

Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia

Kamla Bhasin
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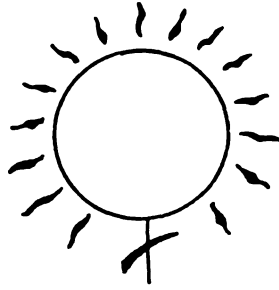
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“In our country we have suffered for centuries; women have been the harijans of our society,” the speaker says emotionally, waxing eloquent on the theme of women’s oppression.

She pauses, then continues, “But ...I am not a feminist!”

The speaker could be a woman prime minister, a professional or an artist—all strong women, who, very possibly, have fought all their lives to succeed in a man’s world. Yet she denies affiliation with feminists.

The audience waits for her to explain what she means by “feminist” and invariably, no such explanation is given.

The categorical way in which some women say, “I am not a feminist” does not simply mean that *they* are not feminists; the implication is that it is not good to be one and that those who are, are somehow misled and irrelevant.

When we hear such statements we cannot help but wonder why some people feel the need to condemn that which many others take seriously.

We can only conclude that they haven’t given feminism any thought at all or that they have imbibed the considerable false propaganda against feminists and feminism.

The media, for example, which is controlled to a large extent by men, has been responsible for a widespread misinterpretation of feminists as “bra-burning”, “man-hating”, “family-destroying” women.

This propaganda is reinforced by other forces and groups that see the emancipation and liberation of women as a threat, with the result that feminists in our countries are attacked and dismissed as “middle class”, “westernised” and “rootless” women.

The fact, however, is that feminists in South Asia have never burnt their bras, even symbolically.

Large numbers are married, have children and run their homes as well, or as badly, as any other woman.

Why are feminists subject to so much attack and why is feminism so often misunderstood?

We believe that this is because few people have bothered to try and understand what feminism actually is and what feminists are trying to say and do.

This booklet is an attempt to respond to some of the common questions and doubts raised about feminism, in the hope that at least some of the misunderstandings will be cleared.



What, then, is feminism?

Unlike many other “isms” feminism does not derive its theoretical or conceptual base from any single theoretical formulation. There is also no single person (like Marx, Mao or Gandhi) who has defined feminism for all of us, for all time to come. There is therefore no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times.

The definition thus can and does change *because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions.*

Just as water takes the shape of the container it is in, feminism is articulated in different ways depending on local situations and issues. This means that feminism meant one thing in the 17th century (when the word was first used) and it means something quite different in the 1990s.

It can be, and is, articulated differently in different parts of the world and, within a country, differently by different women depending on their class, background, level of education, consciousness etc. Even among similar kinds of women there are different currents and debates in feminist thinking, particularly with regard to the reasons (i.e. the historical roots) for the existence of patriarchy and male domination, and to the final resolution of women’s struggles.

for a non-exploitative society free of class, caste, race and gender bias.

Nevertheless there are two definitions of feminism (which were accepted by women from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in two South Asian Workshops).

According to one, feminism is “an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at the place of work and within the family, and conscious action to change this situation.”

The other definition is a little more explicit — “Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women’s labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation.”

According to this simple and rather broad definition, anyone (woman or man) who recognises the existence of sexism (discrimination on the basis of gender), male domination and patriarchy, and who takes some action against it, is a feminist.

Feminists recognise that, all over the world, simply because of their gender, women experience discrimination and unequal treatment in terms of basic food, nutrition and health care, education, employment and participation in decision-making in social, cultural, religious, political and economic institutions.

From this definition it is clear that a mere recognition of sexism is not enough, it *has* to be accompanied by action, by challenge to male domination.

But this action can take any form. For instance a woman’s decision to educate herself and pursue a career, or not to be humiliated, or her refusal to be restricted by purdah, or her decision not to have children, are feminist actions and as relevant as the most organised of struggles.

In other words **you don’t *have* to belong to a group to be a feminist**, although in order to do anything effectively it is much better to be part of one.

According to this definition men can also be feminists, although some think this an impossibility because they believe feminism has

to be based on personal experience of discrimination. They accept men as supporters, not as feminists.

The main difference between earlier feminists and present day ones is that earlier, the struggle was for the democratic rights of women. It included the right to education and employment; the right to own property; the right to vote; the right to enter parliament; the right to birth control; the right to divorce, etc.

In other words, earlier feminists fought for legal reforms, for a legally equal position in society; the struggles were, essentially outside the home and the family. They were not looking at patriarchy as a system which perpetuates women's subordination.

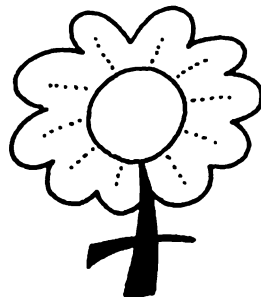
Today, feminists have gone beyond demanding mere legal reforms to end discrimination; they are working towards the *emancipation* of women.

Feminism now includes the struggle against women's subordination to the male within the home; against their exploitation by the family; against their continuing low status at work, in society and in the culture and religion of the country; and against their double burden in production and reproduction.

In addition, feminism challenges the very notion of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive, biologically determined categories.

Thus feminists see that women have to not only fight *against* discrimination but also *for* emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression by the state, by society and by men.

Since women are victims of exploitation (e.g. unequal pay, low wages), subordination (e.g. under male domination), oppression (e.g. violence), we, as women, are in a position to understand the problems facing other women, and know that *we* have to initiate the struggle to change our situation, and society itself



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

Well, it is not enough to simply ask for women's equality vis-à-vis the men in her community.

For example, it does not significantly benefit a peasant woman if she becomes the equal of a peasant man, who is himself brutalised, exploited and oppressed by society. Many feminists, therefore, are not only asking and fighting for the "equality" of women, but for a just and equitable society for women *and* men.

So, according to you feminism is actively working to change the present patriarchal system.

Yes, it is, and more. In addition to being action-oriented, feminism is also an ideology, a belief system. All actions are based on a set of beliefs. Feminism is a doctrine advocating social and political rights for women, equal to those of men. It is also the body of knowledge, thought and theory that feminist scholars/thinkers/writers have created to challenge patriarchal knowledge and ideology. In the words of a Dutch feminist, Saskia Wieringa, feminism is also a discursive



process, a process of producing meaning, of subverting representation of gender and creating new representations of womanhood, of identity and the collective self.

We agree with Saskia Wieringa when she says in her book *Subversive Women*, that feminism carries multiple meanings, limited neither to recent movements nor to western contexts.

Feminism is not a one-dimensional social critique but a multi-layered transformational, political and ethical practice.

As a political movement for change, feminism has always been accompanied by feminist studies, where scholars have studied society, social institutions and social relations from the perspective of women. These studies have made women visible by looking at women specifically rather than as the hidden part of “human beings” or “mankind”. In feminist studies women are both the subjects and objects of study. Women have appropriated the right to define, to give meaning, to interpret, a right that had been exclusively male ever since the creation of knowledge. Women began to focus on areas which had either never been considered worth studying or were not studied from the perspective of women — for example family, sexuality, interpersonal relationships. As male biases were uncovered in existing theory, feminist studies re-examined society and social theory and concluded that as women and women’s perspective were missing from the social sciences, history, literature etc., these were at best half true. Half-truths are dangerous because they masquerade as truths.

For women and men alike, feminism is both a personal, inner struggle as well as its public manifestation. It is individual action as well as organised effort/movement for the attainment of women’s rights.

Are there different kinds of feminism?

Indeed there are, and therefore one should actually speak of feminisms rather than of one universally accepted feminism.

Feminism speaks with many voices. As it touches all aspects of our social and personal lives, feminist concerns and expressions are varied. For example feminists may be scientists, theologians, film makers, poets, social workers, social scientists each of whom express their feminist concerns and consciousness in diverse ways.

