The anti-slavery activities of the Grimké sisters raised the “woman question.” Should women speak in public and exercise political rights?

“I know nothing of man’s rights, or woman’s rights; human rights are all that I recognize.”

Sarah Moore Grimké, 1837

Rejecting Slavery
Sarah and Angelina Grimke grew up in a wealthy, slave owning family in Charleston, South Carolina. By the time each sister reached her twenties, she could no longer bear living with the legal practice of human bondage. Failing to persuade their mother to free her slaves, they left South Carolina and eventually took to lecturing for the immediate abolition of slavery. For women to lecture was controversial. Congregational ministers in Massachusetts charged them with violating the duties of Christian women to be “unobtrusive and private.”

First Woman to Address a Legislature
In 1838 Angelina spoke over parts of three days to a committee of the Massachusetts legislature. For her first speech, such a large crowd showed up, drawn by the novelty of a woman speaking, that her presentation was moved to the House chamber. After the second speech she wrote of her growing confidence. “I felt none of that tremendous pressure upon my spirit which had bowed me to the ground [before]. I felt as if I could stand up in the dignity of my moral being and face a frowning world.”

The Feminist Writings of Sarah Grimké
Perhaps overshadowed as a speaker by her sister, Sarah Grimké’ was a thoughtful writer. Her “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women” endorsed women as political beings and is seen as an important early statement of feminism.