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THE ANTIGONISH WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

We are not all self-defined as feminists (though many of us are).

We do not all agree with everything expressed here (though many of us do).

But we do all act together to support women and to build a better world.

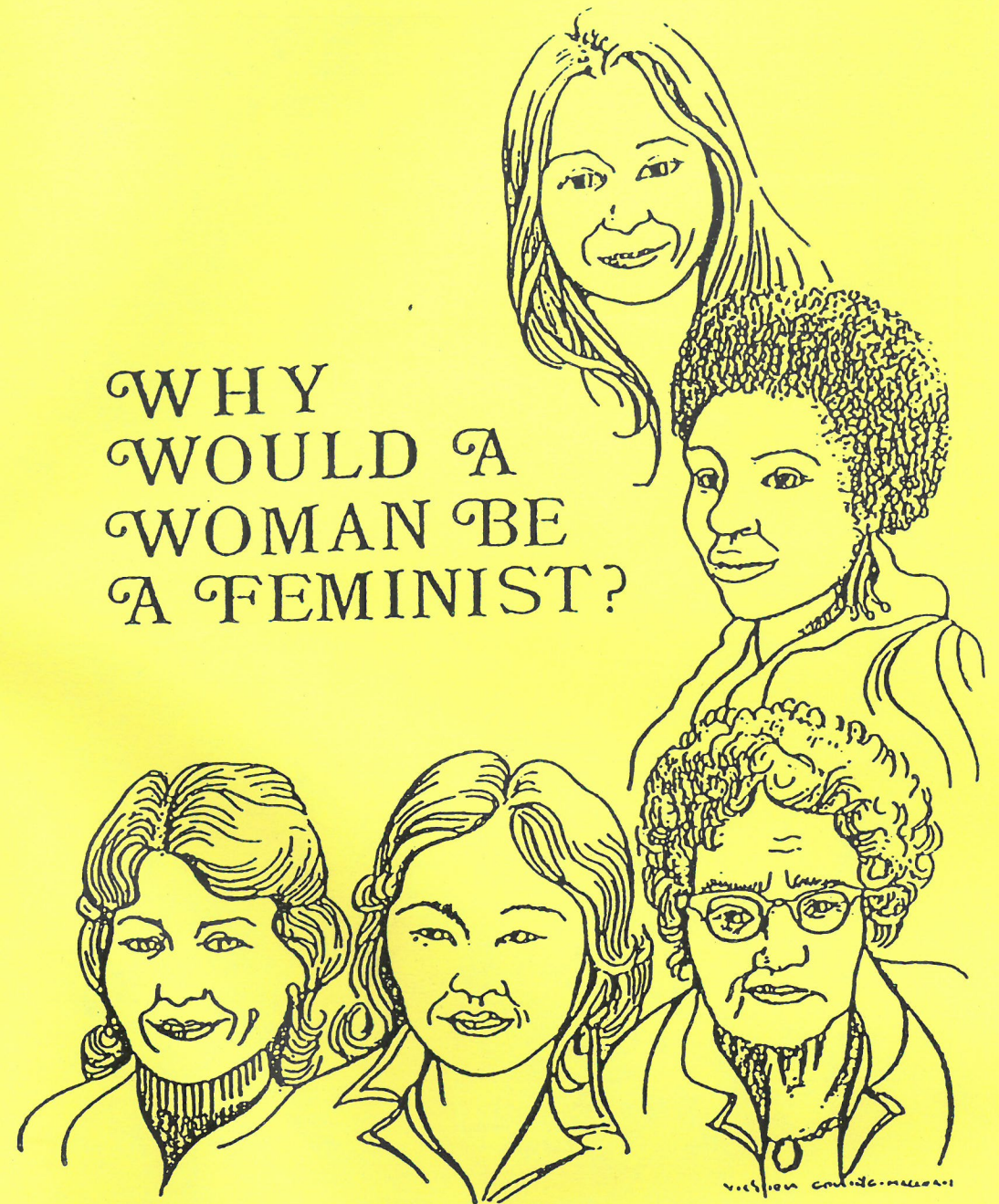
It is in this spirit of sisterhood that we present this document as a basis for information about and discussion of feminism.

