Social Reform by Quaker Women
A CASE STUDY OF LUCRETIA MOTT

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This article focuses on Lucretia Mott, a prominent minister, abolitionist, pacifist, religionist, fighter for women’s rights, and social reformer. Times, conditions, and circumstances have changed, but personal, social, and societal struggles have not and there is as much need for social reform today as during Lucretia’s times. How to discern, handle, and deal with modern-day problems and issues, Lucretia’s endeavours shed light on that and social reformers of the present times can learn much from her example and experiences. Students and scholars in sociology, women’s studies, religious studies, historical accounts, social change, and social welfare will find the contents of this article quite useful.

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INTRODUCTION

Some factual premises have guided the undertaking of this case study. First, for most part of the human history men have dominated societies by holding on to powerful and lucrative positions and relegating women to the less attractive roles and responsibilities. Second, as many past inequities and inequalities still exist, women will have to go a long way to establish equality with men. Third, despite various handicaps and restrictions, women have excelled in various fields and contributed as much to the welfare and growth of societies. Fourth, while societies that have embraced equality, fairness, and justice towards women have flourished over time, others have not. Fifth, equality, fairness, justice and
welfare are intrinsic to peace and pacifism and social reform is integral to the processes of fairness, justice, peace, and pacifism. Sixth, social reforms should be accorded priority over remedial work in order to have a better handle on problems and issues and their eventual uprooting (Gallagher, Lubelska and Ryan, 2001). These premises were found relevant for this case study for two reasons: 1) they pointed to the need for further research in this area; and 2) directly or indirectly guided the case study and the development of this article.

Specifically the case study is focused on the life and endeavours of Lucretia Mott with special attention to her reform efforts in the areas of abolition of slavery and bringing about greater rights for women. The objectives are: 1) to share with the readers the life and endeavours of Lucretia Mott; 2) to draw insights and lessons from her reform efforts; 3) to point out the relevance of her experiences for modern-day social reformers; and 4) to suggest proper discernment, handling, and dealing of present problems and issues for greater equality and welfare in societies.

Lucretia Mott was brought up in the Quaker tradition, which considerably coloured her thoughts, goals, strategies, and actions. Some background information on this tradition is essential to understand Lucretia’s life and reform efforts.

**Quakerism and Quakers**

Quakerism was born during the middle of the seventeenth century when the whole of Europe was undergoing turmoil and conditions were very unsettled. Famines, diseases, disasters, wars, epidemics and dynastic struggles were frequent, population declines and economic downturns were common, and religious rivalries were rampant. Peasant uprisings had begun, shortages and struggles were regular, and religious diversification was occurring. Some new religious orders emerged and among them were the Cluny, Cistercians, Templars, and Premonstratensians (Peters, 1997). Conflict between the state and the church continued, the power of the Catholic Church declined, and internal dissentions in it increased. Protestant Reformation was already asking the people to change their religious practices and Puritans were trying to bring Christianity to its past glory. Populist trends had emerged and democratic tendencies were becoming stronger. Ordinary people took advantage of these circumstances and started asserting their rights to seek the ‘Truth’ and ‘God’ in their own ways. This led to the birth of new sects like the Diggers, Levelers, Ranters, Muggletonians, Brownists, Familists, Fifth Monarchists, Mennonites and
Quakers. All these sects challenged the orthodoxies and came up with their own religious practices. With the passing of time, however, these new sects disappeared and only the Mennonites and Quakers have survived (Dandelion, 2008; Hamm, 2010; Russell, 1979).

The core belief of Quakerism is that God is present in every person as the “holy spirit.” The God within us provides all knowledge and imparts guidance and direction for living. To receive that knowledge one has to only listen to the “inner voice” and pay attention to the revelations. Each individual has the capacity to know ‘God’ and ‘Truth’. Therefore all people are spiritually equal, everyone is worthy, and all deserve liberation. This applies to men and women, the rich and the poor, locals and strangers.