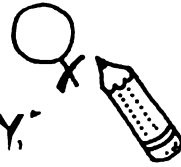
In fact the concerns, expressions and struggles of a feminist may

change in different phases of her life. As a student she may struggle against discrimination and sexism in educational institutions. As an employed woman she may be concerned about a suitable working environment for women. As a working mother she may have to fight for creches or against sexism in children's books. As a divorced woman she may have to struggle with all the social problems faced by single women.

This is why feminism is multi-vocal, multi-focal and multi-dimensional.

Patriarchal ideology and attitudes pervade all social institutions (family, religion, law, media, education etc.) at all levels. To counter this omnipresence feminism has developed varied ideologies and strategies.

HISTORY IS HIS STORY.
WOMEN NEED TO WRITE HER STORY."



The main strands of feminism are liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism and eco-feminism. One also hears of cultural feminism, Islamic feminism and Gandhian feminism. All these feminisms are concerned with improving the lot of women and are committed to analysing their present status and understanding its causes in order to improve it. However within this common understanding there is room for considerable disagreement. So, just as there are several marxisms there are several feminisms.

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

This question is seldom raised as a question. It is posed, invariably, as an allegation, an attack or even a *fact* and, as such, feminists are "naturally" to be condemned and not taken seriously.

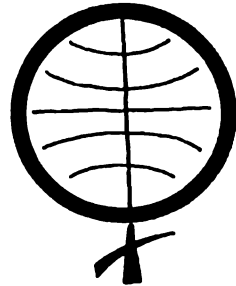
What is interesting is that this allegation is made most forcefully by men and women who are themselves very western, who have been

to English-medium schools and colleges, and who speak English, wear western clothes etc. Such allegations are however never made about western science or “modernisation”.

These very people do not question the foreign origins of the parliamentary or presidential system, for instance, nor the development of capitalism, private ownership of land and absentee landlordism, or the ideology of the Left.

Admittedly the term “feminism” was not born in South Asia; but then neither were the Industrial Revolution, Marxism, Socialism, or for that matter, even some of our South Asian religions.

Einstein was not born in Lahore, nor Marx in Calcutta, nor Lenin in Dhaka; yet their western origins have not made their ideas irrelevant for us, because an idea cannot be confined within national or geographic boundaries.



In any case, while the *term* feminism may be foreign, (it comes from the French word ‘femme’) the *concept* stands for a transformational process, a process which started in South Asia in the 19th century as an organised and articulated stand against women’s subordination. Thus feminism was not artificially imposed here, nor was it a foreign ideology.

Feminism and feminist struggles arose in Asia when a consciousness developed about democratic rights and the injustice of depriving half the population of its basic rights.

In fact, feminist consciousness arose in Asia during certain historic periods of heightened political consciousness, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, during struggles against foreign rule and against the local despotism of feudal monarchs.

The voices against women’s subordination during this period took the form of a demand for the possibility of widow remarriage, for a ban on polygamy, the practices of sati and of purdah, and demands for the education and legal emancipation of women.

A changing social landscape brings about changes in the issues and

forms of oppression, which is why the demands in the 1990's are different from those in the 1880's.

What is important is that the cause remains the same and that these changes are a part of the larger struggle for, and process of, emancipation.

The issues which contemporary feminists are raising in South Asia are based in indigenous culture. Issues of dowry, violence against women, rape, equal wages, discriminatory personal laws, the use of religion to oppress women, the negative portrayal of women in the media, all of these are local issues.

Many of these have also been raised by western feminists but this fact neither makes them irrelevant for us nor proves that South Asian feminists are "followers" of western feminists.

If some forms of women's oppression are universal, then the struggles must and will also be universal. This is why women the world over have raised their voices against sexist media, discrimination in jobs, discrimination in religious institutions, and all kinds of violence against women, etc.

In the face of these facts, how can we call South Asian feminists either western or irrelevant ?

In any case, there is no such thing as "western feminism" because even in the West there are different kinds of feminisms, with very different analyses, strategies, activities.

Were there debates in Asia before colonialism, about women's position in society ?

Yes, the "debate" on women is an old one. For example, the issue of whether women could join a religious order and become nuns was debated by the Buddha and his followers in the 6th century BC. Buddha's aunt, Gautami, who brought him up after his mother (Gautami's sister) died, approached him along with 50 women with the request that they be ordained.

At first the Buddha declined, saying the time was not ripe to admit women into the Sangha.

But Gautami and the other women were not ones to give up easily.

They approached Ananda with the argument that if men could be ordained why couldn't women?

On Ananda's plea, the Buddha consulted the senior monks and agreed to ordain women as Bhikkunis; albeit they were given a lower status than Bhikkus.

Even after 2,500 years women do not have such rights in some religions.

According to us this was a serious feminist discourse which led to fundamental changes in the position of women in religion.

Since then there have been many women and men (e.g. Mira Bai, Rani Laxmi Bai, Razia Sultana, Rokeya Begum, Raja Rammohun Roy, Savitri and Jyoti Phule) who have challenged patriarchal norms.

In our opinion calling feminism an imported ideology betrays ignorance and insults our own traditions which have been challenging patriarchal thinking and structures for centuries.

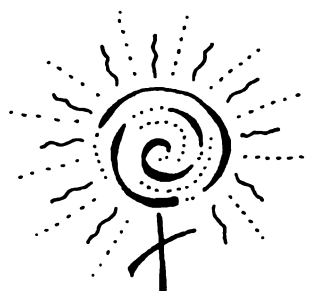
Similarly there have been continuing debates on women's right to education in many Asian countries.

In the 18th century a Chinese scholar, **Chen Hung-Mou** wrote on women's education, before the famous Mary

Wollstonecraft did. He said, "There is no-one in the world who is not educable; and there is no-one whom we can afford not to educate; why be neglectful only in regard to girls? Just after leaving infancy, they are raised and protected deep in the women's quarters. They are not like the boys who go out to follow an outside teacher, who benefit from the encouragement of the teachers and friends...when girls grow older, they are taught to embroider, to prepare their dowries and that is all."

Do you mean to say men have been supporting women's issues?

Yes. Many of the earliest agitators for women's emancipation in the East were men.



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

Were there no women activists in Asia during this period?

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

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

But is this struggle really relevant today? After all, women now have many democratic rights — education, employment, franchise, etc. And isn't it true that we have women prime ministers, strong women political leaders and professionals? Why then do we still need feminism?

Although women are an active part of our workforce and some have even become economically independent, women in South Asia also have the lowest paid jobs, if they are paid at all.

Even amongst those at the “top”, very few are in decision-making and executive or managerial positions.

Most working women are “family helpers” or work in the informal sector, earning very little.

Women continue to be the last to be hired and the first to be fired.

As soon as factories are mechanised, and modernised, women are replaced by men or machines and thrown out of their jobs. The worst example of this is the textile industry in India from which large numbers of women workers have been retrenched.

The situation in Sri Lanka, where the statistics on female life expectancy, literacy, etc. were once quite impressive, has deteriorated over the last 10-15 years.

In India, the sex ratio continues to become more adverse for women, which means more women and girls fail even to survive. Several million women and girls continue to be killed by patriarchal neglect, discrimination and violence.

In most South Asian countries, while on the one hand women are being provided more opportunities, better laws are being passed and there is more awareness and articulation of gender issues, there is on the other hand a resurgence of patriarchies.

Religious fanaticism of all kinds has meant more restrictions for women.

In Pakistan, for example, progressive family laws have been replaced by more anti-women laws; in Bangladesh, fundamentalists have been attacking emerging women's groups and NGOs working for the empowerment of women. Right-wing Hindu groups in India are busy reviving patriarchal role-models.

Market fundamentalists are spreading pornography and demeaning images of women with incredible speed.

Beauty contests, which had been discredited and which had more or less disappeared, are back with a vengeance along with globalisation and liberalisation.

