We, the men? On the Founding Fathers’ exclusion of their wives, sisters, daughters and mothers

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In 1776, America’s women did not as a rule vote, but were taxed by colonial assemblies and would continue to be taxed by all-male legislatures in independent America. How could this be squared with the Declaration of Independence’s grand principle of no taxation without representation?

The answer: American male voters back then saw themselves as virtual representatives of the women in their lives — their wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers.

American women themselves generally were not — not yet! — claiming otherwise. They were not petitioning American men the way colonists had petitioned the king and Parliament. They were not writing woman-suffrage essays, convening feminist or feminine assemblies, organizing all-female committees of correspondence, engaging in female civil disobedience, boycotting men or doing any of the things that patriots were doing to dramatize and explain their sense of aggrievement toward Britain.

This apparent quiescence would not last. Led by crusaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, mid-19th-century American women would proliferate petitions for women’s equality, pen and print suffragist books and essays, convene pro-women assemblies, organize feminist boycotts and do much, much more. When they did, they would in fact brilliantly echo and adapt the very language of the Declaration of Independence in iconic

statements such as the Seneca Falls Declaration of 1848.

Abigail Adams brought issues of gender equality to the White House in 1797. She emphasized the importance of educating girls and appealed for equal rights for women and men. (Benjamin Blyth // Wikimedia Commons)

Women in the 1760s and 1770s were of course participants in the great debate between Britain and America. Patriot “Daughters of Liberty” made homespun and brewed indigenous teas to support boycotts. Loyalist women tried to stiffen the spines of their spouses. Once war broke out, women on both sides of the contest often “manned” their households, freeing up men to fight on battlefields.

That said, many Revolutionary-era women, from patriot Betsy Ross (who sewed a flag) to loyalist Peggy Shippen Arnold (who whispered sweet things to her husband Benedict and bamboozled George Washington and Alexander Hamilton with fake hysteria), played highly gendered roles. The major pamphlets, essays, orations and the like in this era came from men as

men, either openly or under pen names at first, with men later admitting authorship.

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The most pointed discussion of the rights of women came from the era’s shrewdest political spouse. On March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to John that “I long to hear that you have declared an independency.” Then she pivoted: “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 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 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.”

Abigail began here by reminding John that she wholeheartedly supported his crusade for American independence. They were in this together — John could never have left his Massachusetts home for Philadelphia without Abigail’s unwavering support. With good reason did John think that he virtually represented Abigail.

What, specifically, was Abigail asking John to do in her March 31 letter? Not to support women’s suffrage, or even equal rights for women to own property, make contracts, publish newspapers, or do anything of the sort. Rather, Abigail was arguing that independent America should reform marriage laws to eliminate customary powers of husbands to physically discipline their spouses — what the common law referred to as a husband’s power of “domestic chastisement” and “moderate correction,” and what

Americans today would describe as spouse abuse.

In her words: “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 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.”

In his epistolary response to Abigail, John missed the force of Abigail’s point. He was not always a gifted listener. She countered, briefly, but based on the tenor of the hundreds of extant letters between John and Abigail, one suspects that she may well have communicated her more detailed views to him in person on some later occasion. She was not one to hold back, and he genuinely loved conversing with his extraordinarily clever and articulate spouse, who in much of their back-and-forth wore the affectionate nickname Portia — Shakespeare’s ingenious heroine able to beat men at their own game.

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