Sugar Mamas
British Women and the War on West Indian Slavery

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In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, an age of restricted female rights and responsibilities, the movements to abolish the slave trade and slavery itself in British colonies provided a rare opportunity for women to be involved in political and social activism. Abolitionists and politicians mobilized female supporters from all sectors of British society to produce and spread anti-slavery rhetoric and support for reform. Despite their traditional restriction to domestic activities, many women actively and enthusiastically took on the challenge of abolition and their participation became an integral part of the abolition movement. Without women’s participation in the movement, the push for abolition would have been much more difficult and may not have been achieved until much later in the nineteenth century. Capitalizing on their position as the moral center of the home and and embracing their ability to influence communities, women used pamphlets and in-person campaigns to spread abolitionist sentiments throughout Britain. In addition to their influence in the abolitionist movement in Britain, the social and political activism of women fed directly into the feminist and suffragette movements later in the nineteenth century.

This project explores how British women overcame their political limitations and used their social positions in order to challenge the institutions of slavery. Women’s activism against the slave trade and later against slavery had dramatic but overlooked political, social, and religious implications for Britain. Most of the primary sources used were written by women and their anti-slavery organizations, including pamphlets promoting the moral and political righteousness of abolition and reports from abolitionist societies which had been organized by and consisted of women. These sources provide a rare look at early political activity by women in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, as women generally did not produce an abundance of political literature until the women’s movement later in the nineteenth century. They also provide a reflection on the roles of women in society, and demonstrate that women could be influential and important to British politics even though they had little political power.

British slavery was a contradiction in and of itself. While the kingdom’s economy and wealth was based on the economic production of its colonies in the West Indies, the British took great pride in their liberty and Christian principles.¹ For a nation that was so rooted in Christianity, slavery was considered a stain on its reputation.² Many opponents of slavery focused on this hypocrisy, noting that it was “absurdity and folly…directly at variance with the enlightened policy of our Government and of the age in which we live.”³ Slavery was deemed an abomination of the highest level of morality. Abolitionist pamphlets and writings emphasized the cruelties of West Indian slavery in order to bring its realities to British society, claiming that in order to have “the most perfect freedom,” British society must “no longer impose upon others a slavery…most oppressive; and…no longer range the world to increase the misery of mankind.”⁴ The stage had been set for a widespread push for Parliament to abolish slavery.

In the final decades of the eighteenth century slavery quickly became, and long remained, an issue intermingled with religion, politics, social conventions, and international relations. The specific motivations for involvement in the abolition movement varied from person to person, but generally fell under at least one of these categories. The most important reason for activism was the idea that slavery directly contradicted religious beliefs in what many Britons considered “the most-highly favored…of all


³. West India Sugar (Liverpool: George Smith, 1827), 2.

⁴. [William Fox], An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum, 10th ed. (Philadelphia: Daniel Lawrence, 1792), 3.
Abolitionists often saw the need to end slavery as part of a moral duty to relieve the suffering of an oppressed people. Many anti-slavery societies grew out of religious communities, which believed that slavery was “a decidedly religious question” and incorporated Evangelical principles into their campaign. These organizations argued that when people ignored the Christian call to love their neighbors and to be interested in the welfare of mankind, “the love of God is extinguished, and our own true happiness is extinguished with it….when we become careless of their interests, we are moral suicides.” While the New Testament preached love and humanitarianism to a certain degree, it said nothing that prohibited or condemned slavery, while the Old Testament provided passages that allowed for the acquisition and possession of slaves. Slaveholders and traders were accused of using this lack of biblical criticism to excuse cruelty and greed, which abolitionists believed would discredit the religion in the eyes of slaves. Side-stepping the issue of Christian charity and humanitarianism, many opponents of abolition, such as House of Commons member Isaac Gascoyne, focused on the economic risk of ending slavery was dangerous for investors and for the empire, arguing that doing so would cripple the British economy and power structure. Even though both pro- and anti-slavery parties believed that their cause was divinely sanctioned, many opponents of slavery believed that evolving religious attitudes placed Christianity on the side of the abolitionists.

