

## Has Feminism Failed?

Twenty years have passed since the movement began. The relevant questions today are: «What have they (women) done?», «Where do they stand today?» and «What is the outcome in Africa, in Europe, in Asia and in America?»

### Cons

In East or West, it seems that women still have to fight for their rights. While women in some areas have achieved more than their sisters in other areas, the overall outcome seems to fall short of the goals of the Women's Movement. There seems to be no guarantees for women anywhere, still. In many parts of the world, women are still victims of traditions, religions, myths and ideologies.

For instance, male births are still preferable in China, where females are considered an invaluable addition to the population. In Tibet, women are forced to abort, even during the eighth month of pregnancy. In India, twenty five percent of girls are ill-treated and killed before the age of fifteen because they are a financial burden to their parents who have to cover the expenses of marriage. In Africa, financial bankruptcy affects females for they are the first to be taken out of schools and put into the labor market.

In Africa, the ritual of female circumcision is still practiced. In the East, the pressure to wear the veil and its role-expectations are perpetuating. In Algeria, «every girl who goes out at night is killed» says a young Algerian. Furthermore, girls are separated from boys in schools because «women love to dominate, manipulate and destroy men.» One student said that she had to submit to wearing the veil before she was admitted to class<sup>(1)</sup>.

Often, women end up paying the biggest price for political change. For instance, the unification of North and South Yemen had the happy outcome of ending the struggle between brothers. But the unified status of Yemeni women soon clenched a heated controversy (see *Al-Raida*, vol. IX, No. 50, p. 8). Southern women demanded the long-adopted democracy of their Northern sisters and refused to yield to Islamic fundamentalism, notably the veil. Eventually, however, they found themselves forced to wear the veil although their call for

democracy was answered. And to top it all, their husbands gained access to taking additional wives from the North<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Western model of freedom has been transmitted as the ideal formula for women all over the world. Women think that all it takes to earn freedom, New York, London or Paris style, is financial independence. But are they aware of the problems women in the West face? Research has it that these women earn thirty percent less than men.

Which brings us back to the original question: «Has the Women's Movement produced positive or negative results?»



According to American, Kay Ebeling, a free-lance writer and member of the feminist generation (also known as the Experimental Generation), **Feminism has failed**<sup>(3)</sup>. Ebeling explains that «the message of Feminism was: woman, you don't need a man. It was a philosophy that made divorce and cohabitation casual and routine. It made women poor and saddled them with raising children alone.» Ebeling remarks that «Feminism made women disposable. The reality (today) is a lot of frenzied and overworked women often abandoned by men.»

It seems that what Ebeling is really saying is that «Feminism is lonely.» However, although more women lead a single's life and may be lonely, there is no denying that more women are integrated in economic, political and other spheres of public life.

#### Pros

The following are direct quotes taken from Time Magazine<sup>(4)</sup> highlighting the achievements of the Feminist Movement.

... The efforts of women around the world to see that their rights are respected... involve a struggle to share information. If knowledge is the currency for power, images of change bring opening and inspirations....

... Although there remains corners of the world untouched by the revolution... some themes are becoming universal, namely the desire for women and men to achieve their goals without sacrificing their nature...

... The dreams transcend old boundaries though they vary from place to place... economics may be a primary goal in one country, support for families in another, protection from violence in a third....

... As feminism moved from theory to practice, it brought surprises: among the first nations to elect female heads of government were those that seemed least likely to do so, such as India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan... In Eastern Europe's emerging democracy, women may be getting a chance to share real, not cosmetic power.

Indeed, prior to the revolution, the world beyond was not aware of the existence of rituals like circumcision, crimes of honor, abortion and killing of female siblings, denial of women's right to divorce or work, abuse, white slavery, rape and other injustices.

After the revolution, victimized women learned that they actually have **rights**, which they can claim and protect. Consequently, women's groups, regardless of how powerful or powerless they are, began to emerge almost everywhere.

Indeed, women are slowly transcending old boundaries. Probably, one of the greatest boundaries that they have transcended is that of silence. For the sake of example, five sisters broke the vow of silence against their father who had abused them since childhood in the French suburb of Angier.

Another achievement of the movement is its success in linking women's rights to human rights issues. Women issues were incorporated into larger matters concerning the world community, such as literacy, hygiene, health, education, violence, politics, work and others. For instance, the illiteracy of women, although still comparatively higher than men, has become a concern for relief organizations, social associations and governments, and not only feminists. Contingently, human



rights groups may be more effective where women's groups are not.

Higher on the hierarchy of needs and rights, the Women's Movement has gained strongholds in the media, this century's most powerful weapon. Not only was information communicated to the world, but voices were raised, pressures were made and changes were achieved. For example, Ireland elected its first female President of the Republic, Ms. Mary Bronson. Ms. Sharon Brat Dickson is Mayor of Washington DC, the capital city of the United States of America; and Ms. Anne Richards is Governor of the State of Texas<sup>(1)</sup>. Ms. Margaret Thatcher was premier of Great Britain.

The biggest surprise was what happened in Saudi Arabia. Hence, Saudi women were motivated to speak up when glimpses of western cultures, embodied in the armed forces, came to Saudi Arabia. In the past, Saudis would indulge their «western» behaviors while away from home, and submit to strict traditions and laws in their homeland. With the coming of the Americans, they found themselves face to face with the fact that eleven percent of these forces are women sharing the front with the men.

### Conclusion

Here we have two extremes trying to evaluate each other. Women in the traditional parts of the world are overburdened with male domination. While, women in the West complain from singularity and alienation. Does this mean that the Women's Movement should be aborted because it has substituted alienation for submission?

Maybe it is time that the Movement be re-visited and re-evaluated. It stands to reason that after twenty years of trial and error, a more profound understanding of equality should be reached. After all shouldn't women and men be equals not competitors and not have a slave-master relationship? How can the Women's Movement preserve sex-roles and emphasize equality? How can the movement avoid the pitfall of sounding negative because of its «aggressive and patronizing» tone? Maybe «Moderation is the best policy.» ●

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(1) **Al-Diyar** daily newspaper, Thursday, November 29, 1990 (Arabic reference).

(2) Ibid.

(3) Kay Ebeling. «The Failure of Feminism», **Newsweek** November 1990, p. 9

(4) «On The Move» (special section) **Time International**, December 3, 1990, p. 47-59.

(5) Ibid. **Al-Diyar**.