



# **FEMINISM**

**SOME QUESTIONS ON FEMINISM  
AND ITS RELEVANCE IN SOUTH ASIA**  
— Kamla Bhasin & Nighat Said Khan

**THE STREAMS OF FEMINISM**  
— Teresita Quintos — Deles

**WHAT FEMINISM DOES NOT MEAN**  
— Belinda A. Aquino

Occasional Paper No. 2

Some Questions on

# Feminism

and

## its Relevance in South Asia

KAMLA BHASIN  
NIGHAT SAID KHAN

"In our country we have suffered for centuries; women have been the harijans of our society." The speaker goes on in this vein on the theme of women's oppression. A pause—and then a strong statement: "But... I am not a feminist!" The speaker could be a woman prime minister, professional or artist—all strong women who, very possibly, have fought all their lives to succeed in a man's world. We are amazed to hear, "But I am not a feminist" coming from them, and wait for them to explain what they mean by "feminist". Invariably, no such explanation is given. The categorical way in which they say "I am not a feminist" does not simply mean that *they* are not feminist; the implication is that it is not good to be one and that those who are, are somehow misled and irrelevant.

Hearing such statements we cannot help wondering why people feel the need to condemn something that many people take seriously. We can only conclude that they haven't given feminism any thought at all or that they have imbibed the considerable false propaganda against feminists and feminism. The media for example, which is controlled to a large extent by men, has been responsible for a widespread misrepresentation of feminists as "bra-burning", "man-hating", "family-destroying" women. This propaganda is reinforced by other forces and groups that see the emancipation and liberation of women as a threat, with the result that feminists in our countries are attacked and dismissed as "middle class", "westernized" and "rootless" women.

The facts, however, are that feminists in South Asia have never burnt their bras, even symbolically. Large numbers are married, have children and run their homes as well or as badly as any other women. The question then is why feminists are subject to so much attack and why feminism is so often misunderstood. We believe that

this is because few people have bothered to try and understand what it actually is and what feminists are trying to do. This booklet is an attempt to respond to some of the more common questions and doubts raised about feminism in the hope that at least some of the misunderstandings can be cleared.

**Q. What is feminism then?**

**A.** Unlike many other "isms" feminism does not derive its theoretical or conceptual base from any single theoretical formulation. There is therefore no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times. The definition thus can and does change *because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions.* This means that feminism meant one thing in the 17th century (when the word was first used) and that it means something quite different in the 1980s. It can also be articulated differently in different parts of the world and, within a country, differently by different women depending on their class background, level of education, consciousness, etc. Even among similar kinds of women there are different currents and debates in feminist thinking, particularly with regard to the reasons (i.e. the historical roots) for patriarchy and male domination, and to the final resolution of women's struggle for a non-exploitative society free of class, caste, race and gender bias. Nevertheless a broad definition of feminism for us today (which was accepted by women from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in a recent South Asian workshop) is, "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation."

According to this definition anyone who recognises the existence of sexism (discrimination on the basis of gender), male domination and patriarchy and who takes some action against it, is a feminist. From this definition it is clear that a mere recognition of sexism is not enough, it *has* to be accompanied by action, by a challenge to male domination. But this action can take any form. For instance a woman's decision not to be humiliated, or to educate herself and pursue a career, or her refusal to be restricted by purdah, or her decision not to have children are; as feminist actions, as relevant as the most organised struggles. In other words you don't *have* to belong to a group to be a feminist, although in order to do anything effectively it is much better to be part of one.

The main difference between earlier feminists and present-day ones is that earlier, the struggle was for the democratic rights of women. It included the right to education and employment; the right

to own property; the right to vote; the right to enter parliament; the right to birth control; the right to divorce, etc. In other words, earlier feminists fought for legal reform, for a legally equal position in society; the struggles were, essentially, outside the home and the family. Today, feminists have gone beyond mere legal reforms to end discrimination; they are working towards the *emancipation* of women. Feminism therefore now includes the struggle against women's subordination to the male within the home; against their exploitation by the family; against their continuing low status at work, in society and in the culture and religion of the country; against their double burden in production and reproduction. In addition, feminism challenges the very notions of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive, biologically determined categories.

Thus feminists see that women have to not only fight against discrimination but also *for* emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression by the state, by society and by men. Since women are victims of exploitation (e.g. unequal pay, low wages); subordination (e.g. under male domination); oppression (e.g. violence against women), we are in a position to understand the problems facing other women, and know that we have to initiate the struggle to change our situation, and society itself.

**In its essence then, present-day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home.**

Here we would like to say that it is not enough to simply ask for a woman's equality vis-a-vis the men in her community. For example, it does not take a peasant woman very far even if she becomes equal to a peasant man who is himself brutalized, exploited and oppressed by society. Feminists, therefore, are not only asking and fighting for the "equality" of women, but for a just and equitable society—for women and men both.

**Q. Isn't feminism a western notion and therefore quite irrelevant in South Asia?**

**A.** This question is seldom raised as a question. Invariably it is posed as an allegation, an attack, or even a *fact*, and as such feminists are "naturally" to be condemned and not taken seriously. What is interesting is that this allegation is made most forcefully by those men (and some women) who are themselves very western, who have been to English medium schools and colleges, and who themselves speak English, wear western clothes and so on. Such allegations are however never made about modern science or "modernisation"—all a result of "westernisation".

These same people do not question the foreign origins of the parliamentary or presidential systems for instance; of the development of capitalism; of private ownership of land and absentee landlordism; or of the ideology of the Left. Granted that the term "feminism" was not born in South Asia; but then neither were the industrial revolution, Marxism, socialism, or for that matter, even some of our South Asian religions. Einstein was not born in Lahore, Marx in Calcutta or Lenin in Dhaka; yet their western origins have not made their ideas irrelevant for us. Nor should they be considered irrelevant, because an idea cannot be confined within national or geographic boundaries.

In any case, while the *term* feminism may be foreign, the *concept* stands for a transformational process, a process which started in South Asia in the 19th century as an organised and articulated stand against women's subordination. Thus feminism was not artificially imposed here, nor was it a foreign ideology. Feminism and feminist struggles arose in Asia when a consciousness developed about democratic rights and the injustice of depriving half the population of its basic rights. In fact, feminist consciousness arose in Asia during certain historic periods of heightened political consciousness, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, during struggles against foreign rule and against the local despotism of feudal monarchs. The voices against women's subordination during this period took the form of a demand for the possibility of widow remarriage, for a ban on polygamy, the practices of sati and of purdah, and demands for the education and legal emancipation of women.

