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Women and the American Experience

A CONCISE HISTORY



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(Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999). Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995) suggests how slavery and then emancipation shaped family relations. Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean To Be Counted: White Women in Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998) explores women's activism in public life. For women's impact on small-town life, see Lisa C. Tolbert, *Constructing Towns: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), ch. 4.

Useful articles on white southern women appear in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South* (New York, 1991); Christie Anne Farnham, ed., *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader* (New York, 1997); Janet L. Coryell, et al., eds., *Beyond Image and Convention: Explorations in Southern Women's History* (Columbia, Mo., 1998); and Fraser, Saunders, and Wakelyn, eds., *The Web of Southern Social Relations*, cited previously. For primary sources, see Michael O'Brien, ed., *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827–1867* (Charlottesville, Va., 1993); Joan E. Cashin, ed., *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore, Md., 1996); and Carol Bleser, ed., *Tokens of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South* (Athens, Ga., 1996). For primary sources on microfilm, see "Southern Women and their Families in the Nineteenth-Century: Papers and Diaries" (University Publications of America). A northern counterpart is "New England Women and their Families in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Centuries: Personal Papers, Letters, and Diaries" (University Publications of America).

For explorations of southern character and society, see William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York and Evanston, Ill., 1957); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1983); and Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Rituals in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, Md., 1987). A recent edition of Mary Chesnut's diary, a revised account of her wartime experience, composed in the 1880s, is C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, Conn., 1981). For the original Civil War diary, see C. Vann Woodward and Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New Haven, Conn., 1984).

For quizzes and additional resources related to American women's history, visit the book's Website at www.mhhe.com/americanwomen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Benevolence, Reform, and Slavery, 1800–1860



HILE POPULAR CULTURE promoted woman's sphere, American women became involved in enterprises beyond the home. In the early nineteenth century, middle-class women in towns and cities formed female societies devoted to charitable and humanitarian ends. Through voluntary associations, women created social and civic networks, developed experience in organization and tactics, and made a distinctive contribution to benevolence and reform. The "female society" provided a stepping-stone from domestic life to public life.

The voluntary associations that women joined between 1800 and 1860 were initially formed to pursue religious goals, with clerical approval. Missionary, charitable, and tract societies, which multiplied in the early 1800s, enabled middle-class women of pious bent to assist and uplift the deprived and depraved. But the habit of association had militant potential. By the 1830s, northern women formed associations not only for benevolent goals but also for broader ones—peace, temperance, abolition, and moral reform. They worked not merely to ameliorate social ills but to eliminate them. Far fewer women were involved in reform than the untold numbers committed to benevolent works. But their activism raised new questions about women's role in public life. By midcentury, the stage had been set for the start of a women's rights movement and a frontal attack on the limitations of sphere.

The tradition of female association reached all regions, though with sectional variations. It began in the urbanizing Northeast and made its way west, but played a more muted role in the South. In the North, a number of circumstances combined to facilitate it. In the early nineteenth century, an era of evangelical fervor, women were prominent, at least by numbers, in Protestant congregations. Ministers depended on their fund raising, support, and good works. Also, the expansion of towns and cities made growing numbers of middle-class women accessible to one another and provided a field for their activism. The poor and impious in urban areas, it seemed, could only profit from women's help and control. As in the churches, these women were filling a social vacuum, not invading a territory occupied by men. After 1830, once the tradition of female association was well established, an outburst of reform opened new options and broadened the arena of women's involvement.

A final contributing factor, throughout the early nineteenth century, was an expanding middle class. Although excluded from business and politics, middle-class women held a positive sense of their roles and responsibilities as women. Benevolence and reform were not merely the most appealing routes to public life for such women but the only ones. Within the female association, they extended the skills they already had, in household management, care for the young, concern for the afflicted. They capitalized on their obligations as bastions of piety and guardians of morals. They also created new roles, parallel or complementary to those of the men in their families—the minister, lawyer, tradesman, and entrepreneur. Excluded from official channels of authority, middle-class women created their own. In so doing, they carved out a public space midway between the realms of domesticity and politics.

ORIGINS OF ASSOCIATION

The founding of female societies for pious purposes in the first three decades of the nineteenth century lay the groundwork for entry into public life. Bible and tract societies, missionary societies, charitable societies, maternal societies, and Sunday school associations—all arose in the wake of religious revivals. The emotional upheavals of the Second Great Awakening and the fervor generated by leading evangelists such as Charles G. Finney left converts with a sense of commitment and mission. Because women were bastions of piety in their congregations and a proven success as domestic evangelists (awakening male relatives to the need for salvation), ministers encouraged their formation of associations. The model for such activism had been established by Englishwomen in the evangelical sects, which lent it a certain legitimacy. Moreover, female societies would extend the Protestant empire and keep the funds flowing. Following the trail of revivals, women's benevolence peppered the East, moved westward with migrants, and spread as far as the territories.

Whatever their titles, early female associations delved into the same type of activities: fund raising, charity, uplift. At one of the first, the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes, formed in 1800, members congregated at regular meetings to sew and knit goods for sale. They dispensed the proceeds for a multitude of causes: to prepare young men for the ministry by supporting their education, to fund missionaries to the heathen in the West, and to assist the locally indigent with clothes, food, spiritual inspiration, and donations to their churches. Society members engaged in the vital tactic of "visiting" the poor with such assistance and distributed religious publications along with their charitable contributions. "Visiting" was the crucial word in voluntary benevolence. It led out of the home and into the homes of others. As women's associations multiplied, they developed more specialized goals—such as care for orphans, widows, or destitute mothers. They also created a gamut of institutions, such as schools, asylums, refuges, and workshops, to aid and redeem the worthy poor.

Voluntary benevolence was by no means a female monopoly. Women's societies were often absorbed as "auxiliaries" into large, male-dominated, national, nonsectarian federations—such as the American Bible Society, Tract Society, Home Missionary Society, or Sunday-School Union. On other occasions, female societies spawned

auxiliaries and statewide unions of their own. And sometimes they just sprang up independently, as was the case with maternal societies—the most informal of voluntary associations. Members of maternal societies met monthly or biweekly to share methods for raising pious offspring. As the only prerequisites for membership were piety and motherhood, rather than time, funds, or local clout, maternal societies involved a broad social range of women, especially from rural and small-town constituencies. They emerged wherever a few women congregated—in the countryside, in cities, even on the frontier. Their evangelical goals and stress on activism in the home were well within the confines of woman's sphere.

But women's voluntary associations assumed an especially activist role in urban life, primarily in the expanding commercial towns of the Northeast and Midwest and in the older seaports. Growing cities posed challenges because poverty and vice were more proximate. Here women made their most aggressive attempts to assist the indigent, reform the deviant, combat impiety, and provide employment for poor women. Such efforts created a new frontier of social welfare, at first through "visiting" and then through institutions, supported by subscription. Sunday schools, for instance, were formed to impart spiritual values to children of the poor. By the 1820s, hundreds of such schools had been started, enrolling almost 50,000 children and staffed and managed by benevolent women. Female associations also ran charity schools, infant schools, orphan asylums, and a gamut of homes, shelters, and refuges for women in need. Such efforts appeared in southern cities, too, notably those of Virginia, which boasted more urban space than any other southern state and a more diversified economy. In 1812, 46 Petersburg, Virginia, women signed a petition to start a female orphan asylum that would protect the most vulnerable of poor people, parentless girls, "forlorn and helpless," from economic need and sexual hazards. Richmond's Union Benevolent Society, founded by charitable women in 1836, sent "visitors" to aid "worthy females" in poor families around the city and strove "to devise means for the improvement of their situation."

Often the tactic of visiting spawned new goals and institutions. This was the case with one of the earliest charitable associations in New York, formed by 15 women in 1797. Its founder and director, Isabella Graham, a devout Presbyterian widow, and her board of managers provided food and help for worthy widows with families. By 1816, the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children supported 202 widows and 500 children. Each manager was responsible for a district, as well as for making sure that the poor widows in her charge did not beg, sell liquor, own property, behave immorally, or have living husbands. The goals of the managers soon expanded. Raising funds by subscription and by lottery, the society turned its attention to the poor widows' children, to prevent them from "growing up in habits of idleness and its native consequence, vice." The society eventually supported three Sunday schools in poor districts, two Sunday schools for adults, and a charity school for poor widows' children. It also ran a tailor shop and a spinning shop, where poor widows made flax. Isabella Graham's daughter, Joanna Bethune, who married a rich merchant and served as a society officer, carried these goals farther and became a dynamo of benevolence. She founded an Orphan Asylum Society, a Female Sabbath School Union, an Infant School Society, and a Society for the Promotion of Industry, which employed 500 women.