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WHY WOULD A WOMAN BE A FEMINIST?



Why Would a Woman Be a Feminist?

Women have been involved in community development, in human centred reform and social improvement for many, many years. In fact this has been the hallmark of women's activism. One historian has dramatically summarized what women's voluntary associations were doing at the turn of the century in the following list:

building libraries; lobbying for clean water and clean milk; overseeing and profoundly influencing the development of public education; promoting housing reform; designing measures to protect public health; inspecting prisons; teaching prisoners; creating museums, orchestras, and public libraries; organizing women into trade unions; protecting immigrants from exploitation; abolishing the noxious convict lease system; lobbying for the conservation of natural resources; organizing peace societies; supporting prohibition; trying to abolish child labor; lobbying for state regulation of wages and hours (especially for women workers); trying to control prostitution; attacking the problem of tuberculosis; recalling judges; studying the structure of government; founding colleges for women or opening existing institutions to them; engaging in factory inspection and intensive fact-finding with respect to women and children workers; inventing the school lunch program, the juvenile court, and the bookmobile; creating parks and playgrounds; investigating tenement houses and employment agencies--the list seems endless. ('On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility.' p.15) Anne Firor Scott, *Journal of American History* (June 1984).

It is not too much to suggest that the functioning of our human communities, the care we show each other, the powerless and the needy has been women's work and women's concern--both in the public realm and in the private realm, the home. And this work and these concerns have been consistently undervalued.

The governing principles of our society have not been the human centred values of caring, sharing and nurture--but individualism, profit and competition. The public arenas of production and of politics (realms from which women have been

largely absent) are governed by competition and the notion of individual success that is foreign to women and that women have been excluded from. For this "success" is not admired in or sought by women. Women are judged by the altogether different criteria of care, service, and co-operation even as these qualities have been less valued and have been relegated to women and the margins of our society. This has involved also the undervaluing and subordination of women.

This is a bold statement that may surprise you. So I'd like to support it with evidence that there is historically a deep misogynist (woman hating) theme in our culture. A theme whose echoes we face to this day. Ours is a culture which has viewed men in relation to God and the world and women in relation to men. In the pre-industrial period women were seen as temptation, as essentially evil creatures of the flesh who must be controlled to labour economically for men if the devil was not to work through them. Later, in industrial societies, women were seen as asexual angels, closer to God, bearers of men's children who must be "protected" in a separate sphere from the harsh male world to provide comfort and diversion for men. In both versions women are presumed not to be creatures of reason. They are defined by their body, not their mind, first as sexual creatures and later as reproductive creatures. And they are seen in terms of men, if not a servant then a threat--good woman or bad woman.

In both earlier and later views of women "good women" were subordinate to men--in the first because men had to control female power and evil; in the second because men had to protect the weak and gentle woman from other men's evil. These pre-Christian quotations reflect the earlier view of women:

There is a good principle which created order, light and man, and an evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman.--Pythagoras

We may thus conclude that it is a general law that there should be naturally ruling elements and elements naturally ruled ... the rule of the freeman over the slaves is one kind of rule; that of the male over the female another ...

the slave is entirely without the faculty of deliberation; the female indeed possesses it, but in a form which remains inconclusive ... -- Aristotle (*Politics*)

When a woman thinks ... she thinks evil. -- Seneca

Although Christ's message is in sharp contrast to these views they influenced the Church Fathers:

You are the devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. (Tertullian)

And it persisted through the centuries in Europe, exemplified, for instance, around 1446 by Kramer and Sprenger, authors of the *Maleus Maleficarum* which became the handbook of the witch hunts that flared throughout Europe over hundreds of years:

All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.

It was reflected also by Martin Luther:

God created Adam lord of all living things but Eve spoiled it all.

