
Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, from which this excerpt is taken, changed the lives of many American women by bringing their restlessness and unhappiness to public attention. It is widely seen as one of the major contributors to the development of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night–she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--“Is this all?”

For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. ...

By the end of the nineteen-fifties, the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17. The proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958. A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband. By the mid-fifties, 60 per cent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar. Colleges built dormitories for “married students,” but the students were almost always the husbands.

Then American girls began getting married in high school. And the women’s magazines, deploring the unhappy statistics about these young marriages, urged that courses on marriage, and marriage counselors, be installed in the high schools. Girls started going steady at twelve and thirteen, in junior high. Manufacturers put out brassieres with false bosoms of foam rubber for little girls of ten. And on an advertisement for a child’s dress, sizes 3-6x, in the New York Times in the fall of 1960, said: “She Too Can Join the Man-Trap Set.” By the end of the fifties, the United States birthrate was overtaking India’s. ...

In a New York hospital, a woman had a nervous breakdown when she found she could not breastfeed her baby. In other hospitals, women dying of cancer refused a drug which research had proved might save their lives: its side effects were said to be unfeminine. “If I have only one life, let me live it as a blonde,” a larger-than-life- sized picture of a pretty, vacuous woman proclaimed from newspaper, magazine, and drugstore ads. And across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde. They ate a chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young models. Department-store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller. “Women are out to fit the clothes, instead of vice-versa,” one buyer said. ...

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife—freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had
found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. … For over fifteen years, the words written for women, and the words women used when they talked to each other, while their husbands sat on the other side of the room and talked shop or politics or septic tanks, were about problems with their children, or how to keep their husbands happy, or improve their children’s school, or cook chicken or make slipcovers. Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different. Words like “emancipation” and “career” sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years. …

If a woman had a problem in the 1950’s and 1960’s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. If she tried to tell her husband, he didn’t understand what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself.

For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about the problem than about sex. Even the psychoanalysts had no name for it. When a woman went to a psychiatrist for help, as many women did, she would say, “I’m so ashamed,” or “I must be hopelessly neurotic.” “I don’t know what’s wrong with women today,” a suburban psychiatrist said uneasily. “I only know something is wrong because most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn’t sexual.” Most women with this problem did not go to see a psychoanalyst, however. “There’s nothing wrong really,” they kept telling themselves. “There isn’t any problem.”

But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, “the problem.” And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it. Later, after they had picked up their children at nursery school and taken them home to nap, two of the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know they were not alone. …

Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete.” Or she would say, “I feel as if I don’t exist.” Sometimes she blotched out the feeling with a tranquilizer. Sometimes she thought the problem was with her husband or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair, or another baby. Sometimes, she went to a doctor with symptoms she could hardly describe: “A tired feeling . . . I get so angry with the children it scares me . . . I feel like crying without any reason.” A Cleveland doctor called it “the housewife’s syndrome.” …

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off.

How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life? How can she believe that voice inside herself, when it denies the conventional, accepted truths by which she has been living? And yet the women I have talked to, who are finally listening to that inner voice, seem in some incredible way to be groping through to a truth that has defied the experts. …

I began to see in a strange new light the American return to early marriage and the large families that are causing the population explosion; the recent movement to natural childbirth and breastfeeding; suburban conformity, and the new neuroses, character pathologies and sexual problems being reported by the doctors. I
began to see new dimensions to old problems that have long been taken for granted among women: menstrual difficulties, sexual frigidity, promiscuity, pregnancy fears, childbirth depression, the high incidence of emotional breakdown and suicide among women in their twenties and thirties, the menopause crises, the so-called passivity and immaturity of American men, the discrepancy between women’s tested intellectual abilities in childhood and their adult achievement, the changing incidence of adult sexual orgasm in American women, and persistent problems in psychotherapy and in women’s education.

If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes. It is the key to these other new and old problems which have been torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.”

Gloria Steinem became a spokeswoman for American feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s. This article in *New York* magazine connected “Women’s Liberation” to Black Power and to the experiences of young women in “the Movement” (a blanket term for the New Left, counterculture, anti-war, and civil rights movements) in general.

