Voices in the Women’s Movement

Directions: Using the document assigned to you, complete your section on Handout C: Document Analysis Jigsaw.

Angelina Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South (Excerpt)*, 1836

Pamphlet urging American women to oppose slavery on moral grounds

I have thus, I think, clearly proved to you seven propositions, viz.:

First, that slavery is contrary to the declaration of our independence.

Second, that it is contrary to the first charter of human rights given to Adam, and renewed to Noah.

Third, that the fact of slavery having been the subject of prophecy, furnishes no excuse whatever to slavedealers.

Fourth, that no such system existed under the patriarchal dispensation.

Fifth, that slavery never existed under the Jewish dispensation; but so far otherwise, that every servant was placed under the protection of law, and care taken not only to prevent all involuntary servitude, but all voluntary perpetual bondage.

Sixth, that slavery in America reduces a man to a thing, a “chattel personal,” robs him of all his rights as a human being, fetters both his mind and body, and protects the master in the most unnatural and unreasonable power, whilst it throws him out of the protection of law.

Seventh, that slavery is contrary to the example and precepts of our holy and merciful Redeemer, and of his apostles.

But perhaps you will be ready to query, why appeal to women on this subject? We do not make the laws which perpetuate slavery. No legislative power is vested in us; we can do nothing to overthrow the system, even if we wished to do so.

To this I reply, I know you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do and if you really suppose you can do nothing to overthrow slavery, you are greatly mistaken. You can do much in every way: four things I will name.

1st. You can read on this subject.
2d. You can pray over this subject.
3d. You can speak on this subject.
4th. You can act on this subject.

I have not placed reading before praying because I regard it more important, but because, in order to pray aright, we must understand what we are praying for; it is only then we can “pray with the understanding, and the spirit also.”
Sarah M. Grimké, *Letter on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Excerpts), 1837

The letter was addressed to Mary S. Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. Note: Grimké’s internal quotations in italics are from Blackstone’s Commentaries.

My Dear Sister,

There are few things which present greater obstacles to the improvement and elevation of woman to her appropriate sphere of usefulness and duty, than the laws which have been enacted to destroy her independence, and crush her individuality; laws which, although they are framed for her government, she has had no voice in establishing, and which rob her of some of her essential rights. Woman has no political existence. With the single exception of presenting a petition to the legislative body, she is a cipher in the nation; or, if not actually so in representative governments, she is only counted, like the slaves of the South, to swell the number of law-makers who form decrees for her government, with little reference to her benefit, except so far as her good may promote their own...

"By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being, or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything..."

Here now, the very being of woman, like that of a slave, is absorbed in her master. All contracts made with her, like those made with slaves by their owners, are a mere nullity. Our kind defenders have legislated away almost all of our legal rights, and in the true spirit of such injustice and oppression, have kept us in ignorance of those very laws by which we are governed. They have persuaded us, that we have no right to investigate the laws, and that, if we did, we could not comprehend them...

"The husband, by the old law, might give his wife moderate correction, as he is to answer for her misbehavior. The law thought it reasonable to entrust him with this power of restraining her by domestic chastisement. The courts of law will still permit a husband to restrain a wife of her liberty, in case of any gross misbehavior."

What a mortifying proof this law affords, of the estimation in which woman is held! She is placed completely in the hands of a being subject like herself to the outbursts of passion, and therefore unworthy to be trusted with power. ...

"A woman’s personal property by marriage becomes absolutely her husband’s, which, at his death, he may leave entirely away from her."

And farther, all the avails of her labor are absolutely in the power of her husband. All that she acquires by her industry is his; so that she cannot, with her own honest earnings, become the legal purchaser of any property...

"All that a slave possesses belongs to his master; he possesses nothing of his own, except what his master chooses he should possess..."

The various laws which I have transcribed, leave women very little more liberty, or power, in some respects, than the slave. “A slave,” says the civil code of Louisiana, “is one who is in the power of a master, to whom he belongs. He can possess nothing, nor acquire anything, but what must belong to his master.”

I do not wish by any means to intimate that the condition of free women can be compared to that of slaves in suffering, or in degradation; still,
I believe the laws which deprive married women of their rights and privileges, have a tendency to lessen them in their own estimation as moral and responsible beings, and that their being made by civil law inferior to their husbands, had a debasing and mischievous effect upon them, teaching them practically the fatal lesson to look unto man for protection and indulgence...

Thine in the bonds of womanhood,
Sarah M. Grimké

Lucretia Mott, *Discourse on Woman* (Excerpts), 1849

*Mrs. Mott first delivered this speech criticizing the restrictions on married women, and later published it.*

The question is often asked, “What does woman want, more than she enjoys? What is she seeking to obtain? Of what rights is she deprived? What privileges are withheld from her?” I answer, she asks nothing as favor, but as right, she wants to be acknowledged a moral, responsible being. She is seeking not to be governed by laws, in the making of which she has no voice. She is deprived of almost every right in civil society, and is a cypher in the nation, except in the right of presenting a petition. In religious society her disabilities, as already pointed out, have greatly retarded her progress. Her exclusion from the pulpit or ministry—her duties marked out for her by her equal brother man, subject to creeds, rules, and disciplines made for her by him—this is unworthy her true dignity. In marriage, there is assumed superiority, on the part of the husband, and admitted inferiority, with a promise of obedience, on the part of the wife. This subject calls loudly for examination, in order that the wrong may be redressed. …

It is with reluctance that I make the demand for the political rights of woman, because this claim is so distasteful to the age. Woman shrinks, in the present state of society, from taking any interest in politics. The events of the French Revolution, and the claim for woman’s rights are held up to her as a warning. But … remember that the age was marked with extravagances and wickedness in men as well as women. Indeed, political life abounds with these excesses, and with shameful outrage. Who knows, but that if woman acted her part in governmental affairs, there might be an entire change in the turmoil of political life. It becomes man to speak modestly of his ability to act without her. If woman’s judgment were exercised, why might she not aid in making the laws by which she is governed? …

Far be it from me to encourage woman to vote, or to take an active part in politics, in the present state of our government. Her right to the elective franchise however, is the same, and should be yielded to her, whether she exercise that right or not. Would that man too, would have no participation in a government based upon the life-taking principle—upon retaliation and the sword. It is unworthy of a Christian nation. But when, in the diffusion of light and intelligence, a convention shall be called to make regulations for self-government on Christian, non-resistant principles, I can see no good reason, why woman should not participate in such an assemblage, taking part equally with man.
Sojourner Truth, *Ain’t I a Woman? (Excerpts)*, 1851
_Speech delivered to the Women’s Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851_

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.