

VOTES FOR WOMEN

The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited

Edited by Jean H. Baker



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THE CASE FOR REFORM ANTECEDENTS FOR THE WOMAN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Alison M. Parker

The woman's rights movement and the demand for woman suffrage emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century from a variety of other movements. Suffrage became the primary goal of the woman's rights movement during the 1850s and remained so until women finally achieved the right to vote in 1920. In the early 1800s, however, it was not necessarily clear that suffrage would become the preeminent issue. Radical intellectuals and working-class women articulated concerns over the roles and rights of women, but often did so without demanding woman suffrage.

The Industrial Revolution, the second Great Awakening, and changing ideas of women's role in society combined to inspire many Americans, particularly in the North and Midwest, to participate in reform movements. The evangelical revivals of the antebellum era brought more women into reform movements by emphasizing women's greater piety and moral rectitude. Middle-class white women, in particular, benefited from the increasingly mercantilist and capitalist economy, but unlike their fathers and husbands, were ostensibly protected from the crass and corrupt business world by their confinement in the domestic sphere. The ensuing Cult of True Womanhood, or the Cult of Domesticity, seemingly limited women's role to the home, wherein they would nurture their husbands and children by inculcating piety and good citizenship. Although conservative in its origins and expectations, the Cult of True Womanhood also led women into moral reform. Because male religious,

education, and business leaders agreed that women were naturally morally purer than men, some women concluded that they must be able to apply their nurturing, protective instincts to society as a whole.

Women first organized themselves together for charity work such as feeding hungry widows, protecting wage-earning women from vice, rehabilitating ("saving") prostitutes, and reforming prisons and insane asylums. All this work moved women from the domestic into the public, political sphere. Under the rubric of True Womanhood, pious middle-class women could be found in tenements, in front of houses of prostitution, inspecting prisons, and entering legislators' offices to demand change. Benevolent women were not intent on challenging their place in society, but a few found themselves believing that they could never solve the problems of an urbanizing and industrializing America without the right to vote. Corrupt or impious politicians would be defeated, some believed, if only women had the vote.

A wide variety of reform causes gained strength in the first several decades of the nineteenth century. Temperance, for instance, was a response to dangerously high rates of alcohol consumption, growing public awareness of a link between alcohol and men's domestic violence, and an increasing need on the part of employers for dependable, efficient workers. Some laborers decided to limit their use of alcohol in order to become more dependable at work and more responsible at home. A temperance movement of middle-class evangelicals arose, while workers formed separate temperance societies, calling themselves Washingtonians. Women participated in the temperance movement, claiming a right to public activism that was based less on concerns about women's equality or females with drinking problems than on the consequences of male drinking on women and children. At first, women simply appealed to men to stop drinking for the sake of their families. By the 1850s, however, some female temperance activists argued that only when women joined together to secure their equal rights would they be truly protected from the evils of alcohol. In this way, temperance activism could lead a participant to a woman's rights and pro-suffrage stance.

Some social reforms were meant to improve women's status. After the American Revolution, arguments for a basic education for girls met with comparatively little resistance. What became more difficult was to secure for females the opportunity to have the equivalent of a high school and especially a college education. Those who supported higher education for women generally believed in women's equal natural rights and intellectual capabilities. Unlike some other moral reforms, demands for equal

education more directly challenged women's subordinate status. If women were able to receive college and university educations, they might also be able to pursue professional careers. This demand was a direct challenge to women's place in the home. For this reason, equal education was a radical reform that attracted the attention of Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Wright, and Margaret Fuller, all of whom believed that equal education would do more to improve women's status in society than voting rights.

Similarly, wage-earning women articulated a set of grievances centering on women's inequality at work without explicitly demanding suffrage. From unequal wages to unsafe and unsanitary working conditions and limited job options, working women demanded change. Although the woman's rights conventions of the 1850s featured speeches on the concerns of and conditions facing wage-earning women and although each convention established or heard from a Committee on Industry, the agenda of working-class women was less prominent in the movement overall. Instead, married women's property rights and woman suffrage were the goals that were most assertively promoted by the middle-class women who dominated the movement for woman's rights.

