

Women's Activism in the Early 19th Century

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Women took part in all of the major reform movements that swept across the United States during the early 19th century, including the abolition movement. In certain respects, the traditional view of women as nurturers enabled them to participate in the movement. In other ways, women used reform movements to challenge the doctrine of “separate spheres” and secure much more expansive public roles for themselves. By 1848, a number of American women, many of whom were veterans of the abolition movement, assembled in upstate New York for the Seneca Falls Convention, which is considered the springboard for the women’s rights movement.

Our discussion of women’s activism during the early 19th century breaks down as follows:

1. Separate Spheres

Recall the concept of “**republican motherhood**,” which defined women’s political role in the new republic in response to growing demands for gender equality from Judith Sargent Murray and other American women.



TERM TO KNOW

Republican Motherhood

Reinforced traditional expectations of women as wives and mothers, by insisting that women’s role in a republic was to raise good children, instilling in them all the virtue necessary to ensure the republic’s survival.

By the early 19th century, Dr. Benjamin Rush and other American reformers argued that women could best fulfill their role as “republican mothers” by educating children in the principles of liberty. They believed in traditional gender roles, viewing women as inherently more moral and nurturing than men. For this reason, they suggested that women were uniquely qualified to take up the roles of educators of children.

By the mid-19th century, however, amidst the changes in the household economy brought by the market revolution, the concept of “republican motherhood” gradually evolved into a new doctrine known as **separate spheres**, which further divided responsibilities between the genders, and restricted women from public life by relegating them to home and domestic responsibilities.



TERM TO KNOW

Separate Spheres

The division of life and responsibilities into separate private and public “spheres” according to gender. Men were able to move freely between the public and private spheres.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Men could leave the home and provide for their families by working. Men also engaged in public activities, such as gathering at a community tavern or participating in local elections.

Whereas “republican motherhood” had bestowed upon women something of a public responsibility through the education of children, the doctrine of “separate spheres” expected females to submit to male authorities and restrict themselves to the private sphere, or family life. Here, they were expected to nurture children, practice virtues such as frugality and simplicity, and provide emotional support for the family. In addition, women were expected to remain humble and obedient to their husbands.



BIG IDEA

Under the doctrine of “separate spheres,” men conducted the dirty work commonly associated with the public sphere, such as employment in the market economy or participation in American politics. Women were relegated to the private, or domestic sphere, where they bore children and utilized nurturing and selfless qualities to maintain the family unit.

Catharine Beecher, the daughter of temperance advocate Lyman Beecher, was among many American women who reinforced the doctrine of separate spheres. Beecher was particularly critical of women like **Sarah and Angelina Grimké**, the sisters who had become vocal critics of slavery and argued publicly on behalf of abolition in the 1830s.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Catherine Beecher

Daughter of temperance advocate Lyman Beecher, who wrote in support of the 19th-century doctrine of separate spheres and the ideal of middle-class womanhood.

Sarah and Angelina Grimke

Born into a wealthy slave-owning family in the South, the Grimke sisters became early advocates for both abolition and women's rights.

In response to the publication of Angelina Grimké’s *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836), which argued that women should stand publicly against slavery, Catharine Beecher wrote a letter to Angelina that included a clear articulation of the “separate spheres” doctrine:

Catharine Beecher, Response to Angelina Grimké’s *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*

“Heaven has appointed one sex the superior and to the other the subordinate station, and this without any reference to the character or conduct of either. It is therefore as much for the dignity as it is for the interest of females, in all respects to conform to the duties of this relation....

Woman is to win every thing by peace and love; by making herself so much respected, esteemed and loved, that to yield to her opinions and to gratify her wishes, will be the free-will offering of the heart. But this is to be all accomplished in the domestic and social circle....”



THINK ABOUT IT

According to Catharine Beecher, how should women influence American opinions on slavery and other important issues?

In all, Beecher's writings represented a female sensibility that revolved around the separate spheres doctrine. The home was to be the site of female authority, through which women could influence the public actions of their husbands and children.

2. Women and Abolitionism

Although Beecher's opinions were widely held, women actively participated in the abolition movement. Despite the radical nature of their effort to end slavery and create a biracial society, most abolitionist men clung to traditional notions of proper gender roles. White and Black women, as well as free Black men, were forbidden from occupying leadership positions in the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Because women were not allowed to join with men in playing leading roles in the organization, they formed separate societies, such as the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and similar groups.

The rhetoric associated with the abolition movement, particularly its insistence that slavery was a moral evil—and the movement's use of moral suasion, or appealing to the conscience of its audiences—resonated with many northern White women. They condemned the sexual violence that many masters and overseers practiced against enslaved women.



DID YOU KNOW

Narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (published in 1861), which were aimed almost exclusively toward female audiences, played an instrumental role in revealing the sexual exploitation that many enslaved girls and women experienced at the hands of slaveowners.



