

WOMAN SUFFRAGE



50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

# Empowering Young Women: Rewriting History Before it Happens

By Diana Smith, former Mayor of the Village of Seneca Falls, Past President of NYCOM and Senior Municipal Advisor & Business Development Director, MRB Group | Ph: (315) 283-3751 | email: DSmith@mrbgroup.com | www.mrbgroup.com

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the largest expansion of voting rights in the history of America, giving half the population their first legally recognized voice in governance. That feat took almost an equal span of history to accomplish.

In 1848, in the Village of Waterloo, NY, a group of women including Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton joined over tea to write a document called the "Declaration of Sentiments." It called out, in a series of simple statements modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the immoral and unjustified oppression of human beings – women, who by their birthright alone were denied the privileges afforded arguably to **all** by our Founding Fathers.

Stanton then organized a Convention in nearby Seneca Falls and read the document, receiving signatures of support from one hundred women and men who attended. News of the first Women's Rights Convention spread surprisingly far, in an era devoid of today's technology for sharing information. Newspaper accounts and written communications were followed by years of tireless person-to-person campaigning by Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and many more who dedicated their lives to carrying the Convention's message forward and fighting for equality for women. The battle would continue for decades. Champions like Alice Paul were mocked, ridiculed, even arrested. Paul protested with others, bringing attention to the demand for women's suffrage at the gates of the White House. She and her fellow supporters were later depicted as ***Iron Jawed Angels*** for their refusal to eat while imprisoned for their "lawlessness." Their perceived radicalism would eventually penetrate the consciousness – and conscience – of America. The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was adopted in 1920 and women finally gained the right to vote!

Today's generations of women owe these incredibly brave and courageous women our gratitude.

As we look back at the history of the battle, it's clear that granting suffrage marked a significant change in the legal status of women, although the social status of women did not immediately change. Alice Paul later returned to Seneca Falls, the birthplace of the women's rights movement, to fight for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Today, a century later, the Equal Rights Amendment has still not been adopted!

While the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment opened spheres of influence for women, it certainly didn't grant them an equal voice. In 2020, fewer than one third of those in positions of political leadership in America are women, despite the fact that women make up over half the population.

Why isn't the representation of women in positions of influence equal? The complexity of that discussion is daunting. In many cases, women still receive less pay for equal work. They still experience the limits of "the glass ceiling" in career advancement. Women are still excluded or treated differently in many arenas, like sports. Accomplished women in the media are often recognized more for their fashion sense than for their professional achievements. Women who take charge are often characterized as "domineering," overly aggressive and deemed unattractive, whereas their male counterparts are recognized as decisive, powerful and exhibiting leadership.

Sadly, many young women learn to accept these social norms as simply "the way it is." By the time they are teenagers, many young girls have dealt with gender bias, sexism, and have been presented with many unrealistic, fictional role models who appear to prioritize physical beauty over all else.

**"Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world." - Harriet Tubman**

Until women are equal contributors in policy making and leadership, the implicit language of discrimination, bias, and ignorance of women's issues will remain the norm. Until women have an equal opportunity to set the agenda, garner the votes, and introduce new policies, they will continue to struggle as a minority despite their numbers, in a self-perpetuating saga of inequality.

The creators of **First Amendment First Vote** are targeting young people with a game-changing strategy. They plan to rewrite history before it happens, and are inviting you to get involved.

An educational program founded by former City of Auburn Mayor Melina Carnicelli, **First Amendment First Vote** provides high school girls at a critical, impressionable age with exposure to their potential to lead.

Melina worked with educators to create a workshop with one agenda: to inspire girls to seek leadership positions in local, state and national government. The program offers young women with more than just a suggestion that leadership is possible; it introduces them to women of influence, shares hands-on experience and tools, and shines light on the path to obtaining leadership positions. Most importantly, it creates an expectation of leadership.

By the time students finish the two-day session, they have engaged in roundtable discussions and learned key skills that will benefit them in all career choices. They leave feeling empowered to make a difference. Indeed, they will!

NYCOM members can help broaden the effectiveness of **First Amendment First Vote**. Visit the website at [1st1stv.org](http://1st1stv.org), and learn how you can become a partner, and bring the program to your community. As a leader and agent of change, what greater legacy can you leave than to have opened the doors to better, stronger leadership?

After the 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, it took another 72 years for America to grant women the right to vote. One hundred years later, we face many challenges as a nation. Together, we can find solutions! Yet, the issue of inequality is a self-crippling phenomenon, impeding all of us. Ignoring the potential of women ignores

the contributions, brainpower, wisdom and determination of half of all Americans. It's no different than only using half of the tools in a toolbox, or choosing to light only half of a room.

Whether at the local or national level, if we are going to achieve our full potential, we need to utilize all of our resources! We need to encourage young women to choose the path of leadership, to seek out knowledge, strong role models and sources of empowerment. **First Amendment First Vote** is a brilliant step toward that brave new world.



Diana Smith is the former Mayor of Seneca Falls, NY, the birthplace of Women's Rights. She works with community leaders as a Senior Municipal Advisor and Business Development Director for MRB Group, and is an advocate for women's leadership.

**Mayors, Board Members,  
Community Leaders:**

*Thank You!*

On behalf of the entire MRB Group team, please accept our heartfelt thanks for all you do, each and every day, to protect our communities and critical resources during these unprecedented and challenging times.

Your leadership and commitment is appreciated.

Ryan Colvin, PE  
President of MRB Group

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