

Source Selection and Teaching Guide by Katherine Turk, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

<p>Historical Era</p> <p>POST-WAR UNITED STATES (1945-early 1970s)</p> <p>Document 9.3</p>	<p>Document Title: NOW Statement of Purpose, 1966</p> <p>Document Type: Organization Mission Statement</p> <p>BRIEF DESCRIPTION:</p> <p>The “Statement of Purpose,” a founding document of the National Organization for Women (NOW), outlined the founders’ explanation of the problems facing American women and asserted that their sex should organize to solve them. As the largest feminist membership group of the “second wave” era, NOW attacked many of the gendered inequalities that defined American life—especially those related to work.</p>
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SOURCING THE SOURCE

Inspired by and often rooted in the social justice movements of the mid-1960s, four dozen women and men established NOW. Betty Friedan, by then the well-known author of the 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*, drafted this Statement of Purpose. African-American attorney and civil rights activist Pauli Murray edited the document to emphasize the connections between women’s specific concerns and other social justice struggles. Friedan, Murray and the rest of NOW’s founders adopted this document at their inaugural conference in late October 1966.

Intended Audience: NOW’s founders wanted this Statement of Purpose to reach potential members as well as powerbrokers in American media, politics, and industry. They may have hoped that men and women alike who read the statement would reconsider their ideas about gender, whether or not they became active participants in the organization.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

Historical Context:

Many Americans in the mid-1960s were optimistic that their country was progressing toward equality. But women received the message, in every part of their lives, that men belonged in charge. The nation’s laws defined women as second-class or third-class citizens. Abortion was illegal; rape and domestic violence were weakly prosecuted. State laws put husbands in control of their families’ money even when wives earned wages. Women of color suffered all of these harms and more, and many participated in the Civil Rights

movement. Women who desired women were marginalized from American society and from the mainstream feminist movement.

This legal inequality grounded women's subordination in other forms. On screen and in print, popular culture lectured women that their most important job was to find a man and keep him. White men dominated the media, defining themselves as newsworthy and their ideas as objective truth. Bars and restaurants routinely limited women's hours of service or banned them altogether. From professional groups to the Little League, associations excluded women and girls. Both the Democratic and Republican parties kept women on the margins in supportive "auxiliaries." Top colleges and universities held low quotas for women, accusing their sex of stealing spots from men who were destined to enter into the professional world, while women were destined to become wives and mothers.

But the American economy was changing rapidly at midcentury. The cultural ideal of the male breadwinner coupled with a female homemaker had always been out of reach for some—especially people of color. That ideal became unworkable for most as the cost of living rose, and women increasingly entered the paid labor force. Searching for work in the newspaper classified ads, job seekers saw the pages split into "Help Wanted-Men" and "Help Wanted-Women." That divide reflected a rigid and unequal labor force. Most jobs were considered appropriate for either men or women. The work women could get, especially women of color, was typically dead end and low waged. Women comprised a tiny percentage of the professions, and that percentage had declined since World War II. Sexual harassment was a common problem that would not be named until the mid-1970s. Economic support was meager for women receiving public assistance. For the majority of women, independence and financial security were elusive.

Some women began to argue that their sex could begin to solve these problems by organizing together. Many were inspired by the Civil Rights movement, which had changed the nation's consciousness and won major legislative victories: the Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in housing, public accommodations and the workplace on account of race, religion and national origin. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which addressed workplace rights, also included a ban on sex discrimination. But the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which the Act created to interpret and police Title VII, did little about that law's sex provision even though one-third of the complaints the agency received in its first year referenced women's workplace treatment.

Observing this situation, Black women were among the most vocal advocates of a new civil rights group for women. Attorney and activist Pauli Murray understood that federal officials would have to apply equal energies to Title VII's bans on sex and race discrimination if the law was to benefit women of color meaningfully. Murray noted that there had been no women among the major speakers at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. had given his electric "I Have a Dream" speech. "It should not be necessary to have another March on Washington in order that there be equal job opportunities for all," Murray told a group of women activists in 1965. "But if this necessity should arise, I hope women will not flinch from the thought."