**Q.** Were there debates in Asia about women's position in society before colonialism?

**A.** Yes, the "debate" on women is an old one. For example, the issue of whether women could join the order and become nuns was debated by the Buddha and his followers in the 6th century B.C. There has been a continuing debate on women's right to education in many countries of Asia. In the 18th century a Chinese scholar, **Chen Hung-Mou** wrote on women's education, before the famous Mary Wollstonecraft did. He said: "There is no-one in the world who is not educable; and there is no-one whom we can afford not to educate; why be neglectful only in regard to girls? Just after leaving infancy, they are raised and protected deep in the women's quarters. They are not like the boys who go out to follow an outside teacher, who benefit from the encouragement of teachers and friends... when girls grow older, they are taught to embroider, to

prepare their dowries and that is all."

**Q. But these are examples of male consciousness. Have men been supporting women's issues?**

**A.** Yes. Many of the earliest agitators for women's emancipation in the East were men. In China, for example, **Kang Yu-Wei** attacked footbinding and women's subordination: "I now have a task: to cry out the natural grievances of the incalculable number of women of the past. I now have one great desire: to save eight hundred million women of my own time from drowning in the sea of suffering. I now have a great longing: to bring the incalculable, inconceivable numbers of women of the future the happiness of equality and of independence." In Egypt **Ahmed Fares El Shidyak** in 1855 wrote a book (*One Leg Crossed Over the Other*) supporting women's emancipation, and **Kasim Amin**, around the same time created a sensation with his book *The New Woman*. In Iran several male intellectuals of the 1880s and 1890s took up the issue of women's rights, opposing polygamy and the seclusion of women; while in India, from the time of **Ram Mohun Roy** who agitated against sati and women's enslavement, numerous social and political reformers have raised the issue, including famous names like **Vidyasagar, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, and Syed Ahmed.**

**Q. Were there no women activists in Asia during this period?**

**A.** Yes, there were many, even in the 19th century. Some of the lesser-known early agitators on women's rights were **Pandita Ramabai** (1858-1922) of India, who attacked Hindu religious orthodoxy and spoke up for women's freedom as early as the 1880s and who herself led an independent life; **Kartini** (1879-1904), a pioneer of women's education and emancipation in Indonesia, who defied tradition to start a girl's school; **Qurrat ul Ayn** (1815-51) of Iran, a Babi heretic who abandoned her family, gave up veiled seclusion, preached unveiled in public, and died fighting on the battlefield; **Jiu Jin** of China (1875-1907) who left home to study in Tokyo and to involve herself in revolutionary politics and women's issues. Jiu Jin was arrested for these activities and executed. It was she who said, "The revolution will have to start in our homes, by achieving equal rights for women." **Sugala** (from the Mahavamsa) and **Gajaman Nona** are two Sri Lankan women who defied the stereotype of feminine passivity

**NOTE:** Sections of pages 5 to 10 have been largely reproduced from a pamphlet "Feminism is Relevant" by Feminist Study Circle, Colombo.

and prudery to give expression to their individuality as women. **Sugala** fought King Parakrama Bahu I in defence of her kingdom, while **Gajaman Nona** wrote poetry, some of which was considered by men to be too ribald for a woman.

With the changes in our society the issues and forms of oppression have changed and therefore the demands in 1980 will be different to those of 1880. What is important is that the cause remains the same and that these changes are a part of the total struggle for and process of emancipation. The issues which present-day feminists are raising in South Asia are both indigenous and very concrete. Issues of dowry, violence against women, rape, equal wages, discriminatory personal laws, the use of religion to oppress women, the negative portrayal of women in the media, all of these are local issues. Many of them have also been raised by western feminists but this fact neither makes them irrelevant for us nor proves that South Asian feminists are "followers" of western feminists. If some forms of women's oppression are universal, then the struggles must and will also be universal. Issues relating to sexual freedom, lesbianism, etc., raised by some western feminists have hardly ever been raised by us here. In fact South Asian feminists seldom adhere to (most are not even aware of) western feminist ideology, nor do we get into theoretical debates and divide ourselves by forming alliances with specific ideological positions taken by western feminists. In the face of these facts, how can we call South Asian feminists western or irrelevant?

**Q.** But is this struggle really relevant today? After all, women now have many democratic rights—education, employment, franchise, etc. And isn't it true that we have had women prime ministers and strong women political leaders? We have women in many professions; we have women diplomats, doctors, engineers, lawyers, professors. What then is the problem and do we still need feminism?

**A.** Although women are an active part of our workforce and some have even become economically independent, women in South Asia also have the lowest paid jobs, if they are paid at all, that is. Even of those at the "top" very few are in decision-making and executive or managerial positions. Most working women are "family helpers" or work in the informal sector, earning very little. Women are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. As soon as factories are mechanised and modernised women are replaced by machines and thrown out of their jobs. The worst example of this is the textile

industry in India from where large numbers of women workers have been retrenched. In some cases there has definitely been an improvement in the status of women. In Sri Lanka, statistics about female life expectancy, literacy etc. are quite impressive. But on the whole, in all our countries, women are behind men in every sphere. The figures with regard to women's participation in politics are in fact appalling, in spite of the fact that two of our countries have had women prime ministers. For despite all this, no South Asian country has had more than a handful of women members of parliament since independence. The presence of a few women in important public positions in no way proves that the overall status of women in our countries is satisfactory.

**Q. Surely recent policies have resulted in the liberation of women? They have brought women out of the home and into the workforce and have made them economically independent.**

**A.** While some women have indeed benefitted from these changes, their number is small, and needs to be increased. We are *for* more women coming out of the home and into the workforce if they want and need to work. But at the same time we are *against* policies which allow and perpetuate the exploitation of women's labour—i.e. the payment of low wages, the prevalence of unhealthy working conditions, overwork, arbitrary hiring and firing, denial of freedom of association, sexual exploitation, etc. But it needs to be added here that economic independence, although very important for women's emancipation, is not enough. Even economically independent women are subordinate to their men and families and face discrimination at home. The fight for economic independence is thus, only one aspect of women's struggle.

**Q. But surely if we want to develop, we have to tolerate these forms of exploitation for some time. Once we have developed, the negative features will disappear.**

**A.** There is really no guarantee that the negative features will disappear with development. In fact past experiences indicate that in most cases this does not necessarily happen. The model of development we follow in our countries is based on the capitalist mode of production and historically, capitalist development has reinforced and intensified gender specific roles as well as the exploitation of women. For example, in Europe the home had earlier been the centre of production (food, clothes, soap, candles, etc.), and the women played an important role in this production, as well as in agriculture and animal rearing. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the



role of women changed. On the one hand poor women were forced to work in factories and mines (as cheap labour) and reproduce the next generation of workers, while on the other, women of the bourgeoisie were kept in the home as housewives, and their role was limited to reproduction, that is to producing heirs. Dissenting, independent bourgeois women who refused to conform were ostracised and penalised. With this the ideology of the *exploitation* of poor women and the *seclusion* of rich women was perpetuated. Given the nature of development in our countries, these same tendencies already exist here and are likely to continue.

