

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

Introduction

In the early 1830s, *The Liberator*, a radical abolitionist journal published in Boston by activist William Lloyd Garrison, initiated a column called "Ladies Department" in which appeared articles, poems, and letters by and for the paper's female readership. Designed to inspire women to work to end slavery, the "Ladies Department" identified itself both by its female-centered content and by the visually striking illustration of a black woman kneeling in chains and imploring assistance with the words, "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?"

For the white, female readers of *The Liberator*, the image, together with its compelling question, forced a comparison of the enslaved black woman's situation with their own. The pervasive racism of the era, based on widely accepted ideas about the racial superiority of white Americans and the racial inferiority of free and enslaved black Americans, would have made it difficult for white readers to respond affirmatively to the question in the illustration. Popular attitudes about independence and virtue led most Americans to consider slaves as servants utterly dependent on their masters, or as the most debased of human beings. The black woman's kneeling, supplicant position perhaps aided her ability to gain the sympathy of white viewers: she did not threaten their status; she merely asked for their help. Nevertheless, viewing enslaved black women as "sisters" and "women" would have been unconventional, if not radical, for white women in the 1830s.

Despite its potentially startling nature, the illustration was a familiar one to Americans involved in the struggle to end slavery. A similar version featuring a male slave and posing the question, "Am I not a Man and a Brother," appeared in the late 1780s and had quickly become an emblem of British and American abolitionist causes. By the early 1800s, Americans encountered the image everywhere, from porcelain cameos designed by Josiah Wedgwood, to newspapers, coins, the title pages of books, commercial crockery, and even women's needlework.

At first glance, the male and female versions of the illustration appear to convey a universal message, that of the humanity of the slave and the sin of slavery. Yet as Americans discovered in the decades that followed, asking white women to identify with their black "sisters" in chains carried with it implications reaching far beyond the abolition of slavery itself. This module explores the changes that embracing

such a sisterhood ushered in. How did white women's involvement in abolitionist activities influence what Americans considered to be the proper sphere of female action? How did their participation affect the way they viewed themselves and their positions in the complex social, cultural, political, and economic milieu of the time? What were the ultimate consequences of viewing female slaves as both "women" and "sisters?"