

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

## **Context**

### **Antebellum America**

Women's involvement in the American anti-slavery movement occurred within the context of an evolving set of ideas about the appropriate activities of men and women in Antebellum American life. Laws codifying the rights of women and men gave rise to notions of appropriate behavior, as did religious revivalism and emerging movements for moral and social reform. These factors and more influenced how white women viewed themselves and their actions once they entered the fray of the abolitionist cause.

### **Gender Roles**

Very distinct ideas about masculine and feminine traits and appropriate behavior defined gender roles in Antebellum America, particularly in the more commercialized areas of the Northeast. Americans at the time believed in essential and natural differences between women and men. According to commonly held views, the "True Woman" (or one embodying the archetypal feminine ideal) was religiously pious, morally pure, physically delicate, highly emotional and intuitive, submissive to her husband, and, above all else, devoted to the domestic pursuits of housekeeping and child-rearing. Her husband, in contrast, was expected to be strong, perhaps a bit coarse, reserved rather than emotional, intellectual, steady minded, and skilled and enterprising enough to make a living for himself and his family in the emerging areas of commerce and trade. As such, a woman's work took place in the home; the "private sphere" of domesticity became her domain of power and influence. Men, in turn, inhabited the "public sphere," where they dominated business, industry, skilled and unskilled professions, law, and politics.

### **Separate Spheres**

Separate public and private spheres served as more than just discrete domains in which men and women operated. Americans accepted the public sphere as the world of masculinity, and men participated in it to prove their manliness. The domestic or private sphere became the place where women were made and femininity forged. Men and women alike considered the home a repository of social virtue that women, because of their inherently pure and pious natures, were

uniquely suited to maintain. In the home, women raised the next generation of virtuous citizens and best served the interests of their families, insulated as they were from what many considered the competitive, brutish world and corrupting power of the marketplace and party politics. Most Americans believed that social, political, and economic order would reign as long as men and women remained in their respective spheres.

## **Women and the Law**

Common law legal codes bolstered the customs that kept women at home and subordinate to men. Under the system of coverture, women entered a state of "civil death" upon marriage. With their legal identities "covered" by their husbands, married women could not sue or be sued, make contracts, buy or sell property, or even control the property they brought with them into marriage or earned through their own labor. Husbands also had complete control over decisions regarding children and custody. The law, in fact, negated women's civil identities to such a degree that if a man raped a married woman, her husband could sue the perpetrator for injuries (since it was his "property" that had been damaged). The wife, for her part, could not sue.

## **Women and the Right to Vote**

Coverture's precepts carried over from the legal to the political realm. In Antebellum America, federal and state governments universally denied women the right to vote. Since wives were legally "covered" by their husbands, husbands in essence "spoke" for them in the political arena. Stripped of the right to vote, women became increasingly dependent on men. Extending voting rights in the early 1800s to all white men (voting requirements had originally depended on ownership of property) in what became known as "universal white male suffrage" only exaggerated the differences between women and men and reinforced the masculine characteristics of the public, and thus political, sphere.

## **Early Activists**

Early voices of protest against legal and political constraints did emerge. In 1776, Abigail Adams implored her husband John, then participating in the Continental Congress, to "Remember the Ladies" as the nation's political leaders wrote up new codes of law. "Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands," she wrote. "Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could." Although the new laws, in fact, did not "remember" women in the way Abigail had hoped, arguments

over women's rights, especially in elite circles, continued. When British writer Mary Wollstonecraft published her tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in 1792, American magazines took up the debate as well. Nevertheless, the discussions accomplished little in terms of concrete gains for women. By the early 1800s, most women appeared to accept their subordinate status with little public dispute.

### **Antebellum Reform and Education**

Women's formal exclusion from the political sphere and their consignment to the domestic realm did not necessarily eliminate their influence from arenas of social and political change. Embracing key principles of the "True Woman," American women used their child-rearing responsibilities as an excuse to argue for increased access to education. Just as importantly, they wielded their supposedly superior level of Christian piety and virtue as a weapon to gain access to public debates over the most important social and moral concerns of their time.

### **Christian Revivalism**

The Northeastern region of the United States, undergoing transformation by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and the introduction of the market economy, became the center for Antebellum reform efforts. Dramatic social and economic changes created tumult and insecurity in the lives of many Americans and exposed them to the problems of poverty, alcoholism, prostitution, and vice. Many turned to religion for solace and inspiration and participated in the wave of Christian revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening. Under the tents of evangelical ministers traveling across the frontier and Northern states, ordinary men and women heard fervent messages of salvation that promised deliverance from hardship through personal religious conversion. Revivalist preachers promised that participants could survive the vicissitudes of life if they chose to live in a more "perfect" and Godly manner. The perfection of the self, as many followers came to believe, could and should lead to the perfection of society as well. Convinced that God was on their side, Christian Americans began the process of purifying the nation of its sins by distributing Bible tracts, providing aid to the poor, waging campaigns against prostitution and illicit sex, and inaugurating a powerful temperance movement designed to eradicate the influence of alcohol and drinking.

## **Revivalism and Women**

Women, who participated in the Second Great Awakening in numbers far greater than men and who were known for their high degree of religious and moral concern, quickly assumed leading roles in the efforts at social reform. Although most white Americans generally considered the realm of public activity unfeminine, Christian women used their "female moral authority" to protect themselves from charges of "unladylike" behavior as they distributed literature on street corners, surveilled brothels, and formed voluntary societies and organizations. In the process, they gained a public voice as well as invaluable experience outside of the home.

## **Slavery and Abolitionism**

In the early 1830s, an influential minority of white religious activists added the institution of slavery to the list of national sins requiring abolition. Slavery now formed the backbone of the Southern economy, where enslaved African Americans labored against their will to support cotton and rice plantations as well as small farms and urban trades. Southern slavery indirectly bolstered the Northern economy as well to the benefit of merchants and industrialists. To white reformers committed to the Christian theology of perfectionism, which upheld that only those in possession of self-discipline and free will could carry out God's commands, slavery became the greatest sin at all. Not only were the conditions of slavery degrading and cruel, but the very nature of servitude, which required following the orders of a master, deprived slaves of the opportunity to act of their own free will and live as responsible and moral Christians. Slavery particularly enraged activist Quakers, whose fiercely egalitarian philosophy of human social relations posited that God lived within all people. If Christian reformers could save the soul of the nation, slavery, they insisted, would need to be eradicated once and for all.

## **The Garrisonians**

William Lloyd Garrison, a Massachusetts-born printer, became the most vocal proponent of the new strain of abolitionism. From 1831 until 1865, Garrison edited and published *The Liberator*, the leading anti-slavery weekly of the time, in which he argued for the immediate abolition of slavery. He also advanced his agenda through the work of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society, both of which he helped found in the early 1830s. Reflecting their religious roots, Garrison and his allies based their campaign on a strategy of moral suasion: their primary objective was to arouse public sympathy for the slave and

to sway public opinion enough to influence state and national policymakers. The Garrisonians published handbills, newspapers, and booklets, which they mailed across the country and into the South. They organized public meetings and speaking events. They raised money to support their own activities as well as the efforts of the "underground railroad," which led enslaved blacks to freedom in the North. In addition, they collected hundreds of thousands of signatures on petitions that they then mailed to Congress in an unrelenting campaign to abolish slavery.

## **Conclusion**

Like the other reform movements of the Antebellum era, the abolitionist movement attracted a great deal of female participation and support. Women entered the movement committed to challenging the institution of slavery. Little did they and their male allies understand what the full repercussions of their activism would be.