10.6: Women's Rights in Antebellum America

In the era of revivalism and reform, Americans 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. These economic and religious transformations increasingly seemed to divide the world into the public space of work and politics and the domestic space of leisure and morality. 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. In spite of this apparent valuation of women’s position in society, there were clear limitations. Under the terms of coverture, 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, sign contracts, or vote.

Female education provides an example of the great strides made by and for women during the antebellum period. As part of a larger education reform movement in the early republic, several female reformers worked tirelessly to increase women’s access to education. They argued that if women were to take charge of the education of their children, they...
needed to be well educated themselves. While the women’s education movement did not generally push for women’s political or social equality, it did assert women’s intellectual equality with men, an idea that would eventually have important effects. Educators such as Emma Willard, Catharine Beecher, and Mary Lyons (founders of the Troy Female Seminary, Hartford Female Seminary, and Mount Holyoke Seminary, respectively) adopted the same rigorous curriculum that was used for boys. Many of these schools had the particular goal of training women to be teachers. Many graduates of these prominent seminaries would found their own schools, spreading women’s education across the country, and with it ideas about women’s potential to take part in public life.

The abolitionist movement was another important school for women’s public engagement. Many of the earliest women’s rights advocates began their activism by fighting the injustices of slavery, including Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. In the 1830s, women in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia established female societies dedicated to the antislavery cause. Initially, these societies were similar to the prayer and fund-raising-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. This latter strategy, born of fervent antislavery advocacy, ultimately tethered the cause of women’s rights to abolitionism.

Sarah Moore Grimké and Angelina Emily Grimké were born to a wealthy family in Charleston, South Carolina, where they witnessed the horrors of slavery firsthand. Repulsed by the treatment of the slaves on the Grimké plantation, they decided to support the antislavery movement by sharing their experiences on northern lecture tours. At first speaking to female audiences, they soon attracted “promiscuous” crowds of both men and women. They were among the earliest and most famous American women to take such a public role in the name of reform. 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 see that they would need to fight for women’s rights in order to fight for the rights of slaves. Other female abolitionists soon joined them in linking the issues of women’s rights and abolitionism by drawing direct comparisons between the condition of free women in the United States and the condition of the slave.

As the antislavery movement gained momentum in 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, Lucretia Mott was among the American delegates attending the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Because of 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 such treatment, Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose husband was also a delegate, 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.
Stanton wrote the Declaration of Sentiments for the Seneca Falls Convention to capture the wide range of issues embraced by the early women’s rights movement. She modeled the document on the Declaration of Independence to make explicit the connection between women’s liberty and the rhetoric of America’s founding. The Declaration of Sentiments outlined fifteen grievances and eleven resolutions. They championed property rights, access to the professions, and, most controversially, the right to vote. Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men, all of whom were already involved in some aspect of reform, signed the Declaration of Sentiments.  

Antebellum women’s rights fought what they perceived as senseless gender discrimination, such as the barring of women from college and inferior pay for female teachers. They also argued that men and women should be held to the same moral standards. The Seneca Falls Convention was the first of many such gatherings promoting women’s rights, held almost exclusively in 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 the bulk 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 generations of activists.