The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism

Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement

Julie Roy Jeffrey

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intense interest." So involving and stimulating were these events that the women had to be "careful that they do not become the topic of all absorbing interest. . . . that we do not forget the Slave himself." [111]

During the 1830s, abolitionist newspapers, lecturers, and already converted friends, neighbors, and kin urged women to remember the slave. The surviving sources do not reveal whether women initially played a significant role in Garrison's campaign for immediate emancipation, although the support of some for the free produce movement and the literary antislavery publications of others warn against assuming that they were altogether absent. In any case, the unpopularity of the cause made leaders feel that the support of women was at least symbolically desirable. What responsibilities women might assume only revealed themselves slowly, and few abolitionists, male or female, perceived the consequences of encouraging women to use their moral influence in the cause. While many people made soothing statements about the congruence of abolitionism with the usual female concerns, the efforts to teach women how to argue the abolitionist case and to encourage women to circulate antislavery materials and to recruit others suggested that the work of abolitionism might indeed take women far from the kitchen and parlor.

As leaders were groping toward an understanding of women's part in antislavery, women themselves were also finding their way in the new reform. Women articulated the powerful reasons that drew them to the new cause and emphasized the importance of listening to the call of moral duty. They began to learn new skills and ran the risks that went along with advocating an unpopular position. As they joined antislavery societies, they confronted organizational issues common to associational life and particular challenges related to the nature of their reform. As Mary Clark, from Concord, New Hampshire, explained in a letter to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, she, who relished the work, and other members of the antislavery society were more and more convinced that women especially were called to the work of abolitionism. In that work, there was a special part suitable for females and not adapted "to the sterner nature of man." [112]

Chapter 2
Antislavery Societies
The 1830s

Oh, turn ye not displeased away though I
should sometimes seem
Too much to press upon your ear, an oft
repeated theme;
The story of the negro's wrongs is heavy at my
heart,
And can I choose but wish from you a
sympathizing part? [1]

Although abolitionists continued to form antislavery societies until the Civil War, the 1830s were the heyday of antislavery organizational efforts. Antislavery advocates established associations on the local, county, state, and national levels. While membership figures may not be entirely trustworthy, by 1837 there were reportedly more than 1,000 state and local antislavery societies with at least 100,000 members.[2]

Many of those joining antislavery societies lived in rural communities, villages, and small towns clustered in New England, western New York, along the Pennsylvania-Ohio border, and in parts of the Midwest where New Englanders and Quakers from the South and the mid-Atlantic had settled. While abolitionist organizers could hardly afford to ignore the cities, they had followed the spirit of advice given to Lewis Tappan in 1836 by the energetic and compelling antislavery agent Theodore Weld. "Let the great cities *alone*: they must be burned down by *back fires*. The springs to touch in order to move them *lie in the country*. . . . Let every thing in the

shape of agents, papers, etc. be poured upon the *country*—in the *country*—the villages—and the smaller cities in the interior."[3]

Common assumptions during the 1830s that associated women with virtue and characterized abolitionism as a moral reform made female support for the cause almost a legitimizing device. If the presence of women reinforced the moral character of abolitionism, women's moral character should make them naturally interested in the plight of the slave. As Rev. Ludlow reminded the annual meeting of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society in 1836, women were the "most important and powerful coadjutors in the glorious cause." Indeed, "every woman who is worthy of the name of woman," needed "only to be informed upon the subject, to find all the noble sympathies of her heart enlisted in the cause of emancipation." Although this heavily gendered appeal did not mesh with the Hicksite Quaker women's more egalitarian understanding of their gender, many evangelical women found it persuasive. Exhortations to American women to enter the ranks of abolitionism bore fruit as women established local and county female antislavery societies and held three national conventions in the last three years of the decade. Even before the controversy over the participation of women in the antislavery movement began to divide abolitionists at the end of the decade, some women and men were meeting together in joint associations.[4]

How many women joined antislavery societies is not known. Some figures are suggestive, however. Of 183 local antislavery organizations in Massachusetts in 1838, for example, 41 of these were women's associations. In addition, 13 juvenile societies, most likely supervised by women and primarily composed of "young misses," flourished.[5] Writing from Newburyport, Massachusetts, the president of the female antislavery society there noted that the men's society had disintegrated and observed "what is done [here] is chiefly by females." Yet no records for the Newburyport society exist. Even though the work of female antislavery societies was considerable and vital to the survival of the reform, the remaining records of women's organizations are few. Combined with other primary sources, however, these records suggest women's contributions to abolitionism and the ways in which they created and attempted to maintain an institutional identity. Sources also illuminate the difficulties, some common to male and female voluntarism, others specific to female societies, women abolitionists faced in organized antislavery.[6]

An examination of female institutional life reveals the fundamental importance of a gendered view of the world. Although seemingly conservative in its definition of woman's sphere as domestic and private, it was capable of demanding behavior that took women beyond the boundaries of what the culture at large defined as womanly. Abolitionism was not the only reform to highlight the tensions in and the elasticity of woman's sphere. Temperance and some moral reform activities also pressed against gender boundaries. But abolitionism raised these issues in a particularly vivid way. While most ministers did not denounce temperance or argue that prostitution should be left alone, many authoritative voices condemned abolitionist activities and women's participation in them. Women involved in abolitionism could not avoid confronting the ambiguities implicit in the view of women as society's moral voice.

As Chapter 1 pointed out, the formation of female antislavery societies might result from the efforts of a visiting lecturer or local clergy, or the exertions of individual women persuaded of the necessity of immediate emancipation. Some, like Louisa Phillips of North Marshfield, Massachusetts, were already working for the cause in their own communities before deciding the time had come to organize collectively. These women approached friends, neighbors and relatives in person to win support for the proposed society. Others, like Eliza Chace in Rhode Island and Betsy Cowles in Ohio, undertook letter writing campaigns to encourage women outside their own neighborhoods to start up female societies.[7]

The initiation of a female society could turn into a public ceremony demonstrating women's collective support for abolitionism. In the fall of 1835, after Theodore Weld's lecture in Austinburg, Ohio, 150 women were so solemnly impressed by "the reality, extent, & unspeakable evils of the system of Slavery" that they formed the Ashtabula County (Ohio) Female Anti-Slavery Society and formally signed their names under the society's constitution. Less impressive in terms of numbers but similar in terms of dynamics was the experience of women in Dighton, Massachusetts. Although "their was not more than three or four who had thought much on the subject of slavery," the eloquence of English lecturer George Thompson was so moving that twenty-three women formed an antislavery society.[8]

Such public rites had overtones of an evangelical revival meeting. Given the background of antislavery lecturers, many of whom were ministers or had contemplated entering the church, the evangelical atmosphere was predictable. Like sinners poised on the anxious seat, exhorted to come forward and be saved, those listening to antislavery lectures were urged to come forward and commit themselves to the holy cause of abolitionism.[9]

Though a spellbinding outside lecturer could act as the catalyst for the ceremony of commitment, local women might orchestrate the event. In Mellville, Massachusetts, some ladies of the village, recognizing they had

"too long [been] slumbering over their duty," invited the antislavery lecturer Charles Burleigh to address them. At the end of his address, a constitution was circulated, and twenty-nine of those present signed it.[10]

Often the formation of an association must have been both less dramatic and public. A woman, alone or with a group of like-minded associates, called her friends and relatives together to consider the possibility of establishing a female antislavery society. Such a gathering could lead to immediate action, as it did when women in Brooklyn, Connecticut, met in Davison's Hotel during the summer of 1834. Fired up by the reading of several articles, the women voted to form an association and appointed a committee to prepare a constitution and a list of nominations for officers. But such congeniality and decisiveness was not always the case. The absence of a charismatic lecturer and the social character of the occasion also provided abolitionist opponents an opportunity to disrupt organizing efforts. In Dorcester, Massachusetts, a woman dubbed "Mrs. Pro-slavery" outmaneuvered a core of women who described themselves as modest and retiring. Her zeal against the idea of an antislavery society was such that the "large and respectable meeting, composed of ladies from all parts of the town, was dissolved." Her antagonism, however, merely delayed the formation of the society.[11]

Even after women decided to form an association, they faced a good deal of work before the organization could function. As Lucy Wright commented, "It takes us some time to get into operation." While lecturer James Thome persuaded fifteen or twenty women to join the newly formed Ladies Society after his lecture in Geneva, Ohio, Mrs. Cowles and a few others had to hunt down thirty additional women they thought they could get as supporters.[12]

Beyond recruiting for the association, the organizers had to make important initial decisions. The Dover, New Hampshire, women who agreed to begin an antislavery society in 1835, for example, were quickly involved in the weighty business of selecting a preamble and constitution. This was no formulaic task. As one member of another female antislavery society explained, a preamble constituted a society's "creed." And like any creed it would serve not only as an expression of collective identity but also as a statement of belief to be used with outsiders. In their preamble and constitution, Dover women stressed the themes of sin and duty and used temperance as an example of the individual and collective transformation that a radical reform might achieve. They carefully outlined their goals: immediate emancipation, the elevation of the character and condition of colored people, the circulation of literature, and fund-raising. With one of their major recruiting tools completed, they then selected a committee of four women (three single and one married) to canvass the other women in the community and secure their signatures to the document. Eventually 388 were listed as members of the new society.[13]

The use to which the Dover women put their new constitution makes it apparent why some abolitionist women decided to confront the question of propriety in their founding document. If women were to persuade their more timid neighbors to join in antislavery work, it was just as well to address their misgivings at once. Groton, Massachusetts, women adopted a constitution that not only called slavery a flagrant violation of God's principles but also emphasized that women had a duty as women to do what they could because slave women suffered "in more than equal proportion." In Winthrop, Maine, the female association's preamble stated that "women have intellects, sentiments, feelings and souls, . . . [and therefore] they have something to do, when intellects are wasted, sentiments perverted, feelings outraged, and souls lost." Similarly, women in Canton, Ohio, stated in their preamble, "We consider that we are *not moving out of our proper sphere* as females when we assume a *public* stand in favor of our *oppressed sisters*." They went on to document the "mighty and soul moving reasons which render it peculiarly incumbent on women to act in this cause."[14]

No doubt women who were securing signatures for the constitution and members for the new society first sought out those sympathetic to their goals. In the summer of 1837 in Boylston, Massachusetts, Mrs. Sanford, the minister's wife, made calls to gain support for the proposed female abolitionist society. Sixty-year-old Mary White, daughter of a minister, wife of a farmer and storekeeper, Aaron White, and mother of ten children was an obvious choice for the proposed society. She had amply indicated her interest in religious and reform causes. Mary taught Sabbath school, attended temperance meetings, and accompanied her daughter Eliza to maternal meetings. For over a year she had joined in prayer meetings for the slaves and attended general meetings on the subject of slavery. Though Mrs. Sanford could only have sensed the cumulative impact of these activities, Mary's diary shows a deepening commitment to emancipation. After recording that she had heard an antislavery lecture, Mary routinely composed short prayers of supplication. On the day that she heard two sermons as well as an antislavery lecture at the town hall, for example, Mary ended her diary entry hoping that "the Lord . . . grant deliverance to the poor slaves." When Mrs. Sanford carried the constitution for the proposed society to the White farm one June evening, Mary responded positively. The next day, Mary came to the town hall to help in the formation of the

society and to attend the prayer meeting afterward. Mary White and her daughters would continue to be active in the antislavery cause for years.[15]

Mary Frizell Manter, a resident of Walpole, Massachusetts, a member of the Baptist Church, and the mother of a little boy whom she persuaded to "put . . . all his money into the Anti-slavery cause" was also the kind of woman whom those soliciting signatures would target. Though Mary Manter was "poor and not much likely to be of much use in the world," her willingness "to be a poor despised one" and follow the demands of duty must have been apparent to friends and neighbors.[16]

The number of signatures that some women were able to secure suggests, though it does not prove, that, in some communities, female organizers moved beyond the obvious sympathizers to talk to those who had slight interest in their proposal. Such personal encounters, whether planned or unexpected, demanded more than the physical presentation of the constitution. Women found themselves explaining and trying to convince others about the nature of the cause.

