3

“FEMALE WOMEN OR FEMININE LADIES”¹

Gender and Women’s Rights before the Antebellum Movement

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To begin an essay on antebellum woman’s rights with the first explicitly woman’s rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 would not only be a cliché but also limit the discussion of woman’s rights to a single narrative. Although an exciting yarn, at once inspiring and frustrating, the line running from Republican Motherhood to women’s prominence in the antislavery movement through woman’s rights conventions of the 1850s and on toward the woman’s suffrage movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century tells an ever narrowing and distinctly white story that continues to owe plot points to its original authors, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. Women’s historians have added complexity, nuance, and dissent, but the tale of the antebellum woman’s rights movement remains largely homogeneous, a curious feature for its activists, who trained in a movement addressing racial inequality, and a distinct liability as they claimed to speak for all women.

Historians have followed several lines of inquiry in addressing the antebellum women’s rights movement, addressing legal reform, abolition, and republican ideology, but all have had to contend with gender. As theorist Joan Scott argued, “the concept of gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships,” while “politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics.”² In other words, ideas about the proper behavior and place of women in society influenced all institutions of power with the force of law, contemporary science, medical practice, and social custom, and women’s behavior was policed, permitted, and punished according to society’s ideals. Women, in turn, used these same ideals to influence and alter those very same institutions. Yet, even as they resisted proscriptions for their gender, women also internalized and deployed them in order to understand their place in the world and their interactions with other people. Given the many factors that described a woman’s life, from her race to her socioeconomic standing to the location of her home, most women came to very different conclusions and formulated very different ideals about their own gender. Therefore, if historian Elsa Barkley Brown was correct in contending that “all women do not have the same gender,” then placing the origins of the movement within the history of women’s gender can explain its particular make-up and limitations.³

By the time that a woman’s rights consciousness had produced activism in pursuit of legal, social, and political change, the dominant ideology held up “True Womanhood” as the
model for appropriate feminine behavior. Whether conforming to, critiquing, rejecting, or excluded from this ideal, no woman could escape its cultural force. According to women’s journals such as *Godey’s Ladies Book* (published 1830–1878), advice books such as *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), and the popular novels of the day, the “True Woman” confined herself to the “private sphere” of the home. There, pioneering historian Barbara Welter observed, she cultivated “the four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”

Writers on domesticity, like Catharine Beecher, attempted to subsume all women through a presumed shared experience of motherhood, family, home, and all of their attendant work. In reality, this was neither a practical model nor an accurate description of most women’s lives, and the concept of a “true woman” implied its opposite, the “false” or perhaps “deviant” woman. Even many conservative women chafed at the constraints of the ideal. The “damned mob of scribbling women” writing sentimental fiction rejected “submissiveness” in their heroines, but most women recognized their legally-enforced dependence. Even proslavery, anti-woman’s rights essayist Louisa S. McCord conceded that God had not “perhaps given to woman the most enviable place in his creation.”

True womanhood came to fruition in the Jacksonian era but grew from an older ideology of “separate spheres,” which divided the world into the public world of men and the private sphere of women. This notion had formed by the late eighteenth century and represented a new philosophy about relationships among classes of people. In the early modern era, “spheres” had described a social rank, its occupants, and their appropriate activities. The public sphere encompassed all of those duties related to the maintenance of the state or society, while the private sphere concerned those related to the household and family. That is, gender was different from spheres, and men and women performed different roles within all spheres. Although women were generally considered lesser versions of men in terms of intelligence, strength, and morality, like men, they held both public and private roles related to their social standing. Political theorists likened family to government, with both accepting hierarchy as inherent to society, government, and family. As the king was head of state, so was the father head of household.

