



Pages for All Ages:



# That's Not Fair!



by Nancy Wood



## Some words and phrases to know before you read

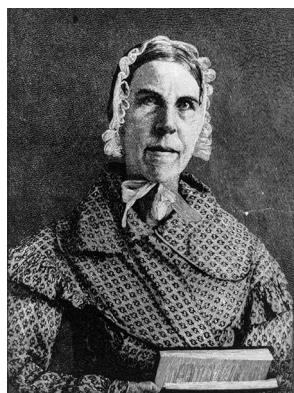
- speeches, public speaking
- slavery, enslaved
- equal rights
- Quaker elders
- planter, plantation
- good education
- Philadelphia
- journals
- Negro
- pew
- races (of people)
- pamphlet
- epistle
- a leading
- non-Quaker
- speaking truth to power



The Grimké sisters became famous in the early 1800s for doing something that almost no women did back then. They traveled around the United States giving speeches against slavery. They also gave speeches about equal rights for women. When they felt that something wasn't fair, they acted on that feeling. They didn't let anything – their parents, their Quaker elders, violent mobs, or public opinion – stop them from trying to help make life better for everyone.



When they were children, Sarah and Angelina Grimké saw with their own eyes how bad slavery was. Their father was a wealthy planter in South Carolina. He kept hundreds of people as slaves to do all the work on his plantation. The girls grew up watching the cruel treatment of enslaved people.



Sarah Grimké (1792 - 1873)



When Sarah was five years old, she saw a slave being whipped. She was so upset that she ran away from home. She went to the seaside and looked for



a ship to take her to a new home where there was no slavery. When she got a little older, Sarah talked to her parents and people at their church about letting their slaves go free, but no one would do it.

The Grimké sisters also saw how life was unfair for women. There were eleven brothers and sisters in their family. The boys got a good education, and the girls did not. Sarah decided to educate herself. She studied the books in her father's library and taught herself geography, history, and mathematics. Her father said that if she were a boy, she would be one of the best lawyers in the country. But because she was a girl, she was only allowed to do housework and care for children. That didn't seem fair.

Sarah was thirteen when her sister Angelina was born. Sarah helped raise Angelina, and the two girls became very close. Angelina called Sarah her "sister-mother." As Angelina got bigger, Sarah told her about how wrong slavery was and how girls couldn't study in college. The sisters wished for a world full of freedom and fairness, but home life for them was strict. They were expected to get married and do as they were told. Neither of them wanted to get married and run a large household that used slave labor. They wanted to live their own lives.

Sarah got the freedom she wanted when she was twenty-six. Her father became very ill, and the doctors in South Carolina couldn't help him. He had to go to Philadelphia to see a special doctor, but he was too sick to travel alone. So, Sarah traveled with him.

In Philadelphia, Sarah met the Quakers. She read the journals of George Fox and John Woolman.



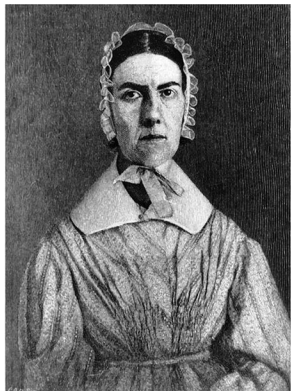


She learned about Quakers’ ideas on slavery and women’s equality – ideas that matched her own. She started attending Quaker meeting. Then her father died, and she had to move back to her family’s plantation. Back on the plantation, Sarah’s hatred of slavery grew so strong that she couldn’t stay. She moved back to Philadelphia to live among the Quakers.

Nine years later, when Angelina became a young woman, she joined Sarah in Philadelphia. Sarah introduced Angelina to the Quakers, and the sisters decided to join the Religious Society of Friends. It seemed like a religion that would let them live their truth. They joined a Quaker meeting, but soon there were problems.

The meeting’s elders didn’t like these two young women talking so much about slavery and women’s equality. And the sisters didn’t like it that the meeting had a “Negro pew” where only African-Americans were supposed to sit. The Grimké sisters would sit

on the Negro pew during worship, upsetting almost everyone. The sisters were upset, too. It seemed that, even though the Quakers *said* they welcomed people of all races, none of them would sit next to anyone with darker skin.



*Angelina Grimké (1805 - 1879)*

Even though Sarah and Angelina felt disappointed with the meeting, they stayed with it. And they kept working against slavery. They wrote pamphlets to women in slave-holding families in the South. They wrote epistles for Yearly Meeting. They wrote letters to newspapers.

Then the sisters were invited to speak to a group of women in New York. Sarah wanted to say “no.” Neither sister had ever spoken in public before. Also, Sarah didn’t want more problems with the Quaker meeting. But to Angelina, the invitation seemed like a leading. She felt like she *had* to say “yes,” and she did.

They discovered that Angelina was a wonderful speaker. Audiences everywhere loved to listen to her. The sisters received more invitations to speak. Eventually, Sarah spoke in public, too. Even though she never liked public speaking, Sarah spoke from the heart, and people felt moved by her. But not everyone loved the Grimké sisters. All sorts of people thought it was absolutely, completely, totally wrong for women to speak in public, ever, about anything. Some of those people were Quakers in the meeting that the Grimké sisters attended.

Eventually, Angelina fell in love with a man who fought against slavery. The couple got married in a non-Quaker wedding. After that wedding, Angelina and Sarah were “written out of meeting.” That means the Quakers kicked the Grimkés out of the meeting because Angelina had married a non-Quaker and because Sarah had attended the wedding.

Even though the Grimké sisters had trouble with their Quaker meeting, they lived their lives as true Quakers. They worked for fairness by speaking truth to power. Even though their own Quaker meeting rejected them, many other Quakers listened to the sisters’ message. Sarah and Angelina Grimké helped the whole Religious Society of Friends become better at truly standing up for fairness.

- Tell about a time when you thought something wasn’t fair.
- When something isn’t fair, how do you talk about it?
- Has there been a time when you have found something not right with your Quaker meeting? Could you talk about it?

*Nancy Wood is a member of Santa Cruz Friends Meeting. Her story, “Paying Attention,” was published in the anthology Enlivened by the Mystery: Quakers and God. She is the author of several “Pages for all Ages” biographies.*

*The portraits of Sarah Grimké (p. 16) and Angelina Grimké (p. 17) are from wood carvings by an unknown artist; the images are in the public domain.*

