

Betty Ford, "Remarks to the International Women's Year Conference," October 25, 1975 (abridged)

. . . While many new opportunities are open to women, too many are available only to the lucky few. Many barriers continue to the paths of most women, even on the most basic issue of equal pay for equal work. And the contributions of women as wives and mothers continue to be underrated.

This year is not the time to cheer the visible few, but to work for the invisible many, whose lives are still restricted by custom and code . . .

. . . the limits on women have been formalized into law and structured into social custom. For that reason, the first important steps have been to undo the laws that hem women in and lock them out of the mainstream of opportunities.

But my own support of the Equal Rights Amendment has shown what happens when a definition of proper behavior collides with the right of an individual to personal opinions. I do not believe that being First Lady should prevent me from expressing my views. I spoke out on this important issue, because of my deep personal convictions. Why should my husband's job or yours prevent us from being ourselves? Being ladylike does not require silence.

The Equal Rights Amendment when ratified will not be an instant solution to women's problems. It will not alter the fabric of the Constitution or force women away from their families. It will help knock down those restrictions that have locked women in to old stereotypes of behavior and opportunity. It will help open up more options for women.

But it is only a beginning. The debate over ERA has become too emotional, because of the fears of some—both men and women—about the changes already taking place in America . . . Change by its very nature is threatening, but it is also often productive. And the fight of women to become more productive, accepted human beings is important to all people of either sex and whatever nationality . . .

I have been distressed that one unfortunate outgrowth of the debate has been a lack of appreciation of the role of women as wives and mothers . . . We have to take that "just" out of "just a housewife" and show our pride in having made the home and family our life's work . . .

Freedom for women to be what they want to be will help complete the circle of freedom America has been striving for during 200 years. As the barriers against freedom for Americans because of race or religion have fallen the freedom of all has expanded. The search for human freedom can never be complete without freedom for women.

By the end of this century, I hope this nation will be a place where men and women can freely choose their life's work without restrictions or without ridicule.

On the eve of the nation's third century, let us work to end the laws and remove the labels that limit the imagination and the options of men and women alike. . .

Read the full speech online at the website of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum:
<http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/bbfspeeches/751025.asp>.