

Notes on Women Abolitionists

- Women participated in the campaign from its beginning, gradually moving into the political domain as the political climate changed.
- During the early years of the campaign women were viewed as a moral rather than a political force.
- Many women published anti-slavery poems and stories.
- Hannah More publicised the campaign with 'Slavery, a Poem' 1788, which depicted the situation of a female slave, ill-used and separated from her children. This is a theme repeatedly emphasised by women campaigners.
- Mary Wollstonecraft wrote 'Vindication of the Rights of Woman' 1792, writing 'When therefore I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense; for, indirectly they obtain too much power and are debased by the exertions to obtain illicit sway.' Wollstonecraft compared a man's dominance of a woman to a planter's dominance of a slave.
- Appeals were made to women to buy sugar that had been produced in the East Indies using free labour. More than 300,000 people joined this boycott of sugar grown using slave labour.
- In 1788 the Abolition Society and its provincial committees had 206 female subscribers. However, they were generally not invited to sign the thousands of petitions organised by the Abolition Society.
- The outbreak of the war with France in 1792 impacted the campaign as attentions turned to the revolution.
- The act of 1807 abolished Britain's direct involvement in the slave trade, but there was no immediate resolution to end slavery itself in the British colonies. When the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery was formed in 1823, which later became the Anti-Slavery Society, women once more became involved with the anti-slavery campaign.
- Elizabeth Heyrick, a former schoolteacher and a convert to Quakerism, contradicted the notion of gradual abolition in an 1824 pamphlet called 'Immediate, not Gradual Abolition'. In the years following the publication of her pamphlet more than 70 women's anti-slavery societies were formed, often taking the 'immediatist' stance on abolition.
- The image of the kneeling chained black slave that was used as the Society of the Abolition of the Slave Trade's logo was adapted and used in objects such as Wedgwood's cameos. Women bought and wore these objects to publicise their support for the anti-slavery cause. For example the first women-only society formed in Birmingham in 1825, adopted an original Wedgwood cameo image as their logo. It featured a kneeling female slave and was captioned 'Am I not a Woman and a Sister'.
- In 1830, the Anti-Slavery Society agreed to permit women to sign petitions and so make their views known to parliament.
- In 1833 nearly 300,000 women signed anti-slavery petitions, nearly a quarter of the total presented that year.
- The act to end slavery in the British colonies became law in 1834 and imposed a period of 'apprenticeship' on slaves. A national women's petition was organised on behalf of the apprentices and addressed to Queen Victoria. The petition carried 700,000 signatures of women, which was described as 'unprecedented in the annals of petitioning'. The system of apprenticeship was finished in 1838.