



ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

In the mid-1800s, women were denied the same rights as men, and, among other disparities, they were not allowed to vote, run for public office, or go to college. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) was an early leader of the women's suffrage movement. She, along with Lucretia Mott and others, organized the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, a cornerstone event in the women's rights movement. Afterward, Stanton was president of the National Women's Suffrage Association for more than 20 years and co-editor of *Revolution*, an early feminist magazine, from 1868–1870. Along with Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joselyn Gage, she compiled the first three volumes of *History of Women Suffrage*, published from 1881 to 1886, and wrote *Eighty Years and More*, published in 1898.

"The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" was adopted on July 19, 1848, at the Seneca Falls convention. Drawing on Thomas Jefferson's "The Declaration of Independence," the statement lists grievances suffered by women and was signed by both women and men attending the convention. The only resolution not unanimously adopted was the ninth, which demanded the right to vote, because some attendees felt they should strive for rights that seemed more realistic. Stanton, however, argued that the power to choose elected officials and make laws would help secure the remainder of the rights called for in the document, and it passed by a small majority. The convention and "The Declaration of Sentiments and Rights" were controversial at the time and are now considered the start of the women's rights movement.

Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions

Prereading Question

Consider the place of women in American society. In what ways are women equal to men? In what ways—legally or illegally—are women unequal to men? Why does such inequality continue to exist—despite the law or because of it?

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they were accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be profitable to it.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.

He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation—in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall use

every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the State and National legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of Conventions embracing every part of the country.

[The following resolutions were discussed by Lucretia Mott, Thomas and Mary Ann McClintock, Amy Post, Catharine A. F. Stebbins, and others, and were adopted:]

Whereas, The great precept of nature is conceded to be, that “man shall pursue his own true and substantial happiness.” Blackstone in his Commentaries remarks, that this law of Nature being coeval with mankind, and dictated by God himself, is of course superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries and at all times; no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this, and such of them as are valid, derive all their force, and all their validity, and all their authority, mediately and immediately, from this original; therefore,

Resolved, That such laws as conflict, in any way, with the true and substantial happiness of woman, are contrary to the great precept of nature and of no validity, for this is “superior in obligation to any other.”

Resolved, That all laws which prevent woman from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority.

Resolved, That woman is man’s equal—was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.

Resolved, That the women of this country ought to be enlightened in regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer publish their degradation by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance, by asserting that they have all the rights they want.

Resolved, That inasmuch as man, while claiming for himself intellectual superiority, does accord to woman moral superiority, it is pre-eminently his duty to encourage her to speak and teach, as she has an opportunity, in all religious assemblies.

Resolved, That the same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior that is required of woman in the social state, should also be required of man, and the same transgressions should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman.

Resolved, That the objection of indelicacy and impropriety, which is so often brought against woman when she addresses a public

audience, comes with a very ill-grace from those who encourage, by their attendance, her appearance on the stage, in the concert, or in feats of the circus.

Resolved, That woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her.

Resolved, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.

Resolved, That the equality of human rights results necessarily from the fact of the identity of the race in capabilities and responsibilities.

Resolved, therefore, That, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means; and especially in regard to the great subjects of morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to participate with her brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by writing and by speaking, by any instrumentalities proper to be used, and in any assemblies proper to be held; and this being a self-evident truth growing out of the divinely implanted principles of human nature, any custom or authority adverse to it, whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind.

[At the last session Lucretia Mott offered and spoke to the following resolution:]

Resolved, That the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women, for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to woman an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions, and commerce.

Textual Questions

1. Why does Stanton write this argument as a "Declaration"? What effect does this choice of title have both on her argument and on her audience?
2. Who is the "we" to whom Stanton addresses her speech? What in the text defines this "we"?
3. Who is the "he" in Stanton's argument and how is "he" defined?

Rhetorical Questions

4. How does Stanton begin generally and build to a specific indictment/list of grievances? Why would she organize her argument in such a way? Is this organization effective or ineffective?
5. Does Stanton's argument build effectively and persuasively to her resolutions? Which of these resolutions is most/least effectively worded?
6. Consider Stanton's resolutions. How do you think her original audience would have reacted to them? What evidence do you have for what you say?

Intertextual Questions

7. What effect does Stanton's modeling of the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" on the "Virginia Declaration of Rights" and the "Declaration of Independence" have? What effects might she have hoped for this modeling to have on her argument?
8. To what degree do you find more recent statements about the rights of women (Shirley Chisholm's, beginning on page 98) drawing on Stanton's text, continuing the intellectual tradition of this argument? Give specific examples.

Thinking Beyond the Text

9. In the "Declaration of Independence," Thomas Jefferson crafts an indictment of King George III for his treatment of the American colonies; in the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," Elizabeth Cady Stanton indicts men for their treatment of women. Do you believe that these indictments, one clearly modeled upon the other, are truly parallel? Does this modeling give credibility to Stanton's argument or detract from it?
10. As she indicts men, Stanton lists very specific grievances against them. Do you believe that the situation of women in America now, more than 150 years after Stanton made her "Declaration," is significantly different? In what ways do you believe that the place of women in American society is better? In what ways do you doubt that women are treated better than they were in Stanton's time?

For Writing & Discussion

11. Research the rights—in political, social, and economic terms—of women in America in the late 1840s. Pick one topic from your research and, in a short essay, compare and contrast the rights of women in Stanton's time to the rights of women in the present.