

## 1998 Declaration of Sentiments

### Preamble

We gather on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Sentiments issued by the first U.S. women's rights convention in Seneca Falls to reaffirm and advance its basic human rights principles. The Declaration, patterned after the Declaration of Independence, described the legal, social, and economic liabilities under which women lived in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century asserting, "A history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward woman."

While women have made many advances over the past one and one half centuries, equality has not yet been achieved. For example, the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution first proposed 75 years ago has not yet been ratified. The persistence of entrenched patterns of sex discrimination, poverty, political exclusion, and violence against women in many forms in the United States and around the world should outrage women and men alike on the eve of the new millennium.

The year 1998 is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a United Nations document setting forth fundamental human rights for all, signed by the United States and all member states in 1948. The document affirms everyone's entitlement to civil, economic, political and social rights, "without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

Today women around the world are demanding that women's rights be defended as human rights and that governments, private institutions, and communities be held accountable for promoting and upholding the human rights of all. We pledge to work to achieve worldwide realization of equal human rights for women, men and children of all races and nations.

In linking these two important anniversaries, we add our voices as U.S. women to those of other women in this country and around the world who are seeking to realize equality and human rights for all. Further, we affirm previous programs of action for women's rights, noting in particular the National Plan of Action from the National Women's Conference held in Houston, Texas, in 1977 and the International Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in 1995. It is essential that our government work vigorously to implement these platforms and that the United States Senate ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

We note with alarm trends at the end of this century that tend to undermine the human rights of women and men. Without sufficient enforcement of human rights standards, the globalization of the economy has worsened the marginal

existence of hundreds of millions of women. The growing economic inequality within and between countries threatens our peaceful co-existence. The continuing escalation of war and civil strife and the violence practiced against women destroy lives and turn large numbers of women and children into refugees. The neglect and pillage of the environment and disregard for the resources necessary for sustainable development diminish lives today and for future generations. The growing global market trafficking in women and children for sexual and economic exploitation demeans and destroys countless lives.

Further, women throughout the world face growing backlash and fundamentalist forces determined to deny our claims to the human rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Women everywhere are seeking to counter these trends and to create societies with justice and equality for all. Nevertheless, we are often separated from one another by the persistence of racism, homophobia, ethnic, class and other divisions in the world which produce inequality among women. We will not trade off the rights of one woman for the advancement of another. We commit ourselves to respecting women's diversity and finding common ground by working to end all forms of discrimination women face based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, religion, culture, age, sexual orientation, disability, class, childbearing choices or marital status.

We also celebrate the contributions of women to political and civic life, our economy and our communities. The values and leadership of women are changing businesses and governmental policy as well as daily life. Democracy thrives when women have full and equal representation in all decision-making. Families thrive when women and men share the responsibilities and joys of family life. Times have changed. Women in the United States are now the majority of voters, almost half the workforce and the driving force behind the growth of small business. Policies and institutions have not kept pace.

We see it as the responsibility of women and men to create the changes necessary to advance the human rights of all. As U.S. women, we acknowledge our challenge and obligation to work against injustice and for human rights at home and wherever U.S. policy and institutions impinge on the lives of others around the world.

We pledge to uphold the principles of the Seneca Fall Declaration of Sentiments and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to seek policies that embody these principles. We build upon a global women's movement which has reached into every corner of our country and consciousness and which gains strength from women's diversity. Further, we commit ourselves to extending the promise of this movement to new generations.

Just as women's lives and roles are seamless, so the following areas of concern are interrelated and the actions proposed are only some of those needed to move this agenda forward. Bearing these principles in mind, we call for bold actions and legislation at all levels to transform our society to assure equality and human rights for the girls and women of the next millennium. As for foremothers and forefathers in Seneca Falls pledged to achieve equality, so we the women of Forum 98, pledge our individual and collective efforts to the achievement of these goals.

### **Women Take Leadership**

On the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we envision a world with new leadership reflecting the rich variety and diversity of people in our communities, our country and around the globe - a world in which compassion and caring, human rights, social justice, and economic equity are central values.

We affirm that women have a fundamental human right and responsibility to full political participation and leadership to create an inclusive, humane, and just society. Decision-makers must be representative of the gender and racial composition of the population.

### **Shaping a better world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century includes:**

- Teaching respect for human diversity, in all its forms;
- Building a viable and just economy based on environmentally sensitive and sustainable development;
- Ending poverty and eliminating economic disparities and inequitable access to resources;
- Creating a culture of peace and rejecting the glorification of war and violence;
- Eliminating violence against women and children;
- Ending the use of religion to subjugate and control women;
- Providing quality health care and educational opportunity for all;
- Ensuring that technology serves and does not dehumanize women.

