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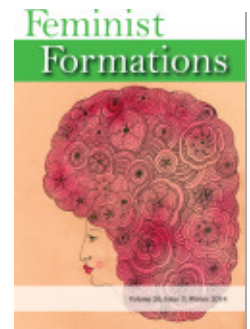
Declaring Sexual Equality: Documents from Around the Globe

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Declaring Sexual Equality: Documents from Around the Globe

Penny Weiss

From the Seneca Falls Convention on Women's Rights in 1848 through gatherings and organizations around the world today, feminists have systematically and collectively analyzed the character and range of existing gender-related problems in their societies, envisioned more equitable and inspiring alternatives to the status quo, and explored a variety of methods for change. This article is the first to look comparatively at a wide range of documents emanating from these meetings and groups, and to read them as one would any significant political treatise. The remarks here draw on documents from both working organizations and one-time conferences, as issued by grassroots and inter-governmental groups from local, regional, and international gatherings, that are both wide-ranging and issue-specific. While the documents are not evenly distributed over time, they do represent over a century and a half of feminist organizing. What follows includes a consideration of the scope of issues raised by feminists across time and place, and then, in greater detail, examines specific ideas about politics and education. Finally, in the search for something that might be called "feminist traditions," the article looks especially at connections and continuities in the documents.

Keywords: declarations / feminism / feminist activism / global feminism / social change

"It's not just a dream—it is possible—
and it is urgently crying out to be done."

—"A Declaration: For Women's Liberation
and the Emancipation of All Humanity"

Introduction

Insufficient attention has been paid to the documents that emerge from grassroots feminist organizing. Starting with the first women's rights convention in 1848, virtually all the information available is on who participated and why the gathering took place rather than on the documents produced. Even in books with "Seneca Falls" in the title, for example, we are more likely to learn about "the remarkable ladies of Seneca Falls" (Gurko 1974, vi) and "the seminal events that occurred in the years just prior to Seneca Falls and in the decades that followed" (McMillen 2008, 4) than about the document that dominated discussion at the meeting. This neglect strikes me as sadly consistent with assumptions, perhaps as unconscious as they are relentless, that women's political writings are derivative and strategic rather than theoretical, broad, and original. It also has profound consequences, I will argue, for understanding feminist history, theory, and activism.

Inspired by the fruits of my initial investigation into the 1848 "Declaration of Sentiments" (Weiss 2009), "Declarations of Sexual Equality" is a generic name for the class of documents I examine in this study. I focus on texts that come from groups committed to and engaged in the process of political change. Thus, although rich and exciting, I exclude those drafted by individuals, such as Olympe de Gouges's 1787 "Declaration of the Rights of Woman" and Emma Goldman's 1909 "A New Declaration of Independence," in favor of ones that more unambiguously emerge through and reflect some kind of political process. Also, I keep United Nations documents in a pile of their own and deal with them minimally here, since they come from and speak to often quite different audiences, are the object of some study, and are sometimes criticized by the ones on which I concentrate. I also focus on ones that have the classic form or elements of the "Declaration of Sentiments": a portrayal of problems, a vision of better alternatives, and some suggested processes for getting from the former to the latter; in the end, however, not all of those I work with contain all three elements. My remarks draw on documents from both working organizations and one-time conferences, as issued by grassroots and inter-governmental groups and arising from local, regional, and international gatherings, that are both wide-ranging and issue-specific. There is broad geographical representation. While the documents are not evenly distributed over time, they do represent over a century and a half of feminist organizing, and I hope to keep locating more. To date, my observations are based on the following:

1. "Declaration of Sentiments," Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls (New York, July 19–20, 1848)¹
2. "Resolutions," Woman's Rights Convention at Rochester (New York, August 2, 1848)²