Complementing the belief that Christian doctrine condemned the slave trade was the idea that African slaves, as well as all African people, needed to be “civilized” in the British model. Following Enlightenment concepts,

5. [Heyrick], Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences, 14.
6. An Appeal to the Christian Women of Sheffield, From the Association for the Universal Abolition of Slavery (Sheffield: R. Leader, 1837), 13.
10. HC Deb 10 June 1806 vol. 7 cc591-593.
the abolition movement emphasized ideas of natural rights and a need for education, which contradicted the system of slavery. However, civilizing slaves could not be accomplished while nominally Christian plantation owners and slave traders continued to violate religious laws. Abolitionists stressed that focusing on educating the slaves without abolishing slavery diverted “public attention from the great fundamental evil itself, to the partial alleviation of the distress which it occasions, [which] shall do harm instead of good.” Before Britain could lead the way in “civilizing” the people of Africa, they first needed to end the system which oppressed the Africans.

Politicians, while hesitant to take on the complicated issue, could not avoid the battle over slavery. Pro-slavery and anti-slavery parties both pushed Parliament to take a stand. The idea was rapidly spreading through Britain that something “which is morally wrong cannot be politically right.” Parliamentary action was led by the Evangelical Party, the reform party, and “hard-headed, practical men” like William Fox and William Wilberforce. This was a combination that guaranteed humanitarian reform. However, any attempt to limit or end the slave trade met with powerful opposition. Fox complained that the great wealth that came out of the slave trade “created an influence that secures its continuance.” Abolitionists recognized the overwhelming power that greed had over politics. In addition to opposition by people who profited from slavery within Britain, colonial legislatures took advantage of their distance from the government and ignored recommendations and orders from Parliament concerning the slave trade. For legislation to have any affect, reform-minded politicians like Fox and Wilberforce needed widespread public support.


15. [Fox], *An Address to the People of Great Britain*, 3.

16. [Heyrick], *Apology for Ladies' Anti-Slavery Associations*, 3.
In the late eighteenth century, women were largely excluded from the debate over slavery. During this time, they were commonly confined to the home as wives and mothers, and were expected to stay out of political issues. This was not always seen as a disadvantage. Many women considered themselves “happily excluded from the great theatre of public business, from the turmoils of ambition, the strife of debate, and the cares of legislation.” Despite this artificial but culturally ingrained inferiority, women found small ways to contribute to the abolitionist movement. Fox, a popular pamphleteer as well as a politician, urged people to refuse to use products, especially sugar and rum, produced by slaves in the West Indies until planters agreed to stop importing slaves. Given the structure of domestic duties, this call was primarily aimed at women who ran their household. While there was some success in this campaign, historian Clare Midgley notes that its main contribution was “the role it played in creating in large numbers of men and women a sense of individual responsibility for slavery, and a belief in the possibility of achieving its downfall through extra-Parliamentary action.” For many, this was the first taste of social and political activism.

The other main contribution women made in this first stage of the abolitionist movement was through the publication of anti-slavery poetry. Poets such as Hannah More and Ann Yearsley produced “political propaganda for a huge audience” as part of the abolition movement. Their poetry publicized the plight of African slaves in the West Indies and urged women to involve themselves in the movement:

Say not that small’s the sphere in which we move,
And our attempts would vain and fruitless prove;
Not so - we hold a most important share,

18. [Heyrick], Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences of British Women, 3.
19. [Fox], An Appeal to the People of Great Britain, 11.
In all the evils - all the wrongs they bear,
And tho’ their woes entire we can’t remove,
We may th’increasing mis’ries which they prove,
Push far away the plant for which they die,
And in this one small thing our taste deny;
We must, we ought, ‘tis Justice points the way;
Mercy and Charity loudly call - “obey.”