Thus, Quaker women were accorded respect and revered by men, enjoyed equal status with them, and were allowed to take part in all the activities of the movement as workers, leaders, preachers and reformers. The same principle was followed in homes, businesses, places of worship, and in community affairs where women could contribute substantially. Collective living and working was recommended and it was believed that group settings helped merging of the hearts, created a common consciousness, and extended the love of God to all. Service to others was essential and, no matter how busy one was, every Quaker was expected to make time for rendering service to others. Humility was another important virtue followed sincerely by every Quaker. Quakers considered all people to be fallible and, hence, personal reformation was essential. By adhering conscientiously to these self-imposed principles, the Quakers kept their civic and moral strengths high. Their motto was that life was to be lived in a way that it “spoke for itself” and served as an example to others.

Conditions kept on changing and so did Quakerism. Ultimately the Quakers split into three main sects: 1) Conservative Quakers - who stuck to the original beliefs and practices; 2) Liberal Quakers - who adjusted the beliefs and practices to emerging circumstances; and 3) Evangelical Quakers - who took the beliefs and practices back to the form from which the sect had originally parted. Many commonalities, though, remained in the three traditions (Dandelion 2008; Smith, 1998; Peck, 1988; Dalglish, 1969; Trueblood, 1966).

Lucretia Mott

Lucretia Mott’s ancestors were the first settlers to settle in Nantucket, Massachusetts, a tiny island thirty miles south of Cape Cod in north-
east America, in 1659. Lucretia Mott was born on January 3, 1793 to Thomas and Anne Coffin. Lucretia was second of their eight children. While Thomas Coffin owned a ship, Anne Folger Coffin ran a shop. The island culture bred freedom and independence and influenced Lucretia’s personality. Numerous exciting events were taking place around the time of Lucretia’s birth (Bacon, 1980). The Constitution of America had been ratified in 1788, the French Revolution had begun in 1789 with emphasis on human equality, Benjamin Franklin had lobbied in the United States Congress against the slave trade, and Mary Wollstone had published *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 in France. The Revolutionary War had ended and Nantucket was still trying to recover from its impact.

Within the socio-political realms of those times, men played the dominant role in all decision-making and women continued to manage their homes and children. Property belonged to men and, in case of a divorce, children and belongings were normally turned over to men. Women, in contrast, were meek and subservient, not allowed to speak in public, had no voting rights and not allowed to participate in politics.

Parallel to the problems arising because of the low status of women in society, were the slavery issues of Black people that required much attention. The Constitution of America and the government supported slavery and protected the rights of the slaveholders. Movements to get rid of slavery had begun. The other issues needing better attention at those times included better care for the mentally-ill, prison reforms, better treatment of foreigners, support systems for the poor, and equal educational opportunities. Natural disasters, diseases, economic downturns, population shifts, and shortages were common, urban sprawl was on the move, environment was deteriorating, poverty was on the rise, and monopolisation of power, religious rivalries, and political instabilities completed that picture (Gallagher, Lubelska and Ryan, 2001; Horton and Horton, 2005; Jorns, 1931).

**Influences and Early Life**

Lucretia’s family and the Quaker meetings had considerable influence on her views towards the issues faced by women and slavery. She began her studies at age four in a Quaker grammar school. As Lucretia was brought up in an egalitarian environment, her exposure to the plight of women and slaves came much later in life. As per the Quaker tradition, Lucretia had always observed that women played significant roles in worship meetings, businesses and community affairs. However, she soon realised
that conditions for women in the town outside the Quaker tradition were very different. The same applied to the horrors of slavery. Lucretia became aware about the cruelties faced by slaves, the forced capturing and separations from their families. Lucretia was also influenced by the appeals made by Thomas Clarkson to end slave trade and slavery; she read about this in *Mental Improvement* by Priscilla Wakefield (Bacon, 1980).

