

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

Evidence 16: "The Rights of Woman, Part I," 1849

A

Introduction

In the years that followed the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton continued her relationship with Lucretia Mott and her pursuit of woman's rights, even while remaining committed to the abolitionist cause. Stanton's four small boys kept her busy with domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, she found time to talk with her newfound friends, and to think and write and develop her thoughts and analysis. In the summer of 1848, Stanton, along with Mott and three other local female friends, called a public meeting in the nearby church in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss ways to overcome the constraints they faced as women. To their surprise, over three hundred women and men attended the gathering and participated in two days of speeches and debate. The focal point was a Declaration of Sentiments, penned by Stanton, whose words intentionally mirrored those of the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," Stanton wrote, "that all men and women are created equal."

By challenging the assumption that men and women were essentially different and therefore unequal, Stanton directly attacked the construct of separate spheres and the laws of coverture that had kept women subordinate to men.

Ideas about why women should participate in public life had clearly evolved since the early 1830s, from an insistence that it was necessary for women to wield their female moral authority to cleanse society of its sins, thereby highlighting the differences between women and men, to the assertion that women were men's equals and therefore deserving of the same rights and responsibilities. So had their understanding of their relationship to the iconic enslaved black woman who had originally pushed them into the political sphere. In the early 1830s [see [Evidence 9](#)], the kneeling female slave represented an object of pity, someone on whose behalf white women could wield their moral authority. By the late 1840s, white female

abolitionists had a much deeper sense of identification with the black slave.

Questions to Consider

- On what does the author base her argument that men and women should enjoy equal rights?
- How did the document below, emerging in the wake of the 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, challenge the constructs of separate spheres and the "True Woman?" In what ways did the document reinforce these traditional concepts?
- According to the author of the document, how did the condition of white women compare with that of enslaved African Americans?

Document

For the Liberator.

THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN, PART I

"We are not a free nation, we Americans." We are no republicans? If we mean by that word, a nation where the law emanates from all classes, and is exercised with equal favor or sternness over all, without any distinction of privileged or degraded castes. How can we call ourselves republicans, when one half of us are the subjects and slaves of the other half? Is a man free — does he participate in the rights of a republican, if the laws of his country put him so absolutely in the power of another man, that he can act neither for himself, or others in any way whatever, unless this other man consents? If they (the laws,) beside, take away his property, the produce of his labor and industry, to put the whole at the disposition of the other man, who can turn it to his own individual use, and enjoy it at his own pleasure; bid him to serve that other man all his life, and whatever be his toiling, exertion and industry, they entitle him only to a mere sustenance. Is not that what we call a slave, and a slaveholder? If they command that slave to be submissive, obedient, obsequious and fawning towards that slaveholder, is he not made a most degraded being? Is not this slaveholder made a most despotic tyrant? It is what our law makes us, Americans, tyrants and degraded slaves. I do not use these terms as abusive expressions, but as stating facts; and if I were called to account for my assertion, I could prove it as clearly as the brightest sun shows every thing around us. To prove my assertion, I need not turn to those unfortunate aliens brought into our country through purchase and conquest. No, it is in our own community, at

our own fire-side, that I shall look for it.

I will not ask you if you have a mother; your very existence answers for you. But have you ever given a thought for how much you were indebted to that mother? Your being is the produce of her own, and has been brought forth at the peril of her life, amidst the most excruciating pains. However, her first feeling was love for that poor, helpless, innocent creature of hers, a sufferer like herself! Even then, the continuation of that life she gave you depended mainly on her own. She was still the fountain of life for you. Her breast was to impart to you sustenance and support. Are you aware of the sleepless nights she spent for you? With what patience, what anxiety she watched over you in sickness! How she delighted in guiding your first steps! How she ministered to your wants — your pleasures! How fond of her you were then! How you clung to her! How quick you would run to her in danger! She taught your young heart to feel, your mind to be just, noble, generous. She spared no trouble to unfold your understanding, to elevate it, to create emulation for what was good, and check what was bad. How quick she would perceive, and how she would encourage the dawn of talents in you!

Well, this mother of yours, do you admit her to be a member of that American republic you are so proud to belong to? If you do, the law of your country will tell you what it has settled between you and her, and how it treats her. "To this mother of thine, I bind thee not — thou owest her nothing! She shall have no rights over thee. But I bid thee turn all the gratitude thou owest her into respect, duty, obedience and devotedness to thy father, her husband. Thou owest thy life also to him. He shall be omnipotent over thee. He shall dispose of thee at his pleasure, even when thou art still at thy mother's breast, and that without consulting her. Nay, he may part thee from her. . . . Wast thou to incur his displeasure, never mind for that; she might see her house shut up forever against thee! Her house, did I say? I mistake — she has no house — she has nothing! She is thy father's — thou art thy father's — everything is thy father's. So I have decreed, I who am called the Law." "But who made thee, execrable!" "Not thy mother, not she! Her heart bleeds too cruelly for what she calls an usurpation of all her natural rights. . . ."

. . . Does she enjoy the rights of a republican? Does she receive a just

reward for her motherhood?

Source:

The Liberator 19.6 (9 Feb 1849).