

Catharine Beecher, A Circular Addressed to the Benevolent Ladies of the United States (1829)

In the 1820s, the public role of women was limited to social, religious, and charitable activities; they could not vote or stand for office. The removal issue, however, provided women with an opportunity to focus their benevolent concerns on a political issue. Women's missionary societies had long supported Indian missions through donations of money and goods, and individual women made contributions as well: about half the donors listed in the periodical the Missionary Herald were women. Many women regarded the treatment of the Cherokees and other Indians as immoral, and since morality was well within their purview, they felt compelled to oppose removal.

The call to action came from Catharine Beecher, a prominent educator and writer (and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin). In 1829, she anonymously published a widely distributed circular in which she called on women to petition Congress to defeat the impending Indian Removal Act. In response, women collected signatures on scores of petitions demanding respect for Indian rights, which they sent to Congress.

This kind of concerted political action on a national level was new to American women, who soon began to urge the abolition of slavery and to address other injustices in American society. Opposition to Indian Removal, therefore, empowered women with a public voice despite their disfranchisement. Below is an excerpt from Catherine Beecher's circular that was printed in the Christian Advocate and Journal on December 25, 1829.

The present crisis in the affairs of the Indian nations in the United States demands the immediate and interested attention of all who make any claims to benevolence or humanity. The calamities now hanging over them threaten not only these relics of an interesting race, but, if there is a Being who avenges the wrongs of the oppressed, are causes of alarm to our whole country.

The following are the facts of the case:—This continent was once possessed only by the Indians, and earliest accounts represent them as a race numerous, warlike, and powerful. When our forefathers sought refuge from oppression on these shores, this people supplied their necessities, and ministered to their comfort; and though some of them, when they saw the white man continually encroaching upon their land, fought bravely for their existence and their country, yet often, too, the Indian has shed his blood to protect and sustain our infant nation.

As we have risen in greatness and glory, the Indian nations have faded away. Their proud and powerful tribes have gone; their noble sachems and mighty warriors are heard of no more; and it is said the Indian often comes...to gaze on the beautiful country no longer his own, and to cry with bitterness at the remembrance of past greatness and power.

Ever since the existence of this nation, our general government, pursuing the course alike of policy and benevolence, have acknowledged these people as free and independent nations, and

has protected them in the quiet possession of their lands. In repeated treaties with the Indians, the United States, by the hands of the most distinguished statesmen, after purchasing the greater part of their best lands, have *promised* them “*to continue the guarantee of the remainder of their country FOR EVER.*” And so strictly has government guarded the Indian’s right to his lands, that even to go on to their boundaries to survey the land, subjects to heavy fines and imprisonment.

Our government also, with parental care, has persuaded the Indians to forsake their savage life, and to adopt the habits and pursuits of civilized nations, while the charities of Christians...have sent to them the blessings of the gospel to purify and enlighten. The laws and regular forms of a civilized government are instituted; their simple and beautiful language, by the remarkable ingenuity of one of their race, has become a written language with its own peculiar alphabet, and, by the printing press, is sending forth among these people the principles of knowledge, and liberty, and religion. Their fields are beginning to smile with the labours of the husbandman; their villages are busy with the toils of the mechanic and the artisan; schools are rising in their hamlets, and the temple of the living God is seen among their forests.

Nor are we to think of these people only as naked and wandering savages. The various grades of intellect and refinement exist among them as among us; and those who visit their chieftains and families of the higher class, speak with wonder and admiration of their dignified propriety, nobleness of appearance, and refined characteristics as often exhibited in both sexes. Among them are men fitted by native talents to shine among the statesmen of any land, and who have received no inferior degree of cultivation. Among them, also, are those who, by honest industry, have assembled around them most of the comforts and many of the elegancies of life.

But the lands of this people are claimed to be embraced within the limits of some of our southern states, and as they are fertile and valuable, they are demanded by the whites as their own possessions, and efforts are making to dispossess the Indians of their native soil. And such is the singular state of concurring circumstances, that it has become almost a certainty that these people are to have their lands torn from them, and to be driven into western wilds and to final annihilation, unless the feelings of a humane and Christian nation shall be aroused to prevent the unhallowed sacrifice.

Unless our general government...protect these nations, as by solemn and oft-repeated treaties they are bound to do, nothing can save them. The states which surround them are taking such measures as will speedily drive them from their country, and cause their final extinction....

Have not then the females of this country some duties devolving upon them in relation to this helpless race?—They are protected from the blinding influence of party spirit, and the asperities of political violence. They have nothing to do with any struggle for power, nor any right to dictate the decisions of those that rule over them.—But they may feel for the distressed; they may stretch out the supplicating hand for them, and by their prayers strive to avert the calamities that are impending over them. It may be, that female petitioners can lawfully be heard, even by the highest rulers of our land. Why may we not approach and supplicate that we and our dearest friends may be saved from the awful curses denounced on all who oppress the poor and needy, by Him whose anger is to be dreaded more than the wrath of man; who can “blast us with the breath of his nostrils,” and scatter our hopes like chaff before the storm....

To woman it is given to administer the sweet charities of life, and to *sway the empire of affection*; and to her it may also be said, “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a cause as this?”...

You who gather the youthful group...and rejoice in their future hopes and joys, will you forget that the poor Indian loves his children too, and would as bitterly mourn over all their blasted hopes? And, while surrounded by such treasured blessings, ponder with dread and awe these fearful words of Him, who thus forbids the violence, and records the malediction of those, who either as individuals, or as nations, shall oppress the needy and helpless....

This communication was written and sent abroad solely by the female hand. Let every woman who peruses it, exert that influence in society which falls within her lawful province, and endeavour by every suitable expedient to interest the feelings of her friends, relatives, and acquaintances, in behalf of this people, that are ready to perish. A few weeks must decide this interesting and important question, and after that time sympathy and regret will all be in vain.

Source: Theda Perdue, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History With Documents*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 106-109.