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FEMINISM

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 8

Early 20th-century feminism

During the early 20th century, English women achieved legal and civil equality, in theory if not always in practice. Some women, those over the age of 30, were allowed to vote from 1918, and there were arguments about whether their priority was to press hard for enfranchisement on the same terms as men, or to concentrate on women's other needs and problems. Some women, and some men, felt that a woman's party might have helped them build on the gains they had already achieved, but the opportunity was let slip.

The effects of the First World War had been so complex that it is impossible to generalize about them. It had allowed some women the opportunity to work outside the home; in the war years, the number of women employed outside the home rose by well over a million. Some worked in munitions factories and engineering works, others were employed in hospitals; many demanded pay rises, sometimes insisting their wages should be equal to men's. A Women's Volunteer Reserve was formed, and there were some Women's Police Patrols. Their contribution during the war, both domestically and as workers outside the home, almost certainly contributed to their partial enfranchisement in 1918. But many women were left widowed or unmarried, and the war-time press had talked darkly about 'flaunting flappers'. Sylvia Pankhurst commented, sarcastically, that 'alarmist morality-mongers conceived most monstrous visions of girls and women . . . plunging

into excesses and burdening the country with swarms of illegitimate children'. One feminist paper remarked that military authorities did not realize that 'in protecting the troops from the women, they have failed to protect the women from the troops'.

As early as 1918, MPs agreed that women could actually sit in parliament, though it was only slowly that women were actually elected. Christabel Pankhurst stood for Smethwick in 1918, but lost by 700 votes. In 1919 and 1920, two women – the Conservative Lady Astor and the Liberal Margaret Wintringham – succeeded to their husbands' seats. Astor had never been particularly involved in the long struggle for the suffrage, but Wintringham had been a member of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), and also of the Women's Institute. She went on to proclaim, publicly, that homemaking was a 'privileged, skilled and nationally important occupation'.

The Labour Party member Ellen Wilkinson – an unmarried woman with a trade union background – was elected in 1924, and she was impressively outspoken on a whole range of issues; she was keenly interested in women's domestic role and argued for family allowances; she supported trade union rights; and she was a member of an International League for Peace and Freedom delegation that investigated reports of cruelty by British soldiers in Ireland. 'The men come in the middle of the night and the women are driven from their beds without any clothing other than a coat', she wrote: 'They are run out in the middle of the night and the home is burned.'

In 1929, Lady Astor suggested that women MPs form a women's party, but the notion fizzled out when Labour women were reluctant to support the idea. (Some modern historians have argued that this was a real opportunity that was thrown away.) As late as 1940, when a coalition government was formed, there were only 12 women MPs. Local government seemed a more favourable area for politically concerned women. Ever since the 1870s, women had

been actively serving on school boards and other local bodies, and their numbers increased after the war.

NUSEC's broader aim had been to 'obtain all other reforms, economic, legislative and social as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women'. Its members campaigned, for example, to open the professions to women, and argued their right to equal pay. In 1919, the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act, in theory at least, opened the professions and the civil service to women. According to Virginia Woolf, the Act did more for women than the franchise, but modern historians have expressed doubts, at least about its short-term efficacy. In 1923, a Matrimonial Causes Act established equal grounds for divorce between men and women.

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But NUSEC was concerned, not simply with equality, but with *difference*; its members tried to tackle women's special problems and needs. When Eleanor Rathbone became president, she argued that women should demand, not equality with men, but 'what women need to fulfil the potentialities of their own natures and to adjust themselves to the circumstances of their own lives'. Their demands included reform of the laws governing divorce, the guardianship of children, and prostitution. In 1921, the Six Point Group was founded; it included some former militants, including the journalist and novelist Rebecca West, but its demands, and methods, were hardly radical. They too addressed women's special problems, arguing for a better deal for unmarried women, and for widows with children, as well as reform of the law on child assault. They wanted equal rights of guardianship for married men and women, equal pay for women teachers, and they challenged discrimination against women in the civil service. They issued a blacklist of MPs hostile to women's interests, urging women, whatever their political loyalties, to vote against them.

