

WOMEN'S LIBERATION (FEMINISM)

Contrary to the widely held view that the “women’s lib” movement and its ideology originated in the 1960s, feminism has a long history. Yet this history has until recently remained half-hidden, and women’s voices have been submerged or ignored. Some few of these voices have come down to us, however. Writing to her husband, John Adams (1735–1826), who was attending the 1776 Continental Congress, Abigail Adams (1744–1818) asked him to “remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your

ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”¹¹ In a similar spirit, Mary Wollstonecraft chided the French revolutionaries for championing “the rights of man” while neglecting the rights of women—rights she defended in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).¹² The nineteenth century saw an increasing militancy on the part of women. Suffragists in England and the United States demanded that women be allowed to vote, while others lobbied for changes in the laws regulating marriage and divorce. Many in the early nineteenth-century American women’s movement—Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Margaret Fuller, Lucy Stone, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others—were also active in the antislavery movement. As they pointed out, the condition of women and of slaves were similar in many ways: both were without the right to vote, to run for public office, to own property in their own names, or to leave an abusive master or husband.¹³ Others, such as Susan B. Anthony, were active in the temperance movement because many wives and children were sexually abused, beaten, neglected, and abandoned by alcoholic husbands and fathers. Thus, the women’s movement began as an attempt to further the cause not only of women but of other oppressed people as well.

The response of many, perhaps most, men was either to ignore or to ridicule women who dared to make such outlandish and radical demands. John Adams, for example, replying to Abigail’s letter, wrote, “I cannot but laugh.” As it gained strength in the nineteenth century, the women’s movement became the butt of jokes and cartoons; newspaper editorials predicted that if these women had their way, husbands would look after the children while their wives worked and went to the saloon to drink whisky and smoke cigars. Not all men laughed, however; some risked ridicule by siding with the women. In England, William Thompson issued *An Appeal of One-Half of the Human Race* (1825), and John Stuart Mill decried *The Subjection of Women* (1869), as did Friedrich Engels in *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). In the United States the ex-slave Frederick Douglass spoke and wrote on behalf of the fledgling women’s movement, and the antislavery advocate William Lloyd Garrison editorialized in defense of women’s rights.¹⁴

In the twentieth century there developed a number of different variations or variants within feminism, often in combination with other ideologies such as socialism and anarchism. Socialist feminists, for example, argue that women cannot be free until capitalism has been replaced by socialism.¹⁵ Anarchist feminists claim that women will be oppressed as long as the state exists.¹⁶ Lesbian separatist feminists claim that women will be oppressed as long as they associate with and are dependent upon men.¹⁷ But perhaps the two most important and influential contemporary variants are the *liberal feminist* and the *radical feminist* perspectives.

The early women’s movement generally represents the first or liberal feminist view. Like the integrationist variant of the movement for black liberation, liberal feminism has been motivated mainly by a desire to overcome overt forms of discrimination—in marriage, educational opportunities, legal rights and, above all, the right to vote. The last was won in the United States in 1920, with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which states that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” The removal of these and other legal and institutional barriers has been the primary aim of liberal feminists. Their goal has been to give women the same rights and opportunities that men enjoy. Their conception of freedom is schematically summarized in Figure 8.3.

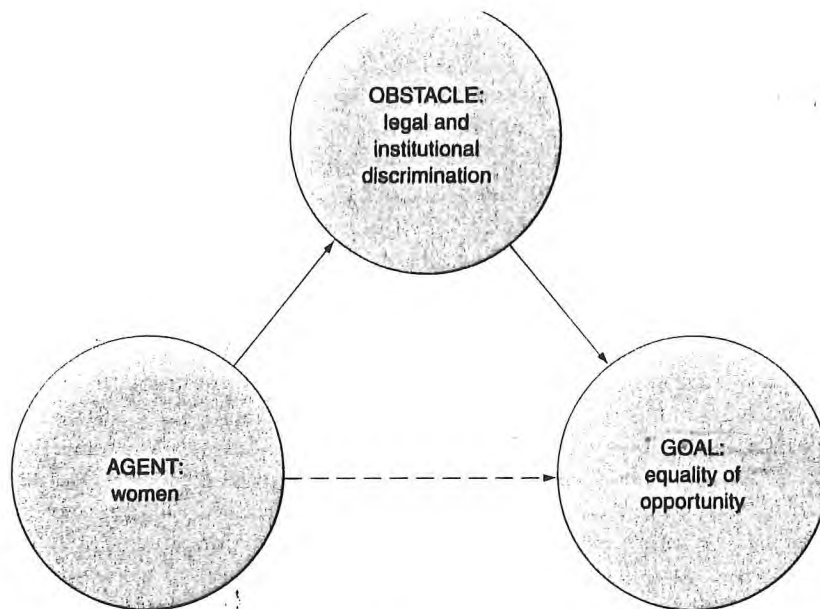


Figure 8.3 The “liberal feminist” view of freedom.

The second and more militant radical feminist phase and its ideology became prominent in the late 1960s. It has been concerned not only with overt sexual discrimination but also with exposing and overcoming more subtle forms of discrimination that go under the heading of **sexism**. Sexism is a set of beliefs and attitudes about women’s supposedly innate inferiority and various inadequacies—intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual, and otherwise—that prevent them from being men’s equals. Radical feminism attempts to expose, criticize, and overcome these sexist attitudes and beliefs, which are widely held by men and—more importantly—by many women as well. To the degree that women share these sexist views, they are afflicted with self-loathing and a lack of respect for themselves and for other women.

