

Feminism Tomorrow

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The image of woman as a stereotype is a simple minded, unexamined notion based on social prejudice. Such stereotyping is common and blatant in much of the literature of the nineteenth century (Payetter, G.C. in Deckhand 1975). Unfortunately all too often similar sentiments continue to prevail in modern society. These find particular expression in the attitudes which suggest that woman is inferior to, or at the disposal of man.

Since the end of the 1960s interest in the history and nature of feminism has come to the fore. Feminism as an ideal is the belief that woman should have the same rights, opportunities and status as man. Though considerable evidence shows that individual women reacted strongly against several prejudice throughout history, only in the nineteenth century came the beginnings of organised opposition to male domination. The immediate aim of feminist organisations was to remove legal barriers which deprive women of their social rights, such as the ownership of property or the right to professional status.

Through the 1960s and 1970s considerable advances were made by feminist groups, particularly in the arena of arousing public awareness of the feminist perspective on society. Their demonstration of the inherent inequity of male : female position in society has given rise to a vibrant feminist movement seeking equality for women in all quarters of society. In bringing about the freedom and equality of women the conditions and structures that bind women in their present place must be changed in the future. Fighting for free and equal entry into the productive sector is not sufficient. Housework must be socialized, otherwise the 'working' woman simply ends up with two jobs. Child care, cooking, cleaning and the other work that is done in the home cannot remain the woman's private responsibility.

· Women must struggle for equal-pay for equal work; equal opportunity in education and employment, and free community - controlled child care centres. Mobilizing women behind these issues provides the possibility of securing some improvements for the future. Women must maintain their independent struggle for liberation. Men must and can be re-educated. Male workers must learn that their chauvinism and dominance can no longer be accepted or acceptable.

The constitutional demands around which a mass movement can be built thus keeping pressure on the current social system will bring change nearer. The demands must address themselves to the social basis of the problem. It seems that advances may already have been made. Perhaps younger men do not moan as much as our fathers did about women's driving, or their lack of punctuality. Men's habits of speech and thought about women have experienced a gradual change in the last twenty years.

We cannot expect a quick and easy transition. In order to bring about real and lasting change, women must continue to intensify their efforts, as, already, opportunities to build a humane, non-sexist society are good. After all, women do constitute more than half of the world's population. Both security and dignity for the housewife should become a major demand. However, women are not yet united. Class and race divide them. Old fears, prejudices, and suspicions are hard to overcome. Yet, women do have many basic interests in common. As more and more women begin to realize that the present system does not serve their interests - that it serves only the interests of a few, upper - class, white males - a mass movement aimed at change may emerge.

As regards the ultimate future of feminism, it seems to me that people think it has passed its peak. However, feminism is not dead and cannot die until equality of the sexes has been reached. Feminist issues may not be as prominent in the media as they used to be, but upon asking women their views on feminism, it can be seen that there are still very strong opinions indeed. "A good part - and definitely the most fun part of being a feminist is about frightening men" (Burchill, 1987). "It always amazes me that women don't understand how much men hate them" (Greer, 1984).

It is my firm belief that every woman is a feminist in her own right, the only argument being that each individual varies in the strength of conviction about feminism. A rise in the number of one parent families leads to the development of feminist issues. This provides both men and women with experiences that take them away from the traditional division of labour within the family. Caroline Jenkins sees the traditional view portrayed as;

Mothers bring children into the world and mothers bring them up. Fathers mostly sit about on their behinds watching television while mothers feed the kids, bath the kids, play with the kids, tell the kids bedtime stories and generally wear themselves out. Most fathers can't be bothered to spend more than half an hour with their kids until they have grown up or until their exhausted wives see the light and divorce them.

(Jenkins, 1990)

A solution to this may be that fathers spend more time with their children in the future, even if only in the more 'attractive' aspects of child care.

Given that this trend continues, it may go some way to break down the rigid sex-role stereotyping that, by seeing women as 'natural' mothers, denies fathers both the physical care of young children and the qualities of caring and tenderness that are associated with this role. Moreover, future moves by feminists, to reduce sex-typing in schools and to break down the stereotyping of men's and women's occupations will, if they succeed, challenge the traditional view of labour in the work - place. Such developments suggest that notions of femininity and masculinity may be less rigid in the future as women are allowed to develop more of their 'male' and men more of their 'female' nature.

Role sharing within marriage is possible, but it cuts across the demands of the work situation, threatening a highly competitive career and, even when that is not an issue, depriving the husband of much leisure time. It would seem to me therefore, that only those men deeply committed to the principle of equality are prepared for the sacrifices that it entails. For a few families, paid domestic help is at least a partial solution. For others the decision is not to have children. But for most couples the answer lies in changes that allow a greater community involvement in child care, or alternatively in a change in the nature of work that enables its combination with domestic responsibilities, rather than as at present, to conflict with them. This would allow both husbands and wives to participate on equal terms in the world of work and in the care of children within the family. Only in this way, I believe, will some of the aspects for the future of feminism be resolved.

The disadvantages women suffer today seem to be from general practice and custom. I myself regard men as a pleasant pastime but no more dependable than the Irish weather. As in the words of Jane Fonda, 'I still feel that women are the superior sex'.

Legislation, in my opinion, has an important role to play in the future of feminism. For instance, in Ireland the government is eager to extend tax benefits to single working mothers who employ child minders, but it has done nothing to encourage men and women to share the work of caring for their own children. Job sharing, flexi-time, cash allowances, tax breaks for employers and incentives for employees would make an inestimable difference if they were offered to men who wanted months off work to be with their new-born babies and to share in child care.

Modern feminists are right to say that most men still suppose that they are entitled

to a working life unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, especially those of childcare. But of course this will continue to be the predominant attitude in the future so long as it is reinforced in every department of our social life. As long as employers demand employees to choose between their families and their jobs the status quo will remain.

If relations between men, women and children are to improve, attitudes to women and womanhood must change. It wouldn't be a bad start if women ceased to be the butt of casual prejudice expressed in half-witted habits of speech. But the most important job of our legislators face must be to remove some of the disadvantages of life for women and to improve their position within the family and within society at large. Until then, women as individuals, as a group and as a class in Ireland in a host of vital ways remain second-class citizens.

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