In their efforts to win adherents to the cause of immediate emancipation, women drew upon published materials and information about slavery they had read or heard and resorted to a range of persuasive techniques. Sophia Davenport left a record of the techniques she used to bring acquaintances to "a right state of mind." Sophia and a friend cooperated in their venture; one evening the friend stayed up until after midnight presenting the case for immediate emancipation to Mr. Ford; the next night it was Sophia's turn. She read aloud "Mrs. Child's chapter upon prejudices." The treasurer of the Dorchester (Massachusetts) Female Anti-Slavery Society gave an account revealing similar tactics and her willingness to exploit social situations. During her stay in West Chester, Pennsylvania, the Dorchester woman received a visit from two ladies who were slaveholders. They challenged her, saying, "You certainly do not pretend that slavery is a sin, for we can prove by Scripture that it is not." Undaunted, the Dorchester officer replied that she could easily prove their error. "We then had a long conversation upon the subject, after which they took home, at my request, a copy of Miss Smith's Appeal to Christian Women of America."[17]

In Canton, Ohio, lecturer James Thome managed to secure the commitment of two young Baltimore women, daughters of a Maryland slaveholder. After they "proclaimed their conversion," they, in turn, "began to visit amongst their acquaintances and to labor with the first Ladies of the place to *convert them*. A ladies Society was formed and they both joined it." Two days after her conversion, one of the young women attended a "gay party, where there was not a single abolitionist, but where *ridiculing abolitionism* was the *order of the evening*." She passed through this occasion "boldly," proclaiming her newly found faith and producing "a great sensation."[18]

It was not uncommon for those engaged in organizing activities to use the term conversion to describe the fruits of their labors. Women who felt deeply about spiritual matters and the sacred nature of their cause naturally turned to religious terminology to describe their recruiting efforts. But their word choice also revealed the magnitude of the change that they sought and the sacred process in which they felt engaged. Like a religious conversion, acceptance of the antislavery cause signified a profound transformation. The moment of commitment, marked formally with the signing of the constitution, represented the beginning of a new life.

Benevolent and religious associations were a familiar part of the nineteenth-century rural and urban landscape for many northern middle-class women, including Mary White of Boylston, Massachusetts. Some historians have suggested that abolitionist societies attracted women whose social and class position precluded membership in traditional benevolent organizations. Evelina Smith's comment that "we see so much pride, ambition & desire of distinction, intermingled with benevolent purpose" suggests not only her critical perspective of benevolent activities but perhaps also her social location.[19] While organizational records and letters do not yield definitive evidence on the connection of women in antislavery associations to traditional benevolence, many recognized that they stood outside of the elite circle of women who directed established benevolent societies. Most antislavery women probably had participated in less formal groups like prayer meetings, but many confessed to meager organizational experience. As M. P. Rogers in Concord, New Hampshire, explained, "we are altogether new hands, and entirely unacquainted with the management of societies." Ann Buckman from Newton, Pennsylvania, echoed Rogers's sense of not knowing "how to proceed in our business."[20]

Whether experienced or not, especially in the first days of organizing and in small country places, women who were trying to establish female antislavery societies felt the heavy weight of responsibility. Abolitionism was not just another cause, it was *the* cause. The path was new and unfamiliar. For advice and moral support, they turned to other female antislavery societies and sympathizers and, in the process, created a grassroots network which, in the long term, was perhaps more critical to survival of the cause than the formation of societies themselves.[21]

When the women in Brooklyn, Connecticut, formed their association, they wrote to societies in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York to discover "what specific departments of labor" each was planning to undertake. In

her reply, D. W. Bell, the corresponding secretary of the New York society, confessed her group's inexperience: "*This* we feel, *we* have *yet* to learn, as *we* like yourselves, are still in our infant state, not being quite four months old." She included, as requested, a copy of their constitution, although she thought "probably you have before *this*, arranged *such* as you think best suited to your necessities."[22]

Societies not only exchanged copies of constitutions but also offered advice and shared information ranging from the format of meetings to their plans for the future. As Boston corresponding secretary Mary Grew explained in her letter to the Reading (Massachusetts) Female Anti-Slavery Society, "We apprehend that much benefit may be derived from a mutual acquaintance with each other's plans, regulations, methods of appropriating funds, etc."[23]

So important was the creation of this female network to the early life of female antislavery societies that when women of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, formed their antislavery society in 1837, they made one of their objectives "epistolary social intercourse." Like Mary Grew, Fitchburg women realized that "intercommunication" could "stir up our minds, strengthen faith, confirm hope, and increase the ardor of love, and the fervor of prayer."[24]

The publication of the Fitchburg Female Anti-Slavery Society's founding documents in the *Liberator* made the society's goals and methods of procedure available to all who read the newspaper. In their efforts to exploit channels of communication, abolitionist women became part of the "new informational environment" created by the communications revolution of the early decades of the century.[25] Relying upon both the postal service and newspapers, female abolitionists were engaged in creating a new kind of "imagined community" that was able, as Mary Clark explained, to overcome hundreds of miles and lack of personal acquaintance. Unlike the imagined male community that derived its identity from reading political news, the antislavery community drew its strength from shared feelings and a sense of personal intimacy between women. Insistent though they were in claiming the status of "lady" in their dealings with the public, women felt comfortable in forgetting the rules of propriety that usually governed their social relations. As Melanie Ammidon explained in her letter to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFAS), "We shall forget all those little forms of etiquette, which under other circumstances we might adhere to." While the absence of familiar conventions might lend an air of abruptness to communications, the "community of interests" and the "bonds" between women compensated for any awkwardness.[26]

Abolitionist women freely adopted the conventions of friendship with those who were technically strangers. "We are yet made friends and sisters," explained Anne Weston, a theme repeated by other women over and over. In a letter to Betsy Cowles, Lucy Wright of Talmadge, Ohio, wrote that, "although an entire stranger," she saw Betsy as a "sister." As she explained, she had "confidence in addressing you" because of the "unanimity of sentiment in the sacred cause of *Liberty*."[27]

During the early stages of institutional life, abolitionist women made key decisions that helped shape their organizations' identities, the roles their societies would play in members' lives, and the ways in which they would view themselves within their organizations. The organizational structure of female antislavery societies was fairly uniform and typical of antebellum voluntary associations. The set of officers included a president, vice president, treasurer, corresponding secretary, and/or recording secretary. In some associations, the emphasis on reading and disseminating antislavery literature resulted in the addition of a librarian to the group. Every society also had a group of women managers. Sometimes they were referred to as counselors or collectors, suggesting somewhat different conceptions of what function those holding this position were to serve.

The decision, often expressed in the constitution, about the frequency of meetings was a critical one. It helped to determine the roles and commitment of both officers and the membership at large. Infrequent meetings, especially when combined with a large membership, meant that either the officers or a core of activists bore the responsibility for maintaining the vitality and carrying on the work of the organization. In Boston, a small group of women, most of whom did not hold office, ran that society on a day-to-day basis. Although they might well be involved in major projects like petition drives, many members (who numbered almost 300 by 1836) participated in the society mainly by attending quarterly and annual meetings. In Philadelphia, too, the board of managers made the decisions and then presented them to the society at large.[28]

When associations met more frequently, once or twice a month, or even weekly, a much greater chance existed that members would share the work and that the distinction between officers and members would be blurred. The report the secretary of the Brooklyn Female Anti-Slavery Society gave at the third annual meeting in 1837 suggested the organization's informal mode of operation and the collective nature of its efforts. Although none of the officers had kept minutes, the society was in a healthy state. Numbers had increased to fifty-six and "notwithstanding the silence of these records for the past year, our meetings had for the most part been continued as formerly once in two weeks, many of them well attended, and rendered

profitable to our cause." Dover, New Hampshire, women apparently found that quarterly meetings to transact business were too infrequent and, in December 1836, their minutes reported that a number of ladies had also organized a sewing circle to meet one afternoon a week to make clothes for poor black students at Oneida Institute.[29]

The variety of arrangements suggests not only institutional vitality but also the varied meanings of participation. In some abolitionist societies, especially those that met infrequently, membership normally represented an insignificant involvement in terms of time and effort. Periodically members might work on a special project, but the abolitionist commitment functioned on the margins of life. In contrast, officers and the small circle of activists in such associations would find that antislavery could become almost a full-time job. Certainly, for the corresponding secretary, writing letters and copies of letters took a substantial amount of time. As Mary Clark of Concord wryly observed. "We Anti-Slavery secretaries must learn to write fast."[30]

For women who belonged to organizations that met regularly and often, membership represented a continuing thread in a busy life that was crowded with other interests and responsibilities. Mary White's diary entries, while lacking in details and certainly reticent about her emotional responses to her antislavery work, do give some idea of the part antislavery played in her life. In June 1837 she helped to form the Boylston Female Anti-Slavery Society. During that month, she attended several antislavery meetings, talked over a petition her minister brought to her house, and perhaps signed the document. A letter she wrote to Maria Chapman of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society at the end of the month indicated that antislavery was obviously a topic of family conversation: she reported that her daughter, Mary, was carrying two petitions around the neighborhood for signatures. As summer progressed into fall, along with her notations about church, daily chores, the weather, family activities, and deaths in the neighborhood, she recorded attending several more antislavery meetings, including one "very interesting lecture" given by the Grimké sisters. The commitment was clear and ongoing, but it was obviously sandwiched among other responsibilities to her church and her family. The next year, Mary added some afternoons of "work for the antislavery Society," probably sewing, and in October she did some calling to get signatures for antislavery petitions. Interspersed with these activities must have been numerous discussions about antislavery matters. For example, Mary recorded in June 1840 that she had visitors one afternoon and enjoyed "a very pleasant interview[. T]he subjects conversed upon the subject of Slavery on the influence of peace Societies & on the precidence of revivals of religion."

