**Colonial Women’s Rights – Primary Source Documents**

**Directions:** Read through the following excerpts from letters written by John and Abigail Adams. Mark these up as you go to help you answer the reflection questions at the end of the document.

**March 31, 1776**

Abigail Adams wrote the following letter while her husband John Adams was attending the Continental Congress to support American Independence.

*I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable 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 particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment 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 of friend.*

*Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex; regard us then as beings placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.*

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**April 14, 1776**

Letter of response from John Adams to Abigail Adams

*As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I won’t blot it out.*

*Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although 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. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave heroes would fight; I am sure every good politician would plot, as long as he would against despotism, empire, monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, or ochlocracy (mob rule).*

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**August 14, 1776**

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams

*If you complain of neglect of education in sons, what shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it? With regard to the education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part of education …*

*I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the benefit of the rising generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for learning and virtue. If we mean to have heroes, statesmen and philosophers, we should have learned women. The world perhaps would laugh at me, and accuse me of vanity, but you I know have a mind too enlarged and liberal to disregard the sentiment. If much depends as is allowed upon the early education of youth and the first principles which are instilled take the deepest root, great benefit must arise from literary accomplishments in women.*

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**May 26, 1776**

The following is a letter from John Adams to James Sullivan. James Sullivan was a state court judge in Massachusetts who often sympathized with those who believed in more equal rights for women. Sullivan thought that all people ought to have some involvement in legislation (voting). The following is John Adams’ response.

*It is certain in theory, that the only moral foundation of government is the consent of the people, but to what extent shall we carry this principle? Shall we say, that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every act of legislation? No, you will say. This is impossible. How then does the right arise in the majority to govern the minority, against their will? Whence arises the right of the men to govern women, without their consent? Whence the right of the old to bind the young, without theirs.*

*But let us first suppose, that the whole community of every age, rank, sex, and condition, has a right to vote. This community is assembled – a motion is made and carried by a majority of one voice. The minority will not agree to this. Whence arises the right of the majority to govern, and the obligation of the minority to obey? From necessity, you will say, because there can be no other rule. But why exclude women? You will say, because their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience, in the great business of life, and the hard enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state. Besides, their attention is so much engaged with the necessary nurture of their children, that nature has made them fittest for domestic cares. And children have not judgment or will of their own.*

*True. But will not these reasons apply to others? Is it not equally true, that men in general in every society, who are wholly destitute of property, are also too little acquainted with public affairs to form a right judgment, and too dependent upon other men to have a will of their own? If this is a fact, if you give to every man, who has property, a vote, will you not make a fine encouraging provision of corruption by your fundamental law? Such is the frailty of the human heart, that very few men, who have no property, have any judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by some man of property, who has attached their minds to his interest.*

*Depends upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitfull a source of controversy and altercation, as would be opened by attempt to alter the qualifications of voters. There will be no end of it. New claims will arise. Women will demand a vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their rights not enough attended to, and every man, who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any others in all acts of state. It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks, to one common law.*

Reflection Questions: *answer on a separate piece of paper*

1. What was Abigail Adams asking for from her husband in the first and second letters? How did her arguments reflect the ideals behind the American Revolution?
2. What did John Adams mean when he referred to women as “another tribe”? What do you think of this comparison?
3. What reasons did John Adams give to explain why women, children, and the poor should not be allowed the right to vote? What did Adams fear would happen if women got the right to vote? What do you think of his opinion? Explain.