

Instructions: Highlight or underline that the text will help you answer your Supporting and Compelling Questions. Take notes on the side and explain why the examples are important.

Women's Rights in Antebellum America

In the era of revivalism and reform, American understood the family and home as the hearthstones of civic virtue and moral influence. This increasingly confined middle-class white women to the domestic sphere, where they were responsible for educating children and maintaining household virtue. Yet women took the very ideology that defined their place in the home and managed to use it to fashion a public role for themselves. As a result, women actually became more visible and active in the public sphere than ever before. The influence of the Second Great Awakening, coupled with new educational opportunities available to girls and young women, enabled white middle-class women to leave their homes en masse, joining and forming societies dedicated to everything from literary interests to the antislavery movement.

In the early nineteenth century, the dominant understanding of gender claimed that women were the guardians of virtue and the spiritual heads of the home. Women were expected to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic, and to pass these virtues on to their children. Historians have described these expectations as the "Cult of Domesticity," or the "Cult of True Womanhood," and they developed in tandem with industrialization, the market revolution, and the Second Great Awakening. In the early nineteenth century, men's working lives increasingly took them out of the home and into the "public sphere." At the same time, revivalism emphasized women's unique potential and obligation to cultivate Christian values and spirituality in the "domestic sphere." There were also real legal limits to what women could do outside of it. Women were unable to vote, men gained legal control over their wives' property, and women with children had no legal rights over their offspring. Additionally, women could not initiate divorce, make wills, or sign contracts. Women effectively held the legal status of children.

Because the evangelical movement prominently positioned women as the guardians of moral virtue, however, many middle-class women parlayed this spiritual obligation into a more public role. Although prohibited from participating in formal politics such as voting, office holding, and making the laws that governed them, white women entered the public arena through their activism in charitable and reform organizations. Benevolent organizations dedicated to evangelizing among the poor, encouraging temperance, and curbing immorality were all considered pertinent to women's traditional focus on family, education, and religion. Voluntary work related to labor laws, prison reform, and antislavery applied women's roles as guardians of moral virtue to address all forms of social issues that they felt contributed to the moral decline of society. As antebellum reform and revivalism brought women into the public sphere more than ever before, women and their male allies became more attentive to the myriad forms of gender inequity in the United States.

Female education provides an example of the great strides made by and for women during the antebellum period. As part of the education reform movement led by Horace Mann and William Holmes McGuffey, several female reformers worked tirelessly to increase women's access to education. In 1814, Emma Willard founded the Middlebury Female Seminary with the explicit purpose of educating girls with the same rigorous curriculum used for boys of the same age. Originally running the school out of her home in Middlebury, Vermont, Willard's efforts to expand her school struggled against financial difficulty and public opposition. It was not until 1821 that she could drum up enough private contributions to finance the opening of her Troy Female Seminary (now called Emma Willard School). The school educated future leaders of the women's rights movement such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Mary Lyons also worked to create opportunities in women's education, helping to establish several female educational seminaries before eventually founding Mount Holyoke College in 1837. Lyons and Willard specifically targeted the wealthy middle-class, but their work nonetheless opened doors for women that previously had remained closed.

Women's participation in the antislavery crusade most directly inspired specific women's rights campaigns. Many of the earliest women's rights advocates began their activism by fighting the injustices of slavery, including Angelina Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In the 1830s, women in cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia established female societies dedicated to the antislavery mission. Initially, these societies were similar to the prayer and fundraising-based projects of other reform societies. As such societies proliferated, however, their strategies changed. Women could not vote, for example, but they increasingly used their right to petition to express their antislavery grievances to the government. Impassioned women like the Grimké sisters even began to travel on lecture circuits dedicated to the cause. This latter strategy, born out of fervent antislavery advocacy, ultimately tethered the cause of women's rights to that of abolitionism.

Sarah Moore Grimké and Angelina Emily Grimké were born to a wealthy family in Charleston, South Carolina, where they witnessed firsthand the horrors of slavery. Repulsed by the treatment of the slaves on their own family farm, they decided to support the antislavery movement by sharing their experiences on Northern lecture tours. They were among the earliest and most famous American women to take such a public role in the name of reform. However, when the Grimké sisters met substantial harassment and opposition to their public speaking on antislavery, they were inspired to speak out against more than the slave system. They began to address issues of women's rights in tandem with the abolitionist cause by drawing direct comparisons between the condition of women in the United States and the condition of the slave.

As the antislavery movement gained momentum in the northern states in the 1830s and 1840s, so too did efforts for women's rights. These efforts came to a head at an event that took place in London in 1840. That year, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were among the American delegates attending the World Antislavery Convention in London. However, due to ideological disagreements between some of the abolitionists, the convention's organizers refused to seat the female delegates or allow them to vote during

the proceedings. Angered by this treatment, Stanton and Mott returned to the United States with a renewed interest in pursuing women's rights. In 1848, they organized the Seneca Falls Convention, a two-day summit in New York state in which women's rights advocates came together to discuss the problems facing women.



Lucretia Mott campaigned for women's rights, abolition, and equality in the United States. Joseph Kyle (artist), Lucretia Mott, 1842. [Wikimedia](#).

The result of the Seneca Falls Convention was the Declaration of Sentiments. Modeled on the Declaration of Independence in order to emphasize the belief that women's rights were part of the same democratic promises on which the United States was founded, the Declaration of Sentiments outlined fifteen grievances and eleven resolutions designed to promote women's access to civil rights. The Declaration begins, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal..." and states 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." While certainly radical, this statement expressed the reformers' belief that white men had effectively prevented white women from exercising the natural rights afforded to every human being. Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men, all of who were already involved in some aspect of reform, signed the Declaration of Sentiments. This document ushered in nearly a century's worth of action on behalf of women's rights.

Women's inability to vote was the first grievance listed in the Declaration of Sentiments, but this was not the first time that white women in New York had demanded the right to vote. Two years earlier in 1846, a group of six women petitioned the New York state legislature to amend the constitution in order to grant women the elective franchise. Yet, while suffrage would prove to be a steadfast cornerstone of the women's rights movement, antebellum activists sought more than just formal political rights. They also pursued the reformation of laws that forced women into dependency on their husbands or male family members. Women's rights advocates rallied against laws that prohibited married women from owning property independently of their husbands and all laws that rendered married women "civilly dead." Above all else, antebellum women's rights advocates sought civil equality for men and women. They fought what they perceived as senseless gender discrimination, such as barring women from attending college or paying female teachers less than their male colleagues, and they argued that men and women should be held to the same moral standards.

The Seneca Falls Convention was the first of many similar gatherings promoting women's rights across the northern states. Yet the women's rights movement grew slowly, and experienced few victories: few states reformed married women's property laws before the Civil War, and no state was prepared to offer women the right to vote during the antebellum period. At the onset of the Civil War, women's rights advocates temporarily threw all of their support behind abolition, allowing the cause of racial equality to temporarily trump that of gender equality. But the words of the Seneca Falls convention continued to inspire activists for generations.

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