



▲ Sarah Moore Grimké, abolitionist and women's rights leader. (The Bettman Archive.)

To Establish Justice

American History

How The Women's Rights Movement Began

As it was written in 1787, the Constitution said little about black slaves. It said nothing about women.

At the time of the Constitutional Convention, women were treated like children. Adult females were barred from most occupations and professions. They could not make binding contracts or sue people in court. Even though women could be tried for crimes, they were excluded from juries.

In most cases, any money or land a woman possessed became the property of her husband once she married. A married woman gave up all individual status; she kept no legal right to her own earnings or even personal belongings such as clothing or jewelry. Most states did not allow single women or widows sole control over their own property, either. Most men simply believed women were not capable of handling business affairs.

When the Constitution was written, women could vote only in New Jersey,

but by 1807, even this state had banned suffrage (the right of women to vote in governmental elections). The main argument against women voting assumed they would be too easily influenced by their fathers, brothers and husbands. According to this view, if women voted, a married man would control twice the voting power of a single male.

From Abolition to Women's Rights

The lack of political clout did not discourage women from becoming deeply involved in public affairs.

Lucretia Mott was raised by a Massachusetts Quaker father who believed in equal education for girls. She became a teacher and married another Quaker teacher. Soon after moving to Philadelphia, the Motts got involved in the abolitionist movement. Their home became a safe stop-over for blacks escaping slavery on the so-called "underground railroad." Mrs. Mott increasingly spoke out against slavery at Quaker meetings.

In 1833, Lucretia Mott attended the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society even though women were prohibited from becoming actual members. Instead, they were encouraged to organize their own separate society. That year, Mrs. Mott formed the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Inspired by Lucretia Mott, women in several northern states established their own anti-slavery organizations to raise money for the cause, distribute pamphlets and circulate petitions calling upon Congress to abolish slavery.

In Philadelphia, two sisters from South Carolina worked with Lucretia Mott: Sarah and Angelina Grimké. The Grimké sisters grew up with slavery but learned to hate it. After they left their home in the South, they moved to Philadelphia, where they became Quakers and impassioned abolitionists.

In 1836, Angelina Grimké wrote a pamphlet encouraging southern women to speak out against slavery. Miss Grimké wrote that there were only two ways to end slavery, "by moral power or physical force, and it is for you to choose which of these you prefer." The pamphlet proved to be so controversial that southern postmasters banned it from the mail.

As their reputations grew, the Grimké sisters were often invited to speak to small groups of northern women in their homes to stimulate



▲ Lucretia Mott. (The Bettman Archive)

more interest in the anti-slavery cause. So many women turned out to hear the southern sisters condemn slavery that meetings soon had to be held in churches. Speaking to such large assemblies was a daring accomplishment in itself since women rarely addressed public gatherings.

The first convention of anti-slavery women met in New York City in May 1837. Speaking at this convention, Angelina Grimké startled everyone by comparing the status of women in the United States to that of slaves. She argued that both had been robbed of their inalienable rights. By working to end slavery, she insisted, women would show their independence and prove their equality to men.

Later that summer, during an anti-slavery speaking tour in Massachusetts, the two sisters even began attracting men to their audiences. Since mixed-gender or "promiscuous" public meetings were considered immoral, many people were outraged. To top this off, Angelina Grimké had the nerve to debate men publicly on whether the Bible approved of slavery. Massachusetts clergymen denounced her from their pulpits, decrying public speaking by females as unnatural and against God's will.

With these experiences, the Grimké sisters found themselves in the center of a whole new controversy. Angelina Grimké remarked at the time, "We are

placed very unexpectedly in a very trying situation, in the forefront of an entirely new contest—a contest for the rights of woman as a moral, intelligent and responsible being.”

As the public controversy continued, Sarah Grimké composed a series of essays, later published in book form, that argued directly for women’s rights. She wrote that females should be admitted to schools and colleges on an equal basis with males. She also demanded that men and women doing the same work should be paid the same wages. Sarah wanted all marriage laws that discriminated against women abolished. Finally, she emphasized that a woman should not have to ask men for these things; they were her birthright.

“But I ask no favors for my sex,” Sarah assured her readers. “I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designated us to occupy.”

The Grimkés spoke to ever enthusiastic audiences, but members of the anti-slavery movement grew increasingly hostile to their message. The idea of women speaking in public to mixed audiences was bad enough. Worse still, the introduction of this new “woman issue” threatened to draw attention away from the cause of slavery.

Abolitionist leaders like Theodore Weld cautioned the Grimkés against speaking out on women’s rights. “Let us all first wake up the nation to lift millions of slaves of both sexes from the dust,” Weld wrote to Angelina Grimké. She responded with, “The time to assert a right is the time when that right is denied.” She then asked Weld, “What then can a woman do for the slave when she is herself under the feet of man and shamed into silence?”