3. "Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States," National Woman Suffrage Association (1876)³
4. "Resolutions of the Zurich Conference," Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) (1919)⁴
5. "Declaration of Principles," U.S. National Woman's Party (1922)⁵
6. "Women's Charter and Aims," Federation of South African Women (Johannesburg, April 17, 1954)⁶
7. "Statement of Purpose," National Organization for Women (Washington, D.C., October 29, 1966)⁷
8. "Women of *La Raza* Unite!" *La Raza* (1972)⁸
9. "Towards Equality," Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974)⁹
10. "A Black Feminist Statement," Combahee River Collective (1977)¹⁰
11. "We Cannot Wait," Association of Salvadoran Women (San Jose, Costa Rica, November 1981)¹¹
12. "World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights" (Amsterdam, 1985)¹²
13. "Abuja Declaration on Participatory Development: The Role of Women in Africa in the 1990s" (Nigeria, November 6–10, 1989)¹³
14. "Feminist Manifesto," Independent Women's Democratic Initiative," known by the acronym NEZDHI (Soviet Union, July 24, 1990)¹⁴
15. "Declaration of Intent," Feminist Network of Hungary (1991)¹⁵
16. "Charter of Intentions," The Serbian Women's Party (Yugoslavia, 1991)¹⁶
17. "Black Women and Europe 1992" (London, February 24, 1991)¹⁷
18. "Riot Grrrl Manifesto" (1992)¹⁸
19. "The Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law" (1994)¹⁹
20. "Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women" (Brazil, 1994)²⁰
21. "The Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles for the Promotion of the Human Rights of Women" (Zimbabwe, 1994)²¹
22. "Women's Declaration on Population Policies," International Women's Health Coalition, International Conference on Population and Development (1994)²²
23. "The European Charter for Women in the City" (Belgium, 1994)²³
24. "Kigali Declaration on Peace, Gender and Development," Pan-African Conference on Gender, Peace, and Development (Rwanda, March 3, 1997)²⁴
25. "The Addis Ababa Declaration," Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (Ethiopia, September 10–12, 1997)²⁵
26. "A Declaration of the Rights of Women in Islamic Societies" (1997)²⁶
27. "Zanzibar Declaration: Women of Africa for a Culture of Peace" (Tanzania, May 17–20, 1999)²⁷
28. "Women's Caucus Declaration," Third Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization (Seattle, November 30–December 3, 1999)²⁸

29. "Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women," Roqia Center for Rights, Studies and Education (Tajikistan, June 28, 2000)²⁹
30. "Statement of Conscience: A Feminist Vision for Peace," Feminist Peace Network (September 1, 2002)³⁰
31. "Kampala Declaration to Prevent Gender-based Violence in Africa" (Uganda, 2003)³¹
32. "Panlyurfa Declaration on Violence against Women," Human Rights Association of Panlyurfa (Turkey, November 22–23, 2003)³²
33. "Statement on the Occasion of International Women's Day," Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (2004)³³
34. "Chiang Mai Declaration: Religion and Women," Peace Council (Thailand, 2004)³⁴
35. "The Africa Declaration on Violence against Girls," Second International Policy Conference on the African Child (Addis Ababa, May 11–12, 2006)³⁵
36. "Manifesto for Gender Equality in Indian Media," Conference on Gender Equity in Media (New Delhi, December 9–10, 2006)³⁶
37. "Declaration of Principles," Gabriela Women's Party (Philippines, 2008)³⁷
38. "Rural Women's Declaration: Rights, Empowerment and Liberation," First Asian Rural Women's Conference (India, March 6–8, 2008)³⁸
39. "A Women's Declaration to the G8: Support Real Solutions to the Global Food Crisis," MADRE (2008)³⁹
40. "Feminist Declaration," Americas Social Forum (Guatemala, October 7–12, 2008)⁴⁰
41. "Sudanese Women Declaration on Darfur," First African Consultation on Darfur (Ethiopia, January 24–25, 2008)⁴¹
42. "Manifesto of the Pan-Canadian Young Feminist Gathering" (Montreal, October 13, 2008)⁴²
43. "Women's Assembly Declaration," World Social Forum (Brazil, February 1, 2009)⁴³
44. "A Declaration: For Women's Liberation and the Emancipation of All Humanity," Revolutionary Communist Party USA (2009)⁴⁴
45. "Kabul Declaration of Women's Rights," Declaration of the Participants of the International Conference, "Family Law and Women's Rights in Muslim Countries" (Afghanistan, April 2009)⁴⁵
46. "Kuwait Declaration on Gender Equality," Forum for the Future (May 4–5, 2011)⁴⁶
47. "The Rights of Indigenous Women in Nepal," National Indigenous Women's Federation (April 21, 2011).⁴⁷

Declarations and manifestos are ripe for political analysis. As the "Manifesto of the Pan-Canadian Young Feminist Gathering" (2008) says, these documents describe "what we are fighting against, what we are struggling for, the

world and communities we dream of building together and the gestures we will make to get there.” Critiques of the present, values and visions of the future, and methods of political change—these are certainly what political thinkers usually like to study, despite the paucity of interest in the political documents listed above. Since most of these documents have never been examined, and on no occasion comparatively, I offer an overview of some basic issues: the contexts in which they are written, their scope, some of their ideas about politics and the political process, and one specific issue: education. Much more, of course, is left for later and for others.

One aspect of my method here requires a defense. I focus primarily (although not exclusively) on *continuities* between the documents rather than *differences*. While the two are equally important, my focus is consciously chosen. Perhaps due to the nature of academic training, feminist authors tend to focus more on distinctions among feminists than similarities, links, and overlaps. I believe, for example, that we know more about what differentiates liberal feminism from socialist feminism, or about the distinctions between the “waves” of feminism, than we do about the connections, continuities, and conversations among them. There are multiple consequences to this pattern. I am particularly concerned that it becomes nearly impossible to see what might be called “feminist traditions,” and that bridges among waves and frameworks disappear as feminism is repeatedly presented as stubborn, stable categories that refuse to learn and evolve. In the name of elegant classifications, we distort our own history and potentially compromise our future. My emphasis, then, is intended to balance that dominant tendency, although, again, I do pay some attention, especially in the conclusion, to development over time and due to ever-changing circumstances.

