1. Feminism: A Short History

Introduction

Together with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, feminism sprang into life in the late sixties and seventies attracting acres of media attention and generating a tremendous energy that translated into real change in many women's lives. But the roots of 'women's liberation', as it came to be known at that time, can be traced back to the late eighteenth century when the revolutionary zeal in France began to influence writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* is seen as the foundation of modern feminism. It's been a long, slow haul with many fits and starts but the achievements of the last two hundred years have revolutionised the lives of women. Some commentators have suggested that we now live in a post-feminist world where women have achieved equality with men and so there is no longer a need for a women's movement. This seems a little hard to swallow given that, even in the Western world where campaigns for equality have been strongest, the average wage for women is still less than average male earnings. Despite some notable advances for women in the political arena, there has still been no serious female contender for the American Presidency or for the premiership of many other countries. Maybe when half the world's leaders are women we can say that feminism's work is over.

Feminism has become a huge area of study since the resurgence of the women's movement in the sixties. Conferences, dissertations, debates and websites abound on the subject. In universities throughout the world academics are

teaching, researching and contributing to the explosion in feminist literature which hit the bookshelves in the late twentieth century and continues to do so. It can be hard to find your way through the maze of information on offer. This book tries to make the task a little simpler by tracing the path of a movement that has taken many twists and turns since its beginning. Its aim is to give an overview of feminism, a straightforward 'what happened when', backed up by short summaries of some key texts and potted biographies of key figures, rather than a detailed analysis which can be safely left to the academics. Geographically, the book concentrates on British and American feminism. To take things much beyond that would be outside the scope of such a slim volume.

So, where do we start? Coming up with some sort of definition might help.

What is Feminism?

Try searching the Internet and you will come up with pages of definitions, many subtly different. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* begins:

> Feminism is a way of looking at the world, which women occupy from the perspective of women. It has as its central focus the concept of patriarchy, which can be described as a system of male authority, which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions.

And then carries on in a similar vein for several paragraphs. *Chambers Dictionary* puts it more simply as the 'advocacy of women's rights, or of the movement for the

advancement and emancipation of women' and that's the one we'll be sticking with, although Rebecca West certainly has the edge on both of these with her comment that:

> I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat...

When did it all begin?

The origins of the women's movement in the Western world can be traced back to the French Revolution which began in 1789. That's not to say that women had not stood up for themselves before that or that there were no women of any note. Boadicea, Elizabeth I (1533 - 1603), Empress Catherine the Great of Russia (1729 - 96) and Joan of Arc (1412 - 31) all spring to mind but these are notable exceptions and, rather like Margaret Thatcher, sisterhood did not seem to be on their agenda.

There were quieter examples of women who not only made their own way in the world but also protested against the inequalities between the sexes. Christine de Pizan (1364 - 1430) was a Venetian writer whose book *Treasures of the City of Ladies*, a collection of snippets of advice to women, is still quoted today. Pizan refused to accept the male certainties that women were both inherently weaker than men and more likely to fall into evil ways. Three centuries later, Mary Astell (1666 - 1731) wrote *Reflections on Marriage*, perhaps the earliest English feminist text. Astell wrote not only about the inequality between men and women in marriage but also about the lack of educational opportunities for women.

Meanwhile, Aphra Behn (1640 - 1689) managed to establish herself as the first English woman playwright, exploring themes such as the consequences of arranged and ill-matched marriages. However, such women were few and far between and the status quo remained largely unchallenged.

There was little choice for women in how they led their lives. For the gentry, marriage, the convent or scratching a living as a governess were just about the only options. Although Aphra Behn was the first in a long and honourable tradition of women writers, few women were able to rely on this for their living.

For the less well off, before industrialisation, men and women worked together on the farm or in the workshop. Both the work women did and the amount they were paid differed from men. With the spread of industrialisation came a more formalised separation between 'men's work' and 'women's work'. Whatever their economic and social background, there was no active role for women in public life and by the late eighteenth century, some women were beginning to chafe against such restriction.

