An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women’s movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
The First Feminists

by Judith Hole and Ellen Levine

Judith Hole and Ellen Levine are the authors of Rebirth of Feminism, a study of the resurgence of feminism in the United States. The book is a history and analysis of the origins, organizational development, philosophy, issues, and activities of the new women's movement. The following excerpt, the introductory chapter, is a brief discussion of the first feminist movement in America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is not meant to be a detailed description of the earlier movement, but rather to serve as an indication that the contemporary women's movement has a much ignored historical predecessor.

The contemporary women's movement is not the first such movement in American history to offer a wide-ranging feminist critique of society. In fact, much of what seems "radical" in contemporary feminist analysis parallels the critique made by the feminists of the nineteenth century. Both the early and the contemporary feminists have engaged in a fundamental reexamination of the role of women in all spheres of life, and of the relationships of men and women in all social, political, economic and cultural institutions. Both have defined women as an oppressed group and have traced the origin of women's subjugation to male-defined and male-dominated social institutions and value systems.

When the early feminist movement emerged in the nineteenth century, the "woman issue" was extensively debated in the national press, in political gatherings, and from church pulpits. The women's groups, their platforms, and their leaders, although not

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always well received or understood, were extremely well known. Until recently, however, that early feminist movement has been only cursorily discussed in American history textbooks, and then only in terms of the drive for suffrage. Even a brief reading of early feminist writings and of the few histories that have dealt specifically with the woman's movement (as it was called then) reveals that the drive for suffrage became the single focus of the movement only after several decades of a more multi-issued campaign for women's equality.

The woman's movement emerged during the 1800's. It was a time of geographic expansion, industrial development, growth of social reform movements, and a general intellectual ferment with a philosophical emphasis on individual freedom, the "rights of man," and universal education. In fact, some of the earliest efforts to extend opportunities to women were made in the field of education. In 1833, Oberlin became the first college to open its doors to both men and women. Although female education at Oberlin was regarded as necessary to ensure the development of good and proper wives and mothers, the open admission policy paved the way for the founding of other schools, some devoted entirely to women's education.¹ Much of the ground-breaking work in education was done by Emma Willard, who had campaigned vigorously for educational facilities for women beginning in the early 1820's. Frances Wright, one of the first women orators, was also a strong advocate of education for women. She viewed women as an oppressed group and argued that, "Until women assume the place in society which good sense and good feeling alike assign to them, human improvement must advance but feebly."² Central to her discussion of the inequalities between the sexes was a particular concern with the need for equal educational training for women.

It was in the abolition movement of the 1830's, however, that the woman's rights movement as such had its political origins. When women began working in earnest for the abolition of slavery, they quickly learned that they could not function as political equals with their male abolitionist friends. Not only were they barred from membership in some organizations, but they had to wage an uphill battle for the right simply to speak in public. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, daughters of a South Carolina slaveholding family, were among the first to fight this battle. Early in their lives the sisters left
South Carolina, moved north, and began to speak out publicly on the abolition issue. Within a short time they drew the wrath of different sectors of society. A Pastoral letter from the Council of the Congregationalist Ministers of Massachusetts typified the attack:

The appropriate duties and influence of woman are clearly stated in the New Testament. . . . The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection. . . . When she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer . . . she yields the power which God has given her . . . and her character becomes unnatural.³

The brutal and unceasing attacks (sometimes physical) on the women convinced the Grimkés that the issues of freedom for slaves and freedom for women were inextricably linked. The women began to speak about both issues, but because of the objections from male abolitionists who were afraid that discussions of woman’s rights would “muddy the waters,” they often spoke about the “woman question” as a separate issue. (In fact, Lucy Stone, an early femininst and abolitionist, lectured on abolition on Saturdays and Sundays and on women’s rights during the week.)

