a short history of a big idea

June Hannam

Feminism

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Feminism

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Contents

Who's Who

Mary Wollstonecraft 1759–97
Her book, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), applied ideas about the rights of man, discussed during the French Revolution, to women and emphasized the importance of education. It has been seen as a founding text of British and American feminism.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton 1815–1902
Leading figure in the early women's suffrage movement in the United States and admired internationally. She worked closely with Susan B. Antony. They founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869 and produced an influential journal, *Revolution*.

Susan B. Anthony 1820–1906
A Quaker from an abolitionist background in the United States, Susan B. Anthony worked closely with Cady Stanton in campaigning for women's suffrage and women's rights. She was president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association from 1892 to 1902.

Millicent Garrett Fawcett 1847–1929
Leader of the British constitutional suffrage movement. She began campaigning for women's suffrage in the 1860s and led the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies from 1897 to 1919.

Hubertine Auclert 1848–1914
A French suffrage campaigner who criticized many of her contemporaries for their failure to prioritise the suffrage. She had her own newspaper, *La Citoyenne* and founded a suffrage group. She was an early advocate of civil disobedience and was influenced by the militant tactics of the British suffragettes.

Anita Augspurg 1857–1943 and Lida Gustava Heymann 1868–1943
Leading members of the radical wing of the German suffrage movement. During and after the First World war they worked for peace through the Women's International League. They were forced to flee Germany in 1933.

Emmeline Pankhurst 1858–1928
The most well-known British suffrage campaigner. With her daughter Christabel she founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903, which pioneered militant methods. She was imprisoned on numerous occasions and inspired many others to join the movement. During the war she gave support to the war effort and formed a short-lived Women's Party in 1918.

Bertha Lutz 1894–1976
A leading campaigner for women's rights and women's suffrage in Brazil, she also attended international women's congresses during the 1920s and 30s and forged links with women from

Europe and North America. She was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in Brazil in 1936.

Sarojini Naidu 1879–1949
Played an important role in India's fight for independence and campaigned for the enfranchisement of Indian women. In 1925 she became the second woman president of the Indian National Congress.

Hudá Sha'rawi 1879–1947
A leading figure in the Egyptian feminist movement. She was active in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in the inter-war years and her energetic advocacy of women's suffrage ensured that the issue was kept alive in Egypt during those years.

Simone de Beauvoir 1908–86
Her book, *The Second Sex* (1949), with its emphasis on woman as 'the other' and her assertion that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' influenced the ideas of 'second wave' feminism.

Betty Friedan 1921–2006
A leading figure in 'second wave feminism', Friedan published a key text, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. She drew attention to the frustrations of American housewives that she labeled as the 'problem with no name'. She was one of the founders of the National Organization for Women in 1966.

bell hooks 1952–
A black American writer and social critic whose books, in particular *Ain't I a Woman?*, 1981, have been influential in providing a critique of the white, middle-class perspectives of feminism in America and Europe.

Key Dates

1760s–90s	Enlightenment debates emphasise a universal human nature and ability to reason.
1789	French Revolution – opens a space for women to take political action.
1792	Publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – founding text of British and American feminism.
1840	World Anti-Slavery Convention, London. Women's exclusion inspired American women to organize a convention for women's rights.
1848	Women's Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, United States. First meeting to focus on women's rights.
1869	Publication of John Stuart Mill's *On The Subjection of Women*. A key text linking the emancipation of women and liberal political theory that was translated into several languages.
1860s–1880s	Organizations to demand improvements in women's social and political position formed in most European countries. Beginnings of 'first wave' feminism.
1888	International Council of Women founded in Washington to foster international solidarity.
1893	Women in New Zealand are the first to gain the vote.
1903	Women's Social and Political Union founded in Britain. Became famous throughout the world for its 'militant' methods.

1904	International Woman Suffrage Alliance formed in Berlin to bring suffragists together from around the world.
1900–1914	Women's suffrage was the focus of feminist activity in Europe and North America.
1915	Women's Peace Congress at the Hague. Women's International League is formed to work for peace.
1918–22	Many countries enfranchise women in the immediate post-war period, including Austria, Canada, United States, Britain, Germany, The Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Sweden and the Republic of Ireland.
1920s and 30s	Struggle for women's rights and women's suffrage in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and parts of the Middle East. In the 1930s women gain the vote in countries such as Brazil, Uruguay, Cuba, Turkey, the Philippines, El Salvador and Puerto Rico.
1944–56	In the immediate post-war period women are enfranchised in a variety of countries including France, Italy, Lebanon, Egypt and Ethiopia.
1949	Publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* – a key text for 'second wave feminism'.
1963	Publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Focus on women's experiences in the family which were to be central to 'second wave' feminism.
1968	Protest against Miss World contest in Atlantic City – beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement.
1975	United Nations International Women's Year.
1976–85	United Nations Decade of Women.
1981	Greenham Peace Camp.
1980s and 90s	Backlash against feminism, in particular in the media.
1995	World Conference on Women in Beijing sponsored by the United Nations.

CHAPTER 1

Turning the world upside down

Introduction

MILLICENT FAWCETT, a leader of the British campaign for women's suffrage, claimed in 1913 that the women's movement was one of the 'biggest things that has ever taken place in the history of the world'.

Other movements towards freedom have aimed at raising the status of a comparatively small group or class. But the women's movement aims at nothing less than raising the status of an entire sex – half the human race – to lift it up to the freedom and value of womanhood. It affects more people than any former reform movement, for it spreads over the whole world. It is more deep-seated, for it enters into the home and modifies the personal character.[1]

Fawcett's words remind us of why feminism, both as an ideology and as a political practice, has been such an important and controversial issue in most countries of the world since

at least the eighteenth century. At many different times and places individuals and organized groups have demanded reforms that would improve women's lives. Feminism, however, has always had the potential of doing more than that – of quite simply 'turning the world upside down'. Feminism is a cultural as well as a political movement. It changes the way women think and feel and affects how women and men live their lives and interpret the world. For this reason it has provoked lively debates and fierce antagonisms that have continued to the present day. Contemporary feminism and its concerns, therefore, are rooted in a history stretching over at least two centuries.

Starting with the late eighteenth century, this book will explore the history of feminism in a range of countries spanning several continents. The use of a broad, comparative approach will highlight the varieties of feminism and the different political and social contexts in which they developed across the world. Although feminist campaigns were usually targeted at specific governments, there was a strong international dimension to the movement as feminists sought to make links with each other across national boundaries. The development of industrial capitalism, imperialism and colonialism from the late nineteenth century onwards also ensured that women's lives would be woven together on a global scale.

Too often the priorities of white, middle-class Western women, in particular, the achievement of the vote and equal rights, are used as a lens through which to view feminism as a whole. The concerns of women in other parts of the world – for clean water, decent food and access to health care are then either marginalized or seen as somehow 'less feminist'. Comparative

work draws attention to the ethnocentrism and racism of Western feminism and questions the notion of a 'universal sisterhood'. Comparisons between countries put national peculiarities to the test and highlight cross-cultural similarities and differences. They also shift the focus away from a definition of feminism that is based on an Anglo-American model (Blom 1998).

Definitions of feminism

Does 'feminism' exist? Or are the differences among feminists today so great that we should speak of 'feminisms'? In fact, such differences are nothing new; the movement has always encompassed a wide range of attitudes, concerns and strategies. A narrow focus on the contemporary movement may hide the reality that it has always been complicated – something that historians of feminism are keenly aware of. This raises the question, therefore, of what is meant by the term feminism and whether it is possible to come up with a working definition that can be applied to a variety of contexts and periods of time. Feminists themselves, and commentators on their campaigns, are bound to emphasize different issues as lying at the heart of 'modern feminism'. For some it is the demand for women's rights or the quest for female autonomy, whereas for others it is the emphasis on the common bonds uniting women in a critique of male supremacy. It is rare to find any political label that is not controversial, but to jettison labels 'would leave one without any signposts in a sea of chaos' (Caine 1997: 7).