Once upon a time—say, ten or even five years ago—a Liberated Woman was somebody who had sex before marriage and a job afterward. Once upon the same time, a Liberated Zone was any foreign place lucky enough to have an American army in it. Both ideas seem antiquated now, and for pretty much the same reason: Liberation isn’t exposure to the American values of Mom-and-applepie anymore (not even if Mom is allowed to work in an office and vote once in a while); it’s the escape from them. …

What do women want? [The Women’s Liberation Movement] is in no way connected to the Bloomingdale-centered, ask-not-what-I-can-do-for-myself-ask-what-my-husband-can-do-for-me ladies of Manhattan, who are said by sociologists to be “liberated.” Nor do the house-bound matriarchs of Queens and the Bronx get much satisfaction out of reading about feminist escapades. On the contrary, the whole thing alienates them by being a) radical and b) young.

The women behind it, and influenced by it, usually turn out to be white, serious, well-educated girls; the same sort who have labored hard in what is loosely known as the Movement, from the Southern sit-ins of nine years ago to the current attacks on the military-industrial-educational complex. They have been jailed, beaten and maced side-by-side with their social-activist male counterparts. (It’s wonderful to see how quickly police from Selma to Chicago get over a reluctance to hit women.) They have marched on Senate committees, Pentagon hawks, their own college presidents and the Chase Manhattan Bank. But once back in the bosom of SDS, they found themselves typing and making coffee. “When it comes to decision-making or being taken seriously in meetings,” said one revolutionary theorist from Berkeley, “we might as well join the Young Republicans.”

Such grumbling noises were being made aloud at Movement meetings as early as five years ago. but women were ridiculed or argued down by men (as well as some “Uncle Tom” women). Eventually, they were assured, “the woman question” would come up on the list of radical priorities—as decided on by radical men. Meanwhile, more backstage work, more mimeographing, more secondary-role playing around the revolutionary cells and apartment-communes. …

Finally, women began to “rap” (talk, analyze, in radical-ese) about their essential second-classness, forming women’s caucuses inside the Movement in much the same way Black Power groups had done. And once together they made a lot of discoveries: that they shared more problems with women of different classes, for instance, than they did with men of their own; that they liked and respected each other (if women don’t want to work with women, as Negroes used to reject other Negroes, it’s usually because they believe the myth of their own inferiority), and that, as black militants kept explaining to white liberals, “You don’t get radicalized fighting other people’s battles.”

At the SDS Convention in 1967, women were still saying such integrationist things as, “the struggle for the liberation of women must be part of the larger fight for freedom.” Many Movement women still are. But members of groups like the Southern Student Organizing Committee and New York Radical Women … withdrew to start concentrating on their own problems. They couldn’t become black or risk jail by burning their draft cards, but they could change society from the bottom up by radicalizing (engaging with basic truth) the consciousness of women; by going into the streets on such women’s issues as abortion, free childcare centers, and a final break with the 19th-century definition of females as sex objects whose main function is to service men and their children.

All this happened not so much by organization as contagion. What has come to be known in the last two years or so as the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) is no more pin-downable
than the Black Power Movement; maybe less so ... WLM-minded groups are springing up on dozens of campuses where they add special student concerns to their activities; professors who assume women aren’t “serious” about careers; advisers who pressure girls toward marriage or traditionally feminine jobs, and faculties or administrations where few or no women are honored in authority. ...

If all this sounds far-out, utopian, elitist, unnecessary or otherwise unlikely to be the next big thing in revolutions, consider two facts: 1) the WLM is growing so rapidly that even its most cheerful proselytizers are surprised, spreading not only along the infra-structure of the existing co-ed Movement, but into a political territory where anti-Vietnam petitions have rarely been seen; and 2) there are a couple of mass movements, from highly organized through just restless, that the WLM might merge with, becoming sort of a revolutionary vanguard.

The older, middle-class women come first, the ones who tried hard to play subordinate roles in the suburbs according to the post-war-baby-boom-women’s magazine idyll but found Something Missing. Betty Friedan, who explained their plight clearly and compassionately in The Feminine Mystique, named that Something: rewarding work. But when these women went out to find jobs, they found a lot of home-truths instead.