**Q. But of what relevance are developments in 18th century Europe to women in South Asia?**

**A.** European imperialism directly linked the European capitalist system to those countries that were colonised and brought about major changes in them. These changes were not only political and administrative but also fundamental to existing economic and social systems, in that they fundamentally altered the lives of the colonised peoples. Women were equally affected by all these changes. The policies and practices of the colonialists made the position of women even worse than what it used to be. For example in pre-colonial societies women worked primarily in food production. Under colonialism although they continued to produce food the changes brought about in agriculture, primarily as a result of the shift to cash-crops, drove women to work on tea, coffee, rubber and other plantations, and also to work in factories and mines.

As in Europe, in South Asia also women of the bourgeoisie were kept in the home but were given some education and a few basic rights. But in spite of these, basic laws were patriarchal with the man as the undisputed head of the family.

Thus with the growth and development of capitalism both in Europe and in the colonies, patriarchal structures were strengthened. Women lost their earlier rights in household production and were exploited in the field and factory, or confined to the home.

In all spheres the culture of capitalism initiated in the 19th century by colonialists reinforced and established patriarchy and patriarchal socio-economic values more firmly. Unfortunately for our countries, our links with our former colonial masters continue to this day. Not just our economic system but our political, legal and educational systems too are still based on British ones.

**Q. Can you briefly explain the word patriarchy because one hears it so often.**

**A.** The word itself means the rule of the father or the patriarch. It refers to a social system where the father controls all members of the family, all property and other economic resources, and makes all major decisions. Linked to this social system is the belief or the ideology that man is superior to woman, that women are and should be controlled by men, and are part of a man's property. This thinking forms the basis of many of our religious laws and practices, and explains all those social practices which confine women to the home, and control their lives. Our double standards of morality and our laws which give more rights to men than to women are also based on patriarchy.

Now when one uses the word patriarchy, it refers to the system that oppresses and subordinates women in both the private and the public sphere.

**Q.** Isn't the real reason for inequality in the workplace the fact that women are less productive than men because they are more concerned with home life?

**A.** Capitalism uses this argument based on the view that a man as head of the household is paid a "family wage"—i.e. a wage that covers subsistence for himself, his wife and his children. According to this view, women engaged in productive work are merely supplementing the family income and can therefore be paid less than men, *even for work of equal value*. The reality is somewhat different. Studies have revealed that in many countries as many as 25 per cent - 40 per cent of all families either live primarily on the earnings of women or are single-parent households headed by women. Most of these women live in poverty or hold poorly paid jobs, and are discriminated against in the workplace by capitalist patriarchy's assumptions, referred to above.

It is also true that in addition to work in the factory, field or plantation, women have to spend many hours attending to household chores—cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water and firewood, child care, and so on. Women therefore experience the *double day*, *double burden*, *double shift*, etc. That is, they bear the burden of "paid work" (as a part of the workforce) and "unpaid work" (in the home). This double burden also makes it difficult for women to get better jobs, to get trained and to move up the professional ladder.

**Q.** Despite all this, surely with modernisation women will be given their due place in society—their domestic chores will diminish and they will go out and become economically independent.

**A.** Evidence has shown that the male biases inherent in the concep-

tion and implementation of modernisation programmes has marginalised women and has in fact, in some cases, removed them from the workforce. For example, in both Punjabs (India and Pakistan) the green revolution with increased mechanisation has deprived women of many of their traditional agricultural jobs, and since technical skills are imparted primarily or solely to men, women are forced into unemployment. Further, the increasing wealth generated by such enterprises has made it possible for wealthy peasant men to confine the women of their families to their homes as a status symbol. In Sri Lanka the Mahaveli scheme has resulted in certain similar problems, with very little land being allotted to independent women farmers. Consequently, these women are deprived of credit, training and so on. They are thus forced into low-paid, unskilled jobs or back into the home, thereby being deprived of any opportunities for economic independence. Similar trends exist in Bangladesh and Nepal. Therefore there is little hope that the present kind of development and modernisation will improve the real status and condition of all women in our countries. This is what makes it necessary for feminists to point out where development is running against women, and demand better policies and programmes.

**Q. Would you call a woman who decides to be just a housewife a feminist?**

**A.** First of all, we wouldn't say "just" a housewife, knowing what and how much a housewife does. Feminists do not belittle or look down upon housewives or housework. In fact one of our major struggles is to have housework recognised and valued so that women who do it are recognised, valued and respected. If housework gets the respect, the recognition and the value that are its due, men would not only start acknowledging it but might also start doing it.

A woman who chooses to be a housewife and feels her individuality and talent are fully utilised by it can still be a feminist. Being a feminist does not necessarily mean working outside the home. All it means is having a real choice based on equal opportunities. The element of choice, of women's own will, is what is important. Our feeling though is, that if women could really choose not to be full-time housewives we would not find so many doing this work.

But this choice must be genuine. The decision should not be made because of conditioning, or because of indirect or direct pressure from others or because there are no other options available. At the moment, however, it is very difficult to determine which is a "conditioned" decision and which a free one. Because of our upbringing and our conditioning, our aspirations have been limited and stultified, and this conditioning is sometimes so well internalised that

it is difficult to say what a free choice actually is. Having said this, we would like to reiterate that a feminist *can* choose to be a full time housewife, if that is what satisfies her, *provided* she can retain her independence and her individuality and provided her partner does not wield power over her because she is not earning. There must be equality and mutual respect within the home. Feminism is not about prescribing what women should or should not do; feminists are fighting for a society where a woman has the freedom to choose, where she is not forced to be a housewife, where she is not pushed into typically "feminine" roles and low paid "feminine" jobs, and where she is treated with respect. We reject male-female polarity and male-female stereotypes. Every girl should have the freedom and opportunity to do and be what she wants to do and is capable of doing. Because she is born a girl, dolls and pots and pans shouldn't naturally be her only toys; nor should she be shoved into dresses which don't allow her limbs to move, or be confined to the four walls of a home, or be pushed into home-science courses, or be forced to be subdued and submissive because she has to adjust to her husband's family, etc. The concerns of feminists are as simple and reasonable as this.