In an 1837 letter to the President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society—by that time many female anti-slavery societies had been established in response to the exclusionary policy of the male abolitionist groups—Sarah Grimké addressed herself directly to the question of woman’s status:

All history attests that man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind; and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought, and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is his inferior. . . . But I ask no favors for my sex. . . . All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy.⁴

The Grimkés challenged both the assumption of the “natural superiority of man” and the social institutions predicated on that assumption. For example, in her “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” Sarah Grimké argued against both religious dogma and the institution of marriage. Two brief examples are indicative:
Adam's ready acquiescence with his wife's proposal, does not savor much of that superiority in strength of mind, which is arrogated by man.\textsuperscript{5}

man has exercised the most unlimited and brutal power over woman, in the peculiar character of husband—a word in most countries synonymous with tyrant. ... Woman, instead of being elevated by her union with man, which might be expected from an alliance with a superior being, is in reality lowered. She generally loses her individuality, her independent character, her moral being. She becomes absorbed into him, and henceforth is looked at, and acts through the medium of her husband.\textsuperscript{6}

They attacked as well the manifestations of "male superiority" in the employment market. In a letter "On the Condition of Women in the United States" Sarah Grimké wrote of:

... the disproportionate value set on the time and labor of men and of women. A man who is engaged in teaching, can always, I believe, command a higher price for tuition than a woman—even when he teaches the same branches, and is not in any respect superior to the woman. ... [Or] for example, in tailoring, a man has twice, or three times as much for making a waistcoat or pantaloons as a woman, although the work done by each may be equally good.\textsuperscript{7}

The abolition movement continued to expand, and in 1840 a World Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London. The American delegation included a group of women, among them Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In Volume I of the History of Woman Suffrage, written and edited by Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, the authors note that the mere presence of women delegates produced an "excitement and vehemence of protest and denunciation [that] could not have been greater, if the news had come that the French were about to invade England."\textsuperscript{8}

The women were relegated to the galleries and prohibited from participating in any of the proceedings. That society at large frowned upon women participating in political activities was one thing; that the leading male radicals, those most concerned with social inequalities, should also discriminate against women was quite another. The events at the world conference reinforced the women's growing awareness that the battle for the abolition of Negro slavery could never be won without a battle for the abolition of woman's slavery:

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.9

Mott and Stanton returned to America and continued their abolitionist work as well as pressing for state legislative reforms on woman’s property and family rights. Although the women had discussed the idea of calling a public meeting on woman’s rights, the possibility did not materialize until eight years after the London Convention. On July 14, 1848, they placed a small notice in the Seneca (New York) County Courier announcing a “Woman’s Rights Convention.” Five days later, on July 19 and 20, some three hundred interested women and men, coming from as far as fifty miles, crowded into the small Wesleyan Chapel (now a gas station) and approved a Declaration of Sentiments (modeled on the Declaration of Independence) and twelve Resolutions. The delineation of issues in the Declaration bears a startling resemblance to contemporary feminist writings. Some excerpts are illustrative:10

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....
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. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world....
He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she has no voice....
He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.
He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself.
As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.
He allows her in church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.
He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.
He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as
his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God. He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Included in the list of twelve resolutions was one which read: "Resolved, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise."

Although the Seneca Falls Convention is considered the official beginning of the woman’s suffrage movement, it is important to reiterate that the goal of the early woman’s rights movement was not limited to the demand for suffrage. In fact, the suffrage resolution was included only after lengthy debate, and was the only resolution not accepted unanimously. Those participants at the Convention who actively opposed the inclusion of the suffrage resolution:

...feared a demand for the right to vote would defeat others they deemed more rational, and make the whole movement ridiculous. But Mrs. Stanton and Frederick Douglass seeing that the power to choose rulers and make laws, was the right by which all others could be secured, persistently advocated the resolution...11

Far more important to most of the women at the Convention was their desire to gain control of their property and earnings, guardianship of their children, rights to divorce, etc. Notwithstanding the disagreements at the Convention, the Seneca Falls meeting was of great historical significance. As Flexner has noted:

[The women] themselves were fully aware of the nature of the step they were taking; today’s debt to them has been inadequately acknowledged.... Beginning in 1848 it was possible for women who rebelled against the circumstances of their lives, to know that they were not alone—although often the news reached them only through a vitriolic sermon or an abusive newspaper editorial. But a movement had been launched which they could either join, or ignore, that would leave its imprint on the lives of their daughters and of women throughout the world.12

From 1848 until the beginning of the Civil War, Woman’s Rights Conventions were held nearly every year in different cities in the East and Midwest. The 1850 Convention in Salem, Ohio:

...had one peculiar characteristic. It was officered entirely by women; not a man was allowed to sit on the platform, to speak,
or vote. _Never did men so suffer._ They implored just to say a
word; but no; the President was inflexible—no man should be
heard. If one meekly arose to make a suggestion he was at once
ruled out of order. For the first time in the world’s history, men
learned how it felt to sit in silence when questions in which they
were interested were under discussion.\textsuperscript{13}