Economic hardships are leading to increasing discrimination against women.

For example, in India, the practice of female infanticide has reached villages in South India, and dowry is being practised by communities which did not give and take dowry earlier.

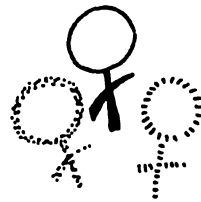
On the whole, in all our countries, women lag behind men in every sphere.

The figures with regard to women's participation in politics continue to be appalling, in spite of the fact that four of our seven South Asian countries have had women heads of state. No South Asian country has had more than a handful of women members of parliament since independence.

Therefore we feel that the presence of a few women in important public positions in no way proves that the overall status of women in our countries has reached satisfactory levels, and that feminists can now relax. Unfortunately, feminism is still much required.

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

While some middle-class women have indeed benefited from these changes, their number is small, and needs to be increased. We must also remember that working class women have always been involved with productive activities and have



been part of the labour force.

As a result of industrialisation large numbers of women working in cottage industries have been thrown out of jobs; as a result of modernisation of agriculture, a large number of women farmers have been marginalised.

When households stop being centres of production, women cease to be integrally involved in productive activities and, consequently, lose their status in the household and in society. This has been happening all over South Asia.

We are *for* more women coming out of the home and joining the workforce if they want to and need to work. We are *against* policies which allow and perpetuate the exploitation of women's labour—i.e. the payment of low wages, the prevalence of unhealthy working conditions, overwork, arbitrary hiring and firing, denial of freedom of association, sexual exploitation etc.

Although it is a very important aspect in the bid for women's emancipation, economic independence is not enough. Many economically independent women are subordinate to their men and families and face discrimination at home.



The other aspect is to bring about a change in patriarchal ideology and mentality, according to which women are considered inferior and subordinate to men. So the economic independence of women must be accompanied by a change in opinions, attitudes and behavior.

But surely if we want to progress, we have to tolerate these forms of exploitation for some time? Once we have progressed the negative features will disappear.

There is really no guarantee that oppression, exploitation, etc. will disappear with development. In fact, past experiences indicate that in most cases this does not necessarily happen. The model of development we follow in our countries is based on the capitalist mode of production and, historically, capitalist

development has reinforced gender-specific roles and intensified the exploitation of women.

For example, in Europe the home had once been the centre of production, agriculture and animal rearing in which women played an important role. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the role of women changed. Poor women were forced to work in factories and mines (as cheap labour) and reproduce the next generation of workers, while bourgeois women were kept at home as housewives, and their role was limited to producing heirs. Dissenting, independent bourgeois women who refused to conform were ostracised and penalised. With this, the ideology of *exploitation* of poor women and the *seclusion* of rich women began.

Given the nature of development in our countries, similar tendencies already exist here and are likely to continue.

The present form of development is not only marginalising women it is making the poor poorer, increasing the disparities between rich and poor, within and between countries, and in addition causing the most alarming devastation of nature and the ecosystem.

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

European imperialism directly linked the European capitalist system to those countries that were colonised and brought about major changes in them.

These changes were not only political and administrative but also fundamental to existing economic and social systems, in that they fundamentally altered the lives of the colonised peoples.

Women were equally affected by all these changes.

The policies and practices of the colonisers made the position of women even worse than before.

For example in pre-colonial societies women worked primarily in food production. Under colonialism although they continued to produce food, the changes brought about in agriculture, primarily as a result of the shift to cash-crops, drove women to work on tea, coffee, rubber and other plantations, and also to work in factories and mines.

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

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

In all spheres the culture of capitalism initiated in the 19th century by colonialists reinforced and established patriarchal socio-economic values more firmly.

Unfortunately for our countries, links with our former colonisers continue to this day. Our economic, political, legal and educational systems, are still largely based on British ones.

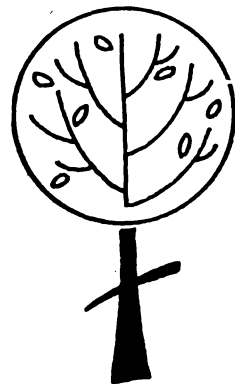
Can you briefly explain the word patriarchy because one hears it so often.

The word itself means the rule of the father, or the patriarch, but here it refers to a social system where men control members of the family, property, and other economic resources, and make major decisions.

Linked to this social system is the belief that man is superior to woman, that women are and should be controlled by men, and are part of a man's property.

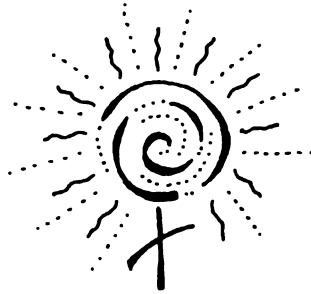
This thinking forms the basis of many of our religious laws and practices, and explains all those social practices, which confine women to the home and control their lives.

Our double standards of morality and our laws, which give more rights to men than to women, are also based on patriarchy, which oppresses and subordinates women in both private and public spheres.



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

Capitalism uses this argument based on the view that a man as head of the household is paid a “family wage”— i.e. a wage that covers subsistence for himself, his wife and his children. According to this view, women engaged in productive work are merely supplementing the family income and can therefore be paid less than men, *even for work of equal value.*



The reality is somewhat different.

Studies have revealed that in many countries as many as 25 to 40 per cent of all families either live primarily on the earnings of women or are single-parent households headed by women. Most of these women live in poverty or hold poorly paid jobs, and are discriminated against in the workplace by capitalist, patriarchal assumptions, referred to above.

It is also true that in addition to work in the factory, field or plantation, women have to spend many hours attending to household chores— cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water and firewood, child care, and so on.

Women therefore experience the *double day, double burden, double shift*, and bear the burden of “paid work” (as a part of the workforce) and “unpaid work” (in the home).

This double burden also makes it difficult for women to get better jobs, to get training and to move up the professional ladder. Because of fewer opportunities for education, women get into less skilled and lower paid jobs.

However, in spite of all these factors, one cannot say women are less productive at their work. In fact many industries prefer women workers because they are more industrious, deft and disciplined.

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

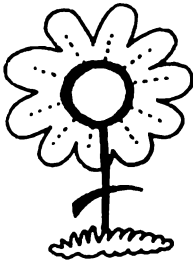
Evidence has shown that the male biases inherent in the
conception and implementation of modernisation programmes
have marginalised women and have, in some cases, removed them
from the workforce.

For example, in both Punjabs (India and Pakistan) the green
revolution with increased mechanisation has deprived women of
many of their traditional agricultural jobs, and since technical skills
are imparted primarily or solely to men, women were forced into
unemployment.

Further, the increasing wealth generated by such enterprises has made
it possible for wealthy male farmers to confine the women of their
families to their homes in order to declare their prosperity and raised
status.

In Sri Lanka, the Mahaveli scheme has resulted in similar problems,
with very little land allotted to independent women farmers.
Consequently, these women were deprived of credit, training and so
on. They were thus forced into poorly paid, unskilled jobs, or back
into the home, thereby being deprived of any opportunity for
economic independence.

Similar trends exist in Bangladesh and Nepal. Therefore there is
little hope that the present kind of development and modernisation



will improve the real status and condition of
women in our countries. This is what makes it
necessary for feminists to highlight exactly where
development is running against women, and
demand better policies and programmes.

Many women researchers have been evaluating
development programmes all over South Asia and
uncovering male biases in them, concluding that,
from the perspective of the poor and the women
of South Asia, the present development is “mal-

development” and “male-development”.

Would you call a woman who decides to be just a housewife, a feminist?

First of all, we wouldn't say “just” a housewife, knowing how much work a housewife does.

Feminists do not belittle or look down upon housewives or housework.

In fact one of our major struggles is to have housework recognised and given value. If housework gets the respect, the recognition and the value that is its due, men would not only start to acknowledge it but might also start doing it.