Such sexist attitudes and beliefs include, but are not limited to, the following: it is “unfeminine” to be successful in scholarly, athletic, or other endeavors, particularly in competition with males; girls have no talent for math (or science or softball); the same actions that are “bold” and “assertive” when a man performs them are “bossy” and “aggressive” when undertaken by a woman; a man who makes a concession or a compromise is being “diplomatic,” whereas a

woman is showing “weakness”; men get “angry,” women become “bitchy”; and a woman who is raped probably provoked or invited the attack. These and many other sexist beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes are widely held by men. But, say radical feminists, women must address and attempt to overcome not only men’s sexism but their own sexism as well. Until women recognize that their chains are in part “mind-forged manacles,” they cannot hope to break them. Women, in other words, need to recognize and overcome their own internalized sexist attitudes and beliefs about their sex’s supposed limitations and liabilities.

Feminists have pursued several strategies for fighting sexism. In the 1960s and early 1970s especially, “consciousness raising groups”—small groups of women who met to talk about their own experiences with and feelings about men, women, sex, love, marriage, children, parents, husbands, lovers, and friends—were formed for this purpose. “Take Back the Night” marches and demonstrations were held to publicize the crime of rape. Women’s counseling centers and battered women’s shelters were opened, and women were invited to talk and to do something about their troubles. Women’s studies programs were started in colleges and universities to enable women to study women’s history (or “herstory”) and other subjects from a feminist perspective. Through these and other means, women’s liberationists have confronted and resisted the sexist stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes held by men and women alike.¹⁸

Unlike liberal feminists, who tend to stress the essential equality and sameness of the two sexes—especially with regard to equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal pay for comparable work—radical feminists tend to emphasize differences. Men and women not only have different biological makeups, they also have different attitudes, outlooks, and values. Women should be free to be

different, they argue, and these differences should be respected and protected. Nowhere are these differences more pronounced than in attitudes toward sex. Unlike most women, many men tend to separate sex from love, trust, and respect. The sex act is therefore seen not as an integral feature of love and mutual respect but as something that has no necessary relation to other emotions or activities. This attitude, in turn, carries over to men's attitudes in other areas as well. This is especially evident, for example, in the attitude toward women that is displayed in pornographic pictures and literature. There women are depicted as mere bodies or body parts—as “sex objects”—rather than as whole people; they are shown to enjoy pain, degradation, and humiliation; and they are always subservient to men, who are depicted as proud, cruel, and uncaring. Not surprisingly, then, radical feminists—unlike liberal feminists—often wage legal and political war against pornography and pornographers.¹⁹

The degrading depiction of women and women's bodies in the mass media is symptomatic, radical feminists believe, of a male *system* of power. Masculine power is both systematic and pervasive. It is not confined to legal and political institutions but suffuses the culture and outlook of modern Western society. For example, pictures of naked or nearly naked women are used to sell everything from soap to automobiles. Older men divorce their wives to marry much younger women who are referred to as “trophy wives”—as though they were to be exhibited as big-game hunters exhibit their kills—and are regarded as symbols of masculine status and power. Hollywood movies offer few depictions of older women as attractive, desirable, or wise. In these and other ways women are systematically exploited and oppressed through cultural representations and images. Therefore, radical feminists say, it is not enough to eliminate or mitigate legal or institutional discrimination against women. Feminists must wage a broadly *cultural* struggle as well.

The view of liberty and liberation at the core of the ideology of the radical feminist wing of the women's liberation movement is summarized in Figure 8.4.

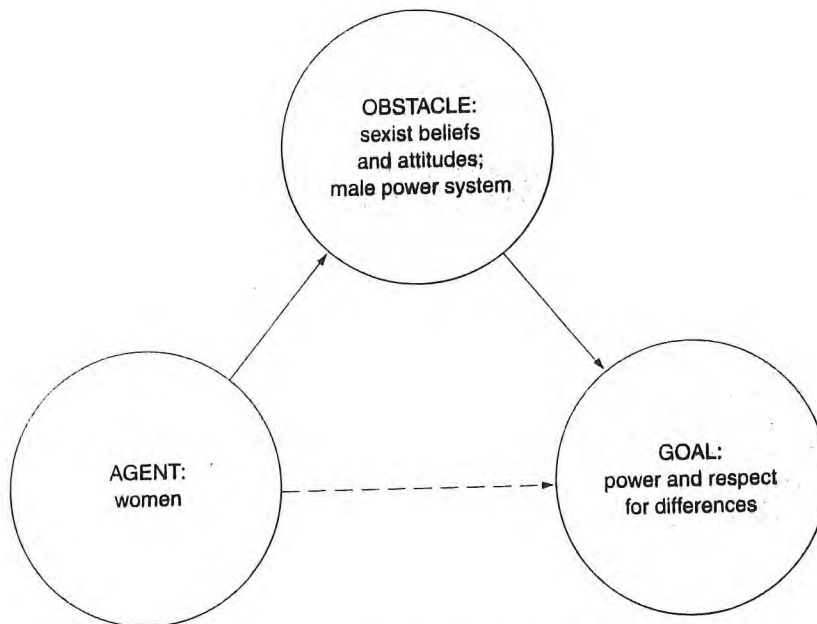


Figure 8.4 The “radical feminist” view of freedom.