In the century leading up to the revolutionary era, however, the configurations of public sphere, private sphere, and gender shifted. New concepts about the social contract and government by consent resulted in challenges to hierarchy. At the same time, reproductive differences between men and women served as the bases for changing ideas about sexual difference that extended beyond genitalia. Enlightenment theorists began to envision more republican forms of government, but they defined the work of that government as explicitly male, thereby associating “public” with men. Child-bearing along with its attendant responsibilities handicapped women’s ability to assume any responsibility away from the household and thus made women more suited to the “private sphere.” In consigning women to the “private sphere,” identified with the home, men could maintain patriarchal authority over their household as something separate from the “public sphere” in which they questioned hierarchy. Furthermore, by identifying each sphere as masculine or feminine territory, theorists linked social roles to biology, and any trait or task assigned to one or the other sphere became an immutable characteristic of men or women. “Once biology became the marker not just of difference but also of inferiority,” historian Rosemarie Zagarri argued, “women’s bodies provided a convenient explanation for excluding them from the same rights and privileges that men enjoyed.” No longer considered imperfect
versions of their male counterparts, women now found themselves described in binary opposition to men. Men, for instance, had the capacity for reason, while women’s strength was sentiment. With greater value placed on masculine features, women found themselves still consigned to the lesser status.\(^9\)

This metaphor of spheres was so powerful that, once identified by women’s historians in the 1960s, it became the prevalent analytical tool for nearly three decades and still influences historical inquiry. In using “separate spheres” to investigate the lives of women between the American Revolution and the Civil War, however, historians began to realize that most, if not all, women’s lives could not be understood through such a limited binary. “‘Woman’s sphere’ is the trope carried too far,” concluded Carol Lasser at a 1999 Society of Historians of the Early Republic symposium. After all, Lasser pointed out, “we begin to understand gender as an unstable, vital, and fluid relation, not as the enclosed space that has imprisoned our thinking.”\(^10\) Nineteenth-century women’s lives, then, could not be accurately represented by the very ideas about gender with which they had to contend because “woman’s sphere” neither included all women nor did it leave room for the actual experiences of women. At best, as Julie Roy Jeffrey conceded, the term could be invoked “to suggest the set of boundaries that were supposed to be observed by middle-class women and to suggest the gender ideology the conservatives proposed.”\(^11\) When considering women outside of the middle class, however, historians had to address Brown’s observation that “being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman – that is, race, class, time, and place,” and to treat the whole as a distinct experience rather than a set of variations.\(^12\)

For instance, at the time in which “woman’s sphere” took shape, an ideology of race similarly based on biological difference was also emerging to justify the enslavement of Africans.\(^13\) Yet, historian Jennifer L. Morgan found, “the connection between African women’s reproductive lives and their suitability for hard manual labor would link their status with their bodies in a way distinct from but related to the biology of race.”\(^14\) From their earliest observation by European men and their arrival in the British North American colonies, non-white women were distinguished from white women in law, gendered divisions of labor, and even in the ways that they mothered their children.\(^15\) While Anglo and African women may have shared the same biology of sex, which differentiated them from all males, the classification of black women as unlike white women gave them a discrete gender.

Furthermore, in both the earlier and later iterations of public and private, masters did not permit slaves to have privacy in any conception of the word. As “woman’s sphere” became synonymous with “private sphere,” then enslaved women were further alienated from the same category of gender as white women. The converse did not apply to enslaved men. Although in the “public sphere” through their status as property and labor and because they were denied privacy, African and African American men were depicted as incapable of shouldering the responsibilities of self-government and therefore not within the same male sphere as Anglo men. In other words, as this racial ideology developed as part of a pro-slavery ideology, freedom did little to grant African Americans admittance into the privileges and protections of their respective gender spheres. Consequently, by the dawn of the nineteenth century, white Americans did not understand themselves as living in a society with two races and two genders, but one with two races and four genders:
white men, black men, white women, black women. This same process also applied to Native Americans, immigrants, and residents of the territories acquired in the Mexican War, with all non-white or non-Anglo genders described as deviant and therefore inferior.16

