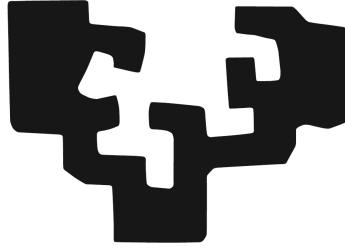


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END OF DEGREE PROJECT

**THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE  
UNITED STATES:**

**THE SENECA FALLS CONVENTION**

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Abstract:

In the 19th century, women had very limited or almost nonexistent rights. They lived in a male dominated world where they had restricted access to many fields and they were considered to be an ornament of their husband in public life, and as a domestic agent to the interior of the family, as the Spanish contemporary expression *ángel del hogar* denotes. In the eyes of the law, they were civilly dead. They were considered fragile and delicate, because they were dependent on a man from birth to death. Tired of being considered less than their male companions, a women's rights movement emerged in the small town of Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Women gathered for the first time in history at the Wesleyan Chapel to discuss women's rights and to find a solution to the denigration they had suffered by men and society during the years. Around 300 people gathered in Seneca Falls, both men and women. As an attempt to amend the wrongs of men, these women created the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*, a document based on the Declaration of Independence, expressing their discontent with how the society had treated them and asking for a change and equal rights, among which there was the right for suffrage. These women based their ideas on previous feminist influences, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges. In fact, de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* resembles to the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* created 57 years later by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Nonetheless, it was not until the 19th Amendment passed in 1920 that the United States finally granted the right to vote to women.

Key words: suffrage, women's rights, Seneca Falls, Declaration of Sentiments

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## 1. Introduction

The United States has always been known for being "the land of the free", the place where people go to find opportunities, and where everything is possible. A country whose most iconic landmark is the Statue of Liberty, a universal representation of freedom, hope, and opportunity. Yet, how is it possible that a country claiming to be liberal since its foundation has always restricted rights only to a small number of privileged ones?

Female figures have represented The United States for a while now, considered iconic symbols of the culture. For instance, Columbia herself, the goddess of America, "was seen as an embodiment of the United States"<sup>1</sup> next to Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom, often worshiped by emancipated slaves since she also represents "freedom from oppression".<sup>2</sup>

The point I want to make is, how is it possible that when we think about the US, all we associate to it are words like liberty, hope, or possibilities? Nobody would ever dare to think there is any kind of discrimination towards any American citizen. However, the reality is far different from the truth. There was a time when everything that was either different, unorthodox, female or black was regarded as something against the values and beliefs of the government.

Women or black people should have never had to fight for their rights. The American Constitution was never written with the intention to segregate people; it never explicitly said that those rights were restricted to a specific group. In fact, it just says that "all men are created equal", meaning that those rights apply for any person who is a citizen of the United States of America. The question is that this sentence, usually read from a universalistic point of view, could be interpreted from different perspectives and in this case, should maybe be interpreted contextually, not as an assumption of discrimination towards women from the idea of rights and liberties.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue\\_of\\_Liberty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Liberty)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.howtallisthestatueofliberty.org/what-does-the-statue-of-liberty-represent/>

Women have been fighting for equality for centuries. My research will focus on the beginnings of the Women's Rights Movement in the United States with a central focus on the Seneca Falls Convention, where everything started, thanks to a group of courageous women who decided it was about time to take action and do something about the inequalities they suffered.

In order to offer an account of the origins of the feminist discourse in America I will first discuss the context in which Seneca Falls convention developed and women's situation at that time. Then I will carry on by talking about Seneca Falls Convention itself; what happened, and the powerful text that it created demanding equal rights for women. Finally, there will be a conclusion discussing how this event is connected to the beginnings of the Women's Rights Movement before 1848 and how it continued to develop afterwards.

In the 19th century, women were never considered equal to men; they were considered like a dependent being, an ornament, but never as people who could stand for themselves. Women from birth to marriage were always subjected to a man: when they were young, to their father, and when they got married, to their husband. "A woman forfeits her Independence forever when she embraces matrimony" (McMillen, 2008, p.15), once a woman was married, she was bounded to submission for the rest of her life. When a couple married, they were one person to the eyes of the law, "the legal existence of the woman is suspended ... or... incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" (McMillen, 2008, p.19). A woman lost the very few rights and possessions she had because they were transferred directly to her husband. He even controlled her wages or any money she may have. She could never sign a contract under her name nor claim child custody.

According to McMillen, the situation of a woman in the antebellum America of the 19th century was the following: they were considered in a lower status than men, their place was at the house, "unfit to operate as political beings and unable to enjoy the benefits of citizenship", very few women acquired education, obtained a well paid job or pursued a career. Instead, they were expected to get married, reproduce, raise a family, create a comfortable home, and find fulfillment through her family (2008, p.13). I am convinced

women like Lucy Stone or Susan B. Anthony so much agreed with these goals for a women's life... Is that really the only thing a woman can aspire to? They agreed or disagreed?

At that time it was unthinkable to do anything that went against the beliefs of the society because "law, religion and custom affirmed the inferiority of women and their duty to remain in silence and subjection" (Stone Blackwell, 1930, p7) and if such institutions reinforced that the woman's place was at home and that she needed to be submissive, that was what it was.

Back in time, men were supposed to engage in issues relating to the state and the world while women were meant to stay at home taking care of the house and family. There was no way a woman could speak her mind in public or else, she would be ridiculed. Moreover, "religion reinforced women's inferior status" (McMillen, 2008, p.18). The religious world idealized a woman that was "virtuous, pious, obedient, and submissive but, at the same time, strong and hard-working" (McMillen, 2008, p.18), in other words, the stereotype of what a "good wife" is. In other words, the public sphere was strictly reserved for men while women were supposed to be referred exclusively to the private, domestic space. A connection with the ancient world could be traced where the *Agora* used to be the public square where politics took place, and which it could only be accessed by men; and the *Oikos*, the domestic, private space dedicated to the family. For both, clear gender distinctions apply.

Hence, why would someone, who is earning a Translation and Interpreting degree, choose a topic like this to write about instead of preparing something translation-related? History has always been quite fascinating to me; I have always loved ancient history, Greece, the Roman Empire, Egypt... However, women's rights are a more contemporary issue, although it goes back for centuries. What pushed me, or in other words, what encouraged me and inspired me to focus on this topic is the situation women are living in the world right now. With women being killed almost every day and seeing that more and more women are taking part in protests, marches, becoming empowered and speaking their minds fearlessly, I thought it would be interesting to do research on this topic and see where everything started and to whom we owe the rights women have today.

## 2. The Seneca Falls Convention

### 2.1. Historical background

It is a fact that women started to fight for equal rights earlier than the Seneca Falls Convention was held. In the old times, Native American women were the chiefs of their tribes. Moreover, during the Civil War, women took charge of the men's duties while they were in combat. Nevertheless, the first sparks of this powerful movement started at some point between 1790 and 1840, the last one being identified as the "take off" of the women's rights movement.

Even if the effects of industrialization were more evident in the last decades of the century, by mid-nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution began making many Americans leave rural life to move into the cities seeking job opportunities in the new industries. Many farms had to close with the arrival of industries and machine produced goods.

The American Industrial Revolution had a huge impact in women's lives. Their lives shifted dramatically because not only did they work at home producing goods for the family and took care of the farm and children, but they also worked in textile factories and coal mines. The economy and the family needs changed, so women worked to help support the home economy. However, in spite of working long shifts, women were paid half of the salary a man received for the same task and they had to cope with discriminatory behaviors at the workplace. "Wages women earned were well below what men were paid for the same work. She could never ascend to a position of responsibility or one in which she supervised male employees" (McMillen, 2008, p. 31). They had to face the glass ceiling that would never let them escalate on the social ladder.

Another factor that had an impact on the views about women's rights was the implementation of democracy in the United States. The USA is a democratic country, which means that the power to elect the government lies on its people. So if one thinks about it, based on this principle, who decided women could not have the right to vote and that they needed to subordinate to men? According to Tocqueville, it is a question related to the morals that the people in the United States have.

As mentioned at the beginning of the essay, the American Constitution never affirmed that all the rights included in it could explicitly be applied to men, in fact, it begins by saying “we the people of America” and people could be used to refer to a man as well as a woman as long as they are citizens of the country. However, when it comes to the rights of the citizens, the American Constitution makes a clear distinction between both genders by making sole references to men. John Adam’s wife, Abigail Smith Adams, after seeing this, wrote to her husband noting that women were being excluded from their political rights. Significantly, John Adams, one of the fathers of the Constitution, replied by saying that granting women political rights would be like granting them to slaves.

The US is a country that is very attached to religion, and that is the reason why they are probably so conservative and orthodox. Tocqueville argues that “Christianity has kept a strong hold over the minds of Americans, and ... its power is not just that of a philosophy which has been examined and accepted, but that of a religion believed without discussion” (Tocqueville, 1990, p.229). In other words, all that is kept in the Bible is an absolute truth that cannot be contradicted, so if the Bible says that a woman should submit to her husband, it is “perfectly acceptable”.

The 19th century American society was one of the most dynamic societies in the western world. They counted with a very active and innovating industry and agriculture. Therefore they were used to change. The country not only was developing in industry and agriculture, but also in political terms. However, they were very conservative in social terms, since they did not permit changes in social structures like slavery. To my understanding, Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville, 1990, pp. 228) fears what the failure of democracy could cause. He anticipates that one of the drawbacks of democracy is that it could cause Americans to be reluctant to make changes or accept new ideas, because it would be easier for them to just accept what is already written than having to explore new points of view. Some may even become lazy for not having to make the effort of thinking because rules and laws already exist for them.

To my mind, the same thing happened with the Women’s Rights Movement. Women were ready to be heard and clearly expressed their demands showing their arguments in a very convincing way. So why shouldn’t they be allowed to have the same rights as



their male companions? Isn't the purpose of democracy to give every citizen the right to choose? Why couldn't women, being citizens and having to pay taxes, have the same rights as any male American citizen?

Tocqueville makes a clear distinction between the rights a girl has and those of a married woman. He mentions that girls since birth have every right to go to school and get an education as well as thinking and speaking up for themselves freely. However, things change when they get married as they lose every right they ever had to their husbands. "In America, a woman loses her Independence forever in the bonds of matrimony. While there is less constraint on girls there than anywhere else, a wife submits to stricter obligations. For the former, her father's house is a home of freedom and pleasure; for the latter, her husband's is almost a cloister" (Tocqueville, 1990, p.319). While a girl is under her father's protection, even if he is in charge of her, she is somehow free to do whatever she likes. However, once she gets married, the little freedom she ever had vanishes completely.

According to Tocqueville, it is the public opinion what rules the American society, and since it is widely accepted that the woman's place is at home, there is no way anyone would ever contradict that. Americans used to believe that "for a married woman the springs of happiness are inside the home" (Tocqueville, 1990, p.319). He also adds that this state of subordination is her choice, since she is the one who picked her husband and decided to forfeit her freedom giving herself into marriage. Therefore, since it was her choice to make, she should be happy about it and embrace it. Tocqueville sees this as an "effort" a woman has to make. In other words, she has to give up on her freedom to embrace matrimony. She sacrifices herself for her husband. Which is completely unfair taking into account that he is not sacrificing in any way for his wife, making it an unbalanced relationship, and already raising the male figure into a superior category than his female companion.

Tocqueville has proved to be a supporter of women by making constant allusions in his book about how women should have a higher status than they have and be equally considered instead of as subordinates. He mentions that in Europe the situation was far different from the one lived in the United States. In Europe, some people would attribute women the same functions in society as men leading to incompetency among men and indecency among women. While when it comes to America, Americans seem

to have these distinctions clearer arguing that nature has created both man and woman different and that each of them should perform a different set of tasks in the society in which each of them is good at, and he adds “you will never find American women in charge of the external relations of the family, managing a business, or interfering in politics” (Tocqueville, 1990, p.324).

Therefore, Tocqueville believes that if father and son are nearly at the same social level as well as master and servant, why shouldn't women be considered equal to men? Tocqueville also believed that women in America possessed a greater intelligence and independence than in Europe and that if the United States has become the country it is today, it is thanks to their women. During war times, it was women who made the country prosperous by working and taking care of the house and family at the same time while men were serving in the military. They were those who lifted the country from the ground and who made it move forward.

This is what made women consider that maybe, they should start protesting for equal rights and at this time, the first feminist movements emerged to fight for workplace equality and voting rights. I think it is very important to provide a definition of the term “feminism” since a lot of people have a misconception on what it means and believe that it is a movement that looks for women's supremacy over men. Feminism is a “movement of women's rights that sought EQUALITY with men”<sup>3</sup>. However, this term was not coined until 1890.

But in fact, what really pushed women to take serious action was the Anti-Slavery Convention that occurred in London in 1837. This event is considered as the starting point of what later will have become the Women's Rights Movement after the Seneca Falls Convention. At this convention, eight American female representatives were invited to sit in on the event, between those women we could find Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Thus, they never let women participate in the convention, since the majority of the attendees denied their participation with a 90% of the votes. Many argued, “females were unable to make sound political decisions and that voting threatened femininity and domestic harmony” (McMillen, 2008, p.30). They also believed that “White women lacked the capacity for independence because they were domestic creatures who relied

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<sup>3</sup> [www.historycrunch.com](http://www.historycrunch.com)

on men for protection” (Corine T Field, 2001, p.115). Many others argued “women would prove a distraction from the fundamental topic at hand and undermine the proceedings” (McMillen, 2008, p.72). In any case, men were scared that if women were given the rights they demanded, they would lose their power and that is why they did not want to let them participate in any aspect of the political life.

The women who attended the convention from that point on considered that action needed to be taken. In one of the letters that Stanton sent to Lucretia Mott she said: “The more I think on the present condition of woman, the more am I oppressed with the reality of her degradation. The laws of our country, how unjust are they!” (McMillen, 2008, p.77). Eight years later, a group of women gathered, among which there were Stanton, Mott’s sister, Mary Ann M’Clintock and Martha Wright, in Quaker Jane Hunt’s house, in Waterloo, to discuss women’s rights. From this gathering, Seneca Falls Convention flourished.

## 2.2. Seneca Falls

Seneca Falls is a town located in the state of New York today known by the name of Finger Lakes District. In the 1840s, Seneca Falls was going through a transitional phase. It moved from being a rural community to becoming an industrial area. Farms were substituted by factories and with the construction of the new railroad that connected Auburn and Rochester, it gave this small town the opportunity to trade goods. It definitely offered new possibilities to everyone.

It was “situated in the heart of an area that was on fire with various reform movements” (McMillen, 2008, p.82). The community strongly supported the anti-slavery movement and they counted with “a strong community of reform-minded women” (McMillen, 2008, p.83).

The idea of a convention came up at an afternoon tea party at Jane C. Hunt’s house in Waterloo, a town close to Seneca Falls. She was a friend of Martha Coffin Wright, Lucretia’s sister, and she invited them both, as well as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Ann M’Clintock, to her house for tea.

Among the women involved in the Women’s Rights Movement, four remarkable women emerged as leaders: Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and

Lucretia Mott, among others. Without their determination and bravery, this whole movement would have never existed. Here, I will discuss each one in more detail.

Lucretia Mott, as mentioned before, was one of the main organizers of the first women's convention ever celebrated. She was a Quaker minister and throughout her life, her family taught her that she could do whatever she set her mind to achieve. She was born in Nantucket Island and she was one of the very few lucky women who was afforded the opportunity to earn an education. In her family, since her father was often away, her mother was the one who made most of the decisions. "Women were the full equal partners of men" (McMillan, 2008, p.5), something that inspired Lucretia to become the person she became in the future.

Lucy Stone is considered the pioneer of the women's rights. She was born in Massachusetts and she came from a modest rural family who had always worked hard. "She was the eighth of nine children" (A. Stone Blackwell, p.3). She was another of the very few women who had the privilege to earn a college degree thanks to her determination and because she never settled for any less than what a man could do. She always wanted to do the same things her brothers did, because why couldn't she enjoy the same privileges her brothers had? However, her father did not agree very much with his daughter's ideas; he believed that the woman's place was at home with her family. In spite of that, Lucy pursued all of her dreams and goals and later in life she became "one of the nation's most famous and spellbinding lecturers of the mid-nineteenth century" (McMillen, 2008, p.6).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born in 1815 in Johnstown, New York. She was "the driving intellect of the women's movement, a principal organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention, and the primary author of the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" (McMillen, 2008, p.5). Her one and only brother died at the very young age of eleven. After that, Stanton decided that in order to fill the gap that his brother left, she would do everything her brother would have done if he were alive. Her purpose became to excel in any activity restricted only to the men sphere, and so she did, "she accomplished more during her lifetime that did most men" (McMillen, 2008, p.9).

Susan B. Anthony was "the tireless campaigner of the women's movement" (McMillen, 2008, p.6). She was raised in a Quaker reformist family. They were committed to abolition and temperance. Her sense of inconformity arised when she started working as

a teacher and she saw that her wages were way below from those of men. Moreover, she was inspired by one of Lucy's speeches in which she mentioned how women in their grave were merely identified as "relicts" of their husband" (McMillen, 2008, p.6). It was then when she decided "she would never be perceived as a piece of property" (McMillen, 2008, p.6).

All of them, except Elizabeth, were Quakers and they were all very involved in the anti-slavery movement. The women that day talked about many things, but the conversation soon shifted into a more serious subject: women's rights. Elizabeth said that she "poured out, that day, the torrent of my long-accumulating discontent, with such vehemence and indignation that I stirred myself, as well as the rest of the party, to do and dare anything" (McMillen, 2008, p.86). At that moment, they decided a convention needed to take place soon.

Henry Stanton, Elizabeth's husband, helped her "locate particular laws to ground their concerns in reality" (McMillen, 2008, p.87), and she put her ideas into a draft document that after in a second meeting the 16th of July, this time at M'Clintock's house, and presented these ideas to her companions. Now they only needed to find a way to get their message across, and while they searched for documents to be used as a frame, they bumped into the Declaration of Independence and they decided to follow it, adjusting it to their own purpose.

In 1848, this small town hosted the first ever Women's Rights Convention with 300 attendees. It took place on the 19th of July and it lasted two days. These people gathered in the Methodist Wesleyan Chapel, a chapel that "welcomed all speakers and their causes" (McMillen, 2008, p.84), to discuss for the first time in public women's rights. It is considered as the starting point of the whole movement, and "acted as the nucleus around which the movement began to crystallize, with clear roots in the past but with new direction, energy and focus" (McMillen, 2008, p.22). Between the participants other than women, there were reform Quakers, and political antislavery advocates as well.

The gathering was organized by Lucretia Mott, "principal organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention" (McMillen, 2008, p.5), Mott's sister Martha Coffin Wright, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "intellectual leader of the women's rights movement" (McMillen, 2008, p.9), giving birth to what became the most important document in the women's rights

history, the *Declaration of Sentiments*. This document was based on the 1776 United States' Declaration of Independence.

The day of the convention arrived, it was only supposed to be opened to a female public, but around 40 men showed up at the door. They decided to let them in, however they asked them not to participate and to just listen to what they had to say.

Elizabeth opened the convention by stating that “her sense of ‘right and duty’ motivated her to take up the cause of women’s rights” (McMillen, 2008, p.90). She encouraged all the female attendees to take part in this and to fight for their rights. She gave a powerful speech in which she mentioned how poorly treated have women been over time adding that “so long has man exercised tyranny over her, injurious to himself and benumbing to her faculties, that few can nerve themselves to meet the storm: and so long has the chain been about her that she knows not there is a remedy” (McMillen, 2008, p.90).

Henry Stanton thought that his wife should have left out the suffrage idea and stick only to social, civil and religious rights. Nonetheless, Elizabeth did not listen to her husband since she strongly believed that if women earned voting rights, they would be able to affect future legislations.

On the day of the convention, everyone listened carefully to the eleven resolutions proposed, but when they arrived at the 9th one, people started not to take the women seriously. Many believed that it was ridiculous for a woman to demand political rights when their husbands and fathers represented them perfectly.

However, when everyone seemed to be resistant to this idea, Frederick Douglass, son of a slave woman and a white man, spoke up, arguing that if women never got rights, he would never be able to get them either. After that, all resolutions were approved. Anti-slavery and pro-women rights movements both go hand in hand, we can't talk about one, without talking about the other. Both movements were based on a common idea: emancipation. Emancipation was a key concept of modernity since nations, peoples, slaves, workers, and of course, women, based their liberation on ideas related to it.

### 2.3. Declaration of Sentiments

The *Declaration of Sentiments* (see document annex) was a document written by Elisabeth Cady Stanton that was read out loud at the Seneca Falls Convention and that

caused big controversy at the time for the facts discussed in it. Many thought it was a powerful text and as a result, it was respected. However, many also believed that it went against their morals and therefore, they did not support it. The text itself was based on the American Declaration of Independence and it triggered a recapitulation of the rights any American woman should have as a citizen of the United States of America.

In the *Declaration of Sentiments*, women demanded voting rights as well as equality between sexes in any sphere. The document opens by defending the idea that God creates all equal, and therefore, all should enjoy the same rights, among which life, freedom, and happiness are considered. Moreover, it is made a reference to how women have lived under tyranny for years thanks to a despotic Government, who instead of correcting their wrongs, prefers to live in the way it is accustomed to because it does not personally concern them.

Further in the document, it is also mentioned how women suffered injuries and usurpations from man, how they were denied the right to vote, how they were submitted to laws that they did not even choose, how marriage laws made her “civilly dead”, how she did not have any rights to own property or even her wages, how in front of the divorce laws, she had nothing to do when it came to child custody, how she had to obey her husband, how the government could tax her property in spite of not having any rights over it, how she did not have access to any lucrative professions because they were all addressed to men, and even if she did have access, how her wages were always lower than those of men, how she had no right to go to college, how the church gave her a subordinate role, how a women had to face different moral codes for men and women, and how it was the man’s right to assign her to a specific domestic sphere.

In the final paragraphs of the Declaration, it is stated that women have been socially and religiously degraded and how they feel oppressed and deprived of their rights, and therefore it is petitioned to allow them to have the same rights and privileges as the citizens they are. In not doing so, future action will be taken until being heard. They attached eleven resolutions addressing their objection to the current situation.

Out of 300 attendees, 100 signed the *Declaration of Sentiments* (68 women and 32 men). This was the most important convention ever held in history because it was the first time that people gathered to discuss such a topic as equal rights.

The Seneca Falls Convention served to raise awareness about the situation in which women were living at that time and it set the example for future conventions. This was the way in which they protested, through conventions. However, it was not for another seventy-two years that women finally achieved what they had been fighting for over the years. On 26th August 1920, the 19th Amendment was incorporated into the U.S. Constitution, finally granting women the right to vote.

### 3. Conclusion

#### 3.1. Previous influences

In spite of the Seneca Falls Convention being a landmark for what later became a whole movement, there were women who shared the same ideas years before. Among them, one can find French citizen Olympe de Gouges, also known as Marie Gouze, and British citizen Mary Wollstonecraft, both contemporary revolutionary women whose ideas were regarded as advanced for the time.

Olympe de Gouges came from an upper social class, she was a bourgeoisie but in spite of probably having more rights than any other women from a lower class, she still thought she needed to fight for equality with men.

De Gouges was a feminist and abolitionist born in France in 1748, (a century before Seneca Falls happened). She was a playwright, activist and women's rights advocate. Among her pieces of work, her most notable piece is the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* written in 1791, only 57 years before the *Declaration of Sentiments* was written. In the same way the Seneca Falls document reproduced the structure and style of the Declaration of Independence of the US, the *Declaration of Rights of Woman* modelled the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (1789). The only difference between the original document and the one reproduced by Olympe was that she adapted the articles by introducing the word "woman" every time the word "man"



appeared. That way, every right could be applied to women without making any distinction.

Olympe always defended equal rights between man and woman in every aspect of public and private life. She was a very well-rounded person and she knew all of the French erudites of the time as she often visited French literary salons. However, she had to face misogyny in a world ruled by men and she was often discredited for her advanced ideas and for being a woman.

Amidst her ideas, she defended that women and men should have the same right to vote. They should both have access to public employment. They should both be able to speak in public without being judged or mocked for it. They should be able to own and control any property, to be a part of the military, to have fiscal equality, and to have a right to earn an education, as well as to have equality of power in the family and ecclesiastical sphere.

In 1791, King Louis XVI had just approved the French Constitution, when Olympe wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, where she expressed her discontent by the definition of citizen that the Constitution provided, “women were not afforded ... any rights of active citizenship”<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, they had no political rights. According to the French Constitution, every man over the age of 25 was considered to be “independent”, and those who paid taxes had the right to vote.

In the preamble of the Declaration, de Gouges opens by saying “Man are you capable of being fair? A woman is asking: at least you will allow her that right. Tell me? What gave you the sovereign right to oppress my sex?” (Preamble of the declaration) She believed that everyone was born with the same rights, women like men, are guaranteed natural, inalienable and sacred rights, consequently, that allowed every citizen to perform a series of tasks in society without making any differentiation for their sex, but only for their virtues and talents, as those are really what can limit a person to do something, but not their gender or race. She also believed that if “women have the right

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympe\\_de\\_Gouges](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympe_de_Gouges)

to mount the scaffold; they should likewise have the right to mount the rostrum.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, why should a woman be executed if she had no rights in the eyes of the law? She was not even considered a citizen so why should she be condemned by applying the same laws they would apply to punish any other “citizen”?

In a similar way, Mary Wollstonecraft defended the same ideas in England. Wollstonecraft was an English writer, philosopher and Women’s Rights advocate like de Gouges. She is relevant because she is considered as one of the founding feminist philosophers. She is best known for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* first published in 1792. However, unlike de Gouges, Wollstonecraft addressed her concerns to a middle-class public making her a supporter of social class differences.

Nevertheless, Mary did not become an important figure in feminism until the 19th century, after the feminist movement emerged. In her work she holds that “women are not naturally inferior to men but appear to be for their lack of education”<sup>6</sup>, in other words, Mary believed that if women had a subordinate status, it was due to the fact that they were denied access to an education where they could have developed their sense of reasoning. She also believed that women “are human beings of the same fundamental rights as men”<sup>7</sup> and she argued that if women lack of any intellectual capacities, it was because men have denied women access to education. Therefore, she thought that if women were granted the same possibilities as men in society, they would be able to accomplish more in their lives. She “viewed women’s education as the first step toward women’s liberation.” (Article: *Seneca Falls Convention and the Origin of the Woman’s Movement*)

Moreover, she argued that “women are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be "companions" to their husbands rather than mere wives. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintained that they were human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men.”<sup>8</sup>

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5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration\\_of\\_the\\_Rights\\_of\\_Woman\\_and\\_of\\_the\\_Female\\_Citizen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Woman_and_of_the_Female_Citizen)

6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Wollstonecraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Wollstonecraft)

7 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Wollstonecraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Wollstonecraft)

8 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Wollstonecraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Wollstonecraft)

She also believed that most of the blame for the perception the society has of women is writers fault because they portray an image of women that make them seem to be delicate, weak and sensitive (Wollstonecraft, 1996, p.61). A view that Higginson also shares arguing that he observed that “from the moment they were born... females learned that they were inferior to men” (McMillen, 2008, p.138).

However, Mary did believe that women are weaker than men by nature and that there is nothing to do about it because God created them like that. She thought that someone who is overly sensitive can become clingy and therefore, dependent, making them weak. In her mind, people should use their sense of reason instead of getting carried away by one’s own emotions. In her opinion, reason is what makes someone a strong person.

We could say that, in a way, both of these women could have had an influence in Seneca Falls times, since it is known that women of the 19th century read Wollstonecraft's work. However, what impact did the Seneca Falls Convention have on later generations of the women’s movement?

### 3.2. Consequences of Seneca Falls

Seneca Falls was, without hesitation, the starting point of what later was going to become a huge movement. It began on a local level and spread to a state level until finally, it arrived at a national audience and even international.

As mentioned earlier in the essay, it took a while until they finally approved suffrage rights for women in the United States. Throughout the 1850s, many conventions were held with the aim “to inform people of the injustices women faced and to discuss how to change the nation’s laws and perceptions of women” (McMillen, 2008, p.105). However, from that moment on, one could say that the situation slightly improved for women, since they earned the right to speak in public and some acts concerning to marriage, child custody, and property rights were modified giving women some power.

Moreover, two years after the Seneca Falls Convention, the first National Women's Rights Convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts. Later on, this convention would continue to take place once every year. At these meetings, the following topics would be discussed: "suffrage, wage inequalities, education, unjust marriage laws, and the lack of occupational opportunities" (McMillen, 2008, p. 110). After these conventions, the idea to formalize the movement spread and associations were created for that purpose.

During the four years that the American Civil War lasted, no National Women's Rights Conventions were held. Nonetheless, compelling occupational changes occurred as women gained access to professions such as nursing. "Female nurses made a difference... mortality rates were reduced by as much as half, due to women's concerns over hygiene, fresh air and water and healthful food" (McMillen, 2008, p. 152). Another working position that increased its demands was teaching, since the positions left by male teachers who had to serve in the military needed to be filled. The civil war was "a great field of labor opening" for women (McMillen, 2008, p. 152).

In 1866, Congress passed the 14th Amendment to the American Constitution. This amendment seemed to profit both women and former slaves since it declared, "all persons born or naturalized in the United States... are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside" (McMillen, 2008, pp. 163-164). What could be interpreted from this statement is that everyone, including women and slaves, was considered as a citizen, and therefore had the same rights as an American citizen. However, the reality was far different and once again, no rights were granted to women. Women felt betrayed by all those men who had supported their cause before and who had now turned their backs on them by prioritizing black male suffrage.

In 1869, the first woman suffrage associations were created for the divergence of interests people had. In the end, it seemed like each of them had their own purposes, and while white American women were fighting for equality, African American women had to face, at the same time, racial discrimination which did not put all of these women in the same level because, at the end of the day, they were not fighting for the same cause. One was at a lower level than the other and even more degraded than the previous one.

As a result, two main organizations were formed: the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), the first one led by Lucy and Henry Stone, and the second one headed by Stanton and Anthony. They claimed that abolitionists used the Women's Rights Movement as an excuse to emphasize African American Civil Rights so they broke their ties with them as they had a very different agenda. However, the real reason why two different organizations were created was due to a misunderstanding among the members that upset Lucy, and resulted in her creating a whole different organization to compete against her former companions. Many believe that "women might have won suffrage years earlier had they been able to ignore differences and past mistakes and work together, rather than expending time and energy in jealous, competitive behavior" (McMillen, 2008, p. 182).

An issue I see when analyzing what happened is that the beginning of the movement mostly focused on middle-class women's problems rather than in minorities or lower social classes, leading to inequality among members of the movement who came from very diverse backgrounds. As with many things in life, it only filled the needs of a few who were in a better position on the social ladder.

However, if Seneca Falls Convention never occurred, women would definitely not have the rights they enjoy today. We have come a long way since everything started, and even if things have slightly improved, there is still a long journey until we embrace the total equality for both sexes.

### 3.3. Resemblance between de Gouges' Declaration and the *Declaration of Sentiments*

It is interesting to analyze both the *Declaration of Sentiments* and the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, since it can be proved that the women were either advanced thinkers for their time or that feminism already existed years back. Moreover, it can be implied that Stanton could have based her ideas on previous feminist influences such as Olympe de Gouges or Mary Wollstonecraft.

Olympe de Gouges' document was written in 1791, 57 years before the *Declaration of Sentiments* was written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Both the *Declaration of Sentiments* and the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* are based on other documents. Olympe's

declaration is a replica from the same declaration of the rights written for man except that she exchanged the word “man” with the word “woman”. The *Declaration of Sentiments* modelled the US Declaration of Independence. In the same way, both ask for equal rights between sexes without any discrimination. Similarly, the two explicitly mention that society, and particularly men, has caused this situation to happen because they were the ones who took away their natural rights. However, their Creator created them both equally, and no distinctions should be made between both sexes. They both ask for political rights although the *Declaration of Sentiments* particularly asks for voting rights. De Gouges’ declaration argues that if a woman has to pay taxes, then she should also be able to participate in politics. There are several articles in Olympe’s declaration discussing taxes and property ownership, a point that is also made by Stanton. They also mention that when applying the laws of the country, no exceptions should be made, regardless of the gender. For instance, if a woman can be punished for being unfaithful, a man should suffer the same consequences as well and vice-versa. Both documents also discuss divorce laws and child custody as well as taxes and private property ownership. The *Declaration of Sentiments* demands that women could speak publicly which matches the 11th article of de Gouges’ document, where she states that every woman has the right to express herself freely. Moreover, Stanton and de Gouges discuss employment and how it should be equal for both as they both have the same capacities and responsibilities. They both say that if these laws do not satisfy or contribute to the happiness and well-being of every citizen then, they are contrary to human nature and therefore not valid, or null. Nonetheless, while Stanton never suggests that females are superior beings, de Gouges does by saying that women are superior in beauty and courage.

Therefore, it could be said that both texts, despite being fifty-seven years apart, were created with the same purpose, women’s liberation. Still today, one hundred seventy-one years later, in spite of the situation having improved since back then, we can still see how some of these distinctions still remain.

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## 5. Document annex

### Annex 1: Declaration of Sentiments<sup>9</sup>

# DECLARATION OF SENTIMENTS

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 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 of divorce; 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 the 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. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education—all colleges being closed against her.

He allows her in Church as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.

He has created a false public sentiment, by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated but deemed of little account in man.

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God.

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.

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. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the State and national Legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of Conventions, embracing every part of the country.

Firmly relying upon the final triumph of the Right and the True, we do this day affix our signatures to this declaration.