Emphasizing the domestic and Christian duties of British women, the poems condemned participants in the slave trade, sympathized with the slaves, and emphasized the need to civilize Africans. The women portrayed slaves as akin to Rousseau’s “noble savages,” capable of reason and society, but unjustly condemned to slavery because they were “convicted…of a darker skin.” Despite support from different levels of society and literature spreading information about anti-slavery, women’s involvement in this first wave of abolition was small compared to their participation in the movement to abolish slavery entirely two decades later.

After much difficulty, the British slave trade was finally abolished in 1807, although slavery itself was still legal. Abolitionists hoped that when the slave trade ended, “the evils of slavery would be gradually mitigated, and the whole system would soon come to an end.” However, it quickly became apparent that this would not be the case. The slave trade “flourished under other flags” and continued in the West Indies in spite of British legislation. Some had predicted this outcome, arguing that “the African slave trade be the most prominent feature in this wickedness [of slavery], yet it is but a feature: and where it is abolished the West India slavery would

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In 1824, Elizabeth Heyrick, a popular abolitionist and pamphlet writer, complained that it had been “seventeen years since the Slave Trade was abolished…but Slavery is still perpetuated in our West India Colonies, and the horrors of the Slave Trade are aggravated rather than mitigated.”

Even though the British slave trade had ended more than a decade earlier, the practice of slavery and its cruelties continued unabated until British society again turned its attention to the issue in the 1820s.

Following the realization that there was no end to slavery in sight, in 1823 a new wave of campaigns began, this time focused on the total abolition of slavery. Despite their continued lack of a political voice, women were far more influential in this second wave of activism than they had been thirty years earlier. Most importantly, female abolitionists like Elizabeth Heyrick and the women of abolitionist societies found a way to be an integral part of the movement without venturing too far from their traditional domestic and social roles, for going too far beyond the gender boundaries would be perceived as a threat and would have complicated their work for the anti-slavery movement.

The call for women to participate in this new movement came early. Traditionally considered the more sensitive of the sexes, it was believed that women’s personalities particularly disposed them “to regard with peculiar hostility an institution which rudely tears asunder all the strongest ties of nature.” The abolitionists calling for women’s involvement emphasized that the lack of a political presence should not prevent them from using their domestic role to influence public opinion and undermine the slave system. Women and their ability to influence society and spread word about the horrors of slavery quickly became a central focus of the abolitionist movement.

British women voiced their opposition and circulated stories of atrocities in the West Indies through an outpouring of pamphlets and propaganda. Just as in the earlier era of the anti-slavery movement, these

26. [Fox], *An Address to the People of Great Britain*, 12.
29. [Heyrick], *Apology for Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Associations*, 4.
writings were aimed at exposing the cruelties of slavery and spurring British women into action. Elizabeth Heyrick, one of the most prolific of the writers, encouraged her “enlightened and patriotic countrywomen [to] reflect on the present situation of England with regard to that cherished crime.” The pamphlets encouraged a variety of different means of activism, including boycotting West Indian sugar and influencing family members. Many of these pamphlets were written by women and specifically intended for other women to read, creating a network of female abolitionists through which stories of atrocities and calls to action were spread.

Much of the abolitionist literature directed toward the women of Britain focused on the condition of female slaves. To appeal to the perceived femininity and sensitivity of women, and to generate the idea of a universal bond of womanhood and family, writers emphasized the horrible treatment of female slaves in the West Indies. Stressing the “malignant influence which slavery exerts over the female character,” authors portrayed enslaved women as “the weakest and most succourless of the human race…whose afflictions and degradations were once experienced by many of the inhabitants of this land.” The connection between formerly oppressed women of Britain and currently oppressed women of the West Indies was meant to outrage the “civilized” women of Britain. Pamphlets emphasized how slavery deprived women of their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers in order to outrage the feminine sensibilities of British women.

