

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 10: First Amendment: Speech, Press, Religion, Assembly, and Petition
10.5 Primary Source

SENECA FALLS DECLARATION (1848)

The first American Women’s Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19–20, 1848. Over the course of two days, convention members discussed and ultimately adopted a “Declaration of Sentiments,” which described the unjust and unequal treatment of women and presented 12 “resolutions” demanding legal and cultural reform. Initially drafted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Declaration echoed the language and cadence of the Declaration of Independence. It then included a long list of grievances: the restrictions that coverture placed on married women; the denial of other rights, particularly the vote, to all women, be they married or unmarried; and structural inequalities that limited women’s opportunities generally. Most of these inequalities were not addressed until the 1900s.

Although Black suffrage was secured by the adoption of the 15th Amendment in 1870, women’s suffrage would not be obtained until the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The 14th Amendment’s protections of civil rights did not extend to questions involving discrimination on the basis of sex or gender until the 1970s. Even then, the long history of legal restrictions noted in the Declaration of Sentiments continued to shape women’s claims to constitutional protections.

Excerpt

This is a rewriting of the Declaration of Independence to support women’s rights. 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 are 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

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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.

Women have been abused by men over time; and here's the evidence. 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.

...

Man denies her civil rights and the right to vote. 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.

...

She has no property rights or rights to her wages. He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

...

She can't pursue many professions, and she is paid poorly. He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.

...

He has degraded her and made her dependent on him. 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.

...

Women are entitled to the rights and privileges of American citizenship. 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 these United States.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**