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ABSTRACT

The coalition of women has roots that reach back through more than a century of American history. In the decades before the Civil War, women spoke out against men on the issue of slavery, and this served a new breed of brilliant and aggressive women who found themselves talking about female as well as black rights and who recognized that white women are part of the same system that exploits black slaves. The anti-slavery movement reached a dramatic schism on the issue of female participation beyond society's accustomed roles. As long as the tales of bondage were confined to the drawing rooms of the committed, women were greeted by friendly faces, but were attacked after the announcement of a public lecture tour. Anti-abolitionist papers focus on this tour suggesting that foes of slavery intend to bring anarchy to the U.S. and are letting women get out of hand. These incidents relating to women's participation in the anti-slavery movement hurtled women toward developing their own organizations. The modern struggle for women's rights also has important roots in the Southern black freedom drive in the 1960's. In the process of supporting the black drive for equality, women have learned something about their oppression. Today, Afro-Americans and women encounter the same arguments, fight the same enemies, and often make unified counter attacks despite differences in their movements. (Author/AM)

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The Black/White History of Women's Rights

In 1964, as President Johnson's Civil rights legislation neared the voting stage in the Congress, southern Senators believed they had devised a foolproof strategy to insure defeat of the legislation when they appended a provision extending its benefits to women. This sudden broadening of its coverage, they reasoned, would divide supporters of the bill, fortify its enemies, and gather some new opposition. The maneuver failed and the most far-reaching civil rights law in almost a century sailed through Congress, black people and women taking a giant step forward together.

While this lock-step advance appeared accidental, it has historical antecedents worth examining at this time when federal funds and concerns are being used to combat both sexism and racism. Afro-Americans and women have encountered the same arguments, fought the same enemies and have often made unified counterattacks—despite profound differences in their movements.

The modern struggle for women's rights had important roots in the southern black freedom drive in the 1960s. Under the leadership of the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, women—Northern and Southern, black and white—played a vital part in the voter registration drives and attempted to solidify local resistance to white supremacy. Women were among the army of college students S.N.C.C. sent into Mississippi's 1964 "Freedom Summer" and participated in thousands of equal rights demonstrations in northern and southern states during those years.

In the process of supporting the black drive for equality, they learned something about their own oppression—that they were welcome to teach children, run typewriters and mimeograph machines, address letters, cook, clean and work for males, but were not invited when men planned basic policy and strategy. The women of S.N.C.C. began meeting to express their resentment over this division of labor. When they carried their protests to the male leadership, they were accused of disunity and were answered with scorn and ridicule.

They responded by saying that in the battle for the rights of others they should not have to forego their own and added pointedly that men engaged in securing equal rights for black people should surely understand that women deserved equality. In the years following, many of these women helped provide the backbone of the new feminist movement.

A half century earlier, suffragettes who began demonstrating in force in front of the White House noted the respect they received from black, as opposed to white, crowds. This often made their daily, lonely vigil bearable. Writing in *Crisis*, Dr. Du Bois* urged "every voter to cast his ballot in favor of women's suffrage." Black women such as Ida B. Wells, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Mary Church Terrell, and Mary McCleod Bethune spoke out for the rights of their race and sex. White women such as Mary White Ovington, Jane Addams, and Lillian Wald became founding members of the NAACP, combatting both racism and sexism. Assuredly white women pursued their own interests and this often included full capitulation to racism.

The Feminist/Black Connection

This coalition of women has roots that reach back through more than a century of American history. In the decades before the Civil War women united under the banner of the American Anti-Slavery Society, their first great rallying point for battling oppression. It enabled them to speak out against men on a vital national issue and served as a training ground for the future women's rights movement.

When William Lloyd Garrison launched the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, women and slaves had much in common. Considered wards of their fathers or husbands, women were treated as children within the household and the larger society. Women could not vote or hold office, own property, sue in court, divorce, or keep custody of their children when divorced by their husbands. They had no future in business, commerce or the professions. Oberlin was the only college to admit females, and the instruction below college level prepared women only for tasks men did not want or thought women should have. Forthright, outspoken, or educated women (many were educating themselves) were considered peculiar, dangerous, or mentally ill. Over and over again women were told that their highest apsirations should be serving their men, attending to home and children, and being as pleasant and as quiet (and as pretty) as possible. Feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton compared a married female's status to that of a slave:

> A married woman has no legal existence; she has no more absolute rights than a slave on a Southern plantation. A married woman takes the name of her master, holds nothing, owns nothing, can bring no action in her own name; and the principles on which she and the slave are educated are the same. The slave is taught what is best for him to know—which is nothing; the woman is taught what is best for her to know—which is little more than nothing, man being the umpire in both cases.

This analogy failed to take into consideration that white women were part of the same system that exploited black slaves—male and female—and black women were *themselves* property, as were their children. If the exploitation of white women was white

*Dr. William E.B. DuBois, a leading black voice until his death in 1963, was a founder of the N.A.A.C.P., Editor of *Crisis*, and author of 30 books.

men's prerogative, exploitation of slave women became a southern industry and a national economic component.

