The coalition of women has roots that reach back more than a century of American history. In the decades before the Civil War, women spoke out against men on the issue of slavery, and this served a new breed of brilliant and aggressive women who found themselves talking about female as well as black rights and who recognized that white women are part of the same system that exploits black slaves. The anti-slavery movement reached a dramatic schism on the issue of female participation beyond society's accustomed roles. As long as the tales of bondage were confined to the drawing rooms of the committed, women were greeted by friendly faces, but were attacked after the announcement of a public lecture tour. Anti-abolitionist papers focus on this tour suggesting that foes of slavery intend to bring anarchy to the U.S. and are letting women get out of hand. These incidents relating to women's participation in the anti-slavery movement hurled women toward developing their own organizations. The modern struggle for women's rights also has important roots in the Southern black freedom drive in the 1960's. In the process of supporting the black drive for equality, women have learned something about their oppression. Today, Afro-Americans and women encounter the same arguments, fight the same enemies, and often make unified counter attacks despite differences in their movements. (Author/AM)
The Black/White History of Women’s Rights

In 1964, as President Johnson’s Civil rights legislation neared the voting stage in the Congress, southern Senators believed they had devised a foolproof strategy to insure defeat of the legislation when they appended a provision extending its benefits to women. This sudden broadening of its coverage, they reasoned, would divide supporters of the bill, fortify its enemies, and gather some new opposition. The maneuver failed and the most far-reaching civil rights law in almost a century sailed through Congress, black people and women taking a giant step forward together.

While this lock-step advance appeared accidental, it has historical antecedents worth examining at this time when federal funds and concerns are being used to combat both sexism and racism. Afro-Americans and women have encountered the same arguments, fought the same enemies and have often made unified counterattacks—despite profound differences in their movements.

The modern struggle for women’s rights had important roots in the southern black freedom drive in the 1960s. Under the leadership of the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Dr. Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, women—Northern and Southern, black and white—played a vital part in the voter registration drives and attempted to solidify local resistance to white supremacy. Women were among the army of college students S.N.C.C. sent into Mississippi’s 1964 “Freedom Summer” and participated in thousands of equal rights demonstrations in northern and southern states during those years.

In the process of supporting the black drive for equality, they learned something about their own oppression—that they were welcome to teach children, run typewriters and mimeograph machines, address letters, cook, clean and work for men, but were not invited when men planned basic policy and strategy. This coalition of women has roots that reach back through more than a century of American history. In the decades before the Civil War women united under the banner of the American Anti-Slavery Society, their first great rallying point for battling oppression. It enabled them to speak out against men on a vital national issue and served as a training ground for the future women’s rights movement.

When William Lloyd Garrison launched the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, women and slaves had much in common. Considered wards of their fathers or husbands, women were treated as children within the household and the larger society. Women could not vote or hold office, own property, sue in court, divorce, or keep custody of their children when divorced by their husbands. They had no future in business, commerce or the professions. Oberlin was the only college to admit females, and the instruction below college level prepared women only for tasks men did not want or thought women should have. Forthright, outspoken, or educated women (many were educating themselves) were considered peculiar, dangerous, or mentally ill. Over and over again women were told that their highest aspirations should be serving their men, attending to home and children, and being as pleasant and as quiet (and as pretty) as possible. Feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton compared a married female’s status to that of a slave:

A married woman has no legal existence; she has no more absolute rights than a slave on a Southern plantation. A married woman takes the name of her master, holds nothing, owns nothing, can bring no action in her own name; and the principles on which she and the slave are educated are the same. The slave is taught what is best for him to know—what is nothing; the woman is taught what is best for her to know—which is little more than nothing, man being the umpire in both cases.

This analogy failed to take into consideration that white women were part of the same system that exploited black slaves—male and female—and black women were themselves property, as were their children. If the exploitation of white women was white

Church Terrell, and Mary McLeod Bethune spoke out for the rights of their race and sex. White women such as Mary White Ovington, Jane Addams, and Lillian Wald became founding members of the NAACP, combating both racism and sexism. Assuredly white women pursued their own interests and this often included full capitulation to racism.

The Feminist/Black Connection

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men’s prerogative, exploitation of slave women became a southern industry and a national economic component.

The young abolitionist movement afforded women an opportunity to challenge men on a vital public issue, one with which they could easily identify. For their part, male abolitionists, black and white, did not insist that women’s place was in the home, nor shun support of the abolitionist movement. On the contrary, abolitionists welcomed women’s aid. They were the first important organization to do so, but confined them to managing cake sales, women’s auxiliaries, running bazaars, collecting petitions and attending to the movement’s housekeeping functions. However, their very inclusion in so explosive a movement created a new public climate for women and helped reshape the female self-image. At the founding convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, women—with male permission—spoke up. In 1835, when British abolitionist George Thompson was three times attacked by pro-slavery mobs in America, abolitionist women each time formed a protective shield around him to prevent his being lynched. Some 45,000 women signed petitions denouncing the slaveholders’ efforts to annex Texas as a vast slave property; a similar number signed petitions calling for an end to slave-trading in the nation’s capital.

The anti-slavery movement also created a new breed of vibrant, brilliant and aggressive women in its brief history. Harriet Tubman, who first fled bondage and then made 19 trips into southern seaboard states to free another 300 slaves, said: “Tell the women to keep fighting.” Sojourner Truth, a New York slave who had seen her children sold from her, travelled about the country testifying against slavery’s evils and selling copies of her “Narrative” of life in bondage. She also devoted her energies to campaigning for women’s rights, effectively challenging male debaters far more educated than she. Lydia Maria Child surrendered her position as the nation’s leading children’s book writer to espouse the anti-slavery cause. School principal Prudence Crandall opened her Canterbury, Connecticut girls school to black students. She lost her white students and so infuriated townspeople that they refused to sell her food and goods, poisoned her water well, set her school ablaze and finally jailed her.

These rebellious women invariably found themselves talking about female as well as black rights. “I expect to plead not for the slave only,” said Lucy Stone, “but for suffering humanity everywhere. Especially do I mean to labor for the elevation of my sex.” While lecturing on abolition she admitted, “I was so possessed by the women’s rights idea that I scattered it in every speech.” In this she was matched by Sojourner Truth, who thought that attaining the women’s rights idea that I scattered it in every speech.” In this she was matched by Sojourner Truth, who thought that attaining equal rights was the most important of all the ills that beset her people. “When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages, for the cause of the slaves has been the woman’s cause.”

As the people sally forth to combat both racism and sexism, it is well to recall these words and the efforts of Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucy Stone, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, and the women who volunteered for S.N.C.C. in the 1960s.

REFERENCES