Context

The contexts in which these documents emerge reveal both recognizable and unfamiliar aspects of politics globally and locally, historically and currently. In general, the documents seem to be written at what appear to be particular moments of crisis and/or opportunity. Negatively, they arise amid concerns over “the famine, pestilence and unemployment extending throughout great tracts of Central and Eastern Europe and into Asia” (WILPF 1919), recovery from life behind the Iron Curtain (“Feminist Manifesto” 1990), impending civil war in Yugoslavia (“Charter of Intentions” 1991), “the rise of racism and xenophobia within Europe” (“Black Women and Europe 1992,” 190), a global food crisis (MADRE 2008), and “neo-liberal globalization, fundamentalism and militarization” in Asia (“Rural Women’s Declaration” 2008). Positively, they also emerge amid the possibility of political change in El Salvador (1981) and in Arab states (“Kuwait Declaration on Gender Equality” 2011); when accomplishments are being celebrated (“Declaration of Rights” 1876); when national

liberation seems feasible (“Women’s Charter and Aims” 1954); or when wars end and organizations like the League of Nations appear to present new opportunities for action (WILPF 1919). Even at these promising moments, however, the concern seems ever-present that women will not be equal participants in determining or sustaining the changes—that the “new” will mean “the same old” for many, including women.

While the events that provide the contexts for these documents are generally well-known, the focus on women and gender equality brings less familiar and visible aspects of them to center stage. We can read, for example, about the effects of nuclear testing on fertile women and their children, the impact of wars on families, and the consequences of religious fundamentalism for women’s freedom (“Rural Women’s Declaration” 2008). Thus, these neglected declarations offer essential information, voices, and ideas that fill out and redirect political conversations that regularly disregard or marginalize the perspectives of women. Some form of marginalization is a sad universal in this collection: “The history of our country the past hundred years, has been a series of assumptions and usurpations of power over woman, in direct opposition to the principles of just government” (“Declaration of Rights” 1876).

Importantly, these documents, sometimes explicitly and sometimes indirectly, make the point that the various crises they address “demonstrate that this [patriarchal capitalist global] system is not viable. Financial, food, climate and energetic crises are not isolated phenomena, but represent a crisis of the model itself, driven by the super exploitation of work and the environment. . . . We [feminists] need to advance in the construction of alternatives” (“Women’s Assembly Declaration,” 2009). The lists of grievances, many of which are repeated across time and place despite containing different emphases and forms, constitute a broad indictment of patriarchal culture, politics, and relationships.

The most depressing element in the documents, even those of the last twenty years, may be the extent to which they believe that women’s status has not improved much, even as it has altered. The “Abuja Declaration on . . . [t]he Role of Women in Africa in the 1990s,” for example, says that “several studies on women in development suggest that the condition of women has worsened: they are poorer, live in increasingly hazardous environments and have lost the supportive mechanisms of the past.” It also notes that “little progress has been achieved in [the] elimination [of] hazardous traditional practices, such as early marriage and pregnancy, female circumcision, nutritional taboos, [and] inadequate child spacing and unprotected delivery.” The 2009 pan-Canadian young feminist gathering points out that “[i]n reality, many of the demands of our feminist mothers and grandmothers remain unmet. . . . Violence is normalized, sexual abuse eroticized. Our sexual health education is inadequate and our reproductive rights are disrespected. Our needs are not being met.” The 1997 “Kigali Declaration on Peace, Gender and Development” expresses concern that “women’s important role in peace, security and development issues remains

outside the mainstream of governance structures despite their being the majority of the population and their significant contributions and skills.” The 2008 declaration from the First Asian Rural Women’s Conference in India claims that “the process of neo-liberal globalization . . . [has] exacerbated human and labour rights violation[s] and economic injustices.” Finally, the 2011 “Kuwait Declaration on Gender Equality” starkly contrasts “the winds of democratic change which have strongly swept the Arab world [with] the increase in attempts to exclude and discriminate against women, as well as the development of violations of women’s rights by certain extremist groups.” Even when women have made gains in education, obstacles still prevent them from making full use of their training; where laws have changed, their “implementation is very poor and disappointing” (“The Rights of Indigenous Women in Nepal” 2011), the laws impotent against sexist culture and religious practices. Even where women have entered the halls of power, they have not always been heard. Incremental change is slow and uncertain.

