

Why Feminism

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Woman is goddess and devil She can bring man to salvation or drag him down with her to hell. On the face of it, the pedestal-gutter syndrome appears to reflect views that are diametrically opposed: woman is good, woman is bad. But in fact these views represent a single attitude: woman is different.

A Far Eastern writer is purported to have said, "How bitter it is to be a woman! Nothing on earth is held so cheap." And Angelica Grimke said, "The slave may be freed and woman be where she is, but women cannot be freed and the slave remain where he is." This might be strange to say when we realize that men and women are two halves of the same species and should fit together like two sides of a coin. Yet throughout history the sexes have regarded each other less as fellow human beings than as alien and exotic creatures -- to be loved, feared, cherished, or confined. In every society, in every century, people have assumed that males and females are different not merely in basic anatomy but in elusive qualities of spirit, soul and ability. They are not supposed to do the same things, think the same way, or share the same dreams and desires.

It is true that woman has been esteemed, worshipped and protected, but she has just as often been loathed, ignored and reviled. These apparently opposite attitudes have been referred to as the pedestal-gutter syndrome. Woman is goddess and

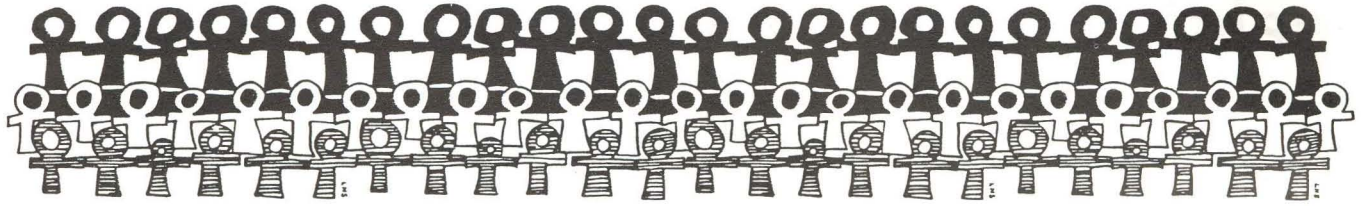
devil, virgin and whore. She can bring man to salvation or drag him down with her to hell. On the face of it, the pedestal-gutter syndrome appears to reflect views that are diametrically opposed: woman is good, woman is bad. But in fact these views represent a single attitude: woman is different. After all whether you are looking up to women or stooping down to them, you don't have to look them in the eye!

Differences in themselves need not cause animosity. It is only when one group considers the other to be immoral, deficient, or dangerous that conflict arises. In the relationship between the sexes, women have been regarded as deficient males, insatiable sex-pots, and incarnations of evil. They are the second sex, the weaker sex, the inferior sex, the sex to be explained. Often, like slaves, women have been regarded as men's property, to be bought and sold, punished and raped, traded or married off in political allegiances. If women were to be used as objects of barter and liaison, as tests of courage and symbols of conquest, they must learn to be obedient.

Thus, we find that even after the

French Revolution when the philosophers hoped that education would cure woman's defects, they were still reluctant to advocate full political equality for women. In fact, in the Social Contract, Rousseau described an exclusively male bond. Females, he said, "must be trained to hear the yoke from the first so that they may not feel it, to master their own caprices and to submit themselves to the will of others." A woman must learn "to submit to injustice and to suffer the wrongs inflicted on her by her husband without complaint." The implication, here of course, is that women are not submissive by nature but must be trained to perfect the role! It is noteworthy that this is the same Rousseau who said elsewhere demanding man's right to overthrow tyranny, "man is born free, yet everywhere he is found in chains."

Stereotype attitudes, like laws, still persist even after the realities change. If you believe that misogyny is anachronistic, ask some people to tell you the traits they think are typical of women and men. You will probably hear that women are dependent, talkative, timid, weepy, vain and bad at numbers, and that men are strong,



self-reliant, courageous, dominant, athletic and good at math. Parents still prefer to have boys rather than girls, and both men and women still think that men are the better and smarter sex.

In contrast to nineteenth century feminists, today's feminists argue that far too much has been made of the biological differences between men and women. For them, different socialization processes account for a larger part of the observed differences in men's and women's behaviour, while biology plays only a minor role. Thus their argument for equality is based upon the belief that the biologically derived differences between the sexes are relatively minor and that a vast inequitable system has been built upon the assumption that such differences are basic and major. Research has shown that although biological differences abound, yet it is clear that neither genes nor cyclic hormones lead to specific actions in any simple direct way; our bodies are not straight-jackets for personality. For one thing, research shows that experience and learning can override biological factors to a remarkable degree. For another, high testosterone levels do not make all men violent and sex-mad; and low estrogen and progesterone levels do not make all menstruating or menopausal women anxious and depressed. Bodily changes do interact with the social ones.

The new feminism presupposes social change. In order to better serve women's needs, changes must be made in people's attitudes, in laws, institutions and, ultimately, the whole social structure of society. The

changes may be only minor or drastic, but the feminists feel that not only will such organization benefit women but that ultimately it will improve all society. Thus, the new feminism is not about elimination of differences between the sexes, nor even simply the achievement of equal opportunity: it concerns the individual's right to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person.

Behaviourists say that particular experiences in childhood eventually fit us for a social system in which males go one way and females another. Most laymen and psychologists believe that the basic ingredients of personality are set in childhood and that virtually from the moment of birth boys and girls take different roads to different personalities. This view implicitly accepts the idea that stereotypes about the sexes have a strong basis in reality: that men are more independent and aggressive and that women are more nurturant and emotional. But it also says that there is nothing inevitable about these differences. They are learned from books, films, parents and other people. Thus, because women learn that achievement (especially intellectual achievement) is aggressive, and therefore masculine, they worry that they will be less feminine, if they compete. Anxiety about this conflict makes women feel defensive if they do achieve and may prevent them from achieving in the first place. Able men do not have this problem because achievement and the masculine role go hand in hand. Women, unlike men, have a motive to avoid success, a fear that achievement

will have disastrous consequences, such as remaining single.

To many writers, the result in sex differences, in self-esteem and achievement motivation account for the greater prevalence of males in politics, business, science and art. To be creative you have to be confident; to advance in your field you need some drive and energy. If socialization suppresses a girl's ambitions and self-regard as it encourages a boy's, the implications for sex differences in social status and personal happiness are serious.

Finally, at the very least, getting females into schools and employment would seem to have clear utility beyond altruism. At stake are not only economic goals, but also the commitment to relieve human suffering and make a more equitable life available to all. In the final analysis, however, it may well be the degree of organization and consciousness of women themselves that will determine just how far along the road to equality the provision of economic opportunity will lead.

In conclusion, feminists are not after turning women into men, rather the qualities most feminists would like to see both men and women adopt and combine parts of the male and female role stereotypes. All people should be warm and concerned for others' welfare, they should be sufficiently self-assured to reach out to others, they should be self-motivated, adventurous, competent, and above all, they should be free to develop their individual potential. ●