As historians began to incorporate intersectional analysis, they also liberated themselves from the nineteenth-century rhetorical division of public and private spheres. This was not so easy a task. When Mary P. Ryan attempted to tack down a definition of “public,” she discovered that in “the pragmatic practices of democracy, the public sphere or realm splinters, inevitably and unregrettably, into more mundane and multiple political spaces.”17 Thus, historians have offered various conceptualizations of those spaces. Mary Kelley conceived of the public sphere as “the social space situated between the institutions of the family and the nation state,” while Elizabeth Varon pointed out that “public” encompassed physical spaces, publication, and “a grouping of citizens who, literally and figuratively, embodied ‘public opinion.’”18 Anne McClintock offered a similar definition of “domesticity,” a concept almost synonymous with the private sphere. Arguing that “domesticity denotes both a space (a geographic and architectural alignment) and a social relation to power,” McClintock demonstrated that the imagery of enclosed spaces associated with a sphere masked those social relationships, obscuring the ways that ideas associated with the private sphere were actually integral parts of such public sphere concerns as imperialism and class conflict.19 Historians looking at the public sphere also turned to relationships and actions that did not fit neatly into the sphere dichotomy, employing the concept of “civil society,” essentially a third sphere that overlapped the other two. Mary Beth Norton described it as a place in which “citizens discuss and possibly try to influence public policy,” thereby becoming “state actors.”20 These civic conversations lay outside of direct, electoral politics and existed anywhere that people debated about or acted upon the conditions that influenced their world. As neither public nor private, nor male nor female, civic space could be used by people with little or no formal power. This broader understanding of “public” then became the place of patriotic celebrations, slave rebellions, and ladies’ sewing circles; and it was also the place in which women first articulated, developed, and advanced an idea of their rights.

The term “women’s rights” entered the American lexicon with the work of Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a popular work among elite women in the United States. Those American women recognized that a new nation founded on republican principles required a new gender ideology that would permit the concept and the reality of an active woman citizen. Although they recognized inherent gender difference, they did not believe that those differences excluded women from reason or natural rights. Elite American women melded this vision to their aristocratic entitlement to a public role as both members of the propertied classes and as intelligent, educated beings. They did not conceive of themselves as voters, but instead argued for civil liberties, the right to be equal to men before the law, even in marriage. Abigail Adams’s oft-repeated plea that her husband, John, “remember the ladies” drew upon this consciousness that women had a vested interest in the creation of the new nation. Women would be held to its laws and should thus be entitled to the attendant rights and privileges. They asked for an independent legal identity, rather than burial in their husbands’ through coverture. John rebuked Abigail as “saucy,” suggesting the obstacles that women like her faced from men of their class, who were reluctant either to
share power with their wives or to concede equality with a dependant whose property and body they controlled. With few models and much resistance, elite women such as Judith Sargent Murray, Mercy Otis Warren, and Susannah Rowson, working through the print culture, carved a role for women as “republican mothers.” This ideal for gender argued that, because women bore and raised the next generation of Americans, they served in the front lines, tasked with raising virtuous citizens who would dispassionately exercise morality and reason in governing the nation either directly or indirectly. As such, they themselves should be, first, recognized as moral and rational and, second, allowed to cultivate their morality and reason through education. Educated women could inform themselves about events of national importance and thereby exercise judicious influence over their sons and husbands. They would also teach their daughters to do the same. “The Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life,” explained historian Linda Kerber, and thus “the mother, and not the masses, came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality.”

“Influence” was the key concept in this new idea of women’s role. As Rosemarie Zagarri pointed out, “when the term ‘influence’ was used in relation to men, it often referred to the covert exercise of political power,” and proponents of this new ideology meant their own use of the term to be understood that way. For women, however, this sort of power generally carried with it the association of royal mistresses who swayed monarchs through their sexual wiles, the very opposite of the moral and rational pressure that proponents of this new ideology hoped to exert. Therefore, the association of female political influence with a proper sexuality contained by motherhood legitimized women’s interest in politics by stripping it of passion and, by extension, partisanship. The invocation of motherhood politicized something most women considered inevitable, tied the education of girls to the future of the nation, and justified a political role for women.

This was not without consequences. Feminist theorist Judith Bennett noted that most women in history have had to make “patriarchal bargains” when redefining contemporary proscription on gender, and Republican Motherhood fit Bennett’s model of “patriarchal equilibrium,” a process whereby women pay for gains in one area with losses in another. As Clare Lyons discovered in her study on sexuality in revolutionary and early national Philadelphia, “women were granted intellectual competency in exchange for the acceptance of a new, inert female sexuality.” More importantly, as Carol Berkin pointed out, “neither expanding women’s economic opportunities nor extending their legal rights found a place in the woman question agenda.” Therefore, “the intellectuals who debated the woman question narrowed rather than expanded woman’s sphere.” Republican Motherhood may have carried cultural force, but no legal changes resulted to grant them the right to property or their children. Women had a political role, but their citizenship was indirect, predicated upon influence through sons and husbands, confined to their homes, and tied to a particular type of sexual behavior.