Further, many gains feel fragile. Dating back at least to the 1876 “Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States,” victories are understood as only partial, tenuous, and ever-threatened holds on sexual equality:

But the privileges already granted in the several states are by no means secure. The right of suffrage once exercised by women in certain States and Territories, has been denied by subsequent legislation. . . . Laws passed after years of untiring effort, guaranteeing married women certain rights of property, and mothers the custody of their children, have been repealed in States where we supposed all was safe. Thus have our most sacred rights been made the football of legislative caprice, proving that a power which grants, as a privilege, what by nature is a right, may withhold the same as a penalty, when deeming it necessary for its own perpetuation.

As wastefully frustrating and time-consuming as reinventing the wheel, having repeatedly to wage the same battles generation after generation depletes and demoralizes, requiring vigilant watch over past victories while new issues are continuously tackled.

Even women’s sense of self is still an issue. In the 1848 “Declaration of Sentiments,” one complaint was that “[h]e has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own power, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.” The 1991 Serbian Women’s Party “Charter of Intentions” observes a need to “promote women’s self-confidence and their faith in their own abilities, strength and maturity to fight independently for legal rights and genuine interests of their own” (158). The 1990 Soviet “Feminist Manifesto” includes a call for “assertiveness–training courses” (129), speaking yet again to a lack of confidence in one’s own voice. In the 1992 “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” there is still talk of a desire “and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities.” At the

“Black Women and Europe 1992” conference, there was a call “that EC training programmes . . . encompass assertiveness and confidence-building” (190). The recurrence of this theme is startling, extending as well to the denigrated status of feminism. The 1848 “Declaration of Sentiments” foresees encountering “no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule [as they] enter . . . upon the great work before us.” One hundred and sixty years later, the Guatemalan “Feminist Declaration” describes a system that “responds to any challenge with the use of violence against our bodies, criminalization, smear campaigns, and repression against our movements.” Sigh.

Scope

Three interconnected points about the scope of these documents are noteworthy. First, the declarations show that what are readily referred to or identified as “women’s issues”—for example, reproduction, sexual violence, childcare, employment, educational opportunity, and so on—do, in fact, form a sort of core across time and place. But there is definitely more to the story. These “traditional” feminist issues are linked to political life more generally, challenging the boundaries that usually limit their relevance. Employment opportunity is linked to issues from trade unionism to globalization, for example, just as reproductive freedom is variously linked to religious fundamentalism, war, and definitions of work. Consequently, there is an insistence that we treat “gender-based violence as a community’s responsibility instead of making it a ‘women’s issue’” (“Kampala Declaration” 2003), just as we do other issues of such magnitude and significance to the entire social fabric.

In addition to making women’s issues everyone’s problems, the subjects are also redefined more comprehensively. For example, the 1994 “Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women” begins with this general definition: “violence against women shall be understood as any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere.” But it goes even further, stating that “[t]he right of every woman to be free from violence includes . . . the rights of women to be free from all forms of discrimination; and the right . . . to be valued and educated free of stereotyped patterns of behavior and social and cultural practices based on concepts of inferiority or subordination.” Any narrow conception of violence against women misses what practices constitute violations, the ways in which violence is incorporated into women’s daily lives, as well as into most institutions, and the obstacles it erects to freedom and equality. Similarly, the 1994 “Women’s Declaration on Population Policies” asserts that

a wide range of conditions . . . affect[s] the reproductive health and rights of women and men. These include unequal distribution of material and social

resources among individuals and groups; . . . changing patterns of sexual and family relationships; political and economic policies that restrict girls' and women's access to health services and methods of fertility regulation; and ideologies, laws and practices that deny women's basic human rights (93).

A second point about scope is the determination in these documents to establish that supposedly gender-neutral or nongendered political questions contain gendered dimensions. That issues from immigration and agricultural engineering to war and poverty appear repeatedly might surprise those with a contracted conception of feminism's agendas over time. The 2000 "Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women," for example, points out "that poverty and the lack of freedom of movement pushes women into prostitution, involuntary exile, forced marriages, and the selling and trafficking of their daughters." A gender-blind approach to poverty misses many of its causes, costs, and solutions. The 2008 "A Women's Declaration to the G8" on the global food crisis points out that

support for small farmers must include a focus on women, who produce most of the world's food, [but whose] capacity . . . is badly undermined by laws and customs that discriminate against women. In many countries, women . . . are not even recognized as farmers. They are denied the right to own land and excluded from government programs that facilitate access to credit, seeds, tools, and training.

Again, the failure to perceive and attend to this gendered-dimension of farming contributes to the failure to resolve the food crisis.

