

The struggle for married women's rights in the 1880s

Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, married women in the US were legally subordinate to their husbands. Wives could not own their own property, keep their own wages, or enter into contracts. Beginning in 1839, states slowly began to enact Married Women's Property Acts to allow women more control over their property and finances.

In the late nineteenth century, however, Anne Brown Adams, a daughter of the abolitionist John Brown, wrote to a friend that reform was slow and did not necessarily change behaviors inside the home. In her letter, Adams lamented that the "struggle for a married woman's rights will be a longer and a harder fought battle than any other that the world has ever known." She declared that "men have been taught that they are absolute monarchs in their families" and enumerated the abuses that some women suffered:

Women are taught that their only hope of heaven, is to "endure to the end," That it is a religious duty to "submit themselves to their husbands in all things," I know a man who tells his wife "I own you, I have got a deed (marriage license and certificate) to you and got it recorded, I have a right to do what I please to you," And the law of a Christian land says she shall submit, to indecencies that would make a respectable devil blush for shame.

Excerpt

The struggle for a married woman's rights will be a longer and a harder fought battle than any other that the world has ever known. Men have been taught that they are absolute monarchs in their families, (even in a republican country,) ever since the world began, and that to kill a wife by inches, is not murder, women are taught from infancy that to betray by look or word or even to mention to an intimate friend the secrets of their married life, is worse than disgraceful, Therein lies the power of the man, He knows that no matter what he does, the woman will keep silent as the grave.

I could tell you things that have come under my observation, that would make the blood boil in your veins, And these things are going on day after day without let or hindrance. "Wives be obedient to your husbands in all things!"

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Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image, and study the excerpt or transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Which freedoms were denied to married women in Adams's day, and why? Be specific in your response.
2. How did Adams explain the origin and purpose of the rules and customs that subordinated married women to their husbands?
3. How did the religiously, politically, and legally sanctioned domination of married women affect Adams's individual worldview? Did it spur her to activism, and if so, in which areas of reform?

Transcript

Anne Brown Adams to [Alexander Ross], circa 1880s

The struggle for a married woman's rights will be a longer and a harder fought battle than any other that the world has [*inserted: ever*] known. Men have been taught that they are absolute monarchs in their families, (even in a republican country,) ever since the world began, and that to kill a wife by inches, is not murder, women are taught from infancy that to betray [*inserted: by look or word*] or even to mention to an intimate friend the secrets of their married life, is worse than disgraceful, Therein lies the power of the man, He knows that no matter what he does, the woman will keep silent as the grave [2]

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I do not envy St. Paul the eternal privilege of hearing the agonizing cry, that is wrung from the hearts of so many wretched women, "How long oh Lord must I endure all this,"

"Wives obey your husbands!"

"Servants obey your masters!"

I wonder if he is proud of his work today?

I am glad that you link to tobacco with with [*sic*] liquor as intemperance. It seems to me that the damage [4] it is doing is almost equal to that of drinking. Its [*inserted: use is*] is spreading so rapidly of late, among the boys and women. Nearly all of our best writers put a cigar in the mouth of their heroes. Did it ever occur to you to think of the [*struck: damage*] [: mischief] that the author of the "Tom Brown at Rugby and Oxford" books, did to the world, when he wrote those two popular works? By making his heroes continually smoke and drink?

I confess that I am unable to understand the old story, of God created a set of beings that He could not control, and then getting angry and revengeful at his poor handiwork. Why could not He have created them respectably decent in the first place? I keep asking. But this is enough too much, of this.

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Images

[GLC 3007, #53]

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Anne Brown Adams to [Alexander Ross], s.l., circa 1880s, p. 1 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03007.53)

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Anne Brown Adams to [Alexander Ross], s.l., circa 1880s, p. 2 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03007.53)

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Annie Brown Adams to [Alexander Ross], s.l., circa 1880s, p. 4 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03007.53)