The French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft

The demand for women's rights that began to be voiced in the late eighteenth century forms the basis of modern feminism. Women's voices were first raised in unison during the French Revolution in which many of them took an active part. Citoyennes, Republicaines, Révolutionnaires (Revolutionary Republican Women Citizens) called for the right for women to vote and to hold senior civilian and

military posts in the new Republic. Having fought alongside men, women were bitterly disappointed when the revolutionaries' *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789) explicitly denied equality with their male *compadres*. Olympe de Gouge replied in 1791 with her *Declaration of the Rights of Women* calling for equal rights with men. De Gouges, a member of the royalist Girondin faction, persisted in her demands and was sent to the guillotine in 1793 during the Jacobin Terror (see Key Figures and Texts).

Across the Channel, Mary Wollstonecraft enthusiastically debated the events in France with her radical friends. A keen supporter of the French revolutionaries, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) was her passionate reply to Edmund Burke's attack on the Revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Like de Gouges, Wollstonecraft found herself deeply frustrated by the revolutionaries' neglect of women's rights. Her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was written in 1792, the year after De Gouges' *Declaration*. Although nineteenth century feminists distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft, unwilling to be associated with her outspoken opinions on sexuality and the scandal of her illegitimate daughter, the *Vindication* is now seen as the foundation stone upon which modern feminism was built. It is a passionate critique of both the education available to women and the assumptions surrounding marriage and family life. Claiming that the financial dependence of women on their husbands amounted to little more than 'legalised prostitution', Wollstonecraft demanded that women be recognised as citizens

in their own right with equality of access to both education and employment (see Key Figures and Texts).

Coming at the same question from an entirely different angle, Hannah More's pamphlet, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), called for an educational system tailored to enable women to be moral guardians to their children, carry out their philanthropic duties and lay the foundations for a marriage based on friendship. The antithesis of Wollstonecraft in both her life and her work, More's links with evangelical philanthropy, coupled with her conservatism, meant that her views were far more likely to be listened to by a society made jittery by events in France.

Although she seems an unlikely feminist, with her acceptance of the sexual hierarchy, Hannah More made a significant contribution to the movement. As society became more industrialised, divisions between men and women became more pronounced. In the newly expanding middle classes, material conditions improved but women still found themselves confined to the domestic sphere and expected to find fulfilment in their role as moral educators of the next generation. More capitalised on this idea by taking it outside the home and helping to establish a role for women which would later enable nineteenth century feminists like Josephine Butler to extend the boundaries of moral education into campaigning for women's rights (see Key Figures).

As writers, both Wollstonecraft and More were part of a growing number of women in the eighteenth century who saw literature as a viable profession. Not only did it offer educated women a small measure of financial indepen-

dence, it also provided a way of drawing attention to the difficulties faced by women. Novelists such as Mary Hays, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth and, later, Jane Austen debated what became known as the 'Woman Question' in their novels. They addressed concerns about marriage, motherhood and family life, sometimes extending the debate to include such difficult issues as rape and prostitution (see Key Texts).

William Thompson's Appeal and the sad story of Caroline Norton.

In the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution, Britain was in no mood for anything but conservatism. This together with the whiff of scandal surrounding Mary Wollstonecraft's reputation, confirmed for many by the *Memoirs* (1798) written by her husband William Godwin, meant that her ideas were not openly discussed for some time.

Women continued to establish some sort of civic role for themselves by raising money during the Napoleonic Wars with France but little else was done to further their emancipation.

In the 1820s there was a renewal of interest in social, parliamentary and legal reform. William Thompson's *Appeal Of One-Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to retain them in Political and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* (1825) put forward radical demands for female emancipation in reply to James Mill's *Article on Government.* Thompson refuted Mill's arguments against universal enfranchisement, comparing the situation of women to the slavery that

the recently formed abolitionist movement was attempting to eradicate in America. Claiming to be a mouthpiece for Anna Wheeler, a fellow member of the Owenite co-operative movement, Thompson's *Appeal* was an impassioned plea for reform and equality (see Key Figures and Texts)