In fact, the lobbying by feminists all over the world has led governments to calculate the money value of unpaid work done by women, thereby recognising the contribution of women.

The 1995 Human Development Report of UNDP put the total value of the unpaid work done by women annually at 11 trillion US Dollars. (By the way, one trillion is 1,000 billion and one billion is 1,000 million).

A woman who chooses to be a housewife and feels her individuality and talents are fully utilised by it, can be a feminist.

Being a feminist does not necessarily mean working outside the home.

All it means is having a real choice based on equal opportunities. Our feeling, however, is that if women could really choose not to be full time housewives, many would opt out.

But this choice must be genuine. The decision should not be made because of conditioning, or because of indirect or direct pressure from others or because there are no other options available.

At the moment, however, it is very difficult to determine which is a “conditioned” decision and which a free one.

Having said this, we would like to reiterate that a feminist can choose to be a full time housewife, if that is what satisfies her, provided she can retain her independence and her individuality and provided her



partner does not wield power over her because she is not earning. There must be equality and mutual respect within the home. Feminism is not about prescribing what women should or should not do. Feminists are fighting for a society where a woman has the freedom to choose, where she is not forced to be a housewife, where she is not pushed into typically “feminine” roles and low paid “feminine” jobs and where she is treated with respect.

We reject male-female polarity and male-female stereotypes.

Every girl should have the freedom and opportunity to do what she wants to do and to be what she is capable of becoming. Just because she is born a girl, dolls, pots and pans should not be her only toys; dresses which don't allow her limbs to move freely should not be her only clothes; nor should she be confined to the four walls of a home, pushed into home science courses, or be forced to be subdued and submissive in order to adjust to her husband's family etc.

The concerns of feminists are as simple and reasonable as these.

However, feminist concerns are not only the few narrowly defined “women's issues” like rape, wife beating, reproduction, fertility and equal wages

Many of us believe that everything in the world concerns women because everything affects us.

All issues are women's issues, and feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just social and economic order, nationally and internationally; and seek to integrate the feminist perspective into all spheres of personal and national life.

According to the main slogan at the 1995 Beijing Conference, feminism means **looking at the world through women's eyes.**

If all issues are women's issues, women must have an point of view on everything, be it nuclear warfare, war between two countries, ethnic and communal conflict, political, economic and development policies, human rights and civil liberties or environmental issues. In fact, despite their limited human



and other resources women's organisations are already involved in many of the above.

In Sri Lanka, for instance, women are actively asking for a political solution to the ethnic problem; in Pakistan, women have consistently and daringly opposed archaic, anti-women laws which have been imposed on them and on Pakistani society in the name of Islam. By doing this Pakistani women also opposed the Martial Law regime and Islamic fundamentalism. In Nepal women have been active in the struggle for democracy. In Bangladesh feminists have been part of the struggle against religious intolerance and Islamisation of the state as well as against ecologically destructive and "anti-poor" development policies and programmes. In India, women have been involved with a range of issues including environment and communal violence. Women's groups in South Asia have prepared critiques of government development plans and policies from a feminist perspective, and have participated in other areas of national life. They have also mobilised against the nuclearisation and militarisation of South Asia, and have coined the slogan "*We Want Peace in South Asia Not Pieces of South Asia*".

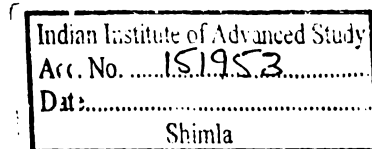


But don't feminists get unnecessarily worked up about little things? For example, does it matter if a woman is called "chairman"? Surely we can't change everything?

Although the language issue has never been a major one in the sense that none of our larger campaigns has been around it, we do find it important to challenge and change language because languages are also patriarchal.

Language and words are important and we have to recognise that our languages are sexist, that they convey male superiority, and that they exclude and belittle women.

Since language, like religion and ideology, tends to perpetuate a male bias and male point of view, why then should we accept something that discriminates against us, insults us and does not recognise either our existence or our actual contribution to society?



Earlier, when women had not entered many areas of public life i.e. when there were no women chairing, sporting, reporting, when there were no women scientists, or theologians, language reflected a reality by creating terms like chair-man, sports-man, media-man, etc. Now certain aspects of language are outdated because social realities have changed: since women are increasingly found in these areas of activity, there is no reason why there should not be words like chair-person, sports-person, one-woman-show etc., or the third person be “she”, “herself” and “her”.

It does not take much effort to do lingual justice to women; all it requires is a conscious effort for it to become a part of our consciousness and vocabulary. But in jest, some of us do say that we would not insist on changing words like man-eater and manhole.

***Dear Sirs ● man to man ● manpower ● craftsman
 ● working man ● the thinking man ● the man in the
 street ● fellow countrymen ● the history of
 mankind ● one man show ● man in his wisdom ●
 statesman ● forefathers ● masterful ● masterpiece
 ● old masters ● the brotherhood of man ● Liberty
 Equality Fraternity ● sons of free men ● faith of our
 fathers ● god the father ● god the son ● yours
 fraternally ● amen ● words fail me***

Aren't feminists against marriage and family and don't they destroy peaceful homes ?

We do not know of any feminist anywhere who has said she is against marriage or family, per se. However, we do know many who are against unḥappy, unequal, unjust marriages and families. Many feminists may actually destroy homes (we will deal later with the “peaceful” part), but only in the same way that harijans destroy a “peaceful community” when they refuse to take (carry) shit, or peasants/workers “disturb the harmony” of a village or a factory when they stand up to a landlord/ industrialist to ask for justice.

After all, one person's peace may be another person's disharmony. First of all, is it wrong for women to break the silence about violence within homes?

Can a woman who starts resenting her uneventful life, the drudgery and the mindlessness of repetitive domestic work and the annual child-bearing, be called a “home-breaker”?

Would you call a woman who resents being just a shadow of her husband, who refuses to echo her husband’s desires, who refuses to spend the rest of her life helping her husband pursue his career or realise his ambitions, a trouble-maker?

Is a woman who wants to live also for herself, who has her own dreams and ambitions, who doesn’t want to be an ideal, submissive, self-effacing wife, breaking a home, or is the man the true destroyer who insists that she negate herself in this way?

If a woman asks to be treated with dignity, but her family and husband do not do so, surely the blame for destroying the peace of a home should fall on the others, not on women?

*A man's house is his castle.....
.....let him clean it!*

Feminists (meaning women who want respect and dignity) do disturb homes but not “peaceful” homes, because the “peacefulness” of most homes is a façade, behind which lie demolished feelings, individualities, emotions and dreams of countless women.

As long as women do not object to such injustice there is peace.

As long as women do not ask men to share housework, to take turns to wake up at night to attend to howling infants, there is peace.

When women start asking for equity and justice the trouble starts. When women start resenting pain, insults and frustration, and when they start expressing this, the “peace” is disturbed and they hear remarks like, “After a whole day’s work must I come home to face such unpleasantness?”

*A woman is called
a feminist
every time she refuses to be
a doormat*

Let us take a closer look at our peaceful homes.

There is ample evidence to show that there are conflict, tensions

and violence within families.

In millions of homes in every social strata, wives are brow-beaten, battered and humiliated.

In millions of homes in South Asia, the very birth of a girl is considered a bad omen. Female infanticide has been with us for centuries. Now, with the help of science, Indians have also resorted to female foeticide. Further research shows that female babies are breast-fed for shorter periods, given less food and less medical attention compared to male babies.

Women's health needs are hardly looked into. Every year in South Asia, thousands of young women die during childbirth.

The result of all this neglect and violence against women is the horrifyingly low sex ratios in South Asia.

There are 74 million women missing in South Asia because of patriarchal violence, neglect, discrimination.

Is this "peaceful" for women?

And is it "peaceful" when brides are burnt for insufficient dowry, divorced at will, or physically mutilated by relatives?