However feminist concerns are not only the few narrowly defined "women's" issues like rape, wife-beating, contraception and equal wages. Many of us believe that everything in the world concerns women because everything affects us. Since feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just social and economic order, nationally and internationally, all issues are women's issues. There is and has to be a women's point of view on all issues and feminists seek to integrate the feminist perspective in all spheres of personal and national life. Women must therefore take a position on everything whether it is nuclear warfare, war between two countries, ethnic and communal conflict, political, economic and development policies, human rights and civil liberties or environmental issues. In fact, despite their limited human and other resources women's organisations are already involved in many of the above. In Sri Lanka, for instance, women are actively asking for a political solution to the ethnic problem; in Pakistan women have consistently and daringly opposed archaic, anti-women laws which have been imposed on them in the name of Islam. By doing this Pakistani women have also opposed the Martial Law regime and Islamic fundamentalism. In India, women have been actively involved with a range of issues including environment and communal violence. Women's groups in South Asia have also prepared critiques of government development

plans and policies from a feminist perspective. and have been involved in other areas of national life.

**Q. But don't feminists get unnecessarily worked up about little things? For example, does it matter if a woman is called a "chairman"? Surely we can't change everything?**

**A.** Although the language issue has never been a major one in the sense that none of our larger campaigns have been around it, we do find it important to challenge, to try and change its usage, since it has ideological, cultural and historical implications. Language, *words*, are important and we have to recognise that our languages are sexist, that they convey male superiority, and that they exclude and belittle women. Since language, like religion and ideology, tends to perpetuate a male bias and a male point of view, why then should we accept something which discriminates, insults or does not recognise our existence and our actual roles in society?

Earlier, when women had not entered new areas of work (when there were no women chairing, sporting, reporting, when there were no women scientists, or theologians), language reflected a reality by creating terms like *chair-man*, *sports-man*, *media-man*, etc. Now certain aspects of language are outdated because social realities have changed: since women are increasingly found in these areas of activity, there is no reason why there should not be words like *chair-person*, *sports-person*, *one-woman show* etc., and that the third person not always be he, himself and his. It does not take much effort to do lingual justice to women; all it requires is a conscious effort for it to become a part of our vocabulary.

**Q. Don't feminists destroy peaceful homes?**

**A.** Well, yes, many feminists may actually destroy homes (we will deal later with the "peaceful" part), but they do it in the same way as *harijans* destroy the peaceful community when they refuse to take (carry) shit!! Or when peasants or workers disturb the harmony of a village or a factory when they stand up to a landlord or an industrialist. After all, one person's peace may be another person's poison.

Can a woman who starts resenting her uneventful life, the drudgery and the mindless repetitiveness of domestic work, and the annual childbearing be called a home-breaker? Would you call a woman who resents being just a shadow of her husband, who refuses to echo her husband's desires, who refuses to spend the rest of her life helping her husband pursue his career or realize his ambitions, a trouble-maker? Is a woman who wants to live also for herself, who has her own dreams and ambitions, who doesn't want to be an

be selfish! We should give men an equal opportunity for experiencing mothering, sharing and caring.

Feminists believe that children would grow up better if they got the best of *both* their parents, quite apart from the fact that if mothering were shared by both parents it would not remain a burden only for women. Mothering would then (and *only* then) become truly creative, joyous and fun for everyone concerned. In short, feminists are not against mothering and motherhood—we only want every woman to have the right to decide whether and when she wants to have children and we want to share motherhood with men.

**Q. All this sounds reasonable, but then why is feminism so threatening? Why is it always under attack? Why is it so often ridiculed and misrepresented? Why does it invite so much hostility?**

**A.** It is not at all surprising that people feel threatened by feminism. They are quite honest when they say, "You know, we don't mind things like women's welfare but this feminism is a problem." Feminism makes people uncomfortable because it is perhaps the only *ism* which enters the sanctity of the home, which concerns the most intimate of our relationships, which questions our very beliefs, attitudes and behaviour patterns as well as our values and our religions. Anything which does all this has to be threatening.

Once women question patriarchy, once we question male superiority and male domination, we necessarily run into conflict with our own fathers, brothers, husbands, sons and friends since these are the men who personify patriarchy for us in the most painful and immediate way. It is painful not only for the men who are questioned but also for the women who raise the questions. We often wonder whether what we are doing is right, whether it is really worth it, whether we can avoid being bitter if we face and resent subtle or blatant sexism all the time in the home, at work and in society. What do we do when our husbands get the wages for our labour; or when their work and professions and ambitions get precedence over ours? What does a female child do when her brother gets more to eat or is allowed to go to school or given preference on other matters? What happens to the daughter when she gets no share of the family property or to a mother when her son imposes his will on her because he is a man? What do we do when we are insulted, ridiculed and oppressed? Yet the slightest hint of objection to such treatment is seen as a threat, and as said earlier, rightly, so since any challenge is a threat to the status quo. Since feminism challenges society at every level this means challeng-

ing the status quo of interpersonal and family relationships. The pain of such a challenge is present for both men and women, but women dare to face up to it because the pain of maintaining the status quo is greater. Women can only gain by the struggle for they have nothing to lose but their chains. Men have also to gain in this new society that feminists want to create but many are unnecessarily antagonistic, particularly middle class urban intellectual men who despite their own class origin often attack feminists for being middle class and separatist.

**Q. Is feminism a middle class phenomenon?**

A. Although at one level it seems that feminism in South Asia is limited to the middle class this is not the full picture. It "seems" that this is the situation for two reasons: firstly, the media only mentions what happens in our cities, and secondly our middle class feminists are more articulate. They not only struggle but also write about issues and communicate their ideas through different media like newspapers, magazines, street theatre, songs and television. Because we hear more about urban middle class women and their organisations, we tend to think that working class women and peasant women either don't feel oppressed or that they do nothing about it. This is far from being true. There are in fact hundreds, even thousands, of women and women's groups in the working class who *are* raising women's issues, in addition to raising general issues of class, poverty, etc. Thousands of members of SEWA Ahmedabad, Working Women's Forum, Madras, women's sanghams organised by CROSS, Hyderabad, NIJERA KORI, BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh, just to name a few, have been raising issues like alcoholism, wife-battering, equal wages, sexual harassment, etc. Women in the Chipko movement raised issues related to the environment and energy from a woman's point of view. Even at the individual level rural women wage feminist struggles when they decide to attend literacy classes, or join women's groups against the wishes of their men, or when they dare to stop the raised fists of their husbands from coming down on them, or raise public alarm against sexual harassment by landlords, petty officials or policemen. In societies like ours, the seeds of feminism are in every woman. To become a feminist you don't have to know the words or the jargon, nor do you need to be equipped with theory. All that is needed is a recognition of patriarchy and the courage to put an end to injustice, male discrimination and double standards. A peasant woman does not have to be familiar with theory to know that being paid unequal wages for equal work is unjust or

that no-one has the right to beat or rape her.

However as stated earlier, middle class, educated women are the more articulate, the more "active" in the sense of demonstrations, agitations, etc. but this can hardly be held against them. On the contrary the fact that they use their education and their economic independence to fight for other women as well as themselves should go in their favour. In any case middle class feminists play the same role in the feminist movement as other urban middle class groups do (and have done) in all other movements for societal change.