Lucretia’s family moved to Boston just before she turned twelve years old and at age thirteen she started attending Nine Partners, a Quaker boarding school in Dutchess County in New York (later known as Millbrook). When employed as a teacher, she noticed that male teachers were paid three times more salaries. This fact shocked her and a lifelong struggle for equal rights for women started. She met her future husband James Mott at Nine Partners in 1811. James Mott by and by became not only Lucretia’s best friend, but also her well-wisher, guide, and supporter in all her social reform efforts (Sterling, 1964; Beegel, 2009; DeAngelis, 2001).

**Trying Times**

Lucretia’s family moved to Philadelphia in 1809. James moved to Philadelphia and became a partner in business with Lucretia’s father. Lucretia’s father died in 1815, leaving a heavy debt for the family to pay off. Thereupon Lucretia’s mother restarted her shop and Lucretia started teaching in a school. James got into the cotton business. Anti-slavery sentiments were strong and abolitionists were recommending the boycott of all products made through slave labour. That included sugarcane, tobacco, indigo, and cotton too. James, accordingly, quit his cotton business and shifted to wool business. That was the beginning of abolitionist life for James and Lucretia. Another important happening of the times for James and Lucretia was their religious shift. Quakerism stood divided into Hicksites and Gurneyites (Dandelion, 2008). Elias Hicks was a prominent Hicksite figure at that time and James and Lucretia were greatly impressed by him. Under his influence both turned Hicksites and promoted that cause for the rest of their lives (Bacon, 1980; DeAngelis, 2001).

**Beginnings of Social Reforms**

Lucretia was formally accepted as a Quaker minister in 1821 and thereafter her life was dedicated to religious preaching and reform. Lucretia’s sermons were unconventional and included fixations in Quakerism, women’s rights...
and slavery. In addition, Lucretia espoused with the Hicksites positions on various issues and addressed mixed male and female audiences. Accordingly opposition to her sermons remained strong and efforts were made to remove her from the ministry. But Lucretia stayed firm and continued to be in great demand as a preacher and speaker (Sterling, 1964; Greene, 1981).

Young abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison shared with James and Lucretia some of his anti-slavery views and impressed upon them that a gradual approach to the removal of slavery was a bad idea and not workable. He also expressed that the idea of shipping slaves to Africa or other lands was an injurious proposition and, hence, resettlement of slaves should be done in America. In 1833 James and Lucretia helped Garrison to organise the American Anti-Slavery Society. They also noticed that all important positions in the society were occupied by males. While women could attend the meetings, they could not participate in the proceedings. Along with some other women, Lucretia and James Mott founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in December 1833. This society was inter-racial and inter-denominational; their goals were to not only remove slavery, but also racism and other man-made inequalities. The society developed close relationships with the Blacks and other minority communities. Lucretia walked hand-in-hand with the minority women in public and preached in Black parishes. Her sister-in-law and brother-in-law, in the meantime, established the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society (Faulkner, 2011; DeAngelis, 2001).

Lucretia also served the antislavery cause by extending hospitality to abolitionist speakers, helping fugitive slaves in their legal fights with owners, donating money to abolition-related charities, and participating in the ‘Underground Railroad’ that helped run-away slaves move to free states. Lucretia and the other ladies collected funds for these activities by organising fairs, which also created awareness on anti-slavery issues among the public. Some people who did not like what Lucretia and the other ladies were trying to do drafted a warning letter at the Congregational Church General Assembly regarding their activities, especially speaking in public and addressing mixed audiences (Faulkner, 2011; Bacon, 1980; DeAngelis, 2001).

**Fight for Women’s Rights**

In 1837 Lucretia helped organise the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in New York City. Her speeches were always radical.
While some people appreciated her views, others criticised them severely. That criticism came from both Quakers and others. Some people thought that she was a “racial amalgamator.” Thus Lucretia faced constant threats of violence and in 1838 a mob tried to stop her from speaking at an antislavery meeting in Philadelphia. (Sterling, 1964; Faulkner, 2011; Greene, 1981).

