Name: _____ Class: _____

Am I Not A Woman And A Sister?

Women and the Anti-Slavery Campaign

By Elizabeth Crawford (adaptation of original text)
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Many groups of people fought against slavery, but the majority of these organizations were led by men. This article explores the efforts women made in the anti-slavery campaign, despite not having a voice in politics. As you read, take notes on the impact women had on the abolitionist movement.

[1] The words 'Am I not a woman and a sister?' can be seen over the figure of a black slave woman, on one knee, holding her chained hands up as though she is begging for forgiveness. This image was a powerful symbol in the early 19th century. It was used by women in Britain who were not just fighting for the end of slavery worldwide, but also for the right to have a voice on the topic.

"Am I Not A Woman And A Sister?" by Unknown is in the public domain.

The image was based on the motto 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' These words were similarly featured alongside an image of a male slave on one knee and in chains. The motto and image were originally used by members of an anti-slavery group called the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. However, they were later used by many organizations fighting to end slavery.

The Abolitionist Movement

Though there were always people who were strongly against the slave trade since it began in the 15th century, organizations didn't begin to form in Britain until slavery had been outlawed in the country. If that seems strange, this is because although

slavery had been ruled illegal, people could still hold slaves, or trade them in other countries that were under British rule at the time.

People that were fighting to end slavery were known as “abolitionists.” They wanted to “abolish” every aspect of slavery. These organizations were largely dominated by men. Two of the most famous abolitionists in history were the Englishmen William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. However, it is not widely known that women also played a major role in the anti-slavery movement. In fact, it was a woman, known as Lady Middleton, who first persuaded both Wilberforce and Clarkson to join the abolitionist movement.

Women & The Early Abolitionist Movement

[5] Women at the time were prevented from taking any active part in politics, including the abolitionist movement. They were not even allowed to add their names to the mass petitions to end slavery. Men felt that the value of the petitions would be diminished[1] if women were allowed to sign them. Women were only occasionally allowed to take part in public debates. One record even shows that at a debate in London, in 1788, they could only speak if they covered their faces with veils.

Because of these restrictions, women had to find other ways to support the abolitionist movement:

Literature

Because poetry was considered suitable for women at the time, many of them wrote verses that brought light to the experiences of slaves. An example of this is Mary Scott’s poem, The Female Advocate. In this poem, Scott drew attention to Phillis Wheatley, the first slave and black woman to have a book of poetry published in Britain. Hannah More also wrote a poem called Slavery, a Poem, which was published as a large, handsomely printed, 20-page book.

Financial Support

Women were also a huge financial support to the abolitionist movement. Many of

1. **Diminish** ***(verb)*** to become less in size or importance

them donated money to the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, even though they could not take official roles within the organization. They used their financial power to boycott slave-produced goods like sugar from the West Indies, shopping instead for sugar that was grown in the East Indies by free labour. Long before abolitionist women came up with their own motto and symbol, they were purchasing bracelets, earrings and other items with the "Am I Not a Man and a Brother" image.

Women Abolitionists Fight to be Heard

Britain passed a law in 1807 that ruled that the country and other countries under its rule, were to have no direct involvement in the slave trade. The anti-slavery campaign continued however, with the aim of abolishing slavery worldwide.

[10] Over the years that followed, women began to form their own anti-slavery societies. The formation of these societies and the activities they undertook[2] did not escape criticism. Wilberforce expressed what one imagines was a very common view: 'All private exertions[3] for such an object become their character, but for ladies to meet, to go from house to house stirring up petitions – these appear to me proceedings unsuited to the female character as delineated in Scripture'.

Women were now a petitioning force. In the early 19th century, hundreds of thousands of women signed petitions. Women were not only petitioning and participating in the political process, they were now even questioning the aims of the movement. In 1824, abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick called for the immediate emancipation of slaves. This came in contradiction[4] to the Anti-Slavery Society's aim of gradual emancipation. Six years later, the influential Birmingham women's society threatened to withdraw its funding from the Anti-Slavery Society if it did not agree to change its aim to immediate abolition. The change was agreed.

However, women would still face challenges. In 1840 the first World Anti-Slavery Convention was organized in London. Women delegates arrived from all parts of

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2. to commit oneself to and begin
3. **Exertion** ***(noun)*** use of physical or mental energy; hard work
4. **Contradiction** ***(noun)*** the act of saying something that is opposite in meaning to something else

Britain. From across the Atlantic came women belonging to a section of the US abolitionist movement that also campaigned for women's rights. All women were, however, denied participation in the convention. That decision led not only to a split in the British anti-slavery movement but, indirectly, to the beginning of the US campaign for women's right to vote. Several of the British women who were not allowed to participate were among those who, 26 years later, signed the first petition to grant women the right to vote.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the main idea of the article?
    A. Women played an important role in the anti-slavery movement.
    B. Women could not financially support the anti-slavery movement.
    C. Women were prevented from taking part in the anti-slavery movement.
    D. Women could only use their poetry to support the anti-slavery movement.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "Because poetry was considered suitable for women at the time, many of them wrote verses that brought light to the experiences of slaves." (Paragraph 7)
    B. "They used their financial power to boycott slave-produced goods like sugar from the West Indies, shopping instead for that grown in the East Indies by free labour." (Paragraph 8)
    C. "Women were not only petitioning and participating in the political process, they were now even questioning the aims of the movement." (Paragraph 11)
    D. "Several of the British women who were not allowed to participate were among those who 26 years later signed the first petition to grant women the right to vote." (Paragraph 12)

3. Which statement best describes the connection between the women abolitionists and women's right to vote?
    A. Despite facing challenges, women played an influential role in the anti-slavery campaign.
    B. After learning how to become successful petitioners, women petitioned for the right to vote.
    C. Because they were prevented from participating in politics, women had little impact on slavery.
    D. Many of the same women who fought for the end of slavery would go on to fight for their right to vote.

4. Which statement best captures the author's point of view in the passage?
    A. Historically, many people had strong feelings against slavery and slave trade.
    B. Both men and women slaves were treated cruelly and unfairly by their owners.
    C. Despite facing challenges, women played an influential role in the anti-slavery campaign.
    D. Women's involvement in petitioning lessened the impact petitions had on the anti-slavery movement.

5. How does the author support the idea that women found ways to be involved in the abolitionist movement without having the right to petition or to vote?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author explains that women in Britain and American were not given political rights. How have political rights for women in America changed over time? Explain your thinking.

2. How were women in this text treated unfairly because of their gender? How did they overcome this treatment to fight for what they believed was right? Have you ever been treated unfairly because of your identity?