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What is Feminism?

Any attempt to "introduce feminism" invariably faces numerous challenges. Where to start, who to include, what to leave out and when to stop are all important considerations. This book provides an overview of the development of feminist activism in the Anglo-speaking world. It specifically outlines feminist thought in Britain and the US, although it refers to international contexts where relevant.

The book acknowledges and intends to celebrate the variety of feminist perspectives which have developed throughout women's history, taking as its premise bell hooks' famous definition.

FEMINISM
IS THE STRUGGLE TO END
SEXIST OPPRESSION.



Introducing Feminism traces the historical and social development
of this struggle.

The Rise of Individualism

Social activity and philosophical writing on women was founded on either of these ways of thinking, although many writers often used a combination of both. Between 1890 and 1920, both perspectives seemed complementary. But by 1920, their goals had diverged, reflecting women's varied needs and experiences.

IN BRITAIN AND THE US, INDIVIDUALIST FEMINISM DOMINATED AS EDUCATED AND FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT SINGLE WOMEN BECAME OUTSPOKEN AND PROMOTED A NON-FAMILY-BASED EXISTENCE.

AT THE SAME TIME, MARRIED WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR FORCE BECAME A POLITICAL ISSUE, AS DID FALLING BIRTH RATES.



Individualism's respect for human rights and its dismissive attitude towards sex-linked qualities was the representative way of thinking for the post-Second World War generation of women.

IN THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE, THE HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE IS THE BASIC UNIT OF SOCIETY; WOMEN CONTRIBUTE EQUALLY TO MEN THROUGH CHILDBEARING.



IN THE INDIVIDUALIST PERSPECTIVE, THE INDIVIDUAL IS THE BASIC UNIT OF SOCIETY; OUR SOCIAL ROLES SHOULD NOT BE DEFINED BY OUR GENDER.



First Wave Feminism

We think of **first wave feminism** as referring to the **organized** feminist activity which evolved in Britain and the USA in the second half of the 19th century. This organized movement relied primarily on the various independent and sporadic activities of 18th-century feminists.



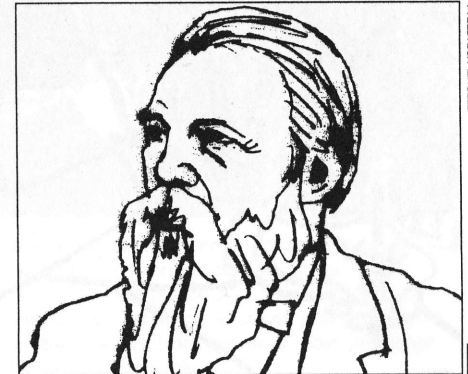
They were not particularly concerned with working-class women, and did not label themselves as feminists (a term coined in 1895). They were mostly concerned with injustices that they had experienced on a personal basis.

The major achievements of the first wave feminists were: the opening of higher education to women and the reform of secondary education for girls; and the enactment of the Married Women's Property Act, 1870. They remained active until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, which put a stop to suffrage campaigns. First wave feminist activism failed to secure the vote.

Milestones of First Wave Feminism

- 1770-84** Abigail Adams corresponds with her husband
- 1792** Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
- 1821** Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America*
- 1837** Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*
- 1837** Angelina Grimké lectures in public about abolition and women's suffrage
- 1837** Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady attend World Anti-Slavery Convention in London
- 1848** Seneca Falls Convention
- 1851** Harriet Taylor Mill, "The Enfranchisement of Women"
- 1854** Caroline Norton, *English Laws for Women in the 19th Century*
- 1866** Barbara Bodichon founds Women's Suffrage Committee
- 1869** John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women"
- 1869** Married Women's Property Act
- 1892** New Zealand grants women's suffrage
- 1902** Women's Suffrage Conference held in Washington DC
- 1903** Emmeline Pankhurst founds the Woman's Social and Political Union (WSPU)
- 1905** Vida Goldstein founds *Women's Sphere*
- 1909** Vida Goldstein founds *Woman Voter*
- 1914-18** First World War

IN 1884 FRIEDRICH ENGELS WROTE *THE ORIGINS OF THE FAMILY, PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE STATE*. IN THIS WORK HE ARGUES THAT THE FAMILY UNIT IS VITAL FOR THE SUCCESS OF CAPITALISM.



