

National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year



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WASHINGTON, D. C.--A proposed National Plan of Action outlining major steps that must be taken to assure full equality for American women was announced here today at a press conference held by the President's National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year.

The 38-page National Plan, which includes support for the Equal Rights Amendment and more than a hundred recommendations for remedial action to end discrimination against women in employment, education, health, marital property relations and 22 other areas of concern, will be debated and voted on by nearly 2,000 delegates to the National Women's Conference when it meets in Houston November 18 to 21.

"We're often asked what more do women want," Commission Presiding Officer Bella Abzug said as she announced the plan. "Here we have an answer based on meetings held in every State and Territory of our nation in the past year. A cross-section of American women--140,000 strong--of all ages, backgrounds, incomes and racial, ethnic and religious groups attended, including thousands who had never been to a women's meeting before. In overwhelming numbers, they spoke

out for equality for women."

Joining Ms. Abzug at the press conference were other members of the 46-member Presidential commission, including actress Jean Stapleton. The 56 State/Territorial Meetings and the National Women's Conference were authorized under Public Law 94-167, as a follow-up to International Women's Year, 1975, and were Congressionally mandated to "identify the barriers that prevent women from participating fully and equally in all aspects of national life, and develop recommendations for means by which such barriers can be removed."

The proposed National Plan is a synthesis of Commission recommendations adopted by vote of a majority of the State/Territorial meetings and other recommendations voted on by 10 or more State Meetings. Additional recommendations were made by the Commission, which voted to approve the Plan at a two-day meeting in Washington, D.C. October 20-21.

It will be included in a final Commission report to the President and the Congress. Under the law, President Carter is required to submit recommendations for action to Congress within 120 days after receiving the report.

A Declaration of American Women accompanying the National proposal notes the "positive changes" that have occurred since the founding of this nation when women were "non-persons and slaves," but asserts that "millions of women still face a daily reality of discrimination, limited opportunities and economic hardship. Man-made barriers, laws, social customs and prejudices continue to keep

a majority of women in an inferior position without full control of our lives and bodies."

Women "lack effective political and economic power," it says. "We have only minor and insignificant roles in making, interpreting and enforcing our laws, in running our political parties, businesses, unions, schools and institutions, in directing the media, in governing our country, in deciding issues of war and peace."

In addition to calling for final ratification of the ERA, which it describes as "the fulfillment for American women of the promise of equality proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence," the proposed Plan includes these recommendations:

--Federal and State laws relating to marital property, inheritance and domestic relations should be based "on the principle that marriage is a partnership in which the contribution of each spouse is of equal importance and value...Alimony, child support and property arrangements at divorce should be such that minor children's needs are first to be met and spouses share the economic dislocation of divorce."

--Support for the right to reproductive freedom, including opposition to exclusion of abortion from Medicaid and other funding.

--Support for affirmative action programs in employment, education and business opportunities. (Eighteen specific recommendations on employment include support for a policy of full employment, Federal legislation to provide equal pay for work of equal value, and guarantees of pregnancy disability benefits.)

--Support for a National health security program that covers the health needs of women as individuals and a strengthened Food and Drug Administration to protect women from hazardous, unsafe or ineffective drugs, devices and cosmetics.

--Special programs to end discrimination against minority women, disabled women, lesbians, rural women, older women and women in prison.

--Action to assist battered wives and victims of rape and child abuse. (The Declaration describes women as "victims of violence in a culture that degrades us as sex objects and promotes pornography for profit.")

--Federal funding of comprehensive, voluntary, quality child care and developmental programs, with services accessible to all who need them, regardless of income.

--Welfare reform to "change the focus of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program from providing custodial services to children to assisting heads of families on AFDC, if they are able to work, to get off welfare and to support themselves and their dependents."

In a series of recommendations on international affairs, the National Plan calls for the appointment of more women to participate in the formation and execution of all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, supports the United Nations Decade for Women, and calls on the U.S. to "take the lead in urging all nuclear powers to start phasing out their nuclear arsenals rather than escalating weapons development and deployment...and (to) develop initiatives to advance the cause of world peace."

Other recommendations propose to overcome discrimination against

women in elective and appointive office, in the arts and humanities, the mass media, credit, insurance and collection of statistical data.

Finally the Plan proposes that the Congress and the President establish a Cabinet-level Women's Department in the executive branch of the Federal government "to help insure that all persons are guaranteed equal opportunities without regard to sex."

The Plan notes that "existing programs for women are dispersed throughout the Federal government, resulting in a lack of effective leadership and coordination and in a wasteful duplication of efforts to improve the status of women. They lack visibility, power and resources."

Establishing a Cabinet-level Department headed by a woman, the Plan says, "would bring the needs and interests of the broadest possible spectrum of women to the attention of the President and Federal decision-makers and would provide a mechanism to follow up on the recommendations in the National Plan of Action."

The declaration concludes: "We demand immediate and continuing action on our National Plan by Federal, State, public and private institutions so that by 1985, the end of the International Decade for Women proclaimed by the United Nations, everything possible under the law will have been done to provide American women with full equality.

"The rest will be up to the hearts, minds and moral consciences of men and women and what they do to make our society truly democratic and open to all."