In this book the term feminism will be used to describe a set of ideas that recognize in an explicit way that women are

BOX 1.1

Feminism: the defining characteristics

1. A recognition of an imbalance of power between the sexes, with women in a subordinate role to men.
2. A belief that women's condition is socially constructed and therefore can be changed.
3. An emphasis on female autonomy.

subordinate to men and seek to address imbalances of power between the sexes. Central to feminism is the view that women's condition is socially constructed, and therefore open to change. At its heart is the belief that women's voices should be heard – that they should represent themselves, put forward their own view of the world and achieve autonomy in their lives. This working definition is summarized in Box 1.1.

The word *féminisme*, meaning women's emancipation, was initially used in political debates in late-nineteenth-century France and the first woman to proclaim herself a *féministe* was the French women's suffrage advocate, Hubertine Auclert. Earlier in the nineteenth century it was common to refer to the 'woman movement', the 'women's movement' or to 'women's rights'. Even after 1900 when the word feminism was in more general use in Europe women might still prefer to describe themselves as suffragists rather than as feminists. In some cases, as in the United States after 1910, feminism was used by those who wanted to distinguish themselves from the 'woman movement' with its emphasis on suffrage and equal rights. The term feminism was preferred because it implied a more

far-reaching revolution in relationships between the sexes, in particular, within the family. How appropriate is it, therefore, to use the word feminist when contemporaries did not describe themselves in that way? It is obviously important to take account of the language used by women themselves in specific historical periods since it helps us to understand their aims and objectives. On the other hand, the term feminist does provide a useful shorthand to convey a set of meanings that are instantly recognizable, in particular, if feminism is defined as broadly as possible. It will, therefore, be used throughout this book to refer to individual women and to social movements that challenged gender inequalities.

Women's rights, women's emancipation and women's movements

Women's rights, women's emancipation and the women's or woman movement were all used by feminists at different times and places to describe their movements and goals. These labels had complex meanings which could change over time. Women's rights campaigners demanded that women should have formal equality with men in the law, politics and in civil society. In the course of making these demands, however, some began to question whether women should simply be seeking to enter a world that was defined by men and shaped by male values. Instead they argued that women were different from men and that 'feminine' qualities should be valued in the public as well as in the private sphere. This tension between equality and difference has been present in feminist debates since the late eighteenth century and will be a persistent theme in this book.

Women's emancipation implies that broader change was needed once formal equality had been achieved. Women were unlikely to be able to take advantage of equal rights while other aspects of their social position remained the same, for example their responsibility for child care. For socialist women full emancipation could only be achieved once women were liberated from economic and class oppression. It was imperative therefore to work for the overthrow of capitalism. During the twentieth century terms such as the women's movement or women's groups took on a different meaning from the one that was common in nineteenth-century Europe. In the earlier period the women's movement was used as a term to refer to those women who acted together to challenge women's subordination. In Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, however, the term women's movement was used to distinguish groups that made demands on behalf of the community, or who sought to uphold the status quo, from feminist movements that sought to challenge gender roles and inequalities. We need to be careful, therefore, to be clear about what particular groups and movements aimed to achieve.

Chronologies

The mid-eighteenth century is used here as the starting point for a history of feminism. In earlier centuries individual women did debate women's social position. The most well known of these are Hildegard of Bingen, founder of a vibrant convent in the twelfth century, and the fourteenth-century poet and writer, Christine de Pizan. Through their writings and actions they challenged contemporary views about a woman's place and sought

greater equality for women, in particular, in education. In the period in which they were writing, however, their ideas had little impact beyond a small, educated elite. It was not until the eighteenth century that there was a marked shift in the extent and nature of the development of feminism. The number of texts dealing with women's emancipation increased and the audience for them began to grow. Women were excited by the new ideas of the Enlightenment and the upheavals of the French Revolution. They began to imagine alternative social and gender relations and came together in various forms of association to challenge male domination and to reject contemporary definitions of what it meant to be female. By the mid-nineteenth century women in Europe, North America and the white-settler colonies of Canada, New Zealand and Australia began to organize together for the first time in societies and groups whose sole purpose was to achieve changes and improvements in the social, political and economic lives of women.

This organized movement takes centre stage in most histories of feminism. The educated, articulate women who led the movement were aware that they were making history. They wanted their achievements to be recognized by future generations and to tell their own story. So they wrote autobiographies, memoirs and histories that have helped to shape the way in which we view the characteristics and aims of early feminism. This close relationship between feminist politics and the development of a history of feminism continued with the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Activists were keen to trace the origins of their movement and constructed and reconstructed their own history and traditions in line with their contemporary preoccupations. This has had important implications for the

ways in which the history of organized feminism has been understood and for the framework within which the story has been told. Thus some ideas, individuals and campaigns have been privileged over others. The suffrage movement, in particular, has held a central place in histories of feminism, especially in Britain and the United States where it was a strong and highly visible campaign. A focus on suffrage, however, can be a distorting lens through which to view feminism as a whole. Many women had other priorities, in particular, if they were involved in nationalist, anti-colonial and revolutionary struggles, and we need to make sure that their attempts to pursue women's social, economic and political rights are not lost from view.

A focus on well-organized women's movements has led to the development of a common narrative in histories of feminism that identifies two key periods of activism – 'first wave' feminism, c. 1860s to 1920 and 'second wave' feminism in the 1960s and 70s. This has been adapted slightly to fit the context of some other European countries. In Denmark, for example, three waves have been identified. The first in the late nineteenth century, before demands were made for the suffrage, the second, suffrage phase, just before and during the First World War and the third wave in the 1970s. In Norway there was a long first wave, going up to the end of World War Two and then a second wave from the 1960s to the 1980s, but with two 'crests' in the 1880s and 1970s. The use of waves as a metaphor can, however, be problematic. A focus on 'ebbs and flows' draws attention away from continuities and lines of tradition and reinforces the assumption that in periods of 'ebb' little feminist activity took place. This means that we can miss the variety of ways in which feminists continued to press for change in a hostile political

climate, for example in the inter-war years (Legates 2001: 282). The 'two wave' model, drawn from the experiences of Britain and the United States, provides a chronological framework that is misleading when applied to other countries. It assumes that the main gains for women's suffrage had been won by 1920, after which the movement fragmented, and yet in South America the inter-war years proved far more significant, while in the 1940s over half the female population of the world still did not have the vote.

These are important reminders that we need to take care that the metaphors that we use, such as 'waves', illuminate rather than constrain our understanding of feminist activities. Thus women's attempts to challenge aspects of their social role in 'quieter' periods need to be rescued from obscurity and seen as a key part of the history of feminism. At the same time we should not underestimate the impact of high-profile, public campaigns which raised 'feminist consciousness' in an explicit way. The suffrage campaign and the Women's Liberation Movement, for instance, generated widespread publicity, influenced contemporary politics and affected the ways in which women and men thought about themselves and their place in the world. Historians have therefore searched for other ways to describe 'phases' in feminist history that can differentiate between periods of intense activity, while at the same time not ignoring that there were continuities in feminist campaigns or privileging one chronological framework over another.

An important and influential American historian of feminism, Karen Offen, prefers a metaphor derived from the study of volcanoes. Her comparative study of European feminisms has led her to suggest that feminism is a 'rather fluid form of discontent

that repeatedly presses against . . . weak spots in the sedimented layers of a patriarchal crust', with the task of the historian, like that of the geologist, to 'map and measure the terrain, to locate the fissures, to analyse the context in which they open . . . and to evaluate the shifting patterns of activity over time' (2000: 25–6). A senior scholar with the Institute for research on Women and Gender at Stanford University, Offen is also a founder and past secretary-treasurer of the International Federation for Research in Women's History. Her comparative work raises many issues that are explored in the course of this book.

Themes

In a book of this size it is not possible to provide a detailed account of the development of feminism in individual countries. Emphasis is placed, therefore, on identifying broad trends and changes over time and on introducing recent interpretations and approaches. There are a number of key themes. Firstly, the challenge made by feminists to prevailing ideas about a 'woman's place'. From the late eighteenth century onwards it was assumed that there was a separation between public and private space. Women's identification with the family and domesticity, or the private sphere, was then used to justify their exclusion from the public world of work and politics. For feminists it was important to contest these ideas and to dispute their exclusion from public life, in particular from the exercise of citizenship. In doing so they challenged contemporary definitions of masculinity and femininity, re-defined what it meant to be female, and used imagination to look forward to a society in which gender relations would be transformed (Yeo 1997: Introduction).