FRIEDRICH ENGELS

Rules of Conduct for Men and Women

Matthew Carey was an Irish-born publisher who lived in Philadelphia and wrote about various moral and education issues. In 1830 he published an essay entitled "Rules for Husbands and Wives" in which he **advised husbands to treat their wives as equals**. He summarized his recommendations into maxims and emphasized that "Bear and Forebear" is the best counsel for a happy marriage.



1. A good husband will always regard his wife as his equal; treat her with kindness, respect and attention; and never address her with an air of authority, as if she were, as some husbands appear to regard their wives, a mere housekeeper.
2. He will never interfere in her domestic concerns, hiring servants, &c.
3. He will always keep her liberally supplied with money for furnishing his table in a style proportioned to his means, and for the purchase of dress suitable to her station in life.
4. He will cheerfully and promptly comply with all her reasonable requests, when it can be done, without loss, or great inconvenience.
5. He will never allow himself to lose his temper towards her, by indifferent cookery, or irregularity in the hours of meals, or any other mismanagement of her servants, knowing the difficulty of making them do their duty.
6. If she have prudence and good sense, he will consult her on all great operations, involving the risque of ruin, or serious injury in case of failure. Many a man has been rescued from destruction by the wise counsels of his wife. Many a foolish husband has most seriously injured himself and family by the rejection of the advice of his wife, fearing, lest, if he followed it, he would be regarded as ruled by her! A husband can never procure a counsellor more deeply interested in his welfare than his wife.
7. If distressed, or embarrassed in his circumstances, he will communicate his situation to her with candour, that she may bear his difficulties in mind, in her expenditures. Women sometimes, believing their husband's circumstances to be far better than they really are, expend money which cannot well be afforded, and which, if they knew their real situation, they would shrink from expending.

1. A good wife will always receive her husband with smiles – leave nothing undone to render home agreeable – and gratefully reciprocate his kindness and attention.
2. She will study to discover the means to gratify his inclinations, in regard to food and cookery; in the management of her family; in her dress, manners and deportment.
3. She will never attempt to rule, or appear to rule her husband. Such conduct degrades husbands – and wives always partake largely of the degradation of their husbands.
4. She will, in every thing reasonable, comply with his wishes – and, as far as possible, anticipate them.
5. She will avoid all altercations or arguments leading to ill-humour – and more especially before company.
6. She will never attempt to interfere in his business, unless he ask her advice or counsel, and will never attempt to control him in the management of it.

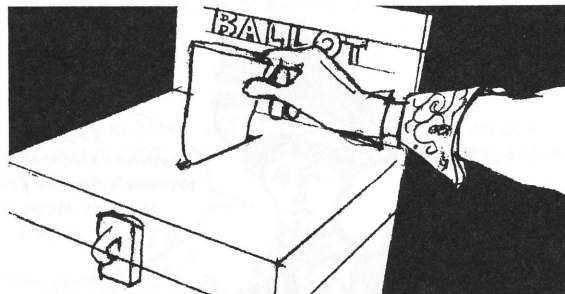
Should differences arise between husband and wife, the contest ought to be, not who will display the most spirit, but who will make the first advances. There is scarcely a more prolific source of unhappiness in the married state, than this "spirit", the legitimate offspring of pride and want of feeling.



Carey's advice attempted to emphasize the different spheres in which males and females dwell. Women should be restricted to household management tasks while men belong to the public sphere where they earn money in order to provide for their family. In spite of his emphasis on equality and respect between husbands and wives, Carey cannot help himself but establish a clear hierarchy in the relationship.

Suffrage Gains Momentum

The fight to achieve full voting rights for women was slow and at times violent. But achieving suffrage was a milestone in the history of feminism.