As soon as the pamphlets circulated abolitionist sentiments and recommended methods of protest, women throughout Britain quickly began to organize against slavery. In 1825, the Female Society for Birmingham was established as the first women’s anti-slavery association. Other areas soon followed the example of the ladies of Birmingham and within a decade

32. [Heyrick], Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences, 12; and The Third Report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their Respective Neighbourhoods, For the Relief of British Negro Slaves, Established, April 8, 1825 (Birmingham: Benjamin Hudson, 1828), 11.
women’s anti-slavery societies could be found throughout Britain. The general aim of these societies was “the diffusion of information on the subject of Slavery, and the promotion of the immediate and complete extinction of that cruel and iniquitous system, throughout the British dominions.” However, when women began to establish these anti-slavery societies in the 1820s they were careful not to overstep their domestic boundaries and to maintain a non-threatening image. The belief that women had no business in politics was still very strong, and many prominent abolitionists, including the movement’s unofficial leader William Wilberforce, were initially against these women’s organizations. Despite this initial opposition, larger abolitionist societies soon recognized the potential of these women’s societies due to their success in using their domestic and social influence. Women’s anti-slavery associations around Britain quickly became an official part of the abolition movement, although largely still limited to activism in the domestic sphere.

Their restriction to the domestic sphere did not reduce women’s enthusiasm for the cause; instead it led to a powerful display of strength. Pamphlet writers and abolitionist society members revived the sugar boycotts of the 1790s to demonstrate how far women’s influence could reach in support of abolition. As the head of domestic responsibilities, women generally had control over food and household goods. Seizing this opportunity and proclaiming that “great effects often result from small beginnings,” abolitionists urged supporters to “encourage, by their example, as well as by their influence, the use of the produce of free labour, in preference to that of slave labour.” Members of the anti-slavery societies campaigned in person in neighborhoods, encouraging abstention from slave-produced sugar, and even boycotted local business that used sugar produced by slave labor in the West Indies. The vocal opposition of women to West Indian sugar was extremely influential on community views and commerce.

34. Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 44-47.
35. An Appeal to the Christian Women of Sheffield, 3-4.
37. Heyrick, Immediate, Not Gradual, Abolition, 8; Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Associations, 6.
Thomas Clarkson, a prolific anti-slavery writer, noted their success during his travels through Britain and estimated that “no fewer than three hundred thousand persons had abandoned the use of sugar.” The great number of people who took the stand to boycott West Indian sugar demonstrates the wide influence of women in the abolitionist movement.

Women also used their domestic roles to shape the political opinions of family and friends. One abolitionist group urged women to “throw all your talents, all your influence, into the scale of justice and humanity.” Anti-slavery associations encouraged female supporters to use their superior moral sensibilities to influence the political views of the men and women around them: “you can influence your husband, children, relations, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, in a certain manner and to a certain degree…by bringing their moral feelings and their religious principles to bear on it.” Elizabeth Heyrick believed that a woman’s moral influence was so strong that any immoral practice they chose to focus on would not endure their opposition. If women set their hearts on a cause and worked hard for it, it had no chance of surviving. Taking advantage of their unique position in society, women often used their position as the moral center of a family and their influence in society to support the fight against slavery.

Women also spread abolitionist sentiment to other women. Although they had no direct political voice, “to the hearts and consciences of our own sex…we have unlimited access.” Anti-slavery societies tasked women with spreading abolitionist sentiment to their “less enlightened countrywomen,” who in turn could apply more pressure on the men of society.

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42. [Heyrick], *Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences*, 3.

43. [Heyrick], *Apology for Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Association*, 11.

44 [Heyrick], *Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences*, 16.
circulated about wives and relatives of members of Parliament pushing their husbands to support abolition. These elite women set an example of the proper way for women to influence their husbands and families without venturing too far beyond the limits set on their sex.