Finally, then, there emerges a strong understanding that the achievement of sexual equality will require (as has the achievement of inequality) changes in public and private, governmental and social, religious and secular structures and thinking. The 1994 "Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles for the Promotion of the Human Rights of Women" declares that "too often universal human rights are wrongly perceived as confined to civil and political rights and not extending to economic and social rights, which may be of more importance to women." Government is not the end of the public sphere, and the public sphere is not the end of politics. The 2003 "Kampala Declaration to Prevent Gender-based Violence in Africa" asserts that "gender-based violence is not a private issue but involves society as a whole and therefore calls for holistic approaches. . . . Prevention efforts must be holistic in conception and comprehensive in design. They must engage a broad cross section of the community through a range of methodologies." Overall, therefore, we can see through these manifestos and declarations that "women's issues" have erroneously been perceived as only of concern to women; that gendered issues are often so narrowly defined as to prevent their resolution; and that every social issue should be explored for its gendered dimensions.

Political Process

While not equated with politics, as noted above, the state does come in for special attention. There is often appeal to the state for solutions, demands that it fulfill its obligations, be accountable, proactive, and just. But there is also a great deal of suspicion of the state. For example, the First Asian Rural Women's Conference (2008) claims that "[t]he U.S.-led global 'War on Terror' . . . is providing Asian governments with the rationale to increase militarization and state terrorism and is fanning ethnic conflicts in Asia. . . . In the guise of security, repressive governments . . . are carrying out extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances." The 1990 Soviet "Feminist Manifesto" evaluates traditional politics in this way: "[what] has brought the country to the brink of economic and social catastrophe, is its domination by a militaristic consciousness, the urge to use force to resolve all social conflicts, the infringement of the interests of the individual in the service, allegedly, of the public interest" (130). States are at least as problematical as other patriarchal institutions; often they are more so, given both their resources (from financial to military) and their impact on citizens, policies, and practices.

The state is seen as both a direct violator of women's rights and as complicit in violations by others because, as the 1994 "Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles" declares, it

often supports or condones an exploitative family structure through various laws and rules of behaviour which legitimate the authority of male members over the lives of female members of the family and . . . often fails to act to protect women from private violations or tolerates or, indeed, encourages a structure wherein private violations occur all too frequently.

Sometimes, therefore, there are "thou shalt nots" for the state: for instance, Hungary's 1991 "Declaration of Intent" says that "state policy . . . must not . . . penalize forms of cohabitation outside of the traditional marriage and family" (173). Finally, state "solutions" have often meant little, for a variety of reasons. Hungary's declaration says that "emancipation granted by the state without any previous public discussion or grass-roots organization" has not succeeded, and that "a forced and false harmonization of interests" has prevented "reshap[ing] the structure of interests so as to make possible a real . . . harmonization of interests."

There is much criticism of standard political processes, resulting in advocacy of the democratization of politics at virtually every level. Back in 1848, the "Declaration of Sentiments" focused as much on democratic culture and society as on democratic government (Weiss 2009). This trend continues. The 1994 "European Charter for Women in the City" insists on "egalitarian participatory processes . . . which will favour renewed ties of solidarity." The 1994 "Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law" supports the right of all "women, regardless of

their race, creed, colour or political affiliation . . . to participate in the revolutionary struggle in any way that their desire and capacity determine.” The 1989 “Abuja Declaration on Participatory Development” recommends “the full and equal participation of women . . . in decision-making and management at all levels and on all matters.” The 1992 “Riot Grrrl Manifesto” speaks of interest “in creating non-hierarchical ways of being AND making music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations.” The 1999 “Women’s Caucus Declaration” of the WTO asks for transparency, open participation, inclusiveness, the consensus process, equal access to information, dialogue, democratization of dispute settlements, and gender and regional balance in all decision-making bodies. And the 2003 “Kampala Declaration” notes how “civil society has a catalytic role to play in mobilizing communities, promoting women’s rights, building bridges between policy and practice, and facilitating change at the grassroots.”

Democratic concerns include who is at the table, what is on the agenda, the manner in which items will be discussed, and how decisions will be made. The insistence on attention to an inclusive process clearly emerges from histories of silencing, invisibility, tokenism, marginalization, and disillusionment; but it also arises, on the other hand, from an understanding of the democratic process as both educational and empowering for participants and linked to greater voice and sounder policy.

The women’s movement itself is also linked to democracy. There is recognition “that the process of social renewal cannot be truly democratic without an active, independent women’s movement” (“Feminist Manifesto” 1991). Hungary’s 1991 “Declaration of Intent” also asserts that “[t]he feminist movement is an organic part of Western democracy.” Moreover, the 2011 “Kuwait Declaration on Gender Equality” notes that “equal participation of women and men is an essential element of democracy of peoples and societies”—a useful distinction to emphasize.

