

TOWARDS A RADICAL MOVEMENT

April, 1968

(2nd draft)

Heather Booth, Evie Goldfield, Sue Munaker

Ours is an age of promise. Technology and abundance have made it clear that a decent life might at last be easily within the reach of all. Self-determination, freedom seem like real possibilities. More than this, though, it is an age of promise denied. Under the banner of freedom, atrocities are committed. With all the rhetoric of economic development, the majority of the earth's people are hungry, exploited, powerless.

Not only the impoverished, but many others, are learning that no one is really free in our society; that while some groups are much more oppressed than others, ordinary individuals have little ability to live the life or bring about the changes they desire. Among these others are groups of women, angered at the society that relegates them to a secondary and servile position.

The movement for social change taught women activists about their own oppression. Politically, women were excluded from decision-making. They typed, made leaflets, did the shit-work. The few women who attained leadership positions had to struggle against strong convention.

Also, women in the movement were in a unique situation. As some got married, they found that there were no models for a marriage in which both man and woman were politically active. Was the once active woman now to assume a supportive role, to stay home with the kids or get an unwanted job to support her activist husband? Were both partners interests to have equal weight in determining what kind of work they would do, where they would live?

In December, 1965, at a national conference of the Students for a Democratic Society, the subject of women's role in society and in the movement was openly discussed. The discontent of the women activists was brought to the surface, therein initiating a radical women's movement.

The problems discussed were not just those of political activists, but of all contemporary women.

Women had been integrated into the labor force during the war doing what they felt was useful, purposeful work. When the men came home, though, women were either pushed into the lower sectors of the labor force or moved back into the home. Women's image began to change in the popular magazines; domesticity was glorified frills were again in vogue, drudgery was made glamorous.

Women who returned to the domestic setting found that things were not quite the same as before. New labor-saving devices gave them free time. This freedom made a vacuum in their lives; they had nothing meaningful to fill it with. The housewife role, offered up as the most fulfilling for women, was expanded, elaborated, filled up with trivia so that each labor-saving device could be compensated for by a new task. Women joined clubs and charity organizations in vast numbers. They took enrichment courses and dabbled in the arts. Shopping became a major occupation; an incredible amount of energy was expended on finding those items which would adorn the house and the woman, expressing her identity. Yet, none of this really satisfied. It was not serious, not involving; it merely whittled away the long, endless hours.

Many women remained in the labor force, although often displaced from the jobs they held during the war. More women than in preceding generations began to work outside the home, but not on an equal basis with men. With their taste of economic independence came the taste of exploitation both as women and as workers. As workers they learned that rights can be won through collective union action, as women the lesson was not learned so quickly.

A new generation of women sense the boredom and bitterness of their mothers. They do not want to be confined to the same roles. They are trying to understand why it is that women are still expected to play subordinate roles.

MYTHS

There have always been myths which defined as the essence of the "true woman", her natural passivity and her maternal instincts. While today's elaboration of them may be more subtle, they are still unfounded, haunting women as they are invoked to justify today's norms.

Woman's nature is usually explained in terms of her biology. She is passive in her sexual role; she receives the penis. Therefore, she desires to encircle and enclose, rather than to extend to and to strive. Man's sex, on the other hand, is activity itself, the symbol of strength, potency and dominance. Too often this metaphoric passivity is taken as literal truth. Freudian psychology and its popularly understood implications assume that what was thought, tho not proven, true for Victorian German upper-middle class women is universally true. Freud's concept of penis envy tells us that women are motivated primarily by the fact that they are not men. Erik Erikson, a favorite of social psychologists describe, "...the basic modes of feminine inception and maternal inclusion" preparing women for the perceptive and acceptant traits of future motherhood." (Childhood and Society, pp.88-90) Only as people began to suspect that the "truths" were unsubstantiated did they begin to find that in fact women are sexually as non-passive as men (see the Masters-Johnson study, The Human Sexual Response).

And then, why should function follow form? Even if women were by nature sexually passive, it hardly follows that they should be passive in other realms. But social institutions, historically created by men, have perpetuated the functional myths to justify their own position.

The Judaic-Christian Church teaches that to the extent that women are sexual creatures they are unclean, foul, "the doorway to the devil." Yet, by regarding sex only as a duty, the pure chaste woman can attain a holiness denied to man. Embodying these myths are the harlot, the virgin, (the latter to become a respectable woman). Both of them are socially useful, each subordinate to men, serving their needs.

Today's family has institutionalized the myth of whore and saint with a new slant. The ideal woman is wife, mother, mistress -- the playboy's dream. She is to comfort and serve him under the guise of the "modern free woman" that releases the man from guilt. She is still his woman, weak, gentle, submissive, emotional, sensitive, intuitive, unable to cope with the world without a man. She attains her identity through her husband and later through her children, whom she treats like private property; she's hurt when they leave home because they are denying her of her identity.

Historically, there may have been an excuse for this role as part of a division of labor. Continuous pregnancies kept women physically weak and less mobile than men. Now that the pill enables people to control the timing and number of children they will have, the incessant childbearing role is a lame excuse for confining women to domestic chores.

Educational institutions further perpetuate the myths. The liberal arts education legitimates, for men, their right to control and manage the society. For women it is a waiting period in which they can find a husband and make themselves educated companions or introspective victims. As women are irrelevant to the decisions made in society, so this education they receive is irrelevant for preparing them to make such decisions. The situation is perpetuated because women are either excluded from academic consideration or else presented in shallow characterizations.

Evolving from the sexual myths and reinforcing them are the limiting and stereotyped ideas of masculine and feminine. A woman who does not conform to the notions of feminine as serving and supportive is deviant: masculine, castrating, shrewish, sluttish, frustrated or frigid. Thus, nonconformist women are labeled and put in their place. As long as artificially constructed, mythically based images of masculine and feminine are the only alternative, both men and women are going to find conflict between their imposed sexual identity and their goals as human beings.

New myths are being created. They say that women are better off than they have ever been... that a New Woman is emerging. She is middle class and liberated. She is able to have a family; yet, because of labor saving devices she has much leisure time to devote to meaningful activity. A wide variety of consumer goods enable her to enjoy life on a scale never enjoyed before. These are the myths; what is the reality?

REALITIES

Although a large number of women do work, it is usually in service occupations. And, even if women considered their jobs worthwhile, the jobs pay less than men's and are low in status. According to statistics gathered by the Department of Labor in 1964, women are paid \$5-10 less per week than the same job as men. The median annual income for white working men is \$6497, for white women, \$3859, for non-white men-\$4285, for non-white women, \$2674. Only 1% of these women make more than \$10,000 per year and 1/4 of those women own estates. While a radical movement does not aim to integrate women into the male job structure, even less to encourage women to become business executives, weapons experts or advertising writers, it is important to note where discrimination exists. With the exception of those few who "make it in a man's world" women are systematically excluded from science, business, medicine, law and academia. Most working women are low paid factory workers, maids, waitresses, secretaries, elementary school teachers, social workers, or nurses. Some are in high paying occupations which exploit their femininity such as models, playboy bunnies or exotic dancers.

The career woman image does not apply to the bulk of women workers who are stuck in low-paying, tedious, dead-end positions. Neither does it apply to middle class, white collar women workers who are idealized by the media. We are supposed to believe that a career is glamorous because a woman dresses stylishly and serves men in such jobs as airline stewardess or New York secretary. The justification for channeling women into service occupations is that women are better servants. The excuse for keeping them out of high status occupations is that women are bad risks; they will marry and have kids. These are self-fulfilling prophecies. Women are raised to believe that they should serve and that they can't have both a career and a family. Then, the smart thing to do is to find a man to support them. Society reinforces these conditions by not providing enough child care centers, public all day nurseries, paid pregnancy leaves, shorter work days, etc.

Why is there a new myth? The mystique of the idealized New Woman has been generated in order to sell a lot of unnecessary products to a lot of bored, insecure, passive, frustrated women. Clothing and make-up are not just adornments, but become expressions of one's very essence--which is constantly being manipulated by the mass media. Miss Clairol says:

Have you found the real you? Some women never do. In fact, many women never make the most exciting discovery of all: They should have been born blonde.

A host of other advertisers echo her statement.

Styles change constantly; "new" products flood the market. Women must be made to want--no, need more and more things. The New Freedom for women is the freedom to buy and thereby support our market economy. The new leisure time is time for consuming. Irrationally changing clothing styles would not be accepted in a society where priorities centered on human needs rather than on profit-making. In the United States, priority is put on automobiles and military equipment--goods which will produce the most profits, rather than on something socially necessary from a humane point of view, such as low cost decent housing for poor people. Passive, docile, accepting women are therefore important to this system since their tasks as consumers can be manipulated. As long as work for most people is meaningless and unfulfilling and women are not expected to DO anything, women will have to gain identity from what they buy, what they own and how they look.