For instance, there is hardly a hierarchy in the country—business, union, government, educational, religious, whatever—that doesn’t discriminate against women above the secretarial level. Women with some college education earn less than men who get as far as the eighth grade. The median income of white women employed full time is less than that of white men and Negro men. The gap between women’s pay and men’s pay gets greater every year, even though the number of women in the labor force increases (they are now a third of all workers). ... The subtler, psychological punishments for stepping out of woman’s traditional “service” role are considerable. (Being called “unfeminine,” “a bad mother” or “a castrating woman,” to name a traditional few.) And, to top it all off, the problem of servants or child care often proves insurmountable after others are solved. ...

The middle-class, educated and disillusioned group gets larger with each college graduation. National Organization for Women (NOW)—founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan, among others, “to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” — is a very effective voice of this group, concentrating on such reforms as getting irrelevant sex-designations out of Help Wanted ads and implementing Equal Employment Opportunity laws.

If the WLM can feel solidarity with the hated middle class, and vice versa, then an alliance with the second mass movement—poor women of all colors—should be no problem. They are already organized around welfare problems, free daycare centers, for mothers who must work, and food prices. For them, equal pay, unequal training and sex discrimination for jobs (not to mention the woman-punishing rules of welfare) exact a daily price: Of all the families living below the poverty level, 40 per cent are headed by women.

A lot of middle-class and radical-intellectual women are already working with the poor on common problems, but viewing them as social. If the “consciousness-raising” programs of the WLM work, they’ll see them as rallying points for women qua women. And that might forge the final revolutionary link. Rumblings are already being heard inside the Democratic Party in New York. It’s the women who staff and win elections, and they may finally balk at working for only men—not very qualified men at that—in the mayoral primary.

There is plenty of opposition to this kind of thinking, from women as well as men. Having one’s traditional role questioned is not a very comfortable experience; perhaps especially for women, who have been able to remain children, and to benefit from work they did not and could not do. Marriage wouldn’t go straight down the drain, as traditionalists keep predicting. Women’s liberation might just hurry up some sort of companionate marriage that seems to be developing anyway.

But there is bound to be a time of, as social anthropologist Lionel Tiger puts it, “increased personal acrimony,” even if the revolution fails and women go right back to darning socks. (Masculinity doesn’t
depend on the subservience of others, but it will take us a while to find that out.) It might be helpful to men—and good for women’s liberation—if they just keep repeating key phrases like, “No more guilt, No more alimony, Fewer boring women, Fewer bitchy women, No more tyrants with all human ambition confined to the home, No more ‘Jewish mothers’ transferring ambition to children, No more women trying to be masculine because it’s a Man’s World . . .” (and maybe one more round of “No more alimony”) until the acrimony has stopped.

Because the idea is, in the long run, that women’s liberation will be men’s liberation, too.
No More Miss America

In August 1968, young radical feminists demonstrated against the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City. This was one of the important inaugural events of the women’s liberation movement. While the organizers, in the invitation below, suggest throwing away bras (along with girdles, false eyelashes, and the like), no burning of bras took place. Nonetheless, this image was constructed by the media, connecting “bra burning” to draft-card burning and the “burn, baby, burn” image of urban rioting, all radical repudiations of the status quo.

On September 7th in Atlantic City, the Annual Miss America Pageant will again crown “your ideal.” But this year, reality will liberate the contest auction-block in the guise of “genyooine” de-plasticized, breathing women. Women’s Liberation Groups, black women, high-school and college women, women’s peace groups, women’s welfare and social-work groups, women’s job-equality groups, pro-birth con-

