at least enjoyed economic equality, but as wives, they were destined to become appendages to their men, servants to their husbands. As mothers, they would be defined as passive vehicles for the replenishment of human life. The situation of the white housewife was full of contradictions. There was bound to be resistance.⁸

The turbulent 1830s were years of intense resistance. Nat Turner's revolt, toward the beginning of the decade, unequivocally announced that Black men and women were profoundly dissatisfied with their lot as slaves and were determined, more than ever, to resist. In 1831, the year of Nat Turner's revolt, the

organized abolitionist movement was born. The early thirties also brought "turn-outs" and strikes to the Northeastern textile factories, operated largely by young women and children. Around the same time, more prosperous white women began to fight for the right to education and for access to careers outside their homes.⁹

White women in the North—the middle-class housewife as well as the young "mill girl"—frequently invoked the metaphor of slavery as they sought to articulate their respective oppressions. Well-situated women began to denounce their unfulfilling domestic lives by defining marriage as a form of slavery. For working women, the economic oppression they suffered on the job bore a strong resemblance to slavery. When the mill women in Lowell, Massachusetts, went out on strike in 1836, they marched through the town, singing:

Oh, I cannot be a slave,
I will not be a slave.
Oh, I'm so fond of liberty,
I will not be a slave.¹⁰

As between women who were workers and those who came from prosperous middle-class families, the former certainly had more legitimate grounds for comparing themselves to slaves. Although they were nominally free, their working conditions and low wages were so exploitative as to automatically invite the comparison with slavery. Yet it was the women of means who invoked the analogy of slavery most literally in their effort to express the oppressive nature of marriage.¹¹ During the first half of the nineteenth century the idea that the age-old, established institution of marriage could be oppressive was somewhat novel. The early feminists may well have described marriage as "slavery" of the same sort Black people suffered primarily for the shock value of the comparison—fearing that the seriousness of their

protest might otherwise be missed. They seem to have ignored, however, the fact that their identification of the two institutions also implied that slavery was really no worse than marriage. But even so, the most important implication of this comparison was that white middle-class women felt a certain affinity with Black women and men, for whom slavery meant whips and chains.

During the 1830s white women—both housewives and workers—were actively drawn into the abolitionist movement. While mill women contributed money from their meager wages and organized bazaars to raise further funds, the middle-class women became agitators and organizers in the anti-slavery campaign.¹² By 1833, when the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society was born in the wake of the founding convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society, enough white women were manifesting their sympathetic attitudes toward the Black people's cause to have established the basis for a bond between the two oppressed groups.* In a widely publicized event that year, a young white woman emerged as a dramatic model of female courage and anti-racist militancy. Prudence Crandall was a teacher who defied her white townspeople in Canterbury, Connecticut, by accepting a Black girl into her school.¹³ Her principled and unyielding stand throughout the entire controversy symbolized the possibility of forging a powerful alliance between the established struggle for Black Liberation and the embryonic battle for women's rights.

The parents of the white girls attending Prudence Crandall's school expressed their unanimous opposition to the Black pupil's presence by organizing a widely publicized boycott. But the Connecticut teacher refused to capitulate to their racist demands. Following the advice of Mrs. Charles Harris—a Black woman she employed—Crandall decided to recruit more Black girls, and if

*The first female anti-slavery society was formed by Black women in 1832 in Salem, Massachusetts.

necessary, to operate an all-Black school. A seasoned abolitionist, Mrs. Harris introduced Crandall to William Lloyd Garrison, who published announcements about the school in the *Liberator*, his anti-slavery journal. The Canterbury townspeople countered by passing a resolution in opposition to her plans which proclaimed that "the government of the United States, the nation with all its institutions of right belong to the white men who now possess them."¹⁴ No doubt they did mean white *men* quite literally, for Prudence Crandall had not only violated their code of racial segregation, she had also defied the traditional attitudes concerning the conduct of a *white lady*.

Despite all threats, Prudence Crandall opened the school . . . The Negro students stood bravely by her side.

And then followed one of the most heroic—and most shameful—episodes in American history. The storekeepers refused to sell supplies to Miss Crandall. . . . The village doctor would not attend ailing students. The druggist refused to give medicine. On top of such fierce inhumanity, rowdies smashed the school windows, threw manure in the well and started several fires in the building.¹⁵

Where did this young Quaker woman find her extraordinary strength and her astonishing ability to persevere in a dangerous situation of daily siege? Probably through her bonds with the Black people whose cause she so ardently defended. Her school continued to function until Connecticut authorities ordered her arrest.¹⁶ By the time she was arrested, Prudence Crandall had made such a mark on the epoch that even in apparent defeat, she emerged as a symbol of victory.

