

## **Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (Seneca Falls, NY, 1848)**

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al.**

### **Historical Background**

The growth and development of manufacturing as a dominant economic system, especially in the North, in the latter part of the antebellum period, had a substantial effect on the role of women in society. Women made up a sizeable percentage of the new industrial workforce, but could not vote for representatives nor run for office. This political unfreedom was directly tied to a lack of economic liberty, as married women working in industry often had their entire wage –smaller than that paid to their male coworkers – paid to their husbands. Further, it was seen as untoward and unnatural for a woman to even speak in public to an audience outside of her family.

Notwithstanding this fact, women were very active in the growing abolitionist movement. Following the precedent set by antislavery activists, some prominent women's rights activists set about to create a convention to discuss and publicize their message. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and others active in the abolitionist movement organized the convention to be held in July 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY as a "women's rights convention."

### **Historical Significance**

The Declaration of Sentiments was the result of the first women's rights convention. The Seneca Falls Convention is sometimes hailed as "the birthplace of the American women's rights movement." Although the calls for reform listed in the Declaration of Sentiments might seem commonplace or even obvious to twenty-first century readers, the reaction at the time was somewhat different. One newspaper covering the convention described the convention as "the most shocking and unnatural event ever recorded in the history of womanity." On the other hand, the structure of the document was anything but radical, being modeled explicitly on the Declaration of Independence. The first two paragraphs are a direct quotation of the Declaration of Independence with few but significant modifications. One such change included the insertion of "women" into the famous clause declaring the natural equality of man.

The Declaration of Sentiments set the tone for future women's rights conventions and set the agenda for reform: legal equality, women's suffrage, economic freedom, and an equal role in religious life. Around the same time as the convention several tangible gains in the fight for equal rights were made in New York, as the state legislature passed the "Married Women's Property Act of 1848." This law allowed married women to retain some property rights in marriage. However, women would not receive the right to vote nationally until 1920, some seven decades later.

## Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: women's suffrage, suffragettes, feminism, social activism, equal rights, civil society, relationship of religion and society

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- describe and summarize the arguments in the Declaration of Sentiments;
- analyze and describe rhetorical strategies used in Declaration;
- describe change in roles of women in society in the first half of the nineteenth century;
- define and describe "first wave feminism" from 1848-1920;
- appreciate the role of the Declaration of Independence in United States political history.

## Questions to Explore

What does it mean that men and women are created equal?

Can men and women be assigned by law or custom to different spheres and still be equal? Can they enjoy equal rights and still have different roles and ways of life?

What arguments were made for assigning to men the role of legal head of the family? How can we explain the fact that even many women opposed the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments at the time?

Even after agreeing that a particular practice is unjust, many people disagree about the tactics one should use to right injustice. In the opinion of some, immediate revolutionary action is necessary. Others argue that gradual change is more likely to result in progress without causing harmful unintended consequences. Where do you place yourself on this spectrum? Explain why, using both the struggle for women's rights and another contemporary issue that you think presents a case of serious injustice.

The majority of the grievance listed in the declaration related to violations of women's rights by the law. These inequalities were called "de jure" because they were mandated by law in their inclusion in the formal legal code. Now that legal equality has been achieved in large part, has the battle been won? If not, what should feminists fight for next? Can governments like ours offer more than legal equality to their citizens? Explain your answer fully.

## Comparison

Stanton's arguments are in many respects similar to those used by Frederick Douglass just a few years later in his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Compare and contrast these two reformers' arguments and the situations in which American women and African-American

slaves found themselves. Does either one make a stronger case than the other? Could one consistently accept the arguments of one and not the other? Explain.