The rhythms of commitment revealed in Mary White's diary may well capture the part that abolitionism played in the day-to-day life of most women participating in the cause. As her diary shows, Mary was well known in her neighborhood as an abolitionist. In November 1841, she recorded that she had received a visit from Abby Kelley in January 1841 and that she also accompanied her minister when he called on the famous Grimké sisters. But Mary spent only a small part of her time and energy on abolitionist work. She faithfully attended meetings, but her domestic chores must have meant she was tired when she went to some of them. Surely she was fatigued in November 1841 when she went to a meeting after making several barrels of applesauce.[31]

Another important decision that affected the collective identity of an antislavery society concerned membership. Founding documents often included a statement of eligibility. The female antislavery society organized at the Chatham Street Chapel in New York in 1834, for example, opened membership to any woman "(not a slaveholder) approving of the principles of this Society, and contributing annually one dollar." In the village of Loudon, New Hampshire, membership dues of the sewing circle were in keeping with country ways and set at less than twenty-five cents annually. While abolitionism was a moral duty, constitutions revealed their social and economic assumptions about who might become a member. Abolitionist women might not have much money nor belong to the social elite, but they considered themselves ladies who could spare a mite for society dues or, like Mary Manter, could afford to give up some of the middle-class niceties of life. As Mary explained, "I have worn no ornament for some time and I wore no gloves in the summer and some things I do without so I can do a little in the cause of humanity."[32]

Perhaps because some abolitionists were less than secure in their own class position, they did not welcome the involvement of women whom they did not consider "ladies" or at least marginally middle class. In Lynn, Massachusetts, where many of the antislavery society's members were the wives and daughters of shoemakers, members were reminded at the second annual meeting that their individual duty toward abolitionism had not ended when they joined the society. Each woman had an individual duty to perform in the shop, school, kitchen, and, revealingly, "the parlor." The society did make some accommodations to hard times in 1837 with a resolution to waive the fee for women if they could furnish an article for the

antislavery fair in Boston. Still, that resolution was followed by one that suggested fair articles should be "particular and handsome."[33]

While the Lynn society made some concessions on membership, a coterie of members in New Bedford demonstrated their wish to exclude certain undesirables. "Last sat," reported one New Bedford resident, "there was a kind of meeting not a regular one however. . . . There it was decided by two or three members that the clause in the constitution which said that any one can join by paying 50 cents &c—should be altered—that no one should join till the society has approved. . . . The reason they give is that . . . [a certain lady] has joined, & they want no such person among them."[34]

Racial assumptions about membership also operated. Although race was not mentioned directly in clauses dealing with membership qualifications, the term "lady" had race- as well as class-based overtones. In the North, most blacks lived in urban centers. Thus, in rural and small-town communities that lacked an African American population, women may have been unconscious of any racial prejudice. But in cities like Fall River or New Bedford, where. by 1838, blacks made up 8 percent of the population, the presence of women of color at meetings forced a clarification of values about race. Some of the Fall River white women who "did not think it was at all proper to invite them to join the society" were opposed to putting African American women "on an equality with ourselves." Other members disagreed, "maintained . . . [their] ground," and brought the "respectable young colored women" into the society. In New Bedford the attendance of a Mrs. Johnson did not raise the issue so dramatically because, in the opinion of one of the society's members, she was "rich & respectable & pretty white." The "finish of the game" was to come at the next meeting when eleven African American women intended to join the society.[35]

The resolution of such episodes usually involved incorporating African American women into white female antislavery societies. But the women were an addition and an afterthought, if not second-class members. At the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in New York in 1837, Mary S. Parker, who presided over the gathering, acknowledged the resistance to racial inclusiveness when she told the gathering, "The abandonment of prejudice is required . . . as a proof of our sincerity and consistency." Few were able to live up to such exhortations, however. Even in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, where black and white women shared leadership responsibilities, the top officers were always white. Sarah Douglass, one of the black members, may or may not have been thinking about her colleagues when she commented that "even our professed friends have not yet rid themselves of prejudice." In the end, most black women

preferred their own organizations with goals that combined assistance to the black free community with self-improvement and abolition.[36]

Forced consideration of the race issue in terms of membership did not encourage most white women to explore a significant paradox in female antislavery thought that was painfully apparent to free blacks. White women often justified their antislavery activism by explaining that they had not only special responsibilities to free black women from slavery but also a special sensitivity, based on gender, to their plight. As the Canton, Ohio, women explained in their constitution, they could not be "deaf to the cry of the sable mother" to whom they had the closest ties, that of sisterhood. That antislavery women could believe they were so intimately linked to and attuned to some black women (i.e., slaves) and not to others was a significant if largely unexplored contradiction.[37]

A few women, as the records of the PFAS show, did recognize the contradiction and attacked northern prejudice as a prop of the slave system. Black women in that organization gave ample evidence to their colleagues of the impact of racism. Sarah Douglass's mother, for example, was not allowed to sit with whites or to become a member when she attended the Arch Street Quaker meeting. The PFAS's constitution, drawn up by women of both races, reflected black women's experience and the Quaker women's sensitivity to racial issues. It denounced prejudice in the strongest terms and stated that African Americans possessed "inalienable rights." Some of the white members, like the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott, also made a point of associating with black women outside of the meetings.[38]

"I feel deeply for thee in thy suffering on account of the cruel and unchristian practice which thou has suffered so much from," wrote Sarah Grimké to Sarah Douglass. That sympathy was genuine, as were the efforts she and her sister, Angelina, made to free themselves from racial norms. Yet even though both women recognized the role white racism played in constricting the opportunities and experiences of free blacks, they still expected that blacks should do much of the work of reducing racism. As Angelina explained to Sarah Douglass, "You my dear Sister have a work to do in sorting out this wicked feeling as well as we. You *must* be *willing* to come among us though it *may be* your feelings *may* be wounded." Black women should help "paler sisters . . . to encounter . . . our sinful feelings."[39]

Religious assumptions also shaped the rationales and goals of antislavery societies. Founding documents did not explicitly refer to denominational matters, but a diffuse Protestantism permeated statements of purpose and expectations of membership. The definition of slavery as a sin violating divine law and demanding repentance suggested the experience

of conversion; the references to duty and the necessity of forming "Holy & correct public opinion" pointed to the activism expected after conversion. Quotations from the King James version of the Bible reinforced the Protestant character of the organization and gave clues about who would feel comfortable in joining an antislavery society and who would not. Evangelical churchgoers, Unitarians, Quakers, and even Protestants and dissenters who did not attend church but who nonetheless felt at home in the culture at large all might feel called to join the abolitionist crusade. But Catholics, Jews, and others at the margin of Protestant society, recognizing the Protestant character of antislavery organizations, would not join antislavery associations in any numbers and were not expected as converts.[40]

Probably not apparent to abolitionist organizers in the first flush of enthusiasm, when many women pushed forward to sign a constitution, was the relationship between size and organizational vitality. What quickly became obvious was that many women signed an organization's constitution because of a momentary interest or as a general expression of support. Like signing a petition, subscribing to the female association's constitution could signify sympathy, perhaps a donation, and even attendance at a few meetings. But as Lucretia Mott said of Mira Townsend, she "is not among our active members."[41]

Maria Child saw the difference between the "active" members and those who were not as one between "the *nominal* abolitionists" and "*real* ones," those who "really sympathize with the slave." To recognize this difference was to raise fundamental questions. On the one hand, the whole point of abolitionism was to change public opinion and to gain adherents. Large numbers told the world that abolitionism was succeeding and carried a propaganda value. But the desire for large numbers conflicted with the reality of apathy and partial commitment, as well as the desire for efficiency. When Anne Weston wrote to Eliza Mason, a member of the Bangor Female Anti-Slavery Society, she conveyed not only the perspective of the Boston clique about the role of the general membership but also the problems caused by numbers. In her opinion, the Bangor society was wise not to try to augment its size. "The women who will prove in truth an addition will seek you, and the good that a large and inefficient Society will bring about cannot for a moment enter into competition with that produced by a board, however small, who have counted the cost, who are aware of the difficulties that they must encounter."[42]

If size might affect efficiency, a central value for many of the women's organizations, numbers also might influence the abolitionist women's own sense of themselves as a special band. While they did not discuss and perhaps did not think about the relationship between size and collective identity, committed abolitionist women felt part of a community distinct from the world at large. This sense of community was nourished by correspondence and communication in the pages of antislavery newspapers. It was symbolically conveyed in the initiation rites of joining an antislavery society and the use of the term conversion to signify that step.

Perhaps it was this sense of distinctiveness, this sense of being in the minority, that led to a curious episode in the life of the Canton Ladies Anti-Slavery Society. In March 1836, the society held a special meeting to consider the status of one of its members, Mrs. Betsy Reynolds. The records do not reveal what Betsy had said or done, only that the group determined that the society's president should call on Betsy to "ascertain whether it is her desire to have her name erased." A week later, the president reported the results of her visit: Betsy Reynolds wished to withdraw from the society. Members felt it was important to mark her leave-taking as a significant termination of fellowship. Betsy Reynolds would not just slip away. In a ceremonial way, the crossing of boundaries was given form as "the Secretary waited upon Mrs Reynolds, who erased her name and ceased to be a member."[43]

While organizational arrangements varied among antislavery organizations, there was substantial agreement upon the traits that should characterize the committed member of a female antislavery society. As they communicated with one another, ordinary women helped to construct an identity for themselves, collectively and individually. Not surprisingly, they drew upon familiar stereotypes. When Ashtabula County women called for a "mild & Christian spirit" and more prayer at their first annual meeting in 1836, for example, they were on safe ground. But the call for more energetic and muscular qualities, generated by a realistic assessment of the challenges of activism, suggested some departures from genteel and pious ideals.

By the third decade of the nineteenth century, certain character traits had taken on a gendered meaning. The idea that a woman had duties and obligations that superseded any of her own interests was commonplace. Organized antislavery women made female duty fundamental to their concept of themselves and gave it an important place in their constitutions. As a dialogue sent by a woman who identified herself as "C. W." to the *Liberator* in 1838 made clear, women should listen to the demands of duty even when the work offended their sensibilities. Purported to be true, the little drama presented a discussion between a lady and a gentleman about the lady's failure to do anything for the cause. Miss M. assured Mr. W. that, while she was opposed to slavery, she did not "approve your mode

of action. The abolitionists are *so disagreeable* and violent, that I can't bear them," she declared. Mr. W. responded that, since she believed slavery was wrong, was it not "your duty to use all your power in opposing it?"[44]

As the vignette suggested, female duty justified commitment at the deepest level. Furthermore, in real life the sense that women were doing their duty helped to build up the confidence needed to carry on in what both Miss. M. and Mr. W. agreed was an unfashionable cause. And although Mr. W. did not succeed in persuading Miss M. to lend her influence to the cause, the appeal to duty did prick the female conscience. In the small drama, the reader could sense the power of that appeal and its potential to transform. The dialogue ended with Mr. W. casting "a look of pity after Miss. M.," who had fled the encounter "trying to smile."[45]

The Christian virtues of faith, perseverance, and self-sacrifice were also central to the ways abolitionist women constructed their identity. While male abolitionists may have ascribed to these virtues, they were more closely associated with cultural definitions of middle-class femininity. Like the appeal to duty, the emphasis on these qualities must have helped women to persist in and justify their support for the movement.

Other characteristics of the committed abolitionist departed from the familiar contours of middle-class female identity. One of the essential qualities for individual women and female antislavery societies was efficiency, a value drawn from the male world of the marketplace and production. The repeated refrain in letters was the need for the society and its members to operate efficiently and systematically in their meetings, in the way they handled their business, and in their efforts to raise money.