The young abolitionist movement afforded women an opportunity to challenge men on a vital public issue, one with which they could easily identify. For their part, male abolitionists, black and white, did not insist that women's place was in the home, nor shun support of the abolitionist movement. On the contrary, abolitionists welcomed women's aid. They were the first important organization to do so, but confined them to managing cake sales, women's auxilliaries, running bazaars, collecting petitions and attending to the movements's housekeeping functions. However, their very inclusion in so explosive a movement created a new public climate for women and helped reshape the female self-image. At the founding convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, women—with male permission—spoke up. In 1835, when British abolitionist George Thompson was three times attacked by pro-slavery mobs in America, abolitionist women each time formed a protective shield around him to prevent his being lynched. Some 45,000 women signed petitions denouncing the slaveholders' efforts to annex Texas as a vast slave property; a similar number signed petitions calling for an end to slave-trading in the nation's capital.

The anti-slavery movement also created a new breed of vibrant, brilliant and aggressive women in its brief history. Harriet Tubman, who first fled bondage and then made 19 trips into southern seaboard states to free another 300 slaves, said: "Tell the women to keep fighting." Sojourner Truth, a New York slave who had seen her children sold from her, tavelled about the country testifying against slavery's evils and selling copies of her "Narrative" of life in bondage. She also devoted her energies to campaigning for women's rights, effectively challenging male debaters far more educated than she. Lydia Maria Child surrendered her position as the nation's leading children's book writer to espouse the anti-slavery cause. School principal Prudence Crandall opened her Canterbury, Connecticut girls school to black students. She lost her white students and so infuriated townspeople that they refused to sell her food and goods, poisoned her water well, set her school ablaze and finally jailed her.

These rebellious women invariably found themselves talking about female as well as black rights. "I expect to plead not for the slave only," said Lucy Stone, "but for suffering humanity everywhere. Especially do I mean to labor for the elevation of my sex." While lecturing on abolition she admitted, "I was so possessed by the women's rights idea that I scattered it in every speech." In this she was matched by Sojourner Truth, who thought that attaining the right to vote for black males represented only half the job.

The anti-slavery movement reached a dramatic schism on the issue of female participation beyond society's accustomed roles. Angelina and Sarah Grimke left a wealthy, slaveholding and politically-prominent South Carolina family to come North to join the Quakers and then abolitionism. As long as they confined their tales of bondage to the drawing rooms of the committed, they faced a friendly audience. But when they announced a public lecture tour, although it was for "women only," they suddenly found themselves under attack. Their poignant firsthand accounts of slavery's evils drew increasing audiences, and men first appeared in the back of their lecture rooms, then ventured into the open seats. Newspapers denounced these "promiscuous assemblies" (where men and women publicly sat side by side) and the Grimkes for trying to revolutionize American society. Anti-abolition papers focused on this lecture tour as proof that foes of slavery intended to bring anarchy to the United States, and were letting women get out of hand.

William Lloyd Garrison and his followers held firm the Grimkes' right to be heard but his movement began to splinter on this and other issues. In the face of a withering fire from outside the movement, the Grimkes continued on their lecture tour, doing their best to ignore the din and to focus on the slavery issue. But finally, and from various towns on their lecture route, they decided to answer their critics through a series of letters. "Can you not see that women could do and would do a hundred times more for the slaves if she were not fettered?" asked Angelina Grimke. At another point she stated, "Women ought to feel a peculiar sympathy in the colored men's wrongs for,like him, she has been accused of mental inferiority and denied the privilege of a liberal education." On July 17, 1837 Sarah Grimke fired a classic salvo that shifted from defense to attack:

> But I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God designed us to occupy.

Garrison not only refused to conciliate those who deplored women participating in this movement, but asigned Abby Kelly, an eloquent Massachusetts schoolteacher, to lead the counter-attack. Lydia Mana Child, Lucretia Mott, and Maria Chapman were elected to the American Anti-Slavery Society's Executive Committee, and Abby Kelly, by a 650 to 450 vote, was appointed to a leading committee. At this juncture, leading anti-Garrison males deserted the organization and founded the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

In 1840 a further dramatic incident hurtled women toward their own organization. The World Anti-Slavery Convention in London refused to admit females to its proceedings and William Lloyd Garrison, rather than participate in its proceedings, joined his female co-workers in the galleries. Two of the excluded, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, promised themselves to start agitating for women's rights in America. In 1848 they organized the first women's convention in Seneca Falls, New York and 300 men and women attended. When the controversial resolution favoring women's suffrage came up for a vote, Mott and Stanton approached Frederick Douglass, their comrade from the anti-slavery movement, and asked his support as they lacked experience in public speaking and he was a seasoned orator. Douglass' plea insured passage of the historic resolution.

Douglass, the outstanding spokesman for black America at the time, always held, "My sympathies are not limited by my relation to any race. I can take no part in oppressing and persecuting any variety of the human family... my sympathy is with the oppressed." It was also Douglass who underscored the historic role women had taken in the fight against bondage: "When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages, for the cause of the slaves has been peculiarly woman's cause."

As the people sally forth to combat both racism and sexism, it is well to recall these words and the efforts of Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucy Stone, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, and the women who volunteered for S.N.C.C. in the 1960s.

William Loren Katz

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