Invoking a seemingly universal female experience of motherhood also masked the new ideology’s singular application to white women who had developed Republican Motherhood in response to their own class and race concerns. While the argument for educating future mothers of future citizens theoretically benefited women outside of the elite, whose capacity was not in question, only families with the economic luxury of
sparing their daughters’ labor and the availability of publicly-supported schools could fulfill that potential. Hostility toward black education shut free African American girls out of all but a few northern classrooms, with doors opened to black boys much sooner than to their sisters. Their lack of education was then used as a sign of inferior intelligence, thereby reinforcing the existing racial ideology that associated black women with labor rather than intellect and limited them to bodies without minds, Phillis Wheatley’s renowned genius notwithstanding. In any case, the question of black male citizenship was in limbo, so any construction of female citizenship that placed them auxiliary to their husbands had no meaning for black women. Subsequently, community activism prioritized black male citizenship and privileged the masculinity that would legitimize it. For enslaved women, the entire discussion was moot. Thus, under Republican Motherhood, white women reproduced citizens while black women reproduced labor and, as slaves, property.

Tying female virtue to sexual behavior also became a tool by which to exclude non-elite women from influence. Clare Lyons noted that women of the “rabble” in Philadelphia included sexuality as part of their definition of freedom. “Sexual freedom,” she argued, “symbolized women’s claims to individual independence and their assertions of Lockean rights of self-determination.” This stood them in opposition to those who insisted upon a more constrained sexuality that emphasized virginity before marriage, celibacy outside of marriage, and monogamy within marriage, with miscegenation out of the question. This dichotomous view of sexuality emphasized women’s control over their own choices, reinforcing feminine free will; but, Republican Motherhood framed the choices as good or bad, moral or immoral, virtuous or debauched. A woman could choose to be chaste and therefore contribute to the health of the republic, or she could choose to be lascivious and threaten the nation. One choice entitled her to political influence, the other marginalized her.

Enslaved women were entirely disqualified from this choice. White masters and mistresses defined their female slaves’ gender through labor and reproduction only, stripped of the social and emotional contexts of family and motherhood. Without the morality of that context, white masters and especially mistresses dumped all of their anxieties about unrestrained sexuality onto their slaves. If Republican Mothers were the embodiment of chaste, reasoned, virtue, then enslaved mothers were their lascivious, unintelligent, immoral opposite. The credence of this idea grew along with the expansion of slavery. Because these features justified their enslavement, they were tied to black female gender rather than their status as slave and freedom from slavery did not liberate them from this depiction. Equally troubling stereotypes plagued black men, and both became reasons to exclude them from the blessings of liberty.

As a result, African American sexual behavior worried black church leaders throughout the nineteenth century. Ministers such as the Reverend Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, exhorted their congregations to practice sexual continence as part of a broader agenda of moral uplift that would prove African Americans’ civic virtue. This sort of argument resembled that of the white proponents of Republican Motherhood in that citizenship had to be earned as a privilege through proper behavior rather than being endowed by the Creator as a natural right. It also became a mark distinguishing the aspiring black middle class from the working class. Rather than a
capitulation to white norms, however, adoption of such gender ideals as Republican Motherhood was part of a life lived in opposition to racist expectations about African Americans and their families. For a black woman, then, Republican Motherhood entailed liberation from a restrictive understanding of her gender as merely procreative but also an acceptance of another definition that limited her to a particular type of sexuality and power.

