

A Movement Arises (1800-1860)

Directions: Keep these discussion questions in mind as you read the background essay, making marginal notes as desired. Respond to the reflection and analysis questions at the end of the essay.

Discussion Questions

- The Declaration of Independence is based on principles of equality and natural rights. To what extent did the women engaged in the various reforms of this era draw upon similar themes? To what extent are new ideas introduced? To what extent do those ideas draw from principles of the Declaration of Independence?
- How did wisdom and experience gained in the various social reform movements of the early 1800s help pave the way for the struggle for women's equality and suffrage?
- What debates on current issues also center on the themes of equality and natural rights? How do those involved in these debates draw on similar arguments made by the suffragists?
- What are challenges and benefits of a prolonged movement for change?

Introduction

A generation had passed since the British colonies had declared themselves independent and won a war against the mighty British Empire to prove it. With the turn of the century, “these united states” would necessarily have to define themselves. Among the questions that “We the People” would need to answer were these: What did it mean to be an American? What was the real meaning and impact of our Founding documents and ideals in practice? And, what was the appropriate role for women in the family, American society, and the Republic?

Women Seek a Public Voice

In 1791 the French writer, Olympe De Gouges argued fiercely for the rights of women:

“Male and female citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, must be equally admitted to all honors, positions, and public employment according to their capacity and without other distinctions besides those of their virtues and talents.”

The French National Convention charged her with treason and had her executed by guillotine in 1793. British writer Mary Wollstonecraft condemned the social constraints placed on girls and women. “Taught from infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison,” she wrote in her best known work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft posited that if women seemed inferior to men, it was because they had been deprived of environmental advantages like

education. Many women's rights advocates in the mid-nineteenth century agreed with the views of Olympe De Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft. It was time to take seriously the enlightenment claims of equality and liberty. It was time to reform their world and gain a true public voice for women, providing them with greater opportunity to define their own roles.

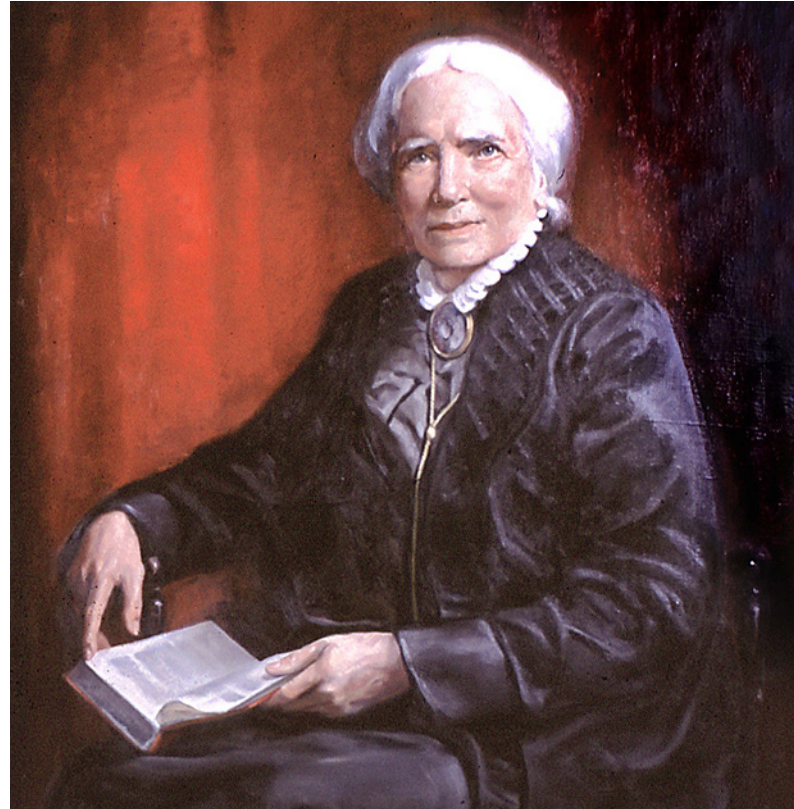
Women and Education

For most girls in America before the Civil War, there was little opportunity for education beyond learning to read. In most cases, even people who disagreed about the proper public role of women agreed that their education was important. Educator and political activist Catharine Beecher (the sister of author Harriett Beecher Stowe) championed the allegedly superior ability of women to teach and nurture children. She founded Hartford Female Seminary in 1823, and called for increased teacher training. She wrote:

“It is to mothers and to teachers that the world is to look for the character which is to be enstamped on each succeeding generation, for it is to them that the great business of education is almost exclusively committed.”

Beecher was also politically engaged, leading letter-writing protests of Indian Removal under President Andrew Jackson. Despite her political activities, Beecher opposed women's suffrage, explaining it would cause “the humble labors of the family and school to be still more undervalued and shunned.”