Of all the reforms of the antebellum era, radical abolitionism had the most compelling message for those women who participated in it and then organized the woman's rights movement. Those women who were drawn to abolitionism found a radical movement that spoke of freedom from oppression, of natural inalienable rights, and of the possibility of immediate redemption from sin. These arguments were compelling to women who, moreover, observed parallels between the legal condition of slaves and women. Once they began participating in the antislavery movement, women developed the rhetorical and practical skills that enabled them to create a woman's rights movement. Some historians have suggested that woman's rights activists did not adequately separate themselves from the abolitionist movement and so were unable to develop a clear enough agenda, organizational structure, or separate membership.

By the time of the Civil War and certainly in the postbellum years, woman suffrage came to be seen as the best way to solve a variety of perceived social ills, including marital inequity, unfair divorce laws, wage inequality, and intemperance. Indeed, some historians suggest that after the Civil War, woman's rights activists forsook work on a broader range of reform concerns in order to concentrate on suffrage. Susan B. Anthony, in particular, argued that all other reform issues of concern to women should be given less attention. She and others believed that once women won the right to vote, they would instantly force the passage of laws that

they had been demanding for decades. Other reforms may have been sacrificed by activists who focused on suffrage, but the vote also provided women with a clear common goal and an agenda that was compatible with both assertions of natural equal rights and equal citizenship in the American republic.

Dispersed calls for woman's rights coalesced into an organized movement in 1848 with the first woman's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York. Yet the movement had not developed overnight. Among the important forerunners were two British intellectuals, Mary Wollstonecraft and Frances Wright. Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she argued that women were rational beings who should be able to be educated, earn their own livings, and develop their characters "regardless of the distinction of sex."¹ Wollstonecraft was committed to women's free and equal education. Her book was distributed in America and later publicized by several important activists, including Frances Wright.

In the late 1820s, Frances Wright, founder of the antislavery communitarian experiment, Nashoba, became the first woman to speak to large audiences of men and women on secular and political topics in the United States. Wright's public speeches were the most significant source of her fame. Thousands of people came, in part for the novel and "sensational" phenomenon of hearing a woman speaker and in part because of the attraction of her utopian rhetoric and free thought. Wright was an early proponent of the notion that marriage was a form of coercive bondage for women, who were thereby denied the right to inheritances, wages, and joint guardianship of their children. Like many antebellum reformers, Wright focused on marriage because it was simultaneously a legal institution, a religious commitment, and a powerful site of human emotions. Wright favored replacing current laws on marriage and illegitimacy (also biased against women, in her opinion) with what she termed nonlegalized bonds of "generous attachments." Partnerships based on mutual respect as well as love, she insisted, need not be officially regulated or sanctioned by either legal or religious authorities. She advocated improving education and professional training for women while protecting them from the legal inequalities of marriage and the superstitions of the church. Wright lobbied hard for the Workingmen's Party. Frances Wright never explicitly applied her argument that women and men have equal and natural rights to the idea that women should be given the right to vote. Perhaps this is because she participated in party politics and political debates without hesitation and saw herself as a powerful public

speaker who could mobilize large numbers of male voters to support her favored Workingmen's Party. Her silence on the subject of women's political equality through voting rights also suggests just how unthinkable woman suffrage was.