Indeed, as black women developed their own ideals of gender that included elements of white womanhood, they founded black womanhood on freedom and self-determination rather than motherhood and influence, although the former incorporated the latter. Self-determination began with emancipation for themselves and for their children and families, and grew through both property ownership and community building. The first freed them from the control and abuses of masters and mistresses, and allowed them to make decisions about most aspects of their lives. The second signified economic self-sufficiency. The third usually took place within a church and situated them within a self-governing society that both paralleled and was part of the larger process of creating the American nation. Enslaved women developed a similar ideology of gender for themselves that integrated both self-determination and community even when emancipation was not possible. In her study of antebellum Virginia slave women, Brenda E. Stevenson found that they seized “the prerogative of slave female principle, the protection and procreation of black life in the face of white opposition.”

While bondswomen developed a gender consciousness of resistance and community, free and white women developed one that insisted upon some form of recognition as vested members of the American nation. The roles they created for themselves, however, consistently contended with pressure to limit the very influence that lay at the heart of their new-found political identity. Women’s presence at patriotic and political celebrations served as potent symbols in legitimizing the festivities with virtue and nonpartisanship embedded in the ideal of white femininity and their status as nonvoters. Yet, this image of a disinterested but politically-engaged woman masked partisan sympathies that ran as deeply as their husbands’ and fathers’. In one of the many ironies about the intersection of gender, class, and politics in early Washington, D.C., historian Catherine Allgor observed that “women and men of political families handled the explosive issues of power and politicking in a republican environment by cloaking the power in female garb and by denial.” Hostesses from the president’s wife, Dolly Madison, to boarding house matrons used the niceties of parties, teas, and dinners to facilitate the sort of partisan deal-making necessary to a functioning government. In doing so, Allgor found, “middle-class and elite women used a veil of respectability to work aggressively toward their political goals.”

As partisan divisions deepened, women were accused of violating the bargain that allowed them to emerge as political actors in the first place. Federalists and Republicans alike had used white women’s support as evidence of their own rightful claim to national leadership, granting women the free will to make a selection between the two parties. As with sexual morality, however, there was a right and a wrong choice. One party’s good wives and daughters were the other’s sluts and slatterns. By 1829, even a presidential candidate’s wife was not off-limits as Andrew Jackson’s opponents portrayed his wife, the pious Rachel, as a rough-hewn rube, the victim of seduction, and an adulteress. All three traits indicated her moral weakness and inadequacy as a virtuous influence upon her...
husband, potentially the next president of the United States. When he did become president, a new scandal erupted concerning Margaret Eaton, the widowed daughter of a boarding house proprietor in Washington, D.C., and subsequently the wife of Jackson’s Secretary of War, John Eaton. This “petticoat affair” laid bare the political influence of Floride Calhoun, wife of Secretary of State John C. Calhoun. Their husbands’ opponents represented the former as an uncouth adulterer and the latter as wielding illegitimate power, each symbolizing the worst fears about women of their respective classes and each representing the consequences of allowing women to hold any sway in politics.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, partisanship was clearly part and parcel of politics, and women could no more reserve their proclivities toward one party or another than men could. Women, who were expected to police political division and mitigate its destructive tendencies, implicitly received the blame for the erosion of a mythical unity and consensus that had never existed in the first place. Thus, they were no longer entitled to a place in the political landscape. Ironically, as men’s electoral power increased with universal white male and limited black male suffrage, women’s decreased. In one oft-cited New Jersey case, single, propertied, white women lost the right to vote at the same time that it was gained by all free white men. If the legitimacy of the republic now rested on the participation of all white men, then the political influence wielded by white women was suspect and a threat to democracy, Floride Calhoun being a prime example. The Jacksonian Democrats, for all of their idolization of representative government, understood the Common Man as just that: a man. Rosemarie Zagarri labeled this two-decade-long process a “Revolutionary Backlash,” hypothesizing that the mid-nineteenth-century iteration of separate spheres “may actually have been a reaction against women’s more extensive involvement in politics, a convenient way to explain and justify excluding women from party politics and electoral activities.”

