

Gloria Steinem, “Testimony before Senate Hearings on the Equal Rights Amendment,” May 6, 1970

My name is Gloria Steinem. I am a writer and editor, and I am currently a member of the Policy Council of the Democratic National Committee. And, I work regularly with the lowest-paid workers in the country, the migrant workers, men, women, and children both in California and in my own State of New York.

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During twelve years of working for a living, I have experienced much of the legal and social discrimination reserved for women in this country. I have been refused service in public restaurants, ordered out of public gathering places, and turned away from apartment rentals; all for the clearly-stated, sole reason that I am a woman. And all without the legal remedies available to blacks and other minorities. I have been excluded from professional groups, writing assignments on so-called “unfeminine” subjects such as politics, full participation in the Democratic Party, jury duty, and even from such small male privileges as discounts on airline fares. Most important to me, I have been denied a society in which women are encouraged, or even allowed to think of themselves as first-class citizens and responsible human beings.

10 However, after 2 years of researching the status of American women, I have discovered that in reality, I am very, very lucky. Most women, both wage-earners and housewives, routinely suffer more humiliation and injustice than I do.

20 As a freelance writer, I don’t work in the male-dominated hierarchy of an office. (Women, like blacks and other visibly-different minorities, do better in individual professions such as the arts, sports, or domestic work; anything in which they don’t have authority over white males.) I am not one of the millions of women who must support a family. Therefore, I haven’t had to go on welfare because there are no day-care centers for my children while I work, and I haven’t had to submit to the humiliating welfare inquiries about my private and sexual life, inquiries from which men are exempt. I haven’t had to brave the sex bias of labor unions and employers, only to see my family subsist on a median salary 40 percent less than the male median salary.

25 I hope this committee will hear the personal, daily injustices suffered by many women—professionals and day laborers, women housebound by welfare as well as suburbia. We have all been silent for too long. But we won’t be silent anymore.

35 The truth is that all our problems stem from the same sex based myths. We may appear before you as white radicals or the middle-aged middleclass or

black soul sisters, but we are all sisters in fighting against these outdated myths. Like racial myths, they have been reflected in our laws. Let me list a few.

40 That women are biologically inferior to men. In fact, an equally good case can be made for the reverse. Women live longer than men, even when the men are not subject to business pressures. Women survived Nazi concentration camps better, keep cooler heads in emergencies currently studied by disaster-researchers, are protected against heart attacks by their female sex hormones, and are so much more durable at every stage of life that nature must conceive 20
45 to 50 percent more males in order to keep some balance going.

Man's hunting activities are forever being pointed to as tribal proof of superiority. But while he was hunting, women built houses, tilled the fields, developed animal husbandry, and perfected language. Men, being all alone in the bush, often developed into a creature as strong as women, fleeter of foot, but not
50 very bright.

However, I don't want to prove the superiority of one sex to another. That would only be repeating a male mistake. English scientists once definitively proved, after all, that the English were descended from the angels, while the Irish were descended from the apes: it was the rationale for England's domination of
55 Ireland for more than a century. The point is that science is used to support current myth and economics almost as much as the church was. . . .

Another myth, that women are already treated equally in this society. I am sure there has been ample testimony to prove that equal pay for equal work, equal chance for advancement, and equal training or encouragement is obscenely
60 scarce in every field, even those—like food and fashion industries—that are supposedly “feminine.”

A deeper result of social and legal injustice, however, is what sociologists refer to as “Internalized Aggression.” Victims of aggression absorb the myth of their own inferiority, and come to believe that their group is in fact second class.
65 Even when they themselves realize they are not second class, they may still think their group is, thus the tendency to be the only Jew in the club, the only black woman on the block, the only woman in the office.

Women suffer this second class treatment from the moment they are born. They are expected to be, rather than achieve, to function biologically rather than
70 learn. A brother, whatever his intellect, is more likely to get the family's encouragement and education money, while girls are often pressured to conceal ambition and intelligence, to “Uncle Tom.”

I interviewed a New York public school teacher who told me about a black teenager's desire to be a doctor. With all the barriers in mind, she suggested
75 kindly that he be a veterinarian instead.

The same day, a high school teacher mentioned a girl who wanted to be a doctor. The teacher said, "How about a nurse?"

Teachers, parents, and the Supreme Court may exude a protective, well-meaning rationale, but limiting the individual's ambition is doing no one a favor.
80 Certainly not this country; it needs all the talent it can get. . . .

Another myth, that children must have full-time mothers. American mothers spend more time with their homes and children than those of any other society we know about. In the past, joint families, servants, a prevalent system in which grandparents raised the children, or family field work in the agrarian
85 systems—all these factors contributed more to child care than the labor-saving devices of which we are so proud.

The truth is that most American children seem to be suffering from too much mother, and too little father. Part of the program of Women's Liberation is a return of fathers to their children. If laws permit women equal work and pay
90 opportunities, men will then be relieved of their role as sole breadwinner. Fewer ulcers, fewer hours of meaningless work, equal responsibility for his own children: these are a few of the reasons that Women's Liberation is Men's Liberation, too.

As for the psychic health of the children, studies show that the quality of
95 time spent by parents is more important than the quantity. The most damaged children were not those whose mothers worked, but those whose mothers preferred to work but stayed home out of role-playing desire to be a "good mother." . . .

Gunnar Myrdal noted 30 years ago the parallel between women and
100 Negroes in this country. Both suffered from such restricting social myths as: smaller brains, passive natures, inability to govern themselves (and certainly not white men), sex objects only, childlike natures, special skills, and the like. When evaluating a general statement about women, it might be valuable to substitute "black people" for "women"—just to test the prejudice at work.

105 And it might be valuable to do this constitutionally as well. Neither group is going to be content as a cheap labor pool anymore. And neither is going to be content without full constitutional rights.

Finally, I would like to say one thing about this time in which I am testifying.

110 I had deep misgivings about discussing this topic when National
Guardsmen are occupying our campuses, the country is being turned against
itself in a terrible polarization, and America is enlarging an already inhuman and
unjustifiable war. But it seems to me that much of the trouble in this country has
115 to do with the “masculine mystique”; with the myth that masculinity somehow
depends on the subjugation of other people. It is a bipartisan problem; both our
past and current Presidents seem to be victims of this myth, and to behave
accordingly.

Women are not more moral than men. We are only uncorrupted by power.
But we do not want to imitate men, to join this country as it is, and I think our
120 very participation will change it. Perhaps women elected leaders—and there will
be many more of them—will not be so likely to dominate black people or yellow
people or men; anybody who looks different from us.

After all, we won't have our masculinity to prove.