Feminists did not develop their ideas in a vacuum but had to engage with an existing framework of social and political thought – this in turn helped to shape the characteristics of feminism at different times and places. The complex relationship between equality and difference, a second theme in the book, provides a good example. Feminists did not necessarily challenge the view that women had different qualities and characteristics from men, but used this to their own advantage. They argued that because women were different then they needed to exert an influence for good in the world beyond the family and so they needed equal rights in politics, employment and the law. There could be tensions, however, in bringing these perspectives together and also between the demand for personal autonomy and collective responsibility towards others. These tensions were then worked out in different ways by individual feminists and by the movements of which they were a part.

A further theme will focus on sisterhood. Feminists attempted to develop a politics based on women's solidarity with each other at both a national and at an international level. 'Sisterhood is powerful' was one of the key slogans of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s. And yet differences of class, race, nation and sexual orientation constantly threatened to undermine this solidarity. Separate women's organizations played a key role in developing a sense of collective identity and a 'feminist consciousness', but did not provide the only space in which women could make their demands. Many feminists sought to achieve their goals through mixed-sex political parties and viewed their feminist causes as inextricably linked to a broader political agenda. Thus, they had to juggle competing loyalties and political identities, often making difficult choices over the course

of a lifetime. Some feminists prioritized gender issues throughout their lives, while others shifted the focus of their political interests over time, in some periods prioritizing the fight against racism or class exploitation rather than women's subordination to men. Therefore, the relationship between feminism and other social and political reform movements, including nationalist struggles, socialist politics and anti-colonial movements will form a major theme for this study.

Feminist ideas, in theory and in practice, were complex. It is important, therefore, not to be too quick to label individuals as feminist or non-feminist on the basis of an ideal model of what a feminist should look like. Women expressed a variety of ideas, and took many different routes, as they tried to challenge inequalities in their lives. Whether they worked in single-sex groups or in mixed-sex political parties feminists had to develop effective tactics. This meant making compromises and negotiating with others who had a different agenda. What they had in common, however, was a vision of a different world for women in which they could imagine possibilities that were not confined by rigid sex roles. To achieve this world they were ready to risk imprisonment, ill health and public ridicule. As Josephine Butler, leader of the British campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, wrote in 1871: 'English women will be found ready again and again to agitate, to give men no repose, to turn the world upside down if need be, until impurity and injustice are expelled from our laws.'[2]

Further reading

A key text that provides a detailed and thought provoking comparison of feminist ideas and movements in a wide range of

European countries is Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. Other comparative studies of Europe include: Gisela Bock, *Women in European History*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002; and Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga, *Gendering European History*, London: Leicester University Press, 2000.

Europe and North America are compared in Marlene Legates *In Their Time. A History of Feminism in Western Society*, London: Routledge, 2001.

For a comparative study that not only looks at Europe, North America and Australia, but also goes further afield to include Japan, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay, see Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (eds) *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994. This was a pioneering study that drew attention to the extent to which the history of feminism had been viewed through the perspective of a model drawn from Britain and North America.

The complex relationship between feminism and nationalism is explored in: Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840–1920*, London: Croom Helm, 1977; and Mrinalini Sinha, Donna J. Guy and Angela Woollacott (eds) Special Issue on Feminisms and Internationalism, *Gender and History*, 10, 3, 1998. Kumari Jayawardena examines feminism and nationalism in 12 countries in Asia and the Middle East in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London: Zed Books, 1986.

Studies of Western feminist involvement in the project of imperialism and colonialism reveal the multiple ways in which the local, the national and the global intersect. They also draw attention to the ethnocentrism and racism of Western feminism.

See, for example, Ian C. Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall and Philippa Levine (eds) *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race*, London: Routledge, 2002; Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Power, 1865–1914*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994; and Catherine Hall, Keith Mclelland and Jane Rendall (eds) *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

The comparative texts referred to above all discuss different definitions of feminism. In addition, Barbara Caine suggests that women's rights were at the core of modern feminism in *English Feminism, 1780–1980*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Jane Rendall also employs the term modern feminism to describe the late eighteenth century onwards and uses the word feminist 'to describe women who claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in society, and a few men who sympathised with them': Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1985, pp. 1–2. For an argument that feminism can be used to describe periods when it was not employed by contemporaries, see Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Virago, 1983. The opposite position is explored in Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986.

Women's critique of their subordinate position before the late eighteenth century is explored in Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to 1870*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

The use of the term 'waves' in histories of feminism is discussed in: Karen Offen (2000); Drude Dahlerup, 'Three Waves of Feminism in Denmark'; and Beatrice Halsaa, 'The History of the Women's Movement in Norway' – both in Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (eds) *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, London: Zed Books, 2002.

Notes

1 M. Fawcett, 'Introduction' in H.M. Swanwick, *The Future of the Women's Movement*. London, G. Bell, 1913, p. xii quoted in K. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 2.

2 Quoted in A. Summers, *Female Lives, Moral States*. Newbury: Threshold Press, 2000, p. 126.

CHAPTER 6

The 'personal is political': women's liberation and 'second wave feminism'

IN 1968 WOMEN IN ATLANTIC CITY DECIDED to stage a protest against the Miss America beauty contest. They invited women to throw their bras and girdles, symbols of the pressures on women to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty, into a 'freedom trash bucket'. This was the start of a new and explosive period in feminist history. A series of provocative direct actions followed and soon attracted the attention of the world's media. The women's liberation movement, as it was popularly called, swept through North America and western Europe. For almost a decade this vibrant political force was rarely out of the headlines. It was the first time in two generations that women 'unapologetically declared their feminism' (Legates 2001: 327) and the movement soon became known as 'second wave feminism'.

Origins of 'second wave feminism'

What led women to take such flamboyant and public actions? Why was 1968 a crucial turning point? Some of the answers must be looked for as far back as the Second World War. Women's expectations were raised as a result of their extensive participation in the war effort – as workers, members of the armed forces and as activists in the resistance. In France (1944) and Italy (1945) women finally gained the right to vote, while in the atmosphere of liberation after the war feminists demanded full civil rights for women. In France, for instance, pre-war suffragists, resistance workers and Catholic women joined together to ensure that the new Constitution in France would include a clause on sexual equality in all areas of life, including family law, as well as a guarantee that mothers and their children would receive protection.

Formal equality, however, did not automatically mean that women experienced a fundamental change in their social and economic position. A fear of social instability after the upheavals of war led governments to emphasize the importance of 'traditional' gender roles. Social welfare policies, for instance, including family allowances and social security payments, were based on the assumption that there was a male breadwinner. The image of the contented wife and mother, giving all her attention to housework, children and the care of her husband was widespread in popular magazines and advertisements. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the 1950s has been described as the 'decade of the housewife'. As the political landscape became more conservative it proved increasingly difficult for feminists to find a space to put forward alternative views. During the Cold War,

in countries dominated by the Soviet Union only Communist Party sponsored organizations were allowed to thrive, while governments in the West were suspicious of any movements that appeared 'radical' or subversive. In this climate 'traditional' family roles were seen as crucial for social stability. In Spain, for example, under the authoritarian regime of General Franco, women were expected to devote themselves to the family and had few personal or social rights. In Catholic countries such as Italy and Ireland women were subordinate to male relatives within the family and in the 1950s and 60s suffered from discriminatory legislation relating to divorce, adultery and abortion.

BOX 6.1

Simone De Beauvoir, 1908–86

Born in Paris, De Beauvoir studied at the Sorbonne where, in 1929, she met Jean-Paul Sartre. Through their lifelong friendship she contributed to the development of existentialist philosophy and she became well known as a novelist, political theorist, essayist and biographer. *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)*, published first in French in 1949, provided a detailed analysis of women's oppression. Her existentialist views were evident when she argued that existence precedes essence – hence, one was not born but became a woman. De Beauvoir argued that the assumption that men represented the norm, and that women, throughout history, had been seen to deviate from this, limited women's sense of themselves and their possibilities since they were always viewed as 'the other'. This, coupled with her assertion that women were as capable of choice as men, provided feminists with a new way of understanding the social position of women and helps to explain the impact of her book.