The notion of women as powerful and evil but economically useful when under control did not entirely disappear with feudalism as the following later quotations show:

Nature intended women to be our slaves ... they are our property, we are not theirs. They belong to us, just as a tree that bears fruit belongs to a gardener. What a mad idea to demand equality for women! ... Women are nothing but machines for producing children. (Napoleon Bonaparte)

That in woman which inspires respect and fundamentally fear is her *nature*, which is more 'natural' than that of man, her genuine, cunning, beast-of-prey suppleness,

the tiger's claws beneath the glove, the naivety of her egoism, her ineducability and inner savagery ...
(Freidrich Nietszche, *Beyond Good and Evil*)

But this powerful and negative image came gradually to be a minor motif, overshadowed by a newer view of women as childlike and weak, naturally fitted to mother and amuse men and to obey--still almost a separate, less fully human species than men, now restricted by nature to the separate sphere of the home.

Schopenhauer

(woman) is in every respect backward, lacking in reason and reflection ... a kind of middle step between the child and the man, who is the true human being ...

Alfred Lord Tennyson put it poetically:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was clear:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them--these are the duties of women at all times and what should be taught them from their infancy.

Auguste Comte (often called the father of sociology) was even clearer, if possible:

It is in order to develop her moral superiority that woman must gratefully accept the rightful domination of man First as a mother and soon as a sister, then above all as a

wife, and finally as a daughter, marginally as a maid-servant in these four natural roles woman is destined to preserve man from corruption inherent in his practical and theoretical existence.

And Fichte repeats the theme:

(Woman) is subjected through her own necessary wish--a wish which is the condition of her morality--to be so subjected. The woman who surrenders her personality, and yet retains her full dignity in doing so, necessarily gives up to her lover all that she has.... She should renounce to him all her property and all her rights.

These quotations are not isolated examples of a minority position. They are just a few instances of the general majority view of women and what women's relation to men should be.

In contradiction to this mainstream tradition of trivializing and devaluing women, feminists value not just obedient and dependent women but all women for their strength and reason and compassion as full political and independent people. We like and admire women and ourselves as women. If I had to identify any one thing as the spirit of feminism, the core of feminism, it would be this love of women, this woman-identification. And this is perhaps the most deeply radical aspect of feminism in our society. For it goes counter to such a central and defining tradition.

Most women in our society have very strong self-images. We respect and value ourselves. Our sense of self is generally not damaged by the negative stereotypes of women in our society. We know that these stereotypes do not apply to us or our friends. But that does not mean that these stereotypes have no power or are not damaging. Because they powerfully determine our sense of "other women". Let me ask you to reflect on a few common phrases that you may be familiar with:

Women are their own worst enemies.

Housewives are such dull people.

I'd rather work for a man.

Women executives are castrating bitches.

Women's talk is all chatter.

Men's talk at parties is so much more interesting than women's.

It is a woman's duty to make herself attractive.

Women are only interested in trapping some man.

Women hate to be with other women.

Women are always playing hard to get.

No man likes an easy lay.

Women liked to be raped.

Women don't know the value of a dollar.

Don't worry your pretty little head about it.

You think like a man.

We don't believe these ideas about ourselves or our women friends but if we are not feminists we tend to believe them about "other women." We experience ourselves as exceptions to the norm of women. And we value ourselves and our friends in so far as we are not like other women. We pay a high price for this even though our sense of worth may remain intact. For it means that we cannot bring our sense of strength together with our sense of womanhood. *WE ARE WEAKENED BY THIS DIVISION WITHIN OURSELVES.* And it means that our sense of self-worth divides us from other women. The stereotypes hide the fact that many of the strengths we recognize in ourselves are strengths we have *because* we are women, strengths we share with other women. *WE ARE WEAKENED BY THIS DIVISION AMONG OURSELVES.*

It is very, very difficult to fight this negative view of women even though our individual self-images are strong. To do

it we need to have an alternative vision of the world and set of values that recognizes women's particular strengths, concerns and activity. Feminism gives us this. It is redefining the world and social issues:

- Women do *not* ask to be raped.
- Women are *not* responsible for being beaten.
- Prostitution is *not* a victimless crime. The young women who, if they are not controlled by an individual pimp are controlled by bikers or the mob and whose life expectancy is about 36 years are the victims.
- Housewives are *not* parasites. They have no money because the structure of their essential and difficult work denies it to them, not because they don't work.
- Pornography is *not* harmless fun it is hate literature against women and it is dangerous, especially when we understand it in the cultural tradition I outlined earlier.

