

Women in the Abolitionist Movement

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject: U.S. History

Time Required: One to two 50-minute class periods

Historical Thinking Skill: Identification, Primary Source Analysis

Objectives: Students will:

- Identify key female abolitionists and analyze their contributions to the fight against slavery
- Read, understand, and analyze primary source documents

Background:

The abolitionist movement in the United States gained momentum in the early 19th century, with activists working to end slavery through speeches, writings, petitions, and activism. While prominent men such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison were active in fighting for the abolition of slavery, many women played critical roles in the movement as well. Their involvement not only helped bring about the end of slavery but also laid the groundwork for the women's rights movement.

Women who spoke out against slavery faced unique obstacles because of their gender. In the 19th century, women were expected to focus on domestic duties and stay in the private sphere. Many female abolitionists encountered resistance—not only from pro-slavery advocates but also from men within the abolitionist movement itself.

Despite these challenges, women abolitionists used their voices and skills to advance the movement. Some took direct action by helping enslaved people escape, while others used their social status to challenge pro-slavery norms. Many women linked abolitionism to broader issues of racial and gender equality, arguing that the fight for one could not be separated from the fight for the other.

Materials:

- Slideshow on female abolitionists
- Copies of primary source excerpts with suggested guiding questions (attached)



Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Warm-Up Activity (5 minutes)

Show images or quotes from well-known male abolitionists (Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison). Ask:

- Who are these figures? What did they fight for?
- Were there women involved in the abolitionist movement? Who?

Part 2: Setting the Stage (15 minutes)

Use a brief slideshow or short video to introduce women abolitionists, such as (but not limited to):

- Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Lucretia Mott, Angelina & Sarah Grimké, Maria W. Stewart, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Part 3: Primary Source Analysis (25-30 minutes)

Divide students into groups. Assign each group a different primary source excerpt (you can certainly add others to this list):

- Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851)
- Angelina Grimké's Speech at Pennsylvania Hall (1838)
- Maria W. Stewart's Speech "Why Sit Ye Here and Die?" (1832)
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poem, "Bury Me in a Free Land" (1854)

Each group should:

- Read and annotate their assigned excerpt
- Answer critical thinking guiding questions and consider:
 - What is the main message?
 - How does the speaker address both slavery and women's rights?
- Present findings to the class in a mini "gallery walk" or short presentations

Part 4: Comparison Activity (15-20 minutes)

As a class, discuss how fighting against slavery could inspire women to advocate for their own rights.

- Document Comparison:
 - Read a short excerpt from the Declaration of Sentiments (1848).
 - Compare its themes to abolitionist writings.
- Ask students: **In what ways were the abolitionist and early women's rights movements connected?**



Part 5: Assessment

Students choose one female abolitionist and create a short podcast, infographic, or creative letter imagining they are writing to her in the 1800s. Students should showcase their understanding of the claims made in the primary source, evidence to support the claim, and general impact on the abolition movement.



Founding Civics

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Primary Source 1: Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I A Woman?"

Delivered on May 29, 1851, at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.



Guiding Questions:

1) How does Truth use personal experience to make her argument?

2) What stereotypes about women does she challenge?

3) How does her speech connect the struggles of race and gender?



Primary Source 2: Angelina Grimké Weld, Speech at Pennsylvania Hall (Excerpts)

Delivered on May 17, 1838, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

As a Southerner I feel it is my duty to stand up here to-night and bear testimony against slavery. I have seen it -- I have seen it. I know it has horrors that can never be described. I was brought up under its wing: I witnessed for many years its demoralizing influences, and its destructiveness to human happiness. It is admitted by some that the slave is not happy under the worst forms of slavery. But I have never seen a happy slave. I have seen him dance in his chains, it is true; but he was not happy. There is a wide difference between happiness and mirth. Man cannot enjoy the former while his manhood is destroyed, and that part of the being which is necessary to the making, and to the enjoyment of happiness, is completely blotted out. The slaves, however, may be, and sometimes are, mirthful. When hope is extinguished, they say, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." What is a mob? What would the breaking of every window be? What would the levelling of this Hall be? Any evidence that we are wrong, or that slavery is a good and wholesome institution? What if the mob should now burst in upon us, break up our meeting and commit violence upon our persons -- would this be any thing compared with what the slaves endure? No, no: and we do not remember them "as bound with them," if we shrink in the time of peril, or feel unwilling to sacrifice ourselves, if need be, for their sake...

Many times have I wept in the land of my birth, over the system of slavery. I knew of none who sympathized in my feelings -- I was unaware that any efforts were made to deliver the oppressed -- no voice in the wilderness was heard calling on the people to repent and do works meet for repentance -- and my heart sickened within me. Oh, how should I have rejoiced to know that such efforts as these were being made. I only wonder that I had such feelings. I wonder when I reflect under what influence I was brought up that my heart is not harder than the nether millstone. But in the midst of temptation I was preserved, and my sympathy grew warmer, and my hatred of slavery more inveterate, until at last I have exiled myself from my native land because I could no longer endure to hear the wailing of the slave... My heart sunk within me at the abominations in the midst of which I had been born and educated. What will it avail, cried I in bitterness of spirit, to expose to the gaze of strangers the horrors and pollutions of slavery, when there is no ear to hear nor heart to feel and pray for the slave. The language of my soul was, "Oh tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon." But how different do I feel now! Animated with hope, nay, with an assurance of the triumph of liberty and good will to man, I will lift up my voice like a trumpet, and show this people their transgression, their sins of omission towards the slave, and what they can do towards affecting Southern mind, and overthrowing Southern oppression...