Women who worked in government agencies in Washington, D.C. witnessed how federal officials trivialized Title VII's meaning for women. They began to imagine a new kind of expansive and assertive women's group. President John F. Kennedy, under pressure from activists including former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, had established the President's Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) in 1961. Its bedrock principle was that women could and should be studied as a group. The Commission, stocked with leaders from labor, education and the government, shaped a nationwide conversation on women's status and how to upgrade it. *American Women*, its 1963 final report, offered measured recommendations but stopped short of promoting full gender equality. Most states formed their own commissions on the status of women which continued to

meet after the national group dissolved. While these commissions varied in their targets and effectiveness, most were better equipped to study problems than to deliver their proposed solutions.

The state commissions were holding their third annual meeting in June 1966 when a few dozen attendees, including some of the D.C. feminists who had been debating the problem of sex discrimination and the EEOC's reluctance to address it, held a late night meeting in the hotel room of Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*. Some argued that a new women's group might not be necessary, citing the number of well-run women's groups at the conference. They changed their minds the next morning when they could not convince the federal officials in charge of the conference to consider adopting a more activist agenda. At midday, the women from Friedan's room gathered at two tables at the closing luncheon of the conference. They shared ideas and scribbled on paper napkins, settling on NOW's name and framing its basic mission to bring women "into full participation in the mainstream of American society and in truly equal partnership with men." Twenty-eight women paid the group's first dues: labor unionists, civil rights activists, civil servants, medical workers, professors, writers, and more. Before leaving the capital that day, they determined to hold an official founding conference in a few months' time.

At that meeting, which convened at the Washington Post building in Washington, D.C. in late October, 1966, NOW added a second cohort of twenty-one founders, bringing the total to 49. The gathered women and men elected officers and adopted this Statement of Purpose. They agreed upon general principles, but fractious issues related to labor, racial justice and reproductive rights simmered just below the surface. "We are off to a pretty good start," Murray remarked regarding their first few months, as NOW's members began to hammer out their positions and pursued members and influence. "But we shall have all of the problems of mothers of a lusty infant." Motherhood thus remained a powerful framework for describing women's activism, even as NOW's members argued that women deserved lives that transcended the identities and responsibilities of mothers.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

NOW became the largest feminist membership organization of the late-twentieth century "second wave." In its most creative period in the early 1970s, NOW had tens of thousands of members, hundreds of local chapters, and three dozen national task forces working on everything from workplace rights, women and poverty and women in the arts, to lesbian rights and racial justice. In concert and in tension with other feminist groups, NOW changed America. Its members pressured lawmakers to establish and enforce gender equality provisions. They also opened up American culture to the principles that women deserved to define their own lives as well as to participate fully in American politics, work, and public life.

NOW's Statement of Purpose outlined the organization's ambitious motivations—to create "a civil rights movement to speak for women"—and revealed that project's inherent challenges. NOW's basic premise was that women shared enough in common to organize as a single group. But women also reflected the nation's racial, regional and class diversity. The Statement of Purpose illuminates the tensions between its authors' urge to make broad claims about women's experiences and their acknowledgement that their varied identities positioned them differently. For example, the document defines waged work as a site where women should pursue gender equality, applying their "creative intelligence" to "American industry" in order to avoid becoming "permanent outsiders." Yet it also calls for "proper recognition" of "the economic and social value of homemaking and child-care." In seeking to transcend traditional family roles as women's primary identities, feminists inflamed opponents such as Phyllis Schlafly who would accuse groups including NOW of undermining motherhood and marriage.

NOW's Statement of Purpose identifies work as a site of women's subordination. But, beyond women's near-total exclusion from the white-collar professions and male-typed blue-collar work, women's relationships to labor varied widely. That variation created problems the document tends to sidestep. For example, college-educated women needed merely the chance to "break through the silken curtain of prejudice and discrimination" and enter the professions, whereas less elite women faced more complicated challenges. The Statement of Purpose asserts that "today's technology" (eg. dishwashers, vacuum cleaners and clothes dryers) made some domestic tasks easier, but those innovations could not eliminate white-collar women's need, absent men's increased domestic labor, of something else: low-waged cooking, cleaning and caring work performed by other women, often women of color whom the document points out were "concentrated on the bottom of the job ladder." But did creating "full equality" mean making more men join those women at the bottom or making all work fairer? Further, the document criticizes the "double discrimination of race and sex" that Black women faced, but it does not explain how society or government officials should address it. The more NOW sought to fill in its agenda, beyond the broad strokes sketched out in its Statement of Purpose, the more challenging questions emerged.

