

Women in the abolitionist movement



The abolitionism was regarded as a strong movement of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries that sought to eradicate slavery and free millions of black people who had been held as slaves. Abolitionism was also regarded as the anti-slave movements in the Atlantic world[1]. The roots of the anti-slave movement lie in the black resistance to slavery, the ideas about universal human rights, the changed interpretation of the Christian morals, and the economic changes that were affecting the entire world. As Europeans gained power and colonized several states across the world, they began to rely on forced labor from Africans and their descendants[2]. By the mid of the seventeenth century, slavery had hit the United States. Those who were enslaved lost their free rights were served as slaves for life and passed the same to their children. Majority searched for their freedom through court action, rebellion, or even escape. The Quakers were the first abolitionist from America who believed that slavery was physically dangerous for both the slave and the master as well as sinful. The Quakers urged the Americans to terminate their involvement in the slave trade. With time, abolitionism had spread beyond African Americans. Several political and religious movement joined the campaign and rallied North American to lead the world into political abolitionism. Majority of those who rebelled against the slave trade and slavery were blacks. They believed the intervention of the government and the church could end slavery. Since the government was doing nothing to solve the problem, they turned to violent means as well as forming aggressive movements that rallied for the rights of women and enslaved people. The paper discusses women in the abolitionist movement in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century and their role in the movements.

The Commencement of Women Involvement in Abolitionist Movements

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, America was undergoing rapid industrial growth. Majority of the men worked in these industries as women were left to maintain the domestic sphere such as taking care of children, maintaining moral order in homes, and encouraging religious study. Society expected women to be pious, submissive, and engage in domesticity. Such characters were held to define true femininity. Although the women directed domestic affairs, their involvement with the matters of the society increased in the 1820s. The society accepted the engagement terming it as an extension to domesticity. By 1830s, women pushed further and extended their roles by joining and participating in groups that championed for the moral and radical change in the society[3]. As more women joined and formed the anti-slave movement, society began to judge them as controversial.

Despite the disapproval the women received from the public, they went on to support the abolition of the slave trade. Their involvement with the society and the abolition movement gave the women the experience in activism. In the 1820s, Elizabeth Chandler led several women into the abolition movement through her publication[4]. The recruitment of women in the Garrison's liberator into the Ladies Department triggered discussions on the difficulties of life as a woman slave and the harsh treatment some had to endure during pregnancy.

Mechanisms used by Women in Abolition of Slave Trade

In ancient America, women were considered lesser beings as they had no voting rights nor influence on political movements. Despite their lack of influence and appearance in the political scene, women played a crucial role in the abolition of the slave trade and the subsequent slavery during the British colonial rule. At the beginning of the abolition movements, women were not direct activists as they were not allowed to take part in politics. However, some women such as Lady Margaret Middleton helped in persuading William Wilberforce to take an active role in the abolition process. She did not actively engage in the process herself. Others participated indirectly by writing imaginative literature and publications on slavery. The publication campaign strategy soon became popular and drew several women into the platform from various regions across the world most of whom wrote and published ant-slave poems and literature[5]. The aim of the increased campaign against slavery through anti-slave publication was intended for wide readership across the globe. Some women who were slaves wrote poems about their own lives in slavery which were quite influential[6].

In addition, women brought and wore garments of anti-slavery cameos that were intended to publicize their support of the abolition process that had already gained roots. The Abolition Society was rapidly growing so that by 1788, the movement had 206 female subscribers. The female subscribers were mostly wives and daughters of manufacturers, professionals, Unitarian, shopkeepers, and even others from evangelical backgrounds. They were all out to advocate for the rights of slaves and the subsequent abolition of the policies that supported slavery especially in the south and the entire country.

As part of the anti-slave campaigns, the women organized sugar boycotts of the 1790s immediately after the abolition bill had failed in the parliament[7]. The sugar was grown on plantations that were tended by their enslaved colleagues. During this period, more than three hundred thousand people joined the sugar boycott to force the abolition of the slave trade. Although their campaigns bore fruits, they did not stop until they obtained full freedom from all forms of enslavement. By 1807, the Abolition Act was passed that abolished the slave trade but remained silent on chattel slavery. The chattel slavery held that a child born of slave parents was considered a slave. The abolitionist women kept the anti-slave movement moving until the 1820s. Consequently, it was also these women that pushed for total slave abolition during the British rule.

Champions of Justice in the Abolitionist Movement

Although women were not formally admitted to the earliest abolition movement, they formed an important part in the movements within and beyond America. Both white and black women aided in shaping anti-slavery discourses through the distribution of literature that helped in the fight against the slave trade and slavery alike[8]. The writing made the role of women in abolitionism more visible. However, their involvement in the movement changed in the 1820s and the 1830s as they took active roles in re-orientating the reform culture and shaping the anti-slavery activism. During this period, women led petition drives to both federal and state government thus making anti-slavery a serious social concern. Women such as Lydia Maria Child and Sojourner Truth dedicated their lives to the abolitionist cause.

In the decades that followed, both white and black women served as editors, lecturers, organizers, and fundraisers of the anti-slavery movements[9]. The slaveholders criticized the role of women abolitionists arguing that they stirred up trouble in the slavery issues[10]. Although some males in the movement had trouble supporting women leaders and lecturers, the women intensified in their quest for liberation of the slaves from enslavement. The movements grew stronger and stronger with the passing of each day. Although the women who championed for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery were several, some like Angelina Grimke, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth were considered icons in the abolitionist movements.

