

ABIGAIL ADAMS CALLS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The start of the rebellion against British rule led colonists to think in fresh ways about liberty. Abigail Adams began thinking about the fact that English laws often put women in a very disadvantaged position. (For example, husbands held legal power over property in a marriage.)

In March of 1776 Abigail wrote a now famous letter to her husband, John Adams, who was in Philadelphia meeting with other leaders at the Continental Congress. These condensed excerpts use the spelling found in the original letters.



I long to hear that you have declared an independancy — and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I would desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.

Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could.

If pertuculiar care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determind to forment [begin] a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend.

Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity. Men of Sense in all

Ages abhor [despise] those customs which treat us only as the vassals [servants] of your Sex. — *Abigail Adams*

John wrote back from Philadelphia to his wife in a partly serious and partly joking style. He agrees that the legal system favors males. But he makes the claim that in practice (as opposed to the legal rules) women actually have great power over men. Changing the laws, he argues, would give women (“the Petticoat”) complete power (“Despotism”) over men.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude.

We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects [the ones who are ruled].

We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight.

— *John Adams*

Abigail was not convinced by John's arguments. From their home near Boston, she sent her husband a letter predicting (correctly) that someday the laws that limited women's rights would be changed.

Group Discussion: *What is the main argument Abigail uses to justify women's right to rebel against laws that put them at a disadvantage? What do you think of the points John makes?*