As the efforts of Graham and Bethune suggest, female benevolence meant not merely charity but also the start of institutions with distinctly economic goals—to provide both jobs and relief for working women unable to subsist. The Boston Seaman's Aid Society, directed by Sarah Hale, was one example. It began by providing work for women bereft of male support and ended up with a small nonprofit business, a vocational training program, a school, and a residence. Significantly, the Seaman's Aid Society originally had a religious affiliation, but quickly became a secular venture. Another secular model was the Providence Employment Society, which began in the 1830s. Here well-to-do women from prominent families tried to correct the ills of an economic system that victimized poor seamstresses. The society, run by a board of directors and supported by subscription, was in effect a small garment business and model employer. It paid good wages that kept up with inflation. Board members developed a rationale for extending their managerial roles from home to civic work: As women, they understood "what female work is and what female suffering means."

Like the Providence Employment Society and the Seaman's Aid Society, women's benevolent associations usually adopted a corporate structure. They drew up constitutions, elected officers, held formal meetings, and wrote minutes, reports, and tracts. The main business at hand was to solicit, manage, and dispense funds. An unmarried woman might best serve as treasurer, so that no husband could control the money. The association provided a variety of other positions as well—director, board member, manager, corresponding secretary, or the all-important "visitor." Enterprising women often had overlapping memberships, just as the voluntary societies of a locale developed overlapping constituencies. The board of directors who ran such associations were often no strangers to the business world. They came from families of means and were related to men who were active in banking, manufacturing, and commerce.

Whether women managed institutions, taught in Sunday schools, solicited funds from local housewives, or visited in the poorer parts of town, the voluntary association provided an outlet for their skills, a community of peers, and a foothold outside the home. It also provided an avenue for extending female values into the community. Through association, women transformed moral superiority into a social calling. They legitimized the tactics used to achieve benevolent goals—fund raising, tract distributing, and "visiting." Most important, they made the female society acceptable. The tradition of association provided a conduit through which more volatile currents would later flow.

There was of course an ambivalent thrust to voluntary benevolence. The progress it achieved was unconscious and insidious, just as "visiting" was covertly aggressive. Often pious and devout, the thousands of women involved in such societies sought to fulfill a mission rather than to tamper with the boundaries of woman's sphere. Benevolent associations united such women in common cause but never challenged the roles they were assigned by custom, convention, and clergymen. They opened avenues to social activism but were also a means of class identification. Leadership roles in voluntary benevolence were confined to the "haves," who were able to help those with little or nothing.

More liberal, critical spirits, such as Harriet Martineau, Lucy Stone, and Sarah Grimke, decried the defects of benevolent efforts. They cited the inanity of raising

funds for male divinity students when women had no access to higher education, or of distributing tracts and Bibles instead of campaigning against slavery. "Men like to see women pick up the drunken and falling," Susan B. Anthony once observed. "That *putting business* is 'woman's proper sphere.'" Lydia Maria Child, however, argued that the evangelical sects, and the female societies they spawned, transformed their participants. They had "urged upon women their prodigious influence and consequent responsibility," said Child in 1841. "They have changed the household utensil into a living energetic being." After 1830, some of the energy unleashed by benevolence was harnessed to humanitarian reform as well.

There were two main links. First, voluntary benevolence promoted the visiting not only of homes but of public institutions—first almshouses, and then asylums, hospitals, jails. By the 1830s, for instance, women were regular presences at prisons where they sought to "commiserate and alleviate the condition of the inmates," as a New York minister proclaimed. Prison reform soon became a female cause. Access to the incarcerated also inspired new callings. When Dorothea Dix discovered her vocation in 1841 she was teaching a Sunday school class for women at the East Cambridge jail. Here she found the insane mixed in with vagrants and prostitutes. For the next two decades, Dix investigated public institutions and deluged state legislatures with "memorials" appealing for funds to expand the care for the insane. Her mission as a reformer rested on the groundwork laid by voluntary benevolence.

Second, voluntary benevolence capitalized on the gender consciousness associated with woman's sphere. It evoked empathy for female victims—the widowed, the abandoned, the "friendless female" destined for prostitution. It spurred disdain for their oppressors—the deserting spouse, the underpaying employer—and for all social evils attributable to men. War, drink, licentiousness, all left in their wake a trail of miserable women—the soldier's widow, the drunkard's wife, the victim of seduction. By the 1830s, when associations were formed to obliterate specific evils, women became involved in female societies for peace, temperance, and antislavery, which were run under the aegis of men's organizations. They also joined societies for moral reform, which were not.

MORAL REFORM

Moral reform, a women's crusade, erupted in the 1830s and early 1840s, with a cast of thousands. Moral reformers intended not only to abate social ills through charitable works but also to make changes in thought and behavior, primarily those of men. The movement was both a benevolent, fund-raising one and a militant pressure group. Within its ranks, urban and rural women united to extend their moral superiority beyond the home with vigor and aggression.

Their platform was to erase the double standard of sexual morality and impose a single standard of moral purity on all Americans, male and female. This involved a gamut of subsidiary planks. Within the home, children were to be given a pious upbringing and moral education. Outside it, moral reformers harbored ambitious goals. They wanted to end prostitution and to punish and ostracize seducers, adulterers, and lechers. They also intended to reform fallen women, to give them support,

employment, and moral uplift, and to prevent the downfall of others. Running throughout the moral reformers' aims was a perfectionist streak: to obliterate licentiousness from the minds of men and to drive vice from the face of the earth.

The movement began in New York City in 1834, at a church meeting of middle-class women, following a five-year siege of Finney revivals. It also came on the heels of the Magdalen Society, a brief and abortive attempt by a young divinity student, John McDowell, to reform New York prostitutes and save young men from corruption. The New York Female Moral Reform Society, with Mrs. Finney as its first president, picked up where McDowell had left off. Indeed, the society hired him as an agent. But the female society altered the tenor of his cause. It was now fallen women who were to be saved.

In the 1830s, moral reform expanded geographically at a rapid rate, spawning auxiliaries and attracting large numbers of women. When the Boston Female Moral Reform Society was formed in 1835, 70 women were involved in its founding, and hundreds more soon joined rural auxiliaries. In 1837, the New York society had 250 auxiliaries and 15,000 members. In western New York, local societies gathered as many as 100 to 200 members each. By 1840, the New York society became a national one, the American Female Moral Reform Society, and claimed 555 auxiliaries. The movement had swept through New York and New England and farther west, absorbing local groups, spurring the formation of others, reaching city, town, and rural backwater. The society now held annual conventions and regional meetings; vice-presidents were posted in strategic cities; correspondents among groups addressed one another as "sister." At least two periodicals expounded the cause. The *Advocate of Moral Reform*, begun in New York in 1835, had 20,000 subscribers within a few years. A Boston-based counterpart, the *Friend of Virtue*, filled a similar function.

Although the moral reform movement began with clerical endorsement and help, as did all evangelical groups, this was no ladies' auxiliary. It was a women's campaign. Significantly, by the late 1830s, moral reform societies hired only women as their agents, bookkeepers, and institutional staff. Moral reform was also a specifically female reaction to urbanization and the perils of migration, as historian Mary P. Ryan contends. The mobility of the early nineteenth century brought in its wake a youthful migrant population—apprentices, clerks, seamstresses, factory girls—who left home, boarded out, and moved beyond the reach of parents and ministers. The weakening grip of traditional authority left no one in control in the moral arena and paved the way for manifold abuses, from seduction to prostitution. The vacuum of moral authority was one that women were ready to fill. The cause attracted a range of activists: the well-off, church-going matron who had long resided in a city or town; the migrant mother who had just moved in and feared for the welfare of her children; the rural correspondent of the *Advocate*, ever on the lookout for abuse. Moral reform offered a way to improve the environment, protect the young, help less fortunate women, and exert authority over men—or, as the *Advocate* put it, in a strident moment, "to control masculine behavior as he dictates hers."