Frances Wright's name became an epithet for many social conservatives and was used to pressure women to confine themselves to the domestic sphere. By attacking organized religion and the revivalism sweeping the United States as irrational, as well as by attacking marriage and prescribed sex roles, Wright epitomized to her critics the dangerous instability of free thought and woman's rights. Because she was a woman, Wright's public speaking was considered improper and immodest. Her detractors not only called Wright a "Red Harlot" but also labeled any woman who dared to attend her lectures as impure. In spite of or because of her notoriety, some other women held on to the spirit of Wright as a daring activist woman. In the 1880s, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda J. Gage wrote the *History of Woman Suffrage*, the first volume featured a portrait of Frances Wright on the frontispiece. Lauding her as a pioneer, they explained that "her radical ideas of theology, slavery and the social degradation of woman, now generally accepted by the best minds of the age, were then denounced by both press and pulpit, and maintained by her at the risk of her life."²

Woman's rights ideas developed not only from radical women intellectuals like Wollstonecraft and Wright but also from the demands of working women. Women from rural farm families entered into wage-earning work in New England textile mills in the 1820s. Their experiences highlighted the unequal wages and restricted job openings available to women. By the 1830s, factory women were experiencing work speed-ups, longer hours, and wage cuts. In spite of the fact that women were stereotyped as unable to organize, female mill workers did go on strike, marching in processions through the streets. Pride in themselves as native-born "daughters of freemen" inspired them to form associations to fight for better working conditions and hours. At the Lowell textile mills in Massachusetts, women created a union in 1845—the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. Women workers found that tactics such as signing pledges vowing not to work on an extra loom (which would increase their work load and cause more accidents) could pressure factory owners to cancel these work speed-ups. Hoping to improve working conditions, wage-earning women also testified before legislatures considering protective labor laws. Their concerns for the rights of working women found a place in the woman's rights movement.

For middle-class women interested in respectability and independence, who wanted or needed to earn a wage and did not want to work as a private governess, teaching was the only real option. As public education expanded for boys and girls in the North and Midwest during the antebellum era, women began to be hired as teachers—mostly as a cost-cutting measure. Thus, as more women received educations and entered the teaching profession, salaries fell. Male teachers continued to dominate the leadership of the professional organizations and sometimes questioned why teachers were not as respected as other professionals. Susan B. Anthony was a schoolteacher for over a decade and fought against women's unequal wages and status within the profession. As she explained at an 1853 teachers' meeting:

Do you not see that so long as society says a woman is incompetent to be a lawyer, minister, or doctor, but has ample ability to be a teacher, that every man of you who chooses this profession tacitly acknowledges that he has no more brains than a woman? And this, too, is the reason that teaching is a less lucrative profession, as here men must compete with the cheap labor of woman.³

Unequal pay was clearly a problem facing women, but many woman's rights advocates argued that a more fundamental and persistent problem blocking women's full political citizenship and wage-earning opportunities was their inferior educational opportunities. Dr. Harriot K. Hunt of Boston, for instance, sent a formal protest along with her taxes every year, in which she pointed out that free higher educational opportunities were available for males but not for females, showing that "the rights and interests of the female part of the community are sometimes forgotten or disregarded in consequence of their deprivation of political rights."⁴ Attempts to provide better educations for girls and young women began with Emma Willard's Troy Female Seminary, founded in 1821. Willard's school was praised by Stanton and Anthony as the first to include "higher mathematics" for girls.⁵ Oberlin College in Ohio opened in 1835 and accepted women and blacks, but women were not able to take a full course of study until the 1840s. Abolitionist and woman's rights activist Lucy Stone was among the first to graduate from Oberlin with a regular (not a partial or "literary") degree in 1847.

Among the leading intellectuals who strongly supported women's access to classical higher education was Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller.

She herself had received a private classical training from her father at home. In order to encourage women's intellectual development, Fuller initiated a series of "conversations" where women would meet to discuss important philosophical, literary, cultural, and political issues. In her 1844 book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she argued for women being able to hold any job, including political office: "We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man."⁶ Fuller connected women's access to education and occupations to real freedom. She further observed that both white women and slaves were restricted by unjust laws, a parallel that would also be drawn by women in the abolitionist movement.

Arguably, slavery was the most significant moral and religious issue facing antebellum American society. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's call for the immediate emancipation of slaves appealed to evangelical women already active in moral reform, who believed that through emancipation they could help redeem both oppressed slaves and sinful slave-owners. Empathy and pity for their "enslaved sisters" gave white and free black women a rationale for becoming involved in antislavery activism. Female abolitionists condemned slavery as inherently disruptive of family ties between parents and children as well as wives and husbands. It was women's moral duty, they reasoned, to fight against an institution that denied slave women their rightful roles of wife and mother. Attending church in greater numbers than men and prizing their religious and moral sanctity, antebellum women justified their fight against slavery as a fight against sin.

