WHATEVER HAPPENED TO WOMEN?

NOTHING—

THAT'S THE TROUBLE.

A REPORT ON THE NEW FEMINISM / BY ELLEN WILLIS

Feminism has revived. It began stirring in 1963 when Betty Friedan deflated the myth of the fulfilled suburban housewife. It got a push from a prankish Southern Senator who, to point up the absurdity of the proposed Civil Rights Act, added a sex-discrimination clause to the fair-employment provision. And it made its first public appearance when a number of professional women founded the National Organization for Women (NOW), a civil-rights group concerned mostly with bread-and-butter issues—discrimination in education, employment, and public accommodations; restrictive abortion laws; lack of day-care facilities. At the same time, younger women involved in the radical movement were discovering that they were second-class revolutionaries. Men who proclaimed the right of all people to control their own lives still expected women to make the coffee, lick the stamps, take typing jobs to support their men's movement work—to do anything, in fact, except help make political decisions on an equal basis. In the past two years, more and more radical women have formed separate groups to discuss their situation as radicals and as women.

Out of this separation has come the Women's Liberation Movement, which is growing so fast that some large cities have as many as 20 groups. Although Women's Liberation is also interested in concrete issues, its perspective is very different from NOW's. Radical feminists do not want equal privileges in the existing society; they want to restructure it, changing its definitions of masculine and feminine, of work and the family.

Like the early feminist movement, which grew out of the campaign to end slavery, the present-day women's movement has been inspired and influenced by the black liberation struggle. The situation of women and blacks is similar in many ways. Just as blacks live in a world defined by whites, women live in a world defined by males. (The generic term for human being is "man"; "woman" means "wife of man.") To be female or black is to be peculiar; whiteness and maleness are the norm. Newspapers do not have "men's pages," nor would anyone think of discussing the "men's problem." Racial and sexual stereotypes also resemble each other: women, like blacks, are said to be childish, incapable of abstract reasoning, innately submissive, biologically suited for menial tasks, emotional, close to nature.

Most important, both women and blacks have a history of slavery—only female slavery goes back much further. From the beginnings of civilization until very recently, women in most societies were literally the property of their husbands and fathers. Even now, many vestiges of that chattel status persist in law and custom. Wives are still known by their husbands' names. In many states, a wife is legally required to perform domestic services, have sexual relations on demand (continued on page 206)
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if her health permits, and live with her husband wherever he chooses or be guilty of desertion. Restaurants, bars, and other public accommodations can legally refuse to admit a woman without a male escort or exclude her altogether. And vote or no vote, politics has remained a male preserve. Women make up more than half the population, but hold less than 1 per cent of elected offices. They also get few political appointments, except for the inevitable “adviser to consumer affairs” (women’s place is in the supermarket).

In any case, the “emancipated” woman, like the freed slave, has merely substituted economic dependence for legal subjection. According to recent statistics, white women workers earn even less than black men. Most women, especially mothers, must depend on men to support them, and what fact alone gives men power over their lives.

By now, almost everyone recognizes racism as an evil. But in spite of all the parallels, most people either deny its existence or deny its existence. “Yes, it’s a man’s world,” some say, “and that’s the way it should be.” Normal women like the female role.” As a respected figure of Dr. Spock recently wrote in a women’s magazine, “Biologically and temperamentally, I believe women are made to be concerned first and foremost with child care, husband, vace, and home care.” Then he explains away the discontent of many women with these roles by saying that their education has contributed to them. Other antifeminists insist, “Women are free. They can vote, work, and have orgasms—what more do they want? In fact, women are too free. They’re taking over and robbing men of their masculinity.” In between these extremes is the argument that “women can liberate themselves individually; they don’t need a movement.”

The usual response to any mention of feminism is laughter. “Feminists” are little old ladies brandishing umbrellas, square-jawed maniacal freaks, or humorless puritans. This prejudice is so strong that even some activists in the women’s movement have been reluctant to call themselves feminists or identify in any way with the original women’s rights movement. Because antifeminist sentiment comes from women as well as men, it can’t be dismissed out of hand as male propaganda aimed at keeping us in our place. The questions must be taken seriously. Is male supremacy natural and desirable? Are we already as free as we want to be? Do we need a movement?

To get an idea of why I’m convinced we do need a movement let’s analyze the situation of the most privileged woman in history—the young, educated female who is so often referred to as the “emancipated,” or “new,” or “modern” woman. This is the woman who wants to enjoy sex, share love and an equal companionship with a man or men, and do engaging work outside the home as well as having children. How likely is she to achieve these not unreasonable goals?