In 1840 the approach to the “woman question” divided the American Anti-Slavery Society and two factions were formed. These factions elected their own delegates to the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention held in London the same year. Questions arose about the participation of elected women delegates and with a vote of nine to one it was decided that they could not participate in the proceedings of the convention. Thus they were assigned a “visitor status” instead of the expected “delegate status” and were made to sit apart from men. Thereafter the male members of the American delegation chose to sit with the women delegates. These included William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Nathaniel Rogers, William Adams, and Charles Bemond (Bacon, 1980; Faulkner, 2011).

After her return to America, Lucretia travelled extensively to fight for women’s rights and end slavery (Faber and Hoover, 1971; Mott, 1850; Marisco, 2008). She met several slaveholders and pointed out to them that slaveholding was immoral. Lucretia also suggested short-term and long-term solutions to these issues and the reforms that were needed (Mott and Greene, 1980). At the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London, Lucretia met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a strong advocate for women’s rights. In 1848 a women’s rights convention was arranged at Seneca Falls in New York on the “Declaration of Sentiments”. Male-female equality was actively sought and a declaration was made “we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal and therefore deserve same status in the society”. Women’s voting rights, equal citizenship, equal public/political participation, equality in marriage, right to divorce, equal rights to property, equal rights to positions, and same pay for same job done were also discussed in the convention (Marisco, 2008; Faulkner, 2011; Bacon, 1980).

**Abolition of Slavery**

Slavery had already been in existence in America for more than two hundred years when Lucretia, James, and other likeminded individuals started their fight for the abolition of the institution. Protests against slavery began early, first by slaves themselves and then others joined too.
Eventually the ‘Underground Railroad’ system got created. Laws against sympathising with or helping escaped slaves were harsh and punishments were severe. Abolition societies came into existence and their numbers kept on increasing. The ‘Fugitive State Act’ was passed by the Congress in 1793 to ensure that run-away slaves were returned to their rightful owners. In 1850 another ‘Fugitive Slave Act’ was passed with harsher penalties for those who helped run-away slaves. However, James and Lucretia continued to work for women’s rights and the abolition of slavery (Thomas and Thomas, 1905; Bacon, 1986; Levin, 2004; Marisco, 2008).

**The Approaches**

Three main approaches were used in the handling of women’s issues and the abolition of slavery: the gradualist approach, the radical approach, and the radical-moralist approach.

*The gradualist approach* believed in the gradual elimination of slavery. The means recommended included publicising of problems and issues, convincing the legislature and the administrative bodies to pass appropriate laws and take suitable actions, and educating the public. John Wolman, Anthony Benzet and John Churchman were influential and suggested that emancipated slaves should be sent to their native lands for resettlement. The gradualist group therefore tried to convince the slaveholders and the government to free the slaves on moral and ethical grounds. Peaceful dialogues, negotiations, compromises, and actions were part of the strategies employed by them.

*The radical approach* believed that the gradualist approach was too narrow in scope, results were slow to come, and peaceful dialogues, negotiations, compromises and actions were difficult to achieve. Doubts were also expressed about the long-range effectiveness of the gradualist approach that let problems and issues accumulate and people suffer. Moreover, the Constitution and the government were tilted in favour of the power bases and the slaveholders. The ‘Fugitive Slave Acts’ and existing traditions further complicated matters. Thus the radical group suggested prompt and radical actions which produced quick results. They held rallies, delivered speeches, staged protests, wrote in newspapers and magazines. Those undertakings stayed peaceful most of the times, but violence did erupt occasionally and in some cases were extreme (Levin, 2004; Sharma, 2013).

*The middle path approach* stressed that radical actions were necessary, but moral appeals must also be made to the people. Lucretia, James, and
their co-workers belonged to the third group and were labeled as radical-moralist reformers. They adhered to peaceful means and condemned any violence in the undertaking (Drescher, 2009; Thomas and Thomas, 1905; Marisco, 2008; Bacon, 1986).