This feminist redefining breaks down debilitating divisions among women, the good woman and the bad woman (by man's definition), and housewife and the working woman (who both do the housework and child care without pay). Feminists can do this because we realize that we are not the only exceptions to the dominant negative image of women. *ALL* women are exceptions. To recognize this is to be able to question dominant definitions on the basis of our own experience because we know it is not different from other women's:

- Housework is hard, skilled, valuable work.
- Sexual harassment is endemic, a constant in women's lives.
- Our best and surest support comes from our women friends who are not exceptions but representatives of the class of women. And so on.

This is exciting and liberating. It frees us to trust ourselves and our experience and other women, and to discover what we have in common. It opens the way to the enormous pleasure and strength to be found in discovering and connecting with and supporting other women. This is *SISTERHOOD* and is another key aspect of feminism--*A COMMITMENT OF SUPPORT FOR WOMEN*, for our sisters. This is enriching in a personal sense and in a collective sense because it makes possible acting together for social change. Which is

to give or to withhold our consent, to encourage or to forbid any policy or course of action which concerns the people--our children every one. (in *The Proper Sphere* eds. R. Cooke & W. Mitchensear, 1976, p.300)

And in 1979 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English wrote:

We refuse to remain on the margins of society, and we refuse to enter that society on its own terms ... The human values that women were assigned to preserve (must) become the organizing principles of society. The vision that is implicit in feminism (is) a society organized around human needs. There are no human alternatives. The Market, with its financial abstractions, deformed science, and obsession with dead things--must be pushed back to the margins. And the 'womanly' values of community and caring must rise to the center as the only *human* principle. (in *For Her Own Good*, Ehrenreich and D. English, 1979, p.342. Emphasis in the original, bracketed words added)

Feminism is, then, not just the demand for women's equality in the world and the structures that we know. Nor is it simply the continuation of women's caring and sharing around the edges of this world. It is about the transformation of these structures and this world to make caring and sharing activities its central organizing principles. This is a tall order. But it is essential today when our world is threatened with destruction. If it is ever to be achieved women must play a central role. And these must be women who love and support and respect women and therefore themselves.

Feminism is not an organization you can join or a set of rigid principles. It is not a *thing*, but is the *process* of women coming together, supporting each other and gaining strength to change the world. Feminism is women's way to participate in making history. In that sense it is both a celebration and a trust. And it is what we all make it together. That is why a woman would be a feminist and why so many are today.

another central element of feminism--COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY
TOWARD A MORE HUMANE SOCIETY.

Not all the women engaged in the kind of public reform activity I listed at the beginning of this talk were feminist. But many were. Feminism is about bringing together women's traditional human concerns and contribution (in the public and private realms) with a powerful affirmation of women and women's power. The marginalization of human concerns in our society has been also the marginalizing, trivializing, devaluation of women. To build a society where these concerns are central is to build a society where women are central and powerful.

FEMINISM ASSERTS BOTH THE VALUE OF WOMEN AND OF HUMANITY.
Feminism stands for women's entry into the public world not to be like men, but to be powerful agents for social change. Feminism stands for women building the power to bring their human concerns to the centre of the political stage and it has done this since its inception. Let me read you two quotations from feminists who wrote and spoke seventy years apart:

In 1914 before women had the vote Sonja Leathes wrote:

Women today say to the governments of the world: you have usurped what used to be our authority, what used to be our responsibility. It is you who determine today the nature of the air which we breathe, of the food which we eat, of the clothing which we wear. It is you who determine when, and how long, and what our children are to be taught and what their prospects as future wage earners are to be. It is you who condone or stamp out the white slave traffic and the starvation wage. It is you who by granting or refusing pensions to the mothers of young children can preserve or destroy the fatherless home. It is you who consider what action shall be considered a crime and how the offender, man, woman or child shall be dealt with. It is you who decide whether cannons or torpedos are to blow to pieces the bodies of the sons which we bore. And since all of these matters strike at the very heart strings of the mothers of all nations, we shall not rest until we have secured the power vested in the ballot: