

Notes for Participants, National Forensic League's Lincoln-Douglas Debate on Feminism and Gender Equality

Topic: "Resolved: The Pursuit of Feminist Ideals is Detrimental to the Achievement of Gender Equality"

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"There are naturally ruling elements and elements naturally ruled. The rule of free men over slaves is one such rule and the rule of male over female is another."

—Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C., Renford Bambrough, ed. *Philosophy of Aristotle*, Mentor, 1963, 387.

"When men imagine a female uprising, they imagine a world in which women rule men as men have ruled women."

—Sally Kempton, "Cutting Loose," *Esquire*, July, 1970.

"In reading recent books on women's history, I notice that it is the fashion, particularly among academic historians and literary historians, to disclaim any notion of male conspiracy in the oppression of women. It seems to be incumbent upon the author to say that readers who gain from the book the impression that men as a group have done something unpleasant to women as a group are entirely mistaken, for the author never intended any such thing. 'For my part,' I must say with William Lloyd Garrison, 'I am not prepared to respect that philosophy. I believe in sin, therefore in a sinner; in theft, therefore in a thief; in slavery, therefore in a slaveholder; in wrong, therefore in a wrongdoer; and unless the men of this nation are made by women to see that they have been guilty of usurpation, and cruel usurpation, I believe very little progress will be made.' If this book leaves the impression that men have conspired to keep women down, that is exactly the impression I mean to convey; for I believe that men could not have succeeded as well as they have without concerted effort."

—Ann Jones, Foreword to *Women Who Kill*, Fawcett, 1981, xvii.

1. FACT : Men are on average taller and heavier than women.

Does might make right? It is a basic premise of a constitutional democracy that law must prevent unbridled use of individual or group power—physical, economic, or ideological—over less powerful individuals or groups.

Whether men, as a physically more powerful class, will allow this principle to apply to women, as a physically less powerful class, is a question that arose at the beginning of this country when Founding Father John Adams was urged by his wife Abigail in 1776 to create a constitution that would acknowledge women's right to equal protection of the law and thus end the English common law practice of subordinating women to the authority of male relatives. On behalf of women, Abigail Adams wrote:

"In your new code of laws ...put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity."
—*The Feminist Papers*, Alice Rossi, ed. Northeastern Press, 1988, 10.

John Adams's chilling response remains the basis of women's status under the United States Constitution to the present day:

"Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our Masculine systems."
—*Ibid.*, 11.

[Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#)'s feminist response to this fact of constitutional law was included in resolutions approved by the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights:

RESOLVED, That the women of this country ought to be enlightened in regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer publish their degradation by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance, by asserting that they have all the rights they want."

—Elizabeth C. Stanton, [Susan B. Anthony](#), Matilda J. Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, 1888 in Judith Papachristou, *Women Together*, Knopf, 1976, 25.

It is a measure of the power of "masculine systems" to distort and suppress feminist discourse (and thus to block effective use of the only right women have

that is recognized by the Constitution, their right to vote) that this [Seneca Falls resolution](#) has such relevance to the current topic of the National Forensic League's "Lincoln-Douglas" debates. *Are the constitutional rights of any class of citizens except women still open to debate?*

2. What is feminism?

FEMINISM is the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. 2. organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. — [Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary](#), 1980.

FEMINISM is the logical response to sexism; it exists because sexism exists. FEMINISM is "the radical notion that women are people." n.a.

FEMINISM: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is —I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat."
—Rebecca West, *The Clarion*, 1913.

3. What is "gender"?

Aside from its grammatical meaning, it seems to be a euphemism for sex specification and the social meanings imposed on it. How can we tell what "gender" someone is? We look at them. It is impossible to discuss "gender" issues without reference to stereotyping people according to biological sex identification.

Legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon sees defining of "gender difference" as an expression of power:

"Our issue is not the gender difference, but the difference gender makes, the social meaning imposed on our bodies."
—Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Harvard U. Press, 1989, 23.

4. What is "gender equality"?

As the above definition suggests, it is "the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes."

"I recognize no rights but human rights—I know nothing of men's rights and women's rights."