What about sexual liberation? It would be nice if the mini-skirted girl in gay colors and way-out make up really were a symbol for a new, sexually liberated woman. Since women have been thought of primarily as sexual beings, it would be expected that their liberation would come through sex, but those who have been "sexually liberated" have often merely adapted men's attitudes towards sex. Women are still seen and see themselves as sexual objects and treat men in kind, taking pride in the number of conquests they make. This attitude is at best one of revenge for women's own sexual exploitation. Women cannot liberate themselves through sex while in other important respects their social role remains unchanged.

PROGRAM

The initial work of any new radical women's group is to understand the realities and myths which relegate women to a subordinate role. Women come into the movement with two perspectives: either with a primary concern for women's issues such as abortion, child day care centers or the desire to research and discuss in greater depth women's position in society, or with a more general concern about political issues such as racism and the war. There is no contradiction between women's issues and political issues, for the movement for women's liberation is a step toward changing the entire society. Women are not seeking equality in an unjust society, rather from an understanding of the basis of their own oppression they are developing programs for overall social change.

The common understanding, whichever the perspective, is that part of the way that women are oppressed is that they see their problems as personal ones and thus blame themselves. The first step in building a movement is to see that the problems are that men as individuals are not "the enemy"; rather "the enemy" is those social institutions and expectations perpetuated by and constraining members of both sexes. Radical women are not forming groups for the purpose of segregating them-

selves from men, but in order to focus on the means by which women can come to terms with those institutions.

There are now about 35 small radical women's groups concentrated in a few cities. The programs develop according to the interests of the members. In groups where most of the women are in the radical movement, the first discussions often center on their role in the movement. From these talks comes the realization that as women they have been non-radical, playing passive political roles as secretaries or administrative help rather than as strategic planners.

Though the original groups were just of young radical New Left women there are now groups of once non-political housewives, women now married to movement men who previously had no political of their own, college students, high school students. They want to share their understanding of their problems as women with other women. As they see the nature of other types of oppression--of the poor, of black people, and other movements of liberation---NLF, Black Power, etc.

Groups are undertaking action projects such as leafletting women factory workers about the war, high prices, and women's wages. Some are fighting to change abortion laws and practices, setting up communal child care centers, forming drug and consumer co-ops. One university group is planning a student run course on women, for women. Others are setting up seminars on imperialism and other political issues. By discussing these serious political and intellectual questions in small groups with other women, inhibitions about females using their minds rationally can be overcome. Several groups are talking about running guerilla theater in stores and shopping centers to dramatize the war, high prices, and women's role as consumer and servant.

Some are looking for ways to relate to the anti-war movement that will not be auxiliary. Women may set up and run coffee shops near army bases to talk with the GI's, to see how they feel about the war, and to pose alternatives for them. Women may also try to organize wives of servicemen and women in the service or other women in the towns where bases are located. Some women are going door-to-door to talk with wives of working class men about the war, racism, and the presidential election. Many are planning for some activity around the Democratic Convention.

Talking about common problems in the context of the need for social change is in itself liberating. Creating programs such as these allows for the development of self-confidence, leadership and an analysis which widens the possible alternatives seen for women. Working on such issues, one develops a vision of and a movement for a society in which all people can define themselves without the awkward imposition of social roles.

CONCLUSION

The roots of the movement for women's liberation were in the contradictions between the promise held out and the existence lived. The promise was for freedom and justice now. Instead there was oppression and injustice for all but a few. Once it seemed as though reforms such as civil rights bills, anti-draft legislation, the end of the war in Vietnam, would in themselves bring justice. But unlike the feminists of the 1800's women now realize that America's problems must be attacked at their root. For justice to come to black people there must be black economic and political self-determination. For an end to militarism there must be an end to control of society by business which profits only with the suppression of national wars of independence. For the true freedom of all women, there must be a restructuring of the institutions which perpetuate the myths and the subservience of their social situation.

It is the explicit consciousness of these hopes and analysis which lead us to fight for women's liberation and the liberation of all people.