Thompson's indictment of marriage is graphically illustrated by the sad story of Caroline Norton. Trapped in a violent marriage, Norton found herself barred from her own house after a short absence. At this time, women had virtually no legal standing once they were married. Any property that they owned, including income from that property, passed into the hands of their husband on marriage. They were unable to enter into legal contracts of any kind and had no rights over their children. Even rape was legal within marriage. For many years Norton was denied access to her three young sons. Desperate, she set about trying to change the law, writing and distributing pamphlets about her situation. Although she met with no success, her book *English Laws for Women* (1854), brought the question of legal reform for women into the forefront of the public arena. Some progress in marital law was made with the Divorce Act of 1857 which made it easier for women to leave hellish marriages, but the sexual double standard was enshrined by making it possible for a man to divorce a woman on grounds of adultery, while women had to prove that men were also cruel, bigamous or incestuous. Despite her appalling treatment by her husband, Norton continued to support the idea of male superiority, refusing to countenance the idea of women's rights as a part of her appeal for legal reform (see Key Texts).

How the movement for the abolition of slavery became a potent force for feminism

The debate sparked by Thompson and Mill with their opposing arguments on enfranchisement attracted a good deal of attention from those interested in social reform including the writer, Harriet Martineau. Under a male pseudonym, she wrote on a wide range of subjects including education, marriage laws, prostitution and health, linking these issues with the oppression of women but prudently kept her distance from the passionate appeals of both Thompson and Wollstonecraft.

In 1834, the year after the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Martineau visited America where she met activists in the abolitionist movement such as Lucretia Mott (see Key Figures) and the Grimke sisters. In America, all-women abolitionist groups such as the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society founded by Mott, were becoming involved in debates on women's rights.

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s the links between the abolitionists and feminism grew stronger. In 1840 the World Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London. Not only were women delegates not allowed to take part in the debate; they were forced to suffer the indignity of listening to the proceedings from behind a curtain. For some, including Lucretia Mott and her colleague, Elizabeth Cady Stanton both of whom were to become prominent in the founding of the American women's movement, this was a turning point. After the Convention, many of the American abolitionists toured Britain. Useful links were forged between delegates such as Mott and Stanton and the women who came to hear them speak. Women involved in

the abolitionist cause could hardly fail to see the similarities between themselves and the slaves they were trying to emancipate.

For many women, two factors were essential to achieve their own emancipation - equality of education and enfranchisement. Only with equal opportunities in education could women hope to work towards equality in employment with men and attain financial independence. Only with the vote would they have their say in policymaking. Alongside these two major areas, activists like Josephine Butler, another veteran of the abolition movement, continued their work for women's rights by campaigning against such oppressive laws as the Contagious Diseases Act which had virtually legalised brothels in certain towns (see Key Figures).

Education opens doors

Whilst women had been assigned the role of 'moral educators' in the home, destined to keep the next generation on the straight and narrow, opportunities for their own education were minimal. In the eighteenth century women were likely to be educated at home. Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) had been influential in raising the subject of education for women and by the middle of the nineteenth century there was a good deal of debate on the issue. In 1854 Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes established what would later become known as the Langham Place Circle to debate educational and legal issues for women. They set up *The English Woman's Journal* as a platform for that debate, attracting many feminists to the circle including Adelaide

Proctor and Jessie Boucheret who set up the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women.

Feminists mounted campaigns for improvements in opportunities in higher education. Bodichon worked alongside Josephine Butler to persuade Cambridge University to offer more opportunities for women students resulting in the provision of lectures for women and the eventual establishment of Newnham College. Emily Davies's campaign for equal educational opportunities ultimately succeeded in the establishment of Girton College, Cambridge in 1873. Although many activists such as Butler felt that educational opportunities should be improved for women, Davies was one of the few who insisted that they should be equal and it was thanks to her that women were admitted to the University of London in 1878. The previous year another victory had been gained when Elizabeth Garrett Anderson succeeded in her battle to gain the right for women to register as physicians.

The big issue - the battle for the enfranchisement of women

From the mid-nineteenth century the battle for the vote occupied the women's movement on both sides of the Atlantic. For both American and British women it was a long, hard and often bitter fight. The American Congress pipped Parliament to the post by awarding women the vote in 1920. Whilst British women over thirty were enfranchised in 1917, it was not until 1928 that equal voting rights with men were achieved.

The American suffrage movement

The American women's movement had in effect been established in 1848 with the Seneca Falls women's rights convention organised by Lucretia Mott (see Key Figures) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. After their exclusion from the debates that took place at the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention in London solely because of their gender, the American suffragists turned their attention to women's rights.