**Civil War and the Aftermath**

Events around the time of the Civil War were crucial for the antislavery movement. Abraham Lincoln was elected as President in 1860 and in 1863 he signed the ‘Emancipation Proclamation Act’ that freed all slaves in the rebel territories. Then in 1865 ‘The Thirteenth Amendment’ to the United States Constitution ended slavery in America. Lucretia and her companions in the antislavery movement started focusing on issues like the resettlement of slaves, education of their children, employment, and voting rights. Lucretia also continued to advocate for equal rights for women and the Hicksites’ positions also remained a priority for her (Faulkner, 2011; Bacon, 1980; Olsen, 2006).

**Broadening of Religious Horizons**

Lucretia was greatly influenced by some Unitarians and Transcendentalists of the times including Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, William Penn, Rabbi Isaac Mayer, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. She was keen that Quakerism also broaden its premises and accept some of these principles. She started incorporating these ideas in her speeches and sermons and her tone became more and more radical. Many people, Quakers and non-Quakers, did not like that and started criticising her. Lucretia, however, carried on with her mission. Later in the company of some like-minded friends, she helped establish the Free Religious Association in 1867. The main goal of that organisation was to instill free thinking in people and cause religious liberalisation in America (Bacon, 1980).

**Founding of New Organisations**

Lucretia helped to establish the American Equal Rights Association in 1866 with the help of Stanton, Anthony, Stone, and others. This organisation became active in 1867 in Kansas where Black suffrage and women’s voting rights were to be decided by a popular vote. James died in 1868 and in 1869 Lucretia got elected to the presidency of the American Equal Rights Association. However, differences of opinion cropped up and Lucretia resigned from that position. She founded the National Women Suffrage
Association with the help of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others. One of the goals of that association was to seek an amendment to the United States Constitution in favour of voting rights for women. However, the issues of slaves had gained greater prominence, which, made it difficult for Lucretia and the others to win back the momentum for women’s problems and issues. Lucretia, in the meantime, tried to focus more on the Hicksites positions and issues and in 1869 helped open the co-educational Quaker Institute of Higher Learning. Located in Philadelphia, the Institute later became Swarthmore College. It is still considered to be one of the top liberal arts institutions in America (Faulkner, 2011; Bacon, 1980; 1986).

Other Reform Efforts
Lucretia also started paying more attention to some other needed reforms. She had been active since the 1830s in several pacifist associations. She became a leading voice for the Universal Peace Union and suggested that nations and people must end wars. She founded the Northern Association for the Relief and Employment of Poor Women in Philadelphia in 1846. Lucretia believed that societies faced multiple problems that were interrelated and hence their solutions also had to be interrelated, integrated, and comprehensive. Adequate attention had to be paid to that aspect of the social reforms and women in particular were to play a greater role in those as they were better informed about problems and issues at home, in the neighborhood, and in the community. Attention also was to be paid to the problems and issues of the minority populations, ethnic groups, immigrants, foreigners, and other vulnerable people. To all these positions Lucretia gave a moral and social imperative (Bacon, 1980; Faulkner, 2011). Lucretia continued to work until her death on November 11, 1880 in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania.

Our Times, Relevance, and Lessons
While the times, circumstances, situations, and issues have changed much since Lucretia’s days, the personal and societal struggles have remained the same. Men still occupy powerful and lucrative positions in societies, women still do most of the home chores and take care of the families. Despite the restrictions women have shown excellence in various spheres. Lucretia’s case offers some insights and lessons. As Gandhi (1928) would also repeat it later on, Lucretia emphasised that problems and issues must not be ignored and unfairness and injustice must not be tolerated at any
level. Foremost on her mind were the dignity and respect of women and their equal position with men as free citizens.