Statistics collected not by feminists but by our governments and UN bodies show us that the family is perhaps the most unsafe place for girls and women.

By lifting the veil from our conflict- and injustice-ridden families, feminists are actually trying to make them happier places for their members.

A doctor who tells us of the sickness in our body can surely not be called our enemy. Just as we turn to doctors who are good at diagnosis, we should embrace feminists for their brave candour and concern about the health of our families.

Those who wish to maintain such "peace" at all costs are like Brahmins who want to preserve the caste structure and ensure the "harmony" of Indian villages; or like landlords who want to keep the system of bonded labour intact

Isn't it incredible that progressive people become champions of



tradition only when it comes to women?

They do not blame peasants and workers when they try and change the system; yet women who refuse to be confined, dictated to, and mistreated, are blamed for creating disharmony.

Isn't it rather the patriarchal social system, which crushes women and their personalities, that is responsible for creating disharmony, and breaking up families?

While most feminists are not against the home and the family, we do take the position that the only way to save both is to change the nature of female-male relationships within them.

Peace and harmony can no longer be maintained at the cost of women.

We cannot talk of democracy outside the family and yet allow male dictatorship within it.

In fact we believe that real democracies and egalitarian societies can only be established if we practice democracy, equality and mutual respect within the family.

Real peace in society can only be established if we experience peace at home.

As feminists we wish to reaffirm that there should be

NO MORE SILENCE ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Many feminists believe that there can be different forms of families, marriages and partnerships, depending on people's preferences and choices.

Heterosexual activity and marriage is one form and homosexual family and marriage another.

People may also choose to live together without getting married, or several people may set up a commune in which they share household resources and chores.

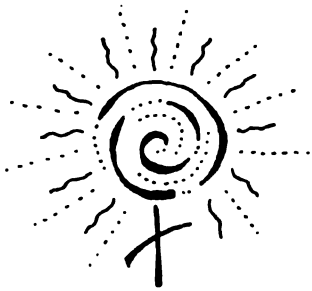
But are feminists against motherhood?

Where do such questions come from? At times the kinds of questions we are asked and the allegations made against feminists are most exasperating. Such questions often betray discomfort with feminism.

Feminists are definitely not against women having children, but we do not consider motherhood to be every woman's destiny, nor do we equate womanhood with motherhood.

We believe that every woman should have the choice to have or not have children. At present such a choice does not exist legally, socially or psychologically, in many of our countries.

Our struggle, therefore, is for women to have more choices.



Furthermore, we feel that although only a woman can bear a child, anyone (including a man) can bring it up, or mother it.

Motherhood does not mean physically giving birth to a child.

It means looking after, nurturing and caring for another human being. It means helping another person develop

physically, emotionally and mentally.

Such mothering can be done by anyone, not necessarily by the women who give birth. There are many women who cannot bear children but make excellent mothers. On the other hand, there are those who bear numerous children but are simply bad, even violent, mothers.

Most women, however, see motherhood as their destiny, but this is due both to the lack of alternatives and to a glorification of motherhood. Women are admired for their ability and desire to sacrifice, to suffer and live for others. This has been a psychological trap for women. Such glorification is like the sugar coating on bitter pills and, for generations, women have fallen for this bit of sugar and accepted a role that has confined, suffocated and immobilised them.

We women do not have special limbs to look after children, nor do we have special glands which produce love and care!

*If a woman can cook,
so can a man
because
she doesn't cook with her womb!*

If the world really considered motherhood, sacrifice, and living and caring for others to be the most noble of activities (if that is what you got Nobel prizes for) men would not have allowed women to monopolise it.

For all their praise of motherhood, men are averse to practising it themselves.

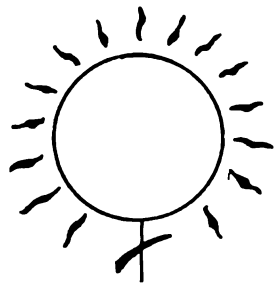
In fact if sacrificing our lives for others is superior to all other activities, then we women should unselfishly give men the opportunity to experience motherhood, sharing and caring!

So, the ability and capacity to mother is not necessarily natural, that is, it is not biologically determined.

Men can also mother and some men do. Mahatma Gandhi supposedly said that he would consider himself a good human being only when he had developed motherly qualities.

In our opinion one of the worst things patriarchy has done has been to create unnecessary dualities between women and men, nature and culture, emotional and rational. Patriarchy and capitalism deny men the opportunity to nurture and care for children, with the result that most men become hard, harsh, insensitive and uncaring.

Many feminists believe that everyone can and should be gentle and strong, nurturing/giving and assertive, emotional and rational. Both men and women should have the so-called feminine and masculine qualities and responsibilities.



Is it true that feminists want to replace patriarchy with matriarchy ?

This question either betrays a total misunderstanding of feminism, or is an attempt to discredit it. Have you ever heard of a feminist who has said or written that she would like to replace patriarchy with matriarchy? If you cannot recall such statements then the question emerges perhaps from your own inability to accept equality between the genders. It seems, some people can only think in terms of hierarchy.



Feminists are against bondage, hierarchy and inequality of all kinds and we are for freedom, equality and justice.

It is said that when a woman becomes like a man she is a demon, but when a man assumes feminine qualities he becomes a saint. So why do you feminists want to be like men?

First, we do not believe in or accept that men have, or should have, one set of qualities and characteristics, and women another. We believe that both men and women can have or develop the so-called “masculine” qualities (strength, bravery, fearlessness, dominance, competitiveness etc.) and the so-called “feminine” qualities (caring, nurturing, love, timidity, obedience etc.). These are human qualities and not specific to either men or women.

Problems arise when patriarchy imposes one set of qualities on men and another on women. It is this imposition of stereotyped qualities which leads to the creation of domineering, intolerant, aggressive men and subservient, spineless, fearful women. We would like both girls and boys, men and women to imbibe positive “masculine” and “feminine” qualities so that they can develop their potential.

There is a man and a woman in each one of us and both of them need to be nurtured.

Feminists by no means wish to imbibe the negative “male” qualities and traits. The world is already collapsing under the weight of male violence and aggression and it can do without more aggression. Actually, we would rather that men become more like women i.e. they look after children and old people, run homes etc. This will make men more gentle, sensitive and human and will relieve women of some of the burden of work.

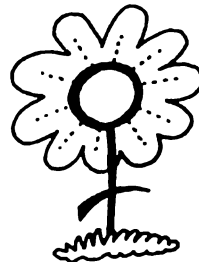
And if bravery, fearlessness, rationality, efficiency are considered “male”, then women should definitely imbibe and practice these traits.

What does the feminist slogan “Personal is Political” mean?

One of the most important slogans coined by feminists, this means several things. First, that feminists consider the divide between personal and political, or domestic and public, both unreal and problematic.

We feel everything public has an impact on our personal/domestic lives and vice versa. The public and domestic domains and spaces are not separate, they flow into each other all the time. Public policies, debates, programmes influence our personal and domestic lives and what we learn and do within our families follows us into the public arena.

Second, that it is only by understanding and analysing the oppression in our personal lives that we can move towards an understanding of our marginalisation in the public and political sphere. Feminists emphasise the need to validate our personal experiences and subjective feelings.



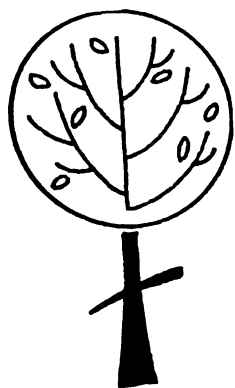
Third, that the oppression and exploitation of women within families

cannot be dismissed as the “personal matter” of families, and remain unaddressed, unanalysed or unchallenged.

Given the fact, that oppression of women is rooted in the home/family, sexuality and man-woman relations, the claim that the personal is political is an assertion of the systematic nature of women’s oppression.