In addition to schools like Hartford Seminary, other educational opportunities for women began to arise. The first women's college, Wesleyan Female College in Georgia, opened in 1839. In 1849, when Elizabeth Blackwell received her medical degree from New York's Geneva Medical College, she became the first



▲ Portrait of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in America to earn a medical degree..

woman in America to earn a medical degree. Six years later, the University of Iowa became the first public university to admit women alongside men. Several states passed laws reflecting the belief that women should be involved in decisions regarding education. In 1838, Kentucky allowed widows with school-aged children to vote in school elections. Kansas adopted a similar policy in 1861.

Women Advocate for Abolition

Many women found political voices through their work in the abolitionist movement. Notable among these were Sarah and Angelina Grimké, sisters from a wealthy, slave-holding South Carolina family. After moving away from South

Carolina and becoming Quakers in the 1820s, the Grimké sisters wrote and spoke out boldly against the injustice and immorality of slavery. In her booklet, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” (1836), Angelina refuted the idea that the Bible sanctioned slavery, which was among the most common claims posited by pro-slavery advocates at that time.

The Grimké sisters’ work was a direct challenge to the prevailing custom of the time regarding the proper place of women in society. That cultural expectation, which historians call the **Cult of Domesticity** maintained that women were naturally more pious, pure, and



▲ Portrait of Sarah Grimké, wood engraving, unknown date, Library of Congress.

submissive than men. This line of reasoning claimed that men were equipped by nature for the conflict inherent in public life and politics, and women were not. Therefore, it was considered unnatural and unladylike for women to participate in public life. It was fine for women to meet with and teach other women or children. But speaking to “mixed audiences” (men and women) was indelicate and unrefined. It was a woman’s role to keep an orderly and peaceful home and care well for the children so that her husband had a pleasant haven to return to at the end of a hard day at work.

In 1837 the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts released a pastoral letter condemning the Grimké sisters’ bold indictment of the whole nation – not just the South – for the sin of slavery. Summing up the rules of domesticity, the pastors wrote,

“The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from that weakness God has given her for her protection. When she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer, her character becomes unnatural, and the way opened for degeneracy and ruin.”

Opposing even the opportunity for women to speak in public, the pastors advised churches not to allow “strangers to preach on subjects that ministers do not agree with” and stated that they should beware of “the dangers which at present seem to threaten the female character.”

Sarah Grimké responded to the Pastoral Letter:

“I rejoice that they have called the attention of my sex to this subject, because I believe if woman investigates it, she will soon discover that [the impending danger is] from those who, having long held the reins of usurped

authority, are unwilling to permit us to fill that sphere which God created us to move in, and who have entered into league to crush the immortal mind of woman.”

Among the first female social reformers in America, Sarah and Angelina Grimké applied biblical arguments in their tireless work for equality, both for enslaved people and for women. The Grimkés and many other women engaged in reform efforts that they hoped would improve life both within and outside of the home. In movements to abolish slavery, battle alcoholism, reform prisons, and improve education they developed the skills and organizational networks that they would use to advance the struggle for women’s equality and suffrage.

A Turning Point: The World Anti-Slavery Convention

Abolitionism was a worldwide movement. Inspired by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the 1600s, it had taken deep root in western Europe. The British Parliament abolished the slave trade throughout their empire in 1807, the same year that Congress abolished the foreign slave trade in the United States. However, the institution of slavery persisted even as abolition efforts in various countries condemned its violation of the principle of human equality. In 1834 Parliament abolished slavery in the British Empire. More than 300 people, most of them from Britain and the United States, attended the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Among the American attendees were two women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who was already in England on her honeymoon) and Lucretia Mott. But when they arrived, they were stopped at the door. A mixed-sex meeting would be improper, they were told.



▲ At the World Anti-Slavery Convention, women were not allowed to participate. They were seated in a gallery where they were only allowed to observe and listen.

Some male delegates, including American abolitionist Wendell Phillips, said the convention should admit the women. But nearly all the other men present were opposed. Eventually, the women were escorted to a separate gallery. From there, they would be allowed to observe and listen, but not to vote, serve on committees, or even speak.

This treatment affected Mott and Stanton deeply. Stanton wrote:

“My experience at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, all I had read of the legal status of women, and the oppression I saw everywhere, together swept across my soul, intensified now by many personal experiences.”

The very night of their exclusion from the World Anti-Slavery Convention, Stanton and Mott resolved that they would one day organize a women’s rights convention in the United States.

The Seneca Falls Convention

That convention occurred eight years later in Seneca Falls, New York. Three hundred women and men gathered in Wesleyan Chapel and witnessed a revolutionary act: a woman opened a public meeting. Stanton said:

“We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed—to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support, to [erase] such disgraceful laws as give man the power to chastise and imprison his wife, to take the wages which she earns, the property which she inherits, and, in case of separation, the children of her love.”

Over two days, Stanton presented the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, a document which she modeled on the format of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.