Abolitionist women embraced the ideals of freedom and liberty represented by the American Revolution and its founding documents, arguing that the legal institution of slavery challenged these ideals and so needed to be abolished. In spite of the fact that male abolitionists first recommended that women simply engage in antislavery arguments with family and friends, women who put a priority on efficiency soon sought to organize for collective action. Women joined the American Anti-Slavery Society (established in 1833), for instance, in separate local female auxiliaries, of which there were more than one hundred by 1838. Two of the foremost women's abolitionist associations were the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (1832), founded by Maria Weston Chapman, and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (1833), led by the Quaker minister Lucretia Mott.

Just as white and black women were excluded from membership in the American Anti-Slavery Society until 1840, free black men did not allow

women to participate in their conventions until the 1850s; even then, their presence was strongly discouraged. These national conventions promoted abolition and discussed economic and social problems facing free blacks. In an early attempt to challenge the subordinate role of women within the African American community, Maria Stewart, a free black woman, dared to speak publicly in Boston in the early 1830s. Advocating abolition, economic and educational self-sufficiency, and better educations for girls, she boldly urged blacks to "boycott white business . . . and [sue] for your rights."⁷ In her speeches, Stewart asked:

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah to be a mother and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? . . . If such women . . . once existed, be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive by their example, both in public and in private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at the present.⁸

Her speaking career was short, however. Stewart gave it up in 1833, dismayed that her audiences proved unwilling to accept women's equality or political leadership.

Because of contemptuous treatment from both black men and white women, black women generally formed their own organizations. Free black women organized the first female antislavery society in the nation in 1832. They also provided support for their families and each other through antiracism initiatives and self-help programs, such as insurance and charity work, within their communities. Beneficial societies helped them pay for funeral expenses or the loss of a husband's wages. Free black women held fairs and bazaars to meet fundraising needs for antislavery and Underground Railroad efforts. They also supported the Colored Free Produce Society and boycotted slave-produced goods.

Women organized antislavery fairs to raise money, working together in each others' homes to produce goods to sell at the fairs. These activities were controversial, especially when black and white women worked together. Abolitionist women distributed tracts and newspapers and engaged in debates with other citizens, including the clergy, about the rightful place of women in the abolitionist movement. Those women who worked in the Underground Railroad learned to take serious risks in work

that was physically hazardous and emotionally trying. Grassroots activism led to national Anti-Slavery Conventions of American Women, which took place in the late 1830s. These conventions drew together hundreds of women from many states, inspiring them to engage in more antislavery work. Women's antislavery activities led to charges that they were engaging in an unwomanly meddling in politics. Criticism often focused on the right of women to speak in public.

Generating much controversy in and out of the movement, a few women who became nationally prominent abolitionists came to view the inequalities of slaves and women (white and black) as interrelated. As Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton later observed: "Sarah and Angelina Grimké and Abby Kelley, in advocating liberty for the black race, were early compelled to defend the right of free speech for themselves. They had the double battle to fight against tyranny of sex and color at the same time."⁹ Sarah and Angelina Grimké were sisters from a wealthy South Carolinian slaveholding family who became ardent abolitionists. In 1836, Angelina Grimké wrote *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States*, arguing that "I know that you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do. . . . You can speak on this subject. . . . You can act on this subject. . . . Try to persuade your husband, father, brothers and sons that *slavery is a crime against God and man*."¹⁰ The Grimké sisters argued for equality within a religious context, pointing out that women and men were equally the children of God, who had endowed them with the same moral duties and also the right to carry out those duties.¹¹ Calls to activism that came out of a concern for morality, for the oppressed slaves, and for religious duty were generally more appealing to women than the natural rights approach of radicals like Frances Wright. But as they found themselves thwarted by prejudice against women's public activism, some female abolitionists moved toward the fight for woman's rights.