Not only is feminism important to democracy, but democracy is crucial to the women’s movement. The importance of democracy to feminism is apparent in these documents in two respects: the attention paid to *inclusion* and their own democratic processes. Regarding the former, on the basis of these documents, the history of the women’s movement is less one of outright exclusion than of an ever-growing commitment to inclusion. Greater attention to class became apparent only two weeks after the 1848 Seneca Falls convention when the Rochester delegates discussed “the laboring class of women,” and issues surrounding slavery also garnered significant attention in the wave of conventions following Seneca Falls. In later documents, there is “acknowledge[ment of] the historical exclusion of ‘Othered’ women” (“Manifesto of the Pan-Canadian Young Feminist Gathering” 2008) and a desire to create something better. Yugoslavia’s 1991 “Charter of Intentions” states that the “Women’s Party appeals to all who feel socially marginalized” (157), while the 1994 “European

Charter for Women in the City” says that “[e]very woman, and particularly underprivileged or isolated women, must have access to public transport in order to circulate freely and to fully enjoy economic, social and cultural life in the city.” Hungary’s 1991 declaration calls for “strong efforts . . . to increase society’s tolerance of all otherness—whether cultural, sexual, racial or religious—and its acceptance of mentally and physically disabled people, and of pensioners” (173). The 1994 Inter-American convention in Brazil continued this attention to the intersections of gender with other social identities, asserting that

parties shall take special account of the vulnerability of women to violence by reason of, among others, their race or ethnic background or their status as migrants, refugees or displaced persons. Similar consideration shall be given to women subjected to violence while pregnant or who are disabled, of minor age, elderly, socioeconomically disadvantaged, affected by armed conflict or deprived of their freedom.

These commitments expand who participates in the making of policy and who is affected by it. Democratization is contrasted with “authoritarian consciousness and behaviour, . . . lust for power and dictatorship over human needs” (“Charter of Intentions” 1991, 159).

Briefly, regarding democracy in their internal politics, the 2008 “Sudanese Women Declaration on Darfur” calls for “regular dialogue between women constituencies in Darfur, between Darfuri women and the other Sudanese sisters, as well as between Sudanese women and the African Women Peace Networks.” The pan-Canadian feminists (2008) declare themselves “committed to an ongoing process of critical self-reflection to inform and transform our movement.” The Combahee River Collective (1977) states that “[w]e believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society.” Dialogue is an enduring democratic practice, and a conscious commitment to difficult dialogue comes up repeatedly in these documents, whether between women and men, NGOs and states, citizens and repressive governments, or among women of different cultures, races, and ethnicities.

Additionally, there are frequent mentions of sympathy and solidarity with other oppressed groups, both within and across national boundaries. The 2008 Guatemalan “Feminist Declaration” mentions resistance in Nicaragua, Mexico, and Haiti, as well as activism by indigenous women and labor leaders. Combahee expresses a “particular . . . commitment to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression,” including “[l]esbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work” and “workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket[ing] a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set[ting] up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood” (1977). The Guatemalan declaration includes a long list of those with whom “we can build alliances

. . . in order to make these transformations.” By contrast, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (2004) cautions that we “should never make cease-fires or deal with this or that faction of fundamentalists”. Overall, then, we can see that feminists have accrued a great deal of experience with and knowledge about both oppressive and liberatory political processes. Further, an intersectional understanding of the different effects of domination is apparent across the globe.

Education

Education is one of many specific recurring issues in this set of documents, dating back to Seneca Falls in 1848, where the “Declaration of Sentiments” included a complaint that “[h]e has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education—all colleges being closed against her.” Some educational concerns are basic. Calls for girls to receive “institutional education in all the intellectual and physical disciplines” (“Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women” 2000), have “equal access to education, equal opportunities for higher education, and . . . free[dom] to choose [one’s] subject of study” (“A Declaration of the Rights of Women in Islamic Societies,” 1997) and be able to climb “higher up the diploma ladder” (“Abuja Declaration on Participatory Development” 1989) are most fundamental. Concern over low “enrollment of girls/women in” particular areas, such as “science-based training programmes and professions” (ibid.) and “schools for women in political leadership” (“Feminist Manifesto” 1990, 130) is also a familiar, centuries-old cry.

A third long-standing concern revolves around the tools of education, from texts to curricula. As Hungary’s 1991 “Declaration of Intent” states: “The books and activities of nurseries and schools must be examined critically in order to prevent the continued propagation of obsolete and destructive prejudices regarding gender roles” (173). The pan-Canadian young feminists (2008) “envision communities committed to . . . learning and teaching true herstory and histories of our victories and struggles, especially those of women of colour and Aboriginal women.” On a more specific level, the 1994 “Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles” emphasizes teaching about human rights in law schools, while the “European Charter for Women in the City” (1994) notes that “gender issues in cities must be taught in schools, institutes for architecture and town planning, and in universities.” More generally and actively, the 1994 Inter-American convention in Brazil calls for “educational programs appropriate to every level of the educational process, to counteract prejudices, customs and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes or on the stereotyped roles for men and women which legitimize or exacerbates violence against women.”

