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The epic of history is a story of societal change and resistance to that change by various means. This fact is especially exemplified in one of the most pivotal moments in the history of the US: the fight for women's equality. Beginning in the mid 19th century and as a result of an atmosphere of political, economic, and social changes, including, but not limited to: the market revolution, the end of the civil war, the second great awakening, and the growth of labor unions, many women would exit the sphere of domesticity and join men in the outside world. These women broke free of the norms of their time, disturbing a system that had long been in place. **This development would result in the first women's rights movement, which was highly controversial for its time, facing significant pushback from a large number nationwide. This was due to the fact that women's equality was a disruptive force that went against common scientific consensus at the time, which had placed women as physically and psychologically dissimilar and, in most ways, inferior to men, and thus unfit for a place at the male table. Furthermore, women's equality went against common religious sentiments and notions, whereupon such a change would require an upheaval of religious values. Finally, movement for women's rights challenged existing societal notions within the household and workplace that many feared would be permanently altered.**

Throughout much of western history, women had been viewed as fundamentally different from men in the physical and mental scope. The dogma believed by almost all typically held that

women were incapable of “masculine” tasks (with tasks pertaining to almost any meaningful interaction with the outside world, e.g. commercial labor, religious involvement, political intercourse). While this dogma had changed in practice by the mid 19th century, it was still held firmly in the minds of most Americans. This is evidenced in “Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences Between the Sexes”, where its author Thomas R. Drew argues that women have earned their place in domesticity due to their weakness, timidity, and natural naiveté to the outside world (218-219). Drew furthers this argument by stating that women must conform to the submissive character that their biology insists upon to successfully “draw a man to her side” (219). Drew draws upon biological differences as causes for what he considers the natural state that women exist in, subservient to and protected by men. Under this consensus, to exit traditional gender roles held at the time would be a violation of one’s nature. Then, after establishing this point, Drew attempts to threaten women who dare to reject societal standards with the prospective of not being able to attract a male counterpart. Much like Drew, the Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Massachusetts employed biological theory to argue against the exodus of women from the domestic sphere. The letter specifically states that women working for themselves would go against nature, as for them to behave like males would be to abuse the facilities god gave them (224). The letter even went as far as to suggest that women deviating from domestic life would lose the ability to reproduce (224). The implications of such a letter are twofold. Primarily, it shows the sentiment held by religious authority at the time, that a woman leaving the domestic sphere was akin to transgressing nature. However, it also shows the falsehoods that grew from such a sentiment, which, intentional or not, functioned as a discouragement to women considering such a path. Both the letter and the writing of Drew reflect the deeply ingrained belief that a woman’s place in the household was predetermined by

biology, which contributed significantly to the controversy around the early fight for women's equality.

Another reason the movement for women's equality generated controversy was that it challenged facets of common religious beliefs held at the time, and thus needed to argue for new interpretations of scripture to function ideologically. This is shown in the writings of Sarah Grimke, a devout Quaker, who uses the Bible to reverse religious arguments on women's rights. Specifically, Grimke cites instances of the beginning of the Bible in which God created both man and woman equally, as well instances where both Adam (man) and Eve (woman) fell to the same original sin as equals (222-223). Grimke also employs a novel interpretation of the Bible that favors women's rights, stating that a mistranslation in Genesis transformed the "shall" in "thou shall be subject unto thine husband" into a "will", mistakenly turning a prediction in the Bible into a command from God (223). Such interpretations essential to justification of women's rights ultimately led to religious controversy. The ideas of Grimke are starkly contrasted with the aforementioned Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Massachusetts, which states that God created women with the intention of being subservient to man and out of the public realm. Specifically, the letter argues that "God has given [woman weakness] for her protection", and that women were made to be "mild, dependent, [and] softening", not equal to men in any manner (224). This clash of interpretations and following ideologies contributed significantly to the large controversy around the fight for women's rights.

Furthermore, the first women's rights movement faced large amounts of pushback and controversy due to the fact that it challenged existing societal notions about women's roles, beyond those informed by conceptions of religion and science. Specifically, many feared that deviation from "womanly" roles and into "male" ones would disrupt and damage society itself.

This is demonstrated in “Women are out of their Latitude”, a publication released in 1848 that argued against women leaving the domestic sphere, claiming that it was amoral, unnatural, and detrimental to the public. Specifically, the article argues that women joining male positions would be seen by “true hearted female[s]” as “unwomanly” and that it would require men to assume female positions in an opposing fashion, a large-scale societal change that (retrospectively seen) would not actually be necessary (229). The article continues, furthering that “society would have to be radically remodeled” (229). Such an argument, regardless of truth, demonstrates the popular sentiment at the time—fear and unsurety of what women’s rights would ultimately bring on a societal scale. Advocates for women’s rights counteracted this offense by simply arguing that society would not be disrupted and that the public good would not be harmed. This is shown in the writings of Elizabeth Caty Stanton, who wrote that the notion of separate spheres for each sex was flawed and that “spheres” are actually determined on an individual basis, regardless of gender (230). Stanton furthers this example by giving cases of well-known women who fought for their rights, describing the individual aspects of their obligations and showing that they still take care of their families and themselves (231). Stanton makes such an argument as a rebuttal to those like the author of “Women are out of their Latitude”, who could not foresee a world in which women were liberated and societal systems still functional. The existence of these documents shows the time and effort put into both sides of the debate surrounding this topic, showing that it was a major concern and fear of opponents of women’s rights and likely a primary generator of the controversy surrounding it.

While it generated significant controversy, the attempted exodus from the domestic sphere by many women of the mid 19th century holds its significance as the first major women’s rights movement in American and broader western history. Though the intended outcome may

not have been achieved, proponents of women's rights still succeeded in challenging biological, religious, and social roles, putting up a damn good fight while doing so. Moreover, future waves of feminist movements would grow out of it, eventually resulting in American women's suffrage in the year 1920. The attempt to alter an unjust system and the resistance mentioned in this essay would be mirrored time and time again in later and contemporary efforts for broader human rights.