control and pro-abortion groups—women of every political persuasion—all are invited to join us in a day-long boardwalk-theater event, starting at 1:00 P.M. on the Boardwalk in front of Atlantic City’s Convention Hall. We will protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us. There will be: Picket Lines; Guerrilla Theater; Leafleting; Lobbying Visits to the contestants urging our sisters to reject the Pageant Farce and join us; a huge Freedom Trash Can (into which we will throw bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, and representative issues of Cosmopolitan, Ladies’ Home Journal, Family Circle, etc.—bring any such woman-garbage you have around the house); we will also announce a Boycott of all those commercial products related to the Pageant, and the day will end with a Women’s Liberation rally at midnight when Miss America is crowned on live television. Lots of other surprises are being planned (come and add your own) but we do not plan heavy disruptive tactics and so do not expect a bad police scene. It should be a groovy day on the Boardwalk in the sun with our sisters. In case of arrests, however, we plan to reject all male authority and demand to be busted by policewomen only. (In Atlantic City, women cops are not permitted to make arrests—dig that!) Male chauvinist-reactionaries on this issue had best stay away, nor are male liberals welcome in the demonstrations. But sympathetic men can donate money as well as cars and drivers.

Male reporters will be refused interviews. We reject patronizing reportage. Only newswomen will be recognized.

THE TEN POINTS

We Protest:

1. The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol. The Pageant contestants epitomize the roles we are all forced to play as women. The parade down the runway blares the metaphor of the 4-H Club county fair, where the nervous animals are judged for teeth, fleece, etc., and where the best “specimen” gets the blue ribbon. So are women in our society forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous “beauty” standards we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously.

2. Racism with Roses. Since its inception in 1921, the Pageant has not had one Black finalist, and this has not been for a lack of test-case contestants. There has never been a Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian, or Mexican-American winner. Nor has there ever been a true Miss America—an American Indian.

3. Miss America as Military Death Mascot. The highlight of her reign each year is a cheerleader-tour of American troops abroad—last year she went to Vietnam to pep-talk our husbands, fathers, sons and boyfriends into dying and killing with a better spirit. She personifies the “unstained patriotic American womanhood our boys are fighting for.” The Living Bra and the Dead Soldier. We refuse to be used as Mascots for Murder.

4. The Consumer Con-Game. Miss America is a walking commercial for the Pageant’s sponsors. Wind her up and she plugs your product on promotion tours and TV—all in an “honest, objective” endorsement. What a shill.

5. Competition Rigged and Unrigged. We deplore the encouragement of an American myth that oppresses men as well as women: the win-or-you’re-worthless competitive disease. The “beauty contest” creates only one winner to be “used” and forty-nine losers who are “useless.”

6. The Woman as Pop Culture Obsolescent Theme. Spindle, mutilate, and then discard tomorrow. What is so ignored as last year’s Miss America? This only reflects the gospel of our society, according to Saint Male: women must be young, juicy, malleable—hence age discrimination and the cult of youth. And we women are brainwashed into believing this ourselves!

7. The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination. Miss America and Playboy’s centerfold are sisters over the skin. To win approval, we must be both sexy and wholesome, delicate but able to cope, demure yet titillatingly bitchy. Deviation of any sort brings, we are told, disaster: “You won’t get a man!!”

8. The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity. Miss America represents what women are supposed to be: unoffensive, bland, apolitical. If you are tall, short, over or under what weight The Man prescribes you should be, forget it. Personality, articulateness, intelligence, commitment—unwise. Conformity is the key to the crown—and, by extension, to success in our society.
9. Miss America as Dream Equivalent To—? In this reputedly democratic society, where every little boy supposedly can grow up to be President, what can every little girl hope to grow to be? Miss America. That’s where it’s at. Real power to control our own lives is restricted to men, while women get patronizing pseudo-power, an ermine cloak and a bunch of flowers; men are judged by their actions, women by their appearance.

10. Miss America as Big Sister Watching You. The Pageant exercises Thought Control, attempts to scar the Image onto our minds, to further make women oppressed and men oppressors; to enslave us all the more in high-heeled, low-status roles; to inculcate false values in young girls; to use women as beasts of buying; to seduce us to prostitute ourselves before our own oppression.

NO MORE MISS AMERICA

Principles

NEW YORK RADICAL WOMEN

This brief position statement sketches out a radical feminist perspective of the late sixties.

We take the woman’s side in everything.

We ask not if something is “reformist,” “radical,” “revolutionary,” or “moral.” We ask: is it good for women or bad for women?

We ask not if something is “political.” We ask: is it effective? Does it get us closest to what we really want in the fastest way?