Moral reform was distinguished not only by its widespread appeal but by its innovative tactics. At the outset, the New York society hired male agents to proselytize among fallen women in almshouses and jails. But the members of the executive

committee soon took over the "visiting" themselves. In New York, in Boston, and wherever they could, moral reformers presented themselves at brothels, where they sang hymns, offered prayers for the fallen, searched out runaway daughters, and noted—and threatened to reveal—the identity of patrons. Moral reformers also assaulted their state legislatures, in Boston and Albany. They petitioned and lobbied for laws that would make seduction a crime; such laws were passed in Massachusetts in 1846 and in New York in 1848. A third battle front was institutional. At first, activists tried to reform prostitutes through prayers, conversion, moral education, and location of alternative employment. Then they founded homes and refuges to redeem the fallen and protect the helpless. The New Yorkers opened a House of Reception, a prostitute's refuge. The ambitious Bostonians founded a Home for Unprotected Girls, a Refuge for Migrant Women, and an Asylum for the Repentant. Both groups set up employment services to place the reformed in domestic jobs, preferably in rural areas where they would be out of harm's way.

Finally, the executive committees of moral reform societies actively investigated alleged instances of immorality, or sought them out. Visiting took on a new and aggressive dimension. In the expanding industrial town of Utica, a fulcrum of revivals and reform in western New York, "visiting committees" went into less prosperous parts of town, where they solicited data on sexual offenses within the home. The Utica reformers also waged a petition campaign against prostitution and urged the prosecution of seducers. Overall, moral reformers battled the enemy on a number of fronts: in brothels, in state legislatures, and in the courts; in their own homes, in other people's homes, and in "homes" they established themselves (although the last had a meager clientele).

The *Advocate*, meanwhile, discussed the dangers of licentiousness and printed letters from rural correspondents exposing seducers and lechers. When called to task for the assertiveness of their campaign, as well as its impropriety, the editors took the offensive: "Why should we be castigated as Amazons . . . when we wish to unite to take measures for the protection of our own sex?" New York reformers, who increasingly empathized with the prostitutes they assisted, became concerned with the low wages paid to working women, the role of poverty as a cause of prostitution, and the plight of women who were destitute or in prison. "The fallen and the falling . . . are our sisters by way of a common humanity," the *Advocate* proclaimed.

But the newspaper's militant stance was short-lived. By 1845, moral reform was retreating from the more aggressive aspects of its campaign. The *Advocate* urged readers to pursue their domestic goal, moral education of the young, and to contain their vigilance within the home. New York reformers gave up their visits to brothels and joined related causes, such as prison reform. Local societies disbanded and ended their far-flung campaigns. Clearly there were limits to the extension of moral superiority beyond the home. These limits were sometimes suggested by the clergy and sometimes established by the reformers themselves. The Boston society, significantly, promised in 1839 to confine its activism to women. The Utica society splintered in 1845 over the issue of whether it was proper to hold a public discussion of sexual matters in a nearby college town. It was difficult, in short, for moral reformers to combat lechery, seduction, and prostitution without violating their own propriety and respectability.

During its decade of activism, however, moral reform involved a broad range of middle-class women. It also served as a link between voluntary benevolence and more radical causes. The Boston society, for instance, was linked to the maternal society movement, which permeated New England. Many of its leaders also belonged to the Boston Female Antislavery Society, founded in 1832. The New York branch drew heavy support from the Tappan brothers, who also financed the early abolitionist campaign. Future women's rights advocates, too, joined moral reform societies. Susan B. Anthony belonged to a society in New York, and Lucretia Mott was an officer of one in Philadelphia. Finally, the moral reformers' demand for a single standard of sexual morality would remain a major plank in women's campaigns for the rest of the century.

But the feminist thrust of moral reform, like the life span of the movement, was limited. This became clear in 1838 when the *Advocate* published a piece by abolitionist Sarah Grimke, the most controversial woman in public life since reformer Frances Wright, who, a decade earlier, had scandalized New York audiences with her public lectures. Like Wright, Sarah Grimke had violated propriety by speaking to "promiscuous" audiences of men and women, and like Wright, she had invoked clerical ire. Her remarks to the moral reformers were much, or too much, to the point. "Men have endeavored to entice, or to drive, women from every sphere of moral action," she declared. Deploping clerical domination, Grimke exhorted *Advocate* readers to "rise from the degradation and bondage to which we have been consigned by men." But moral reformers took offense. They were unwilling to defy ministers and unable, in the end, to defy the limits of sphere. Moral reform illustrated both the radical potential of female association and its limitations. It ended up back in the home.

The abolitionist movement, which emerged at the same time as moral reform, had far different consequences. Abolitionism catapulted women into "politics" and evoked bitter disputes over their role in public life—the very type of controversy the moral reformers tried to avoid. But like moral reform, abolition was an outgrowth of evangelical Protestantism. It evolved in the wake of revivals and employed evangelical techniques. Finally, to women caught up in the cause of the slave, abolition was itself a moral reform and therefore especially appropriate as an arena for female activism.

WOMEN IN SLAVERY

From the 1820s onward, slavery hardened as an institution. The expansion of cotton into the new, fertile lands of the Southwest, the rising value of slaves, the growing fear of rebellion and outside interference, and a universal tightening of the slave codes made slavery at once more permanent and more oppressive. The need for labor in new states—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and later Texas—increased the likelihood of sale and separation. Sometimes whole plantations were moved to the Southwest. But young adults, in most instances, were more likely to be sold to meet labor demands. Antislavery sentiment began to gain ground, in short, just as slavery became more profitable and entrenched. In all states, emancipation became more difficult, if not impossible. Slave codes, now strictly enforced, prohibited gatherings and curtailed the most minimal of liberties.

Slave women, like slave men, worked mainly in the fields, under the gang system or the task system, usually in all-female groups. They engaged in all types of agricultural work—the sowing, picking, and packing of cotton; the hoeing and milling of corn; even lumbering and construction work. Northern schoolteacher Emily Burke, who taught in Georgia in the 1830s and 1840s and described life on a large plantation near Savannah, observed slave women involved in every facet of labor, from fence building to plowing. "When I beheld such scenes, I felt culpable in living in ease and enjoying the luxuries of life," said Burke, "while so many of my own sex were to drag out such miserable existences merely to procure those luxuries enjoyed by their masters." Middle age brought no relief. Women who performed the most strenuous physical tasks, such as plowing, were probably past their child-bearing years. Untrained in the more skilled and valued crafts (blacksmiths, carpenters, masons),



Under slavery, women typically worked for their owners as field labor. Pictured are slaves picking cotton. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library)

Antislavery Society in a petition to Congress, "if the nameless and unnumbered wrongs of which the slaves of our sex are made the defenceless victims, did not fill us with horror." To abolitionist women, slavery gave licentious men total power to ruin "the sanctity and glory of woman." In addition, as Sarah Grimké pointed out, male power under slavery ruined white women as well as black. The southern white woman, she contended, who "looks upon the crime of seduction and illicit intercourse without horror . . . loses that value for innocence in her own [sex] which is one of the strongest safeguards to virtue."

By voicing such arguments, women in the antislavery movement used gender to justify their antislavery commitment. Their inherent responsibility as women, they insisted, was to rescue women in bondage. "They are our sisters," Angelina Grimké told a women's antislavery convention in 1837, "and to us as women they have a right to look with sympathy for their sorrows, and effort and prayer for their rescue." Again, as women, antislavery activists contended, they had special reason for their activism. "Women can do more than men for the extension of righteousness," exhorted antislavery agent Abby Kelley, "because they have not, from the customs of society, been so much perverted, and hence their moral perception is much clearer." Appealing to the women of Massachusetts, the Boston Female Antislavery Society made the same point. "As *wives* and *mothers*, as *daughters* and *sisters*, we are deeply responsible for the influence we have on the human race," the society declared. "We are bound to urge men to cease to do evil and learn to do good."

Sympathetic toward the woman slave or empathetic toward a subject race, hundreds of northern women supported the antislavery cause. Although the abolitionist movement was dominated by men, the influence that women exerted surpassed their expectations.

