

“Liberal Feminisms” and Political Autonomy

BY THE early 1840s the Garrisonians proved themselves committed to advocating woman’s rights as equal rights. Abby Kelley Foster, Lucretia Mott, and in 1848, Lucy Stone integrated woman’s rights claims into their antislavery lectures. Garrison provided these women a small income for speaking, space in the *Liberator* for promoting woman’s rights issues, and regular endorsements, but he stopped short of encouraging his female antislavery colleagues to hold their own conventions for woman’s rights or start an independent journal. By the time Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann McClintock, Jane Hunt, and Martha Wright (Lucretia Mott’s sister) planned the Seneca Falls convention in July 1848, however, several state legislatures had proposed property reforms for married women; women had organized temperance reform societies; the women of the Seneca tribe had persuaded Lucretia Mott to respect and tolerate cultural differences; massive democratic uprisings had occurred in France; and Frederick Douglass had published laments about the exploitation of women in antislavery reform.¹ Influences beyond Garrisonian ideals pushed the five women organizers of the first woman’s rights convention. Their main constituency, however, still consisted of Garrisonians.

Of the non-Garrisonian influences, married woman’s property rights reform inspired most of the independent claims for woman’s rights. Although abolition inducted some educated, white, middle-class women into public efforts for moral reform, various proposals for married woman’s property reform during the late 1830s and 1840s gave woman’s rights reformers new egalitarian grounds in civil law.

Many men supported this reform because it would loosen the restrictions on the exchange of inherited property during their wives’ lifetimes and would guarantee its distribution to their children and grandchildren.² Some men, however—such as Ira Harris of New York State—also reflected upon equal rights for married women beyond property ownership. As