Ironically, Angelina Grimké eventually changed her position when she married Theodore Weld, in May 1838. Two days after the marriage, she addressed the National Anti-Slavery Convention held at Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia. She now agreed that the slavery issue had to be dealt with before the “woman issue.” As she spoke, a mob of anti-abolitionists, inflamed by a woman speaking in public, threw stones against the windows of the hall. At the end of the convention, the mob broke into the building and burned it to the ground.

The Birth of the Women’s Rights Movement

The American Anti-Slavery Society made a momentous decision in 1840. Led by radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the majority of the all-male organization finally voted to admit women as members and officers. Garrison’s group sent four men and one woman, Lucretia Mott, to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Other American anti-slavery societies also sent women delegates.

Organizers of the conference considered women “unfit for public or business meetings” and believed they would harm the anti-slavery cause. When the question of seating female delegates arose, some clergymen shouted, “Turn out the women!”



▲ Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. (The Bettman Archive.)

Consequently, Lucretia Mott and the other American women were forced to listen in silence from the spectators’ gallery.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not come to London as a delegate but as the bride of Henry Stanton, a prominent American abolitionist. In London, Mrs. Stanton met Lucretia Mott for the first time, and the two immediately became friends. They spent much of their time vigorously discussing women’s rights. Before sailing back to America, they promised each other they would work together to organize a convention promoting the rights of women.

Back in Philadelphia, Lucretia Mott returned to her anti-slavery work, and Elizabeth Stanton was soon busy being

a mother and housewife in Boston. Later, the Stantons moved to Seneca Falls in western New York. During the summer of 1848, eight years after the London convention, Mrs. Stanton learned that Lucretia Mott was to visit the area. Together with some others, the two friends decided to call a convention “to discuss the social, civil and religious conditions and rights of women.”

On July 19, 1848, less than a week after Mrs. Stanton and Mrs. Mott announced their convention, about 250 women and 40 men assembled at a church in Seneca Falls, New York. Among the men was Frederick Douglass, the former slave, who was then publishing his own abolitionist newspaper in nearby Rochester. Even at this women’s rights meeting, it was unthinkable for a woman to act as chairperson. Lucretia Mott’s husband took on the role, and Mrs. Mott, the only woman present with public speaking experience, made the opening remarks.

Elizabeth Stanton then nervously read the main document of the convention: the Declaration of Sentiments. It began with a pointed rewording of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal.” It went on to include a list of injustices committed by men against women. Mrs. Stanton also read a series of resolutions calling for the legal equality of men and women.

The second day was taken up with discussion and debate. All the resolutions were unanimously approved except for number nine. This resolution declared that it was the duty of women to secure their right to vote. Even in this gathering of “free-thinkers,” such a proposal was astonishing. Up to this time, no one had seriously advocated female suffrage.

It was Elizabeth Stanton’s idea to include women’s suffrage in the list of resolutions. Her husband (who fully supported the convention) tried to talk her out of it, but she refused to listen. Even Lucretia Mott had her doubts. “Thou shalt make us ridiculous!” the Quaker abolitionist warned. “We must go slowly.” But this did not dampen Mrs. Stanton’s spirit. At the convention she argued that women, empowered by the right to vote, were more capable of winning other rights. Frederick Douglass agreed with Mrs. Stanton. In

(continued on next page)

an emotional speech, he declared that the right to vote was absolutely necessary for the freedom and equality of all people. In the end, resolution nine passed by a small margin.

One hundred men and women signed the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions on July 20, 1848. At first, the newspapers ridiculed the "petticoat rebellion." But as the newspapers joked, interest in women's rights grew. Before long, state, regional and even national conventions were held to promote equal rights for women. New leaders, like Susan B. Anthony, emerged to carry the "woman issue" into the 20th century.

A glove maker named Charlotte Woodward was among the signers of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions in 1848. She attended the Seneca Falls Convention out of curiosity and because she resented the law that gave her husband sole control over the wages she earned. As it turned out, she was the only woman from that convention still alive to vote when the Nineteenth Amendment went into effect 72 years later. □

For Discussion and Writing

Angelina and Sarah Grimké argued that women were in many ways similar to slaves. What evidence from the article can you find to support this view?

2. How did the participation of women in the cause against slavery lead to the movement for women's rights?

3. Do you think Angelina Grimké did the right thing when she finally agreed

with her husband to work against slavery before spending time and energy on the "woman issue"? Why or why not?

For Further Reading

Gurko, Miriam. *The Ladies of Seneca Falls, The Birth of the Woman's Rights Movement*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.



A C T I V I T Y

1. Assign a class member or small group to locate and reproduce a copy of the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments. This document is reprinted in Miriam Gurko's book, *The Ladies of Seneca Falls*, as well as many other books on woman's history.

2. One or more students should first read aloud the introductory paragraphs from the Declaration of Sentiments. The entire class should then discuss the following questions:

a. Why do you think the leaders of the Seneca Falls Convention decided to use Jefferson's Declaration of Independence as the model for their Declaration of Sentiments.

b. Who has replaced King George III as the cause of injustice?

3. Continue reading aloud from the