The Seneca Falls convention issued a *Declaration of Sentiments* echoing the language of the *Declaration of Independence*, in its statement that 'all men and women are created equal...' It attracted a good deal of press attention, much of it hostile. Mott, Stanton, Susan B. Anthony (see Key Figures) and many others lectured throughout America, campaigning on such issues as married women's right to own property, equal rights to education, employment and the vote. After spending five months gathering signatures for a petition, Stanton appealed to the New York Legislature against a law compelling employers to pay women's wages to their husbands. Her hard work paid off - by the mid-1850s many State legislatures were sympathetic to her appeals and by 1860 fourteen states had passed reforms.

American female suffragists called off their campaigns during the Civil War, siding with the Union cause in support of the emancipation of slaves. When the war ended, efforts were made to link the enfranchisement of freed slaves with votes for women. The failure of this initiative provoked much bitterness. The movement split in 1869 when Lucy Stone (see Key Figures) chose to support both the Fourteenth Amendment, which secured equal legal

rights for all US born citizens but introduced the word 'male' with regard to voting rights, and the Fifteenth Amendment, which enfranchised black men but did not extend the vote to women. Anthony and Stanton's National Woman Suffrage Association continued their more militant campaign for a full constitutional amendment on women's suffrage whilst Stone's American Woman Suffrage Association campaigned for the vote on a state by state basis. The two factions were reconciled in l890. American women finally won the right to vote when Congress adopted the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The British suffrage campaign and the emergence of the 'new woman'

The British women's suffrage campaign spanned sixty-one years from 1867, when the first National Societies for Women's Suffrage were set up in Manchester and London, to 1928 when full voting rights for women were finally secured by the Equal Franchise Act.

The influential philosopher, John Stuart Mill was a founding member of the London branch of National Societies for Women's Suffrage. Mill's views had been heavily influenced by his relationship with Harriet Taylor with whom he had written many articles on women's rights. He had become a champion of women's suffrage and in his book *The Subjection of Women* (1869) argued that enfranchisement was the key to freedom for women. In 1865 Mill had been elected to Parliament and had attempted to add an amendment on women's suffrage to the 1867 Reform Act (see Key Figures and Texts).

Under Mill's leadership the London branch emphasised the importance of feminine decorum but the Manchester approach was very different. It was led by Lydia Becker who travelled the region speaking on suffrage and reporting her progress through the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, which she edited from 1870 until her death in 1881. In it she pointed to the importance of legal and political reform citing cases of brutality and drawing explicit parallels between black slaves and women. The *Journal* consistently attacked the laws on married women's property including the 1870 Married Women's Property Act which failed to safeguard inherited property and income for women's own use. It was not until the 1882 Married Women's Property Act that married women's property was finally secured for their own use.

By the 1890s the question of women's rights had finally come to the fore. As a new generation became involved in the campaign there was a good deal of debate on the 'new woman'. Mary Wollstonecraft was rehabilitated and even members of the old guard embraced her. The meaning of marriage, the sexual double standard and many other aspects of the 'new woman' became a feature of fiction such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Sarah Grand's *Heavenly Twins* (1893) and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

Over time, two strands had emerged in the campaign for women's suffrage in Britain. The moderate strand was led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett (see Key Figures), a fervent supporter of John Stuart Mill, who had served on the Married Women's Property Commission. She became an active member of the London Suffrage Committee in

1868, leading the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies from 1897. The other more militant and better-known strand was led by Emmeline Pankhurst with the help of her daughter Christabel (see Key Figures).

In 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst set up the Women's Social and Political Union, attracting women from all walks of life including teachers, clerks, dressmakers and textile workers. Millicent Garrett Fawcett's support of Bryant and May, a company in which she was a shareholder, in the 1889 'match girl' strike for better pay and conditions had raised questions for the women's movement. Activists such as Eva Gore Booth began to highlight problems facing working class women. Whereas the movement had previously been almost exclusively middle class, feminists, as they were now coming to be known, began to understand the diversity of women and of the problems that they faced. The 1880s and 1890s saw a proliferation of organisations concerned with women's labour such as the Women's Trade Union League and the Women's Co-operative Guild. For these organisations, suffrage took a back seat to women's employment issues.