—Angelina Grimke, "Letters to Catherine Beecher," 1836, in Alice Rossi, ed. *The Feminist Papers*, Northeastern Press, 1988, 322.

"I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks."

—Sarah Grimke, Letter II, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*, 1838, in Judith Papachristou, *Women Together*, Knopf, 1976, 13.

Some people are so used to unequal treatment of women that they think "sex equality" is an oxymoron. Asked if he was complying with [Title IX](#), a federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education, a grade-school principal replied, "Yes. The girls are almost as equal as the boys."

Some men practice "patriarchal reversal," convincing themselves that:

"Feminists don't want to be equal, they want to be superior. They want equality only when it benefits them, not when it hurts them."
—Letter to the editor, *Philadelphia Daily News* (9/6/94). The writer cites the military draft and car insurance rates as examples of disparate burdens on men, both of which in fact inflict significant costs on women.

Ernestine Rose, an outstanding nineteenth century orator described her door-to-door campaign to gather signatures on the first petition for a married women's property law in New York state:

"After a good deal of trouble, I obtained five signatures. Some of the ladies said the gentlemen would laugh at them; others, that they had rights enough; and the men said the women had too many rights already."

—Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, Harvard Press, 1959, 65.

Note that many men continue to think that "gender equality" means women having "too many rights already."

Because sexism is the status quo, some people like to think that equality means different-but-equal, the "two spheres" model.

"Nature destined woman to be the home maker...while man is the moneymaker."

—Rep. Webb, floor debate on the 19th Amendment, *Congr. Record*, Vol. 52, Part 2, 63rd Congress, 3rd Session, January 12, 1915, 1421.

But women reject gender roles as innately oppressive:

"Women feel just as men feel. They need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts just as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer."

—Charlotte Bronte. *Jane Eyre* (1847). Penguin, 1984.

5. Is equality bad for women?

The resolution claims that "the pursuit of feminist ideals is detrimental to the achievement of gender equality." Since the feminist ideal is achievement of gender equality, this resolution must be saying that feminism causes sex discrimination. Haven't we heard this song before?

In any society, those privileged by the status quo have always resisted change by threatening that advocates for change "will be the first to be hurt by it," that it "would do more harm than good," and that the intended beneficiaries of change "don't want it."

"We recognize the sinister nature and far-reaching dangers of the Equal Rights Amendment to our American way of life, since it would destroy the family unit and be detrimental to women's rights as we know them."

—Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, October 28, 1975.

"Woman has her own ultimate status as the mother of men, the exemplar and expounder of all noble, moral and spiritual gifts. If you give her besides the uttermost gift of man, his power to rule, you destroy the equality between them."

—Illinois Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, *Chicago Record-Herald*, May 17, 1911.

6. By blaming sexism on feminists instead of on men, the Resolution tries to discredit "organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests," i.e. feminism. (see definition at 2.)

"What has made women unhappy in the last decade is not their 'equality'—which they don't yet have—but the rising pressure to halt, and even reverse, women's quest for that equality."

—Susan Faludi. "Blame it on Feminism," *Mother Jones*, Sept/Oct 1991, 27; repr. as Introd. in *Backlash*, 1991.

But if feminist activity is "detrimental to gender equality," then we must conclude that the American Revolution was detrimental to achieving liberty from British rule. Were the efforts of 19th century abolitionists detrimental to achieving an end to slavery? Was the Suffrage campaign detrimental to winning recognition of women's right to vote? Were the actions of [Martin Luther King](#) detrimental to advancing the civil rights of black people? Was Nelson Mandela's pursuit of the ideal of racial equality detrimental to ending apartheid in South Africa?

Feminist Sonia Johnson asked, "Who but women would be told that it's o.k. to talk about your oppression, but not o.k. to organize to end it?"