Once we consider our personal problems and our subordination as part of a system, they do not appear fixed and immutable. This is why feminists have been trying to understand, and start public debates on, what happens to women and men within families, and have been working to politicise issues which were previously considered too trivial for public debate and action.

Fourth, that all personal actions, even thoughts and beliefs of individuals, influence society and relations between people. (Here the word politics refers to distribution of power, or power relations between people).



To give some examples, if a woman accepts being beaten by her husband without opposing it, it is a political act as it sends out messages of compliance, subordination, inferiority etc. to her children, neighbours and her husband. This act strengthens the belief that a husband owns his wife, that he is a “pati”, “swami” (owner and lord) who can treat his “dasi” (slave) as he wishes.

Similarly, if a woman refuses to accept insults and physical violence, this too is a political act which sends out the opposite messages. The

same is true of every personal choice and action of ours; whether we give or take dowry or do not; whether we treat our sons and daughters equally or do not etc. Actually, even a smile is not a personal matter, because when we smile, often people around us start smiling, whereas they lose their smiles if we assume a serious expression. Scientists tell us that the breeze from the fluttering of a butterfly in the Amazon can so affect the climate as to start a hurricane in Indonesia.

Is it surprising then that every action or inaction on our part affects the social atmosphere around us?

Finally, the meaning of the statement 'personal is political' revolves around taking a stand in one's personal life.

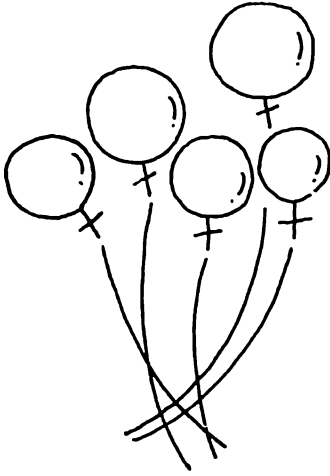
If we wish to bring about changes in society we must begin with ourselves. Instead of trying to be missionaries simply talking about change, we should try to live in such a way that our own life is the message. What we do has more influence than what we say. This is the reason why many feminist groups all over the world have been trying to create non-hierarchical and democratic structures and organisations, to practice collective decision-making and shared leadership, to create nurturing organisations. Many of these efforts may not have succeeded but at least values like democracy, transparency, sharing, caring have been cherished, discussed and kept alive.

Is feminism a middle class phenomenon?

It might seem as if feminism in South Asia is limited to the middle classes. This is actually not so. Such an impression arises because the media focuses mainly on what happens in our cities, and also because middle-class feminists are more articulate. They are not only active in the feminist movement but also write about issues and communicate their ideas through different media like newspapers, magazines, street theatre, songs and television.

Because we hear more about urban middle class women and their organisations we tend to think that working class rural and urban women either don't feel oppressed or that they do nothing about it. This is far from true. There are in fact thousands of women and women's groups in the rural areas and urban slums who are raising women's issues and general issues of poverty, environment, etc. Thousands of members of SEWA Ahmedabad, Working Women's Forum, Madras, women's sangams or groups organised by thousands of NGOs in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have been lobbying against wife battering, sexual harassment, and for equal wages. Women in the Chipko Movement raised issues related

to the environment and energy from a woman's point of view. Thousands of women have been struggling against alcoholism in Andhra Pradesh, North Eastern states and Haryana. These women have dared to challenge the nexus between the liquor mafia,



politicians and the police.

Even at the individual level, rural women take the first step towards feminism when they begin to make choices for themselves. They may decide to attend literacy classes or join women's groups against the wishes of their men; dare to stop the raised fists of their husbands from raining down on them or raise public alarm against sexual harassment by landlords, petty officials or policemen.

In societies like ours, the seeds of feminism are in every woman. To become a feminist you don't have to know the words or the jargon, nor do you need to be equipped with theory. All that is needed is recognition of injustice and the courage to put an end to this injustice, male discrimination and double standard. A peasant woman does not have to be familiar with feminist theory to know that no one has a right to beat or rape her, or that being paid unequal wages for equal work is unjust.

As stated earlier, some middle class women are more articulate, and more visible, but this can hardly be held against them or against feminism. On the contrary the fact that they use their education and their economic independence to fight for other women as well as themselves should be held in their favour. In any case middle class feminists play the same role in the feminist movement as urban middle class groups do (and have done) in all other movements for societal change. Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Marx, Mao, Ambedkar, Phule were all from the middle class and so are many leaders of many people's struggles today. The middle class has played an active role in many movements for change, and feminism is no exception.

Are feminists man haters?

Feminists do *not* hate men but we are against patriarchy, male domination and the “maleness” in men (and in those women who might imbibe similar behavioural patterns) which is expressed as domination, aggression, violence etc. We are against the patriarchal system and patriarchal ideology which considers man to be superior and which gives more rights to men.

However, all systems are perpetuated by people. The system does not rape or batter a woman, a man does; the system does not withhold property from a daughter, a father does.

Therefore we *are* against men who do not accept women as their equals, who treat women as their property or otherwise view them only as commodities.

Unfortunately many men do dominate and do have such qualities in them. This is true even of the most ardent “democratic” and “socialist” men who, while expressing notions of equality in society refuse to practice equality within the home and in interpersonal male-female relationships.

However, we believe that just as women are not naturally caring and nurturing, men are not naturally aggressive and domineering. They are, in fact, as much victims of their upbringing and societal conditioning as are women, and as trapped in the images and roles that society has determined for them.

Our problem is that most men do not appear to recognise this and few want to struggle to liberate themselves into becoming more human and truly democratic. Moreover, some men are antagonistic to any move by women to help them recognise this.

Feminists are also very critical of women who protect, support or justify patriarchy; or who are dictatorial, undemocratic, aggressive. Most of us do not idolise women like Madeleine Albright.

The issue of gender equality is not about the conflict between women and men but between those who believe in and want equality between men and women and those who wish to maintain male domination.

All of us know that there are men and women in both these camps. Many men are today examining their own masculinity, their rights and behaviour patterns. For the first time masculinity, male power, male sexuality, male knowledge systems, male war games are on the table for critical examination and the examiners are both men and women.

Therefore it is both simplistic and wrong to think that the fight for gender equality is a fight between women and men.

The fight is between belief systems and ideologies; between those who want gender hierarchies (and other hierarchies of caste, class, race, North-South) to be removed (and replaced by equality, not just by another set of hierarchies) and those who wish to maintain the status quo, keeping things as they are.

Yet there can be no denying that there is also some polarisation and conflict in interests between men and women. This is however, not because they are born men and women but because of the gender division of labour which is forced on them, and which leads to different responsibilities and thus different experiences and needs. These polarisations and conflicts do need to be acknowledged and addressed.

All this sounds reasonable, so why is feminism so threatening? Why is it so often ridiculed and misrepresented? Why does it invite so much hostility?

It is true that people have been too willing to accept and believe all the rumours/hate campaigns against feminists and feminism. They are too willing to criticise and ridicule feminists because of their own discomfort with feminism. Sometimes this discomfort is expressed as a joke (“Are you one of those bra burners and hairy women ha, ha, ha, ha”) sometimes as fear (“Listen, don’t spend too much time with my wife. I do not want a feminist at home”) and sometimes as an outright attack on feminists.

The weaknesses and faults of individual feminists are too readily

seen as faults of feminism. For example, if a woman who is a feminist, smokes or drinks, feminism is responsible; but Marxism is not blamed if a Marxist smokes. People also accept working class women smoking bidis. Yet people seem to forget that women who follow and espouse feminism are human and hence they may smoke, drink, get angry, be unreasonable, neglect children, etc., like any other man or woman may do.

Feminism is not responsible for our weaknesses and faults except in the sense that we women claim the right to be human, to commit mistakes or be weak.