The interest in education is justified as the means of avoiding limited and dire alternatives for women on the one hand, and as leading to positive change

in the world on the other. Negatively, the lack of education leads to invisibility (“Chiang Mai Declaration” 2004) and has “ensured both that [women] remain unpaid household servants, and that they do not have an equal chance with men in the world of paid work” (“Declaration of Intent” 1991). On the positive side, as the “Chiang Mai Declaration: Religion and Women” states, “[j]ust as education of women is today understood to be critical in transforming the world, so providing women with religious education is critical in transforming religion.” As the 2002 “Statement of Conscience: A Feminist Vision for Peace” says, “[w]e demand immediate response to the pleas of women . . . for immediate assistance with literacy programs to ensure their full participation in brokering peace, in decision-making, and in post-conflict reconstruction.” Education is consistently seen as among the most powerful tools; the denial or limitation of literacy is a well-trodden path to subordination. But to be truly liberatory, education must go beyond mere access to what exists.

Another theme that emerges, then, is the use of a range of institutions for a variety of educational purposes. “Women of *La Raza* Unite!” (1972), for example, calls for community-controlled clinics both “for education about medical services [and] as a tool for further education of Chicana personnel into medical areas . . . and as political education for our people” (129). This flexibility in purpose becomes especially important when attention is focused on those not of traditional school age. The Committee on the Status of Women in India, for example, mentions the need for “an alternative system [that] has to be designed to provide basic education to adult women, particularly in the 15–25 age group” (1974). Potentially connected here is attention to how “commercialization and monopoly control are destroying the traditional knowledge and practices that have kept indigenous women self-sufficient” and therefore “call[s] for . . . reclaim[ing] rural women’s knowledge and skills” (“Rural Women’s Declaration” 2008). The 2011 “Rights of Indigenous Women in Nepal” commits “[t]o preserve and promote the traditional indigenous know how and [also] to increase their capacity to access and use the modern information, communication and technology.”

An interesting angle emerges beyond traditional forms of education, extending to political education broadly understood, and especially to education for liberation. From Seneca Falls onward, there has been concern that women “ought to be enlightened with 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 they have all the rights they want” (“Declaration of Sentiments” 1848). The “Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles” (1994) mentions the need for “gender sensitized new initiatives in legal education, provision of material for libraries, programmes of continuing judicial discussion and professional training to lawyers and other interest groups in the protection of the human rights of women and better dissemination of information about developments in this field to judges and

lawyers.” It also “emphasized the need [for governments] to translate the international human rights instruments and the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights into local languages, in a form accessible to the people [and to] mount extensive awareness campaigns through diverse means to disseminate and impart human rights education.” “Black Women and Europe 1992” called on members to “familiarize themselves with the legal framework, organizational structure and political sources of influence of the European Community” (190). Hungary’s 1991 “Declaration of Intent” called for analysis of “the impact of the last forty years on women’s roles, status, and self-conceptions [that would] be widely disseminated” (172). The South African “Women’s Charter and Aims” (1954) declared an “intention to carry out a nation-wide programme of education that will bring home to the men and women of all national groups the realization that freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage.” In addition to traditional educational issues, Turkey’s “Panlyurfa Declaration on Violence against Women” (2003) focuses more on “introduc[ing] education projects in schools addressing the risk of children being exposed to sexual abuse. In addition, education should be provided on the subject of gender in high schools. The education of women on the subject of struggle against violence against women is crucially important.” The declaration also mentions educating sexual partners, together, about family planning, and using women’s organizations to develop educational units in schools. Altogether, declarations of sexual equality highlight the importance and complexities of establishing forms and methods of education that will actively serve as a means toward equality.

Concluding Thoughts

There is an interesting history and philosophy of feminism to be found in these documents. They reveal an enduring set of core commitments. Sounding like an excerpt from Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the 1997 “A Declaration of the Rights of Women in Islamic Societies” states “that the oppression of women is a grave offense against all of humanity and that such offense is an impediment to social and moral progress throughout the world.” The scope of the documents is evidence of a deep understanding of the sources and nature of both oppression and equality. But there is also evolution evident here, as there should be, as political lessons are learned and circumstances change. For example, there is, over time, less emphasis on the state as a simple or unproblematic solution, and a deeper commitment to diversity.

