

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

Evidence 5: "Petition Form for Women," 1834

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Introduction

Many anti-slavery societies made the circulation and submission of petitions to Congress a top priority in their campaigns to end slavery. In the early 1800s, signing and submitting a petition had a much greater political significance than such actions do today. Viewed as part of a centuries-old tradition in which subordinates petitioned their superiors for help or for the remedy of a perceived injustice, petitions in early America provided a means by which people excluded from formal political participation could make requests of men in political power. Women had often petitioned courts and legislatures, as individuals, in matters concerning family and personal economic affairs. Petitioning, in fact, was one of the few political rights Americans agreed that women possessed. As an accepted tradition, petitioning gave women a political voice while maintaining their deference to men.

In the early 1830s, through newly formed anti-slavery societies, women began to use petitions as a collective political tool. Gathering signatures became a means of spreading the word about the abolitionist cause; submitting the completed petitions became a way to spark discussion in Congress and pressure lawmakers to act. The petitions, which quickly grew from a trickle to a flood, created such an uproar in Congress that, in 1836, the House of Representatives passed a "gag rule" to table all anti-slavery petitions without discussion or action. Politicians rightly recognized the divisive potential of the slavery issue and wanted to keep it under wraps. Nevertheless, abolitionist women continued to insist on their right to petition, gathering more and more signatures until, by 1863, approximately three million women had signed petitions.

Reading petitions such as the one reproduced below, which requests that Congress outlaw slavery in the District of Columbia, provides a glimpse into how women expressed their collective political voice during a time in which they were assumed to play no role in the formal sphere of organized

politics.

Questions to Consider

- What attributes of womanhood do the petition's authors deploy in their attempt to sway public officials?
- Why do you think they believed that ignoring the problem of slavery would make them "less than women?"
- Did the petition cast women as challenging their prescribed feminine role or as reinforcing it? What might the impact have been on their effectiveness as a group?

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TO TE HON. THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE U. STATES, IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED

Petition of Ladies resident in _____ County, State of Ohio

Fathers and Rulers of our Country,

Suffer us, we pray you, with the sympathies which we are constrained to feel as wives, as mothers, and as daughters, to plead with you in behalf of a long oppressed and deeply injured class of native Americans [referring to American-born slaves], residing in that portion of our country which is under your exclusive control. We should poorly estimate the virtues which ought ever to distinguish your honorable body could we anticipate any other than a favorable hearing when our appeal is to men, to philanthropists, to patriots, to the legislators and guardians of a Christian people. We should be less than women, if the nameless and unnumbered wrongs of which the slaves of our sex are made the defenseless victims, did not fill us with horror and constrain us, in earnestness and agony of spirit to pray for their deliverance. By day and by night, their woes and wrongs rise up before us, throwing shades of mournful contrast over the joys of domestic life, and filling our hearts with sadness at the recollection of those whose hearths are desolate.

Nor do we forget, in the contemplation of their other sufferings, the intellectual and moral degradation to which they are doomed; how the soul formed for companionship with angels, is despoiled and brutified, and

consigned to ignorance, pollution, and ruin.

Surely then, as the representatives of a people professedly christian, you will bear with us when we express our solemn apprehensions in the language of the patriotic Jefferson "we tremble for our country when we remember that God is just, and that his justice cannot sleep forever," and when in obedience to a divine command "we remember them who are in bonds as bound with them." Impelled by these sentiments, we solemnly purpose, the grace of God assisting, to importune high Heaven with prayer, and our national Legislature with appeals, until this christian people abjure forever a traffic in the souls of men, and the groans of the oppressed no longer ascend to God from the dust where they now welter.

We do not ask your honorable body to transcend your constitutional powers, by legislating on the subject of slavery within the boundaries of any slaveholding State; but we do conjure you to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia where you exercise exclusive jurisdiction. In the name of humanity, justice, equal rights and impartial law, our country's weal, her honor and her cherished hopes we earnestly implore for this our humble petition, your favorable regard. If both in christian and in heathen lands, Kings have revoked their edicts, at the intercession of woman, and tyrants have relented when she appeared a suppliant for mercy, surely we may hope that the Legislators of a free, enlightened and christian people will lend their ear to our appeals, when the only boon we crave is the restoration of rights unjustly wrested from the innocent and defenseless. — And as in duty bound your petitioners will ever pray.

Source:

Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century Company, Inc.), 175-176.