Several new magazines directed at women appeared in the 1920s, though their titles – *Woman and Home*, *Good Housekeeping* –

clearly signal the limited expectations of their audience. But there were also dissenting voices, with a more radical take on women's position, in *Time and Tide*, which was launched in 1920, its distinguished contributors including Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Rose Macaulay. This magazine argued that women should act, independently, to put pressure on *all* the political parties to tackle women's concerns, and it raised a whole range of women's issues, including the position of unmarried mothers and of widows, and the guardianship of children. West wrote in 1925, as so often deliberately provocative:

I am an old fashioned feminist, . . . when those of our army whose voices are inclined to coolly tell us that the day of sex-antagonism is over and henceforth we have only to advance hand in hand with the male, I do not believe it.

West was a socialist and a suffragist, an effective propagandist who always enjoyed a scrap – and who believed that women still had plenty to fight about.

But her writing covers a whole range of subjects, and she is perceptive and often sharply witty. She mocks masculine sentimentality about women: 'If we want to make every woman a Madonna we must see that every woman has quite a lot to eat', she remarked, but she is equally scathing about idle upper-class women who spend days 'loafing about the house with only a flabby mind for company'.

In later years Rebecca West went on to write very effectively on the trials of Nazi war criminals; and in the late 1930s produced a long and very interesting book on Yugoslavia. Her novels, on the other hand, reveal an unexpected and often cloying sentimentality about the relations between men and women. Perhaps this sprang from what seems to have been an unhappy private life: she had an illegitimate child by H. G. Wells and, though they stayed together for a few years, she essentially

brought up her son Anthony alone. He later turned nastily on his mother, apparently without any understanding of what must have been a difficult time for her.

All through this period, the popular press, whether nervously or sarcastically, tended to portray the feminist as a frustrated spinster or a harridan; one journalist remarked that, because of war, many young women 'have become so de-sexed and masculinised, indeed, and the neuter states so patent in them, that the individual is described (unkindly) no longer as "she" but "it"'. Women teachers, as well as women in the civil service, sometimes had to fight against discrimination. The 1920s also saw the beginnings of economic recession and, as so often, women were the first to face unemployment.

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But there were certainly more women being adequately educated, at schools and also at university level, thanks in large part to the work of Emily Davies (see Chapter 5). However, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, in her typically oblique way, suggested the ways in which women were second-class citizens in Cambridge: she describes being barred from entering a famous library, and how she and a friend, a fellow in a women's college, dined, not like the men on sole and partridge, but on gravy soup and beef. In 1935 another writer, Dorothy L. Sayers, gave in her novel *Gaudy Night* a much more generous and affectionate account – based on her own education at Somerville College, Oxford – of the integrity, high intelligence, and conscientious concern for other people shown by the women dons (even though she had to import her male detective to sort out a criminal problem for them). As one of her dons remarks, cheerfully, they have indeed achieved a great deal – and it has all been done by 'pennypinching'.

The battle for legal, civil, and educational equality has been – and to some extent still is – a central element in feminism; but the movement has also highlighted the differences between the sexes, and asked for a new and deeper understanding of women's special

needs as wives and mothers. One of the most interesting – and in the long run, most significant – episodes in the early 20th century concerned a subject that had rarely been publicly discussed, and which could still arouse bitter opposition: contraception. As early as 1877, the pro-birth control organization the Malthusian League had issued propaganda about ways of controlling conception; two of its most prominent members, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, were put on trial for publishing an American tract on the subject, called *The Law of Population*. (This was the same Annie Besant who became a vociferous supporter of the strike of female workers over conditions at the Bryant and May match factories in the 1880s.)

The Law of Population was written by Margaret Sanger, who had worked as a nurse with women in the New York slums, as well as setting up a monthly magazine, *Woman Rebel*, which not only called for revolution but – apparently more dangerously – also offered contraceptive information. In a pamphlet called *Family Limitation*, she argued that contraception enabled ‘the average woman’ to have ‘a mutual and satisfied sexual act . . . the magnetism of it is health-giving and acts as a beautifier and tonic’. Sanger left the United States the day before she was due to be tried under the Comstock Law, which, in 1873, had made it an offence to send ‘obscene, lewd or lascivious’ material through the mail. She arrived in Glasgow in 1914, then came to London in July 1915, where she met Marie Stopes.

