

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

Evidence 14: An Account of Women's Experiences at the June 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London, England

A

Introduction

It was not only speaking in public that led activist women to question their second-class status. As the next two documents show, sometimes the attempt to do something as simple as attending a meeting could raise women's ire and consciousness about their place in American life.

The document below describes the experiences of a group of outspoken and committed female abolitionists, including Lucretia Mott, a well-known Quaker activist, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the newly wed wife of anti-slavery advocate Henry Stanton and a committed abolitionist in her own right. In June 1840, Mott and Stanton traveled as part of a larger group of women to London, England, to participate as delegates from the United States in the World's Anti-Slavery Convention. When they arrived, they discovered to their dismay that the Convention's organizers neither welcomed their presence nor their involvement. Some male leaders argued that mixed-sex meetings went against British custom. Others insisted that women's involvement in politics was un-Christian, invoking the kinds of arguments used by Massachusetts clergy against the Grimké sisters. After considerable debate, organizers told the women that they could sit quietly in a separate women-only section curtained off from the main convention hall where they could listen to — but not participate in — the convention's proceedings.

Questions to Consider

- How did the women respond to their exclusion from the main events of the World's Anti-Slavery Convention?
- In what ways did their arguments about women's rights echo those of Sarah and Angelina Grimké in Evidence [10](#), [11](#), [12](#), and [13](#)?

Document

The question of woman's right to speak, vote, and serve on committees. . . .disturbed the peace of the World's Anti-Slavery Convention, held [in 1840] in London. The call for that Convention invited delegates from all Anti-Slavery organizations. Accordingly several American societies saw fit to send women, as delegates, to represent them in that august assembly. But after going three thousand miles to attend a World's Convention, it was discovered that women formed no part of the constituent elements of the moral world. In summoning the friends of the slave from all parts of the two hemispheres to meet in London, John Bull never dreamed that woman, too, would answer to his call. Imagine then the commotion in the conservative anti-slavery circles in England, when it was known that half a dozen of those terrible women who had spoken to promiscuous assemblies, voted on men and measures, prayed and petitioned against slavery, women who had been mobbed, ridiculed by the press, and denounced by the pulpit who had been the cause of setting all American Abolitionists by the ears, and split their ranks asunder, were on their way to England. The fears of these formidable and belligerent women must have been somewhat appeased when Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, Abby Kimber, Elizabeth Neal, Mary Grew, of Philadelphia, in modest Quaker costume, Ann Green Phillips, Emily Winslow, and Abby Southwick, of Boston, all women of refinement and education, and several, still in their twenties, landed at last on the soil of Great Britain. Many who had awaited their coming with much trepidation, gave a sigh of relief, on being introduced to Lucretia Mott, learning that she represented the most dangerous elements in the delegation. The American clergymen who had landed a few days before, had been busily engaged in fanning the English prejudices into active hostility against the admission of these women to the Convention. In every circle of Abolitionists this was the theme, and the discussion grew more bitter, personal, and exasperating every hour.

The 12th of June dawned bright and beautiful on these discordant elements, and at an early hour anti-slavery delegates from different countries wended their way through the crooked streets of London to Freemason's Hall. Entering the vestibule, little groups might be seen gathered here and there, earnestly discussing the best disposition to make of these women delegates from America. The excitement and vehemence of protest and denunciation could not have been greater, if the news had come that the French were about to invade England. In vain these obdurate women had been conjured to withhold their credentials, and not thrust a

question that must produce such discord on the Convention. Lucretia Mott, in her calm, firm manner, insisted that the delegates had no discretionary power in the proposed action, and the responsibility of accepting or rejecting them must rest on the Convention.

At eleven o'clock, the spacious Hall being filled, the Convention was called to order. [The American abolitionist Wendell Phillips immediately made a motion to admit the female delegates to the Convention, setting off hours of vociferous debate. Ultimately, a large majority of the Convention's male delegates voted to exclude the women formal participation in the meeting, insisting instead that if they wanted to attend, they could listen to the proceedings from behind a curtained wall]. . . .

However, the debates in the Convention had the effect of rousing English minds to thought on the tyranny of sex, and American minds to the importance of some definite action toward women's emancipation.

As Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wended their way arm in arm down Great Queen Street that night, reviewing the exciting scenes of the day, they agreed to hold a woman's rights convention on their return to America, as the men to whom they had just listened had manifested their great need of some education on that question. Thus a missionary work for the emancipation of woman in "the land of the free and the home of the brave" was then and there inaugurated. As the ladies were not allowed to speak in the Convention, they kept up a brisk fire morning, noon, and night at their hotel on the unfortunate gentlemen who were domiciled at the same house. Mr. Birney, with his luggage, promptly withdrew after the first encounter, to some more congenial haven of rest, while the Rev. Nathaniel Colver, from Boston, who always fortified himself with six eggs well beaten in a large bowl at breakfast, to the horror of his host and a circle of aesthetic friends, stood his ground to the last — his physical proportions being his shield and buckler, and his Bible [which he likely shook in the faces of the supporters of female participation in the Convention]. . .his weapon of defence.

The movement for woman's suffrage, both in England and America, may be dated from the World's Anti-Slavery Convention.

Source:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds.,

History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 1 (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881), 53-54, 61-62.