The move towards militancy in the suffrage movement began in 1905 with the arrest of Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst after they interrupted a Liberal election meeting, demanding to know the party's stance on votes for women. When the militants stepped up their campaigns, with such actions as chaining themselves to the Ladies Gallery in Parliament in 1908, the moderates disassociated themselves. The militants succeeded in capturing public attention, provoking a good deal of hostility as well as support. Organisations such as the Women's

Anti-Suffrage League were established and suffragists were cruelly lampooned by the press.

In 1911, Prime Minister Asquith agreed that a bill would be proposed giving propertied women the vote in return for a moratorium on demonstrations at the Coronation of the new King. When the bill was blocked, the suffragists' anger was unleashed on the windows of the Home Office, the Board of Trade, the Treasury and the National Liberal Club. All over the West End, more windows were smashed and there were many arrests. Once in jail, the suffragists went on hunger strike and were subjected to the pain and indignity of forced feeding, resulting in a public outcry. The government's response was to introduce a 'Cat and Mouse' Act whereby women were released when their health began to fail, only to be re-arrested when they were sufficiently well.

When war broke out in 1914, the campaign was called to a halt. Many women became involved in the war effort, some working as voluntary nursing assistants at the Front, movingly described by Vera Brittain in her book, *Testament of Youth*. The 1917 Representation of the People Act gave women over thirty the vote in acknowledgement of their contribution to the war effort.

The years between the wars

Although many women had become involved in war work, much of it had been voluntary and did little to advance employment opportunities after the war. Those women who had found jobs in areas of work previously done by men found themselves out of a job once the war

was over. There was still much to be done in the battle for equal rights.

In 1919 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies became the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) under the leadership of Eleanor Rathbone (see Key Figures). Its declared aim was 'to obtain all such reforms as are necessary to secure real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women'. The NUSEC set out a six point programme which consisted of equal voting rights with men; an equal moral standard; the promotion of women candidates as MPs; equal pay for equal work and equal employment opportunities; widows' pensions and equal guardianship, and support of the League of Nations, which had been set up after the First World War. Under Eleanor Rathbone's leadership the organisation turned its attentions towards educating women for citizenship.

The first woman MP to be elected to the House of Commons took her seat in Parliament in 1919. As an American millionairess, Nancy Astor could hardly be described as a feminist pioneer but she was amenable to acting as a spokeswoman on feminist issues in the House.

Other areas of debate were opening up. Women's sexuality and the contentious issue of birth control began to be debated more openly by feminists such as Dora Russell. The magazine *Time and Tide*, set up in 1920 by Lady Margaret Rhondda, published many articles on these and other feminist issues.

Although the twenties may have seemed quiet after the militant campaigns before the War, significant advances

were achieved. In 1920 Oxford University admitted women to degrees. The 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act allowed women to sue for divorce on the basis of adultery and in the same year, the Guardianship of Infants Act gave divorced women the right to custody of their children. In 1924 Ellen Wilkinson was elected the first woman Labour MP, giving working class women a voice in Parliament. The crowning glory was, of course, the granting of full enfranchisement to women through the Equal Enfranchisement Act of 1928. With the attainment of full suffrage the feminist emphasis shifted to welfare exemplified by Eleanor Rathbone's work on the proposal of a family allowance to be paid directly to mothers.

As the Depression began to loom in the late twenties, opportunities for advances in women's rights began to close down. Little more would be achieved until after the Second World War.

The Second World War and its legacy

Just as they had in the war of 1914-1918, women stepped into men's jobs during the Second World War. On both sides of the Atlantic women took on engineering work, earning the affectionate nickname of Rosie the Riveter in the United States. In Britain, the marriage bar enforced in teaching and the civil service in 1920 was suspended. It would be abolished in 1944 but women civil servants would have to wait until 1946 before they could continue in their jobs after marriage. As in the First World War, pay and conditions did not match what had been on offer to men. Concern was such that an Equal Pay Campaign Committee was set up in 1943 headed by the MPs

Edith Summerskill and Mavis Tate. Small advances were made in the years immediately after the War such as the admittance of women to the police force in 1945 but equal pay remained an issue. Although it was introduced for teachers in 1952 and for civil servants in 1954, it would be many years before more general legislation would be brought in.

