

## First Wave Feminism and the Emergence of the New Woman

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## First Wave Feminism then...

- Primary (public) focus on female citizenship
  - So, Abigail Adams's "Remember the Ladies!"
  - And the suffrage movement
- But also (less public, less clearly identified as "feminist") focus on challenging assumptions about women's "essential natures"
  - In this way, very much in line with Wollstonecraft and Mill, both of whom were much-read by First Wave feminists.

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- First Wave Feminist activism grew out of Abolitionism
  - Which in itself led to the rise of a suffragist movement
    - Originally to ensure the ending of slavery
      - Because it was assumed that women as a group would end slavery if given the vote
    - But later as a basic human right
      - That had been denied women politically
      - In this latter sense, it needed to disprove theories about women's supposed inability to exercise citizenship on their own behalf.

## Abolitionism as both Inspiration and Experience

- Women's moral opposition to slavery
  - Part of Second Great Awakening
- But also source for political experience
  - In abolitionist societies
    - Such as the Boston Women's Antislavery Society
  - And as a place where women's discourse could be heard
    - In part because of the support of leaders like William Lloyd Garrison
    - And because women were speaking to OTHER women as well as society as a whole.

## Women's Voices in Abolitionism

- One of the chief sites where women's political voices can be heard in nineteenth-century America
- And even more interesting, a site where women of broad class and race backgrounds leave their publicly-expressed political thoughts behind for us to rediscover.

## Maria W. Stewart (1803-79)

- One America's first black women political writers.
- In 1832, in Boston, she mounted lecture platform to speak to assembled crowd of men and women (promiscuous assembly) against the colonization movement, a scheme to expatriate black Americans back to West Africa.
- Her public career was barely 3 years long.



### Maria W. Stewart

- After husband (a free black shipfitter) died in 1829, underwent religious conversion and gave self over to career of secular ministry of political and religious witness.
- Stewart published a political pamphlet, a collection of religious meditations and delivered 4 public lectures which were later printed.
- Took public stage after the mysterious death of David Walker, a black Boston author of an inflammatory pamphlet "Walker's Appeal," a call for slave rebellion in the American South.

### Maria W. Stewart

- Stewart knew that she too faced danger for her unpopular political and abolitionist beliefs, perhaps especially because of her race.
- "Many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa," she wrote, "and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs."
- Criticized Boston white society for racism and segregation, but ALSO criticized Boston's free black community for its passivity and "cooperation" with slavery.

### Maria W. Stewart

- Argued that women had not only the right but the duty to speak up about oppression
- Especially those who were "doubly oppressed" by their race AND gender
- Women must speak on behalf of each other and children
  - Esp. on behalf of unprotected women (like herself)
  - Who were targeted because of the double standard

### Positing Sisterhood

- Angelina Grimké's "Appeal to Christian Women of the South," and "Appeal to Women of Nominally Free States"
- Theme of both appeals:
  - sisterhood of black and white women.
  - "The female slaves are



Angelina Grimké (1805–1879)

### Positing Sisterhood

- Angelina Grimké's "Appeal to Women in Nominally Free States," which came out of the 2nd annual women's antislavery convention:
- "In consequence of the odium which the degradation of slavery has



### Positing Sisterhood

- Both appeals, those of sisterhood and of the degradation of both black and white by the existence of slavery, promoted political activism among women based on the familiar ideas characterizing the cult of true womanhood: women had greater moral virtue, sensitivity, and piety.

## Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)

- Part of Second Great Awakening
- And attacked the exclusion of Black women from the category of womanhood – “Ain’t I a Woman?” – in the midst of her argument for women’s suffrage (delivered 1851, at Women’s Convention, Akron, Ohio):



## Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t a Woman?” (1851)

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- Abolitionism is the pre-history of the Woman’s Rights movement in the U.S.
- Where “First Wave Feminism” is born and tempered
- The internal politics of the Abolitionist movement itself creates feminist consciousness and trains women to be able to conceptualize and express it.