And yet women did not remain silent. They continued to organize together to demand improvements in their employment and family lives, working through trade unions and political parties as well as their own single-sex organizations. Debates about gender roles were fuelled by key pieces of writing. Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) was a particularly influential text.

De Beauvoir argued that women did not have a clear identity of their own since they were always viewed as 'the other' in relation to men. She emphasized that the roles and characteristics assigned to women were socially constructed. In a famous passage she concluded that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', since a woman's 'destiny is imposed upon her by her teachers and her society' (De Beauvoir 1953: 315). De Beauvoir did not see herself as writing in a feminist tradition but tried to understand women's subordination in the context of her broader interest in existentialist philosophy. Nonetheless, her work was to become a key foundation text for 'second wave feminism'.

The image of the perfect wife and mother was increasingly at odds with the realities of women's lives in the late 1950s and 1960s. As young women took advantage of the opportunities offered by an expansion in higher education they were less content than their mothers to accept a future bounded by domesticity. At the same time married women began to enter the labour force in larger numbers. They were clustered in part-time and low-paid work that prompted extensive public debates and government inquiries into gender inequalities at the workplace, many of which resulted in legislation. In Norway, for example, the principle of equal pay was adopted in 1958 and a new taxation system for married couples was introduced,

weakening the male breadwinner system. In Canada a number of women's organizations came together in 1966 to put pressure on the government to appoint a Royal Commission on women, while in France public discussion on women's work outside the home contributed to a reform of the law on marriage in 1965.

The 1960s also saw the publication of another key text, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). This seemed to encapsulate the frustrations of white, middle-class housewives in suburban America who, when interviewed, suggested that their lives had not been fulfilled. Friedan labelled this as 'the problem with no name'. She explored how women had come to believe that they should be good wives and mothers and therefore blamed themselves if they failed to be contented with their roles. Friedan's solution for this problem was to encourage women to take up paid employment, although she perhaps underestimated the difficulties of combining paid work and child care. She also gave too much emphasis to the bored housewife and said little about those women who were active outside the home in voluntary social or political work. Nonetheless, she was important in drawing attention to 'sex role conditioning' and to the fact that nurture, rather than nature, had assigned women to domestic roles. She stimulated debates about the position of women, in particular, on women's experiences within the family – a question that was to be central for 'second wave feminism'.

Protest in the 1960s

It was the black civil rights movement, however, that provided the main impetus for women to organize together and to challenge contemporary gender roles. By taking part in the movement they

established networks, learned new tactics and also began to raise questions about their own lack of rights. In 1966 Betty Friedan, along with labour and civil rights activists, established the National Organization of Women (NOW) to 'bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now' (Legates 2001: 348).

NOW can be located in many respects in a long-standing liberal tradition that emphasized the importance of men and

BOX 6.2

National Organization for Women

The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded by Betty Friedan and other feminist leaders in 1966. At its first conference in Washington NOW declared that its aims were to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society so that they could reach their full potential as human beings. It sought to use the law to gain equality of opportunity in employment and education and to achieve equal civil and political rights and responsibilities for women. It spearheaded women's growing involvement in political campaigns and called for women to speak out for their own rights in partnership with men. NOW has continued to help women and to act as a pressure group up to the present day. It has mobilized numerous mass demonstrations – for example, in 1978 100,000 people marched in favour of an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and there have been several Marches for Women's Lives for reproductive rights, culminating in a demonstration of 1.15 million people in 2004. NOW currently has 500,000 members and its priorities include economic equality, an equal rights amendment to the Constitution, abortion rights and reproductive freedom, ending violence against women and opposition to racism and bigotry against lesbians and gays.

women working together to achieve change through legislation. Nonetheless, by 1967 its members had begun to take more radical direct action, picketing government offices to ensure that laws were complied with. Just as pressure began to mount for more attention to be paid to gender inequalities, student unrest and demonstrations against the Vietnam War in 1968 were to transform the political landscape.

Across Europe and North America students took to the streets to protest against the Vietnam War, to call for reforms in education and to demand civil freedoms. Inspired by revolutionary struggles elsewhere in the world they criticized the capitalist system and, in Paris, were joined by workers from a range of industries who went on strike. Grass-roots action and street demonstrations, in which there were violent confrontations with the police, characterized the movement. Women joined into these activities with enthusiasm but too often ended up as caterers and minute takers rather than as speakers and decision takers. Their frustration at being marginalized was increased by the fact that this was 'flagrantly contradicting the anti hierarchical and participatory ideals of the 1968 movements' (Eley 2002: 366). When they demanded a greater role women found that men, who claimed to be their comrades, did not take them seriously and were 'sexist' in their attitudes. This prompted women to draw attention to the specific problems that they faced as women and to question the priorities and concerns of a male-defined left politics.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that women began to meet together in autonomous single-sex groups to discuss issues that concerned them and to raise their own demands. Inspired by the demonstration against the Miss World contest in Atlantic City

women in America and elsewhere took direct action to draw attention to their grievances. In Germany women members of the Socialist German Student Federation met to discuss their specific problems, in particular child care, and argued that the family, as well as the workplace or the university, should become a site of political activity. When they met with derision from men at a subsequent conference one woman pelted her critics with tomatoes. French women also rejected the 'sexism' of the Left. They formed numerous women-only groups, including the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes). Some of these groups wanted to work anonymously underground whereas others, following the provocative style of May '68, carried out spectacular public actions, using 'transgression, insolence and caustic humour to win the media's attention' (Picq 2002: 316). The most famous example was when one woman laid a wreath of flowers under the Arc de Triomphe for the wife of the unknown soldier. In 1971 over 300 French women signed a newspaper article, known as the 'Whore's Manifesto', declaring that they had had an illegal abortion and this was followed by a similar public declaration in West Germany.

In Britain the women's liberation movement gained an impetus from the campaign of women factory workers for equal pay as well as from disillusion with the attitudes of men in the anti-Vietnam War protests. The first Women's Liberation Conference, attended by over 600 women, was held at Ruskin College early in 1970. A National Women's Coordinating Committee was formed to demand equal pay, equal education and employment opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand and 24-hour nurseries. Disruptive actions were also common. In 1969 the Tufnell Park women's liberation group leafleted the Ideal

Home Exhibition and a year later there was a protest against the televised Miss World Competition at the Albert Hall in which protesters threw smoke bombs and bags of flour.

The women's liberation movement was not just confined to Europe and North America. Japanese feminists, for example, highlighted inequalities in family law and the problems of working women. They organized demonstrations and sit-ins and campaigned to have a 'sexist' television commercial for instant noodles removed. In Scandinavia, however, where legal equalities in marriage and the right to abortion had already been achieved, and where social welfare legislation enabled women to combine work and family, a women's liberation movement was far less evident.

Characteristics of the women's liberation movement

Feminists did not always agree on the best way to organize and on the demands that they wanted to make. In France, Germany, Italy and the United States there was an emphasis on women working autonomously in single-sex groups. In the United States, in particular, feminists tried to develop a separate women's culture and placed emphasis on sex oppression. In Britain, however, class politics exerted more influence and many feminists sought to maintain links with the trade union and labour movement. And yet with their slogan 'sisterhood is powerful' women sought to transcend their differences and had a sense that they were part of an international movement with shared characteristics.

Autonomous women's groups were at the heart of the women's liberation movement. Formed at a grass-roots level and outside

of existing political parties, they deliberately rejected hierarchies and national leaders. At meetings individual women were encouraged to speak about their own experiences. Consciousness raising, as it was termed, was intended to help women to develop an awareness of their position and to take control over their own lives and aspirations. As they talked about the frustrations that they experienced in their private lives women came to realize that their difficulties were not just individual ones but arose from social conditions that were shared by others. This self-knowledge was then a springboard for taking collective actions to achieve change. These could be spontaneous, unplanned actions including 'sudden outbreaks of anger, gatherings with singing, dancing through the streets, impromptu speeches and exuberant expressions of solidarity' (Kaplan 1992: 19). They could also be well-organized events such as sit-ins, marches and demonstrations. For example, in 1977–8 women marched through the streets in Britain, West Germany and Italy in 'Reclaim the Night' actions to assert their right to be in public spaces in safety after dark.