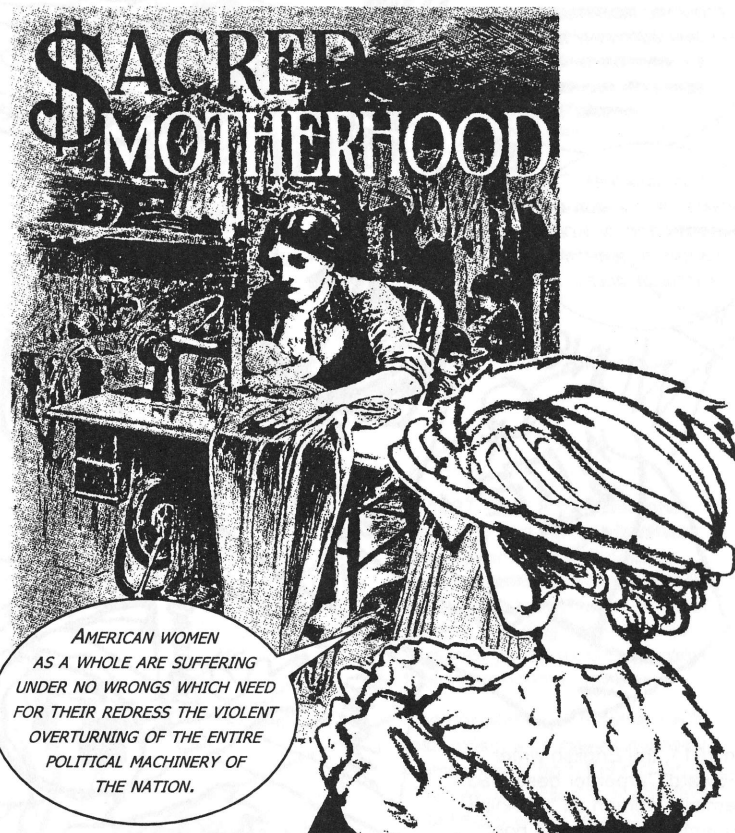
- 1892** New Zealand is the first country to grant women's suffrage; women vote in the 1902 elections, sparking a wave of suffrage around the world
- 1902** Australian women achieve the right to vote
- 1906** Finland extends the vote to women
- 1913** Norway
- 1915** Denmark
- 1917** The Netherlands and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- 1918** British women over the age of 30 gain the vote. Canada and Luxembourg
- 1919** Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Poland and Sweden. Belgium grants partial vote
- 1920** US women gain the vote
- 1928** British women 21 years and older are extended full voting rights
- 1929** Ecuador
- 1934** Turkey grants suffrage to women
- 1944** France
- 1946** Women gain the vote in Japan
- 1947** China and Argentina
- 1948** women vote in South Korea; full vote in Belgium
- 1955** educated women can vote in Iraq
- 1958** voting opened to Muslim women in Algeria
- 1963** Libya
- 1971** in Switzerland, women vote in Federal elections
- 1990** women vote in all Swiss cantons

By the 1980s, women could vote almost anywhere around the world except for a few Muslim countries. In Kuwait, for example, women are still not allowed to vote.

Against Suffrage

Once the vote was won in Britain and the US, few feminists remained active. Those who did fought for contraceptive rights, abortion law reform and the chance to be admitted to certain professions.

What must be noted here is that the fight to achieve suffrage was often accompanied by similar protest against it. One notable example from 1913 is that of Grace Duffield Goodwin.



She cautioned that the pursuit of suffrage would threaten women's domesticity, motherhood and the entire social order.

The First Backlash

Feminist activity at the beginning of the 20th century caused serious **controversy** which translated into a number of outspoken and vehement publications attacking "feminists" for being immoral, **bad mothers** and **lesbians**.

WOMEN'S DESIRE
TO PARTICIPATE
IN POLITICS AND TO ACHIEVE
ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE AND
PERSONAL AUTONOMY IS EXPLAINED
AS A SYMPTOM OF ABNORMAL
SEXUALITY AND PERVERSE
DESIRE.

THIS UNNATURAL
BEHAVIOUR IS A SIGN OF
HOMOSEXUALITY, OF WOMEN
WANTING TO PERFORM
MASCULINE ROLES.

Women
UNITE!
♀
Rev.

In 1911, the English writer Edward Carpenter described feminist women as "mannish in temperament", with poor maternal instinct, and lesbian.

Feminism = Lesbianism?

In 1901, the American psychiatrist William Lee Howard wrote a novel entitled *The Perverts*, which **equated feminism with lesbianism** and degenerate morality.

THE FEMALE
POSSESSED OF MASCULINE
IDEAS OF INDEPENDENCE AND
THAT DISGUSTING ANTI-SOCIAL
BEING, THE FEMALE SEXUAL PERVERT
ARE SIMPLY DIFFERENT DEGREES
OF THE SAME CLASS OF
DEGENERATES.
WILLIAM L. HOWARD

In 1927, Dr E.F.W. Eberhard in Germany argued that **feminism**, which promoted lesbianism, **could potentially destroy Western civilization**. He accused feminist leaders of being lesbians who seduced young women to convert them to the movement.