Linked to the idea of efficiency was the emphasis on industry, exertion, and, in the words of the women of Lynn, "energy of action." Women could not be passive. Although for some women, praying would be the primary means by which they expressed their antislavery beliefs, the ideal that was emerging prompted involvement and anticipated discord. Writing from Ohio, Lucy Wright talked about taking courage and going "*forward* for a desperate struggle." In the heat of what Lynn women agreed was a "moral conflict," female abolitionists must be bold. "We will *not fear* the *frown* of the *scornful*, nor the reproaches of the *prejudiced*," Canton women asserted. "We will[,] with the assistance of God, *persevere* in our work of mercy, until it shall be accomplishd."[46]

As the communication between women's societies made clear, there was consensus that an abolitionist should also be well informed about the facts of slavery and skillful at presenting them intelligently. But in the words of Lynn women, "*willing minds*" had to be matched by "*warm hearts*." A

true female abolitionist must be able to feel the burdens and sufferings of the slaves, to make imaginative connections. Without the ability to use intellect and imagination, women would be unwilling to make the sacrifices demanded of them and would be ineffective advocates for immediate emancipation. At the fifth annual meeting of the Portland Female Anti-Slavery Society, for example, members were encouraged to visualize the slave mother nursing her babe "with the dread of the driver's whip before her eyes." Such a vision would "render us more prompt to utter the feelings with which it inspired us, and less fearful of exciting the disappointment of others, and by the zeal and sincerity which we should plead for our suffering fellow creatures many would be convinced and led to join us."[47]

In some respects, women were constructing an ideal that moved beyond the usual gender polarities. Abolitionist women should be skilled at processing information and using it just as men were. But they should also be able to use intuition and imagination to gain and give a visceral understanding of the evils of slavery. It was not enough to know about slavery or sympathize with the slaves. One had to be able to do both. As Mary Grew explained in her letter to the Brooklyn Female Anti-Slavery Society, the challenge was to "place *facts* before their minds, so vividly delineated" that they could not be forgotten.[48]

In one sense, conservative men and women were right when they argued years before the woman issue became a heated topic of debate within antislavery associations that abolitionist women ignored what many accepted as natural boundaries for female activity. But many abolitionist women sensed that definitions were elastic and capable of expansion, that there was more room for moral activism than conservatives would ever acknowledge. The number of references to propriety and woman's place in association constitutions shows that many women were conscious of both conservative norms and the way definitions could be stretched. They were adept at both acknowledging and transgressing gender expectations in almost the same breath. "We will never overstep the boundaries of propriety," the PFAS's Third Annual Report declared, "but when our brothers and sisters, lie crushed and bleeding . . . we must do with our might, what our hands find to do . . . pausing only to inquire, 'What is right?' "[49]

When attacked, some women were quite capable of lashing back at their detractors. Lucy Wright, writing for the Portage Female Anti-Slavery Society in Ohio, reported the society's growth from 37 to 390 members in a mere seven months and their efforts at petitioning. She also reported that the sight of so many active women had produced the predictable response, the insistence that women were out of their sphere. Lucy labeled that an-

tagonistic force as "Satan" at work in the world. In Lynn, faced with the same kind of criticism, the women suggested that "a corrupt public sentiment" had "prescribed" the boundaries they were ignoring.[50]

The newcomers to antislavery societies soon came face-to-face with some of the fundamental challenges of organizational life. The emphasis on energy, perseverance, and work signified the recognition that enthusiasm was not sufficient to sustain female activism. There were many reasons that a female society might never amount to much, but the inability to attract the right kind of women to leadership positions especially damaged its chances of survival. In 1837, Deborah Weston wrote, "The Female Society here is struggling on & will I hope come to some thing." In New Bedford, there was "considerable trouble about a vice-president, if no New Bedford person who is suitable can be got, would you take the office if you were me?" Deborah asked. In Glastonbury, Connecticut, Hannah H. Smith understood that outside organizers could only initiate; she did "not know of one Antislavery woman of the right stamp in Connecticut, of sufficient information & energy to organize a society or manage its concerns."[51]

Associational records and letters show the consequences of poor leadership. In Providence, Rhode Island, the choice of a Mrs. Fairbanks as the president of the antislavery society alarmed some members about the society's future. With the reputation of being "notoriously inefficient," Mrs. Fairbanks had a history of destructive management. She had quarreled with the Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society some years earlier, and even more damaging, she had undermined the Ladies Society. By her reassurances that the women did not need to work, and that she was going to "do all," nothing was accomplished by either society members or Mrs. Fairbanks. As a Stoneham, Massachusetts, woman explained, leadership demanded "exertion on the part of the managers [or others in the society] & some self-sacrifice of each individual." Mrs. Fairbanks encouraged neither.[52]

As the selection of Mrs. Fairbanks suggests, it was not always easy to find those who were willing and able to organize and manage a society's concerns. When Dover women tried to put together an organizing committee of four, one of the single women refused to serve on the committee. And sometimes a society's officers held their position in tandem with their husbands' leadership in male associations. The disappearance of these women's names from the leadership rosters suggests that these wives did not have the interest, time, or perhaps talent to do what was necessary for the organization.[53]

The records of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society illuminate the difficulties encountered in the process of building up effective leadership. In

December 1837, the society voted that one of its members, Mary Spencer, prepare an address on slavery that the society would issue to the women of Essex County. The published address would not only serve as an important piece of propaganda for the cause but also help to establish the society's prominence locally. Mary was reluctant to agree and requested two weeks to think over the charge. At the end of this time, she turned down the assignment. While the minutes were silent about her reasons, the fear of publicity, possibly feelings of inadequacy, and the press of other obligations all could have played a part in her refusal. Within a month, the society faced another problem: the woman elected as president declined the office. The association then voted that the two Dodge sisters "prevail upon her to accept." Only a few years later, the pattern was repeated when Lucy Ives also refused the presidency. Once again, a committee was formed to try to reason with the candidate, this time with success. Lucy agreed to serve "until some other individual should be obtained."[54]

Salem was fortunate, for Lucy grew into her new position and became the association's long-term president. But she never became comfortable with all of her duties. When the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society sponsored successful public lectures during the 1840s and 1850s, members agreed that a woman should chair the meetings. But Lucy would not, explaining that she had "not . . . sufficient confidence." Even with the passage of years, Lucy still "had not [acquired] sufficient confidence or experience in conducting public meetings" to act as the visible head of the organization.[55] But while she was not sufficiently relaxed to appear before audiences as the organization's spokesperson, Lucy did preside over one of the most long-lived and successful of all female antislavery societies.

In an unpopular cause without widespread community support, the role of elected officers or a few committed women was critical to institutional vitality and even survival. The Brooklyn Female Anti-Slavery Society's failure to hold its annual meeting, for example, signified fatal weakness in the organization. The society's minutes for August 1, 1840, reveal that the lapse was due to "the removal of some, and the absence and illness of others of the most active and efficient portion of our society." While the remaining members decided to "go on as a band of volunteers without even *officers* from the present," no more entries were ever made in the society's records.[56]

Society records do give examples of the way some women became leaders and suggest the impact of their leadership on associational life. The part Lydia Dodge played in the early years of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, for example, contributed to its ability to survive the diffi-

culties it encountered. Lydia and her sister Lucie were among the society's "most efficient women." Lydia never became president, most likely because she had a speech impediment that she felt prohibited her "from all conversational communication with my friends." Perhaps her speech was difficult to understand, but association minutes show her ability to mobilize members. Lydia suggested the address for the women of Essex County, and it was she who moved to have a committee investigate the situation of Salem blacks, suggested using funds to help fugitive slaves, and proposed to have a class so that the society could learn how to run better meetings. She was a member of numerous committees and hosted a small gathering of women who formed a sewing circle to make clothes for the teacher in the black school. The sewing circle, with its specific and realizable projects, remained a core of activism for the society. Lydia's energy and her ideas for projects contributed to the vitality and the interest of Salem meetings.[57]

As scattered letters show, Mrs. Sarah Rugg, president of the Groton Female Anti-Slavery Society, also learned how to provide forceful leadership. In her first surviving letter written in 1836, Sarah gave few signs of being able to take command. Even though she had the "heart to labor for the slave," her hand was "weak" and "trembling" (perhaps from a recent bout with lung fever). She needed advice. Within a year, she had developed the political skills necessary to influence her society. Before the March 1837 monthly meeting, Sarah met with a member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society to discuss how she could ensure Groton's aid for the Boston group. Bad weather kept all but ten members at home, but those who came to the meeting enjoyed a carefully orchestrated afternoon. Sarah began by reading from the Bible "the most denouncing chapter she could find, & stopped to apply it to southern clergy." With the membership reminded of the horrid realities of the slave system, Sarah's resolution to assist the Boston society easily passed, as did her resolution supporting the first national women's antislavery convention scheduled for May. That summer, she was ready to move her society's members onto more radical ground. The Grimké sisters, who had scandalized conservatives by speaking to mixed audiences, were to visit Groton. Their proposed appearance was causing a " 'strife' of tongues" and failing hearts in the village. After some instruction to the Groton society about how to deal with passages from St. Paul, which conservatives had used to censure the Grimké sisters, Sarah tackled the volatile subject of women speaking in public. "I longed to have the matter over," Anne Weston wrote of the meeting, but Sarah acted "very boldly, and, indeed, I think very well of her courage, for probably no one in the female society dared to take the ground of defending women preaching save herself."[58]

The goal of creating energetic leaders and hard-working, committed members faced the constraints of social, economic, and gender realities. In Salem, Lucie Dodge, one of the antislavery society's "most efficient women," married and moved with her new husband to the West. While marriage preparations were under way, she and her sisters could not be counted upon to assist projects of the Salem Society. Transiency often appears in records and correspondence as an important reason for a society's weakness or failure to accomplish work.[59]

Circumstances that today would be considered irrelevant to institutional success loomed large in female antislavery circles. Despite the fact that antislavery societies communicated with one another through the mails, officers could not always convey to members the simple but necessary news of time, place, and date of meetings. While societies that had frequent regular meetings could rely on a schedule and word of mouth, associations meeting less often or changing the meeting time had no easy way of reaching all the members. Mrs. Eliza Gill testified to these difficulties in Fitchburg. She explained that she had hoped to give a definite reply on a task with which she had been charged, but the day of her society's regular meeting was rainy, and she couldn't go. Since then, she had set a meeting, "but a mistake in the day rendered this also a failure."[60]

The Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society decided in 1839 to publish notices of its meetings in the newspapers. For most of the 1830s, however, procedures for notifying members seem to have been more haphazard. Some antislavery societies relied upon local clergy to inform their congregations during the Sunday service of the time and place of the next meeting. Church was the one public place where one could count on reaching a large female audience, but the good will and willingness of clergy was uncertain. Especially as the decade progressed and abolitionism became more notorious, notices of meetings might not be read at all. As young Lucia Weston wrote to her sister, "*We intend* that is the Ladies intend to hold a meeting in the afternoon, and have two or three speeches. . . . Notices have been sent round to every church in the city. . . . Emma went to Mr. Pierpont's meeting[;] it was not read there."[61]

The weather also played an important role in assisting or weakening institutional vitality. In Dover, New Hampshire, for example, attendance dwindled in January because of "a storm and bad walking." It was also small in July, "the day being very warm and the distance so great." Weather

was a particular obstacle in country places where members might live far from one another and have to walk to meetings. This simple reality frustrated Eliza Pope in 1840. In her Massachusetts town, ten miles in circumference, only two or three abolitionists lived in the same vicinity, "and most of them too poor to admit them to ride, (for you know 'not *many* rich not many mighty or noble' are called to this work)." As a result, Eliza felt it was "impracticable to get a sufficient number together" to work for the Boston society's annual fair. She confessed that indifference to abolitionism sometimes made her despair, but some of what she called indifference may have been caused by the physical circumstances over which she had no control.[62]