The 'personal is political' was one of the most famous slogans of the movement. Women were expected to conform to particular ideals of femininity and this affected the ways in which they thought about themselves as well as simply being imposed from outside. Feminists consistently drew attention to the way in which consumerism and advertising used women's sexuality to sell goods and conditioned them into believing that only a particular kind of beauty had value. This encouraged women to spend a great deal of money on the latest fashions and beauty products. It also fed into anxieties about ageing and the 'ideal body shape' that could lead to cosmetic surgery and eating

disorders so graphically portrayed in Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1981). Areas once thought as private, including anxieties about the body, sexuality and relationships between men and women were all viewed as political issues within 'second wave feminism'. The pleasures of sex and women's erotic desires were emphasized as well as women's right to define their own sexuality and the demand that there should be an end to discrimination against lesbians. Consciousness raising played a central role in ensuring that the personal would become political and women were encouraged to 'reassess their personal and emotional lives, their relation to their families, their lovers and their work' and to 'negotiate an autonomous identity beyond those associated with family duties' (Whelehan 1995: 13).

The family was viewed as a key site of women's oppression. Alongside more conventional demands for equal pay and an end to sex discrimination at work feminists called for paid housework, child care facilities, and contraceptive advice. Reproductive rights, including free contraception and abortion on demand, were central issues for the women's liberation movement. Campaigns to legalize abortion, and to ensure that women had the right to choose whether to have an abortion, took place in most countries in Europe and North America in the early 1970s. It was the one issue that managed to bring women from different generations, social groups and political backgrounds together at a national level to work for a reform of common concern. For the most part, these campaigns were successful in legalizing abortion, but the legislation often fell short of the demand for a woman's right to choose.

Feminists communicated their ideas through an array of newspapers, newsletters and journals and also through women's

presses, such as Virago in Britain and Arlen House in Ireland. Education also provided an important space for feminists to challenge conventional wisdoms about gender roles and contemporary definitions of femininity. As more women entered higher education, they highlighted the fact that women were invisible in academic disciplines that had been defined by men. They demanded women's studies courses to provide information about women's lives and to raise new questions about how knowledge had been constructed. This in turn affected the nature of the academic disciplines themselves. Women's studies courses also had a role to play in the political struggle for women's liberation. An important part of the academic project, for example, was to re-discover women's political activism in the past – pioneering texts included Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden From History* and Gerda Lerner's *The Majority Finds Its Past*. As feminists found out more about the varied activities in which women had been involved in the past so they were able to question the view that women's roles were natural and could not be changed.

Key texts of 'second wave feminism'

A number of key texts helped to shape the ideas and characteristics of the early years of the women's liberation movement. 'Liberal feminists' still focused on individual rights and equal opportunities and argued that legal and social policy changes would help women to achieve these. More characteristic of 'second wave feminism', however, was the 'radical feminist' attempt to find new ways of theorizing women's relationship to men. They looked in particular at 'men's social control of women through various mechanisms of patriarchy . . . especially violence,

heterosexuality and reproduction, where men as a group are seen as responsible for maintaining women's oppression' (Maynard 1998: 253). Kate Millett's influential book *Sexual Politics* (1969) argued that patriarchy, or male power over women, underpinned all social forms including the family, religion and the workplace. The fact that patriarchy was all pervasive and also operated at the level of ideas meant that it had the power to shape how women thought as well as how they lived their lives. By suggesting that personal lives were affected by the state and by patriarchy, Millett opened the way for feminists to challenge the division between the public and the private that was central to liberal political thought. Millett's scathing attack on male authors for glorifying sexual brutality against women in literature brought her considerable notoriety and criticism for being anti-male.

Germaine Greer, an Australian academic living in England, also became the centre of controversy for her book *The Female Eunuch* (1971). This was a provocative text that led to criticism from both within and outside the women's liberation movement. Greer produced a polemic about the ways in which women had been conditioned to accept a sense of inferiority to men and argued for sexual liberation outside the monogamous family. She made a spirited attack on the constraints women faced in their lives but was criticized by many feminists for blaming women themselves for failing to grasp the opportunities that were offered. She complained that women were 'frigid' and argued that 'the cage door has been opened but the canary has refused to fly out' (p. 14). With her tall, striking figure and her views on the enjoyment of heterosexual sex, Greer was described by *Life* magazine as the 'saucy feminist that even men like' and it is not surprising that she stood outside the mainstream.

Within Britain, in particular, women who had taken part in left politics attempted to bring together a Marxist and a feminist approach in which the economic roots of women's exploitation within capitalism could be linked with more personal forms of oppression. In her influential text *Woman's Estate* (1974), for example, Juliet Mitchell revised standard Marxist accounts by analysing the position of women not just in terms of relations of production or of private property but also by looking at sexual differences through the insights offered by psychoanalytic theory.

The lively debate among feminists about the root causes of women's oppression and about the nature and importance of patriarchy provides just one example of the vibrancy of the women's movement in the early 1970s. This was a time of exceptional activity as women mobilized across several countries. Contemporaries self-consciously described themselves as feminists and felt that they were taking part in a new phenomenon. In France, for example, feminists proclaimed 'women's liberation, year zero' in 1970 to demonstrate that they had different goals and a different way of thinking than the liberal feminists who had preceded them. Clearly there were many similarities with feminist campaigners of previous generations. 'Second wave feminists' pursued a variety of equal rights campaigns alongside other demands and some of the direct actions and use of spectacle evoked the militancy of the British suffragettes. Nonetheless, there were differences. In Britain, young middle-class women did support campaigns for equal rights at work, but their passionate, personal concerns were about 'images in advertising, child care, the response of left-wing men to women's liberation' (Rowbotham 1989: 166). The language used was significant; emancipation implied freedom from constraints and

the achievement of social policies to enable women to fulfil their potential. Liberation, on the other hand, implied a greater sense of personal empowerment and choice, adventure and sexual power free from prevailing ideas of what it meant to be a woman. More women were now prepared to take part in exuberant actions. They organized from the grass roots, were suspicious of charismatic leaders and put 'personal' issues such as the control of their own bodies and sexual freedoms at the forefront of their politics. The style of the movement was subversive. 'It meant taking the culture's trappings and symbols, its most cherished beliefs and disordering them, playing with them, turning their meanings around in acts of public transgression. It was a calculated acting out, a purposeful disobedience, a misbehaving in public' (Eley 2002: 372).

Decade of women, 1976–85

The mobilization of so many women, and the publicity given to the inequalities and discrimination faced by women throughout the world, contributed to the United Nations designating 1975 as International Women's Year and then instituting the Decade for Women, 1976–85. The UN called on governments to improve health, employment and educational levels of women under the banner of equality, development and peace. This provided a stimulus for women across the world to set up women's groups and to make their own demands. In Japan, for example, the International Women's Year Action Group was able to exert pressure for change on the government at home as well as raising issues in the International Women's Decade conferences held at Copenhagen, Mexico and Nairobi. In Brazil the military

government allowed International Women's Day to be celebrated in 1975 since women were not seen as 'political'. This gave a stimulus to feminist demands. At first these focused on women's work and production, but at the 1978 International Women's Day the politics of the private sphere, the family and reproductive rights were highlighted.

Women in Third World countries had their own independent goals and strategies. In India, for example, a countrywide movement of women emerged on a mass scale in 1979–80 when the Supreme Court acquitted a policeman accused of raping a young woman who was in custody. Women took part in mass demonstrations and established organizations such as the Joint Women's Programme (1981) and the India Democratic Women's Association (1981) to fight all forms of violence against women, including the practice of sati and dowry deaths. Some groups were locally based and autonomous, drawing their active supporters from young, educated urban feminists who had worked with women in rural areas, slums and trade unions. Others were affiliated with various political parties and sought to make gains for women through existing political channels as well as through direct actions.