The correlation of feminism with lesbianism was **meant to scare women away** from the movement. They were warned that enrolling in colleges which emphasized athletics and taught "feminist courses" would ensure "lifelong homosexuality".

Second Wave Feminism

Second wave feminists adopted and adapted De Beauvoir's reasoning that women's oppression lay in their **socially constructed status** of Other to men. The term "second wave" was coined by Marsha Lear to describe the increase in feminist activity in America, Britain and Europe from the **late 1960s onwards**.

TWO POLITICAL
MOVEMENTS SHAPED
THE SECOND WAVE: THE
WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT
(WRM) AND THE **WOMEN'S
LIBERATION MOVEMENT**
(WLM).

THE WRM
WAS COMPOSED LARGELY
OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN WHO
CAMPAIGNED TO END
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN
AT WORK.



The Women's Liberation Movement

The WLM emerged out of the New Left of the WRM in the late 1960s. In the US, it came as a result of **civil rights activism** and **anti-Vietnam campaigning**. The WLM provided **theoretical** solutions to women's oppression, whereas the WRM was the more **practical** and socially driven movement.

SINCE WOMEN'S
ATTITUDES VARY IN ACCORDANCE
TO THEIR RACE, CLASS, AGE AND LEVELS
OF EDUCATION, SECOND WAVE FEMINISTS
INSIST ON CHALLENGING THE MYTH
OF A UNIVERSAL FEMININE
EXPERIENCE.

HENCE
FROM THE 1960S
ONWARDS WE SPEAK
OF **FEMINISMS**.



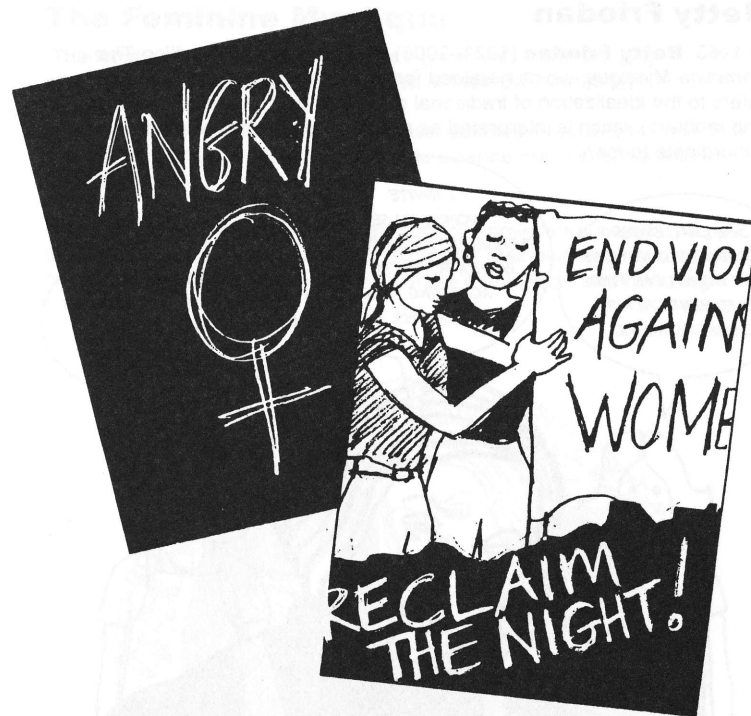
The Personal is Political

The slogan "the personal is political" referred to the fact that every aspect of a woman's private life is affected by and can itself affect the political situation.

IN SUPPORT
OF OUR BELIEF THAT
PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ARE CLOSELY
TIED, WE PROTESTED AGAINST THE
MISS AMERICA BEAUTY CONTEST
IN 1968.



In Britain, where working-class socialism predominated, women workers at the Ford car plant went on strike to protest against gaps in pay. More recent feminists have challenged early interpretations of the slogan and have invited women to separate the personal from the political.