On the whole, the independence, which many women had relished, slipped away when men returned from the war looking for work. In the fifties, the emphasis was very firmly on the joys of marriage and motherhood. Although some women continued to work, the cosy image of the stay-at-home wife and mother as the lynchpin of a stable household was encouraged as the ideal.

It was not until the late 50s and early 60s that the 'woman question' bounced back on to the agenda. Women's pages began to appear in respectable broadsheets such as *The Times* and *The Guardian.* They focussed on childcare, problems facing women at work and debated the meaning of equality between the sexes. *Woman's Hour*, a new BBC radio programme, discussed similar questions. With the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which appeared in translation in 1954, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, the debate became intense (see Key Figures and Texts).

The birth of Women's Liberation

Often called the 'second wave', the first wave being the suffragists, women's liberation grew into a vibrant, sprawling movement that eventually seemed to encompass

as many factions as there were women in it. Just as the militant suffragists had found themselves in the spotlight, the second wave of feminists attracted a good deal of media attention not to mention derision in some quarters. Feminists were regarded with suspicion and never more so than when they attended the consciousness-raising groups that were popular in both Britain and the United States. For many feminists these discussion groups, which aimed to help women understand the nature of their oppression, were the core of the movement.

America

The Feminine Mystique with its analysis of discontent amongst middle class, educated American women, stripped away the myth of the happy housewife content with her role as creator of a domestic haven for her husband and children, and exposed the misery and frustration which lay beneath. On both sides of the Atlantic, women read the book with grateful recognition.

In 1966 Friedan helped set up NOW, the National Organisation of Women, to debate issues of sex discrimination. With a wide range of contacts both in the media and in political lobbies, NOW began vociferous campaigning, picketing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, sending angry telegrams to Washington, filing a complaint against the New York Times for its sex-segregated job advertisements, to name but a few of its initiatives.

To a certain extent, the American women's liberation movement sprang out of the wave of anti-Vietnam War protests that swept through college campuses in the sixties.

Although politically active in the protests women were still expected to get on with making the coffee. When, in 1967, a student conference dropped the feminist resolution from their agenda, women had had enough. They had their own issues to protest and in the following year the women's liberation movement erupted into life. At the Miss America contest in 1968 a group of protesters known as the Redstockings put on non-stop street theatre outside the contest hall to show how women were degraded by the competition. The performance culminated in the crowning of a sheep. Protestors threw objects that they felt symbolised their oppression into the Freedom Trash Can, including wire-cupped bras. Although the Freedom Trash Can was never burnt, the media were quick to construct the myth of bra-burning that was forever linked with women's liberation.

In 1970 NOW called for a Women's Strike to mark the fiftieth anniversary of female suffrage. The level of support and media attention took the organisers by surprise. Women's liberation had become a major issue.

Britain

In 1966 *The New Left Review* published an essay by Juliet Mitchell called 'Women: The Longest Revolution' in which she shifted the feminist debate away from emancipation towards 'liberation' from the many constraints that oppressed women. A quiet beginning for British women's liberation but two years later legislation was passed which enabled women to obtain an abortion, providing two doctors agreed that pregnancy would be detrimental to mental or physical health. In 1968, the fiftieth anniversary of the first step towards female suffrage was

taken seriously enough for the BBC to devote a day to programmes and debates on women's issues.

In 1970, this quiet debate exploded in a burst of energy with a theatrical demonstration against the Miss World beauty competition which was televised from London. Women protestors ran onto the stage, mooing like cows and wearing placards bearing titles such as Miss-conception, Miss-treated, Miss-placed and Miss-judged. Flour-bombs, stink-bombs and smoke-bombs were let off whilst Bob Hope and a bewildered panel of judges ran away, followed by a line of tearful beauties. Five women were arrested in a protest of which the Pankhursts would surely have been proud.

The demonstrations at both the 1968 Miss America and the 1970 Miss World contests indicated a concern for the way in which women were portrayed as objects which feminists found both degrading and oppressive. The debate was to be taken further by writers such as Susie Orbach in *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, published in 1978, and, many years later, Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (see Key Texts).