**Q. Are feminists men-haters?**

**A.** Feminists do *not* hate men but are against patriarchy, male domination and the maleness in men (and in those women who might imbibe similar behaviour patterns) which is expressed as domination, selfishness, aggression, violence, etc. We *are* against men who do not accept women as their equals, who treat women as their property or otherwise view them only as commodities. Unfortunately most men do dominate and do have such qualities in them. This is true even of the most ardent "democratic" and "socialist" men who, while expressing notions of equality in society, refuse to accept equality within the home and in interpersonal male-female relationships.

However we believe that just as women are not naturally more caring and nurturing, men are not naturally aggressive and domineering. They are in fact as much victims of their own consciousness and of conditioning and society as women are, and as trapped in the images and roles that society has determined for them. Our problem is that most men do not appear to recognise this and few want to struggle to liberate themselves into becoming more human and truly democratic; Moreover, any move by women to help them recognize this is considered antagonistic by men.

**Q. If men's liberation is so connected to women's liberation and if they are trapped by the system why are they so fearful of feminism?**

**A.** Men fear feminism and are against a change that would also help them, because basically the present situation suits them in the more obvious ways. Since feminism challenges male superiority and domination in society, at work and in the home, and since it questions male authority based not on ability but on gender, it forces men to review their attitudes, their behaviour and their position. This is neither easy nor pleasant. No ruler willingly gives up



authority after all.

The advantages for men in the present system are innumerable starting with the superior status, love and respect given to them from the moment they are born. All these are the birth-right of every boy but not of every girl. Then of course there is better food, better medical care, better education for male children. There is freedom for them: physical freedom, as well as freedom of expression and of choice.

There are other fears as well that men have had about independent and competent women. They are afraid women will compete with them for jobs. If you define women's role essentially as that of housewives then you can hire them when their labour is required and fire them when convenient and necessary. If the definition of women's role changes and women's competence and their capacity to assert themselves improve, then such discrimination will not be possible. People will get jobs according to their competence and not because they are male or female; this is definitely not something that men particularly welcome.

Capitalism is also against feminism, for if women's consciousness changes they will no longer tolerate the low-paid, least-skilled jobs that they are presently confined to. They will also resist becoming voracious consumers (especially of non-utility items such as cosmetics) and fight against being seen as sex objects.

In short, since feminism challenges the status quo, and proposes a fundamental change in society in which men will lose their present unfair advantages (while gaining others that they are not yet aware of) they fear such a change and therefore fear feminism.

**Q. Are you saying that even though men do not realize it, in the long run feminism will be good for both women and men?**

**A.** Exactly. Feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just, social and economic order in the home, nationally and internationally. This new order necessarily includes men. Of course in such a situation they will definitely lose their male authority, domination and other advantages but they will gain by it in other ways as society itself will gain. For instance if every child in the family (and not just male children) is allowed and encouraged to grow and flourish there would be more talent and creativity in the family and in the nation. Families would also be more resourceful, more economically viable and otherwise stronger if the women were not forced to remain dependent and helpless, needing constant protection. Men would have fewer economic responsibilities and pressures,

and more importantly, would be able to express their own individual inclinations in this new society. They could do work that is now considered "feminine", stay home if they so desired. A whole range of life giving activities that they are now excluded from would fall within their reach; feminism would *liberate men* from the roles and images that society demands of them.

**Q. If you say that men will also gain by the feminist movement then why do women generally organise themselves into all-women groups?**

**A.** The women's movement builds, in the first instance, on the assumption that there is a certain commonality of interest among women. While the feminist movement proposes a society that will be beneficial for all, it is necessary that, at certain stages of a struggle and while working with other movements, women understand the nature of their oppression and plan strategies to change the situation, among themselves. The rationale of this is no different from that used in support of the autonomy of other oppressed classes. We do for instance support the autonomy of peasant and/or worker struggles; we support the autonomy of class/ethnic and national movements, and so on. This distinction is even more valid for the women's movement because the problem here is far more complex and long term. Its ultimate resolution requires not the triumph of one group over another (in this case, female over male) *but a rethinking and restructuring of all aspects of society*. Other classes can achieve their aims within patriarchy; they *can* achieve victory by overcoming or eliminating their antagonists; they *can* find common cause without internal class, caste, religious and ethnic differences. But the women's movement can do none of these. It must resolve and overcome class and other differences within itself. It must change the essence of society; it must *convert* the antagonist. In this sense it is the most difficult struggle of all and women must identify for themselves the process that it will take. In other words separate women's organisations are a necessary and important stage in the struggle but they are only a stage. Slowly the movement will integrate itself with movements for fundamental changes in society and in the mode of functioning of existing institutions. But even while we have separate women's groups we welcome and value the support of sympathetic men; we join the struggles of working class and peasant groups, of groups fighting for civil liberties, human rights, minority rights, the environment, etc.

In conclusion we would like to say that we find feminism to be not only necessary for our society but also very exciting for all those

who are participating in the process of defining, articulating, shaping and living it. We believe it has the potential to provide us with a direction which other *isms* have failed to provide; most of them ignored or did not actively involve one half of humanity. They also ignored the personal or the subjective by focussing only on the social and material or "objective" realities. Feminists see light at the end of the tunnel of feminist exploration—a light leading us towards a social order which is just and humane, and for which feminism is trying to develop a perspective on all issues—economic, social, political, cultural.

It is exciting precisely because it is challenging us into reviewing, redefining and changing the most intimate of relationships, the most personal of beliefs, the most unarticulated areas of our minds and hearts. For the first time we have an *ism* which is suggesting a profound change in society at every level including the personal.

It is exciting because it has not been finally defined by someone else, somewhere else, for us. All of us can and have to participate in the process of finding the meaning of feminism for ourselves. Although people *feel* feminism they have not yet been able to collectively articulate it as an ideology in order for it to have the collective power to bring about the kind of change we are looking for. But the present fluid state of this emerging ideology is not a bad thing because, for the first time, a way of life is being tried out at every level before it is formulated as a theory. For us this is an important process of learning and discovering, a process which necessarily is slow and faltering. This is why there are differences, even among feminists, because we are all learning and are at different stages of the process. Because feminism is about real life situations, its concrete shape may be different in different societies. To opponents of feminism this uncertain (but growing, unfolding) status of our ideology may be a negative point; to us it is a positive one, for the ideology, when it arrives, will have been tried and tested.

