

# The Early Women's Movement

Students always shake their heads in total disbelief when they are reminded that women have had the right to vote for only just over eighty years. They are even more amazed when they read the fiery words and learn about the brave actions of women who dared to speak out against oppression in the early nineteenth century. They are shocked to learn that in 1872, Susan B. Anthony was arrested for “knowingly voting without having a lawful right to vote,” and found guilty. Who would have thought that those committed to the early women’s movement were but the first of several generations of brave women to fight against economic exploitation as well as physical, social, and racial inequality?

The road to the franchise was long and strewn with difficult and often dangerous obstacles. But women persevered. They continued to use their voices to demonstrate that they would not be deterred from achieving their goals.

## Document-Based Questions

### MARIA STEWART

1. Maria Stewart states that “continual fear” has somewhat “lessened in us that natural force and energy which belong to man” (p. 116). What is her explanation of such a natural force and energy? Do you think that people who are oppressed in the world today have a similar natural force and energy? How and why?
2. What examples of “the prayers of self-righteousness and hypocrisy” (p. 116) could be found in pre-Civil War society?
3. How does Stewart’s voice add to the belief that the economic foundations of the United States’ success were built upon slave labor? Support or refute this belief.

### ANGELINA E. GRIMKÉ WELD

1. Do you agree with Grimké Weld's assertion that those who do not support abolition "know not that they are undermining their own rights and their own happiness, temporal and eternal" (p. 117)? How and why? How does she use this speech to support her assertion?
2. What does Grimké Weld mean when she says that the "spirit of slavery" exists in the North and that Northerners must "cast out" that spirit (p. 117)? Do you think she provides adequate examples of precisely how that could be accomplished?
3. Grimké Weld claims that "there is no such thing as neutral ground. He that is not for us is against us" (p. 119). How would you compare and contrast this statement with the one President George W. Bush made to Congress on September 20, 2001, nine days after September 11: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"? Can there be neutral ground? Why, or why not?

### HARRIET HANSON ROBINSON

1. Do you think that it was generally true in pre-Civil War America that "So little does one class of persons really know about the thoughts and aspirations of another" (p. 121)? What examples does Robinson provide to support her statement? Do you think that the same is true in contemporary American society? How and why?
2. Why do you think that "the factory girl was the lowest among women" (p. 121)? What sorts of "degrading occupations" still exist for women in contemporary American society?
3. Why do you think that "one of the first strikes of the cotton-factory operatives that ever took place in this country" (pp. 122–123) occurred in Lowell, Massachusetts? What were their grievances in 1836? How would these grievances compare and contrast with grievances of working women today?

### S. MARGARET FULLER OSSOLI

1. Do you agree or disagree with Margaret Ossoli's statement that "the free American so often feels himself free . . . only to pamper his appetites and

indolence through the misery of his fellow-beings" (p. 124)? Can anyone be free if that freedom is dependent on the enslavement of others? Why, or why not?

2. What primary arguments does Ossoli use to show how men tried to "keep women in their place" in the mid-nineteenth century? Is her rebuttal effective? Why, or why not?
3. Why do you think Ossoli's writing had, as Howard Zinn claims, "a profound impact on the women's rights movement in the United States" (p. 123)?

### **ELIZABETH CADY STANTON**

1. Why do you think Stanton modeled her "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" on the wording and structure of the Declaration of Independence? Do you think this strategy was effective? Why, or why not?
2. At the end of the Seneca Falls Convention, sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the "Declaration of Sentiments." Why would men join in this effort? Do you think the women needed their voices? Why, or why not?
3. Which grievances are most persuasive? Least? How do the voices of the other women in this chapter support these grievances?

### **SOJOURNER TRUTH**

1. What is the primary impact of this famous speech? Why do you think that it is considered one of the most important speeches in the early women's rights movement?
2. Why do you think Sojourner Truth was invited to speak to feminists in Akron, Ohio, in 1851? Do you think that her speech would have been so well received had she delivered it in the South? Why, or why not?