Constitutions stated and faithful abolitionists agreed that women's duty demanded their adherence to immediate emancipation. The implication was that duty to the cause of Christ came before all other duties. Mary Grew, in her letter to the Reading Female Anti-Slavery Society, reminded its members that an "*unhesitating* sacrifice of time" would be necessary. While most committed women might agree upon the goal, in reality, women's duties as wives, mothers, and daughters, responsibilities that were unquestioned for the most part, shaped what they could do and could not do. Particularly because many women working for abolitionism lived in modest circumstances, they could not pay others to do the family and domestic tasks that ate into their time and drained their energies.[63]

Surviving sources provide insights into the lives of many women who labored, unrecognized, to free the slaves. Written records demonstrate the impact of family duties on women's time, and since time and commitment are often related, they reflect the quality of their commitment. Although the fervor of Sarah Plummer's belief was evident in her correspondence and in her efforts to circulate copies of the *Liberator*, she admitted, "I find my time quite limited . . . being surrounded by a little family, without the help of any domestic." Indeed, when women spoke of their family responsibilities (S. W. Thomas's "helpless paralitic" mother who demanded most of her time, Mary Manter's youngest child "partially deranged and . . . a great deal of trouble," and the Ipswich Female Anti-Slavery Society president's consumptive daughter) and their domestic tasks (ranging from getting a family ready for the cold weather to baking pies for Thanksgiving), one wonders how they ever did any work for abolitionism.[64]

When Pauline Garry wrote to discuss her society's small contribution to the annual Boston fair, she regretted the limited means of her group. "We have only 27 members a number of them Misses & some of the adults are so situated they deem it impossible to assist much none are volunteers from the circles of wealth and fashion but labouring women who discharge the cares & duties of a family or provide for their own personal comfort & necessities." Her reference to single women, many of whom were self-supporting, suggests the limits on these women's contributions to antislavery. For both married and unmarried women, then, primary duties were time consuming and often tiring. The First Annual Report of the Sangerville (Maine) Female Anti-Slavery Society acknowledged this reality, although the writer claimed that the women's powers of imaginative sympathy for the slave helped them to overcome exhaustion. "Week after week as we have assembled from our homes, wearied with the fatigues of the day and the cares of labor, how has that weariness vanished and . . . cares . . . lightened, as the wail of the poor mother, and the cry of her famishing babe, has come to us." Reflecting on women's antislavery work in Dighton, Massachusetts, Abby Talbot explained that the society was a small one. "Many among us," she noted, "are weak & sickly." Uncertain health and the problems of age, while obviously not confined to members of female antislavery societies, also hindered associational life.[65]

Whatever the ideal composition for an active society was, many female associations did not have it. In Newburyport, Garrison's birthplace, Elizabeth Wright reported that members of the society did little besides praying and contributing money. The society was made up "chiefly of aged and middle aged persons, who have families and will not or cannot attend to the thing." Young women, she observed, found the cause too unpopular. In other societies, the presence of "poor common peple" who could do "only plain needlework" limited the sewing projects the society could take on.[66]

Active antislavery women often stressed the indifference and apathy they encountered. While they were correct that many of their friends and acquaintances just did not care about slavery, the conditions of women's everyday life obviously affected involvement. Some women did not participate in organized activities because they were too tired and overworked to do so.

At some level, many women sensed the interaction of the social, economic, and gender variables that shaped individual and collective possibilities for female antislavery activism. Annual meetings celebrated organizational survival. In its First Annual Report, the managers of the Ladies' New-York City Anti-Slavery Society found it "peculiarly appropriate" to express their "thanksgiving to the God of the oppressed, through whose favor they are permitted to record . . . [the society's] formation and undisturbed prosperity for even one year."[67]

The ceremonial occasion of the annual meeting also reminded members of the righteousness of their cause, detailed accomplishments, and tried to

spur them on to ever greater efforts. In Austinburg, Ohio, for example, the members of the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society listened to an address on the condition of the slave, then witnessed the addition of 150 new members, which tripled their size. Resolutions were offered stressing the sin of slavery and the need for prompt, efficient, and decided effort. At the conclusion of the meeting, the secretary recorded that "a fresh impulse was given to the cause." In Weymouth, Massachusetts, the secretary tried to cement active loyalty through "a pathetic appeal to . . . feelings to do more in the coming year." "Let every member of this society act in all respects as she would be induced to do, if her father, her mother, her child, her sister, or her brother was in slavery," she declared. "*Then* & only *then* she would be doing what was required of her."[68]

The First Annual Report of the Dorchester Female Anti-Slavery Society opened with an elaborate statement of the women's "insufficiency and inability to do that justice to the subject before us which its importance demands." After this bow to convention, the report continued, "Not being able to do as well as we could wish, is no reasonable excuse for not doing the best we can; therefore, without any more remarks by way of apology, we submit to every friend of God and the poor slave, this humble report." Despite their humility, the Dorchester women ensured that their report would reach the hands of some, if not every, friend of God and the slave, for they had their report published. The more prosperous societies were not the only ones to publish their annual reports. The women of South Reading, as did women in other societies, had the *Liberator* publish their report (a practice that Garrison observed until the end of the decade).[69]

The publicizing of annual reports points to the sense of achievement at survival. It also provided another link in the chain of communication with other women and other societies and a means of exposing to all who would read the report "the most horrid portrait of human depravity ever exhibited."[70]

The effort to use the annual report as one means of instructing members and nonmembers alike was part of a larger educational program undertaken by female societies. Even those who joined female societies might be ignorant about the facts of slavery and lack the proper feelings about the institution. Ruth Evans's observation about members in her Michigan antislavery society highlighted both their good will and their ignorance. She expected twelve women to join the society at its next monthly meeting. While "they heartily meet with it," she said, "many have seldom heretofore, thought much on the subject." In the bustling mill town of Amesbury Mills, Betsey Lincott echoed Ruth Evans's comment: "By many of our members, the subject has received but little of their attention, until about the time of our formation, therefore we have much to learn." The dangers of a commitment based on enthusiasm were obvious. As one woman in Attleborough pointed out, "It does not take much to discourage those who are not well established."[71]

Indeed, the instruction of members about the evils of slavery was as much a goal for some societies as was changing the minds and hearts of the outside world. Teaching women about their cause was perhaps as important for institutional vitality and longevity as the conversion of outsiders. Instructional needs played a significant role in shaping institutional life and helped to structure meetings. Reading antislavery materials aloud during meetings constituted an important part of group life and helped to produce the "animating conversation upon the subject of Slavery" that deepened commitment. The minutes of the Brooklyn Female Anti-Slavery Society show the range of materials to which members of this society listened: accounts of slavery, articles from antislavery papers, pamphlets (some apparently read in installments, as the notation "finished reading Right and Wrong" suggests), fiction, like the "beautiful story from the Oasis," and letters from other societies. In the society's library were also published lectures and poetry that could have been lent out but also may have been read aloud in a group setting.[72]

The format of associational meetings varied. Some had elaborate and formal procedures. The bylaws of the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society called for meetings to be opened with an appropriate Scripture reading, followed by the minutes and the transaction of business, then a reading from antislavery works "with remarks or conversation relating to the object of the society." Closing with a hymn and/or prayer was standard for many groups. Other societies, especially small ones that met frequently, must have had much more informal modes of operating. Surely during the Brooklyn society meetings in the winter of 1836, when the secretary noted "numbers small," the meetings must have been less structured. That society's failure to keep minutes for much of 1837 suggests a freedom from rules that probably was more typical than the structured approach of the Lynn women.[73]

When Groton's Sarah Rugg wrote that her society had been spending meeting time at prayer, her comment showed not only the belief in the sacred nature of the antislavery cause but how easily women might fall into the familiar patterns of the prayer meeting. Yet there were often special monthly concerts of prayer established for that purpose. The women of the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society reminded one another

during their first annual meeting of the importance of the concert and recommended meeting "in different neighborhoods or even smaller circles; & where this is not practicable, we will observe it in our own closets." In Dover, New Hampshire, women supported a monthly concert that survived for almost thirty years.[74]

As the establishment of monthly concerts made clear, an antislavery meeting was not a prayer meeting. Although reading aloud was common, unless the society was composed of black women, it was not a literary or self-improvement society. Each society had to work out a format that would serve the needs of its own members, secure the commitment of visitors who might attend meetings, and, of course, further the cause of emancipation.

A full account of an October 1836 meeting of the Weymouth Female Anti-Slavery Society shows the society in the midst of finding its own meeting style and collective identity. About twenty-eight women, including one or two visitors, gathered for the meeting, which began on an uncertain note. The appointed hour of three arrived and passed without the appearance of the president. Finally, members present agreed to begin, and one of them opened the meeting with a reading from the Book of Esther. When the president finally arrived, she was with the minister, who "walked in as if it had been a meeting of his own, & proceeded to read a chapt from James." The role of clergy in the women's society was unclear, and at least one member was annoyed at the minister's presumption that he should open the meeting. As he was leaving after the hymn, she thanked him, saying that his appearance was an unexpected pleasure. "This," she wrote, "I said to let Miss Mary know he was not invited, otherwise she would have thought he was in a manner compelled to come." The remainder of the meeting moved along more smoothly until the annual report's author refused to allow it to be sent into the *Liberator* for publication. Discussion over whether to have a lecture in the afternoon or evening also proved to be desultory. Members were perhaps not yet entirely socialized to the conversational norms that were in the process of being established. One member spoke to the question of the lecture "& tryed to make a discussion anything to get them to speak."[75]

"Shall we keep the steam up till the work is done?" wondered Maria Child, alluding to the challenge of maintaining members' initial enthusiasm for the cause. As Mary Matthews discovered in Rochester, it was difficult to render the society's "meetings sufficiently interesting to induce ladies to attend." Praying, singing abolitionist hymns, listening to addresses, readings, and letters, discussing slavery and what could be done to end it, making resolutions, and working on projects all helped keep women coming to meetings. The Pennsylvania Female Anti-Slavery Society's policy of forming small committees to carry out all assignments was a successful way of involving members in associational business. Although rarely discussed, the rituals of sociability also must often have played a part in attaching members to the group and cause.[76]

The role of sociability as well as the conflict some felt between sociability and antislavery goals appear in the records of the Dover Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle. The circle's object was to promote immediate emancipation through "discussion, collecting and dissemination of information on the subject of Slavery and raising funds in aid of the Anti-Slavery cause." It was early decided that the society should "adhere strictly to the rules of plainness in the refreshments furnished." Though perhaps unrelated to the refreshments policy, meetings were neglected the following year. At the next annual meeting, members decided to "retain the *good old custom* of having a *social cup* of tea." The society could not reach consensus on the appropriateness of social conventions. Some saw refreshment and conversation as critical, others as indulgence. In April 1844, members voted again on the tea question and decided to fine any member who provided more than "*one kind of cake*." Only a little over three months later, they voted "to *resign* the old practice of taking Tea." By the end of the year, they voted "to resume to practice of furnishing refreshments at our meetings." After over four years of going back and forth on the issue, they seemed to have reached agreement that sociability served a useful function for the society.[77]