Only when a second political party system emerged in the 1840s did women resume their place at public, political gatherings, this time with explicit encouragement of their party sympathies. Elizabeth Varon’s study of Virginia women demonstrated that they were welcomed at Whig events. These new, “Whig women,” Varon argued, were both “partisans who expressed their allegiance to the Whig Party, and mediators whose ‘disinterestedness’ enabled them to promote civic virtue, temper political passions, and focus public affairs on the common good.” The latter qualities implicitly condemned Democratic women in the mold of Rachel Jackson and Margaret Eaton, and the Democratic Party soon re-learned the propagandistic power of visible feminine support. This newer vision of women in politics, however, appeared within the context of “True Womanhood,” a new development in the ideology of gender that simultaneously consigned women toapolitical domesticity and provided them with the tools to engage in more complicated political activism through social reform.

Bearing many of the characteristics of Republican Motherhood, the ideology of domesticity embedded in “True Womanhood” further entrenched the household as the natural habitat of women and reaffirmed virtue as moral piety and sexual purity, while also eliminating the political ramifications of feminine behavior. As a response to the market revolution, domesticity married pre- and post-industrial divisions of labor, allowing its precepts to be applied to both rural and urban women. Work deemed masculine moved outside of the household and became invested with monetary value, while work defined
as feminine remained in the household. With the rise of wage labor outside of the home, women’s labor in the home became literally de-valued, even when women paid other women to perform it, although the work itself was integral to the functioning of the household and, ultimately, the national economy.\textsuperscript{37}

In cities, the products of women’s productive work could now be purchased and their children’s labor was no longer integral to family survival, leading domesticity advocates to urge women to focus on cultivating a warm, loving, and virtuous family life. Furthermore, because the imagery of “separate spheres” trafficked in dichotomies, and because domesticity further collapsed “feminine,” “private,” and “home,” woman’s sphere stood in marked contrast to the “masculine,” “public,” and ultimately “foreign” sphere that men must dominate. As keepers of the private sphere, women provided a safe haven for their husbands and sons from the rough and tumble public world of wage labor, business, and politics. Because this work was unpaid and connected to child-bearing, child-rearing, and traditional gender divisions of labor, the proscriptive literature portrayed women as both biologically-suited to domesticity and expected to enter in the spirit of a calling. Elite women, of course, could afford to purchase or pay women to relieve some of the labor of this vocation.\textsuperscript{38}

Women’s relative position to power, however, had not shifted much since their foremothers created Republican Motherhood. The democratization of white male political power and the emphasis on a competitive marketplace only reinforced the revolutionary era contradiction in which men were equals in the public area but masters in their own home. Retrenchment of slavery in southern states as the cotton market boomed intensified this hierarchy on plantations. Woman’s importance and power continued to lie in her sway over the men in her household. Now, however, hostility toward women’s political behavior and awareness of forces beyond the state readjusted the focus of women’s influence from politics to culture. Rather than pressuring men to become judicious political actors, women should, as Nancy Cott observed, “fit men to pursue their worldly aims in a regulated way.”\textsuperscript{39}

Patriarchy, then, continued to inform men’s understanding of masculinity and thus entitlement to natural rights. Only when husbands discovered that they could protect some of their family’s wealth from an unstable economy by vesting their wives with the power to own property did they agree to some change to separate estates. Those instances were limited and far between. Only New York recognized married women’s right to property, and then only after 1848. Because men relied upon women’s unpaid labor, which could be coerced through women’s financial dependence, they had no impetus to change the laws to grant women more independent economic or legal power.\textsuperscript{40}

Furthermore, because patriarchal families were a coveted privilege held by white men, specifically in the urban middle class, working-class, black, and enslaved men replicated the pattern in their own struggle for national inclusion. For example, rather than embrace working women as fellow laborers in a class-based struggle to affect the conditions of factories, working-class men either construed them as victims in need of protection or more useful to the labor movement as housewives who did not undercut men’s wages or compete with them for jobs, and who supported the family’s economic health through household economizing. While their analysis incorporated a view of class struggle that extended beyond the workplace, their view of class followed the dominant division of men’s and women’s work. As trade unions found traction in party politics, working
women became less useful to working men’s goals. The black civil rights movement followed a similar pattern, but its activists also struggled against an imposed racial ideology that drew black men and women together as partners in resistance. As a result, black women were much more welcome in the civil rights movement than white women were in trade unions. Being a collective movement that relied upon the organizational skill of women in antislavery organizations or churches, civil rights became a family writ large, and the ideology that posited women as caretakers of the home expanded to incorporate the community.41