7. Does the Resolution suggest that "gender equality" is already achieved?

Here are some criteria for "gender equality":

- Legal: Is sex discrimination prohibited by the U. S. Constitution? No. On three key occasions, men excluded women as a class from the benefits guaranteed to male citizens by the [United States Constitution](#)—when it was drafted (1776- 87), when it was amended after the Civil War (1868), and when adoption of the [Equal Rights Amendment](#) was denied in 1982. Laws made, adjudicated, and selectively enforced can continue to privilege men at women's expense until the Constitution is amended to explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. History and government textbooks generally omit the fact that American men have refused for over 200 years to acknowledge women's right to equal protection of the law. Censorship by private or institutional power is just as damaging as censorship done by the state, and even less accountable to the victims of it.
- Political: Are women represented as policymakers in proportion to their presence as 50% of the population? No. Women are numerically underrepresented in policy-making positions in all American institutions of government, education, communication, and business.
- Economic: Who makes more money? Men pay women less than they pay themselves for their work; much paid work is sex-segregated, with sexual

harassment only one of the methods used to protect men from having to compete on their own merits for position and advancement; most domestic work is done by women, is unpaid, and has no guaranteed benefits or time limitations—in effect, homemakers work for tips.

- Security: Who is safer, men or women? Women are at far greater risk of violence from men than men are at risk of violence from women. No woman is as free as any man to walk out of the house alone at night, a serious limitation on women's freedom of movement. Rape, violence done by men to women in their homes, and sexual abuse of girl children are commonplace. Because systems of unequal power and control can only be maintained by the threat or reality of violence, sex inequality promotes violence by men against women.
- Status: The meanest insult to a man is to caricature him as a woman. Every occupation associated with women is a subject for jokes. Terrorism and intimidation of women by men is presented as entertainment. Objectification and subordination of women is eroticized in advertising, art, and entertainment media. Harassment of girls by boys at school is frequent and trivialized.

8. Who opposes gender equality and why?

Because the status quo of sex inequality privileges men at women's expense, many men oppose "the achievement of gender equality."

"The generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal."

—John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1868.

"One thing appears certain—if woman neglects the work which has been given her to do, there is no one to perform it."

—E.H. Chapin, *Duties of Young Women*, Boston, 1848, 15.

Women rightly resist exploitation of their labor as "women's work."

"Leave women, then, to find their sphere. And do not tell us before we are even born that our province is to cook dinners, darn stockings, and sew on buttons."

—Lucy Stone, 1855. Miriam Gurko, *The Ladies of Seneca Falls*, 1976, 122.

9. How is sex inequality defended?

The defense of inequality relies on selective emphasis on "differences" between men and women. Differences are validated when they advantage men and ignored when they don't, e.g. the obligation to pay taxes.

"Women are not built on the masculine plan. Sex makes men and women unlike and unequal."

—John J. Vertrees, *An Address to the Men of Tennessee on Female Suffrage*, 1918.

"Use the draft for an excuse if you like. Use women's work rules for an excuse if you like. Use homesteading. Use child care. Use anything else. But what we are simply doing is in our own little way trying to maintain to ourselves the right to declare a difference between human beings."

—Rep. Stewart McKinney (Conn.), characterizing anti-ERA arguments during Congressional debate on the Equal Rights Amendment, *Congressional Record*, October 12, 1971, H9371.

Pregnancy, a condition unique to women, is particularly targeted for discrimination against women without risk to men. Harassment about abortion, for example, never involves imposing restrictions on men's fertility, the primary source of the need for abortion.

10. How is sex inequality imposed on women?

Since sex differences are said to represent decrees of God and Nature, women's demands for equal status and treatment can be condemned as sinful and unnatural. As institutions speaking for men, the pulpit, the printing press, the courts and the academy never tire of proclaiming that: REAL WOMEN DON'T WANT EQUALITY. Women are strongly encouraged to agree with this idea—or else.

"It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head."

—Sally Kempton, "Cutting Loose," *Esquire*, July, 1970.