#### SIGNERS OF THE DECLARATION OF SENTIMENTS SENECA FALLS • NEW YORK • JULY 19-20 • 1848

Barker, Caroline	Drake, Julia Ann	Jones, John	Mirror, Mary S.	Ridley, Martha	Seebina, Catharine F.
Barker, Eunice	Eaton, Harriet Cady	Jones, Lucy	Mosher, Phoebe	Schooley, Asariah	Taylor, Sophronia
Barker, William G.	Foot, Elisha	King, Phoebe	Mosher, Sarah A.	Schooley, Margaret	Tewksbury, Betsey
Bonnel, Rachel D. (Mitchell)	Foot, Eunice Newton	Latham, Hannah J.	Mott, James	Scott, Deborah	Tilman, Samuel D.
Bunker, Joel D.	Frank, Mary Ann	Latham, Lovina	Mott, Lucretia	Segur, Antonette E.	Underhill, Edward F.
Burroughs, William	Fuller, Cynthia	Leslie, Elizabeth	Moun, Lydia	Seymour, Henry	Underhill, Martha
Capron, E.W.	Gibbs, Experience	Martin, Eliza	Paine, Catharine C.	Seymour, Henry W.	Vail, Mary E.
Chamberlain, Jacob P.	Gilbert, Mary	Martin, Mary	Palmer, Rhoda	Seymour, Malvina	Van Tassel, Isaac
Conklin, Elizabeth	Gild, Lydia	Mathews, Delia	Phillips, Saron	Shaw, Catharine	Whitney, Sarah
Conklin, Mary	Hallowell, Sarah	Mathews, Dorothy	Pficher, Sally	Shear, Stephen	Wilbur, Maria E.
Culvert, F.A.	Hallowell, Mary H.	Mathews, Jacob	Plani, Hannah	Sison, Sarah	Williams, Justin
Davis, Cynthia	Hasley, Henry	McClintock, Elizabeth W.	Porter, Ann	Smallbridge, Robert	Wood, Sarah R.
Dell, Thomas	Hoffman, Sarah	McClintock, Mary Ann	Post, Amy	Smith, Elizabeth D.	Woodward, Charlotte
Dell, William S.	Hoskins, Charles L.	Hunt, Jane C.	Pryor, George W.	Smith, Sarah	Woodworth, S.E.
Doty, Elias J.	Hunt, Richard P.	Metcalf, Jonathan	Pryor, Margaret	Spalding, David	Wright, Martha C.
Doty, Susan R.	Jenkins, Margaret	Miliken, Nathan J.	Quinn, Susan	Spalding, Lucy	
Douglass, Frederick			Race, Rebecca	Stanton, Elizabeth Cady	

This Declaration of Sentiments is reprinted from "Report of the Woman's Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls, N.Y. July 19th & 20th, 1848."

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.womensrightsfriends.org/pdfs/1848\\_declaration\\_of\\_sentiments.pdf](http://www.womensrightsfriends.org/pdfs/1848_declaration_of_sentiments.pdf)

Annex 2: Declaration of the Rights of Woman<sup>10</sup>

Preamble

Mothers, daughters, sisters [and] representatives of the nation demand to be constituted into a national assembly. Believing that ignorance, omission, or scorn for the rights of woman are the only causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments, [the women] have resolved to set forth a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman in order that this declaration, constantly exposed before all members of the society, will ceaselessly remind them of their rights and duties; in order that the authoritative acts of women and the authoritative acts of men may be at any moment compared with and respectful of the purpose of all political institutions; and in order that citizens' demands, henceforth based on simple and incontestable principles, will always support the constitution, good morals, and the happiness of all.

Consequently, the sex that is as superior in beauty as it is in courage during the sufferings of maternity recognizes and declares in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Woman and of Female Citizens.

Article I

Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights. Social distinctions can be based only on the common utility.

Article II

The purpose of any political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man; these rights are liberty property, security, and especially resistance to oppression.

Article III

The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially with the nation, which is nothing but the union of woman and man; no body and no individual can exercise any authority which does not come expressly from it (the nation).

Article IV

Liberty and justice consist of restoring all that belongs to others; thus, the only limits on the exercise of the natural rights of woman are perpetual male tyranny; these limits are to be reformed by the laws of nature and reason.

Article V

Laws of nature and reason proscribe all acts harmful to society; everything which is not prohibited by these wise and divine laws cannot be prevented, and no one can be constrained to do what they do not command.

Article VI

The law must be the expression of the general will; all female and male citizens must contribute either personally or through their representatives to its formation; it must be the same for all: male and female citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, must be equally admitted to all honors, positions, and public employment according to their capacity and without other distinctions besides those of their virtues and talents.

Article VII

No woman is an exception; she is accused, arrested, and detained in cases determined by law. Women, like men, obey this rigorous law.

Article VIII

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<sup>10</sup> <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/americanstudies/files/lavender/decwom2.html>

The law must establish only those penalties that are strictly and obviously necessary...

Article IX

Once any woman is declared guilty, complete rigor is exercised by law.

Article X

No one is to be disquieted for his very basic opinions; woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum, provided that her demonstrations do not disturb the legally established public order.

Article XI

The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman, since that liberty assures recognition of children by their fathers. Any female citizen thus may say freely, I am the mother of a child which belongs to you, without being forced by a barbarous prejudice to hide the truth; (an exception may be made) to respond to the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by law.

Article XII

The guarantee of the rights of woman and the female citizen implies a major benefit; this guarantee must be instituted for the advantage of all, and not for the particular benefit of those to whom it is entrusted.

Article XIII

For the support of the public force and the expenses of administration, the contributions of woman and man are equal; she shares all the duties and all the painful tasks; therefore, she must have the same share in the distribution of positions, employment, offices, honors, and jobs.

Article XIV

Female and male citizens have the right to verify, either by themselves or through their representatives, the necessity of the public contribution. This can only apply to women if they are granted an equal share, not only of wealth, but also of public administration, and in the determination of the proportion, the base, the collection, and the duration of the tax.

Article XV

The collectivity of women, joined for tax purposes to the aggregate of men, has the right to demand an accounting of his administration from any public agent.

Article XVI

No society has a constitution without the guarantee of rights and the separation of powers; the constitution is null if the majority of individuals comprising the nation have not cooperated in drafting it.

Article XVII

Property belongs to both sexes whether united or separate; for each it is an inviolable and sacred right' no one can be deprived of it, since it is the true patrimony of nature, unless the legally determined public need obviously dictates it, and then only with a just and prior indemnity.