ABOLITION AND THE WOMAN QUESTION

As soon as the antislavery crusade began in 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison first published the *Liberator* and founded the New England Antislavery Society, women joined the fold. Female antislavery societies began to form throughout New England in 1832. By 1838, more than 100 such societies had been created. Their spread followed a route familiar to revivals—all over New England, into the major eastern cities, through the towns of western New York, and out to the Midwest, where Ohio became a hotbed of antislavery agitation. Female societies fell at once into the traditional pattern of auxiliaries and devoted their efforts, at first, to fund raising.

But women abolitionists soon engaged in new and more controversial tactics. They spearheaded a militant petition campaign, organized national conventions, and, as antislavery agents, spoke on public platforms, which meant addressing "mixed" or "promiscuous" audiences. Such activism evoked a formidable controversy over woman's proper place, a dispute in which the cause of women and slaves became intertwined. As women defended their roles as abolitionists, they mobilized the conventional rhetoric of benevolence to attack restrictions based on sex. In 1837, a national women's antislavery convention resolved: "The time has come for woman

to move in that sphere which providence has assigned her, and no longer remain satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt custom and a perverted application of Scripture have encircled her."

From the outset, this radical cause brought its supporters into the spotlight of public attention and removed the cloak of respectable anonymity that covered women's benevolence. Abolition, to be sure, drew on a narrower constituency. Members of female antislavery societies often came out of reform-minded environments and from families where husbands or fathers were abolitionists as well. Many activists had already liberated themselves from the rigors of orthodox Calvinism and adopted more liberal creeds. Moreover, a significant proportion of abolitionist women were Quakers, with their own long tradition of egalitarianism and a proclivity for relying on conscience, whatever the consequences. Even Quaker meetings, however, castigated women who adopted the cause. Many left their meetings, if only temporarily, to follow "the divine summons" of abolition, as it was described by a Rhode Island Quaker, Elizabeth Buffum Chace. Becoming an abolitionist meant risking social ostracism, loss of reputation, and outright persecution. The rewards were a sense of personal regeneration, the support of new peers in the movement, and an ennobling sense of commitment. According to Chace, "The antislavery spirit grew and prospered in proportion to the difficulties in the way."

The difficulties became clear in 1833 in the cases of Lydia Maria Child and Prudence Crandall. When Child, a successful author, published an *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, which denounced slavery and defended racial equality, she met ostracism, ridicule, and loss of income. Her book sales plummeted. The same year, a young Quaker schoolteacher in Canterbury, Connecticut, admitted a black student into her hitherto successful female academy. After the other students had been withdrawn, Prudence Crandall reopened her academy as a school for black girls, a move that aroused the ire of the citizens of Canterbury. Crandall was arrested three times and eventually convicted under a new state law that prohibited the instruction of out-of-state blacks. Finally the townsfolk vandalized her school. She closed it and vanished into the West. Throughout her ordeal, Prudence Crandall received support and funds from the newly organized abolitionists in New York and Boston, who transformed her isolated instance of defiance into a cause célèbre.

The opprobrium experienced by Child and Crandall was familiar to women who founded female antislavery societies, such as Maria Weston Chapman in Boston and Lucretia Mott in Philadelphia. The Boston society was started in 1832 by Chapman and 12 other women, the Philadelphia society in 1833 by Mott and a few Quaker associates. Like other auxiliary groups, they both profited at first from male assistance (the Philadelphia society was presided over by a man, a black dentist). Both embarked on the spectrum of activities familiar to voluntary benevolence. The women raised funds for the *Liberator* and for the American Antislavery Society. They held "anti-slavery fairs" where homemade articles were sold. They also distributed tracts, heard lectures on the evils of slavery, supported male agents who spoke for the cause, and pursued charitable works among local blacks—"visiting" black areas and opening black schools.

But in the context of abolition, these once acceptable activities were no longer innocuous. When the Boston Female Antislavery Society invited a prominent

English abolitionist, George Thompson, to address it in 1835, the meeting was disrupted by the threats of a hostile mob and adjourned. Moreover, female antislavery societies soon exceeded their scope as local auxiliaries and united their efforts in a massive petition campaign to Congress, demanding an end to slavery. Not only did women succeed at the arduous door-to-door canvass for signatures, but the petition campaign evoked a sense of shared purpose among female societies. In 1837, abolitionist women organized a national network of volunteers to solicit signatures and set up regional offices in major cities. They also began to hold national conventions, formed an Antislavery Society of American Women, and elected a slate of officers that brought the local leadership to prominence.

The unity evoked by petitioning, however, soon gave way to a controversy that divided the abolitionist crusade. In 1836, the American Antislavery Society proposed that women be hired as antislavery agents. The first women agents, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, were the first southern women to become prominent in public life. Daughters of a prominent, slave-owning South Carolina family (their father and brothers were judges, lawyers, legislators), the sisters had been virtual exiles from the South since 1830, when they settled in Philadelphia. Longtime opponents of slavery, they had passed through a sequence of conversions—from Episcopalianism to Presbyterianism to Quakerism. They then became members of the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society, a commitment that meant discarding their affiliation with the Friends. The barrage of conversions seemed impelled by its own velocity. For the Grimkes, conscience, like Frances Wright's irrepressible egalitarian streak, knew no bounds, and the outcome was much the same.

The Grimkes began to lecture on abolition in New York in 1836, speaking to women's meetings. But their next lecture tour in New England, sponsored by the Boston Female Antislavery Society, drew men as well. As southerners, members of a slave-owning family, and women, the Grimkes were the most exotic and controversial of antislavery agents. Their engagements attracted crowds in the thousands, made new converts, and spawned new societies. Moreover, as their innovative roles evoked opposition, the Grimke sisters became adept in defending not only the slave but also themselves. Public speaking on behalf of abolition placed them, irrevocably, at a crucial juncture at which demands for racial and sexual equality fused.

The reaction to the Grimkes reached a peak in 1837, when their "obtrusive and ostentatious" behavior drew the wrath of the Massachusetts clergy, who denounced them for assuming "the place and tone of man as public reformer." Such activism was unnatural, the ministers contended; by describing the victimization of slave women, the Grimkes lost "that modesty and delicacy . . . which constitutes the true influence of women in society." The clergy urged the agents to return to "the appropriate duties and influence of women." Sarah Grimke responded with her *Letters on the Condition of Women and the Equality of the Sexes*, a scriptural analysis and a militant response to male domination. Grimke drew a parallel between the condition of women and that of slaves. She also demanded for women equal education, pay, and rights—above all the rights of a "moral being." "Men and women are CREATED EQUAL. They are both moral and accountable beings," said Sarah Grimke. "All I ask our brethren is that they take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God destined for us to occupy."

While Sarah Grimke responded to the clergy, Angelina Grimke took on another formidable adversary, Catherine Beecher. Like the ministers, Beecher objected to the Grimkes' invasion of public life, as she explained in an 1837 tract. Woman held "a subordinate relation in society to the other sex," Beecher declared, and should confine her activities to "the domestic and social circle." In her published reply, Angelina Grimke insisted that female influence should be exerted in the same way as male influence. If ministers could address "promiscuous" audiences, so could women. "It is a woman's right to have a voice in all the laws and regulations by which she is to be governed, whether in church or in state," Angelina Grimke told Catharine Beecher.

The Grimkes' stance offended those abolitionists who felt that the spectacle of women lecturing in public could only damage the cause. This conservative view won favor among many clerically oriented women who were active in organizing and petitioning, such as those in New York and about half the Bostonians. The Grimkes' major defense came from Garrison, who announced in the *Liberator* in 1838: "As our object is *universal* emancipation, to redeem women as well as men from a servile to an equal condition—we shall go for the rights of women to their utmost extent." Garrison, like Sarah Grimke, drew an analogy between women and slaves—it was impossible to advocate the rights of one and deny the rights of the other. For those defending "human rights" there was no other choice.

The controversy over women's roles in antislavery soon caused abolitionists to divide into factions. In 1839, the dominant New England branch cracked into opposing camps, aggravated by a women's petition campaign to permit racial intermarriage in Massachusetts. In 1840, the Boston Female Antislavery Society split, and so did the national organization. The Garrisonians nominated antislavery agent Abby Kelley to the business committee of the American Antislavery Society, imported several hundred New England women to attend the annual convention in New York, and won their point, on women's votes. Conservatives withdrew and formed their own antislavery society. Later that year, the "woman question" crossed the Atlantic and disrupted the World Antislavery Convention in London. After 1840, the abolitionist crusade ran on two tracks.