In the typical American family, a girl is trained from childhood to be what the culture defines as feminine. Everyone encourages her to act cute and charming and flirt with her father, her uncles, and little boys. When she announces that she wants to be a stickman, her mother laughs: girls can’t be firemen; you’ll be a mother, like me, or a nurse, or a teacher. When she roughhouses, parents hag, “She’s as tough as a boy.” Yet at the same time they warn, “Someday you’ll have to stop acting like a boy and be a lady.” Most likely her brothers are free to play while she helps with the dishes, and her parents are more tolerant of their noise, dirt, and disobedience—after all, boys will be boys.

When she reaches adolescence, she finds that if she wants friendship and approval from other kids she must direct most of her energy towards pleasing boys. That means being preoccupied with clothes and makeup—with how she looks instead of what she does. It means absorbing all the advice about how to have a “good personality” and “build up a boy’s ego.” (No one worries about her ego.) And it means coming to understand that her status in the world and her worth as a person depend not on what she achieves, but on whom she marries. An A in physics is fine, but unless she is also pretty and well-mannered, people will pity her and consider her brains a compensatory. She also learns that initiated in social activities belongs to the boys: it is her place to wait by the phone. When she wants a boy’s company she can’t approach him directly, but must maneuver him into asking her. She steps out of this role at her peril—if she is very pretty and self-assured she may get away with it, but otherwise she faces humiliating snubs. After a while—if like most girls, she can’t measure up to the standards of attractiveness glorified by the mass media and exemplified by the “popular” girls—she develops feelings of inferiority that may last a lifetime. Sometimes she rebels and withdraws from the game, but only at the price of loneliness.

Then comes college. If a girl hasn’t already lost her incentive to do anything but chase a husband, she is likely to run into new obstacles. Parents will go out of their way to send her to the college he prefers, with a girl, they’re more reluctant. They may insist that she live at home and go to a public college because it’s cheaper, and what difference can it make to a girl? The put pressure on her to study “something practical that you can fall back on,” like teaching. Or make it clear that in return for their support she had better score a professional man.

At school she will have to cope with paternalism, condescension, and sometimes outright hostility from male instructors, especially if she takes “masculine” subjects like math or science. If she is particularly bright she may win the highest of all accolades, “You think like a man.” She will find that, except in traditionally female fields, professional and graduate schools discriminate.

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The sexual emancipation of the "new woman" is as illusionary as the economic. True, the cruder aspects of the double standard are in disrepute. But real sexual freedom implies that each sex cares equally about the physical and emotional needs of the other. In our sexist society, this is far from the case. Women are brought up to be sensitive to a man's needs, to put him first. Men accept this sensitivity as their due and rarely reciprocate. Rather, they tend to see women as objects, as pretty or ugly, easy to get or a challenge, a good catch or a last resort. In general, women are sexually attracted to men whose whole personality interests them: a man's pursuit of nice legs or breasts or long blond hair may have nothing to do with whether he likes the person they belong to. This naturally makes women more hesitant than men to enter sexual relationships. And their hesitancy then impels men to play more elaborate seduction games, reinforcing the hesitancy.

In a way, the relaxation of sexual mores just makes a woman's life more difficult. If she is not cautious about sex, she is likely to get hurt; if she is too cautious, she will lose her man to more ambitious women. Either way, her decision is based on fear and calculation, not on her spontaneous needs and desires. Another myth that needs debunking is that women have won the right to equal sexual enjoyment. Unfortunately, as men have become more sensitive and knowledgeable about female sexuality, they have also begun to demand passion from women as an index of their virility. Orgasmic capacity has become another criterion of a desirable object, like good looks. Under such pressure, a woman who cares about a man is increasingly tempted to let him think she is turned on whether she is or not. To refuse him if she's not in the mood or explain to him how to excite her or take the initiative herself is to risk "defeating his ego," provoking accusations of frigidity, and inducing him to look elsewhere for confirmation of his talents.

Men want women to be available and responsive, but without making too many demands or challenging their sexual prerogatives. By now it has become a psychiatric cliché that many men have reacted to their wives' new sexual aggressiveness with loss of interest or even impotence. The implication is clear: go back to your passive role, or else. Nearly all the participants in a recent magazine survey of young men's attitudes toward the birth-control pill resented the pill because they felt it made women too independent. Even men who defend the sexual revolution the loudest often display contempt for a woman who has a lot of affairs—not because they really think she is "slut," but because her departure from the traditional role is an implicit threat to their power position.