(a)



(b)

Abolitionists utilized a number of images to highlight the moral wrongness of slavery. Among the most effective were the above woodcuts of two chained and pleading enslaved people, a man and a woman. The abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier used the woodcuts *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* (a) and *Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?* to accompany his antislavery poem, “Our Countrymen in Chains,” in 1837.

Selections of Whittier’s poem are provided below. Apply the lenses of race and gender to respond to the questions provided.

John Greenleaf Whittier, Selections from "Our Countrymen in Chains"

OUR FELLOW COUNTRYMEN IN CHAINS! SLAVES—in a land of light and law!— SLAVES—crouching on the very plains Where rolled the storm of Freedom's war! A groan from Eutaw's haunted wood— A wail where Camden's martyr's fell— By every shrine of patriot blood, From Moultrie's wall and Jasper's well!....

What, ho!—our countrymen in chains!— The whip on WOMAN'S shrinking flesh! Our soil yet reddening with the stains, Caught from her scourging, warm and fresh! What! mothers from their children riven!— What! God's own image bought and sold!— AMERICANS to market driven, And bartered as the brute for gold!

Speak!—shall their agony of prayer Come thrilling to our hearts in vain! To us—whose fathers scorned to bear The paltry menace of a chain;— To us whose boast is loud and long Of holy liberty and light— Say, shall these writhing slaves of Wrong Plead vainly for their plundered Right?....



THINK ABOUT IT

Which war in American history does the phrase “Freedom’s war” refer to and why was Whittier compelled to highlight the contradictions between freedom and slavery?



BRAINSTORM

Consider the abolition movement's use of moral suasion and Whittier's use of imagery and rhetoric. How could Whittier's application of race and gender be used to compel women to support the abolition movement?

3. Women and the Underground Railroad

A number of American women, both northern White women and free Black women, also played pivotal roles in helping people escape slavery the South through the **Underground Railroad**.



TERM TO KNOW

Underground Railroad

A biracial network of antislavery activists who coordinated and provided safe houses and passage from the South for those escaping slavery.

Quakers, who had long been troubled by slavery, were especially active in the Underground Railroad, as were members of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS).



DID YOU KNOW

African Americans owned the majority of safe houses that sheltered runaways on the Underground Railroad. Such safe houses could take a variety of forms, including houses, churches, and offices, as well as transportation networks associated with railroads and steamships.

The Underground Railroad emerged as a distinct network of safe passage for people escaping slavery by the 1840s. It is unclear how many enslaved people escaped through the Underground Railroad, but historians believe that between 50,000 and 100,000 enslaved people used the network in their bids for freedom. Runaways who utilized the Underground Railroad found their safest asylum in Canada, because they could still be captured by slave patrols in the North. Most runaways, however, joined the growing free Black communities in Philadelphia, Boston, and other northern cities.

Harriet Tubman, one of the thousands of enslaved people who made her escape through the Underground Railroad, distinguished herself for her efforts in helping others escape as well. Born in Maryland around 1822, Tubman, who suffered greatly under slavery but found solace in Christianity, made her escape in the late 1840s. She returned to the South more than a dozen times to lead other enslaved people, including her family and friends, along the Underground Railroad to freedom.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Harriet Tubman

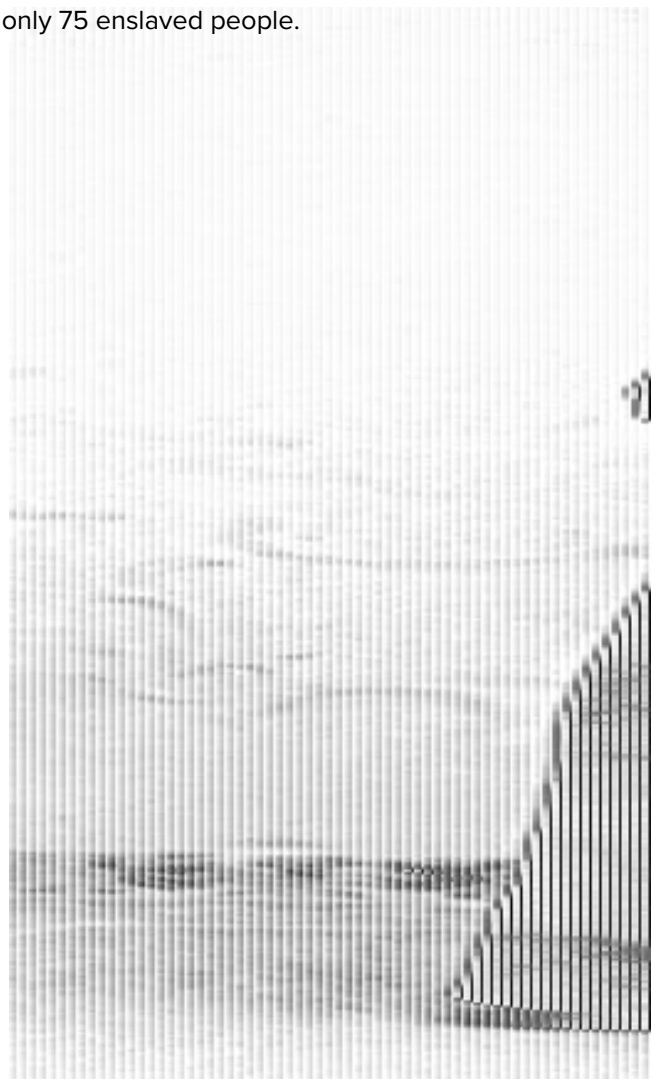
Born in Maryland around 1822, Tubman escaped to freedom in the North in the late 1840s and emerged as a leader of the Underground Railroad, shepherding hundreds of enslaved people to freedom.