We often hear the question asked, What shall we do? Here is an opportunity for doing something now. Every man and every woman present may do something by showing that we fear not a mob, and, in the midst of threatenings and revilings, by opening our mouths for the dumb and pleading the cause of those who are ready to perish....

Women of Philadelphia! allow me as a Southern woman, with much attachment to the land of my birth, to entreat you to come up to this work. Especially let me urge you to petition. Men may settle this and other questions at the ballot-box, but you have no such right; it is only through petitions that you can reach the Legislature. It is therefore peculiarly your duty to petition...

When the women of these States send up to Congress such a petition, our legislators will arise as did those of England, and say, "When all the maids and matrons of the land are knocking at our doors we must legislate." Let the zeal and love, the faith and works of our English sisters quicken ours -- that while the slaves continue to suffer, and when they shout deliverance, we may feel the satisfaction of having done what we could.



Guiding Questions:

1. Why does Grimké Weld emphasize her Southern background?
2. How does she use religious or moral appeals in her argument?
3. How might her speech have been received differently by male and female audiences?



Primary Source 3: Maria W. Stewart, "Why Sit Ye Here and Die?" (Excerpts)

Delivered on September 21, 1832, in Boston, Massachusetts

Why sit ye here and die? If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die. If we sit here, we shall die. Come, let us plead our cause before the whites. If they save us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die.

Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation - "Who shall go forward and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?" And my heart made this reply: "If it is Thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!"

I have heard much respecting the horrors of slavery; but may heaven forbid that the generality of my color throughout these United States should experience any more of its horrors than to be a servant of servants, or hewers of wood and drawers of water! Tell us no more of Southern slavery: for, with few exceptions, although I may be very erroneous in my opinion, yet I consider our condition but little better than that. Yet, after all, methinks there are no chains so galling as the chains of ignorance - no fetters so binding as those that bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of usefulness and scientific knowledge. O, had I received the advantages of early education, my idea would, ere now, have expanded far and wide; but, alas! I possess nothing but moral capability - no teaching but the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

I have asked several individuals of my sex, who transact business for themselves, if, providing our girls were to give them the most satisfactory references, they would not be willing to grant them an equal opportunity with others? Their reply has been: For their own part, they had no objection; but as it was not the custom, were they to take them into their employ, they would be in danger of losing the public patronage...

... But ah! methinks our oppression is soon to come to an end; yea, before the Majesty of heaven our groans and cries have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. As the prayers and tears of Christians will avail the finally impenitent nothing, neither will the prayers and tears of the friends of humanity avail us anything unless we possess a spirit of virtuous emulation within our breasts. Did the pilgrims, when they first landed on these shores, quietly compose themselves, and say: "The Britons have all the money and all the power, and we must continue their servants forever?" Did they sluggishly sigh, and say: "Our lot is hard; the Indians own the soil, and we cannot cultivate it?" No; they first made powerful efforts to raise themselves, and then God raised up those illustrious patriots, WASHINGTON and LAFAYETTE, to assist and defend them. And, my brethren, have you made a powerful effort? Have you prayed the Legislature for mercy's sake to grant you all the rights and privileges of free citizens, that your



daughters may rise to that degree of respectability which true merit deserves, and your sons above the servile situations which most of them fill?

Guiding Questions:

1. What does she mean by the phrase "Why sit ye here and die?" How is this a call to action?
2. How does Stewart challenge both racial and gender oppression in her speech?
3. How does Stewart use religious or moral appeals to persuade her audience?



Primary Source 4: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Bury Me in a Free Land"

First Published on November 20, 1858 in The Anti-Slavery Bugle

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not rest if I heard the tread
Of a coffle gang to the shambles led,
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise like a curse on the trembling air.

I could not sleep if I saw the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash,
And I saw her babes torn from her breast,
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start if I heard the bay
Of bloodhounds seizing their human prey,
And I heard the captive plead in vain
As they bound afresh his galling chain.

If I saw young girls from their mother's arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms,
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might
Can rob no man of his dearest right;
My rest shall be calm in any grave
Where none can call his brother a slave.
I ask no monument, proud and high,
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
All that my yearning spirit craves,
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.



Guiding Questions:

1. What emotions does Harper's poem evoke?
2. Why do you think poetry was an effective form of activism?
3. How does this poem reflect the broader goals of Abolitionists?



Primary Source 5: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Declaration of Sentiments (Excerpts)

Delivered on July 19, 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves, by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her...

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation, - in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States...