About My Consciousness Raising

BARBARA SUSAN

This Redstockings author describes the process of consciousness raising among small groups of women. Consciousness raising was considered one of the most important methods of changing the way in which women saw the world, enabling them to perceive and define their personal situations in social and political terms.

The first consciousness raising session that I attended was about housework. We went around the room and each woman in turn told how she felt about housework and how she felt when she was standing over the dishes or stove, or what happened when she asked her husband or a man she was living with to do the dishes. It came to my turn and I explained how my husband always helped with the housework. If I was tired he'd cook dinner and sometimes even do the dishes. Yet I'd still start to boil every time I'd get in front of the sink or stove. I listened to other women also telling about how their men "helped" with the housework.

I began to get sick at the thought of these liberal men "helping" their wives with the housework. When we did other things like go to the beach or go out for ice cream he didn't help, he shared. It was only a matter of helping when it came to doing things that he didn't like to do. The group began to feel that something was wrong with the whole idea of men "helping" women with the housework. It meant that he was helping me with my job. Every time he'd help and I'd say "thank you" I was reinforcing the idea that it was my job! Regardless of whether I worked or not housekeeping was my job. It became pretty clear after hearing many women speak that this thing about helping was no petty detail of our personal lives. It became clear that it was a political fact. Listen to men talk about housework or better yet ask them how they feel about it. I'll bet that most of them say that they "help out." This is not just a matter of semantics. It is important because it keeps us having the job of housework as our job . . . as woman's job. There were several things that were very surprising to me at this consciousness raising session, not the least of which was the conspicuous absence of men. It was quite pleasant to talk without them. There was no need to argue about whether or not the problems we felt were real. Also, that constant undercurrent of competition that almost all of us feel when in the presence of men was almost totally absent. We were able to begin to find new ways of relating to each other.

After doing consciousness raising for a while Redstockings developed a procedure for it that we find useful. We direct our talk to one particular question at a time in order to formulate an analysis based on our real experiences and so that any generalizations we might come to will be based on fact. We go around the room, each sister taking a turn. In this way everyone has a fair chance to speak and be totally heard. When a sister gives testimony the other women in the group can ask questions in order to clarify in their own minds what a sister is saying. Sometimes women interrupt a testimony to say how their own experiences are related directly to those of the woman speaking. When everyone has spoken we go around the room making generalizations and trying to find out what the connections are between our experiences and how they relate one to the other.

Consciousness raising is not a form of encounter group or psychotherapy. I've been involved in both and I can tell you they are very different. Therapy was useful to me in certain ways. It helped me develop a sense of self-worth and come to the understanding that I wasn't a bad person or useless. My experience in therapy helped me have a better image of myself and I even started to look better and dress in a more attractive way. In short I had more confidence in myself . . .

In retrospect therapy had separated me from my sisters by calling them "most women" and me "special." It had neglected to tell me that my newly acquired feeling of self-worth was only going to propel me headlong into another struggle because although I felt worthy I was still a woman and very few other people were going to recognize my worth. Not only weren't they going to recognize my worth, but I was going to be penalized for fighting for my rights. I was labelled crazy, masochistic, etc. But this time I was not completely fooled.
“SHE’S LEAVING HOME”

I got into the women’s movement and began to see that other women were also called crazy. The relief at finding I was not alone was incredible. I was stunned. Here were women who were strong. And what’s more they were smart and had ideas about how things ought to be. It had been very effective in therapy calling me different from my sisters, trying to make me believe that I could find an individual solution without changing the external political conditions. It had effectively separated me from my sisters and even made me start to hate them. It put me in the position of not being able to identify with other women. I was identifying with men, which seems quite natural to me since they were the ones who got all the goodies.

In the women’s movement and especially in consciousness raising I saw women who recognized that there was no such thing as a personal way of solving their problems so long as male supremacy in all its formal and informal forms still existed. Here were women looking for solutions based on their own collective experience. . . . They were talking about their personal experiences and analyzing them in terms of social structures rather than in terms of their own weaknesses. They were not, as therapy often does, blaming women for being passive and in a rut. They were trying to find out exactly what that rut was and how they were forced into it so that it could be changed. They were trusting to their own minds and experiences to understand oppression . . . not as an abstraction . . . not as something that happened to other women, but as a fact of their lives . . .