As the woman’s movement gained in strength, attacks upon it be-
came more vitriolic. In newspaper editorials and church sermons
anti-feminists argued vociferously that the public arena was not the
proper place for women. In response to such criticism, Stanton
wrote in an article in the Rochester, New York _National Reformer:

If God has assigned a sphere to man and one to woman, we claim
the right to judge ourselves of His design in reference to _us_, and
we accord to man the same privilege. . . . We have all seen a man
making a jackass of himself in the pulpit, at the bar, or in our
legislative halls. . . . Now, is it to be wondered at that woman has
some doubts about the present position assigned her being the true
one, when her every-day experience shows her that man makes
such fatal mistakes in regard to himself?\textsuperscript{14}

It was abundantly clear to the women that they could not rely on
the pulpit or the “establishment” press for either factual or sympa-
thetic reportage; nor could they use the press as a means to dis-
seminate their ideas. As a result they depended on the abolitionist
papers of the day, and in addition founded a number of indepen-
dent women’s journals including _The Lily, The Una, Woman’s Ad-
 vocate, Pittsburgh Visiter [sic]_, etc.

One of the many issues with which the women activists were
concerned was dress reform. Some began to wear the “bloomer”
style (a misnomer since Amelia Bloomer, although an advocate
of the loose-fitting dress, was neither its originator nor the first to
wear it) in protest against the tight-fitting and singularly uncom-
fortable cinched-waisted stays and layers of petticoats. However, as
Flexner has noted, “The attempt at dress reform, although badly
needed, was not only unsuccessful, but boomeranged and had to be
abandoned.”\textsuperscript{15} Women’s rights advocates became known as “bloom-
ers” and the movement for equal rights as well as the individual
women were subjected to increasing ridicule. Elizabeth Cady Stan-
ton, one of the earliest to wear the more comfortable outfit, was one
of the first to suggest its rejection. In a letter to Susan B. Anthony
she wrote:
We put the dress on for greater freedom, but what is physical freedom compared with mental bondage?... It is not wise, Susan, to use up so much energy and feeling that way. You can put them to better use. I speak from experience.\textsuperscript{16}

When the Civil War began in 1861, woman's rights advocates were urged to abandon their cause and support the war effort. Although Anthony and Stanton continued arguing that any battle for freedom must include woman's freedom, the woman's movement activities essentially stopped for the duration of the war. After the war and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery (for which the women activists had campaigned vigorously), the abolitionists began to press for passage of a Fourteenth Amendment to secure the rights, privileges, and immunities of citizens (the new freedmen) under the law. In the second section of the proposed Amendment, however, the word "male" appeared, introducing a sex distinction into the Constitution for the first time. Shocked and enraged by the introduction of the word "male," the women activists mounted an extensive campaign to eliminate it. They were dismayed to find that no one, neither the Republican administration nor their old abolitionist allies, had any intention of "complicating" the campaign for Negroes' rights by advocating women's rights as well. Over and over again the women were told, "This is the Negroes' hour." The authors of \textit{History of Woman Suffrage} analyzed the women's situation:

During the six years they held their own claims in abeyance to the slaves of the South, and labored to inspire the people with enthusiasm for the great measures of the Republican party, they were highly honored as "wise, loyal, and clear-sighted." But again when the slaves were emancipated and they asked that women should be recognized in the reconstruction as citizens of the Republic, equal before the law, all these transcendent virtues vanished like dew before the morning sun. And thus it ever is so long as woman labors to second man's endeavors and exalt his sex above her own, her virtues pass unquestioned; but when she dares to demand rights and privileges for herself, her motives, manners, dress, personal appearance, character, are subjects for ridicule and detraction.\textsuperscript{17}

The women met with the same response when they campaigned to get the word "sex" added to the proposed Fifteenth Amendment which would prohibit the denial of suffrage on account of race.\textsuperscript{18}