The grand dream of democracy can be realized only when women and men share leadership in all the institutions of our society. To this end, we call for:

- Equal representation of women in public office;
- Institutional and structural changes to remove the barriers to equal power;
- Support for statutory and constitutional equality for women;
- Dramatically curtailing the power of money in electoral politics;
- Open and accountable decision making in all public forums;
- Education of girls and young women to gain leadership and power;
- Concerted public education to stimulate citizen participation in politics;

- Public laws and budgets constructed and evaluated in terms of gender impact;
- Increased competition and decentralization of ownership and power over all communication systems accompanied by increased access for women and other under-represented groups;
- Empowerment of women and girls to design and master new and emerging technologies.

## **Women in an Equitable and Productive Economy**

In recognition of economic rights as human rights, we call for the creation of an economically just society that embraces the full participation of women in every aspect of economic life and requires that all employers provide living wages, decent and equitable working conditions, and equal respect for women and men.

In addition to their jobs, all workers also have responsibility to care for others. Employers, government and society at large must recognize this reality. Policies and work places must be transformed to allow workers to meet these caretaking responsibilities. Job-protected family leaves must be expanded and paid; the United States is virtually alone among the industrialized nations in not providing paid leave for family care. Expanded or alternate work options must be available without penalty in pay, benefits, and advancement.

All people are entitled to a quality public education, from early childhood through higher education. Public education is the foundation of a democratic society and the key to a productive economy. Women and girls have the right to a discrimination-free educational environment, training that maximizes their ability to contribute to the economy and society, and equal access to scientific and technical knowledge which will prepare them for the occupations of the future.

We deplore the growing disparity between the rich and the poor and between the exorbitant pay of CEO's and the low value of the minimum wage in the United States. We affirm our connection to women as workers around the globe and our responsibility to eliminate exploitative practices that arise from the U.S. consumer economy and the excessive profits generated by U.S.-based multi-national corporations. We affirm women's initiatives in creating alternative economic systems and structures.

Both the workforce and the economy are changing as new technologies emerge. We call for these opportunities to be used to maximize women's potential rather than marginalize women as contingent workers with little security, low pay and minimal benefits. Women must be equal participants in economic decision making at all levels, from local community development organizations to global institutions.

**We seek to transform the economy and workplaces so that women's basic rights are affirmed including the following:**

- Freedom from discrimination in hiring, pay, benefits and advancement;
- Equal pay for work of equal value;
- Work and educational environments free of violence and sexual harassment, and sex stereotyping that narrows women's choices to a limited range of lower paid occupations;
- Access to public information about the employment practices of all employers, such as statistics on wages, hours, and representation of women in job categories both in relation to men and disaggregated by race and ethnicity;
- The right to organize collectively and be proportionately represented in the leadership of labor unions;
- Equal representation in senior management and on the Boards of Directors of corporations and businesses;
- The opportunity to own and develop their own businesses and to have equal access to capital, credit, government contracts and business assistance programs;
- A secure, adequate and equitable retirement income;
- An adequate safety net for those unable to work; and
- Taxation that is fair to women.

**Women in a Just and Caring Society**

We affirm women's and girls' fundamental human right to full recognition of and respect for bodily integrity and reproductive self-determination. This includes:

- Freedom from violence, sexual abuse, and rape;
- Freedom from coerced pregnancy, with protection for the right to safe abortion and safe birth control;
- Freedom from forced sterilization and genital and other forms of bodily mutilation;
- Freedom from harassment based on gender or sexuality at all ages;
- Right to health education and quality and affordable health care, including preventive, reproductive, prenatal, well-baby, and elder care;
- Right to determine one's own medical treatment;
- Right to physical development and full participation in athletics;
- Right to develop a healthy bodily self-image;
- Right to sexual self-determination.

We affirm women's fundamental human right to form families and mutual consensual adult intimate relationships. Women also have the right not to enter into relationships and not be penalized or disadvantaged because of this choice. Public policy as well as religious and societal institutions should respect and

support women's diverse personal relationships, including their right to dissolve such partnerships equitably and with the protection of children's security.

People have the basic human right to receive care throughout their life course to ensure that fundamental needs are met. We affirm that participating in nurturing and caring – as parents, adult children, partners and others – is an integral and joyful part of what makes us human. We also affirm that providing care is the most valuable and important societal work, is indispensable and central in a compassionate society, and is one which men and women should share fully.

The above principles demand new policies. Governments, private institutions, and the community at large have the responsibility to provide affordable, quality child and elder care, and early childhood education; to ensure that all who need it receive appropriate care; and to assure the safety and well-being of those requiring care. Moreover, all providers, including parents and other family members who choose to provide care for children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities or long-term illnesses, should be economically supported or fairly compensated and not be discriminated against in social security, pensions, health care benefits, employment, and tax policy. Income level should, therefore, not be an impediment to anyone's choice to provide care.

As concerned women, we commit ourselves to stand together on these issues. We recognize and respect the diverse choices and circumstances women face throughout their lives. Therefore, we will not be divided nor exploit each other in our intimate, relational, and caring lives.