### **LUCY STONE AND HENRY B. BLACKWELL**

1. What were the "legal powers" that husbands had over their wives? Which do you find to be most "injurious"?
2. What do you think most men and women who were contemporaries of

Stone and Blackwell would think about this marriage protest? What segments of society do you think would be most receptive? Least receptive? How and why?

### SUSAN B. ANTHONY

1. Why was the right to vote so important to Susan B. Anthony—so important that she was willing to be arrested many times?
2. What does Anthony mean when she writes, “Of all of my prosecutors . . . not one is my peer, but each and all are my political sovereigns” (p. 130–131)? How does she support her statement?
3. What would Anthony’s “broad and liberal interpretation of the Constitution and its recent amendments” (p.131) entail? How did the court respond?

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 6, “The Early Women’s Movement”

After reading Chapter 6 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are four possible main points.

1. For the first 150 years of this nation’s history, women were denied a fundamental privilege of American citizenship, the right to vote.
2. Women involved in early-nineteenth-century social movements spoke out against and actively resisted many forms of political, social, economic, and racial oppression.
3. Even though women knew it to be dangerous to oppose the male-dominated status quo, many bravely persevered.
4. Men, as well as women, supported the early women’s movement.

## Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 6, "The Early Women's Movement," and in *A People's History*, Chapter 6, "The Intimately Oppressed"

If your students are also reading *A People's History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in chapters 6 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People's History* are used together.

5. Early-nineteenth-century American women were trapped in two ways: those who stayed at home were trapped by the ideology of a "women's sphere," and those who were forced to work were enslaved by horrendous working conditions.
6. Despite the negative "bonds of womanhood," their common oppression helped women forge "bonds of solidarity."
7. Slave women faced a double oppression in pre-Civil War society.
8. The belief in "patriarchal sovereignty" was the justification for the subjugation of women.
9. "Women rebels have always faced special disabilities." (*People's History*, p. 108)

## General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*, Chapter 6, "The Early Women's Movement"

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 6, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. Several of the women speak about the existence of fear in their society—fear of racial, political, and social oppression. What do you think it was that gave them the courage to resist in the face of such fear? What are some issues you might support or battles you might fight, regardless of your fear?
2. What is the right to petition? Many of the women in these readings claim that using the petition would be beneficial to their cause. What is Grimké

Weld's ultimate goal for using the petition? To what end would Elizabeth Cady Stanton use the petition? Do you think petitions will help the petitioners achieve their goals? Why, or why not?

3. What are the differences between the voices of the workingwomen and those of the middle and upper classes who are involved in the early women's movement? Do you think these differences will be resolved as the movement evolves? Why, or why not?
4. What common grievances do you hear in all eight of these voices? Are some more articulate than others? More evocative? How and why? What common methods of resistance do you hear in their voices?
5. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Declaration of Sentiments" emphasized that half of all people in the United States were disenfranchised (p. 127). Do you think that this is a completely accurate picture of disenfranchisement in American society in 1848? Who else was disenfranchised? What do you think might be a more accurate percentage of the disenfranchised prior to the Civil War?
6. How was United States citizenship defined in the nineteenth century? Do you think that Susan B. Anthony's address to the judge upon her sentencing in 1873 provides an accurate assessment of citizenship? How and why?
7. Why do you think men had so much power over women in early America? What justifications might men have offered for why women should not be given more rights? What reasons might some women have had for opposing more rights for women?
8. What similarities and dissimilarities do you see in the images of women's expected behavior in the media today and the way women were expected to behave in early America?
9. What resistance to gender equality remains in the twenty-first century?
10. In 1791, a girl stated that she looked at marriage much the same as she looked at death. What might have led her to say this? Do the readings in this chapter support this view? How and why?
11. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in "Main Points in *Voices*"?

12. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*, Chapter 6,  
 “The Early Women’s Movement,” and *A People’s History*,  
 Chapter 6, “The Intimately Oppressed”

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 6 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

13. How do the voices in “The Early Women’s Movement” lend credibility to the narrative in “The Intimately Oppressed”? What does it mean to be “intimately oppressed”? Why is intimate oppression so “hard to uproot”? Do you think women today are still victims of intimate oppression? Explain.
14. What have you previously learned about colonial women resisters, such as Anne Hutchinson or Mary Dyer? About revolutionary-era women’s resistance movements, such as boycotting, “coffee parties,” and the Daughters of Liberty? What happens to your understanding of American history when women’s voices are excluded? When they are included?
15. Why was demanding the right to vote considered to be “radical”—even among women—in the mid-nineteenth century? Do you think it was still considered radical at the time the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted in 1920? Why, or why not?
16. Why was there a “practical need for women in a frontier society” that “produced some measure of equality”? (*People’s History*, p. 111) What were those measures? What were the special attributes of frontier life that would provide more equality for women than existed in urban life in preindustrial America?
17. What was the “cult of domesticity” (*People’s History*, p. 104)? Do you agree that it was “a way of pacifying her [women] with a doctrine of ‘separate but equal’”? Why, or why not?
18. What evidence does Howard Zinn provide to support his statement that

the conditions of bondage faced by workingwomen and upper-class women “created a common consciousness of their situation and forged bonds of solidarity among them” (*People’s History*, p. 117)? If they indeed shared such common bonds, what stood in the way of a unified effort to break their bondage?

19. Given what you know about America in 1776, what do you think the Founding Fathers meant when they wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal?
20. Do you think most American women supported the women’s movement in the pre-Civil War years? Why, or why not? What might have united them? What might have divided them?
21. Howard Zinn suggests that the growing capitalist economy in the United States required that women play particular roles. What was the relationship between the economy and the “proper” attitudes and behaviors expected of women?
22. What were the similarities and dissimilarities between the conditions of enslaved African Americans and white women?

## Evaluation Tools

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. The abolition movement was widespread on the eve of the Civil War. What were the primary goals of the abolitionists? Who were the abolitionists? What roles did they play in pre-Civil War American society? How and why were white and African American women involved in the movement? Learn as much about the life and background of one female abolitionist. Do you think she was typical or atypical of other abolitionists? How and why?
2. Excerpts from the *Lowell Offering* are online at [www.berwickacademy.org/](http://www.berwickacademy.org/)



millgirls/offering.htm. After reading several of these entries, how do the voices of these women compare and contrast with the recollections of Harriet Hanson Robinson? Locate at least two other primary sources that describe the experiences of young women in the pre-Civil War work force. What do they contribute to your understanding of early nineteenth-century women activists?

3. What is a "factory town" (*People's History*, p. 122)? Was Lowell a factory town? How and why? Find out as much as possible about another nineteenth-century factory town. Where was it located? What was produced? What were working and living conditions like? Did the occupants ever protest? How and why? When did it cease to exist? What brought about its closure? Are any factory towns still in existence today? If so, where, and how are they similar and dissimilar to the factory towns of the nineteenth century?
4. Those who study the early women's rights movement draw tremendous inspiration from the words of the women themselves. An especially rich source is the correspondence between Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Much of this, as well as hundreds of primary written and visual materials, have been included in *Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, a PBS documentary of their lives and struggle. View the movie. What new information did you gain about the women's movement? What did you learn about Susan and Elizabeth's personal struggles for equality? Would you recommend this movie to a friend? Why, or why not?
5. The World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840, held in London, voted to exclude women from the convention floor but allowed them to attend meetings in a curtained enclosure. Research this convention and learn more about the reasons for such exclusion, as well as the protest activities of the women who came to London for the meeting. What were the long- and short-term consequences of their exclusion from this convention?
6. The Seneca Falls Convention was treated with scorn from all corners of American society. The press and religious leaders loudly denounced the happenings at Seneca Falls. Using a search engine of your choice, learn as much as possible about the reaction to the Convention and the "Declaration of Sentiments." What did the newspapers report? Why do

you think they were so opposed to the meeting? What insight does this opposition give you into the nineteenth-century efforts to “keep women in their place”?