Sojourner Truth

The black abolitionist was born to a slave of the Dutch-speaking settlers of New York. Due to her contact with experiences of inequality and social injustice as well as abolitionists and feminists, Sojourner lectured on extensive anti-slavery as well as championing for women rights. Owing to her effort in the fight against slavery, Truth became one of the most well-known heroes in the abolitionist movement[11]. She traveled a lot and soon became a public orator on abolitionism. In 1850, Truth published her *Narrative* which made her famous. After selling several copies of her literature, Sojourner Truth bought herself a home in Northampton. Later in 1851, in her speech on “Ain’t I a woman?” Truth defended the spiritual and the physical strength of women[12]. Her spiritualist and advocacy took her to Midwest where she settled in Harmonia, Michigan.

While in the Midwest, Truth continued to advocate for the rights of women as well as the fight against the slave trade and slavery through abolitionist movement. The truth tended using life parables to express social and political concerns. She pointed at the constitution as being blind to the rights of the blacks. Some audience threatened to torch her house if she continued fighting for the rights of the slaves[13]. Truth was determined in what she was doing and could not be deterred by threats. She even encouraged Douglass who was despairing hope in the fight against slavery. She argued that she had sold her life for others, but now it was about time that she sold it for herself. Some male counterparts questioned her gender claiming that she could not be properly feminine in her demeanor. Sojourner was boldly executing her duties as true abolitionist without fear of discrimination and mockery. Sojourner Truth can be described as a true hero who stood by what she thought was right amid a community domineered by male chauvinism.

Harriet Tubman

Everyone including children in America has heard of Harriet Tubman. Tubman was one of the most renowned female abolitionists of her time. People used several names to describe the devoted female abolitionist. Some referred to her as the “ Moses of her people,” while others named her “ General Tubman.” Douglass, one of those who experienced slavery described her as the “ Midnight sky and the silent star...” Tubman was courageous in her effort to end slavery. She is described to have guided the fugitive slaves out the slavery territory back in the 1850s. Tubman also served in a union though behind the Confederate lines. After escaping from slavery, Tubman opted to engage in abolitionism. Although she never acted

as a lecturer due to her impediment of speech caused by an injury sustained while she was a slave, she tirelessly made alliances with the abolitionist movement and women's rights groups. As part of the Underground Railway, Tubman managed to bring fugitive slaves to Frederick Douglass' home. The Underground Railway is mostly associated with Tubman though she was not the founder.

Although scholars have revealed that the number of slaves she rescued may not be as many as people think that does not diminish Tubman's efforts in saving lives. She risked her life to save those of the fugitive slaves from the south[14]. She led both men and women out of the south through the dangerous terrains to freedom of the north and Canada. The success of Tubman in her rescue missions can be attributed to her cleverness and unwavering courage. As part of her determination, Tubman threatened the faint-hearted slaves along the route with a gun. In addition, babies were given sedatives to prevent them from crying especially during the voyage. The south offered a lump sum for whoever would capture Tubman.

Angelina Grimke

Angelina Grimke was a daughter of a slaveholder of the southern states. She was committed follower of the Quakerism. Grimke, having been raised in a family of a slaveholder was capable of giving the northerners a first account of the cruelty faced by the slaves. Angelina, like the other female abolitionist, was not welcomed by the society as an orator and an advocate of the slaves' rights. Male abolitionists were opposed to the role of women in the public activities which caused division in the movement[15]. Above all,

most of her audience was mixed with some being of the antislavery movements while others attended her lectures to cause disruption. Angelina Grimke had become an abolitionist by accident. She never had the thought of becoming one in her early years. Since Grimke and her counterparts were among the first female speakers in America, their lectures attracted a huge following. The audience often dissected their words with disapproval. The disapproval and the public mockery caused them untold frustration, guilt, and a feeling of inadequacy[16]. However, Grimke used the opportunity to learn herself and her rights as a woman.

The research revealed that women communication, especially in public arenas, emphasized the inquiry into the woman's rights advocacy. The speeches and lecture of Angelina Grimke served as the prototype of the feminist expression. How Grimke challenged the role of women in society foreshadowed the conflicts that were later experienced by feminists[17]. Most of her speeches were analyzed and found to be her struggle to find a stance in the community as a woman. Angelina chose the persona of the biblical Esther in the abolitionist movement amid opposition even from her womenfolk who argued that the position of women in the movement was supposed to be acceptable in the society[18]. The claim precluded public speaking.

Conclusion

The contribution of women in the abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries cannot be ignored. Some great women laid their lives to save the slaves who were suffering in the

households of cruel masters. Despite the societal restrictions impeding women from participating in political affairs, the women abolitionists used various means to get their points to the intended destinations. Some used literature to persuade people to support anti-slave movements. Others such as Harriet Tubman used Underground Railroad to help fugitive slaves to escape to the north. All these tactics were meant to bring to an end the evil, sinful, and cruel acts of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. They even joined movements that encouraged the state and the federal governments to end slavery. The contribution of these women must have ultimately culminated into the success of the abolitionist.

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