Consciousness raising is a way of forming a political analysis on information we can trust is true. That information is our experience. It is difficult to understand how our oppression is political (organized) unless we first remove it from the area of personal problems. Unless we talk to each other about our so called personal problems and see how many of our problems are shared by other people, we won’t be able to see how these problems are rooted in politics. When we talk about politics we don’t mean in the limited sense of political parties such as the Democratic and Republican or economic systems like capitalism and socialism. We also see male supremacy as a political system in as much as all men are in collusion in forcing women into inferior and unproductive positions. Rare is the man who will support a woman vis-à-vis another man. There is a tacit agreement among men that women should do only certain kinds of work, (housework, childcare, nursing, clerical work, etc.) and that woman are incapable

THE POLITICS OF HOUSEWORK

of controlling their own lives and therefore must be helped (controlled) by men. This “understanding” that men have is reinforced by our so called democratic legal system, prostitutes are criminals but their clients aren’t (in New York State), women cannot accuse their husband of rape, etc.

In order for us to form a powerful political movement it must be a movement which answers to the needs of all women. We recognize that at the present time there are economic, class and racial differences among women which keep us from coming together politically. It is our hope that consciousness raising in groups of women who are not the same will help us to understand each other and help us all in building a movement which answers to the needs of more than just the most privileged woman. Our analysis is an expanding one, it changes as more and more women enter the movement and contribute their knowledge and experience thereby widening and correcting our understanding of oppression.

The Politics of Housework

PAT MAINARDI

In one of the best known early feminist pieces, published in 1969, Pat Mainardi recounts her personal experience of trying to equalize the work of daily life with her husband, and gives advice to women who want to share the housework with their male partners. The fact that there was a politics of housework proved eye opening.

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Phyllis Schlafly Proclaims the Power of the Positive Woman, 1977

The first requirement for the acquisition of power by the Positive Woman is to understand the differences between men and women. Your outlook on life, your faith, your behavior, your potential for fulfillment, all are determined by the parameters of your original premise. The Positive Woman starts with the assumption that the world is her oyster. She rejoices in the creative capability within her body and the power potential of her mind and spirit. She understands that men and women are different, and that those very differences provide the key to her success as a person and fulfillment as a woman.

The women's liberationist, on the other hand, is imprisoned by her own negative view of herself and of her place in the world around her. This view of women was most succinctly expressed in an advertisement designed by the principal woman's liberationist organization, the National Organization for Women (NOW), and run in many magazines and newspapers and as spot announcements on many television stations. The advertisement showed a darling curvilinear girl with the caption: "This healthy, normal baby has a handicap. She was born female."

This is the self-articulated dog-in-the-manger, chip-on-the-shoulder, fundamental dogma of the women's liberation movement. Someone—it is not clear who, perhaps God, perhaps the "Establishment," perhaps a conspiracy of male chauvinist pigs—dealt women a full blow by making them female. It becomes necessary, therefore, for women to agitate and demonstrate and hurl demands on society in order to wrest from an oppressive male-dominated social structure the status that has been wrongfully denied to women through the centuries.

By its very nature, therefore, the women's liberation movement precipitates a series of conflict situations—in the legislatures, in the courts, in the schools, in industry—with man targeted as the enemy. Confrontation replaces cooperation as the watchword of all relationships. Women and men become adversaries instead of partners.

The second dogma of the women's liberationists is that, of all the injustices perpetrated upon women through the centuries, the most oppressive is the cruel fact that women have babies and men do not. Within the confines of the women's liberationist ideology, therefore, the abolition of this overriding inequality of women becomes the primary goal. This goal must be achieved at any and all costs—to the woman herself, to the baby, to the family, and to society. Women must be made equal to men in their ability not to become pregnant and not to be expected to care for babies they may bring into the world.