A similar argument emerged among middle-class white women. Taking into consideration Anne McClintock’s postulation that domesticity could refer to a place, a relationship, and actions, then domesticity could empower a woman to domesticate the spaces outside of her home, thus explaining Elizabeth Varon’s observation that “the doctrine of separate spheres came to coexist with a countervailing conception of female civic duty.” If a woman’s sphere could be understood as action as well as a place, then she could preoccupy herself with suitable feminine matters outside of her home or use her home as a base for activism that extended into the outside world through mutual aid societies, benevolence organizations, and reform movements. The wider the scope of their reform vision, however, the more likely they were to challenge male prerogative, and permission to act in this civic sphere was predicated on joining their interests with the men of their class. Thus, like Republican Motherhood, the point of view embedded in their concern cloaked unequal power relationships and difference among women.42

Women outside of the middle class quite often defined themselves in opposition to these gender expectations, even if some could see and even long for the privileges that went with conformity. Working-class and black women continued to develop an ethos of self-determination as part of their own ideal of gender. The young, single women who entered the New England mills or moved to cities had escaped the authority of father without entering the patriarchal relation of marriage. While their bosses assumed those paternal roles to a degree, the young women understood the relationship as one of consent and, through labor organization, sought to limit the extent of their employers’ control.43 As the free black population expanded in the North through state-level emancipation, manumission, and escape from bondage, women formed voluntary associations that addressed the particular vulnerabilities of women in poverty, orphans, and deficits in education, as well as supporting men’s organizations and the church as a whole. Their development of a free, black female gender capitulated to certain points of patriarchy, such as the importance of their influence rather than their leadership, because their lives as part of this community were entwined with black men’s assertion of masculinity. Nevertheless, as white women developed a consciousness through Enlightenment ideals that led to the antebellum emphasis on individualism, black women could never entirely separate themselves from their connection to a larger body that faced racial oppression.44

Enslaved women, too, had developed a gender identity in opposition to the one imposed upon them by their masters and mistresses. Whereas free black women used the ideas connected to the domestic sphere as a weapon against racist assumptions about their womanhood and families, bondswomen often found the physical space of that sphere and its relationship to be the site of resistance. Slave mistresses may have complained to their diaries about the ways that the hierarchy on which slavery rested also contributed
to their own oppression, but they in no way sympathized with the black women around them. Mistresses could violate the dictates of passivity to assume the mantle of mastery in partnership with their husbands, and they did so with an un-ladylike zeal for violence. The pervasiveness of control and abuse that characterized every space and relationship connected with slavery led slave women to develop what Stephanie Camp has termed “rival geographies” that incorporated previously understood modes of resistance, maintenance of kinship networks, and seemingly feminine frivolities such as the décor of their cabin and the style of their hair; and with the prevalence of rape, enslaved women used sexual choice as a sign of self-assertion.45

That latter point exposed a problem in one of the most sympathetic and racially-integrated reform movements of northern women. Abolition challenged the existing ideologies surrounding race by recognizing African Americans’ capacity to be fully functioning members of the republic, thereby erasing racial distinctions of gender. Women, in fact, led the move toward racial integration in the movement through their own, parallel organizations. In both organizing the movement and developing antislavery ideology, black and white women transgressed many gender norms and challenged their compatriots’ interpretation of citizenship. Black and white women gravitated toward moral suasion tactics that returned them to a more explicitly political interpretation of influence, and the challenge to patriarchy within the ranks of the American Anti-Slavery Society became the origin of their own claim to more direct political engagement.46

Nevertheless, abolitionism was a largely white, northern, middle-class movement that, with notable exceptions, proposed to speak for slaves. As such, abolitionist women filtered what information they learned about the realities of slavery through their own lens of domesticity and universal womanhood. Doing so produced such powerful propaganda as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and introduced a heretofore absent gender dimension to critiques of slavery. Yet, when speaking about rape, a form of violence directed at women as women, they identified the crime as a violation of virtue first, unintentionally shaming the victim as damaged goods. Enslaved women, on the other hand, experienced rape as violence. Nor might antislavery women understand sexual bargains that enslaved women might have to make in order to negotiate privileges and protections for their family or to exercise self-determination in choices about their bodies. Thus, former slaves, such as Harriet Jacobs, took not only the risk of a public voice but also of exposing their experience to an audience that could only understand their sexual history as one of deviance and dishonor rather than survival and resilience. The two – indeed, three – groups of women might overlap in their concerns for freedom and in representing a feminine experience as distinct from men’s, but the details of their separate women’s experiences were so divergent that each understood her gender to be entirely different from the others.