'Second wave' feminism in Latin America

Women also mobilized on a large scale in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s. Their political strategies, however, were complex and their movements arose within a very different context to that found in Europe and North America. The repression of political parties and trade unions opened up a space for women to play a key role in campaigns to achieve democracy

and they were then inspired to raise their own demands as a sex. Women were involved in three different types of action. In response to the economic difficulties facing their families working-class women joined together at a grass-roots level to ensure access to basic services that were being neglected by their governments. Women also organized as mothers to demand information about missing relatives, in particular their children and grandchildren, and raised human-rights questions. The most famous of the groups were the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina. In both of these cases women used their traditional role as wives and mothers as a justification for their political activism and did not initially draw attention to gender-specific issues.

Alongside these groups, however, educated middle-class women, many of whom were active in left opposition parties, began to raise questions about sex discrimination in the context of the larger class struggle and also established separate women's groups. For example, when the Echeverría regime in Mexico allowed new opposition parties to form from 1970–6 young professional women and students formed feminist organizations. They emphasized the need for consciousness raising and held workshops and demonstrations, often criticizing consumerism and its exploitation of women. In raising the question of what democratization would mean for women, feminists in Latin American countries linked the authoritarianism of the state with authoritarianism in society, in particular the family, and argued that sex oppression lay at the root of most social structures. Their demands mirrored those of their counterparts in the West, ranging from economic and equal rights issues to questions of reproduction and male violence.

The dynamism and variety of the feminist movement in Latin America can be seen in the debates at the biennial *encuentros* (conventions) held in the area during the 1980s. These provided a stimulus to movements in particular countries and also revealed the changing concerns of feminists over time as attendance expanded to include women from Central and South America and from the Caribbean. In Bogotá in 1981 the key debates were over autonomy from mainstream politics and whether feminist objectives could be separated from the class struggle. In Lima in 1983 the theme was patriarchy. The inclusion of members of the popular, grass-roots women's movements expanded the parameters of the debate about autonomy since for some it 'opened up the possibility that women could define and act on their own interests' (Jaquette 1994: 5). In São Paulo, Brazil, in 1985 race and sexual preference were part of the agenda in an explicit way for the first time, although class remained a central issue.

Sex, race and class

For Third World feminists it was impossible to disentangle sex from race and class oppression. In South Africa, for example, black women took part in the struggle against apartheid and also had to cope with the absence of male members of the family. Their priorities were to ensure the economic and physical survival of their families. This entailed working long hours for low pay as well as providing many of the primary health-care services. Thus, the dichotomy between public and private spheres, and between masculine and feminine domains, was less marked in African societies than in many other countries. African

feminism therefore stressed 'human totality, parallel autonomy, co-operation, self reliance, adaptation, survival and liberation' (Steady 1996: 18). Women's role in ensuring family survival led to grass-roots organizing at community level and then to involvement in national and international politics.

In practice there were many overlaps between women's groups that had practical goals, such as the protection of families, and those that highlighted gender inequalities. Women in opposition movements in Latin America used their 'traditional' social role as mothers as a source of strength and were able to create a new feminist practice as they politicized everyday life. In Brazil, for example, housewives who engaged in community politics also began to discuss family, love and childbearing and increasingly focused on women's subordination. This in turn had an influence on the agenda of the middle-class feminist movement. By the late 1970s the feminist movement had reached women from all social classes, had expanded the definition of feminist struggle and had formed new groups, including those based on the needs and specific agendas of Afro-Brazilians and lesbians (Alvarez 1994: 25).

Divisions in 'second wave' feminism

A sense of 'sisterhood', so integral to the women's liberation movement in Europe and North America, was difficult to sustain as differences based on class, race and sexual orientation increasingly came to the surface. 'Second wave feminism' was dominated by white, educated, middle-class, heterosexual women and their concerns. The methods used, in particular, consciousness raising, and the emphasis on sexual freedom and personal

autonomy alienated working-class women who were never drawn to the movement in large numbers. Other groups, such as lesbian feminists and black feminists, challenged the claims of the women's liberation movement to speak for all women and sought to bring their own experiences and priorities to the fore. Thus, in contrast to white middle-class women's criticism of the patriarchal nature of the family, black women were more likely to see the family as a source of strength and support against systematic racism. They were concerned that Reclaim the Night Marches and debates about rape reproduced stereotyped views of the sexualized black man who posed a threat to white women. Similarly, demands for legalized abortion failed to address issues such as forced sterilization that had a specific impact on black women. Black women found it difficult to accept that sexism was

BOX 6.3

bell hooks

bell hooks, a black American writer and social critic, was born Gloria Watkins in 1952 but took the name of her maternal great grandmother. She uses lower case for her name in order to put the emphasis on her writing. She is best known for her attacks on 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' which has involved a critique of the feminist movement for claiming to speak for all women when it represents white, middle-class perspectives. She argues that race, sex, class and sexual orientation are all inextricably linked and that social change requires them to be dealt with as a whole. Her most influential writings include *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981); *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (1984) and *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000). She also lectures throughout the world.

a more fundamental form of oppression than racism and sought to develop their own theories that would link gender and race. The American writer bell hooks has been particularly influential in challenging the racist assumptions of white feminism and in tracing black women's political and historical invisibility to the beginnings of slavery (hooks 1982).

Lesbian feminists argued that it was heterosexuality and not just male economic power that underpinned male supremacy. Authors such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly celebrated women's difference and argued that women could identify with each other in a variety of ways including the emotional as well as the political. For some activists, particularly in the United States, this implied the need for a separatist form of politics that would concentrate on women-identified concerns such as domestic violence. Some lesbians then suggested that heterosexual women could not be feminists since they collaborated with patriarchy and with men. This in turn led to acrimonious debates and splits in the movement in the late 1970s, in particular, over attitudes towards male violence, rape and pornography.

Divisions based on class, race, religion and ethnicity were just as common in the Third World as in Western societies. Community based working-class women's movements in Latin America, for example, tended to view feminist groups as middle class or as representing the interests of white women. In Asia feminists were conscious of the extent to which industrialized, wealthy countries in the region exploited women in less developed, neighbouring states and this contributed to the development of a complex feminist politics. Japanese women, for instance, linked their own oppression, in particular domestic violence, with the oppression of other women in South East Asia that resulted from

Japanese attempts to find cheap labour. As members of the Asian Women's Association Japanese feminists drew attention to the plight of women in the Philippines, Korea and Indonesia who were faced with either low pay in sweated industries or else work providing sexual services for tourists. They attempted to act in solidarity with Asian women rather than to see them as passive victims. In Islamic societies religious differences could lead to complex feminist alliances and strategies. In Iran, for example, the establishment of an Islamic republic in 1976 led to a loss of many rights that had been won over the course of the century. Nonetheless, Islamic feminists used their knowledge of the Koran to justify their arguments that women should have access to greater educational and employment opportunities. At the same time secular feminists reluctantly agreed to take up the veil as part of a bargaining strategy to enable them to make gains in employment, education and welfare.

The three International conferences held during the UN decade of women brought feminists together from different parts of the world, but they also revealed growing tensions between them. White, middle-class Western feminists were criticized for seeing their own goals and assumptions as universal ones. Muslim women, in particular, challenged the view that Islamic societies, with their emphasis on the patriarchal family, were repressive to women and that practices such as veiling were examples of women's lack of personal freedoms. Instead, they pointed to the ways in which Western feminists had been implicated in colonialism and suggested that their personal freedoms were illusory since women were used as sex objects in the media and in advertising. In contrast, Islamic feminists claimed that wearing the veil should be seen in a positive light, since it 'liberates

them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the demands of the beauty myth' (Afshar 1996: 124).

Achievements of 'second wave' feminism

By the late 1970s it became far more difficult to contain differences between women and 'second wave feminism' appeared to have lost momentum. What had the movement achieved? It has been estimated that in western Europe at least a million women were activists and a further 12 million were sympathizers and supporters (Kaplan 1992: 17). In most countries the movement contributed towards legislation that aimed to enhance women's position, including equal pay, sex discrimination laws and, most important of all, the legalization of abortion. A key feature of 'second wave' feminism, however, was women's attempt to set up their own support networks outside mainstream political and social institutions. Women's health centres encouraged self-awareness about the female body and sexuality, while rape crisis centres provided practical help for women. In 1972 the first refuge in the world for battered women was established in Britain by Erin Pizzey .