This is why women's liberationists are compulsively involved in the drive to make abortion and child-care centers for all women, regardless of religion or income, both socially acceptable and government-financed. Former Congresswoman Bella Abzug has defined the goal: "to enforce the constitutional right of females to terminate pregnancies that they do not wish to continue."

If man is targeted as the enemy, and the ultimate goal of women's liberation is independence from men and the avoidance of pregnancy and its consequences, then lesbianism is logically the highest form in the ritual of women's liberation. Many, such as Kate Millett, come to this conclusion, although many others do not.

The Positive Woman will never travel that dead-end road. It is self-evident to the Positive Woman that the female body with its baby-producing organs was not designed by a conspiracy of men but by the Divine Architect of the human race. Those who think it is unfair that women have babies, whereas men cannot, will have to take up their complaint with God because no other power is capable of changing that fundamental fact. On some college campuses, I have been assured that other methods of reproduction will be developed. But most of us must deal with the real world rather than with the imagination of dreamers.

The third basic dogma of the women's liberation movement is that there is no difference between male and female except the sex organs, and that all those physical, cognitive, and emotional differences you think are there, are merely the result of centuries of restraints imposed by a male-dominated society and sex-stereotyped schooling. The role imposed on women is, by definition, inferior, according to the women's liberationists.

The Positive Woman knows that, while there are some physical competitions in which women are better (and can command more money) than men, including those that put a premium on grace and beauty, such as figure skating, the superior physical strength of males over females in competitions of strength, speed, and short-term endurance is beyond rational dispute.

The new generation can brag all it wants about the new liberation of the new morality, but it is still the woman who is hurt the most. The new morality isn't just a "fad"—it is a cheat and a thief. It robs the woman of her virtue, her youth, her beauty, and her love—for nothing, just nothing. It has produced a generation of young women searching for their identity, bored with sexual freedom, and despondent from the loneliness of living a life without commitment. They have abandoned the old commandments, but they can't find any new rules that work.

The differences between men and women are also emotional and psychological. Without woman's innate maternal instinct, the human race would have died out centuries ago. There is nothing so helpless in all earthly life as the newborn infant. It will die within hours if not cared for. Even in the most primitive, uneducated societies, women have always cared for their newborn babies. They didn't need any schooling to teach them how. They didn't need any welfare workers to tell them it is their social obligation. Even in societies to whom such concepts as "ought," "social responsibility," and "compassion for the helpless" were unknown, mothers cared for their new babies.

Why? Because caring for a baby serves the natural maternal need of a woman. Although not nearly so total as the baby's need, the woman's need is nonetheless real.

The overriding psychological need of a woman is to love something alive. A baby fulfills this need in the lives of most women. If a baby is not available to fill that need, women search for a baby-substitute. This is the reason why women have traditionally gone into teaching and nursing careers. They are doing what comes naturally to the female psyche. The schoolchild or the patient of any age provides an outlet for a woman to express her natural maternal need.

Finally, women are different from men in dealing with the fundamentals of life itself. Men are philosophers, women are practical, and 'twas ever thus. Men may philosophize about how life began and where we are heading; women are concerned about feeding the kids today. No woman would ever, as Karl Marx did, spend years reading political philosophy in the British Museum while her child starved to death. Women don't take naturally to a search for the intangible and the abstract. The Positive Woman knows who she is and where she is going, and she will reach her goal because the longest journey starts with a very practical first step.
The Equal Rights Amendment

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution, written by the American suffragist Alice Paul. It was introduced in Congress for the first time in 1923, but did not make it out of committee. It was introduced again every year thereafter from 1923 to 1972.

In 1970, the ERA was passed by the House of Representatives. In 1972, it was passed by the Senate, and went to the states for ratification. (2/3 of the states are required to ratify an amendment for it to become part of the Constitution.) By 1975, thirty-four of the required thirty-eight states had ratified the ERA—but a determined effort to stop the ERA, led by conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly and others, raised opposition to the amendment and slowed further ratifications. In 1978, Jimmy Carter extended the deadline for ratification to 1982. In 1982, the deadline expired with the ERA still three states short of ratification. The ERA has been reintroduced in every session of Congress since 1982, but has not made it to a floor vote since 1983.

Below is the full text of the controversial amendment.

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.