The leaders of the women’s rights movement emerged from the antislavery movement, bringing this disjuncture with them. In its first decade, they attempted to breach some of the differences of class and race by building coalitions across those lines by addressing property rights, equal wages, equal education, and, to a much lesser degree before 1865, suffrage. Indeed, some black women found that they had more room to exercise leadership and advance agendas in the woman’s rights movement than they did in the black convention movement of the same years. Still, as the distance between the black civil
rights and the women’s rights movements widened, black women understood the relationship between gender and disfranchisement differently than white women, a difference that multiplied with every variable that affected a woman’s distance from power. The collapse of the American Equal Rights Association in 1867, which split the black male suffrage movement from the woman’s rights movement and spawned the woman’s suffrage movement, exposed the narrow definition of gender that white woman’s rights advocates had assumed.47

The women’s rights movement, then, was implicitly founded on a construction of gender that had evolved over the previous seventy-five years. Whereas men, over that time, were granted ever more direct political power based on an idea of inherent, natural right, women had to justify their entitlement to civil liberties through their performance of an idealized gender role that could be assumed only by a narrow group of women. Grounded in an argument for influence rather than suffrage, as Republican Mothers or True Women, they had to adhere to a concept of virtue based in sexual behavior and education that reinforced the exclusion of African Americans and working-class women. Women outside of the elite and middle class developed their own conceptions of gender that responded to the oppression in their lives. White woman’s rights activists were able to delineate distinct issues affecting women as a class, and thereby appeal to women from different constituencies. In shaping the movement, however, they rejected concerns that they considered extraneous to their understanding of women’s rights, but that other women could not separate from their own experiences of gender. These problems continue to plague feminists and inform women’s relationship to the state into the twenty-first century. In terms of gender history, The Women’s Rights Movement was actually A Woman’s Rights Movement. After all, if all women do not share the same gender, then all women do not share the same woman’s rights movement, and many women found empowerment and civil recognition through other avenues. As historians of gender explore the proposition that there are multiple genders, then so do they recognize that there are multiple woman’s rights movements.

Notes
1 Jane Swisshelm quoted in Margaret Washington, Sojourner Truth’s America (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 224.
7 Mary Beth Norton, Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), xii–xiii, 70, 146; Clare A. Lyons, Sex among the

8 Zagarri, Revolutionary Backlash, 169.


17 Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy in Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7.


19 McClintock, Imperial Leather, 34–36.

20 Norton, Separated by Their Sex, xii–xiii. On civic space or civil society, see also: Nancy Isenberg, Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 8–9; Kelley, Learning to Stand and Speak, 2; Mary P. Ryan, Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 5–13; Ryan, Civic Wars, 1–18; Varon, We Mean to Be Counted, 2.


23 Zagarri, Revolutionary Backlash, 126, 127–130.


25 Lyons, Sex among the Rabble, 3.
26 Berkin, Revolutionary Mothers, 156.
28 Lyons, Sex among the Rabble, 288.
35 Zagarri, Revolutionary Backlash, 30–37, 135; Kelley, Learning to Stand and Speak, 7.
36 Varon, We Mean to Be Counted, 3–4; Ryan, Women in Public, 30–37.
38 Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, 63–100.
39 Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, 98.
“FEMALE WOMEN OR FEMININE LADIES”

42 Jones, All Bound up Together, 23–27, 101–108; McClintock, Imperial Leather, 34–36; Varon, We Mean to Be Counted, 2; Valerie C. Cooper, Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

43 Dublin, Women at Work, 89–96; Lasser, “Gender, Ideology, and Class in the Early Republic,” 331–337; Stansell, City of Women, 133–137.