Given the familiar charge that feminism has primarily issued from and appealed to middle-class white women, the acknowledgment of and commitment to the diversity of women in these documents is especially noteworthy. While virtually omnipresent, it clearly broadens over time. In 1954, the Federation of South African Women identified themselves as “working women

and housewives, African, Indians, European and Coulored,” and asserted that “[a]s women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress.” The “Sudanese Women Declaration on Darfur” (2008) similarly identifies Sudanese women as “[c]oming from all the regions and various sectors of the Sudan, including the government, civil society organisations, and the parties to the conflict in Darfur.” Comments like these show that calls for sexual equality, both historically and recently, issue from women in various circumstances with a range of social identities; further, the documents attempt to draw from and be useful to that same range of identities. They challenge precisely the divides that have been made to appear natural or inevitable and that constrain progress toward peace and equality, whether among sexes, nations, races, or ethnic, religious, and national groups.

The standard divisions within feminism—from liberal, socialist, and radical, to Black, existential, and environmental—are less obvious here than one might presume, given their dominance in feminist theory books. Some documents neatly fit into these categorizations; for example, the Combahee River Collective’s statement (1977), in fact, has been used to help define Black feminism, and the Association of Salvadoran Women’s “We Cannot Wait” declaration (1981) is clearly committed to textbook versions of socialist feminism. But for the most part, one finds some attention paid to environmental issues not just in “eco-feminist”-type documents but in the “Rural Women’s Declaration” (2008) and the “Women’s Assembly Declaration” (2009) from the World Social Forum. Legal changes are not only found in “liberal-feminist” NOW’s “Statement of Purpose” (1966), but also in the South African “Women’s Charter and Aims” (1954) and the “Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles” (1994). Perhaps more of a conversation among categories of feminism should be reflected on and discussed in our theorizing, as it is evident in our activism. Even more dramatically, perhaps the development of varieties of feminism based more on feminist activism than on male philosophies would be welcome and inspiring.

The varied origins of the documents render different issues visible, which makes them, and the movements they arise from, able to enlighten one another. The documents make clear, for example, what a tragedy it is that debates over reproduction in the United States are often reduced to the availability of abortion, when the reality is that in both this country and abroad the issues are much more complicated. The Nigerian “Abuja Declaration on Participatory Development” (1989) makes clear that across the globe, we still need “measures . . . to avoid pregnancies before 18 years of age and after 45 years,” as well as “family life education . . . in the curriculum of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions” and, “as a means of promoting the health of women and children,” reductions in the number of children that women bear. The pan-Canadian young feminist manifesto (2008) notes that “colonized, marginalized, racialized and disabled women are coerced and/or forced to undergo unwanted or

uninformed abortions, forced to use contraception and are subjected to forced sterilization. . . . Our government steals children from poor and Aboriginal women.” Turkey’s “Panlyurfa Declaration” (2003) gives attention to an almost startling list of other reproductive-freedom issues, including

[p]hysical, sexual, economic and psychological violence occurring in the family, battering, sexual abuse of female children, marital sexual abuse, and marital rape, forced marriages, forced marriages of victims of rape with the perpetrators, forced virginity test[ing] . . . forced sterilization, forced abortion, coercive/forced use of contraceptives, female infanticide, and prenatal selection.

A narrowed scope is self-defeating and, especially, often neglects the needs of poor women and racial and ethnic minorities. Reproductive-freedom advocates have to reckon with the fact that no country is immune from the range of issues addressed in the feminist documents from around the world.

Next, there is much to be gained by reviewing the documents focusing on specific issues. For example, while several mention problems with the media, the “Manifesto for Gender Equality in Indian Media” (2006) goes into much greater detail. The manifesto covers issues from decision-making processes and labor conditions to which subjects the media covers and how, and from the relationship between women’s “presence and influence” in the media and “building democracy and press freedom” to “a culture of equality within media.” Collectively, these documents provide a broad and detailed agenda for change.

Finally, as previously mentioned, these documents indicate an ongoing concern about women’s low sense of self and the resistance and backlash that follows feminist gains. But just as persistent is the belief in the potential power of women and feminism, which harks back to Abigail Adams’s assertion, in 1776, that women “have it in our power . . . to free ourselves.” The “Kigali Declaration on Peace, Gender and Development” (1997) affirms women’s “resourcefulness in organizing for peace, stability, security and sustainable development.” “The Rights of Indigenous Women in Nepal” (2011) treats as unquestionable “the will and determination of indigenous women to change the existing social relation based on domination, exclusion, exploitation and discrimination to a new order based on justice equality and respect for human dignity.” And the Combahee River Collective (1977) states that “[o]ur politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (326). Such self-worth is indeed a necessary condition of feminist social action. So let us now end where we began, with the Seneca Falls “Declaration of Sentiments” (1848):

It is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means; and especially in regard to the great subjects of morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to

participate with her brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by writing and by speaking, by any instrumentalities proper to be used, and in any assembly proper to be held; and this being a self-evident truth, growing out of the divinely implanted principles of human nature, any custom or authority adverse to it, whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with the interests of mankind.

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Notes

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