▲ Pageant celebrating the 75th anniversary of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, Garden of the Gods, Colorado Springs, Colorado. (September 23, 1923)

The delegates adopted the Declaration of Sentiments. Then they constructed the list of resolutions, with all but one resolution passing unanimously. The controversial one that even Mott had been nervous to include read, “it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the **elective franchise**.” This resolution won approval (and only barely) after Frederick Douglass and Stanton spoke in support of it.

The Aftermath of the Convention

Reaction to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was mixed. Under pressure from critics, many of the signers later removed their names. But Horace Greeley, an influential journalist who believed at that time that most women did not want the vote and preferred to leave politics to the men, admitted that there was no way to deny women the vote if one believed in our Founding principles of equality and natural rights:

“When a sincere **republican** is asked to say in sober earnest what adequate reason he can give, for refusing the demand of women to an equal participation with men in political rights, he must answer, none at all. However unwise and mistaken the demand, it is but the assertion of a natural right, and such must be conceded.”

A Beautiful Friendship

Three years after Seneca Falls, Stanton met Quaker and former teacher Susan B. Anthony at an anti-slavery convention. With this fateful meeting began a partnership like few others in American history: Stanton’s writing ability combined with Anthony’s speaking and presentation skills. Stanton could write speeches from home while she raised her seven children,

while Anthony, who was single, could more easily travel. As a team, they took on causes from abolition to temperance to women's legal equality. In 1850 they worked successfully to amend New York law, allowing women to own property, bring suits in court, obtain shared child custody in divorces, and keep their own earnings and inheritances. Two years later they founded the New York State Women's Temperance Society. In 1856, Anthony traveled all over the state speaking out against slavery, with Stanton drafting speeches and providing encouragement.

The Civil War

Leaders of the women's suffrage movement agreed to suspend women's rights conventions as the Civil War raged. But even without these assemblies, their cause gained strength. Women's role in the labor force increased as large numbers of men left for military service. Women worked as nurses and in charitable services during the war, and continued to press for various social reforms afterward. Many of those same women continued their work for abolition and supported a

constitutional amendment to prohibit slavery. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) eventually banned slavery throughout the U.S.

The Seneca Falls Convention did not result in immediate changes for many women's lives, but it was an important part of a movement that would continue to gain strength through collaboration. Reform within a constitutional system is often slow and frustrating. The injustice remains while the reform movement plods along. However, the slow process of constitutional change has benefits. It allows for reformers to win people over through the process of reasoned deliberation. The general public can adjust and digest change that may otherwise be destabilizing. Stanton and the other participants knew they were working for a cause that was greater than themselves. Toward the end of her life, Stanton wrote: "We are sowing winter wheat, which other hands than ours will reap and enjoy." And she was right: only one signer at the convention was alive in 1920 when women across the United States finally won the right to vote.

REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. What were some of Catharine Beecher's accomplishments? Why did she oppose women's suffrage?
2. The Grimké sisters focused much of their effort on the abolition of slavery. What do their achievements have to do with the journey toward women's suffrage?
3. What was the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions?
4. How would you characterize Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's partnership? Have you ever been a part of such a team? Explain.
5. Angelina Grimké wrote in the *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* in 1836:

"Let the Christian women ... embody themselves in societies, and send petitions up to their different legislatures, entreating their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, to abolish the institution of slavery; no longer to subject woman to the scourge and the chain, to mental

darkness and moral degradation; no longer to tear husbands from their wives, and children from their parents; no longer to make men, women, and children, work without wages; no longer to make their lives bitter in hard bondage; no longer to reduce American citizens to the abject condition of slaves, of chattels personal; no longer to barter the image of God in human shambles for corruptible things such as silver and gold.”

What connections can you make between this quote and the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment? With other Founding principles?

6. Elizabeth Cady Stanton knew she might not live to see the fruits of her labors toward women’s suffrage, but she fought on. What virtues are needed to fight for a cause despite knowing you may not live to see it realized? Are you involved in any projects today that are long-term? Give some examples.
7. In 1881, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, “The movement for woman’s suffrage, both in England and America, may be dated from the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention.” Why was the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention such an important event in the U.S. women’s suffrage movement?
8. The women’s suffrage resolution at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 asserted “it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.” According to this statement, whose responsibility was it to gain women’s right to vote? How is this idea different from the idea that rights are a gift from the government?
9. Using the **Principles and Virtues Glossary** as needed, give examples of ways the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions and other actions of reformers reflect any three of the constitutional principles below. Further, give examples of how reform efforts pursuing equality require of citizens any three of the civic virtues listed below. Complete the charts on the next page.
 - **Principles:** equality, republican/representative government, popular sovereignty, federalism, inalienable rights
 - **Virtues:** perseverance, contribution, moderation, resourcefulness, courage, respect, justice.

Principle	Example & Explanation

Virtue	Example & Explanation

A Pathway for Change



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