We invite you to participate in the process of formulating an ideology and creating a better world for each of us.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF FEMINISM, JOIN IT



(Reprinted from a pamphlet of the same title by Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan published by Indraprastha Press (CBT) Nehru House, New Delhi - 110002)

# The Streams Of Feminism

by Teresita Quintos-Deles

(Presented to the Joint GO-NGO Congress for Women by Teresita Quintos-Deles, Philippine Representative to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, at the Golden Shell Pavillion on 31 March, 1990)

Let us begin with a definition. In 1986, following the end of the UN Decade for Women, a gathering of our sisters in South Asia agreed on a broad definition of feminism as "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation."

I like this definition, especially since it sets action as an essential requirement of feminism. It is not enough to recognize the problem of male domination, which, in the Philippines, refers to the reality of women's second-class status in the workplace, women's multiple burdens and "double-day", their marginalization from political and public leadership roles, stifling cultural stereotypes, and the dark reality of violence against women. Feminism requires that one take up action to challenge and transform the reality that maintains one-half of the population in a position of subordination and exploitation by virtue of its gender, whether in the home, at the workplace, in community life, or in any other sphere of life where human relationships are spelled out, whether this action is undertaken alone, but, more effectively, in collective endeavor with others.

This definition furthermore clarifies that feminism is not something "for women only." Males who recognize the problem and decide to do something about it may also proudly bear the label "feminist." We certainly wish that there were more of them in the Philippines. As a favorite slogan says, "A man of quality is not afraid of a woman of equality."

It is important to note that, because women comprise half of every regular human aggrupation, whether by class, sector, age, religion, ethnicity, or whatever else, then feminism must feature a concrete and comprehensive concern to eliminate all forms of inequality and oppression. This is so because as long as any system of injustice prevails, one-half of its victims will be women.

Because sexism does not exist in isolation but relates to other social systems, various schools of thought have emerged to explain the roots of women's oppression and therefore allow a better assess-

ment of possible directions for social change. Three major theoretical perspectives have been developed in feminist theory. We will need to be brief and simplistic here:

First, *liberal feminism* is focused on gaining equal opportunities for women. Having developed within the tradition of western liberalism, this stream of feminism basically accepts the fundamental character of political and economic institutions as given, but argues for individual civil rights that will provide women's equal access to the goods within the society. Its strategies therefore emphasize social and legal reform as well as changes in socialization practices and the re-education of the public.

*Socialist feminism*, on the other hand, underscores the importance of class systems and the economic relations of capitalism, which interact with the patriarchy to bring about women's subordinate status. It posits the necessity of transforming the system of capitalism simultaneously with the struggle against male domination, and seeks to surface gender perspectives in all social issues and struggles for social justice.

The third stream, *radical feminism*, looks at gender as the primary form of oppression and sees class and race as extensions of patriarchal domination. Thus, much of the strategy here is focused on reshaping consciousness and redefining social relations to create a women-centered culture. Sometimes featuring a rigid rejection of men as a dominant class, radical feminism emphasizes the positive capacities of women by focusing on the creative dimensions of women's experience.

While staying on the theoretical plane projects a clear delineation between these three feminist streams, in practice, there is much interplay and there are many grey areas between the three. Feminism is finally a continuous evolution of praxis based on one's concrete conditions and life experience, and feminists journey from one side of the theoretical spectrum to the other, as we continue to do in the Philippines, to make the struggle real and relevant to do a particular time and space.

We must also credit each of these feminist streams with having concretely contributed to women's struggle to eradicate gender subordination worldwide, with liberal feminism's mainstreaming efforts leading to extensive changes in women's legal rights and status, while socialist feminism, especially for women in the Third World, has moved to overcome gender blindness in our struggles for development and against our shared oppression with men due to class, race, religion, or citizenship. In our feminist journey, we must also be thankful for the track of radical feminism which has served as the cutting edge of our movement, exploring vast tracks of unknown grounds in making women free.

Various groups have come up with different lists of "feminist principles." These include -

1. Economic equity and financial autonomy for women, embodied in the campaign for equal pay for work of equal value.
2. Equal opportunities, covering all spheres of life, including equal sharing of responsibilities at home.
3. Equal rights, referring primarily to legal and civil rights.
4. Cultural liberation to enable each unique person to emerge from the trap of gender stereotypes.
5. Sexual freedom, or the right to the control of one's sexuality.
6. Freedom from violence, as in domestic battering and rape, as well as pornography, which is rape in theory.
7. Because other systems of injustice comprise women's reality, we must also maintain the principle of freedom from all other forms of oppression due to class, race, religion, age and citizenship.

In terms of processes, feminism embraces the principle of cooperative and non-hierarchical methodologies, espousing as well the exploration of conflict resolution approaches without resort to nuclear or even conventional warfare, and also promoting a sensitivity to the issues of ecological balance and natural security.

Most important, feminism upholds that "means should mirror ends." Maintaining that the "personal is political," feminism has become the unique social praxis that posits that the struggle cannot be just out there in the streets but must be brought home. The bedroom is as political as the boardroom, child rearing as important as our political movements, and all these need to be transformed. Thus also, as our good friend and NCW Director Remmy Rikken likes to say, every woman is an expert on her own feminist agenda.

Thus also, I must speak of the feminist principle that maintains that men must change too. Men have the responsibility to alter themselves in order to ensure that they do not perpetuate their domination of women. So that, to paraphrase some lines from Nancy R. Smith's poem "For Every Woman," -

There will be no more women "tired of acting weak when (they) know they are strong,"  
as there will be no more men "tired of appearing strong when (they) feel vulnerable,"

There will be no more women "who feel 'tied down' by (their) children,"  
as there will be no more men "denied the full pleasure of shared parenthood,"

There will be no more women who are "denied meaningful employment and equal pay,"  
 as there will be no more men who must "bear full financial responsibility for another human being."

To summarize, feminism proposes a vision of nonsexist society in which there will be no discrimination, whether by race, gender, or class, in the production and allocation of economic resources. It would also be a society where power is not assigned in accordance with one's class, race, or gender, and where individual civil rights are respected and upheld. And finally, such a society would have to respect, encourage, and animate traditional female values, but not restrict them to only one-half of the population, who, by virtue of its gender, is categorized as subordinate to the other.

I cherish the formulation of the feminist agenda by Dr. Hafdan Mahler, who spoke of a society that would give to both women and men "bread and roses, poetry and power" — *tinapay at rosas, tula at kapangyarihan*.

But because we are together on the last day of Women's Month, I hope you will be happy with my decision to end with Denise Levertov's "A Prayer for Revolutionary Love." Such a revolutionary love could inspire the love we share with a male partner, but also with other women, and even inform the direction of our relationship with our children. Here then is our prayer —

That a women not ask a man to leave meaningful work to follow her.

That a man not ask a woman to leave meaningful work to follow him.

That no one try to put Eros in bondage.

But that no one put a cudgel in the hands of Eros.

That our loyalty to one another and our loyalty to our work not be set in false conflict.

That our love for each other give us love for each other's work.

