



## Seneca Falls Convention, [Declaration of Sentiments](#), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1848)

### Historical Background

The Declaration of Sentiments was a document signed by several members of a women's rights convention in 1848 (often referred to as the "Seneca Falls Convention"). The main author was activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Drawing on the Declaration of Independence, the document sought to explain women's grievances. It also sought to outline the rights women should be given in order for them to attain true equality with men. Modeled closely on Jefferson's 1776 Declaration, Stanton's document began with the bold assertion that "all men and women are created equal," directly connecting the women's rights movement to the nation's founding principles. It listed 18 grievances describing how laws and customs had denied women equality in education, employment, property ownership, and political participation. Among these, the most controversial demand was the call for women's suffrage—the right to vote—which helped launch the broader campaign for voting rights in the United States.

Co-organized by Stanton and [Lucretia Mott](#), the convention grew out of their shared frustration at being barred from participating fully in the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. The Seneca Falls Convention was attended by both women and men, including Frederick Douglass, and marked the formal beginning of the organized women's rights movement in America. By linking women's equality to the ideals of liberty and justice expressed in the Declaration of Independence, Stanton and her allies reframed the struggle for women's rights as part of the ongoing effort to fulfill America's founding promise.

**Consider these questions** as you read the text:

1. In what ways did the Declaration of Sentiments challenge the prevailing understanding of who possessed natural rights and was entitled to political participation in 19th-century America? What were the immediate and long-term impacts of this challenge?
2. How did the Declaration of Sentiments adapt the language and principles of the Declaration of Independence to advocate for women's rights? What specific "injuries and usurpations" did it highlight to demonstrate a denial of natural and political rights?
3. The denial of the "elective franchise" (her "inalienable right"), is repeated twice in the first 3 grievances. Why is this right placed above all others? In the original Declaration of Independence, the franchise is alluded to ("right of Representation in the Legislature," dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly," and "suspend our own Legislature"). But the denial of the franchise is driven home in the Declaration of Sentiments. Is the "entire disfranchisement" of women the most egregious offense against women's "most sacred rights"? Why or why not?

4. Thomas Jefferson included the pursuit of happiness in his list of natural rights. Consider that women at this time did not enjoy certain “inalienable rights”? Is having those rights respected essential to human happiness, regardless of gender?

### **Original Text**

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<sup>1</sup> 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 made 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....

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.

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.

...