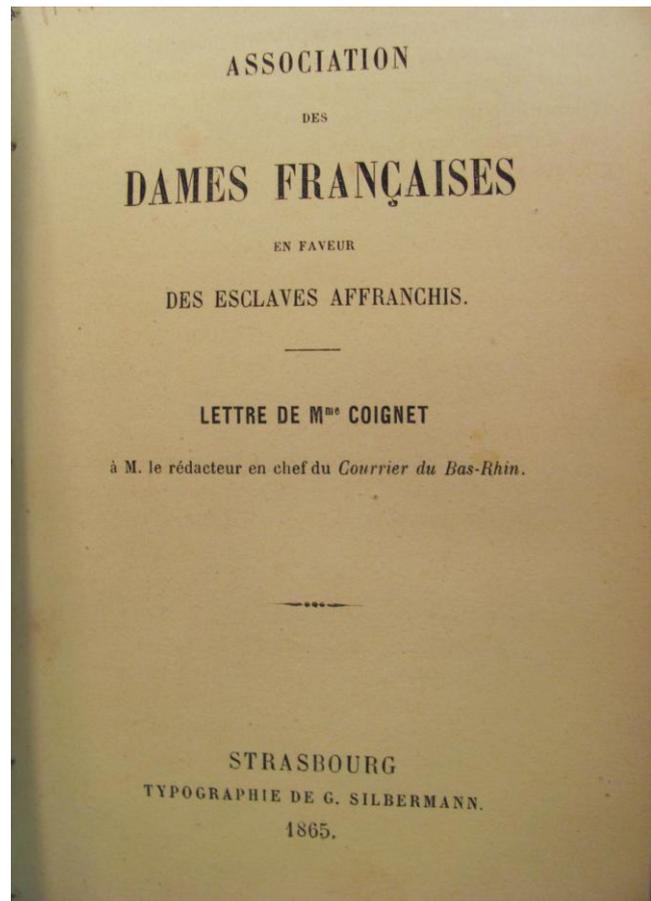


**Association des Dames françaises  
en faveur des esclaves affranchis**

[Association of French ladies for the  
relief of the freed slaves]

1865



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The involvement of French women in abolitionist political culture never reached the same levels of organisation and country-wide involvement as the more prominent British women's anti-slavery associations.<sup>1</sup> Women did not campaign collectively against slavery in France until the mid-nineteenth century. Despite important contributions to anti-slavery campaigns from individual women in France, such as Olympe de Gouges, author of several plays which addressed the problem of slavery, and Madame de Staël, who wrote and translated a number of important abolitionist texts in French in 1814-15, there was no real French counterpart to the hugely influential Birmingham Ladies' Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves (founded in 1825) or other similar groups around the UK. In the late eighteenth century abstention campaigns against the use of slave-produced sugar which initially drew British women into abolitionism did not exist in France, although women were politically engaged there in many other respects.<sup>2</sup> Although a French anti-slavery society came into existence in 1834, no women's branch of the society was founded. The

<sup>1</sup> There were over seventy women's groups campaigning against slavery at the beginning of the 1830s all around Britain, including the Birmingham Ladies' Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves, Sheffield Female Anti-Slavery Society, Nottingham Female Anti-Slavery Society, Bristol and Clifton Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, Leicester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society and the Glasgow Ladies' Emancipation Society.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Drescher, 'Sisterhood and Slavery: Transatlantic Antislavery and Women's Rights', from the *Proceedings of the Third Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University*, October 25-28, 2001 <<http://www.yale.edu/glc/conference/drescher.pdf>>

campaigning, petitioning and political organising which reached a peak in womens' anti-slavery groups in Britain from the mid-1820s to the 1840s, as described by Clare Midgley in *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870*, therefore was not mirrored in French society at the time, which also had a far lower rate of petition signatures among both men and women.<sup>3</sup>

The 1840s did see a small but growing number of petitioning initiatives in France. A petition from the French working classes against slavery in 1844 included female signatories, and a wholly female petition was drawn up in 1847 by the Protestant *Dames de Paris*. This took its tone from British ladies' associations, expressing concern over the plight of female slaves in particular.<sup>4</sup> Leading French abolitionists like Victor Schoelcher and Guillaume de Félice had noted the success of female abolitionism in Britain, and encouraged French women to contribute to campaigns against slavery. The only real anti-slavery organisation of French women, however, was the short-lived charity *Association des Dames françaises en faveur des esclaves affranchis*, which was founded in 1865 as a response to the crisis situation of the former slaves at the end of the US Civil War. In an open letter, the secretary and treasurer of the Association, moral philosopher and educational campaigner Clarisse Coignet stressed that this was a short-term charitable initiative designed to help the unfortunate yet "inoffensive and docile" population of former American slaves.<sup>5</sup> Comparing British and French responses to this humanitarian crisis, Coignet blames a less-developed political culture and absence of large rallies and political meetings in France for the low key response. The Association attempted to get around French restrictions on public campaigning by mobilising women through family and church networks. It appealed to women's purchasing habits, evoking the idea of a shared guilt among French women who had all purchased and worn clothes made from slave-grown cotton, and thus had a debt to repay.

By writing to the editor of the *Courrier du Bas-Rhin* and using a Strasbourg-based publisher the Association of French ladies was one of very few attempts to expand the very Paris-dominated French politics of anti-slavery, and reach out to regional political culture.<sup>6</sup> This fundraising initiative among the female population of "liberal and generous Alsace" is thus an interesting development of European campaigning on behalf of the enslaved and formerly enslaved, despite the limitations of its charitable approach.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Female signatories in Britain made up nearly a third of the total in the 1833 anti-slavery petitions, and two thirds of the signatories against apprenticeship in 1838. Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Schoelcher, *De la pétition des ouvriers pour l'abolition immédiate de l'esclavage* [The workers' petition for the immediate abolition of slavery] (Paris: Pagnerre, 1844). 'Pétition des Dames de Paris en faveur de l'abolition de l'esclavage' [Petition of the Ladies of Paris for the abolition of slavery], *L'Abolitioniste français*, 1847, 35-41.

<sup>5</sup> *Association des dames françaises en faveur des esclaves affranchis. Lettre de Mme Coignet à M. le rédacteur en chef du Courrier du Bas-Rhin* [Association of French ladies for the relief of freed slaves. Letter from Madame Coignet to the Editor in chief of the *Courrier du Bas-Rhin*] (Strasbourg: G. Silbermann, 1865), 6.

<sup>6</sup> The only other significant examples of French regional abolitionist culture took place in Toulouse and Lyon, where petitions were circulated in 1846-1847 – see *Pétition pour l'abolition immédiate de l'esclavage (extrait de la Réforme du 20 décembre 1846)* [Petition for the immediate abolition of slavery (taken from the *Reform*, 20 December 1846)] and Hector Fleury, *De l'esclavage colonial et de son abolition immédiate dans les colonies françaises* [On colonial slavery and its immediate abolition in the French colonies] (Lyon: Boursy Fils, 1847).

<sup>7</sup> *Association des dames françaises*, 9.