

Why Power Up Women?

It was already quite warm in Seneca Falls at 11:00 in the morning on July 19, 1848. The sun shone brightly, rising ever higher in the sky. Beneath that bright blue sunlit sky, women were rising up – powering up – too. Elizabeth Cady Stanton stood resolutely on the steps of the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls and opened the first formal women’s rights convention in the United States. Stanton later recalled that moment as the launch of “the greatest rebellion the world has ever seen.”

The rebellion launched by Stanton in 1848 is not over. Indeed, the “third wave” of feminism is upon us. Strong, empowered women comprise this wave. These women define womanhood on their own terms, conforming to no single definition but agreeing that the goal of feminism remains achieving gender equality in a society currently dominated by patriarchy.

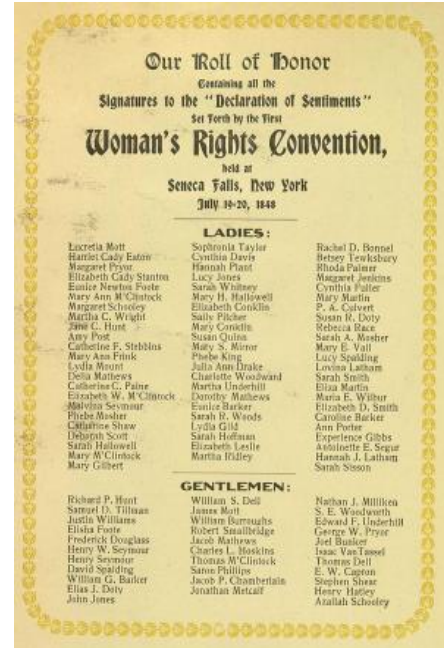
Declaring Equal Rights

It was once unthinkable to have a woman on a presidential ticket as a vice president, let alone as a presidential candidate. This was as unthinkable as having a Latino or African-American president. Yet, we currently have a black president and two declared female presidential candidates, one in each of the two major political parties. It is, therefore, no longer unthinkable to envision an egalitarian society.

At the Seneca Falls Convention, sixty-eight women and thirty-two men¹ declared:

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.

The women’s rights advocates at the Seneca Falls Convention modeled their declaration after the Declaration of Independence, demanding not only the right to vote, but demanding equality in every aspect of life, from politics to education to religion and morals.



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¹ The thirty-two men actually signed a separate list “in favor of the movement.”

While Seneca Falls was the first organized convention in the United States, it does not mark the start of the “movement” for equal rights. The movement, itself, can be seen in the reform movements of the 1830’s when some abolitionists and legal reformers argued for a woman’s right to speak out on moral and political issues.

These movements prepared women for the equal rights rebellion, as Stanton called it. They also brought men into the movement. Women’s rights arguments and ideals permeated the abolitionist and legal reform movements. Abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Sarah Grimké declared in 1838 that “whatever is *morally* right for a man to do, is *morally* right for a woman to do.”²

Sarah Grimké’s sister, Angelina, asked, somewhat provocatively:³

Are we aliens because we are women? Are we bereft of citizenship because we are the mothers, wives, and daughters of a mighty people?”

The Grimké sisters were among a larger group of women speaking out on women’s rights in the late 1830’s and early 1840’s. These women included Lucy Stone (lecturer, abolitionist, and organizer of the first national convention in 1850 on women’s rights) and Abby Kelley Foster (women’s rights advocate and abolitionist) who organized women’s anti-slavery fairs advancing both issues simultaneously.

After Seneca Falls, Sojourner Truth, Martha Wright, Frances E. W. Harper, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage and others became increasingly active in the women’s rights movement.

The Male Feminist

Men have long championed women’s rights. William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist, journalist and publisher of *The Liberator* was one of those men championing women’s rights alongside the early American suffragettes. Garrison submitted a series of seven resolutions to the members of the National Women’s Rights Convention held in Cleveland, Ohio in October, 1853. Garrison reprinted the resolutions entitled “[Women’s Rights](#)” in *The Liberator*, and among the resolutions was the following:

That those who deride the claim of woman to a full recognition of her civil rights and political equality, exhibit the spirit which tyrants and usurpers have displayed in all ages towards the mass of mankind—strike at the foundation of all truly free and

² Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838). Reprinted in Larry Ceplair, ed., *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Selected Writing, 1835-1839* (New York: Columbia University Press 1989), 246.

³ Angelina Grimké, *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 19

equitable government—contend for a sexual aristocracy, which is as irrational and unjust in principle, as that of wealth or hereditary descent—and show their appreciation of liberty to be wholly one-sided and supremely selfish.⁴

Engaging men in the “rebellion” is essential to its success not simply because men control the majority of power and influence in the United States, but because they are as necessary to the process of governance as women, whether that governance is in the form of public service, corporate service or civil service.

This is not a revolutionary or rebellious concept. It is, in fact, the very concept upon which our government was formed. The framers of our constitution borrowed from the experience of Native American people who believed in and lived in an egalitarian society.

Lost In Translation

Benjamin Franklin was a student and an admirer of the collection of Native American tribes known as the Six Nations or the Iroquois Confederacy. The six tribes comprising the Iroquois Confederacy are widely believed to be the oldest living *participatory* democracy on earth. Governance based on the consent of the people may well have started with the Iroquois Confederacy.

