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SECTION K

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# Women pursued the same goals 150 years ago

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An article entitled "Women Versus Their Doctors" appears in a leading feminist journal; another piece protests the current laws against rape; a third demands day-care centers for working women. *Ms. magazine* 1978? No. These essays, written by America's first feminists, appeared in a prominent woman's magazine in 1835.

Neither suffragists nor abolitionists, the authors were simply members of urban voluntary societies. Their names are hardly known today, but their ideas, activities, and aspirations laid the foundation for the contemporary women's movement.

Traditionally, historians have identified the advent of feminism with female abolitionist activity. As one scholar notes: "It was in the abolition movement that women first learned to organize, hold meetings, to conduct petition campaigns. As abolitionists, they began to evolve a philosophy of their place in society and of their basic rights."

The theory postulates that the female abolitionists began to ponder the parallel between woman's status and that of the slave and thus came to recognize their own oppression. This analysis has obscured the true origins of feminism.

Female abolitionists did not, in fact, form a radical departure from antebellum tradition. Indeed, decades before anti-slavery fervor caught the public imagination, tens of thousands of women in cities throughout the nation insulted custom and authority by forming associations dedicated to helping members of their own sex, including such controversial females as prostitutes and criminals. Work within the organizations not only enabled women to expand their sphere and claim unprecedented prerogatives, but also gave them the ability to assert themselves as autonomous individuals.

Ironically, the rise of feminism was a

function of woman's declining role in the decades following the Revolution. During the colonial period the scarcity of labor, making woman's work essential, also gave her substantial status in the early communities. But as the forces of industrialization and urbanization insinuated their values into the young republic, her position deteriorated dramatically. The image of a valuable, contributory member of society gave way to the woman-belle ideal—an all pervasive ethos which circumscribed women's lives.

The woman-belle ideal was a composite of myths, decreeing female abnegation. It denied woman's autonomy and defined her through her relationships to men. Only as a wife, mother, sister, daughter could a woman's life have any meaning. Its tenets affected women regardless of class. While effectively relegating lower-class women to the lowest paying jobs, it deprived their wealthier sisters from any occupation or employment whatsoever. As the dictates of status in the anonymous urban society combined with the increasing numbers of immigrant domestics, a new kind of woman appeared—the useless lady.

Far from enjoying their lives of leisure, multitudes of urban women, during the early decades of the 19th Century, protested their stagnant existences through unexplained illnesses, private diaries, and works of fiction. Finally, however, the yearning for fulfillment and sharing exploded into networks of female voluntary associations in cities across the nation.

In the urban milieu, women found a remarkable form of communication and a compelling purpose for their energies. In one sense, voluntarism represented a multi-faceted quest for identity. In another, it formed a plausible response to urban problems. Within the compact city of the 19th Century poor, widowed women, underpaid laborers, prostitutes, and women criminals were clearly visible, their presence disturbing, their plight compelling. Thus the imperatives of urbanization joined with woman's own needs to produce a plethora of voluntary associations.

Even in their hesitant infant stage,

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# Women's goals

## WOMEN, from K1

these societies helped women to escape from the bondage of the woman-belle ideal. The determination to initiate an organization or join an existing society represented, for many females, a dramatic step toward self-assertion.

This was particularly true because the decision often provoked the opposition of friends and family. The associations' meetings and activities were an attractive alternative to the monotonous and often sickly life of the useless lady, while the functions of the different societies gave women feelings of responsibility and importance denied them in the domestic realm.

Through their associations they learned to run their own meetings, allocate funds, initiate programs and see them through to completion, and work with municipal officials on a host of projects for indigent women. Their work inevitably led to feelings of camaraderie with the other volunteers while simultaneously it gave them a greater appreciation of the underclass women they assisted.

In the early years of female voluntarism, 1800-1830, the members had directed their attention to the least offensive group of women—the poor, the sickly, the widowed. But in the second 30 years, they felt sufficient confidence to defend even the prostitute and woman criminal as victims of society's oppression.

The organizations which worked with these "deviant" women were called moral reform societies. They were started in New York city but soon developed chapters in hundreds of cities and towns across the country. The women met one another at meetings and exchanged ideas through a network of letters in which they spoke of a sisterhood of women.

They sponsored a multitude of programs—evening schools for working women, housing shelters for single women, employment directories, and feminist publications. But their most controversial work was their defense of female outcasts.

The members visited brothels and printed the names of the men they found there. They unleashed a relentless attack on the double sexual standard which admitted their anger at men and their wish to control male conduct as he had controlled woman's. In an unprecedented manner, these women lectured, criticized, and scrutinized male behavior.

Not surprisingly, this display of feminine audacity provoked concerted efforts to suppress their activities. But each criticism only strengthened their resolve. Refusing to stop their defense of other women, the volunteers demanded the right to their own conscience and judgment. And, as they became increasingly confident in their convictions, they emphasized the similarities between themselves and the deviant women they were assisting.

"All women are sisters in the common tie of humanity," they wrote. "In seeking to promote the elevation of our sex . . . we recognize no distinction of station or color." This sweeping assertion of kinship was of great importance. It defended the worth of each woman as a complete individual, and it expressed the belief in a sisterhood of women bound together both by the burden of oppression and the gift of humanity.

By a unique blend of circumstance, then, the development of feminism joined the lives of different classes of urban women together, making the freedom of the one a function of the emancipation of the other. Yet, it is also true that the proximity of urban life, requiring the intense interactions of widely disparate female existences, forced woman to argue for her independence from the most inclusive of all principles: woman's common humanity and right to fulfill her autonomous identity.

In trying to achieve their goals, the volunteers agitated for reforms strikingly similar to those of the women's movement today. Our first feminists founded the earliest day-care centers and were responsible for pioneering laws against rape and seduction. As early as 1840, they demanded that history be revised to reflect women's contributions and carried on relentless campaigns for more equitable employment and educational opportunities. They urged greater male participation in the home and even publicized the plight of "battered wives." Their defense of so-called deviants has an impressively modern sound, and their belief in a community of women is only recently being renewed.

Although some of the early demands seem quaint and dated now, the majority of the programs are still relevant today. Much can be learned from our earliest feminists. Their conviction that woman is an autonomous being whose dignity stems from her humanity is their legacy to the present. It is at once a rich heritage and an awesome responsibility, for this concept still exists only as an idea. It remains for the future to make it a reality.