That our love for each other's work give us love for one another.

That our love for each other give us love for each other's work.

That our love for each other, if need be, give way to absence. And the unknown.

That we endure absence, if need be, without losing our love for each other.

Without closing our doors to the unknown.



# What Feminism Does Not Mean

*(Keynote Paper by Belinda A. Aquino, Professor of Political Science and Public Administration and Vice-President for Public Affairs for the Conference on Women, Culture, and Development in Celebration of Women's Month, Faculty Center, UP Diliman, March 6, 1990).*

In her note to me regarding this morning's gathering, Sylvia Guerrero indicated that since I'm seen as a staunch feminist, could I say something about what feminism means on this significant occasion marking the beginning of Women's Month? First of all, I'm not really too fond of labels, so I'm a bit uneasy about being labelled *feminist*, especially because the term is subject to a wide range of meaning, oftentimes negative, and it's never quite clear what people have in mind when they use it. But I will grant that for a moment and attempt to come to grips with this concept because it is not just a jargon, an abstract *ism* that we are talking about, but a concrete reality that has more implications to our lives as men and women in this modern world than we realize.

I am reminded of that summer in 1977 when I, together with a team of graduate assistants, decided to introduce a course on *Women and Politics* as part of our Political Science curriculum at the University of Hawaii. One of the three male students who registered in the course, an act that I must say took a lot of courage, asked whether feminism was something that women did or do. I was a bit taken aback by the question, but at the same time amused at this refreshing instance of typical student naivete. The framework of the question was something akin to, if socialism was originated by Marx, and Hitler propagated Nazism, then women must have done something too—feminism. The poor student admitted that the only reason he signed up for the course was that he was fascinated by the term *feminism*, but didn't know, let alone understand, what it meant.

So we had to start from there, and I can start with it now, almost 13 years since that summer. But let me reverse the usual order of things here and start with what feminism does not mean, because some concepts are better understood in terms of what they don't mean. I'm taking this stance because I have never met a term in recent years that has been so vilified, maligned, misrepresented, belittled and



trivialized. Part of the challenge to the newly-established Center for Women's Studies at U.P. is to convince the community at large that feminism, Philippine feminism, if you will, is not a dirty word, that on the contrary, it is liberating and salutary in its impact on our daily lives.

First, feminism is not "something that women do," any more than chauvinism is what men choose to possess, leading to the opprobrium "male chauvinist pigs." While it is true that the earlier issues in history had to do with women's rights, with legal or institutional reform to redress traditional discrimination against women, and with opening up the professions to women, the contemporary world has seen instances in which women are actively involved not just in women-oriented issues; but in the broader concerns of humankind. Women the world over are active in struggles against environmental degradation, nuclear warfare, human rights violations, military abuse, corruption, profiteering multinational corporations, excessive development, apartheid and other forms of racism, and so on. These are not women-oriented issues; they are global and gender-free concerns. So, if we construe feminism broadly, as we should, we will find out that much of what we do relate to the entire gamut of human and social relations. By the same token, much of what men do are not specific to men *per se*. The historical record will show that male efforts over the ages have supported feminist issues.

In an excellent paper written by Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan (*Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia*, 1989), they note that many of the earliest advocates for women's emancipation in Asia were men. Kang Yu-Wei, for instance, worked against the ancient practice in China of footbinding women and confining them to the *boudoir* as sex objects. Kang interjected, "I now have one great desire: to save 800 million women of my own time from drowning in the sea of suffering . . . to bring to the incalculable, inconceivable numbers of women of the future the happiness of equality and independence." That was coming from a male feminist. In the late 19th century in Iran, several male intellectuals fought for women's rights, opposing the institution of polygamy and the seclusion of women (*purdah*). In India, the great reformer Ram Mohan Roy resisted long-standing forms of women's oppression, such as *sati* (widow-burning), as did the other famous leaders of the Indian nation — Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore and Ramakrishna.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the other side of the historical human record is replete with evidences of violence and repression against women by men, and in some cases by women themselves, as in the classic example of the Indian mother-in-law against her son's spouse. And it is here that feminism is something that, to quote my student again, "women should do." For who else would do it but us?

This is the narrower but perhaps more salient meaning of feminism — the compelling necessity to minimize if not eliminate entirely, all forms of violence and violations against women. If it means stopping men from pursuing their baser instincts, and heaping abuse of all forms on women — be they their wives, mothers, sisters, friends or peers — then let it be said that feminism is indeed “something women should do.” What I’m pointing out in this statement is that, while feminism should not be confined to women as a general rule, it should be particularized to specific women’s issues when the need arises. In short, feminist consciousness should have both its conciliatory and militant dimensions, always bearing in mind the ultimate goal of justice and equality in human society.

Second, feminism is not an invention of the West. Even if it were and we have accepted it as part of our culture, it should not be castigated simply because it came from beyond our borders. Knee-jerk critics of the women’s movement, many of them ironically Western-educated men and women, always raise this red flag of an objection to feminism as Western. According to Bhasin and Khan again, these very same people “do not question the foreign origins of the parliamentary or presidential systems (in Asia) for instance, of the development of capitalism; or private ownership of land and absentee landlordism; or of the ideology of the Left.” Marxism is an appealing ideology and we have in Asia committed and avowed Marxists. But Marx was not born in Tondo or in Calcutta. Christianity, and more specifically, Catholicism, was and is a Western religion, but it has become part of the life of most Filipinos. Modern science and technology, which are now commonplace in the Third World, had their beginnings in the Industrial Revolution in England. Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, the geniuses of Physics, were not born in Japan. We did not invent television and the video to which most Filipinos, particularly the young, are addicted. Everything we have, our institutions, the books we read, the cars we drive, the toothpaste we brush our teeth with, even the matches that inveterate smokers light their cigarettes (also imported) with, all come from abroad.

So, is it any different that feminism here or anywhere should credit Mary Wollstonecraft, a British woman, for writing the first feminist tract in 1792 with her classic, *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*? Is it irrelevant for me to quote Abigail Adams who cautioned her husband John, later to become President of the U.S., not to put “such unlimited power in the hands of the husbands” in the Constitutional Convention that drafted the U.S. Constitution, simply because she was American? Similarly, is Sojourner Truth’s passionate lament, “Ain’t I a Woman?” inappropriate simply because she was an American black woman? Should I not assign the book *The Politics*

of *Women's Liberation* by Jo Freeman to my classes simply because the author is an American radical feminist, or for that matter, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, because she is French?