The Seven Demands of the WLM

By the mid-20th century, the Women's Liberation Movement had developed clear objectives and was campaigning to achieve:

1. Equal pay for men and women
2. Equal education and job opportunities
3. Free 24-hour nurseries
4. Free contraception and abortion on demand
5. Financial and legal independence
6. An end to discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her sexuality
7. Freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence and an end to male aggression and dominance

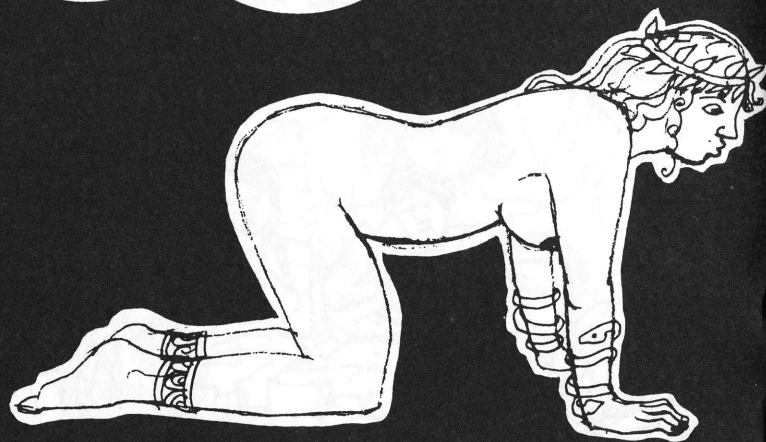
Varieties of Feminisms

Since the 1960s, a variety of feminist perspectives on women's lives has given rise to a number of feminist positions.

Lesbian feminism warns that compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates women's sexual oppression. In 1955, a group of lesbian feminist activists in San Francisco formed Daughters of Bilitis, taking their name from Pierre Louÿs' Sapphic love poetry *Chansons de Bilitis*. In Britain in the late 1970s, the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists made the "case against heterosexuality".

ALL FEMINISTS
CAN AND
SHOULD BE **POLITICAL**
LESBIANS.

A **POLITICAL**
LESBIAN IS A WOMAN
WHO IS NOT
SEXUALLY AVAILABLE
TO MEN.



THE **LESBIAN**
REJECTS MALE SEXUAL/POLITICAL
DOMINATION; SHE DEFIES HIS WORLD,
HIS SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, HIS IDEOLOGY,
AND HIS DEFINITION OF HER
AS INFERIOR.

FOR THE
LESBIAN-FEMINIST,
SEX IS NOT PRIVATE; IT IS A
POLITICAL MATTER OF OPPRESSION,
DOMINATION AND
POWER.



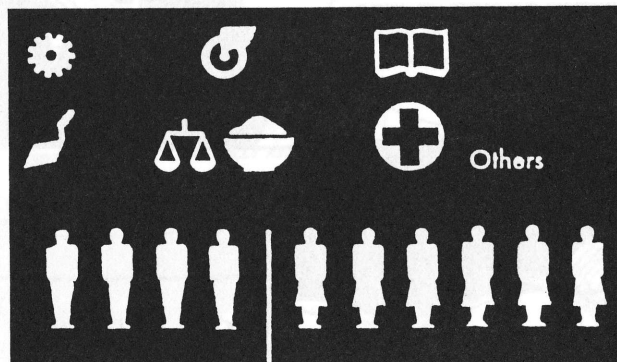
CHARLOTTE BUNCH

THE FUTURE
IS FEMALE.
IF WOMEN
RULED
THE WORLD,
THEN THERE
WOULD BE
NO WARS.

Cultural feminists believe that women have been separated from each other and convinced of their inferiority. The lesbian is the only woman who can realize her full potential.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism asserts that women are held back by lack of education and social discrimination, and argues that a change in public attitudes is needed so that women can be integrated into all levels of society.



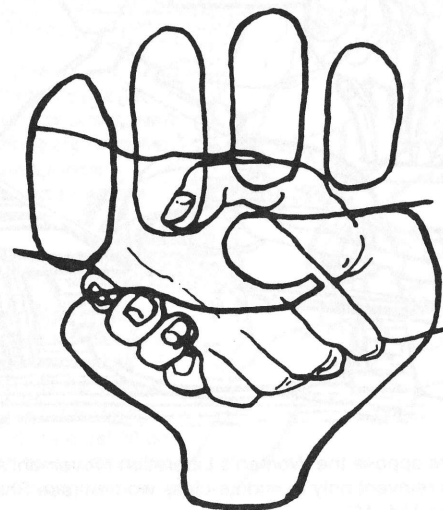
A socialist feminist society would demand /ensure:

- Free, humane, competent medical care
- Peoples' control over their own bodies
- Availability of housing for private and collective use
- Varied, nutritious and abundant diet
- Social respect for the work people do
- Democratic councils
- Scientific improvements geared towards the improvement of human life
- An end of housework as private unpaid labour
- Redefinition of jobs
- Political and civil liberties encouraging participation by all
- Disarming of and community control of police
- Social responsibility for the raising of children
- Free, public quality education
- Freedom to define social and sexual relationships
- A popular culture which enhances self-respect and respect of others
- Support for internal development and self-determination for countries around the world.