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- Within moral reform movement, women had to fight for their voices to be heard
  - But they also believed, because of “Female Moral Authority,” that women were morally compelled to speak
  - So those who silenced them were, by definition, immoral.
    - Even if the silencers were clergymen or otherwise moral leaders.

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- The abolitionist movement taught women how to organize
  - Abolitionist women emerged as leaders on a local and national level
- It was a small step for these leaders to argue that the most expedient way to end slavery was to give women (who were assumed to be antislavery as a group) the vote.
  - There was an assumption that even Southern women would vote to end slavery.
- When abolitionist women argued at Seneca Falls in 1848 that women needed the vote, many female leaders transferred their activism to feminist activity in addition to abolition.
  - For abolitionist women after 1848, suffragism and abolitionism became the SAME movement.

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- First Wave Feminism developed within abolitionism because:
  - A) women in their struggle to speak and to counteract the proslavery church and sexist clergy of the north developed a consciousness of their own oppression
  - B) Garrisonian abolition taught women what to do with that perception and how to make a movement.
    - It gave women the ability to analyze institutions and provided them with the assumption that absolute human equality was a first principle in both morality and politics.

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- This linkage between abolition and feminism appears even before 1848
  - See, for example, the 1836 "Annual Report" of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society.
- "We sometimes, but not often, hear it said-- '[Abolitionism] is such an odd, unladylike thing to do.' We concede that the human soul, in the full exercise of its most God-like power of self-denial and exertion for the good of others, is, emphatically, a very unladylike thing. We have never heard this objection, but from that sort of a woman who is dead while she lives, or to be pitied as the victim of domestic tyranny. The woman who makes it, is generally one who has struggled from childhood up to womanhood, through a process of spiritual suffocation. (cont.)"

## Abolitionism and Feminism

- This linkage between abolition and feminism appears even before 1848
  - See, for example, the 1836 "Annual Report" of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society.
- "...Her infancy was passed in serving as a convenience for the display of elegant baby linen. Her youth, in training for a more public display of braiding the hair, and wearing of gold, and putting on of apparel.... This is the woman who tells us it is unladylike to ask that children may no longer be sold away from their parents, or wives from their husbands, in the District of Columbia, and adds, 'they ought to be mobbed who ask it.' We present her the only argument she can comprehend — the fact that 80,000 of the noblest among the matronage of England, have annually entreated of their government, to do all in its power for the extinctions of slavery, till they prevailed." -- (3rd Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (1836), p. 26.)

## Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793-1880)

- Quaker teacher, reformer, abolitionist, suffragist, civil rights advocate
- With Stanton, author of "Declaration of Sentiments" and later author of Discourse on Women (1850), key feminist text.



## Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902)

- Deeply involved in reform movements, and the wife of Henry Stanton, an abolitionist
- With Mott, an author of the "Declaration of Sentiments" and leader of the suffrage movement to 1902.
- Published The Woman's Bible in 1895.



## Mott & the Birth of Stanton's Feminism

- Mott had read early feminists – esp. Mary Wollstonecraft
- Mott urged Stanton to read the writings of the Grimke sisters, former slave owners from South Carolina who had become Quakers and abolitionists with the American Anti-slavery Society.
  - Both Sarah and Angelina Grimke made direct connections between oppression of slaves by their masters and women by men.

## Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

- Stanton keeps close to the original phraseology of the 18th century document, substituting "male" for "King George":
- "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. . . . The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations *on the part of man toward woman*, having in direct object the establishment of *an absolute tyranny over her*. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world."

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- In 1870-1890, many suffragists, such as Stanton and Anthony, argued that women were human beings first and females second.
  - Important argument because
    - it implied that the lives of women consisted of more than their sex roles or their biological capacity for childrearing.

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- This “sexual difference” argument challenged the 19<sup>th</sup>-century views
  - that the family was the basic social unit and that the male head of the family was the link between the family and the broader society (both politically and economically).
  - that men knew the best interests of women and that, within marriage, the interests of husband and wife were inseparable and united.
  - that men acted in the interests of women and children when they represented them at the polls and in their political deliberations.