As a matter of fact, feminism antedated the West by so many years. The Truong sisters in Vietnam led an army to repulse the Chinese invaders very early on in their country's history. Princess Kartini in Indonesia spoke for the emancipation of her Indonesian sisters while in exile in Holland in the early 1900s. South Asia, particularly India, had an organized movement against women's subordination as far back as the 19th century. Bhasin and Khan also cite a male Chinese scholar, Cheng Hung-Mou, who wrote on women's education in China, long before Wollstonecraft wrote her masterpiece. In the early 1900s, urban educated women in China agitated for new rights in their society.

So, I submit that this critique of feminism as a Western irrelevant concept is a false issue. It betrays an utter ignorance of history and the power of great ideas which transcend national boundaries of time and space. Over time some concepts and ideologies become truly universal.

Third, feminism is not anti-male, anti-marriage or anti-family, as its detractors make it appear. It does not advocate a battle of the sexes or the dissolution of the family. It is not against love nor against having children. It does not condone free love or sexual promiscuity. Least of all, it is not against motherhood.

All these misrepresentations or trivializations of feminism arise from the women's movement's concern about continuing male dominance in society through the institution of *patriarchy*. While that term connotes genteel meanings, as in "benevolent patriarch," it has been in practice the essential embodiment of male superiority, defined as the rule and word of the master being law. With this seemingly immutable status of the male, of the species, women are in effect relegated to a subordinate position in obvious and subtle ways. Patriarchy is the male institutional expression of power. And as you know, the concomitants of power are aggression, selfishness and violence.

Thus, the position of feminists on this issue is that feminism should be against men who behave in such a way as to treat women as inferior, men who are unable to think of women as equals, and who are threatened by changes in the status of women. We are against both men and women who are against change because the status quo suits them just fine.

What feminists seek then is basically simple. They seek the elimination of all forms of inequality, whether at home, in school, in church, in politics, and in the economy — wherever you can find instances in which human relationships are played out. Everyone talks about

equality. That basic principle is enshrined in Constitutions, by-laws, statements of intent, declarations of independence, and other such documents. What feminists are doing in their own way is try to operationalize some of these lofty pronouncements on paper. The new order of things that is envisioned does not exclude men. It just alters the pattern of role stereotyping that has led to this mind-set about what men should and should not do, and what women should or should not do, and all this kind of thing. Actually, men would have fewer responsibilities and pressures to prove themselves if we were to try to equalize workload, functions and other conditions of everyday life. So, in a sense the liberating ethic that has been associated with the women's movement applies to men as well. Feminism in effect would liberate men from age-old stereotyped roles, because women would then be sensible enough to give up some of the perquisites and privileges they receive on the basis of gender considerations. In short, feminism does not mean having your cake and eating it too.

Finally, feminism does not mean being neurotic or lonely. Somehow feminists are viewed as not ordinary people, but as "different," "strange" or "autonomous" beings. They are perceived as pursuing weird lifestyles and even weirder sexual orientations. There is no end to our unkind characterizations of them, including "amazons" and "battle axes of the Republic." While it is true that there are certain strident elements among feminist ranks wanting to do the impossible, this is true with every movement. There will always be what we call the "lunatic fringe" in these modern-day movements and struggles. But they are not representative of the essence or philosophy of a movement. Unfortunately, it is this "fringe" that is often very vocal and thus ends up giving a bad image to an otherwise worthwhile or positive undertaking.

In short, feminists are very ordinary people. There is a feminist strain in all of us, in you and me. Even the ordinary housewife can become a feminist because that is an honorable calling that should be respected just like other professions. You don't have to go outside the home to be a feminist. If it is your choice to remain a housewife, this should be respected as long as this is a genuine choice and you are not coerced by your husband into making his coffee all the time. What is bad is to take a lot of abuse, a lot of suffering, and rationalize it as your fate or the will of God. The home is one fertile area for the promotion of feminism in its elemental forms. Domestic violence is prevalent here and just about every country in the world. And this is because there is no equality and mutual respect obtaining in the ordinary household. I hate to "blame the victim" but it is often the case that women who are victims of abuse don't fight back even if they have the ability to do so. As I said, we have martyrs who take it all sitting down.

Now, having said all that, what in fact does feminism mean? In a sense, having said what it does not mean says a lot already, although what it should mean does not have to be the obverse of its negative meanings. Instead of imbibing the trappings or the trivial aspects of the term, we should stress its central notion and that is equality. It is not an arithmetical equality we are talking about because this is an impossibility. This is much too complex to expound on in a little keynote paper, and I assume that you more or less know the dimensions of the key concept.

But it is important to remember first of all that there are differences, philosophical and practical, even among feminists. And there are differences too in the thrust of feminist consciousness in the '60s and now. In the West, particularly in the U.S., feminism proceeded in stages — first along women's rights from the turn of the century up until the early 60s. Then came the notion of women's liberation which dominated the '60s and '70s. In the '80s, women's liberation was not as visible and audible as it was previously, not because it has failed but because in a sense it has succeeded. What happened was, a larger feminist framework was synthesized from the various tendencies of the women's movement. In a way, feminism blurred the distinction between women's rights and women's liberation. I think this was a healthy, quiet social revolution of sorts, thanks to the persistent efforts of committed women who thought feminism was something "they should do."

For us on the other side of the globe, we have our own version of feminism that is attuned to the peculiarities, specificities, if you will, of our culture. We've had vigorous women's rights struggles and we are never wanting in issues to take on, even in our own fractious ways. We have graduated to a feminist consciousness even without going through women's liberation. Which is to say that we don't have to follow the West in this regard. We can improve on it. Conversely, the West is always welcome to learn from us, and in the process re-define or adapts its own agenda. That is what feminism is all about — a sort of open universal sisterhood that admits of commonalities but respects differences. There is a common denominator that breaks the chain of oppression and dependence, quietly forging a revolutionary transformation of society.

Now I come full circle. I started telling you how I am willing to grant for a movement the validity of the label *feminist*. From a personal perspective, after having talked to you about what feminism means or does not mean, I still don't know what it really means. It's in the nature of the beast, as it were. It's all of everything at once and some other things sometimes. It was not something I picked up like a piece of apple pie in Cornell, or a can of macadamia nuts in Hawaii, or a safari fever

in Nairobi, although all these helped me crystallize what women across the globe are doing to break with their past if necessary, and to live useful, productive lives whether they are tearing down the bastions of *machismo* in Latin America or tending sheep on the green hills of Africa.

And it has not been a lonely journey. In fact it has been liberating as feminism should be.



Occasional Papers are published by the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) principally for the members of the President's Cabinet, legislators, focal points and women's groups.

Should anyone be interested in acquiring copies of any of the Occasional Papers, please get in touch with the NCRFW Media Unit.

A token amount to cover printing and mailing costs shall be appreciated

Occasional Paper No. I  
Women in Development

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE ROLE OF FILIPINO WOMEN

1145 J.P. Laurel St., San Miguel, Manila  
Tel. Nos.: 741-50-93; 741-50-28