The Canterbury, Connecticut, events of 1833 erupted at the beginning of a new era. Like Nat Turner's revolt, like the birth of Garrison's *Liberator* and like the founding of the first national anti-slavery organization, these events announced the advent of

an epoch of fierce social struggles. Prudence Crandall's unswerving defense of Black people's right to learn was a dramatic example—a more powerful example than ever could have been imagined—for white women who were suffering the birth pangs of political consciousness. Lucidly and eloquently, her actions spoke of vast possibilities for liberation if white women en masse would join hands with their Black sisters.

Let Southern oppressors tremble—let their Northern apologists tremble—let all the enemies of the persecuted Blacks tremble . . . Urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and *I will be heard.*¹⁷

This uncompromising declaration was William Lloyd Garrison's personal statement to readers of the first issue of the *Liberator*. By 1833, two years later, this pioneering abolitionist journal had developed a significant readership, which consisted of a large group of Black subscribers and increasing numbers of whites. Prudence Crandall and others like her were loyal supporters of the paper. But white working women were also among those who readily agreed with Garrison's militant anti-slavery position. Indeed, once the anti-slavery movement was organized, factory women lent decisive support to the abolitionist cause. Yet the most visible white female figures in the anti-slavery campaign were women who were not compelled to work for wages. They were the wives of doctors, lawyers, judges, merchants, factory owners—in other words, women of the middle classes and the rising bourgeoisie.

In 1833 many of these middle-class women had probably begun to realize that something had gone terribly awry in their lives. As "housewives" in the new era of industrial capitalism, they had lost their economic importance in the home, and their social status

as women had suffered a corresponding deterioration. In the process, however, they had acquired leisure time, which enabled them to become social reformers—active organizers of the abolitionist campaign. Abolitionism, in turn, conferred upon these women the opportunity to launch an implicit protest against their oppressive roles at home.

Only four women were invited to attend the 1833 founding convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The male organizers of this Philadelphia meeting stipulated, moreover, that they were to be "listeners and spectators"¹⁸ rather than full-fledged participants. This did not deter Lucretia Mott—one of the four women—from audaciously addressing the men at the convention on at least two occasions. At the opening session, she confidently arose from her "listener and spectator" seat in the balcony and argued against a motion to postpone the gathering because of the absence of a prominent Philadelphia man:

Right principles are stronger than names. If our principles are right, why should we be cowards? Why should we wait for those who never have had the courage to maintain the inalienable rights of the slave?¹⁹

A practicing Quaker minister, Lucretia Mott undoubtedly astounded the all-male audience, for in those days women never spoke out at public gatherings.²⁰ Although the convention applauded her and moved on to its business as she suggested, at the conclusion of the meeting neither she nor the other women were invited to sign the Declaration of Sentiments and Purposes. Whether the women's signatures were expressly disallowed or whether it simply did not occur to the male leaders that women should be asked to sign, the men were extremely short-sighted. Their sexist attitudes prevented them from grasping the vast potential of women's involvement in the anti-slavery movement.

Lucretia Mott, who was not so short-sighted, organized the founding meeting of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in the immediate aftermath of the men's convention.²¹ She was destined to become a leading public figure in the anti-slavery movement, a woman who would be extensively admired for her overall courage and for her steadfastness in the face of raging racist mobs.

In 1838, this frail-looking woman, dressed in the sober, starched garb of the Quakers, calmly faced the pro-slavery mob that burned down Pennsylvania Hall with the connivance of the mayor of Philadelphia.²²

Mott's commitment to abolitionism involved other dangers, for her Philadelphia home was a well-traveled Underground Railroad station, where such renowned fugitives as Henry "Box" Brown stopped off during the northward journey. On one occasion, Lucretia Mott herself assisted a slave woman to escape in a carriage under armed guard.²³

Like Lucretia Mott, many other white women with no previous political experience joined the abolitionist movement and literally received their baptism in fire. A pro-slavery mob burst into a meeting chaired by Maria Chapman Weston and dragged its speaker—William Lloyd Garrison—through the streets of Boston. A leader of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, Weston realized that the white mob sought to isolate and perhaps violently attack the Black women in attendance, and thus insisted that each white woman leave the building with a Black woman at her side.²⁴ The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society was one of the numerous women's groups that sprang up in New England immediately after Lucretia Mott founded the Philadelphia society. If the number of women who were subsequently assaulted by racist mobs or who otherwise risked their lives could actually be

determined, the figures would no doubt be astoundingly large.