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- The suffragists proclaimed that the interests of all women, those who married and those who did not, were denied by their absence from the political world.
- These suffragists challenged the male monopoly on citizenship in the interests of sexual equality.

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- Suffragists expected women to use the vote to open the public sphere to women
  - so that as women gained greater rights in the public world,
  - they would demand more rights in the private arena, such as:
    - divorce,
    - the right to pursue self-expression,
    - self-actualization,
    - the right to control their own bodies in marriage,
    - the right to protect themselves from male lust and violence, etc.

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- Women with the vote could then protect themselves and pursue their own intellectual, occupational, spiritual development free from dependence upon men and fully equal to them.
- In arguing for women’s citizenship because of their equality first, suffragists attacked the concept of “true womanhood,” even the politically expedient variant of “female moral authority”

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- But in the 1870s, suffragists argued that while this might be true, women should be given the vote because they were equal as human beings, as individuals.
- If given equal access to education and opportunity, women could achieve at the same level that men could, even if they would still be different from men.
- This point is FEMINISM – First Wave Feminism.

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- Yet, even while arguing for equality, suffragists continued to argue that women were different from men – and that women voters would vote differently (in a positive sense) than would men.
- Suffragists argued that women’s votes – hard-won and thus appreciated – would be less corruptible than men’s (especially the votes of immigrants – but more on that later).

### Ideology: Sexual difference

- Indeed, women could be counted upon to use their votes to do the civic work that they did in their own households: “Social Housekeeping”
- Women would teach children, clean up urban messes, care for the sick and elderly, and create a more humane and less corrupt society if they were allowed to vote.
- See for example, Jane Addams:

### Ideology: Jane Addams & Social Housekeeping

- “[Life in] the modern city is ... going badly [because] the quickly-congregated population has not yet learned to arrange its affairs satisfactorily. Unsanitary housing, poisonous sewage, contaminated water, infant mortality, the spread of contagion, adulterated food, impure milk, smoke-laden air, ill-ventilated factories, dangerous occupations, juvenile crime, unwholesome crowding, prostitution and drunkenness are the enemies which the modern cities must face and overcome, would they survive. Logically their electorate should be made up of those who can bear a valiant part in this arduous context, those who in the past have at least attempted to care for children, to clean houses, to prepare foods, to isolate the family from moral dangers.... (cont.)



### Ideology – Jane Addams & Social Housekeeping

- “...City housekeeping has failed partly because women, the traditional housekeepers, have not been consulted.... The men have been carelessly indifferent to much of this civic housekeeping, as they have always been indifferent to the details of the household. The very multifariousness and complexity of a city government demand the help of minds accustomed to detail and variety of work, to a sense of obligation for the health and welfare of young children and to a responsibility for the cleanliness and comfort of other people. Because all these things have traditionally been in the hands of women, if they take no part in them now they are not only missing the education which the natural participation in civic life would bring to them but they are losing what they have always had.”



### Challenge: Racism and Ethnocentricity in the Movement

- Anthony used the “Race Card”
- This led many Black First wave feminists to organize separately.
- In 1896, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Margaret Murray Washington, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charlotte Forten Grimké, and former slave Harriet Tubman meet in Washington, D.C., to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).
  - And, of necessity, they will have to address issues of race (esp. lynching)



Ida B. Wells-Barnett

“A white woman has only one handicap to overcome, a great one, true, her sex; a colored woman faces two-her sex and her race.” -- Mary Church Terrell



#### Racism and Ethnocentricity

- Although the later phase of First Wave Feminism will reflect efforts to invite African American women back into the movement
  - Women of color will be understandably wary
- The strategies of the second phase of suffrage will create a serious chasm between white feminists and feminists of color which is still being felt in the feminist movement today.
  - And which may even render feminism irrelevant to many women today