In 1837, Sarah and Angelina Grimké went on an extended antislavery lecture tour, daring to be the first women to speak widely to mixed audiences of women and men since Frances Wright. The Grimké sisters' position as respectable ladies did not spare them from sustained attack. The Council of Congregationalist Ministers of Massachusetts issued two Pastoral Letters in 1837 that condemned women's participation in public, political issues: "The power of woman is her dependence. . . . But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer . . . she yields the power which God has given her for her protection, and her character becomes unnatural."¹² Sarah and Angelina Grimké learned from this attack that

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"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."¹³ Angelina Grimké in 1838 argued that "it is a woman's right to have a voice in all the laws and regulations by which she is to be governed."¹⁴ At the grassroots level, white and black abolitionist women's most important work was conducting door-to-door petition drives. Petitions were a form of political action that confronted politicians in the state or federal legislatures with abolitionist demands; petitioning thus involved women in mass democratic politics. Clarifying the links between white women's oppression and the oppression of the slaves, Angelina Grimké spoke before the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1838 in support of women's antislavery petitions, arguing that they were an important way for women who did not have the right to vote to make political claims on the government.¹⁵

The Grimkés' assertions of women's rightful place in politics and abolitionism generated a debate within the American Anti-Slavery Society about whether or not women should be able to serve on committees. The controversy focused on Abby Kelley, a Quaker who in the mid-1830s became the corresponding secretary of the Female Anti-Slavery Society in Lynn, Massachusetts, and a fundraiser for the "Band of Seventy," a group of male agents (and the Grimké sisters) hired by the American Anti-Slavery Society to promote abolition. Kelley gave her first public speech to a mixed audience at an 1838 convention of antislavery women in Philadelphia. As she spoke, rioters screamed, threw rocks at the windows, and before the conference ended, destroyed the building. Angry mobs frequently tried to disrupt abolitionist women's meetings, especially those composed of whites and blacks together. Speaking not only against slavery but against racial prejudice as well, Kelley became the target of a battle over the place of women and women's rights within the antislavery movement. When the New England Anti-Slavery Society allowed women to be members and participants at conventions, Kelley spoke at its convention and was appointed to a prominent committee. Now very visible, she attracted the wrath of conservative ministers within the abolitionist movement. During the American Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840, the chair nominated Kelley to the business committee. Consequently, about 300 men walked out in protest and formed the new American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which forbade women from holding office and also refused office to Garrisonian radicals who rejected party politics. Radical Garrisonian women moved furthest into the public sphere by speaking to audiences of men and women and by holding office in mixed (male and female) abolitionist societies.¹⁶

By the 1850s, abolitionist women's activism and political commitments led many of them to participate in political party rallies and attend propaganda lectures, particularly of the Free Soil, Liberty, and Republican Parties. They made banners supporting the parties, "acted" in *tableaux vivants*, and published articles, songs, and poetry in support of political parties and candidates. Also by the 1850s, antislavery women publicly confronted those religious authorities who lacked commitment to or even opposed antislavery, sometimes breaking with their ministers and churches to form antislavery churches. Ironically, deeply religious abolitionist women doing work that they considered to be just and holy found themselves attacked and condemned by male ministers for stepping outside their domestic sphere. Those ministers and some male abolitionists who rejected women's participation inadvertently fueled women's demands for equal participation within the antislavery movement and ultimately within American society as a whole.