The first national Women's Conference was held at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970. The following demands were put forward - equal pay, equal education and employment opportunities, twenty-four hour nurseries, free contraception and abortion on demand. To make their point, feminists paraded their demands on banners through the streets, shouting them out as they marched. The emphasis was on choice for women. Later three more demands were added - legal and financial independence, freedom for

women to express their sexuality and an end to the oppression of lesbians.

History became very important in British feminism. Both Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham were active in this area. Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* emphasised the importance of historical context in understanding women's oppression (see Key Texts). The magazine *Spare Rib* also played a part in placing the movement within its context, publishing articles on the suffragists but also interviewing feminists such as Dora Russell and Mary Stott who had been active earlier in the twentieth century.

Diversity within the movement

In contrast to nineteenth century feminism which was largely united around the cause of suffrage, the women's liberation movement was extraordinarily diverse. In the US a women's liberation directory was set up which listed everything from women's karate classes to followers of the Goddess. Separate groups addressing particular issues sprang up - Black Women's Liberation activists protested against racial oppression and stereotypes which applied to black women whilst Lesbian Liberation emphasised lesbian oppression. Factions within the movement are far too numerous to mention but broadly it split in to three major ideologies:

> **Radical feminists** defined the problem as one of patriarchy in which male domination in all areas of life had resulted in wholesale oppression of women. This faction mounted women-only campaigns which focussed on the effects of male violence, rape and pornography. In the United

States, Andrea Dworkin still continues her battle against pornography (see Key Figures).

Marxist Feminists linked male domination with class exploitation, arguing that equal rights for men and women wouldn't improve the lot of poor women.

Liberal feminists placed the emphasis on change from within society rather than revolution by putting forward positive role models for girls, establishing equality in their own relationships and lobbying parliament for legislation on equal rights.

There were, however, two issues on which the majority of feminists could agree.

The two big issues - abortion and equal pay

Abortion - the right to choose

The legalisation of abortion was a major issue for the feminist movement. Many on both sides of the Atlantic campaigned for abortion on demand both as a means of eradicating the often tragic results of back street abortions and to give women the right to choose what happened to their bodies. Whilst in Britain, legalised abortion passed comparatively quietly onto the statute book in 1968, the famous Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973 which in effect gave women the right to choose to have an abortion, provoked outrage in the United States. Abortion remains a hugely controversial issue in the States. Militant anti-abortion campaigners routinely harass doctors who

practise abortion - some have been murdered at the hands of extremists. In Britain, abortion on demand remained an issue, although, over time, the required assessment by two doctors as to the effect of pregnancy on a woman's health became something of a formality.

Equal Pay for equal work

In 1963 the Equal Pay Act had been passed in the United States backed up by legislation in the following year on equal opportunity. Although an Equal Rights Amendment had first been introduced in 1923 by Alice Paul, it has still not been ratified by all the states. In the second wave of feminism, NOW put a good deal of effort in to trying to get this through so that equal pay and equal opportunity would be enshrined in the American Constitution.

It was not until 1975 that sex discrimination on both pay and employment opportunities was outlawed in Britain. In 1976, the Equal Opportunities Commission was set up to work to end sex discrimination, promote equal opportunities for men and women, and review and suggest amendments to the legislation.

Both the American Equal Employment Opportunities Commission and the British Equal Opportunities Commission are still kept very busy.

In 1979, the British elected Margaret Thatcher as their first woman Prime Minister although sisterhood was the last thing on her mind.

Post-feminism or the Third Wave?

A wave of conservatism swept through the Western world in the eighties, spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Feminism quietened down although the Greenham Women set up camp around the perimeter fence of the US Air Force base at Greenham Common in 1981 to protest against the siting of Cruise missiles on British soil. They were a solid reminder that there was still a movement out there (see Key Figures).

There was much talk of a post-feminist world in which women had achieved equal rights and therefore no longer needed a movement to campaign for change. Feminists had been derided and caricatured to such an extent by the media that many women disassociated themselves from the movement by prefacing their criticism of a society still dominated by men with the phrase 'I'm not a feminist but…'.