Finally, the sexual double standard can never disappear so long as women are defined contraceptives and abortion on demand. Birth control is not so easily available as is supposed, especially to young, unmarried girls. Still Baird, the director of a Long Island birth-control clinic, is currently appealing a three-month sentence for publicly breaking Massachusetts law by handling an unmarried woman a bottle of spermicidal foam. Thousands of women die or are seriously injured each year as the result of messed-up abortions. Our "new woman" is probably white and middle class.
and thus unlikely to stick a coat hanger through her uterus or give herself over to a $10-a-job butcher, even if high-class illegal abortions are less dangerous and of lower quality. Yet, in most cases a woman’s only other alternative is to bear a child she doesn’t want or can’t afford, emotionally, physically, or financially. One of the ugliest threnodies of sexism is the state’s power to force a woman to use her body for reproduction. The Constitution prohibits involuntary servitude and guarantees every citizen equal protection of the laws; how can compulsory pregnancy be justified? Politicians and churchmen who moralize about killing the fetus care more about an unconscious clump of cells than about the suffering of living women. Those who say “she’s had her fun, she should take the consequences,” are denying women (even married women, who dominate the abortion statistics) the right to sexual happiness on the same basis as men.

The institution that affects women’s lives most is marriage. For most women, it is a central goal. If a woman wants children, she must marry or suffer social ostracism and economic hardship. Marriage also removes her from the social-sexual rat race and gives her status; she has succeeded as a woman. But does it give her what she wants most—genuine love and companionship? If so, it is only because human tenderness and concern sometimes manage to flourish in the worst of circumstances.

Marriage, though disguised as a freely contracted bond between equals, is in fundamental respects a master-slave relationship. It is more necessary to women, but more beneficial to men. A woman’s training in being supportive and ego-building is basically practice for the subordinate role in marriage, where she is expected to put her husband’s work and interests above her own and provide him with a comfortable domestic environment. A working wife is nonetheless held responsible for the household, though her husband may “help” her.

The constant celebration of homemaking in the media cannot conceal the fact that most housework is dirty and boring. Most people prefer just about any job to being a domestic servant; few single women would stand for a female roommate trying to stick them with all the cleaning. But to do the same dirty work for a husband is supposed to be a privilege. The rationalization is usually that women are inherently altruistic, which makes as little sense as Senator George Murphy’s remark that Mexican women are better suited to stoop labor because they are “built low to the ground.”

It is equally spurious to imagine that because women are uniquely equipped to give birth and nurse infants, they also have a special talent for changing diapers and washing clothes. Many, perhaps most, of child rearing involves routine work that, however necessary for the child, is not particularly appealing for the parent. And Dr. Spock to the contrary, many women have no temperamental gift for relating to children; many mandates do, or would if they ever had a chance to develop it. Anyway, taking care of children, however rewarding, is not the equivalent of work in the outside world. Children need love, support, and obeying them and putting their welfare first—more of what a culturally approved wife is already providing for her husband. A mother cannot use her children as outlets for her creative energies without making them into things that exist for her benefit instead of their own. But if she decides that she needs a vocation of her own, even if she already has one, she comes up against institutionalized sexism. Full-time motherhood is the norm, and the system discourages alternatives. The community refuses to take any responsibility for the children of working mothers. Since most part-time jobs are marginal—both spiritually and economically—it is almost impossible, even when the husband is willing, for most couples to break with the traditional division of labor and share outside work, domestic chores, and child rearing. The only option for career woman-mother is to hire a poorer woman with fewer choices to take her place in the home. And this is nothing but exploitation, just piling the load on another woman’s back.

That is the other side of the women problem. For most women—the millions of file clerks, factory workers, welfare mothers, working-class housewives, daughters of rigid patriarchal families—are not “new women” and have never pretended to be liberated. Citing the pseudo-emancipation of an educated minority as proof that women are free has been one of the crueler sports of postwar sociology and journalism.

Many women insist that they are happy with things as they are. But would they have chosen the same life if they really had a choice in the matter or could conceive of an alternative? Male supremacy has existed for so long that it has come to seem an unalterable absolute. What is significant is not that most women are making the best of it, but that more and more women are beginning to insist on their primacy as human beings. As fast as the argument that the emancipation of women has already gone too far, this is akin to the conviction of many white that the blacks are taking over. When a group is used to mistaking certain privileges for natural rights, any encroachment on those privileges is regarded as persecution.

But the most dangerous illusion is that women can liberate themselves as individuals. Male supremacy is not a problem of individual relationships, but a pervasive social force. No man or woman uninfluenced by it. The masculine and radical subcultures are no less sexist than straight society. In hippie communes, the women will do the cooking and cleaning; the chauvinism of radical men inspired Women’s Liberation. A woman cannot hope to find a man who is free of sexist attitudes, nor can she make a man give up his privileges by arguing. He will insist find another woman who accepts the status quo. We will only begin to solve the problem when women organize and back each other up. That is the immediate
goal of Women's Liberation—to get women together, make them see each other as sisters and allies instead of competitors for male favors. As yet we have no clear vision of the new society. That will come later. But we do know that sexism, like racism, is incompatible with human dignity. And we are prepared to fight.