In many ways, woman's rights activism derived from the antislavery movement. Looking back, Stanton and Anthony argued that

above all other causes of the "Woman Suffrage Movement," was the Anti-Slavery struggle. . . . In the early Anti-Slavery conventions, the broad principles of human rights were so exhaustively discussed, justice, liberty, and equality, so clearly taught, that the women who crowded to listen, readily learned the lesson of freedom for themselves, and early began to take part in the debates and business affairs of all associations.¹⁷

Abolitionist women went from empathizing with the plight of female slaves to connecting the oppression of slaves to a growing awareness of their own oppression. The controversy over their full participation in the antislavery movement further highlighted to women activists their marginalized and unequal status in a movement that was ostensibly fighting for freedom. Historian Ellen DuBois suggests that many women entered the antislavery movement already aware of their oppression as women, expecting the movement to acknowledge and resist women's inferior social and political status. As a New York activist, Emily Collins, explained:

All through the Anti-Slavery struggle, every word of denunciation of the wrongs of the Southern slave, was, I felt, equally applicable to the wrongs of my own sex. Every argument for the emancipation of the colored man, was equally one for that of woman; and

I was surprised that all Abolitionists did not see the similarity in the condition of the two classes.¹⁸

Abolitionist women, who later formed the core of woman's rights activists, brought to the woman's rights movement an ability to organize and express their discontent in political and public ways. Although women from other moral reform causes such as temperance also moved into woman's rights activism, antislavery women were more prepared to join an unpopular cause and to anticipate and handle the hostility they received from the general public. Radical abolitionism arguably took more courage—more of a break from convention—to join. This was necessary for those who would argue publicly for woman's rights.

As white and black women participated in abolitionism and other reform causes, they became increasingly aware of the legal inequalities facing women. During the antebellum era, married women, in particular, were treated unequally and unfairly by state laws that kept their property and their earnings from them and that penalized women far more heavily in divorce cases by refusing to allow women to be the primary custodians of their own children. Historian Michael Grossberg points out that in the nineteenth century, although the American judiciary gradually began to grant more women custody of their children in divorce cases, women reformers' attempts formally to change legal statutes met with public resistance. The judiciary, he suggests, could assess the character of the parents in each case without admitting a broad assault on the normative patriarchal family.¹⁹

Married women's legal status as "*femme couverts*," which meant that married women's legal independence was erased and subsumed under their husbands, was publicly challenged by Ernestine Rose, a Polish Jewish immigrant and woman's rights activist. In 1836, Rose presented the first petition to the New York Legislature in support of a Married Woman's Property Act that had been introduced by radical lawyer and legislator Thomas Hertell. With great effort, she found five women willing to sign the petition with her. The bill was reintroduced each year, and each year Rose submitted more petitions in support of it. Soon, she was aided by Paulina Wright (Davis) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. From 1840 on, Rose, Stanton, and Wright appeared before legislative committees to argue in favor of the Married Woman's Property Act. The New York legislature finally passed a limited bill in 1848 that protected the property that women brought into their marriages and inherited after. It most impacted rich women and was considered a limited victory because it did not allow

women to keep any wages they might earn while married. However modest this seemed to activists, who would initiate another campaign to strengthen it, this type of legislative reform was also threatening and radical because it was based on the notion that mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, were equal.

A preeminent leader of the woman's rights movement had been aware even as a child of women's inferior legal and social status. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was raised in upstate New York and was allowed by her father, a judge, to be tutored in a classical education. He also allowed her to sit in his law office and listen to him discuss cases with his clients. It was there that she first realized that married women did not have legal rights to their earnings, their property, or their children. Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended Emma Willard's Female Seminary, yet her desire to attend college remained unfulfilled since none at the time admitted women. Her early introduction to the problems facing women was magnified when she attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 as the new wife of abolitionist delegate Henry Stanton. She observed as the convention decided not to seat the women delegates sent from the United States and then sat in solidarity with them where they had been relegated—behind a curtain in the gallery. There, Stanton met and was influenced by Lucretia Mott, the abolitionist and Quaker minister. Disturbed by women's inequitable treatment, even within a radical movement, they talked of one day holding a woman's rights convention in the United States.

Over the next eight years, Stanton had several children and moved with her husband to the small manufacturing town of Seneca Falls, New York. Isolated and burdened by child bearing, child care, and housework, Stanton grew discontent. When she and Lucretia Mott met again in July 1848, they found themselves ready to organize a convention on "the social, civil, and religious rights of woman." Eager to explore the status of women and urge progressive change, several hundred attended the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention. Ironically, although both Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke, out of prevailing notions of propriety, men conducted most of the meeting.