7. Extending the franchise to all American citizens has been a long process—a process that was initially organized by brave women in the early nineteenth century. Who else did not have the right to vote in the nineteenth century? How was the franchise extended, and to whom, in the early-to-mid-twentieth century? When was the vote legally extended to every American citizen? When was it truly available to every American citizen?
8. Controversy has arisen over the exact wording of Sojourner Truth’s speech. Since no one recorded her exact words, and Frances Gage did not write her account of the speech until twelve years later, no one can be certain. Two accounts exist, that of the 1851 newspaper record, and that of Gage. And here Howard Zinn has offered a third, modernized version, based on Gage’s account. A website devoted to Sojourner Truth discusses these accounts at <http://www.kyphilom.com/www/truth.html>. After reviewing this site as well as at least one other, what do you think was the message Sojourner Truth sought, not just in her famous 1851 speech, but also throughout her life?
9. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich won a Pulitzer Prize for *A Midwife’s Tale*, her story of Martha Moore Ballard, one of the women Howard Zinn mentions in “The Intimately Oppressed” (p. 112). Find out more about Martha’s life and Ulrich’s research by watching the PBS film *A Midwife’s Tale* and accessing the rich details of the PBS website that accompanies the film at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/midwife/>. Who was Martha Ballard? How would you describe her life? Do you think she felt oppressed? How and why? Do you think she would have supported the views of the women you read in these chapters? Why, or why not?

## SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Use the voices and information available in *Voices* (or in both *Voices* and *A People’s History*) to support or refute Howard Zinn’s contention that “Societies based on private property and competition, in which monogamous families became practical units for work and socialization, found it especially useful to establish this special status of women, something akin

to a house slave in the matter of intimacy and oppression" (*People's History*, p. 103).

2. Explain the similarities and differences in the goals and grievances of the women you learned about in these chapters. Which of these voices provided the best blueprints for achieving such goals? The least effective blueprints? How, and why?
3. What issues united and divided the early women's movement? Which issues do you think might have helped you to support the movement if you had lived at this time?
4. Explain how the voices in Chapter 6 reinforce the revolutionary statement Susan B. Anthony invoked at her trial in 1873, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God." Do you agree with this statement? Why, or why not?
5. Using the voices in these chapters, support Howard Zinn's statement in "The Intimately Oppressed" that "Women rebels have always faced special disabilities" (p. 108). What special disabilities does he discuss? Which do the women discuss in their own words? Do women continue to face special disabilities in their contemporary efforts for equal rights? Explain.
6. Why do you think that so many women became involved in the abolitionist movement and in antislavery societies? What did the women's rights movement have in common with abolition movements? Ultimately, which movement was most successful in the nineteenth century? Why?
7. Explain the major types of resistance to women's rights in the early nineteenth century. Why do you think there was so much resistance? What resistance to equality for women remains in the twenty-first century?
8. As Howard Zinn points out, Nancy Cott's book, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, has many meanings. What were some of the "bonds of womanhood" in the early nineteenth century?
9. What voices of resistance in Chapter 6 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
10. How do the voices and information in these two chapters improve your understanding of the early women's movement? What information was especially useful? How and why?

### **SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES**

1. Write a new Declaration of Independence or “Declaration of Sentiments” that expresses the contemporary grievances of American women.
2. Imagine the life of English women who arrived in the North American colonies in 1619—women who had been sold, supposedly “with their own consent.” Write a letter home to your family in England describing, among many other things, your voyage to North America, your experiences upon arrival, and what you think the future holds for you in the New World.
3. Design a statue or other visual memorial to any of the women you have read about in this (these) chapter(s).
4. Stage a discussion in which the following quote from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is debated: “Well behaved women seldom make history.”
5. Write a letter to Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton telling them about the status of American women in the twenty-first century. Be sure to tell them, among other things, what women have achieved, what rights are still elusive, and what you might do to help women gain full equality in contemporary society.