The fact that many working and middle class women smoke, dress the way they like, keep hairstyles of their choice is more a sign of their independence and freedom than of their feminism. In fact many of these “free”, “bold” women may not be, or wish to be called, feminists.



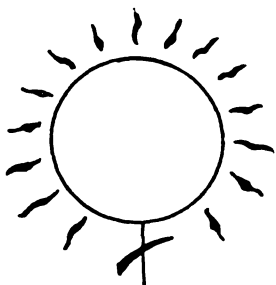
It is not at all surprising that people feel threatened by feminism. They are being quite honest when they say, “You know, we don’t mind things like women’s welfare and all that, but this feminism is a problem.”

There are various reasons for this. Religious leaders of all religions dislike feminists for their consistent criticism

of the patriarchal and anti-women nature of formalised religions and religion-based family laws and traditions. Sometimes the anger of religious leaders is so intense that they want nothing less than the life of strong feminists, as in the witch-hunt against Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh, and the constant threat to feminist and human rights lawyers and activists in Pakistan.

Similarly, in many countries, the Catholic Church has been waging wars against women who wish to control their reproduction and their own bodies. In the US, right wing Christians who oppose abortions have not only been violent against women who are pro-choice, but have been killing doctors who provide abortion services to women. Right-wing and religious men condemn feminists as anti-

family, anti-tradition and anti-religion. In South Asia religious leaders have strongly opposed feminist demands for progressive family laws.



Capitalist men are particularly anti-feminism, for they know that if women's consciousness changes they will refuse to be manipulated as consumers and will no longer accept the low-paid, least-skilled jobs to which they are presently confined. They are also wary of feminists who have been waging war against pornography (which reduces women to sex objects and brutalises them), the cosmetics industry (which creates the cult of beauty and turns women into bodies), the baby food industry (which has led to the death of a large number of babies), the contraceptive industry (which has been treating third world women as guinea pigs and providing unsafe contraceptives) etc. These are all billion-dollar industries and their owners have enough resources at their disposal to discredit any challenge or threat to their evil designs.

The military establishment is also wary of feminists, most of whom are anti-war and at the forefront of the peace movement.

Mainstream academics are uneasy because feminist scholars have been pointing out patriarchal biases in academic disciplines and institutions. Comrades in left-wing political parties and trade unions dislike the way feminists have questioned the treatment of women within these organisations.

Another reason people are uncomfortable with feminism is because it is, perhaps, the only ideology which enters the sanctity of the home, questions our most intimate relationships, our very beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour patterns, and even our religious beliefs. Anything that can do this will obviously be considered threatening.

Once women begin to question male superiority and male domination, we necessarily run into conflict with our own fathers, brothers, husbands, sons and friends, since these are the men who

personify patriarchy for us in the most hurtful and immediate way. Feminism challenges the status quo of society at every level, both in interpersonal and family relationships.

Challenging patriarchy is painful not only for the men who are questioned but also for the women who raise the questions and for whom the agony of keeping the status quo is greater. Women can only gain by the struggle for they have “nothing to lose but their chains”. Men also stand to gain in the new society that feminists want to create, but many are not willing to give up their short-term gains for long-term interests.

We often wonder whether challenging patriarchy is right, whether it is really worth it, whether we can avoid being bitter if we face up to subtle or blatant sexism in the home, at work and in society.

What do we do when our husbands get the wages for our labour; or when their work and professions get precedence over ours?

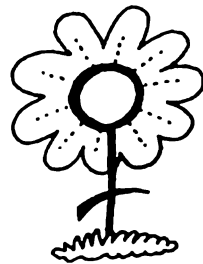
What does a female child do when her brother gets more to eat or is allowed to go to school or given preference on other matters?

What happens to a daughter when she gets no share of the family property or to a mother when her son imposes his will on her because he is a man?

What do we do when we are insulted, ridiculed and oppressed?

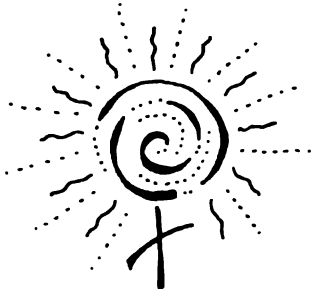
Yet, the slightest hint of objection to such treatment is seen as a threat, which, as said above, is not surprising, for any challenge is a threat to the status quo.

There is no denying that gender issues are very personal, and therefore sensitive and emotional issues. They require us to not just address and confront external agencies like schools, legal systems, the state, capitalists etc., but also our most intimate relationships (husband-wife, sister-brother, mother-daughter etc.) and our own beliefs and values. Often conflict is not between two different groups/communities with different interests but between members of the same family. Sometimes it is between two aspects of the same person.



We are expected to take sides, which often means that we are torn between the two.

We are bewildered when we discover people close to us stamping on our interests, exploiting us sexually, or just not accepting us as equal.



This process of growing awareness is indeed very painful, and not just men but even most women wish to avoid such confrontations and bewilderment. We are uneasy with feminism because it challenges us to take stock of ourselves as women, to critically look at the way we might be exploiting/using our femaleness, playing

“feminine” games; exploiting others; being undemocratic and authoritarian within families or organisations.

In other words, feminism challenges us women to examine the patriarch in ourselves, the source of “maleness”, aggression and hunger for power. After all, women have also internalised patriarchal thinking. We grow up in the same patriarchal families as men, are brought up in the same religious traditions, and go through the same patriarchal educational system. As a result, many women believe men are superior; they discriminate against their daughters, restrict their mobility, limit their choices, stifle their voices. To question and change what we have believed in for so long is very distressing for us women.

According to Maria Mies most men and women try to avoid examining the true nature of gender relations in our societies, fearing that the family—the last island of peace and harmony in the cold brutal world of money-making, power games and greed—will be destroyed.

Moreover, if they allow this issue to enter their consciousness, they will have to admit that they themselves are not only victims (women) and villains (men), but also accomplices in the system of exploitation and oppression that binds women and men together. And that if they want to achieve truly free human relationships, they will have

to give up this complicity.

This is true not only for men whose privileges are rooted in this system, but also for women, whose material existence is bound up with it.

It is feminists who have dared to break the conspiracy of silence about the oppressive, unequal man-woman relationship, and who want to change it. This is why they are dreaded and disliked.

Wherever feminism has made big strides there have been violent backlashes against women.

A few years ago in Canada a man walked into a university and shot dead 14 women students, then killed himself. Apparently, in the letter that he left behind, he said he was very angry with the “new woman”.

Some people feel that the global increase in pornography and violence against women is an attempt to put women back in their place. In South Asia there have been cases of acid being thrown on women who do not cover themselves, and women’s uncovered arms have been slashed.

How is this backlash any different from the violence unleashed against the dalits, peasants, workers, blacks, when they decide to organise themselves and challenge the existing unjust system?

The hostility against feminists only goes to prove that they are challenging a deeply entrenched system, of benefit only to some people. Those whose privileges and profits are being threatened will obviously be hostile, and will unleash anti-feminist propaganda.

If feminism is so painful then why do women and some men accept and promote it?

Well, obviously feminism also offers the joy of facing new challenges, of thinking afresh, of creating a new world. In fact, nothing new can be created without breaking the old, without causing and feeling some pain.

There is pain in childbirth. A seed has to break open to let new life emerge.

The seed that does not break open or create conditions for its own destruction, is a dead seed, a sterile seed.

Knowing this, we feminists accept the pain that accompanies change. Those who struggled for the abolition of slavery, or the creation of socialism, democracy or a society free of casteism and racism, have continued to demolish many existing ideologies, as well as social, economic and political structures.

Destruction and creation are two sides of the same coin.

In fact for many women, feminism has been a life-saver, it has been a liberating, empowering experience. It freed us from the feeling that everything was our fault; that if we were beaten or raped it was because we deserved it.