Opponents of women's equality also argue that women are as equal as they need to be and can only hurt this pleasant status quo by "pursuit of feminist ideals." Press reports on the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, reacted angrily to the convention resolution "that woman is man's equal":

"Every true hearted female will instantly feel that this is unwomanly" and would "prove a monstrous injury to all mankind...productive of no positive good that would not be outweighed by positive evil [and] would alter the relations of females without bettering their condition."
—(Albany NY) *Mechanics Advocate*. quoted in Eliz. C. Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda J. Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, 1881, 802-5, Judith Papachristou, *Women Together*, Knopf, 1976, 27-28.

"A woman is nobody. A wife is everything. A pretty girl is equal to ten thousand men, and a mother is, next to God, all powerful. The ladies of Philadelphia, therefore,...are resolved to maintain their rights as Wives, Belles, Virgins, and Mothers, and not as Women."
—(Philadelphia PA) *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, Stanton, op. cit., 803

"Woman has been created for a different sphere, or rather hemisphere, than man, to which do not belong the troubled elements of commercial, legislative, and political life. I do not say that she has no right to mingle among them; but I do say that, as a general thing, no one who feels the true dignity and mission of her womanhood wishes to mingle there."
—E.H. Chapin, *Duties of Young Women*, Boston, 1848, 12.

Note that confinement to the domestic sphere keeps women economically dependent on men:

"The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life. The constitution of the family organization, which is founded on the divine ordinance, as well as in the nature of things, indicates the domestic sphere as that which properly belongs to the domain and functions of womanhood."
—U.S. Supreme Court, *Bradwell v. Illinois* (1873), denying Myra Bradwell's 14th Amendment right to practice law.

A second defense is the "sex discrimination was invented to benefit women" ploy, claiming that women would be hurt by equality, and are benefited by so-called "benign discrimination" such as exemption from military combat (but not from rapists on jogging paths or parking lots at night) The combat exemption is then used to deny women's right to full citizenship and equal protection of the law.

A third defense of "gender inequality," is to admit that women's situation may not be quite perfect, while insisting that any remedy proposed by feminists would be the wrong one:

"This change...presents no remedy for the real evils that the millions of hard-working and much suffering women of our country groan under and seek to redress."

—(Albany NY) *Mechanics Advocate*, 1848, Stanton, op. cit., 803.

ABOUT DEBATING AND EQUALITY: 11. Was Lucy Stone's pursuit of her right to be a debater detrimental to gender equality?

As a young woman, suffrage leader Lucy Stone had to fight poverty and her father's disapproval to attend [Oberlin College](#) in the 1840's. Although Oberlin was the first college to admit both women and black students, women were not allowed equal status with men. Stone, who intended to become a professional public speaker, studied rhetoric but was barred from participating in weekly debate sessions because school policy did not allow men and women speakers to share the same platform. She fought against the school's discriminatory policies, even refusing the honor of writing a commencement speech because a faculty member would present it on her behalf, while men graduates would present their own speeches. Alerted to this injustice by Stone's eloquent feminist advocacy, some men students declined to read their own speeches at Commencement.

—Miriam Gurko, *The Ladies of Seneca Falls*, Schocken, 1976, 132.

12. John Quincy Adams, the son of John Adams, as a Massachusetts state Representative and former president of the United States, favored discussion of anti-slavery petitions and free debate, as well as defending the right of women to participate in political activities. "Using examples from religious and ancient history to demonstrate the importance of women's political contributions in the past, Adams advocated an active public role for women in an epic speech against the annexation of Texas that he delivered between June 16 and July 7, 1838."

—Judith Papachristou, *Women Together*, Knopf, 1976, 12.

13. See also: Catharine A. MacKinnon. "Not by Law Alone: From a Debate With Phyllis Schlafly (1982)," *Feminism Unmodified*, Harvard U. Press, 1987, 21. The function of Mrs. Schlafly, Camille Paglia, and other handmaidens to misogyny is to allow men to misrepresent the fight for women's rights as merely a cat fight between women. Collaborating with the oppressor has always been a reliable strategy for steady employment. 14. The power of the press to trivialize

women's fight for equality is indicated by titles of many publications on women's history, such as Oliver Jenson's *The Revolt of American Women: A Pictorial History of the Century of Change from Bloomers to Bikinis—From Feminism to Freud*, Harcourt Brace, 1952.

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