While keeping up interest was a generic problem for voluntary associations, records reveal other challenges specifically related to gender. If in the world it was a sin to be silent on the question of slavery, it could also be a problem in female meetings. Women were not as used to public speech as men, and although they were being called upon to learn how to act as the slave's advocates, they had difficulty at times participating in group discussions. The corresponding secretary of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society described how many women at a recent meeting had been "unwilling to express their opinion." Abby Kelley hoped to deal with female reticence by offering the following resolution during the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society's annual meeting in 1837: "That as a free interchange of opinions and sentiments gives life and interest to our meetings, we feel called upon to forget ourselves, as much as in us lies, in the absorbing interest of the objects of our association, thereby overcoming any diffidence that may withhold us from coming forward and communicating our thoughts unreservedly." Perhaps Abby had something to learn, too. Soon after her

resolution, another member made a motion inviting those with resolutions to face the audience, presumably so they could be heard.[78]

If some Lynn women did not speak loudly enough or often enough, others did not observe norms of organizational behavior. Some chatted when business was being transacted. The problem was such that in July 1837, the society added a bylaw to its constitution specifying that "all talking and moving must be suspended" until all the society's business had been finished. The same bylaw emphasized the hour at which the meetings were to begin. Lynn, like other societies, also had trouble getting women to come at the appointed hour so that the meeting could begin on time. The Salem society passed a resolution that its meeting was to start "precisely at the hour appointed," while Dover, New Hampshire, women voted to make special efforts to be punctual. Like workers in the mills, abolitionist women were moving, or being urged to move, away from fluid domestic time to the more regular schedules of the commercial and industrial world.[79]

The abolitionist woman was encouraged to take an active and constructive part in associational life. Female behaviors that did not promote interesting or productive meetings were discouraged, while other behaviors were promoted. Even contentiousness could be welcome, because it could "keep up animated discussion, and develop female eloquence." The ability to make forceful resolutions was prized, for resolutions sparked discussion, clarification of values, and decision making. While these resolutions often appear lifeless to the twentieth-century reader, they helped to create the sense that something important was happening during the meeting.[80]

Antislavery societies offered women more than the opportunity to support emancipation. They created opportunities for friendship, conviviality, and emotional support and a worthwhile pastime outside of the home. Efforts to foster an organizational culture encouraged the acquisition of skills and attitudes valued in the larger world. Educational activities informed women about public events and encouraged them to think about and discuss them. Although not all women would follow the logic of organized abolitionism to its conclusion, associational life provided women with the information, skills, and confidence needed for active citizenship and participation in public life.

In 1836, urging more emphasis on helping free blacks in the North, Theodore Weld suggested the importance of work for organizational vitality. Work gave abolitionists something to do and thus kept them "from *shrivelling*." Devising and carrying out projects animated association life, and the individual projects, while often modest in character, collectively lent important assistance to abolitionism. During the 1830s, women circulated abolitionist literature, secured subscriptions to newspapers, collected money, hired lecturers, sewed for and otherwise assisted needy African Americans, mounted fairs that brought in substantial sums, and were active in petition campaigns. Many of these projects demanded verbal skills and techniques that proved to be useful to women recruiting for their own societies, and they encouraged women to use these talents in a variety of settings, far from the privacy of their homes. As they worked for abolitionism, members of female antislavery societies moved closer to the conception of the woman abolitionist they had created.[81]

Some examples of projects undertaken by members of antislavery associations give an idea of the range of work in which women participated and their personal responses to doing it. Many of the activities female societies sponsored fall under the general category of propaganda. As one correspondent to the *Liberator* pointed out, an important part of publicizing the cause involved "the circulation of anti-slavery tracts, papers, documents, &c. among those, who if not opposed, are not known to be friendly to our views." Not all societies aggressively sought out those unsympathetic to the cause, however. Some, like the Brooklyn Female Anti-Slavery Society, collected materials to lend "to all who have a desire to read." At least one society, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, had a reading room that they considered "invaluable in spreading information where it would not otherwise reach." The society allowed the curious to take the initiative.[82]

But other societies were willing to venture out into their communities to solicit readers. As Grace Williams pointed out, this involved "much effort." In Nantucket, the women's society to which she belonged visited every family on the island with the *Anti-Slavery Almanac*. When the women of the Amesbury and Salisbury (Massachusetts) Female Anti-Slavery Society declared that their most important work was the support for and circulation of Garrison's "pioneer paper," they may well have visualized this sort of commitment. In order to circulate another antislavery paper *The Cradle of Liberty*, members of antislavery societies were instructed to spend two or three days scouring their communities, stopping at every household. In Maine, recognizing the effectiveness of women in this kind of work, the editor of the *Advocate of Freedom* commended the efforts of two women who had obtained seventy-four subscribers to that paper and encouraged others to imitate their success.[83]

None of this work was easy. People had all kinds of excuses not to read. "So many [publications] come. . . . they cannot read nor hear of such cruelties," Experience Billings explained, while "others are engaged for the heathen and have nothing for the slave." Sarah Plummer, who received the

1838.] APRIL—FOURTH MONTH. [30 days.

The slave Paul had suffered so much in slavery, that he chose to encounter the hard ships and perils of a runaway. He exposed himself, in gloomy forests, to cold and starvation, and finally hung himself, that he might not again fall into the hands of his tormentor. [See Ball's Narrative, 2d Edit. p. 325.]

D. W.	Positions of the Sun, Moon and Stars....Tides, Weather, &c.
1	Alphard S. 8 37 n.
2	Low tides. *Rainy,*
3	Regulus S. 9 9 n. *with*
4	Alkes S. 9 58 n. *perhaps*
5	☿ ☌. *a snow squall*
6	☽ apogee. ♃ ☍ ☽. *or*
7	Mirach on mer. 9 47 n.
8	Dubhe on mer. 9 45 n.
9	☽ eclipsed, visible. *two.*
10	♀ at greatest brilliancy.
11	♎ ☍ ☿. Pretty high tides.
12	♀ rises 3 32 m. *Some snow*
13	♄ ☍ ☽. ♀ ☍ ♅. *from*
14	♈ S. 9 16 n. *eastward.*
15	♄ S. 2 11 m. *Rather un-*
16	Mirach on mer. 9 14 n.
17	Dubhe on mer. 9 11 n.
18	Low tides. *settled.*
19	Alkes S. 9 2 n. *An occa-*
20	♅ ☍ ☽. ♀ ☍ ☽. *sional*
21	Denebola S. 9 54 n. *shower.*
22	☽ perigee. *Now expect*
23	♂ ☍ ☽. *several days of*
24	High tides. *fine pleasant*
25	☌ greatest elon. E. ♀ ☍ ☽
26	Zavijava S. 9 26 n. *April*
27	Algorab S. 10 6 n.
28	♈ sets 8 1 m. *weather.*
29	♄ S. 1 17 n. *Rather*
30	♀ ☌. *cool.*

it would rather war against His attributes, than deny His being.

How then should Christians regard this *daring libeller* of the God they love? There can be but one answer to this question,—they must *abhor* it. Yes; let this truth be written upon the four walls of every church in these United States,—CHRISTIANS MUST ABHOR SLAVERY, OR RENOUNCE GOD.

Reader, you may now excuse yourself from acting, because the slaves are black. Will that excuse avail you when YOUR JUDGE shall own them as HIS BRETHREN?—when he shall say, 'Inasmuch as ye did it not *to one of the least of these*, ye did it not to me.' Will it not be insulting your Creator to his face to urge such a plea? If so, how DARE you use it now?

Francis Durret, in the Huntsville (Ala.) Democrat of March 8, 1837, advertises a mulatto slave who had escaped from him, who "had on when he left, a pair of hand-cuffs, a pair of drawing chains," &c.

What would you do to redeem yourself from slavery? '*Thou shalt love thy neighbor AS thyself.*'

Distributing abolitionist literature, like this Anti-Slavery Almanac, *was one of the activities undertaken by female antislavery societies and women working on their own. (Boston Athenæum)*

Liberator as a gift from the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (knowing that the cost of the paper limited its usefulness, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society had voted to have the *Liberator* delivered free throughout the state), spoke of her "unwearied effort" to circulate the paper. She had to "prevail" upon people, as she did with one Bangor gentleman who was determined not to patronize Garrison. Unwilling to let the matter politely drop, Sarah badgered him until he finally agreed to try the paper. Her letter hinted at the psychic costs of her work. When she met with indifference, she confessed, "My spirit is stirred within me, and my soul is in agony, as a burning fire shut up in my bones—then it is, that I flee to my closet, and I find if the ear of *man* is closed, that of the great Jehovah is ever open."[84]

Women also created their own propaganda. While the contributions of women like Maria Child and the Grimké sisters are well known, associations and members of associations also voiced their opinions in print. Only a few months after the formation of their female antislavery society, women in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, drafted a letter to "Professing Christian Women of Kentucky" and had it published in the *Philanthropist*. Appealing to the southern women as mothers, sisters, and daughters, the letter "affectionately" urged them to overthrow slavery and warned them of the consequences of inaction. Annual reports were another means to bolster membership and to make the abolitionist case before the indifferent public. While much of this sort of propaganda has not survived or appeared in antislavery newspapers without attribution, there are enough references to women's contributions to suggest how important they were. Certainly lecturer Marius Robinson, who described the efforts of the president of the Cadiz (Ohio) Female Anti-Slavery Society, recognized their impact. This woman, unwilling to let the local Presbyterian clergyman's defense of colonization go unchallenged, wrote an article for publication that, in Robinson's opinion, "annihilated" the cleric's speech.[85]

Female societies also paid for the publication of effective antislavery materials. On several occasions, the PFAS thought that an invited lecturer had made such a powerful case for abolitionism that his or her remarks should be published. On other occasions, societies picked up the bill for tracts and pamphlets.[86]

When the Lynn women reviewed their work at their second annual meeting, they concluded that publications and individual exertion had all been important for winning adherents to the cause (and to the association). But "more than from any other cause," they stated, "through the influence of the lecture we have received a considerable accession of members within the last few months." Antislavery societies not only sponsored lec-

tures in their own communities but also hired agents to take the message elsewhere. In Salem in 1839, the association engaged Mrs. Abigail Ordway to serve as their agent in Essex County. She found her progress slow, reporting to the board that "the disagreeables far exceed the agreeables on such a route; and there is nothing which can sustain or console the sinking spirits, but the idea of the good eventually to be accomplished."[87]

For many, if not most, white women's organizations, the goal of improving the situation of freed blacks was of secondary importance to abolition, partly because there were so few free blacks in their communities. In cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, however, the substantial black presence shaped organizations' responses to the freedperson's plight. In these places and in others like Salem, Massachusetts, white women followed Theodore Weld's advice and undertook a variety of projects aimed at assisting the black community. Guided by the same sorts of assumptions that initially limited association membership to white women, women's associations, like men's, were certainly not free of prejudice, paternalism, or middle-class values. The decision of a group of women in the Portland Female Anti-Slavery Society to meet twice a week to instruct "the female colored population in knitting, mending, and various kinds of needle work" in order to elevate "the character of an unjustly degraded race," and their later expenditures for clothing and books for children in the "colored school" exhibit all the limitations of the abolitionist approach. Blacks needed to live up to white standards if they were to overcome negative stereotypes and discriminatory treatment. Yet it is important to remember that in the context of the racism of the North, such efforts were risky to one's reputation and that women abolitionists were unusually free of the prejudices of the day. Projects aimed to provide African Americans with the middle-class skills and values that whites believed they lacked often proved useful and even profitable for those who were involved. Furthermore, black women's organizations during the 1830s also endorsed many of the same improvement strategies as the means of overcoming prejudice.[88]

