

“The Pursuit of Perfection—Women & Antebellum Reform”

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It cannot be denied that our country is most horribly scourged by intemperance. In the strong language of Scripture, it groaneth and travaileth in pain, to be delivered from the bondage of this corruption. Our country is free! with a great price obtained we this freedom. ...Yes, we are groaning under a most desolating bondage. The land is trodden down under its polluting foot. Out families are continually dishonored, ravaged, and bereaved; thousands annually slain, and hundreds of thousands carried away into a loathsome slavery, to be ground to powder under its burdens, or broken under the wheel of its tortures. ...Ask the history of the 200,000 paupers now burdening the hands of public charity, and you will find that two-thirds of them have been the victims, directly or indirectly, of Intemperance. Inquire at the gates of death, and you will learn that no less than 30,000 souls are annually passed for the judgment-bar of God, driven there by Intemperance. ...We ask not of salves to man, but to Intemperance, in comparison with whose bondage the yoke of the tyrant is freedom. They are estimated at 480,000! ...Another assertion is equally unquestionable. The time had come when a great effort must be made to exterminate this unequalled destroyer. It was high time this was done when the first drunkard entered eternity to receive the award of Him who has declared that no drunkards shall enter the kingdom of God. ...The whole country is enslaved; and the whole country must rise up at once, like an armed man, and determine to be free. Of what lasting avail would it be for one section of territory, here and there, to clear itself, while the surrounding regions should remain under the curse? The temperance reformation has no quarantine to fence out the infected.

SOURCE: Address to the Young Men of the United States, On Temperance, Rev. C.P. M'Ilvaine, D.D., 1839.

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GENTLEMEN: I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislative of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and the idiotic men and women; of being sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with really horror; of being wretched in our prisons and more wretched in our almshouses.

I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience.

I offered the following extracts in my notebook and journals...

Lincoln: A woman in a cage. Medford: One idiotic subject chained, and one in a close stall for seventeen

years. Pepperell: One often doubly chained, hand in foot; another violent; peaceable now. Brookfield: One man caged, comfortable.

Besides the above, I have seen many who, part of the year, are chained or caged. The use of cages is all but universal...In traversing the state, I have found hundreds of insane persons in every variety of circumstance and condition, many whose situation could not and need not be improved; a less number, but that very large whose lives are the saddest pictures of human suffering and degradation description fades before reality.

Gentlemen, I commit you to the sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands. In this legislation, as in all things, may you exercise that "wisdom which is the breath of the power of God."

SOURCE: Dorothea Dix, The Heritage of America, 1841.

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Upton Lane 8/15/1829

My dear friend.

...I think that I engaged to give some little hints of my view of the state of your debt prison therefore I will endeavor to do it.

In the first place I consider the want of the separation of the sexes the most crying evil and a must unjustifiable exposure of the morals of both parties and that something should be done at once to remedy its at least the womens' room should be locked up at night and they should have a bell that they could ring if they want anything in the night-...There should be a divine service at least once a week and a suitable place for it as it is wrong and hard that prisoners for debt should be excluded the privilege of attending a place or worship. Thus far I think...then I see that much may be done by benevolent ladies of gentlemen frequently visiting these poor creatures reading to them instructing them giving them books (as he has already done) and endeavoring to induce the poor prisoners to make such use of their times as may prove a blessing to them in afterlife also some attention might at times be paid to their families.

SOURCE: Letter of Elizabeth Fry to Sarah Smith, 1829.

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...From the man of highest mental cultivation to the most degraded wretch who staggers in the streets do we meet ridicule, and coarse jests, freely bestowed upon those who dare assert that woman stands by the side of man, his equal, placed here by her God, to enjoy with him the beautiful earth, which is

her home as it is his, having the same sense of right and wrong, and looking to the same Being for guidance and support...

...Man's intellectual superiority cannot be a question until woman has had a fair trial. When we shall have had our freedom to find out our sphere, when we shall have had our colleges, our professions, our trades, for a century, a comparison then may be justly instituted...

...In my opinion, he is infinitely woman's inferior in every moral quality, not by nature, but made so by a false education...

...I would not have woman less pure, but I would have men more so. I would have the same code of morals for both...

...We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed--to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support, to have such disgraceful laws as give man the power to chastise and imprison his wife, to take the wages which she earns, the property which she inherits, and, in the case of separation, the children of her love; laws which make her the mere dependent on his bounty. It is to protest against such unjust laws as these that we are assembled today, and to have them, if possible, forever erased from our statute-books, deeming them a shame and a disgrace to a Christian republic in the nineteenth century...

...The world has never seen a truly great and virtuous nation, because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source...

SOURCE: Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1848 Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention Speech (abridged).

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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. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

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He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men--both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master--the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women--the law, in all cases, going upon a fake supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

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 has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against

her.

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.

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 the United States.

SOURCE: Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Convention, 1848.

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"The costume of woman should be suited to her wants and necessities. It should conduce at once to her health, comfort, and usefulness; and while it should not fail also to conduce to her personal adornment, it should make that end of secondary importance."

SOURCE: "Bloomers;" Amelia Bloomer, mid-19c.

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....It is perfectly clear that whatsoever is morally right for a man to do, is morally right for a woman to do. The Lord Jesus defines the duties of his followers ... I follow him through all his precepts, and find him giving the same directions to women as to men, never even referring to the distinction now so strenuously insisted upon between masculine and feminine virtues: this is one of the anti-Christian "traditions of men" which are taught instead of the "commandments of God." Men and women were CREATED EQUAL; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for a man to do, is right for a woman to do.

What then can woman do for the slave, when she herself is under the feet of man and shamed into silence.

SOURCE: Sarah and Angelina Grimké respectively, 1840.

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One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President (Frances Gage) said with great simplicity:

May I say a few words? Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded; I want to say a few words about this matter. I am for woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint and a man a quart -- why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much -- for we won't take more than our pint will hold.

The poor men seem to be all in confusion and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and there won't be so much trouble.

SOURCE: Reporting on Sojourner Truth, from the Anti-Slavery Bugle, Salem, Ohio, June 21, 1851.