

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

Evidence 10: Letters From Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith

A

Introduction

For a number of women in the abolitionist movement, the act of working for the immediate emancipation of the slave — of entering the traditionally male sphere of politics — challenged them to redefine the notion of appropriate female behavior in early-nineteenth-century America. The sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké were two such women. Despite growing up in a large and prominent slaveholding family in South Carolina, the women found themselves drawn to the intense religiosity of the Second Great Awakening and began questioning both the legitimacy of the Southern slave system and the concept of a proper woman's sphere. Nurtured as young adults by a militant community of Quakers outside of Philadelphia, the sisters joined the Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement in 1835. They sympathized with the movement's egalitarian impulses, its view of blacks as children of God, and its willingness to allow women to play leading roles.

In 1836, Angelina, the younger sister, achieved some small amount of fame by publishing a lengthy pamphlet entitled "An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," which called on Southern women to mobilize against slavery. Reflecting Angelina's intense piety, the pamphlet insisted that one could not be a good Christian unless one worked to emancipate the slaves. Her pamphlet caused a furor in the South. White southerners considered Angelina's decision to speak out against slavery a scandalous act of treason against her family, her region, and her race.

Later that year, Angelina and Sarah took their commitment to abolitionism a step further by attending a training workshop organized by male abolitionists in New York and embarking on a speaking tour of New England and the Northeast. The combination of their strong speaking skills and unique position as white Southern women in opposition to slavery drew record crowds.

Questions to Consider

- What do the letters, written by Angelina to her friend, Jane Smith, indicate about the challenges that speaking in public posed to women like the Grimké sisters?
- Based on evidence in the letters, was Angelina aware that she and her sister were entering a male domain?
- Why did she believe that women had a duty to "intermeddle" in the political subject of slavery?
- How does her justification for political action compare with the explanations provided by other female activists of the 1830s [see Evidence 1 and 3]?

Document

New York

January 20, 1837

My Dear Jane:

For the three weeks previous we had lectured on the Laws of the Slave States & illustrated each by example to show those laws were not a dead letter. Yesterday we had intended to close this part of the subject by this testimony, then by showing that Slavery is cruel to the body, heart, mind and soul of the slave. But I could not get thro' more than the two first, so that the degradation of the mind and destruction of the soul remain fro next week. We now hold our meetings regularly at Henry G. Ludlow's session room every 5th day [of the week, Thursday] afternoon at 3 O'Clock. By the by, as the room was so crowded and oppressingly warm he gave out that we could have the Church itself hereafter — there must have been more than 300 out yesterday & we are told, a more influential class than at first attended. Our publications were eagerly received by the hands which were raised to catch them as we threw them into the crowd. A deepening interest we think is evidently exhibited. It really seems as if the Lord was moving by his Spirit on the hearts of the people and that the tide of feeling is beginning to rise. . .

But dear friend, thou will doubtless want to know whether I find it an easy thing to hold such meetings — I, no! I can truly say that the day I have to speak is always a day of suffering. . . . It is really delightful to see dear

Sister [Sarah Grimké] so happy in this work. I have not the shadow of doubt she is in her right place & will be made instrumental of great good. . .

Thou mayest remark I speak of our talks as lectures. Well this the name that others have given our poor effort, & I don't know in fact what to call such novel proceedings. How little! how very little I supposed when I used to say "I wish I was a man, that I might go out and lecture," that I would ever do such a thing. The idea never crossed my mind that as a woman such work could possibly be assigned me. But the Lord is "wonderful counsel, excellent in working," making a way for his people when there seems to be no way. Dear Jane, I love the work. I count myself greatly favored in being called to it, I often feel as if the only earthly blessing I have to ask for is to be made the unworthy instrument of arousing the slumbering energy and dormant sympathy of my northern sisters on this deeply painful and interesting subject. . . .

Angelina Grimké

* * *

New York

February 4, 1837

My Dear Jane:

. . . [Last week's meeting] was the largest we have had, about 400, I should think. . . . We had one male auditor, who refused to go out when H.G.L. [Henry G. Ludlow] told him it was exclusively for ladys, & so there he sat & somehow I did not feel his presence at all embarrassing & went on just as 'tho he was not there. Some one said he took notes, & I think he was a Southern spy & shall not be at all surprised if he published us in some Southern paper, for we have heard nothing of him here. . . .

Some friends think I make too many gestures, one thinking females ought to be motionless when speaking in public, another fearing that other denominations might be offended by them, because they were unaccustomed to hear women speak in public. But I think the more a speaker can yield himself entirely to the native impulses of feeling, the

better, this is just what I do. . . .

Last 5th day [Thursday] I think not more than 200 were out. Sister [Sarah] spoke one hour on the effects of the soul, & I finished off with some remarks on the popular objection Slavery is a political subject, therefore women should not intermeddle. I admitted it was, but endeavored to show that women were citizens and had duties to perform to their country as well as men. . . . I tried to enlighten our sisters a little in their rights & duties. . . .

Pray for us —
Angelina Grimké

* * *

Boston
May 29, 1837

My Dear Jane:

. . . It has really been delightful to mingle with our brethren & sisters in this city. On 5th day [Thursday] evening we had a pleasant meeting of Abolitionists at Francis Jackson's, in the rooms where the Female AntiSlavery Meeting was held. On 6th day [Friday] evening, we had just another such at Friend Chapman's, Ann's father. Here I had a long talk with the brethren on the rights of women & found a very general sentiment prevailing that it was time our fetters were broken. Goodell said he was well aware that women could not perform their duties as moral beings, under the existing state of public sentiment. M Child & M Chapman support the same views. Indeed very many seem to think that a new order of things is very desirable in this respect.

And now, my dear friend, in view of these things, I feel as if it is not the cause of the slave only which we plead, but the cause of woman as a responsible moral being, & I am ready to exclaim, "Who is sufficient for these things?" These holy causes must be injured if they are not helped by us. What an untrodden path we entered upon! Sometimes I feel almost bewildered, amazed, confounded & wonder by what strange concatenation of events I came to be where I am & what I am. And if I look forward, I am no less bewildered. I see not to what point, all these things are leading me.

. . . .
Tomorrow, we begin our public labor at Dorchester. . . . Pray for us, dear Jane. We need it more than ever. We see only in a glass darkly what results are to grow out of this experiment. I tremble for fear. . . . Sister is to speak at the Moral Reform Society this afternoon. I will leave this open & say something about it.

We have just returned from the meeting, & the Lord was there to help us, for I, too, opened my mouth, tho' I had refused to engage to do so. About 300, I guess, were present & appeared interested in the remarks made. We broached one part of the subject, which I doubt not was new to many, i.e., that this reform was to begin in ourselves. We were polluted by it, our moral being was seared & scathed by it. Look at our feelings in the society of men, why the restraint & embarrassment? If we regarded each other as moral & intellectual beings merely, how pure & elevated & dignified would be our feelings towards, & intercourse with them. How is the solemn & sacred subject of marriage regarded & talked about? My heart is pained, my womanhood is insulted, my moral being is outraged continually, & I told them so. After we had finished, many women came up & expressed their pleasure & satisfaction at this part particularly of our remarks. They were their own feelings, but had never heard them expressed before. . . .

Farewell my dear Jane. May we often meet where spirits blend in prayer is the desire of Thy Angelina.

Source:

Kathryn Kish Sklar, ed., *Women's Rights Emerges Within the Anti-Slavery Movement, 1830-1870: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 92-94.