Ellen Willis, a Middletown Guest Editor in 1966, is pop critic for The New Yorker, an associate editor of U.S., and a member of Bellarkeens, a women's liberation group.

The single life: Seattle
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buddhas in the windows, and over to Jackson to the Japanese section, where one can find dried cuttle fish and vile steamers and yellow-paper-wrapped scrub brushes at stores like Uwajimaya. Then up past more hospitals than seem absolutely necessary to sweeps of hills—and all in a light mist or a small rain that precludes any view of Mount Rainier. “Thirty more days of sun and we'll be another Los Angeles” is the inevitable Seattle saying. followed, just as inevitably, by “Yeah, but who needs it?”

Seattle is, in many ways, an elusive city. It is unerringly outdoorsy, as testified by the clot of boats in the Chittenden locks, the nearby ski areas like Crystal, Snoqualmie Pass, and Alpental, and the clusters of perpetually suntanned types seemingly on a permanent trek to campsites. But it has been a Zen den, a hippie haven (Sunday flower throwers in Volunteer Park; a spectacular four-day mud-in called the Sky River Water Rock Festival), and a place, according to one young resident, where “I have more freedom than any place I’ve ever lived. Do you know that people actually watch the smarts here? And get stoned on the street?”

Although New England and the South are usually given the palm for producing eccentrics, one remembers a Seattleite who owned, she believed, a 2,000,000-trout-insect over whose menu she brooded long and often. And another, a grande dame, through whose house turtles tracked. In both women, the eccentricity was partnered—as it often is—with money.

There is lots of money, old money, tightly held on to in Seattle (“The people here are basically part of the establishment,” a carpenter said), and sometimes there is no money at all. Following the classic ethnic housing pattern, the Jews followed and replaced the Irish in certain areas and were, in turn, followed and replaced by the blacks. There is unemployment (Seattle is basically a one-industry town: Boeing goes, so goes income), and there is friction—terrible friction. “I don’t think there’s any real integration here at all. There was once, but now I don’t think blacks and whites hang out in the same places, except maybe at D. J.’s, where everyone goes to hear the bands”—Melissa Moyer.

Melissa, who is blond, and Sharon Clark, who is dark, live, rather like Snow White and Rose Red, in an old carriage house belonging to Melissa’s grandfather. Both work for United Air Lines, love their jobs, and are totally disinclined to move elsewhere. Seattle, they say, has everything they like: skiing, sailing on one of the city’s seven lakes, tennis, hiking, jogging (with, they confess, cigarettes in pocket), even broom hockey on a rented skating rink. If they dislike anything, it’s the fact that life in Seattle often consists of the same old crowd, since Seattleites who want to high school together tend to meld once again after they leave their respective colleges. Both long for, one suspects, new faces.

Still, it’s a nice life. When they want to see friends, they can usually find them at the Red Onion or The Attic, two bars at the foot of Madison near Lake Washington. (Although, considering the baroque aspects of Seattle’s drinking laws—repealed this summer—it’s a marvel bars have stayed in business. You had to carry a liquor license until 27; women were not allowed to sit at a bar: one could not move with a drink in hand.) Or at the Hink’s, where a big strait-man is $5 and the wailer says cheerfully, “Well, that’s half out, anyway.” When he breaks the cork of your wine bottle. There’s the Lock Spot and the Iron Ball for dancing, the Penthouse for live groups, and if one’s date is an older (read “richer”) man, there’s El Gaucho and the Maribou. Trader Vic’s and Arlo Louis.

Running over to Greenfield’s for auctions is great and so is shopping on Capitol Hill, or out in one of the big shopping districts like Northgate. There’s always something going on in the University district, and there’s “that good place out there that shows foreign flicks.” And the Seattle Repertory Theatre, and the OffCenter Theatre, and the ACP, and...

There’s just one problem. The charming little carriage house is soon to be torn down (it got in progress’s way), and the girls will have to move. They want a cottage—the whole thing will cost about $120 a month—out by Lake Washington, and their families are getting because that’s near an area of racial turmoil. They certainly wouldn’t want to live in one of the single complexes close to the airport, and a house out on Lake Union, however remote that might sound, is often very close in the Patti-weller. They could move out to Bellevue, where they have friends and where there are new buildings going up daily, or across Lake Washington, from where some many commute every day. But they want the city—and so they’re backing a trend, and most likely fighting a losing battle.

Oh, Seattle is building—the new Plaza Hotel is completely round, and the Hotel people are promising something even more exciting than Atlanta’s Regency-Hyatt (before which event one might cry, “Enough already!”), and apartment houses mushroom overnight. But some say the fast are not filling as fast as they should, that Seattle has overextended itself, made too big a gesture. Maybe. But isn’t that what the West is all about?