As they worked within the abolitionist movement, white women learned about the nature of human oppression—and in the process, also learned important lessons about their own subjugation. In asserting their right to oppose slavery, they protested—sometimes overtly, sometimes implicitly—their own exclusion from the political arena. If they did not yet know how to present their own grievances collectively, at least they could plead the cause of a people who were also oppressed.

The anti-slavery movement offered women of the middle class the opportunity to prove their worth according to standards that were not tied to their role as wives and mothers. In this sense, the abolitionist campaign was a home where they could be valued for their concrete *works*. Indeed, their political involvement in the battle against slavery may have been as intense, as passionate and as total as it was because they were experiencing an exciting alternative to their domestic lives. And they were resisting an oppression which bore a certain resemblance to their own. Furthermore, they learned how to challenge male supremacy within the anti-slavery movement. They discovered that sexism, which seemed unalterable inside their marriages, could be questioned and fought in the arena of political struggle. Yes, white women would be called upon to defend fiercely their rights *as women* in order to fight for the emancipation of Black people.

As Eleanor Flexner's outstanding study of the women's movement reveals, women abolitionists accumulated invaluable political experiences, without which they could not have effectively organized the campaign for women's rights more than a decade later.²⁵ Women developed fund-raising skills, they learned how to distribute literature, how to call meetings—and some of them even became strong public speakers. Most important of all, they became efficient in the use of the petition, which would become the central tactical weapon of the women's rights campaign. As

they petitioned against slavery, women were compelled simultaneously to champion their own right to engage in political work. How else could they convince the government to accept the signatures of voteless women if not by aggressively disputing the validity of their traditional exile from political activity? And, as Flexner insists, it was necessary

... for the average housewife, mother, or daughter to overstep the limits of decorum, disregard the frowns, or jeers, or outright commands of her menfolk and ... take her first petition and walk down an unfamiliar street, knocking on doors and asking for signatures to an unpopular plea. Not only would she be going out unattended by husband or brother; but she usually encountered hostility, if not outright abuse for her unwomanly behavior.²⁶

Of all the pioneering women abolitionists, it was the Grimke sisters from South Carolina—Sarah and Angelina—who most consistently linked the issue of slavery to the oppression of women. From the beginning of their tumultuous lecturing career, they were compelled to defend their rights as women to be public advocates of abolition—and by implication to defend the rights of all women to register publicly their opposition to slavery.

Born into a South Carolina slaveholding family, the Grimke sisters developed a passionate abhorrence of the “peculiar institution” and decided, as adults, to move North. Joining the abolitionist effort in 1836, they began to lecture in New England about their own lives and their daily encounters with the untold evils of slavery. Although the gatherings were sponsored by the female anti-slavery societies, increasing numbers of men began to attend. “Gentlemen, hearing of their eloquence and power, soon began timidly to slip into the back seats.”²⁷ These assemblies were unprecedented, for no other women had ever addressed mixed audiences on such a regular basis without facing derogatory cries

and disruptive jeers hurled by men who felt that public speaking should be an exclusively male activity.

While the men attending the Grimkes' meetings were undoubtedly eager to learn from the women's experiences, the sisters were vengefully attacked by other male forces. The most devastating attack came from religious quarters: on July 28, 1837, the Council of Congregationalist Ministers of Massachusetts issued a pastoral letter severely chastising them for engaging in activities which subverted women's divinely ordained role:

The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection ...²⁸

According to the ministers, the Grimkes' actions had created “dangers which at present threaten the female character with wide-spread and permanent injury.”²⁹ Moreover,

We appreciate the unostentatious prayers of woman in advancing the cause of religion. ... But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer ... , she yields the power which God has given her for her protection, and her character becomes unnatural. If the vine, whose strength and beauty is to lean on the trelliswork, and half conceal its cluster, thinks to assume the independence and overshadowing nature of the elm, it will not only cease to bear fruit, but fall in shame and dishonor into the dust.³⁰

Framed by the largest Protestant denomination in Massachusetts, this pastoral letter had immense repercussions. If the ministers were correct, then Sarah and Angelina Grimke were committing the worst of all possible sins: they were challenging God's will. The echoes of this assault did not begin to fade until the Grimkes finally decided to terminate their lecturing career.