Both all-black organizations and some integrated organizations undertook projects aimed at improving education for blacks. The most ambitious effort that surviving records reveal was undertaken by the PFAS in its early years. Quakers had been pioneers in black education in Pennsylvania, and given the prominence of Hicksites in the PFAS and that black women members were from the city's most elite families, an interest in education was predictable. Both groups believed that if blacks were properly educated, they would be more successful in life. In turn, their success would undermine white prejudice. Visits to black schools to evaluate the quality of education there, gifts of educational materials, and financial support for Sarah Douglass's school for girls demonstrated this organization's commitment during the 1830s. Other educational projects included a series of scientific lectures for blacks and sewing classes for women unacquainted with this "important branch of domestic industry." Despite the importance of the work, however, the efforts petered out. Perhaps because the "field of labor [proved] too extensive" for the size of the organization, it was difficult to get women to complete their assignments. Too many were "negligent," and eventually the society turned most of its energy toward fund-raising activities.[89]

The major fund-raising device for the PFAS and other female antislavery associations was the fair, but associations took on many other, more modest efforts. The American Anti-Slavery Society, as well as abolitionist newspaper editors, lecturers, and agents were often in financial straits. Garrison himself was often short of cash and the recipient of gifts from female societies. And Garrison was not the only impecunious abolitionist leader. The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society paid part of Samuel J. May's salary and raised money to ensure that Maria Child had access to the Boston Athenæum library. Maria Child herself wrote letters begging for money, selecting persons who were not abolitionists, because abolitionists "have very limited means [and] . . . what they give to collateral objects [in this case, to help out the black Bostonian Susan Paul] must generally be deducted from their annual donation to the Anti-Slavery cause."[90]

Societies tried a variety of schemes to raise money. In 1838, the *Liberator* was pressing women to establish cent-a-week societies, which the paper claimed were having astonishing success. "Many little bands of female collectors are thus raising from $50 to $100 a year, in places where little would be done by any other plan." Black women's groups undertook similar work to support black papers, which were more economically vulnerable than mainstream papers like the *Liberator*.[91]

Women did not need to be reminded about the importance of money, nor did they need suggestions about how to raise it. Even the Bangor Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society, composed of about twenty-five "misses," concluded "that *money* is of great importance" and "resolved to do our utmost to cast in our mite for this purpose." Dover, New Hampshire, women, in order to work more "efficiently," came up with the idea of appointing eight women who belonged to the town's various religious societies to canvass for donations. At the time of their reorganization in 1840, they also decided to invite men as honorary—but dues-paying—members. As the Dedham

Female Anti-Slavery Society made clear, it was determined to "raise all we could to send in with our cent a week money."[92]

While the sums any one society was able to raise may have been small, collectively abolitionist organizations provided important assistance to a reform movement that often was short of cash. Samuel J. May acknowledged the financial debt the antislavery movement owed to women, even as he minimized the tedious nature of the task of fund-raising. "Often were they our self-appointed committees of ways and means, and by fairs and other pleasant devices raised much money to sustain our lecturers and periodicals," he recalled. Given the fact that most women did not have their own sources of income, the financial commitments they undertook assume an importance greater than the money itself.[93]

A few examples illustrate the frustrations women faced in fund-raising Frances Drake, after a day and a half of soliciting in response to a circular from the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, had only collected $2.25, despite the fact that "every person I called on was an avowed abolitionist, and what is more, were all persons of standing, and *much* property." In Fitchburg, Eliza Gill's efforts to get male and female abolitionists to agree on a contribution plan proved abortive. Despite holding "meeting after meeting," nothing was resolved. Finally, "seeing clearly that if anything was done for the contribution plan it must be done by the women—we concluded to hold six meetings of our Soc. in districts and when we have met, I have made a point of getting as many boxes as we could. As yet I cannot speak of success but think it the best plan for us at present."[94]

Fund-raising, even when the sums collected were tiny, demanded that women carry the abolitionist message and the financial requirements of the movement to others. Sometimes, as was the case in Fitchburg, the audience and the place were familiar and friendly, even if contributions were not forthcoming. But in other cases, solicitations were made in more public and less sympathetic environments. Women's experience with indifference and hostility in the work of fund-raising was good preparation for petitioning.

The massive petition drives undertaken by female abolitionist societies after 1835 constituted women's most extensive grassroots work during that decade. In 1837, from Concord, New Hampshire, Mary Clark reported to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society that, with "great unanimity and earnestness," her society had voted to have a petition and circular prepared. That same year, at its annual meeting, the Lynn Society agreed that petitioning was "one of the most efficient [means] that we can employ." Unlike other petition efforts, like the one Hicksite Quakers put forth during the 1835 Genesee Yearly Meeting in New York, this work brought women like Mary Clark into "direct . . . [contact] with the classes of the community—with the pro-slavery, with the indifferent, with those who are as much as ourselves opposed to slavery, *but*" were reluctant to sign a petition. The personal interactions that collecting signatures required, Rochester women suggested, caused "many who would not otherwise think about it . . . to give it a little place in their minds."[95]

The experience of collecting signatures and the controversy this effort generated forced many women to confront the tensions between their newly constructed identity as female abolitionists and more conservative definitions of woman. The ambitious scope of women's petitioning activities represented their entry into the world of mass democratic politics and implicitly signified their rejection of quiet influence at the hearth for a voice in the civic sphere. While some women would back away once they understood the implications of an identity that was now stretched to include political activism, others would become more radical in their assault on convention, and still others would be comfortable in living with contradiction. But whatever the individual responses to the controversies petition work sparked, the effort did pull many women into political action, most probably for the first time in their lives, and expanded ideas about the meaning of women's citizenship.[96]

In 1832, when Garrison was feeling his way to defining a role for women in abolitionism, he sensed that women might play a modest role in petitioning work: "I cannot see the slightest force in the argument, that because women can have no part in the final decision, they ought not to take any part in helping the subject towards that decision." For Garrison, it was clear that "they do not . . . petition, they only try to call the attention of the men of the acquaintance or neighborhood to facts that may induce them to take the step of petitioning."[97]

This limited conception of the female role in petitioning disappeared as abolitionists made this activity one of their main strategies. In 1835, hoping to force the discussion of slavery in the halls of Congress and in the parlors of American citizens, the American Anti-Slavery Society initiated a petition drive. When Congress passed the Gag Law in 1836, which tabled abolitionist petitions, the issue broadened beyond slavery to include the highly charged and very political question of free speech. If legislators hoped to stem the flow of petitions by their actions, they must have been disappointed, for abolitionist petitioning persisted. In 1838, the American Anti-Slavery Society forwarded to Washington petitions bearing 400,000

signatures. Two years later, an astonishing number of Americans, more than two million, had signed abolitionist petitions.[98]

Encouraged by male antislavery organizations to participate in the drive, female societies responded enthusiastically. A member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society described petitioning as "a magnificent plan." In 1836, the Boston, Philadelphia, and New York female societies coordinated campaigns that reached into country towns and villages as well as into their own communities. The free black women of Connecticut undertook a petition drive aimed especially at other free women. Women proved to be enormously successful at collecting signatures, especially those of other women. Various studies suggest that women were, in fact, far more successful than men at this work. One scholar points out that women's involvement "immediately tripled the number of petition names secured previously by paid male agents."[99]

While women's petitions adopted a humble posture initially, the modest pose did not prevent accusations that women were meddling in politics. During the Second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in 1838, Angelina Grimké took on the critics and folded the new activity into an expanded definition of female duty. "Men may settle these and other questions at the ballot box," she declared, "but you have no such right. It is only through our petitions that you can reach the Legislature. It is, therefore peculiarly your duty to petition."[100]

Petition campaigns touched individuals and antislavery organizations in multiple ways. For societies like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, which coordinated the work of local groups, the project demanded time, energy, skill, and the ability to direct and supervise effectively. When Caroline Weston was a member of the Boston society's petition committee, she admitted to an acquaintance in Franklin County, "I hardly know what steps to take." Although she was to organize Franklin County, she had no idea to whom she should send requests for assistance and names of people "to whom it would be proper or politic to correspond." While organizers could count on the assistance of female antislavery societies where they existed (although each would have to be contacted), as Caroline's letter suggested, they had to extend the antislavery network and engage newcomers in the work. Antislavery newspapers urged participation, while circulars sent through the mail gave the call. The *Advocate of Freedom* instructed its readers in 1838 to "circulate your petitions! Give every individual an opportunity to *sign* them, or to *refuse*. Don't wait for others—*go yourself*—*you*, reader—*man* or *woman*. Delay is dangerous." Societies undertook a considerable amount of correspondence. Julianna Tappan, corresponding secretary of the Ladies' New-York City Anti-Slavery Society, apologizing for her hastily written letter, explained that she was so busy writing societies about petitioning that she had no time to write decently.[101]

Those who were directing the drives provided general instructions and advice for the less knowledgeable. Although Mary Clark and her Concord society had decided to participate in the work, Mary did not know how to draw up a petition about Texas. She requested either a form or written suggestions about how to proceed. Once the petitions had been completed, local societies sometimes forwarded them on so that they could be prepared to be sent to Congress. Mary Weston described working with 248 petitions from Weymouth and 130 from Braintree: "I labored like a dog to get them [ready]." In some cases, women copied their petitions over, which perhaps explains the comment of one woman who remarked, "Having to send both to House & Senate makes the work no little job."[102]

In addition to directing the petition work of local groups, city antislavery organizations also canvassed in their own communities. They established committees to divide up the city into manageable sections and to recruit volunteers to do the petitioning. As a member of the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society explained, because the "highly important" work was "one of much labor, requiring prompt attention and perseverance," it needed workers "who have *warm hearts* and *willing minds*." Suggesting what qualities were needed to be effective, Mary Grew mused, "Is it not strange, that an *argument*, nay, a *train of reasoning*, should even be necessary to convince a human mind."[103]

When Mary Clark wrote on behalf of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, she sought concrete advice, but she also wished to convey her association's willingness to bear the expenses of having the petition sent to every town in New Hampshire. A committee had been formed to oversee the printing and mailing of the materials. Her association's project shows that, while individual female societies might not have the same duties as a Boston or Philadelphia organization, they still were responsible for coordinating local effort and sometimes even more than local efforts.[104]

Canvassing with petitions was done door to door, in the same way that women sometimes circulated papers, almanacs, and other antislavery material. One woman might be responsible for several streets and would have to call at every house and repeat her calls if no one was at home. In one week in 1840, Deborah Weston estimated that she had walked twenty-one miles in her pursuit of signatures. No wonder some women remarked after

a stint of work, "I wore myself out." As Deborah herself had commented in 1836, "I shall be thankful when it is over with, for it is hard work & takes up more time than I can spare."[105]

Deborah occasionally referred to her efforts as amusing. Others found "a victory" when their "arguments find a lodgement in the mind or our expostulations arouse the sympathies of the heart." Few were so positive. Most found canvassing difficult, tiring, and frustrating. Presenting an unpopular cause was embarrassing for some and humiliating for others. Sarah Rugg, after commenting that the work was "humbling," remarked that nothing but duty would induce her to take it on. Maria Child summed up the feelings of most women: Petitioning was "the most odious of all tasks."[106]