Lucretia advised women to remain self-dependent and not wait for the government or others to take care of their problems and issues. Lucretia also urged the reformers not to expect rewards, glory, or praise for their undertakings. If those came forth naturally, good, otherwise the undertakings themselves were the rewards and a sincere reformer felt satisfied with that.

Some other insights and lessons offered by Lucretia’s case study were as follows. First, even when the causes are right, social reformers must not expect everyone to jump on to the bandwagon and lend support. Some people will always oppose the cause due to vested interests and other people are bound to be apathetic. Second, many people feel that they are not “good enough” or “powerful enough” to undertake social reforms. To such people Lucretia advised that each person is capable and worthy. All that is needed is: 1) keen eyes, 2) firm commitment, 3) will to fight, and 4) readiness to sacrifice. Third, problems and issues were interrelated and accordingly reform efforts also had to be relevant, complete, and comprehensive. Modern-day reformers often do not pay enough attention to that and become satisfied with ‘adjustments’ or ‘patch work’. Lucretia was against such orientations and actions. Fourth, social reforms need not only physical resources, but also mental and moral strength. This is a big challenge in modern times where political correctness is the norm and exigent actions are rampant. Fifth, the undertaken causes and strategies must be fair and just to all parties. This is a big challenge to be accomplished in the present environment. Finally this case study reveals that: 1) social reforms are a lengthy and drawn-out process where different social reformers of the past, present, and future are merely links in a big chain, 2) the results of the social reform efforts come in installments overtime; therefore the contributions of the social reformers are also to be assessed in longitudinal terms, 3) social reforms of one time and place influence social reform efforts at other times and places, 4) social reformers of the present times often do not pay enough attention to the lessons and insights available of past efforts to shape current goals, strategies, and actions, 5) problems and issues of the present are more complex and numerous; therefore social reformers of today also need to be more creative, innovative, and resourceful in the planning and handling problems and issues, and 6) cooperation of all is always necessary in the handling of problems and issues, particularly
among the public, the legislative bodies, the administrative operatives, and other organisational units.

NOTES
1. Having finished a four-book series on “Gandhi’s Teachers” (Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad, India), a new series was started on “Social Reform by Quaker Women.” This is a revised version of the second article in the series that was earlier presented at the Annual Meetings of the Canadian Peace Research Association (CPRA) in Ottawa, Canada, in 2015. The author would like to thank Dr. Ramona Denby-Brinson for her suggestions for revision of this article.
2. Ganguli (1972: 23-24), for example, stated: “In the human community in its most primitive forms we find that, while men hunt and carry on warlike activities and procure food, the woman cooks, looks after the fire, implements, and weapons and collects fuel and building materials. Where agriculture begins, the woman tills the land, she is also the earliest weaver and tanner. For all her drudgery, she finds time to draw the first crude pictures on clay, and on stone, and on bronze and iron implements. Engaged in the less strenuous pursuits, she has the leisure to develop the effective side of human nature of which she has more than man.”
3. The tradition of Christianity in Europe already stood divided into Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches.
4. George Fox is regarded as the father of Quakerism and the religion was initially based on his revelations. During their worship the members shook visibly due to the presence of high emotions and accordingly the label of “Quakers” was sarcastically applied to the sect by Justice Bennet during George Fox’s trial in Derby, England in 1650. Following John 15:12-14 “This is my command that ye love one another as I have loved you… ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you” they also came to be known as “Friends.” Other names adopted by Quakers were “The Children of the Light” indicating that they were guided only by the “inner-light” and “Publishers of Truth” meaning that only their ways and mission represented God’s true calling (see: Ingle, 1994; Dandelion, 2008; Russell, 1979; Barbour and Frost, 1988; Benezet, 1814; Penn, 1803).
5. When still a very young girl, Lucretia watched a woman being flogged at a public whipping post.
6. William Lloyd Garrison was a well-known radical abolitionist who published The Liberator.
7. “Underground Railroad” was a well-developed system to secretly move fugitive slaves to free states.

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