"Equal Rights for Women"
Shirley Chisholm

**Equal Rights for Women**
Washington, D.C., May 21, 1969
Shirley Chisholm

Mr. Speaker,

When a young woman graduates from college and starts looking for a job, she is likely to have a frustrating and even **demeaning** experience ahead of her. If she walks into an office for an interview, the first questions she will be asked is, “Do you type?”

There is a calculated system of prejudice that lies unspoken behind that question. Why is it acceptable for women to be secretaries, librarians, and teachers, but totally unacceptable for them to be managers, administrators, doctors, lawyers, and Members of Congress?

The unspoken assumption is that women are different. They do not have executive ability, orderly minds, stability, leadership skills, and they are too emotional.

It has been observed before that society for a long time, discriminated against another minority, the blacks, on the same basis – that they were different and inferior. The happy little homemaker and the contented **“old darkey”** on the plantation were both produced by prejudice.

**demeaning**: humiliating

**“old darkey”**: a derogatory and racist name for African-Americans used in the early 1900s
As a black person, I am no stranger to race prejudice. But the truth is that in the political world I have been far oftener discriminated against because I am a woman than because I am black.

Prejudice against blacks is becoming unacceptable although it will take years to eliminate it. But it is doomed because, slowly, white America is beginning to admit that it exists. Prejudice against women is still acceptable. There is very little understanding yet of the immoralty involved in double pay scales and the classification of most of the better jobs as “for men only.”

More than half of the population of the United States is female. But women occupy only 2 percent of the managerial positions. They have not even reached the level of tokenism yet. No women sit on the AFL-CIO council or Supreme Court. There have been only two women who have held Cabinet rank, and at present there are none. Only two women now hold ambassadorial rank in the diplomatic corps. In Congress, we are down to one Senator and 10 Representatives.

Considering that there are about 3 ½ million more women in the United States than men, this situation is outrageous.

It is true that part of the problem has been that women have not been aggressive in demanding their rights. This was also true of the black population for many years. They submitted to oppression and even cooperated with it. Women have done the same thing. But now there is an awareness of this situation particularly among the younger segment of the population.

immorality: without moral principles

tokenism: a policy of making only a symbolic effort, but not really meaning it

oppression: unjust or cruel power
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A second argument often heard against the Equal Rights Amendment is that it would eliminate legislation that many States and the Federal Government have enacted giving special protection to women and that it would throw the marriage and divorce laws into chaos.

As for the marriage laws, they are due for a **sweeping** reform, and an excellent beginning would be to wipe the existing ones off the books. Regarding special protection for working women, I cannot understand why it should be needed. Women need no protection that men do not need. What we need are laws to protect working people, to guarantee them fair pay, safe working conditions, protection against sickness and layoffs, and provision for dignified, comfortable retirement.

Men and women need these things equally. That one sex needs protection more than the other is a male **supremacist** myth as ridiculous and unworthy of respect as the white supremacist myths that society is trying to cure itself of at this time.

**sweeping**: broad, large

**supremacist**: believing in the superiority of a particular group

## Approaching the Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is the author?</td>
<td>Prompt students to find the author's name. Add that Shirley Chisholm was a Congresswoman in the U.S. House of Representatives from Brooklyn in New York City. She served from 1969 to 1983.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the title?</td>
<td>Invite students to point to the title and then write it on their Note-catcher.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What type of text is it?</td>
<td>Ask students to think about what type of text this is. If they are struggling, help them narrow it down by asking questions like: “Is it a letter? A novel? A speech?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who is the audience?</td>
<td>Once students know it is a speech, ask them to identify to whom the speech is given. “Who is ‘Mr. Speaker,’ identified at the beginning?” After students take a minute to wrestle with it, let them know that Chisholm was addressing Congress. It is customary to start any address to Congress by directing your comment to the Speaker of the House, who is the leader of Congress. Let students know that reading a speech is a bit different from reading other informational texts. They need to consider carefully the audience and purpose. Also, the writing will sound different because it is meant to be spoken aloud. Point out that some words are in bold in the speech. Let students know that if a word is in bold, it means it is defined at the bottom of the pages.</td>
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## Read for Gist

**Teacher Guide**

Read the speech aloud while students follow along. Ask students to turn to a partner and talk about the gist of the speech.
**Text Dependent Questions**

1. What is prejudice?

   Invite students to read the question with you.
   
   Direct their attention to Paragraph 3 so they can see the word prejudice in context.
   
   Invite pairs to discuss what they think the word means.
   
   Invite pairs to record their ideas on their text-dependent questions handout.
   
   Cold call on a pair to share their answer with the whole group and clarify what the word means if necessary.
   
   Ask students to revise their notes where they are incorrect.
   
   Answer: Prejudice is a judgment that disregards facts or truths.
   
   Draw students' attention to the prefix “pre” and the root “jud.” Ask them to think about what they might mean. Give students an opportunity to talk to their partner for a minute, then ask a pair to share with the class. Clarify what it means where necessary.
   
   “pre” means before
   
   “jud” means to judge
   
   Connect to other words that are related, such as justice, just, jury, and justify.

2. According to Chisholm, what are the assumptions of the “calculated system of prejudice” that lies behind the question “Do you type?”

   Repeat the numbered steps from the first question.
   
   Answer: Chisholm uses the frequent experience women had when applying for jobs to frame the issue of women’s rights. Across the first three paragraphs she explains the question with the idea of a “calculated system of prejudice” and the “unspoken assumption” that women do not have the capabilities for positions with more responsibility.
   
   Ensure that students have a thorough understanding of what calculated system of prejudice means before moving on, as understanding what this phrase means is crucial to understanding Chisholm’s speech in its entirety.
### Text Dependent Questions

3. Look at Paragraph 5.
   What does Shirley Chisholm mean by the “happy little homemaker”? What does Chisholm mean by the “contented ‘old darkey’”?

   What similarities and differences does Chisholm see between the experience of women and that of blacks?

5. Look at Paragraphs 8 and 9.
   What are the various statistics Chisholm uses to support her argument?

### Teacher Guide

Repeat the numbered steps from the first question.

“Happy little homemaker”: Chisholm is referring to the idea that women were happy in their role as wives and mothers and not working outside the house.

“Contented ‘old darkey’”: Chisholm is referring to the idea that African Americans were happy to work on plantations without aspiring to do anything else.

If students are struggling, point them to the first sentence in the paragraph: “It has been observed before that society for a long time, discriminated against another minority, the blacks, on the same basis—that they were different and inferior.” Ask students who is being compared to “the blacks.” This will help them see that the focus of the paragraph is on comparing the experiences of women and African Americans. The comparison continues in the second sentence in the paragraph.

Repeat the numbered steps from the first question.

**Similarity:** Both “were different and inferior.” (Paragraph 5)

**Difference:** “Prejudice against blacks is becoming unacceptable although it will take years to eliminate it. But it is doomed because, slowly, white America is beginning to admit [that it exists. Prejudice against women is still acceptable.” (Paragraph 7)

Repeat the numbered steps from the first question.

Two percent of managerial positions are held by women.

No women are on the council of the AFL-CIO or Supreme Court.

There are only two women ambassadors.

There is one female Senator and 10 female Representatives in Congress.

In the United States, there are 3.5 million more women than men.