

Module 04: How Did Abolitionism Lead to the Struggle for Women 's Rights?

Evidence 1: "Duty of Females," 1832

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Introduction

The article below is typical of those appearing in the "Ladies Department" column that William Lloyd Garrison introduced to the readers of *The Liberator* in the anti-slavery newspaper's second year. Garrison hoped the columns would increase women's interest in his weekly paper and, more importantly, encourage them to work to abolish slavery.

Questions to Consider

- What reasons does the author give to explain why women should be concerned about — and opposed to — the institution of slavery?
- To which attributes of the "True Woman" does this document appeal in order to encourage women to engage with political rather than purely domestic concerns?
- What kinds of activities does the writer suggest female readers should engage in? How might the suggested activities have reinforced the concept of separate spheres and commonly held notions of feminine duty?

Document

Duty of Females

From whence comes the indifference manifested to the cause of the female slave? Can a claim like hers be urged in vain? Have American women turned coldly away from her pleading voice, or are the fountains of benevolence sealed in their hearts to all those guilty of "a skin not colored like their own?" We hope not, and believe that the apathy so generally to be remarked on this subject proceeds solely from the want of information, and the belief that all attempts to aid her on their part must be hopeless. They make few exertions from the idea that they shall be able to accomplish nothing. But the experiment has never been fairly tried, and we may be permitted to doubt the validity of the objection. Were slavery a

small evil, it might be removed by proportionable exertions; but this is not the case; many obstacles are to be overcome, and much energy is demanded; it is great and united effort only which can effect its removal. There is a claim on woman; as sufferers in a common calamity, they must assist in its removal; as those involved in the commission of a deep crime, they must lift up their voices against it. Are they not partakers of a common nature with the slave, holding dear the good gift of intellect, and feeling a proud consciousness of the soaring spirit within? Then let them realize the depth of the misery by which that nature is degraded, and mourn bitterly for that system of oppression which bows down the loftiness of a free spirit to the very dust, till the mind, that "spark of divinity," is quenched and lost. Are they alive to the call of benevolence? Let them feel for that misery which so earnestly implores their aid. Would they cheer the mourner, and make the heart of the desolate glad? Let them raise up the oppressed, and give their sympathy to the sorrowing slave. Viewed only as a sufferer, she needs aid; but as a woman and a sister, her chain is on all. . .

But the enquiry is often made, what can women do? Are not their voices weak, and their aid feeble? and would not any exertions they might make be considered obtrusive, and retard rather than accelerate the progress of freedom? We trust not entirely. True, the voice of woman should not be heard in public debates, but there are other ways in which her influence would be beneficial. Let every woman seek to inform herself, to the best of her ability, of the evil of slavery, and the extent to which it is practised in this country. Where the means of information are possessed, she is inexcusable who does not employ them. . . . Let every woman, then, who feels interested in this cause, take pains to acquire information, and the shield of wisdom will prove the best defence against the attacks of ridicule. When this knowledge is gained, let her seek to disseminate it by every means in her power, and thereby interest others in the cause of justice. The influence of some may be greater than that of others; but let every one exert herself to the extent of her ability, and some effect must be produced. Public opinion is the source of public action; and where is this opinion formed? In the shade of private life; there were those views first gained that were afterwards carried into operation in a more extended sphere. Let slavery be spoken of as a withering blight upon our prosperity, at every fireside in the land, and many would rise in their strength to wipe off the foul reproach on our nation. Let no woman say she has no influence;

hers may be the very voice needed to call into action some more powerful and able advocate. Those who imbibe her opinions and sentiments, though now obscure, may be hereafter called to direct the destinies of the nation, and will in after life retain the habits formed in childhood. Let not any woman feel that little harm is done when slavery is lightly treated in conversation; neither let them fear to declare their opinions on the subject. Their sentiments will exert an influence on those around them, and these in their turn will guide others. It is also a great thing when any opinions are exposed to the light, for their intelligent minds will examine, and be influenced by them. This subject demands such investigation. . . .

We now finish this brief and imperfect statement, by desiring every woman to ask herself what she can do in this cause, and not be checked by the fear of discouragement. There is One who can turn the shadow of night into the morning. We wish that every woman should feel her accountability on this subject, and do good whenever and wherever an opportunity may be opened to her. . . .

Source:

The Liberator 2.18 (5 May 1832).