Feminists showed that domestic violence and rape were not just the actions of violent individuals but were caused by social structures and expectations about male and female roles. In doing so they ensured that support would be forthcoming from state agencies in the future. Perhaps the most important aspect of the 1970s, however, was changing the terms in which the woman question was debated and in encouraging women to think differently about themselves and their place in the world. A new language had to be developed in order to make sense

of the all-pervasive discrimination that women faced. It was argued that 'sexism' was embedded not just in the structures of institutions such as the workplace or the family, but also in the ways in which the roles of men and women, and the meaning of masculinity and femininity, were constructed in the media, in advertising and in everyday language. This ensured that the next generation of women would enter a very different world from the one that their mothers had struggled to change.

Further reading

Marlene Legates, *In Their Time. A History of Feminism in Western Society*, London: Routledge, 2001, Ch. 10 provides an overview of the origins of 'second wave' feminism. An analysis of the women's movement in individual countries in the 1950s and 60s can be found in: Claire Duchen and Irene Bandhauer Schöffmann (eds) *When the War Was Over: Women, War and Peace in Europe, 1940–1956*, London: Leicester University Press, 2000; Monica Threlfall (ed.) *Mapping the Women's Movement*, London: Verso, 1996; Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (eds) *Thinking Differently. A Reader in European Women's Studies*, London: Zed Books, 2002; and Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1959*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992, Ch. 10.

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The attempts by feminists to integrate Marxism and feminism are explored in Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', in Lydia Sargent (ed.) *Women and Revolution*, London: Pluto, 1981. Marxist feminists differed over whether patriarchy was a useful tool of analysis, for example, see Judith Newton, Mary Ryan and Judith Walkowitz (eds) *Sex and Class in Women's History*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983; and Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Trouble with Patriarchy', in Mary Evans (ed.) *The Women Question*, London: Fontana, 1982. For a discussion of the concept of patriarchy, see Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. Mary Maynard provides a useful explanation of

the 'three strands' of feminist thought and also gives a critique of these categories: 'Women's Studies' in Jackson and Jones (eds) *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998; and 'Beyond the "Big Three": The Development of Feminist Theory into the 1990s', *Women's History Review*, 4, 3, 1995. Jane Aaron and Sylvia Walby (eds) *Out of the Margins: Women's Studies in the Nineties*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1992 consider the extent to which, after two decades of scholarship, academic studies had been influenced by feminism.

Feminist theory and practice in Third World countries is discussed in: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (eds) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1991; Haleh Afshar (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World*, London: Routledge, 1996; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992; Barbara J. Nelson and Najma Chowdhury (eds) *Women and Politics Worldwide*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994; Jane S. Jaquette (ed.) *The Women's Movement in Latin America. Participation and Democracy*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2nd edn 1994; Victoria E. Rodriguez, *Women's Participation in Mexican Political Life*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Andrea Benton Rushing (eds) *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, Washington, DC: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 18; Z.A. Mangaliso, 'Gender and Nation Building in South Africa', in Lois A. West (ed.) *Feminist Nationalisms*, London: Routledge, 1997; and Maxine Molyneux, 'Mobilisation without Emancipation? Women's Interest, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies*, 11, 2, 1985.

CHAPTER 7

The twenty-first century – still making waves

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO FEMINISM since the heady days of the women's liberation movement? Is there still a space for feminist politics in a world in which older political certainties appear to have collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War? How should feminists deal with new political allegiances and conflicts – fundamentalist Islam against the corruption of the West, civil wars between ethnic groups or the increasing gap between rich and poor nations? As early as the 1980s 'second wave' feminists in Europe and North America could see that their movement was losing momentum and had become more fragmented. The slogan 'sisterhood is universal' was difficult to sustain when differences between women – including race, religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation – seemed more significant than their common interests as a sex.

New ways of thinking appeared to confirm this. Post-modernist theory, in particular, led feminists to question whether it was possible to speak of 'woman' as a distinct category. In her influential book, *Am I That Name?*, Denise Riley suggested that ' "woman" is historically, discursively constructed and always relatively to other categories which themselves change' (Riley 1988 in Hall 1991: 205). If the individual self is fragmented and likely to have multiple identities that change over time, it would be difficult to find a straightforward link between experience and political activity or to conceive of a politics based on collective interests as a sex – both of which had been crucial for 'second wave' feminism.

Women also still took action outside formal political and professional structures. They organized self-help groups at a local level, took part in campaigns over specific issues, such as child-care facilities and tried to get their message across by forming publishing collectives, theatre groups or organizing other cultural activities. There were moments when women could be mobilized in larger numbers. In Britain, for example, a women-only peace camp was set up at the Greenham Common nuclear base in 1981. In the following year over 30,000 women encircled the base and left personal items such as photographs or children's clothes tied to the fence. This provides a good example of how informal networks could be effective in leading to the organization of a large-scale protest. Similarly in the United States, three quarters of a million women were still prepared to march on Washington in 1992 when abortion rights were under threat. Women might join together in specific identity groups, or in single-issue protests, but this seemed like a far cry from the mass mobilization to challenge a common oppression that had characterized the earlier women's liberation movement.

A hostile political climate also made it difficult for a women's movement to flourish. A move to the right in politics led to a new emphasis on the importance of the traditional family and to attacks on some of the gains made by women, in particular, abortion rights. This 'backlash' against 'second wave' feminism was then reinforced by the popular media which used the term post-feminism – not to describe something that occurred after feminism, but to imply that there was an active rejection of 'second wave feminism' and its outmoded ideas. Younger women were encouraged to exercise personal choice, in particular, as consumers of clothes and beauty products, and to react against the stereotype of the serious feminist who wore dungarees, used little make up and was anti-male. This attack on feminism can be seen as a defensive reaction of a male establishment against the threat of change that 'second wave feminism' had posed. On the other hand, there were also feminist authors who criticized second wave feminism, in particular, for its preoccupation with rape and sexual harassment that implied women were victims. The most well known of these authors – who was taken up extensively by the media – was Naomi Wolf, the author of *The Beauty Myth* (1991) and *Fire Within Fire* (1993). Although she argued that the media were largely responsible for creating a negative image of feminism, she also blamed the movement itself for being too rigid in its definitions and for holding back women from doing whatever they wanted.

Post-feminism was used to imply that there was no longer a need for feminism now that women had made so many gains in legal, economic, political and reproductive rights. Indeed, throughout the world girls and women took full advantage of an increase in educational and employment opportunities and

began to make inroads into positions of power in many organizations. Feminism as an approach and a category of analysis became more embedded in academic subjects and women were able to gain positions of influence in higher education and in the media. Publishing houses and journals established by women then provided an important outlet for feminist scholarship. Women were also able to make their voices heard within formal political structures both at a national level and internationally, in the European Union and the United Nations. In 1995, for example, the UN sponsored a World Conference on Women in Beijing. Working through political parties, trade unions and the professions feminists attempted to influence policies affecting the lives of women, in particular in the area of social welfare. In Ireland, for instance, women took an active part in the referenda in the 1980s on abortion and the removal of the constitutional ban on divorce. Women did not necessarily use their positions of power and influence within organizations, however, to challenge gender inequalities. They were more likely to press for social welfare reforms to improve women's health or their housing conditions rather than to focus on empowering women to take control over their lives. The subversive, questioning side of feminism, therefore, appeared to be lost.

Not all women benefited from the social and economic changes of the last two decades of the twentieth century. In the year 2000 women, who were just over half of the world's population, still performed two thirds of the world's work hours, earned less than one tenth of its income and owned less than 1% of its property. Of the estimated 1.3 billion people living in poverty, over 70% were female and there were still vast differences in the maternal mortality rates and general health statistics between

sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and industrialized countries. Even in the West there were paradoxes (Billson and Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 5–6). Young women were told that they had 'never had it so good' and were doing well in education and in employment. But violence against women, exploitative advertising, pornography and prostitution were still endemic. The World Health Organization, for instance, estimated in 2000 that one in five women globally had been physically or sexually abused at some time in her life. The freedom to express sexual desire and to have relationships outside marriage without a social stigma were positive developments for young women, but were accompanied by a greater risk of sexually transmitted diseases and a greater respectability for pornography in the public sphere.