In the early nineties young feminist writers, such as Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, and Susan Faludi (see Key Figures), began to be recognised in the States as representatives of a new generation of feminists. The highly publicised accusations of sexual harassment made by Anita Hill against Clarence Thomas, then a Supreme Court nominee, put women's issues back on the agenda in 1991. In 1995 the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, highlighted the need for recognition of women's issues.

A new movement began to emerge in the States calling themselves the Third Wave. A Third Wave Foundation was set up in 1996 to promote such issues as social secu-

rity reform, particularly important to women who are in and out of the work force, voter registration and women's health. The Foundation offered scholarships and fees to help young women campaign against inequalities faced by women either because of their gender or because of other forms of oppression based on race, creed, sexual orientation or poverty.

If the nineteenth century campaign for suffrage was the first wave of feminism and the demands for equal rights voiced by the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s was the second, what are the aims of the third wave?

What's happening now?

Many modern feminists, whilst acknowledging the debt they owe to the women's liberation movement, feel that things have moved on. There are better employment opportunities, legislation in place to enforce equal pay in most Western countries and childcare is on the agenda of most governments. The areas of debate in modern feminism are many and varied but several issues stand out above the others.

The backlash debate

In 1991 Susan Faludi published her influential book *Backlash* in which she explored ways in which the advances made as a result of the second wave of feminism were being undermined in the media (see Key Texts). Faludi sparked off a debate that is still running. Naomi Wolf gave the debate a different slant in *Fire with Fire* (1993) by suggesting that it was time for women to cast

aside their fears and stand up for what they wanted. In 1999 Germaine Greer, the redoubtable second wave feminist, called for women to 'get angry again' in her book *The Whole Woman*, taking young women to task for assuming that the battle had been won.

Political representation

Women are still woefully under-represented in politics. In 1985, twenty-five women got together in America to set up a fundraising organisation to raise money to help pro-choice Democratic women candidates. They called their organisation Emily's List and it now boasts more than 65,000 donors. A British Emily's list followed in 1993. The 1997 general election saw a something of a readjustment of the gender balance in the British Parliament with an influx of Labour women MPs as a result of the party's landslide victory. However, out of a total of 659 seats in the House of Commons, only 120 were held by women in November 2000 and many of them were unhappy with the family-unfriendly way that Parliament operates.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment came to the fore as a result of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas debacle and remains an important issue on the feminist agenda despite the use of sex discrimination legislation aimed at eliminating it from the workplace. Away from work the debate encompasses such issues as women's right to dress how they wish whether men consider that to be provocative or not. Feminists argue that it's men's responsibility to keep their libidos under control.

Body Image

The emphasis upon the way women look and the way that they are portrayed in magazines, film and television has been on the feminist agenda since the beginning of the second wave. Whilst beauty contests may now be seen as a thing of the past, body image is still a major issue for feminists. Many commentators such as Naomi Wolf argue that the idealised images of youthful, slender beauty that dominate film, television and advertising hoardings damage many women's self-esteem resulting in eating disorders, depression and poor self-image (see Key Texts)

Inclusivity

The third wave aims to move away from the domination of feminism by white middle class women to a more inclusive movement which addresses inequalities aggravated by attitudes toward racial minorities, sexual orientation and physical disablement. Attitudes towards men have softened providing they play their part in aiming for a more egalitarian society.

So, what has been achieved over the last two hundred years?

Mary Wollstonecraft would surely be delighted with many of the advances made since the publication of *A Vindication of Woman's Rights* in 1792. Women throughout the world have been enfranchised. They have equal access to education and equal employment, with legislation in place to protect these rights in many countries. In the Western world women's sexuality is openly recognised and the sexual double standard has largely been whittled away. Many women are financially independent and in charge of their own lives.

However there is still much to do. Women are far from equally represented in political organisations. Although there have been several women premiers such as Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher, they are still comparatively rare. Young women often excel in education, but there are few women in senior management or executive positions. Equal pay for equal work is enshrined in the law but women are still often to be found in the lowest paid jobs. Women still put in more hours working in the home than their male partners even if they are working full time themselves and sometimes earning more.

We may have come a long way but it ain't over yet.

Susan Osborne

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