Socialist feminists saw great potential in uniting women into bonds of **sisterhood** which would allow for a revolutionary seizing of power. They developed a tripartite strategy.

- 1) Win real concrete reforms that meet women's needs
- 2) Give women a sense of their own power
- 3) Alter the relations of power

PARTICIPATION
IN RAP GROUPS MIGHT
LEAD WOMEN TO A DEAD END
IF NOT COUPLED WITH ACTION AND
SUPPORTED BY A CLEAR SENSE
OF IDEOLOGY.



Traditional Marxist Feminism

For Marxist feminists, the division of labour and lack of support for working mothers defines women by their domestic responsibilities and excludes them from productive labour.

WE ASCRIBE
SOCIAL FACTORS SUCH AS
CLASS DIVISIONS TO WOMEN'S
OPPRESSION.

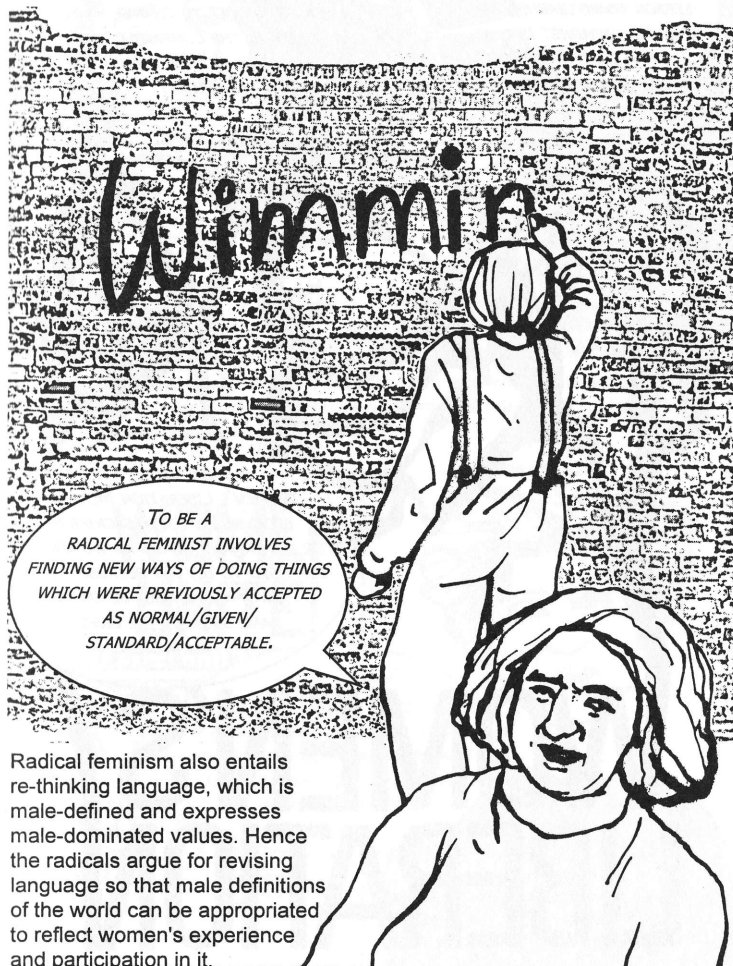
WE ADVOCATE
THE ERADICATION OF THE
BOURGEOIS FAMILY STRUCTURES
WHICH DEPEND ON WOMEN'S
UNPAID DOMESTIC
LABOUR.



Marxist feminists oppose the Women's Liberation Movement's emphasis on achieving goals relevant only to middle-class women (see Shulamith Firestone, pages 114–16).

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism sees itself as revolutionary. It maintains that women's emancipation is not enough, and argues that women are still oppressed and exploited. The only way to "free" them is by opposing patriarchy and marriage. Radical feminists question every aspect of women's lives.



TO BE A
RADICAL FEMINIST INVOLVES
FINDING NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS
WHICH WERE PREVIOUSLY ACCEPTED
AS NORMAL/GIVEN/
STANDARD/ACCEPTABLE.

Radical feminism also entails re-thinking language, which is male-defined and expresses male-dominated values. Hence the radicals argue for revising language so that male definitions of the world can be appropriated to reflect women's experience and participation in it.