Neither Sarah nor Angelina had originally been concerned—at least not expressly—about questioning the social inequality of women. Their main priority had been to expose the inhuman and immoral essence of the slave system and the special responsibility women bore for its perpetuation. But once the male supremacist attacks against them were unleashed, they realized that unless they defended themselves as women—and the rights of women in general—they would be forever barred from the campaign to free the slaves. The more powerful orator of the two, Angelina Grimke challenged this assault on women in her lectures. Sarah, who was the theoretical genius, began a series of letters on *The Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*.³¹

Completed in 1838, Sarah Grimke's "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes . . ." contain one of the first extensive analyses of the status of women authored by a woman in the United States. Setting down her ideas six years before the publication of Margaret Fuller's well-known treatise on women, Sarah disputed the assumption that inequality between the sexes was commanded by God. "Men and women were created equal: they are both moral and accountable human beings."³² She directly contested the ministers' charge that women who seek to give leadership to social reform movements were unnatural, insisting instead that "whatever is right for man is right for woman."³³

The writings and lectures of these two outstanding sisters were enthusiastically received by many of the women who were active in the female anti-slavery movement. But some of the leading men in the abolitionist campaign claimed that the issue of women's rights would confuse and alienate those who were solely concerned about the defeat of slavery. Angelina's early response spelled out her (and her sister's) understanding of the strong threads tying women's rights to abolitionism:

We cannot push Abolitionism forward with all our might untill we take up the stumbling block out of the road. . . . (T)o meet this question may appear to be turning out of the road. . . . It is not: we must meet it and meet it now. . . . Why, my dear brothers, can you not see the deep laid scheme of the clergy against us as lecturers? . . . If we surrender the right to speak in public this year, we must surrender the right to petition next year and the right to write the year after, and so on. What then can woman do for the slave, when she herself is under the feet of man and shamed into silence?³⁴

An entire decade before white women's mass opposition to the ideology of male supremacy received its organizational expression, the Grimke sisters urged women to resist the destiny of passivity and dependence which society had imposed upon them—in order to take their rightful place in the struggle for justice and human rights. Angelina's 1837 *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States* forcefully argues this point:

It is related of Buonaparte, that he one day rebuked a French lady for busying herself with politics. "Sire," replied she, "in a country where *women* are put to death, it is very natural that *women* should wish to know the reason why." And, dear sisters, in a country where women are degraded and brutalized, and where their exposed persons bleed under the lash—where they are sold in the shambles of "negro brokers"—robbed of their hard earnings—torn from their husbands, and forcibly plundered of their virtue and their offspring; surely in *such* a country, it is very natural that *women* should wish to know "the reason *why*"—especially when these outrages of blood and nameless horror are practiced in violation of the principles of our Constitution. We do not, then, and cannot concede the position, that because this is a *political subject* women ought to fold their hands in idleness, and close their eyes and ears to the "horrible things" that are practiced in our land. The denial of our duty to

act is a bold denial of our right to act; and if we have no right to act, then may *we* well be termed "the white slaves of the North"—for like our brethren in bonds, we must seal our lips in silence and despair.³⁵

The above passage is also an illustration of the Grimke sisters' insistence that white women in the North and South acknowledge the special bond linking them with Black women who suffered the pain of slavery. Again:

They are our country women—*they are our sisters*; and to us, as women, they have a right to look for sympathy with their sorrows, and effort and prayer for their rescue.³⁶

"The question of equality for women," as Eleanor Flexner put it, was not "a matter of abstract justice" for the Grimkes, "but of enabling women to join in an urgent task."³⁷ Since the abolition of slavery was the most pressing political necessity of the times, they urged women to join in that struggle with the understanding that their own oppression was nurtured and perpetuated by the continued existence of the slave system. Because the Grimke sisters had such a profound consciousness of the inseparability of the fight for Black Liberation and the fight for Women's Liberation, they were never caught in the ideological snare of insisting that one struggle was absolutely more important than the other. They recognized the dialectical character of the relationship between the two causes.

More than any other women in the campaign against slavery, the Grimkes urged the constant inclusion of the issue of women's rights. At the same time they argued that women could never achieve their freedom independently of Black people. "I want to be identified with the Negro," said Angelina to a convention of patriotic women supporting the Civil War effort in 1863. "Until

he gets his rights, we shall never have ours."³⁸ Prudence Crandall had risked her life in defense of Black children's right to education. If her stand contained a promise of a fruitful and powerful alliance, bringing Black people and women together in order to realize their common dream of liberation, then the analysis presented by Sarah and Angelina Grimke was the most profound and most moving theoretical expression of that promise of unity.