The divided movement of the next two decades had an important impact on women's history. The Garrisonians provided a setting in which women could participate in all facets of reform, a context in which women's rights as reformers were recognized. By the same token, they severed themselves permanently from politics and from all institutional outlets for effecting emancipation. The Grimkes, meanwhile, had retired in 1838 to work with Angelina's new husband, abolitionist Theodore Weld, on his massive compendium of antislavery testimony. Garrison regarded this retreat from the fray as desertion. But the Grimkes' efforts inspired others. Abby Kelley lectured indefatigably throughout the 1840s and recruited new women agents, including Lucy Stone. Many were soon to throw their energies into women's rights. Confronting hostile audiences and angry mobs, on behalf of the slaves, was a radicalizing experience. "We have good cause to be grateful to the slave," said Abby Kelley. "In striving to strike his irons off, we found most surely, that we were manacled ourselves."

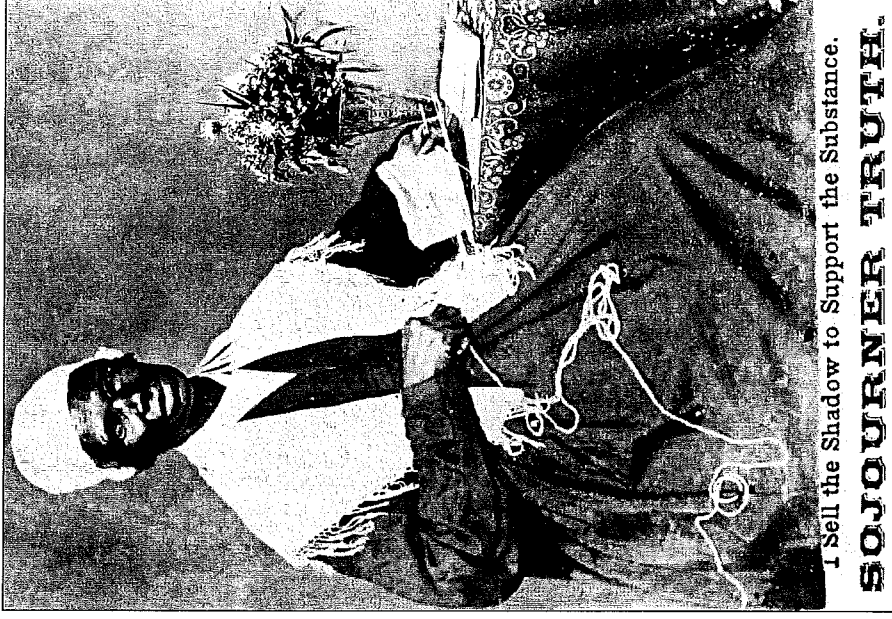
The split within abolition did not prevent more traditional women from continuing their work in the cause. Nor did it have much impact in the West, where

female societies spread through the 1840s, fanning outward from Ohio to Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In St. Cloud, Minnesota, outspoken editor Jane Swisshelm, unable to commit herself to either of the factions in abolition, published an antislavery newspaper, the *Visitor*; that gained, she claimed, thousands of votes for the Free Soil party. In Michigan, Laura Haviland, who formed the first antislavery society in the territory in the 1830s, opened a racially integrated academy, worked as an operative on the underground railroad, and engaged in missionary work among blacks. Like many abolitionist women, including Elizabeth Buffum Chace in Rhode Island and Lucretia Mott in Pennsylvania, Haviland became a professional visitor on behalf of the cause. Working with fugitives, canvassing for signatures, soliciting funds, or addressing conventions, women in antislavery gained training in tactics and a spirit that "grew and prospered in proportion to the difficulties in the way."

Black women too were active in the abolitionist movement. Four black women participated in the founding of the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society, including three members of the prominent Forten family, one of whom served as an officer. Several black women joined the Boston Female Antislavery Society in the early 1830s. But hostility to slavery did not necessarily mean that whites endorsed association with blacks; racial segregation prevailed throughout the North. When the Fall River (Massachusetts) Female Antislavery Society urged black women to join in 1835, opposition among members was so strong that the society almost disbanded. The 1837 convention of antislavery women, condemned "those societies that reject colored members," but black women usually formed their own female antislavery societies.

Nor were African Americans, male or female, at first used as antislavery lecturers. But once they were, women took the lecture. Bostonian Maria Stewart made several antislavery speeches to mixed audiences as early as the 1830s. Former slave Sojourner Truth proved a popular speaker with antislavery audiences, starting in the 1840s, as did Harriet Tubman in the 1850s. By then, other black women abolitionists had lecturing careers. The best known were relatives of prominent black male abolitionists, such as Sarah Remond of Massachusetts, sister of lecturer Henry Remond, and Frances Ellen Harper, niece of another important abolitionist, who spoke on behalf of the Maine Antislavery Society. Sarah M. Douglas, a noted educator, founding member of the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society, and frequent participant in women's antislavery conventions, established bonds of affection with leading white women abolitionists. "It rejoices my very heart to meet with an Abolitionist who has turned her back on prejudice," she wrote to her friend Abby Kelley in 1838. Black women outside the abolitionist movement also entered public debate. Teacher and journalist Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a member of a free black family from Delaware, spoke on behalf of African Americans who fled to Canada after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Cary urged African American self-sufficiency, and, after the Civil War, promoted women's rights.

Abolitionist women described their commitment and careers as quasi-religious experiences. They recounted conversions to the cause that were often preceded by some inspirational event, such as coming upon a coffin of slaves being sold or hearing a Garrisonian address. The most influential conversion was undoubtedly that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who first developed antislavery sympathies in Ohio in the 1830s. Attuned to the patriotic and providential, she felt "the heroic element was



Born a slave in New York's Hudson River valley around 1797, Isabella Van Wagner changed her name to Sojourner Truth in 1843 and began an itinerant ministry. She appeared often at antislavery and women's rights meetings in the 1840s and 1850s. At her public appearances in the 1860s, she sold copies of her biography, written by abolitionist Olive Gilbert, and of her photograph, which she called her "shadow."

(Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan)

strong in me. . . . It made me want to do something, I know not what . . . to make some declaration on my own account." Her moment of truth did not occur until 1850 when, while taking communion, the vision of Uncle Tom's death scene came to her. After much research in antislavery literature, she envisioned the rest of the novel "with a vividness that could not be denied." Later, Stowe explained that she had written *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "an instrument of God." Urging a national conversion in

sentiment, Harriet Beecher Stowe became the most successful antislavery "visitor" of all, reaching more than 300,000 homes.

Unlike Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Harriet Beecher Stowe never joined an antislavery society or spoke on any public platform. She was, on the contrary, a model ex-erter of "influence." The divided abolitionist movement provided an arena in which women could participate on different levels. By far the greatest number of women who opposed slavery filled the role of "domestic evangelist"; they empathized with Uncle Tom, mourned the death of little Eva, and promoted antislavery views among family members. A more activist group of women joined antislavery societies and, in the context of female associations, became propagandists, fund raisers, petitioners, and visitors. Finally, within the small but embattled Garrisonian faction, women became antislavery agents, public speakers, and converts to the doctrines of "human rights." After 1840, division within the abolitionist ranks neither handicapped the movement nor limited women's attachment to the cause.

The Garrisonians did raise new questions about women's rights in public life. They were not the only reformers concerned about women's rights and roles. During the ferment of the 1840s, even before a formal women's rights movement emerged, women's status in society had become a focus of attention.

COMMUNITARIAN ALTERNATIVES AND LEGAL RIGHTS

"Many women are considering within themselves what they need and what they have not," wrote Margaret Fuller in her transcendental tract, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). A celebration of female potential, Fuller's tract catered to women's rising expectations and captured a sense of impending change. Stressing the imperative to remove "every arbitrary barrier that hindered woman's progress," Fuller asserted that "What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule but . . . as a soul to live free and unimpeded." The means for attaining such a liberated state were varied, including "a much greater range of occupation than they now have, to raise their latent powers." Above all, Fuller recommended psychological independence from male domination. "I would have Woman lay aside all thought, such as she habitually cherishes, of being taught and led by men," she declared. "Men do not look at both sides, and women must leave off asking them, and being influenced by them, but retire within themselves, and explore the groundwork of life, till they find their peculiar secret. Then, when they come forth again, renovated and baptised, they will know how to turn dross into gold."