While the activities of ladies of leisure were much more prominent within anti-slavery societies, participation in the movement was not limited to women of privileged classes. The opportunity to participate in the abolition movement united women from various social, religious, and political backgrounds, including “radical proto-feminists,…conservative Evangelicals…, Whig grandees…, and feminist advocates of political economy.” Middle- and working-class women were encouraged to follow their lead by boycotting West Indian sugar and signing petitions. While the movement did little to relax social tensions or loosen the strict divisions of society in general, it did provide a cause that people of any social level could support. Women of all kinds became the voice of the anti-slavery movement in domestic society, a role which required “no shining abilities, nothing beyond ordinary common sense,” and could be achieved by women who possessed “neither talent, power, nor influence.” When promoting the end of a social evil like slavery, every woman had the ability and the responsibility to do her part.

It was inevitable that this new branch of activism alarmed some people. Naturally, plantation owners were concerned about the popularity of the sugar boycotts and tried to discredit efforts of the abolitionists. The end of the slave trade and boycotts of slave-produced goods obviously had an effect on the income of slavery advocates. However, social opposition went much deeper than material interests. In spite of the fact that female

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47. Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 83-84.

48. A Lady [pseud.], A Dialogue Between a Well-Wisher and A Friend to the Slaves, 10.

49. Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 39.
abolitionists largely operated in the domestic sphere, men and women who believed that women belonged in the home and out of politics saw their activism as a threat to the traditional way of life. Women were accused of partaking in unfeminine and unbecoming activities. Others emphasized the idea that charity began at home, and that women should focus on reform in Britain before anything else. The idea that women were involving themselves in political issues seemed immoral and immodest. The women took all of this criticism in stride, emphasizing that the task had been “left to [men] for many a year, but the result of its being so left is not very encouraging,” referring to the failure of legislation and lack of progress. Still, many female activists did their best to keep their activities within the sphere of domestic and religious responsibility in order to reaffirm their traditional roles.

However, a few women ignored traditional opposition and took their activism one step further. Between 1830 and 1833, “hundreds of thousands of women…signed anti-slavery petitions [to Parliament],” an activity that often met with “male opposition and female ambivalence.” Women still had no legal right to sign and present petitions, but their doing so demonstrates how far they were willing to take their activism regardless of any public displeasure it could cause. This radical break with tradition was proof that many women were unhappy with their lack of a political voice and that they were ready to leave their conventional domestic sphere.

The petitions and boycotts had a profound effect on the abolitionist movement. Parliament officially abolished slavery in 1833, after years of activism by men and, more remarkably, by women. Women’s activism against slavery progressed from writing poetry and boycotting sugar to actively campaigning and participating in the abolitionist movement.

50. *A Vindication of Female Anti-Slavery Associations*, 3.


52. *A Lady [pseud.], A Dialogue Between a Well-Wisher and a Friend to the Slaves*, 7.


They had a new role as political entities, despite still having few political rights. However, their fight against slavery was not over. Regardless of the legislation which outlawed slavery throughout the British Empire, it soon became clear that “that accursed system, whose destruction the British people had decided upon, is not destroyed, but exists in aggravated severity.”

British abolitionists turned to the task of eradicating the foreign slave trade, acquiring complete freedom for former slaves in the West Indies, and even encouraging and supporting “those noble-minded and devoted women in America, who are making great efforts and painful sacrifices in defence of the sacred rights of Freedom.” The women of Britain were prepared to lead the world by their example and push for the total and global abolition of slavery.

The participation of British women in both stages of the abolitionist movement was an important step in freeing them from traditional domestic confines. Their vital role as producers and circulators of information and rhetoric for the anti-slavery cause gave them a new political presence. Their actions in the anti-slavery movement were largely a selfless effort, since they apparently gained little from the movement other than knowing that they had supported a moral and just cause. However, their participation also instilled the idea that women could be and, for many, should be politically active. Their influential actions in support of reform and abolition had lasting effects. Before the nineteenth century was over, women once again took to political activism and reform, this time for their own benefit. For most women involved, the abolitionist movement provided their first opportunity to have a political voice, and they were not willing to step back into their traditional apolitical role. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were once again becoming politically active for the cause of suffrage and women’s rights.

55. An Appeal to the Christian Women of Sheffield, 5.
56. Ibid., 10.
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