

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005) was born in New York City to immigrant parents. After high school, Chisholm attended Brooklyn College and began a career in education after graduation. After finishing her masters in early childhood education in 1952, she worked for the New York City Division of Day Care before being elected to the New York State Legislature in 1964. After a court-ordered redistricting changed the congressional boundaries in Brooklyn, Chisholm ran for the new seat and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1968. She was the first African American Congresswoman. While in Congress Chisholm protested against the Vietnam War and advocated for programs to help the poor, women, children and minorities, causes that she would fight for throughout her seven terms in the House. In 1971 Chisholm became a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus. In 1972, she declared her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for presidency. Although she received assassination threats and ran a small campaign, Chisholm received 152 delegate votes (10% of the total) but ultimately lost to George McGovern. In 1977 Chisholm helped establish the Congressional Women's Caucus. After leaving Congress in 1983, Chisholm taught at Mount Holyoke and was nominated to serve as the ambassador to Jamaica by President William J. Clinton, although she declined due to poor health. Chisholm died in 2005 in Florida and was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2015.

KEY EVENTS

Election of 1968, Congressional Black Caucus (1971),
Election of 1972, Congressional Women's Caucus (1977)

KEY PEOPLE

Stanley Steingut, Barbara Lee, Jesse Jackson, William J. Clinton

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In this document, Representative Chisholm delivered remarks on the floor of the House of Representatives regarding the status of women in America in 1969. As one of the few women in the House, Chisholm argued that women had not been aggressive about demanding their rights, although this was changing. Chisholm supported an Equal Rights Amendment and argued that laws that existed could not protect the rights of women. Chisholm also argued that the adoption of an equal rights amendment would be an asset to both women and men by guaranteeing them the same rights. As Chisholm concluded, "Women need no protection that men do not need. What we



Thomas J. O'Halloran, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm announcing her candidacy for presidential nomination, January 25, 1972, Library of Congress (LC-U9- 25383-33), www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ds.07135/

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make and distribute one copy of the document and the reflection questions for each student.
- Direct students to read the document individually
- Ask students to reflect on the document and answer the prompt questions.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Group students into groups of two or three students each for reflection and discussion.
- Engage all students in a whole-class discussion and ask them how this document is still relevant today.

Teacher Tip: Complete this activity yourself beforehand to prepare for possible discussion items and to create your own interpretation of the document.



Roger Higgins, Shirley Chisholm, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left, standing with right arm raised, looking at list of numbers posted on a wall, November 2, 1965, Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-135429), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005676944/>

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.”

FUN FACT

After her election to Congress in 1968, Representative Chisholm worked as a census worker in her Brooklyn neighborhood in 1970. Learn more about Representative Chisholm during the 1970s census at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/national/unpublished-black-history/shirley-chisholm-becomes-a-census-taker-1970>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the New York State Museum and see artifacts belonging to Shirley Chisholm and other New York Women’s Suffrage leaders in their *Votes for Women: Celebrating New York’s Suffrage Centennial* at: <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/votes-for-women/artifacts>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Shirley Chisholm Papers
Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University
<https://catalog-libraries-rutgers-edu.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/vufind/Record/2275595?redirect>

Video, Rep. Shirley Chisholm Presidential Campaign Announcement, January 25, 1972
C-SPAN
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4546804/1972-rep-shirley-chisholm-presidential-campaign-announcement>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Shirley Anita Chisholm
U.S. House of Representatives
[http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-\(C000371\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-(C000371)/)

Shirley Chisholm
National Women’s History Museum
<http://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/shirley-chisholm>

REMARKS BY REPRESENTATIVE SHIRLEY CHISHOLM, MAY 21, 1969

"Mrs. 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 question 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 darky" on the plantation were both stereotypes produced by prejudice.

"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 immorality 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 ~ 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.

"As in the field of equal rights for blacks, Spanish-Americans, the Indians, and other groups, laws will not change such deep-seated problems overnight. But they can be used to provide protection for those who are most abused, and to begin the process of evolutionary change by compelling the insensitive majority to reexamine its unconscious attitudes.

"It is for this reason that I wish to introduce today a proposal that has been before every Congress for the last 40 years and that sooner or later must become part of the basic law of the land the equal rights amendment.

"Let me note and try to refute two of the commonest arguments that are offered against this amendment. One is that women are already protected under the law and do not need legislation. Existing laws are not adequate to secure equal rights for women. Sufficient proof of this is the concentration of women in lower paying, menial, unrewarding jobs and their incredible scarcity in the upper level jobs. If women are already equal, why is it such an event whenever one happens to be elected to Congress?

"It is obvious that discrimination exists. Women do not have the opportunities that men do. And women that do not conform to the system, who try to break with the accepted patterns, are stigmatized as "odd" and "unfeminine." The fact is that a woman who aspires to be chairman of the board, or a Member of the House, does so for exactly the same reasons as any man. Basically, these are that she thinks she can do the job and she wants to try.

"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.

Remarks by Representative Shirley Chisholm, May 21, 1969, Congressional Record, U.S. House of Representatives, pp. 13380-13381, U.S. Government Printing Office

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How has the status of women changed between 1969 and today?

Are the issues that Representative Chisholm wrote about still relevant today?
Please explain your answer using examples.

Do you believe that an equal rights amendment is needed today to protect the rights of women? Why or why not?