It freed us from guilt, from feelings of inadequacy, from a life without choices, from a life without voices.

Feminism freed us from fatalism by showing us that while our sex — female — is natural, our gender — woman — is a social construct; it is society which makes us feminine and masculine, which assigns different roles, rights and responsibilities to women and men. We no longer remained victims, objects; we were transformed into survivors, agents, subjects, makers of our own lives

Feminists declared to the world that women were also human and women's rights were human rights.

As human beings we have the power to redefine gender, to recreate gender relations, to explore alternative ways to structure families, to create more just and equal male-female relationships.

choice

The most precious gift that feminism has given us is the close friendship with women who shared our joy and tears, who understood all that we said and all we could not say, who gave us space to ramble on or to be silent, to cry hysterically or burst into laughter; who held our hands and walked the lonely and often uncharted path towards gender equality.

If men's liberation is connected to women's liberation, and if they are also trapped by the patriarchal system, why are they so fearful of feminism?

All men are not fearful of feminism nor are they all against it, but a significant number of men are, mainly because the present patriarchal system suits them. Since feminism challenges male superiority and domination and since it questions male authority based on gender, it forces men to review their attitudes, their behaviour and their position. This is neither easy nor pleasant. After all, no ruler willingly gives up power.

The advantages for men in the present system are innumerable, starting with the superior status, love and respect given to them from the moment they are born.

Then of course there is better food, better medical care and better education for male children, as well as their freedoms — freedom to move around, freedom of expression and of choice.

Men inherit parental property more than women do and many laws are still biased in men's favour.

Men occupy over 90 per cent of the seats in Parliament, over 80 per cent of managerial positions.

Feminists are feared because they have broken the silence about unequal man-woman relationships, and have exposed the inequalities and violence that exists within families.

Then, again, men fear independent and confident women. They are afraid women will compete with them for jobs.

If you define women's role essentially as that of housewives then they can be hired when labour is required and fired when convenient and necessary.

If the definition of the role of women changes, and there is improvement in women's competence and their capacity to assert themselves, then such discrimination will not be possible. People will be employed according to their abilities and not because they are male or female. This inevitability is not something that men particularly welcome.

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

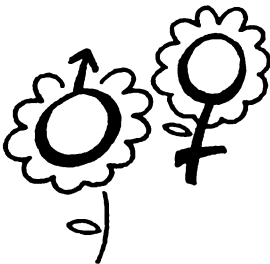
Are you saying that even though men do not realise it, in the long run feminism will be good for both women and men?

Exactly. Feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just, social and economic order in the home, nationally and internationally. This new order necessarily includes men. Of course in such a situation they will definitely lose some of their social advantages but they will gain in other ways. Society, itself, will gain.

For instance if every child in the family (not just male children) is allowed and encouraged to grow and flourish, there would be more talent and creativity generated within both the family and the nation. Families would also be more resourceful, more economically viable and stronger all around if women were not forced to remain dependent and helpless, needing constant protection.

Men would have fewer economic responsibilities and pressures, and more importantly, would be able to express their own individual inclinations in this new society. They would be able to do work that is now considered “feminine”, and stay at home if they so desired. Men would also be able to nurture the feminine aspect in themselves.

A whole range of life-giving activities that they are now excluded from would fall within their reach; feminism *would liberate men* from the roles and images that present society demands of them. Men and women would both be able to explore their true nature.

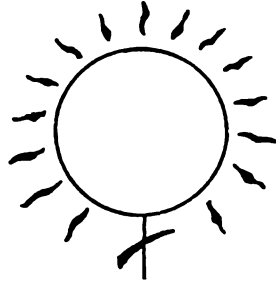


For feminists, the objective is not merely to fill half the positions in the present system with women, nor to achieve equal share of power

in the present unequal and unjust power structure, but to ensure the transformation of society and social relations.

In addition feminism, according to us, is not about women accepting, adapting and adopting male, or patriarchal, values and preoccupations as the only valid ones, but is about re-examining and re-evaluating everything.

In other words, feminism is not about women becoming like men, it is about finding out what is good in both male and female ways of being and doing, and creating an alternative culture.



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

The women's movement was initially built on the assumption that there is a certain commonality of interest among women. While the feminist movement proposes a society that will be beneficial for all, it is necessary that, at certain stages of the struggle, they understand the nature of the oppression and plan strategies to change the situation amongst themselves.

This rationale is no different from that used in support of other oppressed classes.

We support the autonomy of peasant and/or worker struggles, for instance, as well as the autonomy of class/ethnic and national movements etc.

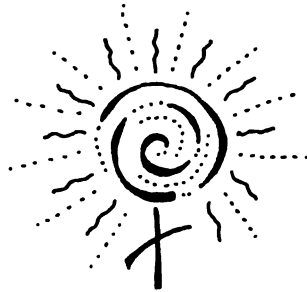
Autonomy is even more necessary for the women's movement because the problem here is far more complex and long term. Its ultimate resolution requires not the triumph of one group over another (in this case, female over male) *but a rethinking and restructuring of all aspects of society.*

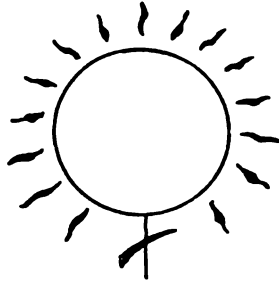
Other classes can achieve their aims within patriarchy; they can achieve victory by overcoming or eliminating their antagonists; they *can* find common cause without internal class, caste, religious and

ethnic differences. But the women's movement can do none of these. It must resolve and overcome class and other differences within itself. It must change the essence of society; it must win over the antagonist.

In this sense this is the most difficult struggle of all and women must identify for themselves the process that it will take.

Separate women's organisations are necessary to provide women the space to be themselves, to talk freely, to develop their self-confidence and leadership skills, to critically examine themselves and to develop strategies and programmes for change. Having separate organisations however does not mean being separatist. Most feminist groups welcome and value the support of sympathetic men; we join in the struggles of the working class and peasant groups, of groups fighting for civil liberties, human rights, minority rights, the environment, etc. On common issues like democratisation, secularism and ecology, feminist groups form broader alliances with other movements and organisations.





In conclusion we would like to say that we find feminism is not only necessary for our society but also very exciting for all those who are participating in the process of defining, articulating, shaping and living it.

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

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

Feminism is exciting because it has not been defined for us by someone else, somewhere else.

It is constantly evolving and we can tailor it to suit our needs.

All of us can and must participate in the process of finding the meaning of feminism for ourselves.

The present fluidity of this emerging ideology is not a bad thing because, for the first time, a way of living and relating is being tried out at every level before it is formulated as a theory.

For us this is an important process of learning and discovering, a process which, necessarily, is slow and faltering. This is why there are differences, even among feminists, because we are all learning and are at different stages of the process.

Since feminism is about real life situations, its concrete shape may vary in different societies.

To opponents of feminism this uncertain (but growing, unfolding) status of our ideology may be a negative feature; to us it is a positive one, for our ideology, when it arrives, will have been tried and tested. Feminism is exciting also because it is a continuous and on-going journey.

As a movement to transform social structure as well as individuals, feminism is a life-long journey for us all.

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



Note:

Most sections of pages 5 to 10 have been reproduced from a pamphlet, "Feminism is Relevant", by Feminist Study Circle, Colombo.

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Feminism is a concept that is almost always misunderstood. Charged with being an "imported" "western" idea, it is considered to be irrelevant for women in South Asia. Why is this so? Why are feminists considered to be rebels? Who are feminists, to begin with? This classic basic text answers the most commonly asked questions on feminism.

KAMLA BHASIN worked with the Freedom From Hunger Campaign of the FAO for over twenty years, and is a well-known gender trainer. She has written extensively on participatory training; on women; and on sustainable development. She has also written many songs on all these issues!

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