Scholarship and popular memory often contrast NOW with the self-described radical feminists who began to gather shortly after this Statement of Purpose was written. Those radicals sought to transform or abolish institutions: the nuclear family, capitalism, universities, and the medical system. NOW's Statement of Purpose seems moderate by comparison. Still, its basic demands—that women deserve an equal hand in shaping American life and that society, rather than individuals, should shoulder the burdens of caring labor—both remain to be met.

GLOSSARY

Automation—technologies and processes that allow production and housework to be done with less human effort.

Double Discrimination—the heightened discrimination that Black women faced as workers because of their interlocking racial and gendered identities: a concept which generations of Black women had understood and acted upon, and for which legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality."

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—the federal agency established by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to administer and later to enforce provisions of the law that prohibit certain forms of discrimination in the workplace.

Human Rights—Civil, political, religious, and economic rights that adhere to all people because they are human beings. This concept gained traction after World War II and grounded many of the social justice movements of the postwar era.

President's Commission on the Status of Women—a body of twenty-six civil servants, educators, writers and leaders of women's groups and labor unions. Convened by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and chaired by activist and former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the Commission studied the problems women faced in their families, workplaces and communities. It issued recommendations in its 1963 final report, *American Women*.

Protection—a reference to the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which courts did not begin to apply to sex discrimination until 1973.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—a provision that outlaws workplace discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion or sex.

Wage Gap—the difference between the average pay received by distinct groups of workers, such as women and men.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- What problems does this Statement of Purpose identify, and how were existing efforts failing to resolve them?
- How and why, according to the Statement of Purpose, do women need to organize to realize their “individual” rights?
- What criticisms does the Statement of Purpose seem to anticipate, and how does it attempt to deflect them?

Historical Era

- What can the Statement of Purpose tell us about how ideas about gender shaped American society in 1966?
- The Statement of Purpose claims to speak from a universal women’s point of view, but does it seem to reflect the interests and experiences of some women more than others? Whose voices are left out?

Labor & Working Class History

- How does the Statement of Purpose seek to define work, whether paid or unpaid, as a source of problems that women have in common?
- According to the Statement of Purpose, how has work been changing, and how do those changes support a call for broader social transformation?
- In the decades since 1966, has work become fairer in the ways NOW’s founders hoped? Which aspects have changed or stayed the same? What gendered and raced inequities remain?

CITATION

Source: National Organization of Women, Statement of Purpose, 1966,” @ <https://now.org/about/history/statement-of-purpose/> (accessed 1/20/2022);
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ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Web-based and Other Media

Click!: The Ongoing Feminist Revolution. <https://www.cliohistory.org/click>

She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry, directed by Mary Dore, produced by Mary Dore and Nancy Kennedy, distributed by Music Box Films, 2014.

Articles and Books

Breines, Winifred, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Gilmore, Stephanie, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminism in Postwar America*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Green, Venus, “Flawed Remedies: EEOC, ATT, and Sears Outcomes Reconsidered,” *Black Women, Gender & Families*, vol. 6, no. 1, 43-70.

- Levenstein, Lisa, “‘Don’t Agonize, Organize!’: The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contested Goals of Postwar Feminism,” *Journal of American History* vol. 100, no. 4, 1114-1138.
- MacLean, Nancy, *The American Women’s Movement: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009.
- Orleck, Annelise, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Roth, Benita, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Springer, Kimberly, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Turk, Katherine, *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Next Page: Curricular Connections and Standards

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS and STANDARDS

Curricular Connections:

NCCHS US Era 9 Standard 1: The economic boom and social transformation of postwar United States, including how it affected various Americans.

This primary source makes explicit and implicit references to postwar economic changes, and offers both qualitative and quantitative information on the ways that different groups of people experienced those economic changes. It provides an opportunity to explore the ways in which the spread of post-war technologies of production and household maintenance, in combination with expanding notions of human rights, affected women's understanding of and resistance to social and cultural expectations grounded in gender stereotypes.

NCCHS US Era 9 Standard 4: *The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.*

This primary source offers an opportunity to examine the founding document and thoughts of leaders of the women's movement, including the factors that influenced them, their concerns and goals, how they understood intersections of race and gender, and the areas of uncertainty and potential conflict still to be addressed.

Common Core Standards: [<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>]

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.