

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

Conclusion

In the late 1840s, white female abolitionists increasingly identified with enslaved African American women. Such identification profoundly shaped both the emerging feminist ideology and the independent movement for women's rights that took shape in the aftermath of the Seneca Falls convention. By comparing their lives to the experiences of black women in bondage, white women began to articulate how oppressed they felt by the laws and customs of their time. Working for the emancipation of black slaves opened their eyes to the unsatisfactory nature of their own situations while providing necessary training in the techniques of political organization and action.

White women activists quickly got to work, holding conventions around the country and pressuring state legislatures to improve women's rights. Their efforts led fairly quickly to the passage of state laws protecting the property rights of married women. Agitation for woman's suffrage began almost immediately as well but would not be obtained for many more decades. It wasn't until 1920, with the ratification of the nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, that women finally gained the federally guaranteed right to vote.

Growing recognition of a common oppressor, however, did not necessarily make permanent allies of white and black women. Despite their roots in the abolitionist struggle, a number of prominent white feminists, among them Elizabeth Cady Stanton, abandoned their commitment to racial justice in the years immediately following the Civil War in order to pursue single-mindedly their goal of woman's rights. Their willingness to put the needs of white women over those of black women plagued the white-dominated campaign for woman's suffrage throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Believing themselves "sisters" to women like the iconic female slave of the ubiquitous illustration may have propelled white female reformers into an emerging feminist revolt. But history reveals the limits of such an imagined "sisterhood."

Nevertheless, in an interesting historical parallel, white women involved in the black civil rights movement of the early 1960s — women with no historical memory of the earlier feminist struggle — experienced a similar growing awareness that led to the rise of Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and 1970s. Then, as before, working to end the oppression of African Americans taught white

American women to question their subordinate status. The black civil rights movement also served as a training grounds for otherwise inexperienced women attempting to enter the political sphere. And yet, in another intriguing repetition of history, the growing identification with the experiences of African Americans did not necessarily eliminate racism among white female activists. Ensuring that the feminist movement included women of all ethnicities remained an ongoing struggle.