Franklin and Jefferson modeled the United States Constitution after the Great Law of Peace, Gayanashagowa.⁵ (Also sometimes referred to as the “Great Binding Law.”) The Great Law of Peace or the Constitution of the Iroquois Nations divides the government for the Iroquois Confederacy into a three-part system: executive, legislative and judicial branches. This should sound familiar to virtually every American primary school system.

Franklin and Jefferson, along with James Madison, made some significant alterations when “borrowing” from the Great Law of Peace.⁶ One of those important changes involved the role of women in government. It seems the importance of women’s roles in governance was lost in translation.

The core teaching of the Great Law of Peace is that peace is the law, and the law is for peace. The absence of a formal legal system reinforces this core tenant. And,

⁴ William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*, October 28, 1853. Reprinted in The Proceedings of the National Women’s Rights Convention Held at Cleveland, Ohio (Cleveland, OH., Geat, Beakdslet, Speab & Co., 1854), 65-66.

⁵ In 1987, evidence was submitted as testimony before the U.S. Senate in hearings on the origins of the Constitution. This was the first time in U.S. history that Congress officially recognized that the U.S. government was “explicitly modeled” after the Iroquois Confederacy. (Congressional Record, 1987).

⁶ Other significant changes include using an elective system or a representative democracy rather than a participatory democracy where direct citizen involvement is encouraged. Slavery was illegal under the Iroquois system and there were no taxes and no prisons. Wrongdoers were encouraged to make amends or be ostracized from the tribe. Equal rights for all was the law.

interestingly, the Iroquois Confederacy looked to women first to enforce this tenant. For instance, if a Confederate Lord (leader) failed to attend to his responsibilities as a Lord:

[T]he other Lords of the Nation of which he is a member shall require their War Chief to request the female sponsors of the Lord so guilty of defection to demand his attendance of the Council. If he refuses, the women holding the title shall immediately select another candidate for the title.

Indeed, the Iroquois Constitution vested the right of selecting Council Lords with women. The right of “bestowing the title” was matrilineal – it passed through the women of the family. Accordingly, women held in trust the title to the land and the property in their homes.

Women not only nominated tribal leaders and war chiefs, but also had the power to impeach any chief who violated the Great Law of Peace or the dignity of leadership. The Women’s Council of the Iroquois Confederacy was effectively our Supreme Court and judicial branch of government empowered with important veto power, including the right to veto a decision to go to war. War Chiefs could not go to war if the Women’s Council did not agree.

Because You Are Woman

Why did the Iroquois Confederacy invest such power in women?

Women deserve 90 percent of the credit in raising the children. Oh, we men do a little. We might change a diaper or two, but in the middle of the night, when a baby cries and we men are sound asleep, momma gets up and rocks the babies back to sleep. The mothers watch the children carefully as they are growing up. The ones who are kind, unselfish, and always helping others are considered for future leadership positions. Honesty is the first requirement for leadership. (Mohawk Bear Clan Chief Tom Porter, 1986)

Iroquois women were vested with this power because of their womanhood – not in spite of it. Iroquois women choose the leaders “because they devote the most time to raising the babies.” Women have veto power over war “because they give birth and respect the sanctity of life in a special way.” Land title is passed down through the women “because one always knows for certain who the mother is.” It is their womanhood that makes them powerful.⁷

⁷ *The Constitution of the Five Nations or the Iroquois Book of the Great Law*. Albany: New York State Museum.; Porter, Tom. 1986. Personal communication.; Schaaf, Gregory, and Chief Jake Swamp. 2004. *The U.S. Constitution and the Great Law of Peace*. Santa Fe, NM: CIAC Press.

Our Next Seven Generations

The Great Law of Peace provides that in:

“every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”

In the minds and hearts of the people of the Iroquois Confederacy, women held a unique power and responsibility. Because of their ability to create and sustain life, women’s perspective enable them to appreciate the importance of decisions that will impact the next seven generations.

Perhaps it is time to look back and understand our own history so that we can move forward in a more deliberate and thoughtful way. We see the power of women in modern day. In 2013, Senator Susan Collins (R., Maine) spearheaded a group of female Senators from both sides of the aisle to end the gridlock in Washington, evidenced by the Senate shutdown. After being shot at on her way to school, Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan became an advocate for girls’ education and the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate.

Women are a powerful force. Women achievers can be leaders. Men can empower women achievers to become leaders. Men and women can recognize their unconscious bias and embrace a broader vision for the capabilities of all genders – and in so doing create a world worthy of the next seven generations.

Abstract Summary

- Can women achievers become leaders?
- Why is it important to increase the percentage of women leaders in the United States and the world?
- What is the responsibility of men to advance women?

These are not just abstract questions. These are the very questions facing men and women today in business, government and civil society. With two women officially running for president in the United States, the question of a “woman’s fitness” to lead the most powerful country on the planet is certain to come up. As citizens, men and women have a shared responsibility to explore these questions and to answer them with an open mind, an open heart, and with the next seven generations foremost in their thoughts.

Won’t you join the conversation?

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