What made it so odious? Both the demanding character of the work and the response it evoked made women uncomfortable. The *Advocate of Freedom* urged women to plead the cause with their friends of both sexes. The paper assured women who took its advice that "from deference to your sex you will be heard when your companion would be hushed into silence. You will not be accused of partyism, of aspiring for office, or of being a spoke in the wheel of political machinery." The assurances were comforting but false.[107]

Canvassing every household in a neighborhood brought women, as the Lynn society had pointed out, into contact with all classes and types of people. Women in Fall River, Massachusetts, for example, called on factory workers, some of them Irish. One woman described "finding our way through crooked and dark entries, up steep and winding stair-cases" of tenement buildings. Although women did not often reveal their feelings about entering into households quite different from their own, there are hints that the experience of encountering unfamiliar class settings might not be congenial. Julianna Tappan's assignment, visiting elite women, seems at first glance as if it should have proved less awkward than canvassing in working-class areas. Julianna did not find it so. Her letter exudes the embarrassment she felt in elegant surroundings, "the splendidly furnished drawing-rooms of wealthy citizens in Hudson Square." Although she tried to cover her embarrassment with scorn for the ill-educated women with whom she spoke, her fervent statement that she was willing "to be *any thing, do any thing* . . . to honor Him" suggests that she had done just that.[108]

In some cases, as records show, women collected signatures of other women only. Since their strategy was to visit households during the day, men must often have been out at work. But women also ended up soliciting signatures from men. In Nantucket, Charlotte Austin reported leaving petitions in shops frequented by men for their signatures. This technique was perhaps more acceptable than what Miss Smith did. In her visits to almost every house in Glastonbury, Connecticut, the young woman presented her case to and argued with men. It was "the men, generally who needed 'free discussion,'" she discovered, for "the women would not act contrary to the ideas of the male part of their families."[109]

After a January afternoon spent on the "petition business," Lucy Chase reported feeling dispirited by a task that was "disagreeable because so few are willing to sign." Other women spoke of almost being thrown out of people's houses, of uncivil treatment, and of accusations of behaving in an unwomanly fashion and of meddling in male matters. Louisa Phillips, for one, was told to go home and mind her own business. But there were even graver insults. Some people suggested that petitioners were trollops, linking their behavior with sexual and racial deviance. And one woman told Deborah Weston, "She hoped all the young ladies who interest themselves in the matter would get what she supposed they were after[,] namely nigger husbands." Such comments were uttered in person and sometimes repeated in the newspapers.[110]

Anna Cook, who was circulating two petitions in Hadley, Massachusetts, described her reception: kindness from some, "by some cold neglect & by others open abuse, without any regard to my feelings personally, or for the slave." The rudeness that women encountered questioned their claim to middle-class respectability. Incivility made it clear that some parts of the community had determined that if abolitionists did not adhere to norms, if they did not act like "ladies" in public (inconspicuously), they would not be treated like ladies. There was little question about how many Americans interpreted the meaning of women's work in petition drives.[111]

Beyond the possibility of an uncertain reception, fatigue came from the repetition of the task. Wrote Sarah Rugg, "I have just circulated two petitions, & sent them on, I thought I had got through this unpleasant part of the business for a while; but lo & behold another is forthcoming; so we must make up our minds to keep at the work. . . . You know my sister what humbling work it is, to circulate petitions, & repeat them so often." Each petition representing one aspect of the antislavery campaign needed its own rationale, even when a woman was carrying two or three at the same time. Lists of petitions sent from the same town show different numbers signing each, revealing that a signature on one did not automatically lead to a signature on another.[112]

Women's petitioning activities continued right up to and through the Civil War. An 1842 circular, for instance, rallied women to take up the arduous work once again despite the sense that results were not "propor-

tionate" to their efforts. Petitioning, they were reminded, represented the "only means of direct political action . . . which we can exert upon our Legislatures." Women repeatedly sent petitions to Congress and to their state legislatures. Women in Massachusetts, for example, mounted a campaign to overturn laws forbidding interracial marriage. The massive drive finally put enough pressure on state legislators that they repealed the offensive legislation. In 1847, Illinois women were less successful in using the petition as an instrument to eliminate that state's black code.[113]

Petitioning was the one task that demanded that women be at their most articulate. Petitions had different objectives, all of which had to be explained as persuasively as possible. Why should Texas be barred from the Union? Why did Congress have the ability to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia? Why should racial intermarriage be allowed in Massachusetts? What was the problem with the resolution adopted by the House of Representatives on December 21, 1837, in relation to slavery? No wonder that Louisa Phillips found that she had to study "a long time to become thoroughly acquainted with . . . [the] arguments."[114]

The actual situations that women encountered demonstrated their need for a wide range of information about slavery and "the affairs of our country." They had to mount arguments as well as counter what the Lynn society called "misapprehensions" and "fears." (Was it fear that led at least one woman to sign a petition and then to scratch off her name?) They had to be flexible and able to decide what approach might work best in each encounter. Sometimes it was not facts, figures, and arguments that were needed but a basic appeal to "feelings of compassion." Women collecting signatures found themselves explaining the need for immediate emancipation, the evils of slavery, the pertinence of political action, the character of the Union, and the character of female duty and appealing to the heart.[115]

A few of the comments women reported hearing while petitioning give some idea of the kinds of responses that were called for. "One woman said 'no I dont want 'em free, I dont want to have nothing to do with 'em, for niggers will be niggers let 'em be where they will' "; " 'I'm willing to put my name down' t'wont do any good or any harm' "; "Said she would not sign for the world, she wished she had slaves etc."; " 'This going about Petitions is doing more harm than anything she knew of, it will dissolve the Union' "; from an Irishman, " 'No . . . we wish to be liberated ourselves first; wait till you treat us as you ought, before you ask us to help you about the negroes' "; " 'thought the men perfectly capable of managing the government without their help.' " Anna Clark, who, like other petitioners, took along antislavery almanacs when she went to collect signatures, found that some of her purchasers' husbands reviled her, threatening to burn the almanacs and thundering that she was helping to dissolve the Union.[116]

Rachel Stearns's description of canvassing in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1842 captures the experience. "As you very well know," she began, petitioning "is a task requiring more than ordinary patience." With "one person after another," she had to "begin at the Anti-slavery Alphabet, and go through the first principles with every one; to answer the question '*who is* Latimer'? 50 times over. But there is one comfort, that 50 people know who Latimer is, that last week did not know. In one house, where they did not know . . . we got *10 names*, in another that and occasional assistance from others has swelled our list considerably. Mother and I have spent all the time we could command possibly." She estimated that she spent about half an hour at each household debating questions.[117]

As women carried out their various responsibilities as members of female antislavery societies and confronted the varying responses to their activism, they experienced a range of emotions from despair to elation, at the money raised, the signatures secured, the sense of duty well done. Despite the complex feelings they expressed during the 1830s, many women expected their cause to triumph. When it did, they would know how much they had done to bring about the sweet moment of victory. Some women even went so far as to suggest that women's societies were more central to the cause of emancipation than men's groups. What would happen if all female societies were dissolved, Dorchester women were asked during their first annual meeting. Sin and infidelity would triumph, they were told, "in spite of all our brethren could do."[118]

In seeking to understand their place in the world, some women moved beyond religious rationales to place their activities within a historical context. Abolitionist women were the daughters of pilgrims, or even more saliently, the descendants of the Revolutionary generation. As one woman in a long letter to the *Liberator* reminded readers, during the Revolution women had not confined themselves to their domestic duties. "Facts innumerable show the ardor and zeal with which they were inspired. Look back and see the societies that were formed to supply the destitute with clothing!" Her conclusion sweepingly rejected criticism. "Let not the fear of man's ridicule, or his pretended anxiety for the supposed welfare of our sex, deter you from using all proper influence which you possess against sin."[119]

The boldness and pride this woman exhibited were widespread and were reflected in the proceedings of the three Anti-Slavery Conventions of American Women that took place at the end of the decade. These events highlighted women's importance to the movement and marked their

coming of age in abolitionism. The first, held in 1837 in New York during the week that other benevolent and moral reform groups were also meeting, drew about 200 women, both white and black, from nine states. One delegate from New England pointed out the unprecedented nature of this public gathering. "To attend a Female Convention!" she exclaimed. "Once I should have blushed at the thought." At the end of the three-day affair, which, as the *Liberator* pointed out, had been "conducted with dignity and talent," the women had condemned racial prejudice, decried the indifference of American churches to the sin of slavery, exhorted females to accept petitioning as a yearly duty, and insisted that it was "the province of woman . . . to do all that she can by her voice, and her pen, and her purse . . . to overthrow the horrible system of American Slavery." Angelina Grimké also urged American women to reject "the circumscribed limits with which corrupt custom and a perverted application of Scripture have encircled her." And although not all of those attending were willing to go so far as Angelina Grimké in ignoring convention, the debate caused by her resolution was "animated and interesting."[120]

The following year, many more women (about 300) were in attendance at the second convention, this time in Philadelphia. The success of grassroots female organizing was apparent in the financial aid promised by antislavery societies located in small communities in Maine, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire. Meeting in the luxurious new Pennsylvania Hall, which also housed a free produce store and the offices of the abolitionist newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, the women debated whether to invite men to their evening session. The Grimkés had already aroused clerical anger by addressing mixed audiences in their speaking tour in Massachusetts, and some delegates were unwilling to overstep the boundaries of propriety at their national convention. As a result, men were urged to attend a public but not officially sponsored session. Meanwhile, a mob in Philadelphia, perhaps 10,000 strong, made its disapproval clear in its efforts to disrupt the evening gathering. The next day, the mob destroyed Pennsylvania Hall. The women persevered, though, finishing their convention business elsewhere. As one abolitionist made clear, despite the violence and destruction, "The women have done nobly today. They have held their convention to finish their business in the midst of the fearful agitation. Their moral daring and heroism are beyond all praise. They are worthy to plead the cause of peace and universal liberty."[121]

The shocking events in Philadelphia illuminated the women's moral courage, the mob's intolerance, and problems beginning to divide abolitionists from one another. Organizers of the following year's meeting in Philadelphia had difficulty finding any space for the convention. In the end, the convention was held not in a luxurious hall, spacious meetinghouse, or church, but in a riding school. And it was the last meeting of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women.[122]

By the late 1830s, the controversies over women's participation in the work of antislavery societies, the difficulties inherent in efforts to abolish slavery, and conflict within the ranks of abolitionists all challenged individual and collective commitment to the cause. Some women dropped out altogether; others formed new societies or took up new forms of work. Still others labored along, feeling isolated and often discouraged. Aroline Chase, a member of the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society, wrote her friend Abby Kelley in 1843, "I feel that I can not contend much longer unless renewed. . . . Every professed friend of the poor slave, turn on another track—our society I *suppose* has a name to live, but it is dead." Although she was proud of the part she had played in the petition drive that eventually persuaded Massachusetts legislators to repeal laws against interracial marriage, she wondered about the future. "You say I must not give up until 50," she reminded her friend. "I am 30 now [and] I feel as though I stand alone." The next decade would sorely test the ties of loyalty and commitment of women like Aroline who had labored so hard for the cause in the 1830s.[123]