As a result of these setbacks, the woman's movement assumed as
its first priority the drive for woman's suffrage. It must be noted, however, that while nearly all the women activists agreed on the need for suffrage, in 1869 the movement split over ideological and tactical questions into two major factions. In May of that year, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the National Woman Suffrage Association. Six months later, Lucy Stone and others organized the American Woman Suffrage Association. The American, in an attempt to make the idea of woman's suffrage "respectable," limited its activities to that issue, and refused to address itself to any of the more "controversial" subjects such as marriage or the church. The National, on the other hand, embraced the broad cause of woman's rights of which the vote was seen primarily as a means of achieving those rights. During this time Anthony and Stanton founded The Revolution, which became one of the best known of the independent women's newspapers. The weekly journal began in January, 1868, and took as its motto, "Men, their rights and nothing more; women, their rights and nothing less." In addition to discussion of suffrage, The Revolution examined the institutions of marriage, the law, organized religion, etc. Moreover, the newspaper touched on "such incendiary topics as the double standard and prostitution." Flexner describes the paper:

[It] made a contribution to the women's cause out of all proportion to either its size, brief lifespan, or modest circulation... Here was news not to be found elsewhere—of the organization of women typesetters, tailoresses, and laundry workers, of the first women's clubs, of pioneers in the professions, of women abroad. But The Revolution did more than just carry news, or set a new standard of professionalism for papers edited by and for women. It gave their movement a forum, focus, and direction. It pointed, it led, and it fought, with vigor and vehemence.

The two suffrage organizations coexisted for over twenty years and used some of the same tactics in their campaigns for suffrage: lecture tours, lobbying activities, petition campaigns, etc. The American, however, focused exclusively on state-by-state action, while the National in addition pushed for a woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution. Susan B. Anthony and others also attempted to gain the vote through court decisions. The Supreme Court, however, held in 1875 that suffrage was not necessarily one of the privileges and immunities of citizens protected by the Fourteenth
Amendment. Thus, although women were citizens it was nonetheless permissible, according to the Court, to constitutionally limit the right to vote to males.

During this same period, a strong temperance movement had also emerged. Large numbers of women, including some suffragists, became actively involved in the temperance cause. It is important to note that one of the main reasons women became involved in pressing for laws restricting the sale and consumption of alcohol was that their legal status as married women offered them no protection against either physical abuse or abandonment by a drunken husband. It might be added that the reason separate women’s temperance organizations were formed was that women were not permitted to participate in the men’s groups. In spite of the fact that temperance was in “women’s interests,” the growth of the women’s temperance movement solidified the liquor and brewing industries’ opposition to woman suffrage. As a result, suffrage leaders became convinced of the necessity of keeping the two issues separate.

As the campaign for woman suffrage grew, more and more sympathizers were attracted to the conservative and “respectable” American Association which, as noted above, deliberately limited its work to the single issue of suffrage. After two decades “respectability” won out, and the broad-ranging issues of the earlier movement had been largely subsumed by suffrage. (Even the Stanton-Anthony forces had somewhat redefined their goals and were focusing primarily on suffrage.) By 1890, when the American and the National merged to become the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the woman’s movement had, in fact, been transformed into the single-issue suffrage movement. Moreover, although Elizabeth Cady Stanton, NAWSA’s first president, was succeeded two years later by Susan B. Anthony, the first women activists, with their catholic range of concerns, were slowly being replaced by a second group far more limited in their political analysis. It should be noted that Stanton herself, after her two-year term as president of the new organization, withdrew from active work in the suffrage campaign. Although one of the earliest feminist leaders to understand the need for woman suffrage, by this time Stanton believed that the main obstacle to woman’s equality was the church and organized religion.

During the entire development of the woman’s movement, per-
haps the argument most often used by anti-feminists was that the subjugation of women was divinely ordained as written in the Bible. Stanton attacked the argument head-on. She and a group of twenty-three women, including three ordained ministers, produced *The Woman's Bible*\(^{22}\), which presented a systematic feminist critique of woman's role and image in the Bible. Some Biblical chapters were presented as proof that the Scripture itself was the source of woman's subjugation; others to show that, if reinterpreted, men and women were indeed equals in the Bible, not superior and inferior beings. "We have made a fetich [sic] of the Bible long enough. The time has come to read it as we do all other books, accepting the good and rejecting the evil it teaches."\(^{23}\) Dismissing the "rib story" as a "petty surgical operation," Stanton argued further that the entire structure of the Bible was predicated on the notion of Eve's (woman's) corruption:

Take the snake, the fruit-tree and the woman from the tableau, and we have no fall, nor frowning Judge, no Inferno, no everlasting punishment;—hence no need of a Savior. Thus the bottom falls out of the whole Christian theology. Here is the reason why in all the Biblical researches and higher criticisms, the scholars never touch the position of women.\(^{24}\)

Not surprisingly, *The Woman's Bible* was considered scandalous and sacrilegious by most. The Suffrage Association members themselves, with the exception of Anthony and a few others, publicly disavowed Stanton and her work. They feared that the image of the already controversial suffrage movement would be irreparably damaged if the public were to associate it with Stanton's radical tract.