DID YOU KNOW

It is unknown how many enslaved people Harriet Tubman rescued by using the Underground Railroad. Some estimates suggest that she helped over 300 enslaved people reach freedom. Other scholarship

insists that she played a direct role in the rescue of only 75 enslaved people.



This full-length portrait of Harriet Tubman hangs in the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian.

4. The Seneca Falls Convention (1848)

Of course, participation in the abolition movement could mean many things for women. For Harriet Tubman, it meant participating directly in the freeing and sheltering of runaways. For other women, participation or awareness of the abolition movement allowed them to embrace feminism, or the advocacy of women's rights.

Like the Grimke sisters before them, a number of American women—including **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** and **Lucretia Mott** (who met at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840) as well as **Susan B. Anthony** (whose family occasionally hosted Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison)—realized that both women and African Americans occupied subordinate positions in American society.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Abolitionist and women's rights activist who, with Lucretia Mott, organized the Seneca Falls Convention and helped draft the Declaration of Sentiments calling for women's equality.

Lucretia Mott

Raised as a Quaker, Mott became a leading activist for abolition and women's rights, and helped organize the Seneca Falls Convention.

Susan B. Anthony

Quaker, social reformer, and women's rights activist who worked closely with Elizabeth Cady Stanton to develop the women's movement in the United States after the Seneca Falls Convention.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Lydia Maria Child, an abolitionist, and feminist, once observed, "The comparison between women and the colored race is striking... both have been kept in subjection by physical force."



(a)



(b)

Both Elizabeth Cady Stanton (a) and Lucretia Mott (b) emerged from the abolitionist movement as strong advocates of women's rights.

Stanton, Mott, Anthony, and other women agreed with Child's observation. In 1848, about 300 male and female reformers, many of them active participants in the abolition campaign, gathered at the **Seneca Falls Convention** in New York.



TERM TO KNOW

Seneca Falls Convention

The first American conference on women's rights, which witnessed the signing of the "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" in 1848.

There, attendees agreed to a "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments," which was based on Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. It declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

“The history of mankind,” the document continued, “is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”

The "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" is notable for instigating the struggle for women's suffrage, or the right to vote. However, also included in the document was a series of statements that criticized the separate spheres doctrine and insisted upon equal rights within the home and in public. Among them included:

The "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments"

“He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.”



BRAINSTORM

Refer back to Lydia Child's observation regarding the subjugation of enslaved people and women. In what ways does the above passage reinforce such sentiments? In what ways does it ignore slavery's harsher aspects?

Seneca Falls marked the beginning of a long struggle on behalf of women's suffrage, which would not be fully achieved until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. More importantly, the convention constituted the dawn of a longer, continuous, and ongoing struggle against a doctrine that restricted women's activities to the home and largely ignored their public contributions.

Additional Resources

Read the full text of the Declaration of Sentiments from the Seneca Falls Convention at [Fordham University](#).



SUMMARY

The doctrine of separate spheres might have relegated women to domestic life, but a number of women challenged this doctrine by participating in some of the most profound reform movements of the 19th century, particularly abolition. Doing so allowed women to think about their lives and their society in new and empowering ways. Not all of these activities occurred in public. Some, such as the work of Harriet Tubman and other women on the Underground Railroad, occurred in the shadows only to become celebrated later. Meanwhile, abolition played an important role in generating the Seneca Falls Convention, widely seen as the beginning of the feminist movement in the United States. This early phase of American feminism did not lead to political rights for women in the short term. Nevertheless, it began the long process of overcoming gender inequalities in the American republic.

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Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, Ret Feb 17, 2017 from the LOC 1848, bit.ly/24kK5dX



TERMS TO KNOW

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Seneca Falls Convention (1848)

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Underground Railroad

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