Margaret Fuller's tract derived from one of the "conversations" she had held for Boston women in the early 1840s. Here she had sought to fill her listeners with intellectual self-reliance and a sense of possibility. Mystically vague, Margaret Fuller's *Woman* met an appreciative reception. Still, the nineteenth-century reader might well have wondered how she could reach the status of "a being of infinite scope" within traditional marriage, which Fuller described as a flawed institution, or how she could achieve Fuller's goal of a "ravishing harmony of the spheres" in a society split into male and female compartments. But during the 1840s, an era when all institutions

were called into question, reformers became absorbed with such problems. One set of answers came from men and women who retreated from the world into the haven of communities.

Since the 1820s, utopian communities had offered models of alternative societies that sought to improve on worldly society. At the thriving New Harmony community in Indiana, founded in 1824, Scottish industrialist and philanthropist Robert Owen established a system of "cooperative labor"; he also tried to erase a trinity of evils that afflicted humanity—private property, organized religion, and marriage. At the short-lived Nashoba community in Tennessee, founded in 1825, reformer Frances Wright engrafted Owenite ideals, including cooperative labor and sexual liberty, onto her ambitious (though unsuccessful) plan for the gradual emancipation of slaves. In the 1840s, utopian ventures proliferated; unlike the antislavery Owenite models, some were formed by religious sects—such as the Shakers and Mormons. The Oneida community, led by John Humphrey Noyes, was also sectarian in origin. Others were nonsectarian—among them the transcendentalist communities such as Brook Farm and the rash of Fourierist associations that sprang up in the 1840s. Religious or secular, communitarian experiments had two characteristics that linked them to Nashoba and New Harmony. Most rejected, to a greater or lesser extent, the values of capitalist society and attempted to replace them with some variant of socialism. And most attempted to offer alternative ways in which men and women could live together, within or outside the bounds of marriage. As a result, communitarians provided new visions of women's roles.

Shaker communities, for instance, relieved women of sexual oppression by excluding both marriage and sexual relations. These celibate communities, which had existed since the Revolutionary era, experienced their greatest period of growth in the 1840s, when the attraction of communitarian life reached its peak. In particular, the Shakers provided an alternative role for women; the Shaker "families" that peppered the Northeast, encompassing some 6,000 souls, attracted more women than men. Within each Shaker "family," or community, a rigid system of sexual segregation prevailed: Shaker men and women lived, ate, worked, and worshiped separately. To one observer, physician Harriet Hunt, the Shaker "family" offered an asylum from the "perversions of marriage" and "the gross abuses which drag it down." Rejoicing in the role of Shaker women as ministers, elders, and medical practitioners, Hunt concluded that "the equality of women . . . is recognized in every department of Shaker life." But her enthusiasm was not universal. When Abba Alcott, the overworked wife of universal reformer and free spirit Bronson Alcott, inspected a Shaker community, she found that the men had "a fat, sleek, comfortable look," while the women were stiff, awkward, and reserved. "There is servitude somewhere, I have no doubt," Alcott told her journal. "Wherever I turn, I see the yoke on women in some form or other."

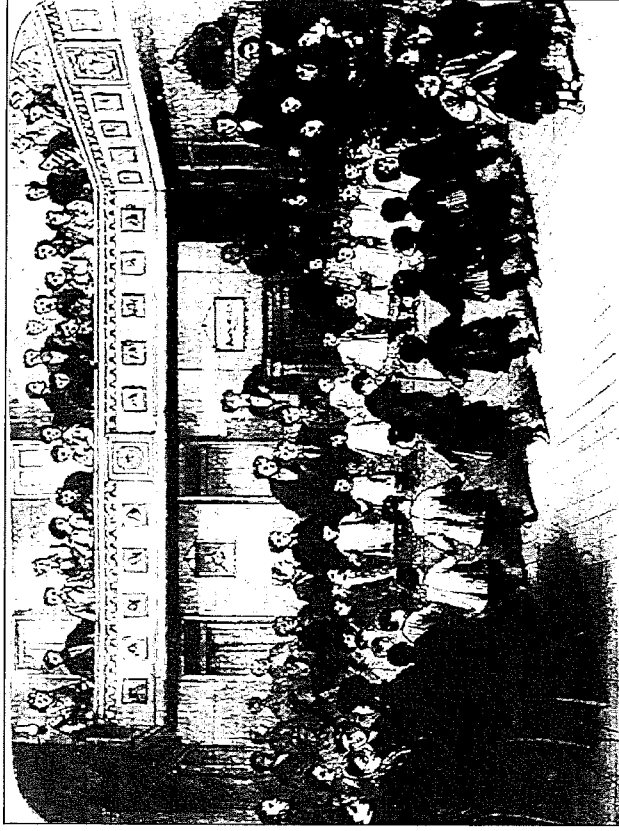
Transcendental communities, such as Brook Farm, did not discard marriage as an institution. But they tried to create an atmosphere in which men and women were equal participants in community life. Brook Farm strove to free women from domestic drudgery by dividing menial work, indoors and outdoors, among community members. "Our womenfolk had all the rights of our menfolk," one enthusiastic resident claimed. "They had an equal voice in all our public affairs, voted for our officers,

filled responsible positions, and stood on exactly the same foot as our brethren." Such goals inspired Brook Farm women. "The very air seemed to hold more exalting qualities than any I had ever breathed," a young woman resident claimed. At Fourierist communities of the 1840s, similar enthusiasm prevailed. Women appreciated the effort to give equal credit to the labor of both sexes. "Both men and women have the *same* pay for the same work," former mill operative Mary Paul wrote to her father from a New Jersey association. "There is more equality in such things according to the work, not the sex."

While celibate Shakers and idealistic transcendentalists were able to live in harmony with their eastern neighbors, the Mormons were not. By the 1840s, the Mormons had removed themselves as far as possible from the "world" to the remote haven of Utah. The Mormon custom of "plural marriage" made the sect controversial. To outsiders, polygamy was anathema and an insult to womanhood. But Mormons defended it as an improvement on women's conventional roles. "Plural marriage," they contended, gave every woman in the community the opportunity for a husband, a home, children, and entry into heaven with the man of her choice. Men ran the Mormon community, just as they dominated public life elsewhere. But each plural family was its own female community, with all aspects of marriage, from domestic work to sexual relations, divided among two or more wives. Mormon women defended the sect and claimed that it improved their status within family and community. They also founded, in 1842, a welfare group and sisterhood, the Relief Society, which functioned as an arm of the Mormon Church.

Mormons were not alone in seeking to alter the institution of marriage. So did John Humphrey Noyes and his controversial community at Oneida, New York. The Oneida experiment ultimately involved about 300 people and lasted for four decades, long after other utopian ventures had collapsed. Noyes created a successful socialist economy and alternative roles for women that evoked conflict. At Oneida, monogamy was prohibited. Under "complex marriage," which Noyes introduced, all the Oneidans were married to one another. This was far from free love, as critics charged, but rather a highly regulated system involving community approval of successive unions, behavior control through "mutual criticism," public application for parenthood, communal child-rearing, and a new variant of motherhood. Noyes's son, for instance, remembered visiting his mother once or twice a week.

The economic, social, and sexual policies at Oneida were connected. While socialism inhibited acquisitiveness and selfishness, complex marriage eliminated men's possession or ownership of women, as well as parents' possession of the communally raised children. An original type of egalitarian, Noyes also developed new techniques of sexual relations intended to satisfy the sexes in equal measure while preventing conception. The "amative" and "procreative" faculties, he contended, were separate. Noyes insisted, too, that less licentiousness existed under complex marriage than in conventional marriage, a view that won little credence outside Oneida. Significantly, those sects that provided alternatives to conventional marriage—Shakers, Mormons, and Oneidans—transformed sexuality from a private concern to a public, or community, concern. They also prided themselves on the elimination, containment, or diffusion of male licentiousness and the enhancement of opportunities for women.



Communal child-rearing was a distinctive feature of the Oneida community in western New York; founder John Humphrey

Noyes objected to the "gloom and dullness of excessive family isolation." Because all labor, including household labor, was socialized, Oneida women might work in the community factory, in domestic industries, or in the cooperative kitchen, school, or child-rearing facility. Here, parents gather to overlook the "children's hour." (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 13, 1873)

Illustrated Newspaper, September 13, 1873

As communities had limited followings and, in most cases, limited life spans, they had little impact on women's lives beyond their boundaries. Out in the "world," communitarians were considered either harmless eccentrics or hopeless degenerates, depending on their sexual arrangements. In the "world," however, new efforts emerged to change women's status. In the 1840s, a campaign began to redress the legal disadvantages of married women.