To provide a focus for the Seneca Falls convention, Stanton wrote a Declaration of Sentiments that was modeled on the Declaration of Independence. In it, she argued that

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. . . . He

has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise. He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she has no voice. . . .

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides. He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.²⁰

Critiquing the legal status of antebellum women, the Declaration of Sentiments asserted women's equality as citizens and then listed the grievances that women had with their current status in the republic. The Declaration of Sentiments included a list of resolutions, each of which was proposed separately to the convention for debate. The resolutions called on women to question laws that restricted their rights, educations, earnings, abilities, and civil status. Women, it asserted, must be able to speak publicly and act freely in religious work and in their churches. One resolution criticized the double standard of sexual morality that existed for men and women. More specifically challenging women's place in society, another demanded that women have equal access to "the various trades, professions, and commerce." The most controversial resolution stated that "it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise." Women's lack of the right to vote was given a causal value—other complaints followed from this denial of a basic right of citizenship.

The Declaration of Sentiments was not only in keeping with the language of the Declaration of Independence but also with the Constitution, which empowered states to set voting requirements in gender-neutral language that could grant women the right to vote and hold public office. The flexibility of the Constitution was ignored by all states except New Jersey. Propertied New Jersey women were able to vote from 1776 to 1807, but were then forbidden from voting because of fears that they had provided the margin of victory (for the Federalist party) in a close election. Historian Linda Kerber argues that women could have become voting citizens without a constitutional amendment if the states had consistently extended those rights soon after the American Revolution. Instead, after the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution added the word "male" to its definition of eligible voters, thereby limiting the possibility of women's voting without another amendment to explicitly grant women the suffrage. Arguments against woman suffrage generally suggested that women would mindlessly vote as directed by husbands, broth-

ers, and fathers, and that by appearing at the polls they were forsaking their femininity.²¹

Not surprisingly, therefore, the most controversial resolution in the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments was that for woman suffrage, which passed only after eloquent appeals were made on its behalf by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass. It was this resolution that was singled out for particular condemnation by the outraged press. Independence was considered a crucial prerequisite for voting rights; women's exclusion from suffrage was based on women's status as dependents of fathers and husbands. Historian Ellen DuBois argues that "the suffrage demand challenged the idea that women's interests were identical or even compatible with men's. As such, it embodied a vision of female self-determination that placed it at the center of the feminist movement."²² Because the ballot represented positive, patriotic claims to citizenship and self-determination, it was central to Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments. The Seneca Falls convention is rightly described as the birthplace of the woman's rights movement. Although woman's rights activists faced certain and determined opprobrium, they were also pleased by the publicity, however negative, that the meeting at Seneca Falls had generated in the press.

From 1848 to 1860, activists held woman's rights conventions to organize reform campaigns, generate publicity for woman's rights issues, and inspire public debate. Interestingly, however, an official national organization did not emerge because many women felt embittered by their experiences within hierarchical antislavery organizations that had closed off options to women. Angelina Grimké wrote to the 1852 Woman's Rights Convention in Syracuse, New York, and urged women to keep an informal structure without a national organization: "The tendency of organization is to kill out the spirit which gave it birth. Organizations do not protect the sacredness of the individual; their tendency is to sink the individual in the mass, to sacrifice his rights, and to immolate him on the altar of some fancied good."²³ Grimké's distrust of organizations was in great part due to the 1840 split within the national antislavery organization over the issue of women's participation and rights.

New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana all regularly held regional woman's rights conventions from 1850 to the Civil War. During that time, national conventions were held annually (with the exception of 1857) in a variety of locations, including Worcester (Massachusetts), Syracuse (New York), Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and New York City. In Illinois and other Midwestern states, support for the woman's rights movement began with women's antislavery work and paralleled the