Shortly after the turn of the century, the second generation of woman suffragists came of age and new leaders replaced the old. Carrie Chapman Catt is perhaps the best known; she succeeded Anthony as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which by then had become a large and somewhat unwieldy organization. Although limited gains were achieved (a number of western states had enfranchised women), no major progress was made in the campaign for suffrage until Alice Paul, a young and extremely militant suffragist, became active in the movement. In April, 1913, she formed a small radical group known as the Congressional Union (later reorganized as the Woman's Party) to work exclusively on a campaign for a *federal* woman’s suffrage Amend-
ment using any tactics necessary, no matter how unorthodox. Her group organized parades, mass demonstrations, hunger strikes, and its members were on several occasions arrested and jailed. Although many suffragists rejected both the militant style and tactics of the Congressional Union, they nonetheless did consider Paul and her followers in large part responsible for “shocking” the languishing movement into actively pressuring for the federal Amendment. The woman suffrage Amendment (known as the “Anthony Amendment”), introduced into every session of Congress from 1878 on, was finally ratified on August 26, 1920.

Nearly three-quarters of a century had passed since the demand for woman suffrage had first been made at the Seneca Falls Convention. By 1920, so much energy had been expended in achieving the right to vote that the woman’s movement virtually collapsed from exhaustion. To achieve the vote alone, as Carrie Chapman Catt had computed, took:

... fifty-two years of pauseless campaign... fifty-six campaigns of referenda to male voters; 480 campaigns to get Legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to votes; 47 campaigns to get State constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions; 277 campaigns to get State party conventions to include woman suffrage planks; 30 campaigns to get presidential party conventions to adopt woman suffrage planks in party platforms, and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses. With the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment the majority of women activists as well as the public at large assumed that having gained the vote woman’s complete equality had been virtually obtained.

It must be remembered, however, that for most of the period that the woman’s movement existed, suffrage had not been seen as an all-inclusive goal, but as a means of achieving equality—suffrage was only one element in the wide-ranging feminist critique questioning the fundamental organization of society. Historians, however, have for the most part ignored this radical critique and focused exclusively on the suffrage campaign. By virtue of this omission they have, to all intents and purposes, denied the political significance of the early feminist analysis. Moreover, the summary treatment by historians of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century drive for woman’s suffrage has made that campaign almost a footnote to
the abolitionist movement and the campaign for Negro suffrage. In addition, the traditional textbook image of the early feminists—if not wild-eyed women waving placards for the vote, then wild-eyed women swinging axes at saloon doors—has further demeaned the importance of their philosophical analysis.

The woman’s movement virtually died in 1920 and, with the exception of a few organizations, feminism was to lie dormant for forty years.

Footnotes

1 Mount Holyoke opened in 1837; Vassar, 1865; Smith and Wellesley, 1875; Radcliffe, 1879; Bryn Mawr, 1885.


3 History of Woman Suffrage (republished by Arno Press and The New York Times, New York, 1969), Vol. I, p. 81. Hereafter cited as HWS. Volumes I–III were edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. The first two volumes were published in 1881, the third in 1886. Volume IV was edited by Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper and was published in 1902. Volumes V and VI were edited by Ida Husted Harper and published in 1922.


5 Ibid., pp. 9–10.

6 Ibid., pp. 85–86.

7 Ibid., p. 51.

8 HWS, p. 54.

9 Ibid., p. 61.

10 Ibid., pp. 70–73.

11 HWS, p. 73.

12 Flexner, p. 77.

13 HWS, p. 110.

14 Ibid., p. 806.

15 Flexner, p. 83.

16 Ibid., p. 84.


18 The Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in 1865; the Fourteenth in 1868; the Fifteenth in 1870.

19 Flexner, p. 151.

20 Loc. cit.

21 Minor v. Happersett, 21 Wall. 162, 22 L. Ed. 627 (1875).
22 (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895 and 1898, Two Parts.)

23 Ibid., Part II, pp. 7–8.


25 A total of 218 women from 26 states were arrested during the first session of the Sixty-fifth Congress (1917). Ninety-seven went to prison.