The law had always discriminated against wives. In all states, married women were legal possessions, rather than legal persons. Under coverture, they had no control over their real or personal property, no rights to their own earnings, no contract rights, and no guardianship rights over their children, although some state courts began to treat mothers with greater lenience. But loopholes to coverture remained. Under equity law, for instance, a wife could acquire a "separate estate." To do so, she needed a written conveyance, perhaps a prenuptial contract, that stipulated her assets, their source, and the degree of control she might exert over them. A variant of

the separate estate was the trust, in which a third party controlled the wife's estate. While other aspects of equity law fell into disuse, the separate estate rose in popularity. In her study of Petersburg, Virginia, women, historian Suzanne Leacock notes that instances of separate estates, while rare until 1820, increased markedly thereafter. The object of such devices, she points out, was not to empower women but to keep property in the family—and out of the hands of husbands' creditors.

But separate estates required special arrangements, and affected only a minority of wives. Grievances about their legal status permeated women's writings. "I had lived twenty years without the legal right to be alone one hour, to have exclusive right of one foot of space," complained abolitionist Jane Swisshelm, a supporter of married women's property reform, who sued her husband for property she had inherited. Marriage, claimed Mary Lyndon, the heroine of an autobiographical novel by Mary Gove Nichols, had "turned me into a thing," with no claim over either property or child. When an improvident husband wasted his wife's inheritance, spent her earnings, or sold her furniture, she had no other choice, as author Elizabeth Oakes Smith expressed it, than to "go down with the ship."

In the 1840s, efforts to improve the legal status of married women met with some success. Propertied legislators appreciated measures that would preserve their estates, if inherited by daughters, from disintegration in the hands of sons-in-law. Mississippi enacted the first Married Women's Property Law in 1839. A similar bill had been proposed in 1836 in Albany, where a women's pressure group was formed. Under the leadership of Ernestine Rose, a Polish-born follower of Robert Owen who had just emigrated from England to New York, women petitioned and lobbied for an end to the most blatant disabilities of feme covert status. Married women, they contended, should be allowed to retain ownership of their property, keep their own earnings, and enjoy joint guardianship over their children.

In 1848, the New York legislature passed a minimal bill providing that married women could retain control over their real and personal property, and other states enacted similar measures. An 1860 New York law gave married women the right to their own earnings. By 1865, 29 states had enacted some form of married women's property law, and the process continued for the rest of the century. The passage of such legislation made the equity loophole of "separate estates" available, in theory, to everyone.

Still, the significance of married women's property laws has to be qualified. First, their impact depended on the state courts, where judges often retained an affection for common law. In New York, for instance, where several pioneer statutes were enacted, superior court judges interpreted the new laws conservatively, thus vitiating their intent. A second qualification involves the motives behind the statutes. Their enactment reflected not so much a new respect for wives as a changing economy, one that required investment capital and a spirit of risk. The married women's property acts can be viewed as part of a larger effort to promote commercial ventures by providing buffers against insolvency: Like separate estates, the laws protected property not only from husbands but also from husbands' creditors. Married women's property acts therefore "represented the demands of an acquisitive and propertied middle class," historian Norma Basch contends. But the campaign for marital property reform "also encompassed a constellation of ideas that extended beyond class interest

to gender interest," Basch points out. "In the context of the nineteenth century, the right of wives to own property entailed their right not to be property."

The battle against legal inequities continued after 1848 under the banner of the women's rights movement. The new crusade, like the Garrisonian camp of abolition from which it sprang, took on a perfectionist hue. It identified a new, pervasive root evil to be exterminated, and it mobilized a battery of disparate grievances that had been unconnected and diffuse. A combination of multiple inequities, rising expectations, and abolitionist expertise thrust the new movement into existence.

THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

When women's rights advocates attempted to draft a manifesto for their first convention at Seneca Falls in 1848, they felt, said Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "as helpless and hopeless as if they had been asked to construct a steam engine." The "Declaration of Sentiments" that resulted mobilized a battery of grievances that women had voiced for two decades and transformed them into a cohesive program of reforms. Identifying the enemy as the "absolute tyranny" of man, the declaration enumerated "his repeated injuries and usurpations." Women had been excluded from higher education, profitable employment, the trades and commerce, the pulpit, the professions, and the franchise. They were deprived of property rights, denied guardianship of their children, and victimized by the double standard. Moreover, their oppression had an insidious psychological dimension. "[Man] has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own power, to lessen her self respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life," the declaration stated. After a dozen resolutions demanding redress, the declaration culminated in an assertion of women's right to the vote—an ultimate invasion of the public sphere.

The new call to arms of 1848, and the movement it began, was a direct descendant of the abolitionist crusade, in which most of its leaders had participated. From the abolitionists, the early feminists inherited a geographical circuit, a mode of agitation, a human rights ideology, and even a small constituency. They were also the legatees of decades of activism in benevolence and reform and of female efforts to rescue female victims—of poverty, slavery, prostitution. In this case, to be sure, the agitators and the victims were the same. The women's rights movement was at once an evangelical crusade that aimed at a massive "awakening," a humanitarian rescue mission, and a modern pressure group. Unique in the context of antebellum reform, it challenged the assumptions on which social space was divided. But the women's rights movement was distinguished primarily by its unseverable link with Garrisonian antislavery.

A network of women, formed in the crucible of abolition and joined by other experienced reformers, led the new movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, married eight years to a prominent abolitionist, had been thrown into inspirational antislavery circles before moving with her family to Seneca Falls in 1847. She had participated in a local Female Antislavery Society, attended the World Antislavery Convention in London with Lucretia Mott, and campaigned in New York for a Married Women's Property Act. Lucretia Mott, a public Friend since 1817, had a long career as a stalwart

of causes—moral reform, temperance, and abolition. An active Garrisonian, she had spent the past decade lecturing on religion and antislavery. Whether fresh from the abolitionist lecture circuit, like Lucy Stone and Abby Kelley; or the property rights campaign, like Pauline Wright Davis and Ernestine Rose; or the temperance crusade, like Susan B. Anthony, women's rights activists were already active in public life in one way or another. "I was a believer and advocate of the doctrine long before I became so publicly," recalled Elizabeth Oakes Smith, a longtime reformer, "for I could not smother aspiration nor could I be a mere household woman."

These advocates brought with them not only experience in reform and an acute sense of "woman's wrongs" but an eagerness to discard the hallmarks of female benevolence. The first to go was the religious impulse that pervaded the majority of women's voluntary associations. Most women's rights advocates had experienced some form of "deconversion" from the rigors of orthodox Protestantism. Converts to the notion of universal salvation, many had moved into more liberal sects or a humanitarian secularism. Others were Friends. Moreover, as Garrisonians, many were skeptical of clerical authority and disdained the "perverse application of the Scriptures" in regard to women. "The pulpit has been prostituted," Lucretia Mott told a women's rights convention in 1854, "the Bible has been ill-used." Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who claimed she had narrowly escaped conversion as a girl, at the hands of Charles G. Finney, eventually became as anticlerical as Frances Wright.

The new movement also discarded formal organization. Although women's rights associations sprang up as far west as Wisconsin, there were no elaborate networks of female societies, no state or national organizations, no battalions of officers, agents, managers, and visitors. Rather, a spontaneous informality prevailed. Individuals or contingents took off on speaking tours or petition campaigns independently, while an informal, shifting series of committees ran conventions. Staged almost annually, along the abolitionist circuit, the conventions passed resolutions, fostered debate with male opponents, and, historian Nancy Isenberg points out, put forth "ingenious arguments for women's full entitlement as citizens." They also drew public attention, which was negative. The new cause encountered hostility and derision. According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, women's rights leaders were "wholly unprepared to find themselves the target of the jibes and jeers of the nation." But conventions also provided an opportunity for supporters, drawn mainly from antislavery ranks, to reiterate and refine the sentiments expounded in the 1848 resolutions.