Changes that might on the surface have brought benefits for women could prove to be contradictory in their effects. Without the context of a strong women's movement, for instance, it was difficult to frame reforms in feminist terms. Thus, professional women who sought improvements in social welfare services such as reproductive rights emphasized health and the well-being of families rather than women's right to choose and sexual autonomy. Similarly, the introduction of democratic governments could, paradoxically, marginalize women's needs and feminist demands. In Latin America, for example, political parties took up feminist demands around employment and social welfare, but were reluctant to pursue reproductive rights, sexuality and domestic violence. Women became less significant as political actors, their activities were more diffuse and there was little sense that the reforms introduced were designed to challenge male power. In eastern Europe, democratization in the 1980s opened up a space for women to organize together, but the

new, male-dominated parliaments increasingly questioned the reproductive rights women had enjoyed under socialism.

In this context, as a new millennium approached, there were signs of a new vitality in feminist politics. Collective actions by women and debates about the future of feminism raised the possibility that we were entering a period of 'third wave feminism' in the twenty-first century. This suggests that for a new generation of women, as well as for many older campaigners, feminism still has a place in their lives and certainly is neither dead nor irrelevant. Throughout the history of feminism there has always been debate about what it means to be a feminist, which goals should be pursued and which tactics should be used. Feminism in the twenty-first century is no exception. It simply has to deal with different patterns, priorities and contradictions which are going to affect the ways in which women act politically.

There have been numerous disagreements about the meaning of 'third wave feminism', and indeed whether there is something distinctive that can be assigned that label. But all participants in the debate contest the view that we are living in a post-feminist age. It is surely significant that Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*, a key text of the women's liberation movement once again came to the fore in 1999 with another book *The Whole Woman*. In this she argued that post-feminism had encouraged women to think they could have it all – a career, motherhood, beauty and a good sex life. Their role as consumers and the importance of personal lifestyle choices had been emphasized at the expense of politics. And yet, as she pointed out, this applied largely to the affluent West where 'the exercising of one person's freedom may be directly linked to another's oppression'. Thus, a collapse in economic power of the majority of women in

the world has been a direct consequence of Western power and control. In this situation, she asked, how could a woman believe that she has passed beyond feminism (Gamble 2001: 51)?

If feminism is still alive and well in the twenty-first century, what does it aim to do and does it have a different character from the feminisms that have gone before? Generation is a key issue. Young women who have benefited from social changes since 'second wave feminism' focus on the body and sexuality as areas where struggle still has to take place. They have also joined into campaigns around global issues including environmentalism, anti-capitalist and anti-corporate activities, cultural production and human-rights questions. They perceive these as women's issues but do not see them in isolation from human issues – a perspective that would have been familiar to peace and human rights campaigners in the inter-war years.

Feminists active in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s have also attempted to develop different strategies for the new millennium. Elaine Showalter, for example, an American author and feminist campaigner suggests community activists, seeking to improve women's lives through better child-care or health facilities, should use the political and economic power that women now hold to help their cause. Debates around the best strategies to follow are not new and echo concerns that feminists have expressed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Should women organize together in women only groups, both as the most effective way to make an impact and also because this provides a safe environment in which consciousness of what it means to be a woman can be raised? Or is it better, in a mixed-sex world, to work with men in organizations addressing common concerns? Should women work through

formal structures to achieve change or does this dilute the whole meaning of feminism with its emphasis on non-hierarchical ways of acting together and informal networks of support?

What has emerged from these debates is the importance of developing a variety of strategies for achieving change; women in parliaments throughout the world are likely to be more effective in raising feminist issues if they have the support of an autonomous women's group outside. Involvement in community struggles over child care, school closures or health facilities, which do not at first appear to have a feminist agenda, can lead to links being made between local activists and feminist groups. Moreover, whether structures are formal or informal collective campaigns lead to networks of support being developed at all levels. In a new political context, and with the distance that enables feminists to re-appraise 'second wave feminism', many issues can be approached in far more complex ways than in the past. Instead of using the slogan a 'woman's right to choose', campaigners around reproductive rights are likely to look at the language of rights that has framed the debates and to consider compromises that might need to be made to ensure legislative success.

'Third wave' feminism might be difficult to define – and indeed the label may have very little meaning. But debates around this issue show that feminism still has vitality and that it is possible for women to take common action for political purposes and not just for individual, personal fulfilment. Women have found, and continue to find, a variety of spaces in which to operate and have expressed greater optimism that both identity politics and single-issue campaigns can be a springboard for broader actions. In France, for example, debate over the small number of women elected to representative institutions has reinvigorated the

women's movement and brought a new visibility to feminist politics. Third World feminists, in particular, have argued that it is possible to conceive of a different type of universal feminism that is no longer rooted within the norms and perspectives of white, Western feminists. They suggest that if emphasis is placed on the great variety of feminisms and on an understanding of the specific contexts in which women develop their strategies and their priorities, feminists would be able more easily to speak to each other across national and cultural barriers. In many instances, such as the women of Burundi who have organized committees to bring together villagers engaged in ethnic disputes, there is an attempt to find common ground as women despite differences.

Feminism has never been a monolithic movement. There have always been many feminisms united by the fact that at their heart they recognize men's power over women and seek to challenge women's subordination. Feminism is not necessarily synonymous with a highly organized and visible women's movement that explicitly challenges gender inequalities and seeks to 'turn the world upside down'. This is not likely to happen very often. As Showalter notes, 'movements by their nature are infrequent and localised events' with a 'specific and attainable goal' (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2004: 60). The absence of a well organized and seemingly united women's movement, however, does not mean a corresponding absence of feminist activity. In the twenty-first century there are still 'persistent, patterned inequalities' (Jackson and Jones 1998: 10) between men and women throughout the world. This makes it imperative not to lose sight of the category 'woman' and to continue to expose the unequal power relationship between the sexes. It is likely that

women will find many different sites, as they have done in the past, in which to make their voices heard and to put forward their demands. Debates will continue about how best to develop a 'feminist consciousness', about the aims and objectives to be pursued and about whether to organize in single or in mixed-sex groups. The many differences between women are bound to lead to a variety of feminisms, but this does not have to prevent women from working collectively. Political and economic globalization are increasingly linking women together across national boundaries and raise the possibility of joint actions in the future against common forms of oppression. As one author notes, in a recent collection of essays on 'third wave' feminism: 'never mind which number we're on, we need to be making waves' (Spencer 2004: 12).

Further reading

Key texts exploring the implications of post-modernism for feminist theory and practice are: Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, London: Macmillan, 1988; and Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. The implications of their work for feminist history is discussed in June Purvis, 'From "Women Worthies" to Post-Structuralism? Debate and Controversy in Women's History in Britain', in June Purvis (ed.) *Women's History. Britain, 1850–1945*, London: UCL Press, 1995. The 'backlash' against feminism in the late 1980s and 1990s is discussed in: F. Rush, 'The Many Faces of Backlash', in Dorchen E.H. Lendholt and Janice G. Raymond (eds) *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack*

on Feminism, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990; and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1991. Two stimulating but controversial feminist texts in the 1990s were: Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women,* New York: Vintage, 1991; and Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*, London: Doubleday, 1999.

For a discussion of the continuing vitality of feminism in the 1990s and beyond, see Gabriele Griffin (ed.) *Feminist Activism in the 1990s*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1995; Breda Gray and Louise Ryan, 'The Politics of Irish Identity and the Interconnections between Feminism, Nationhood and Colonialism', in Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (eds) *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998; Vera Mackie, 'Feminist Critiques of Modern Japanese Politics', in M. Threlfall (ed.) *Mapping the Women's Movement*, London: Verso; Sara Mills, 'Post-Colonial Feminist Theory' and Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones, 'Thinking for Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorising', in S. Jackson and J. Jones (eds) *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

Global dimensions of feminism are considered in: Amrita Basu (ed.) *The Challenge of Local Feminisms*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995. Information on women's lives world-wide can be found in Janet Mancini Billson and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (eds) *Female Well-Being. Toward a Global Theory of Social Change*, London: Zed Books, 2005.

For an overview of contemporary feminist debates, see Valerie Bryson, *Feminist Debaes; Issues of Theory and Political Practice*,

Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999; Sarah Gamble (ed.) *Feminism and Postfeminism*, London: Routledge, 2001; Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (eds) *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.