



Feminism

- old wave and new -



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A tentative definition of feminism might go like this: feminism is a political concept with three parts: (1) an analysis -- which tries to explain why and how women are oppressed, (2) a vision -- of a society in which women are liberated and sex role stereotypes are obliterated, (3) a conviction -- that the oppression of women is a primary contradiction in society.

There have been two major feminist waves in this country, one running from about 1835 to 1920 (it took that long to win its major demand -- the vote); the other beginning some time in the middle of the sixties and ending who knows when.

In both cases, a feminist upsurge was initiated by women who had attempted to function politically in the major reform movements of their days, and had found that because they were women, they would be unable to do very much at all. They found that they would be isolated from positions of decision-making, and instead they would do the shitwork (the typing, petition-gathering, meeting-organizing, etc.) while men made the decisions and got the recognition.

In our generation, women who were working in the civil rights and peace movements inaugurated a new feminism. They had joined and committed themselves to a political movement -- the New Left -- which proudly labelled itself radical, and therefore seemed to be calling for a ruthlessly radical critique of all aspects of American society. These women came to realize that sex-role stereotypes were not being subjected to this searching criticism, and, in fact, were reappearing in particularly virulent forms within the movement. The New Left had dedicated itself to equal justice for all, and yet right in its midst women felt they were not quite being treated as political equals.

The first wave of feminism grew out of the major reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century -- abolitionism. Like contemporary feminists, women working in abolition found that their full and equal participation in political activity was not especially wanted -- that as long as they worked within "woman's sphere," everything would be fine. But as soon as they stepped beyond it, they were severely reprimanded by their abolitionist brothers. Like the women of the New Left, these 19th century sisters discovered that the political world in which they moved -- and which they thought was dedicated to equal justice for all -- was perfectly content to abide by the rules for "proper feminine behavior" that the outside, less politically sophisticated world provided.

What this meant for these 19th century feminists -- as it meant for us -- was that the women did the shitwork and the men made the decisions. Thousands of women participated in the abolition movement -- collecting signatures on petitions to Congress; their labor and those petitions provided the organizational backbone of the abolitionist movement. The decision-making and public acknowledgement were reserved for the men.

In 1837, however, this peaceful division of labor was shattered when two female abolitionists and ex-slaveholders -- Sarah and Angelina Grimke -- started to speak out publicly to mixed audiences against slavery. New England -- and especially its clergy -- was shocked at women lecturing to what it called "promiscuous audiences." Some male abolitionists, notably William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, defended the Grimkes. But what is striking is how many male abolitionists did not. The Grimkes succeeded in preserving their right to lecture, and even began to write and speak about the "woman question." The controversy they had begun -- whether or not women were going to be allowed to participate equally with men in all aspects of the abolitionist movement -- continued to be hotly debated. In the end, it can be credited with generating 19th century feminism.

The next major event in which the "woman question" figured was three years after the Grimkes, in 1840. In that year, British abolitionists announced that they would sponsor a World Anti-Slavery Convention. Off to London went most of the major American abolitionists, among them Lucretia Mott (who was primarily responsible for organizing anti-slavery work in Philadelphia) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a young bride on her honeymoon with her abolitionist husband.

Once in London the American abolitionists had a surprise waiting for them. British abolitionists were offended by the thought of women functioning politically as the equals of men, and therefore the sponsors of the convention decreed that women -- even women like Lucretia Mott -- would not be seated as delegates to the Convention. Once again, a few male abolitionists stood up for the women, but the majority did not bother to even protest this discrimination. The women were placed behind a curtain in the convention hall -- so they might hear the proceedings without offending any male sensibilities. Stanton and Mott left the hall in disgust, to wander around London and discuss the "woman question." They found that they agreed on many things, but especially that the oppression of women deserved attention. Eight years later, in 1848, these same two women organized the first woman's rights convention in the United States, the Seneca Falls Convention.

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By the time the Civil War had started, therefore, women were beginning to understand how they were oppressed and slightly wary of working with men, but they were not yet totally convinced that it was impossible for women to work as political equals with men in reform political activity.

When the War began, the women dropped all their activities as feminists, and threw themselves into patriotic work. They were very conscious that their participation in the national wartime mobilization would be a test of their political seriousness. They also expected to be amply rewarded for their selfless activity once the war was over. They were not. And that was where the final blow was struck and the leading feminists realized that they could not put political trust in men; that it was nearly impossible for even the most liberal of men to understand how much woman feels her oppression and how much she wants her freedom.

The first hint of this final betrayal by liberal men was in the 14th Amendment. This amendment -- the second of the three amendments that followed the Civil War -- defined the rights of citizenship, and prohibited the denial of those rights to persons on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. This was all fine and good except for one thing -- the federal government was extending its protection only to all citizens of the male sex. Not only were women ignored by the Amendment, but they discovered that, after its passage, they were considerably worse off than before. For the first time, the word "male" appeared in the Federal Constitution.

Previously, political discrimination against women had been a matter of local statute and public sentiment. Now, with the 14th Amendment, this discrimination was being endorsed on the national level. Women were furious. They appealed to male abolitionists and radical republicans for support; is this how they were to be repaid for their loyal services during the war? Wendell Phillips, leader of the abolitionist forces, assured them that their time would come, that when he started laboring for the enfranchisement of the black man, he would labor for women also. Two years later the Fifteenth Amendment was passed by Congress. It prohibited dis-franchisement on the grounds of race, color, or previous condition of servitude -- but not one word about sex.

Once again, women discovered that they could not put their faith in male reformers because the oppression of women was not top priority for anyone but women themselves. They had been literally abandoned by the most radical political movement of the day. As it turned out, the decision of the abolitionists to ignore women's claim to the ballot was a particularly momentous one. It took another fifty years to get the ballot for women. This was the final blow -- feminists had learned that if women were to ever win their rights, they would have to win them without the help of men. Looking back on the 1860s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote:

"We would warn the young women of the coming generation against man's advice as to their best interests, their highest development. We would point for them the moral of our experiences: that woman must lead the way to her own enfranchisement, and work out her own salvation with a hopeful courage and determination that knows no fear nor trembling. She must not put her trust in man in this transition period, since, while regarded as his subject, his inferior, his slave, their interests must be antagonistic."