The women's rights convention at Salem, Ohio, in 1850, the only one from which men were excluded, provided one such opportunity. Issuing a call to the women of the state, the Ohio reformers passed 22 resolutions, in which political and economic grievances were reduced, in stages, to psychological dependence and female complicity:

Resolved, that while we deprecate thus earnestly the political oppression of Woman, we see in her social condition, the regard in which she is held as a moral and intellectual being, the fundamental cause of that oppression.

Resolved, that amongst the causes of such social condition, we regard the public sentiment which withholds from her all, or almost all, lucrative employments, and enlarged spheres of labor.

Resolved, that in the difficulties thus cast in the way of her self-support, and in her consequent *dependence* upon man, we see the greatest influence at work in imparting to her that tone of character which makes her to be regarded as "the weaker vessel." . . .

Resolved, that we regard those women who content themselves with an idle, aimless life, as involved in the guilt as well as the suffering of their own oppression. . . .

The Ohio reformers, like those at other conventions, had two targets. One was the state legislature, which, engaged in rewriting the state constitution, rejected their petition for suffrage. Another was women-at-large, "involved in the guilt as well as the suffering of their own oppression." A basic dilemma of the movement was that women were not aware of the need for rights. Lucretia Mott confronted this problem in an 1849 speech, where she used images of bondage and confinement, inertia and paralysis, to describe the psychological enemy:

[Woman] has been so long subject to the disabilities and restrictions, with which her progress has been embarrassed, that she has become enervated, her mind to some extent paralyzed; and like those still more degraded by personal bondage, she hugs her chains.

The conferring of rights, equal opportunities, and the vote, Mott concluded, "shall raise her from this low, enervated, and paralyzed condition." Women's rights, like abolition, was a humanitarian rescue operation. The vote was a means to emancipation, not an end in itself.

Suffrage, however, proved an unwieldy weapon with which to penetrate the perimeter of sphere, and women's rights activists were ambivalent about it. At Seneca Falls, the demand for the vote was the only resolution that failed to evoke unanimous approval. It was passed, by a small majority, only as a result of the concerted efforts of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass. Many women who signed petitions demanding legal rights in the 1840s, as in New York, refused to endorse petitions for suffrage. Most Americans believed that women were not entitled to vote precisely because of their dependent status, a status that women's rights advocates deplored but had to acknowledge. To others, the demand for suffrage symbolized the extreme and unwarranted belligerence of its advocates. "I don't believe woman is groaning under half so heavy a yoke of bondage as you imagine," Lucy Stone's sister wrote to her in 1846. "I am sure I do not feel burdened by anything man has laid upon me, to be sure I can't vote, but what care I for that, I would not if I could." For Garrisonians such as Lucretia Mott, who believed that "political life abounds in outrage," the issue was especially difficult. "Far be it from me to encourage women to vote or take an active part in politics in the present state of the government," she stated. However, Mott also asserted that "[woman's] right to the elective franchise . . . should be yielded to her, whether she exercise that right or not."

The early feminists' dual allegiance—to radical abolition, which rejected the corruption of politics, and women's rights, which demanded access to it—also posed a liability. The women's rights movement was unable to sever itself from the abolitionist crusade because of its leaders' dual commitment, their dependence on other

abolitionist women for support, and finally the endorsement of prominent Garrisonian men. While faced with virtually unanimous hostility outside abolitionist circles, women's rights campaigners won unconditional support from the advocates of human rights. Besides Garrison and Frederick Douglass, a loyal spokesman for women's demands, other stalwarts contributed endorsements. Wendell Phillips and Gerrit Smith (Elizabeth Cady Stanton's cousin) supported the cause, as did Samuel May, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William H. Channing, and Henry Clarke Wright, a staunch backer of the Grimkes. This interesting contingent, composed mainly of liberal ministers, had also escaped from orthodoxy into the more hospitable parlors of Unitarianism and Universalism, antislavery and nonresistance. The women's rights movement's most visible, unified group of backers, significantly, were dissenting clerics within the ranks of radical abolitionism.

What this support was worth, however, is questionable. The mingling of reforms was not necessarily an advantage: On the one hand, it made the cause of women's rights inaccessible to a potential constituency of women who did not share the radical abolitionist stance of its leaders. On the other hand, as historian Ellen Dubois contends, advocates of the cause were restrained by the dual affiliations of their leaders, "which kept them from the mobilization of women around a primary commitment to their own vote." Until the slave was free, the women's rights movement was restricted by its dependence on an antislavery base. Critics were able to attack the movement, as in *Harper's* in 1853, both for its friends (its "intimate connection with all the radical and infidel movements of the day") and for its deviance ("a peculiar enormity of its own . . . a deficit of both nature and revelation").

While women's rights advocates won limited gains in the area of legal rights, they failed to enlarge their tiny constituency. Their tactical successes and failures were best illustrated by the Stanton-Anthony campaigns in New York State in the 1850s. Throughout the decade, activists assaulted the state legislature with an unrelenting petition campaign, demanding further redress in married women's rights (control of their own earnings, joint guardianship rights of children, improved inheritance rights of widows) and suffrage. While Anthony mobilized volunteers and organized the campaign, Stanton, now the wife of a state senator, addressed a joint judiciary committee in Albany to press the case. By 1860, when New York finally passed the most comprehensive married women's property law yet enacted, 14 other states had passed some form of improved legislation as well. Suffrage demands were ignored.

Other tactics backfired. One was an attempt to enlarge the base of support for women's rights by extending it to temperance—a reform movement dominated not only by men but by ministers. Within the crusade against drink, the Daughters of Temperance fulfilled a conventional auxiliary role, unable to participate in conventions or hold office in the male-run national organization. When New York feminists created a State Women's Temperance Association in 1852, 500 women withdrew from the national temperance movement, attended a convention of the new association, and elected Elizabeth Cady Stanton president. But the membership soon splintered and disbanded over Stanton's radical proposal that drunkenness should be cause for divorce. Indeed, Stanton's proposals for liberal divorce laws were unpopular even among advocates of women's rights. A joint feminist-abolitionist invasion of the World Temperance Convention the following year, when activists used the

Garrisonian play of nominating a woman to the business committee, resulted in ignominious defeat. The temperance movement remained under ministerial sway. The women within it were unwilling to abandon clerical support in favor of a feminist alliance or to support Stanton's insistence that women had the right "to be present in all Councils of Church and State."

The temperance women's reaction resembled that of the moral reformers in 1838, when Sarah Grimké's remarks in the *Advocate* evoked dismay. The contrast between moral reform and the women's rights movement is significant. While moral reform, balanced on the brink between benevolence and aggression, won the commitment of thousands, it was ultimately hamstrung by its own ideology. Women's rights lacked the widespread support that moral reform had enjoyed. Devoted to stimulating conversions in "sentiment," women's rights advocates were unable to harness such sentiments effectively. They succeeded, however, where the moral reformers had failed, by integrating a barrage of demands and fortifying them with the human rights convictions they brought with them from abolition. Their antebellum triumph was ideological rather than tactical.

The women's rights movement culminated decades of women's encroachment into the public sphere, beginning with the pious, evangelical voluntary societies of the early nineteenth century. As historian Keith Melder has shown, women's benevolence gradually became more independent and innovative, as it veered away from religious goals and began attacking specific evils (prostitution, drink, slavery) that victimized women. The tactics of women's societies similarly shifted from fund raising and visiting to petitions, conventions, and public speaking. The more radical and assertive the cause, the greater the tendency to discard clerical authority and to view the limitations of sphere as illegitimate. In the women's rights movement, attacks on the sphere were finally reformulated into a demand for total autonomy. As a women's rights convention resolved in 1851, "the proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest to which they are able to attain."

Throughout these decades, the voluntary association provided a framework in which women could function outside the home and collectively exercise what Abbey Kelley called their "clearer moral perception." The Civil War and the vast economic changes that followed wiped out the evangelical and perfectionist impulses that gave antebellum movements their particular character. The heritage that remained was threefold: the tradition of female association, the extension of women's influence through benevolence and reform, and the newborn ideology of women's rights. In the postwar years, all three reemerged—in women's clubs; in temperance work, settlement work, and labor reform; and in the movement for woman suffrage. Between 1800 and 1860, women succeeded in appropriating and feminizing a portion of public space. Their postwar activism in public life was "visiting" writ large.

SUGGESTED READINGS AND SOURCES

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