In spite of their shared interests, their relationship was by no means easy. Stopes was a complicated and difficult woman. As a girl, she had been both clever and ambitious, and, encouraged by her father, was educated to university level, gaining a BSc. But – presumably like many other well-brought-up girls of the period – she knew almost nothing about sexuality. Nevertheless, her very prolonged ignorance does seem unusual; after a long, intense, but sexless love affair with a Japanese man called Fujii, she married a man called Reginald Gates. This marriage was never consummated, but it took



10. Margaret Sanger, a nurse working with women in the New York slums, made contraceptive advice widely available – a very courageous act at the time – and had to flee the country to avoid court action against her.

her something like three years to realize that something was missing. Her second marriage, to Humphrey Roe, never proved quite as rapturous as she had hoped, though he gave her valuable support when she later opened a birth control clinic. But Stopes at least found effective ways of moving through her own ignorance to help other women who might be almost as uninformed as her younger self. She went on to write *Married Love* (1916), which sold 2,000 copies in a fortnight, and by the end of the year had reached

six editions. It was followed by *Wise Parenthood* (1918) and *Radiant Motherhood* (1920). Her style was – well, flowery:

the half swooning sense of flux which overtakes the spirit in that eternal moment at the apex of rapture sweeps into its flaming tides the whole essence of the man and woman.

This (not altogether convincing) bliss was in stark contrast to another, darker but equally fantastic, vision of

the thriftless who breed so rapidly [and] tend by that very fact to bring forth children who are weakened and handicapped by physical as well as mental warping and weakness, and at the same time to demand their support from the sound and thrifty.

But Marie Stopes proved herself a loyal friend to Margaret Sanger. When Sanger returned to America and again faced prosecution, Stopes came to her support, not only organizing a petition on her behalf, but writing, with characteristic drama, to the President of the United States:

Have you, Sir, visualized what it means to be a woman whose every fibre, whose every muscle and blood-capillary is subtly poisoned by the secret, ever growing horror, more penetrating, more long-drawn than any nightmare, of an unwanted embryo developing beneath her heart?

Marie Stopes's books – their practical side, at least, clearly answering an urgent need – continued to sell very well indeed. When she insisted that 'the normal man's sexual needs' are not 'stronger than the normal woman's', she obviously touched a chord in many other women. She and Reginald Gates went on to set up a birth control clinic in Holloway, North London, where poor women were offered free contraceptive advice. The clinic's brochure claimed that they were offering health and hygiene to the internally damaged 'slave mothers' who yearly produced their 'puny infants',

but were 'callously left in coercive ignorance by the middle classes and the medical profession'. But Marie Stopes also managed to antagonize many of the people who shared her interests and who might have worked effectively with her. In 1928, one possible colleague complained that she was suffering from 'paranoia and megalomania'.

In 1936 a group of women tackled an even more controversial issue, when they founded the Abortion Law Reform Association.

Something like 500 women a year were dying from abortions, they argued; and that was quite unnecessary. One of their campaigners, the Canadian-born Stella Browne, had the courage to admit publicly that 'if abortion was necessarily fatal or injurious, I should not be here before you'. The issue remained controversial into (and beyond) the 1950s, when several women's organizations began to press for the legalization of abortion. In 1956, a newspaper survey found that, out of 200 people questioned, 51.9% favoured abortion on request, and 23.4% for health reasons. But abortion remained a major, and often problematic, issue long after the revival of feminism in the 1970s.

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Virginia Woolf has been dismissed as irrelevant by some contemporary feminists; Sheila Rowbotham, for example, remarks that her demand, in *A Room of One's Own*, for £500 a year and space to oneself was simply aimed at a minority of the educated middle class. That is true; but she is read still, and by women (and men) who would never so much as glance at most feminist writing. Woolf was certainly ambivalent about the term 'feminism'; she admitted that she was anxious, when the book was first published, that she might be 'attacked for a feminist'. In *Three Guineas* – a later and much darker book, written in the shadow of approaching war and the growth of fascism – Woolf directly attacks the word 'feminism'; it is 'an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete'. Her plea to 'the daughters of educated men' – rather than simply to educated women – now sounds rather clumsy,

and in the 1930s must have already been rather dated. (By educated men, she explains that she means those who had been at Oxford or Cambridge.) But she refers effectively and scathingly to ‘Arthur’s Education Fund’ that for decades, even centuries, has allowed boys, but not their sisters, to be adequately taught; and she remarks sardonically that, until 1919, marriage has been ‘the one great profession open to women’. Moreover, she adds, they were actually unfitted even for that by their lack of education.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf defends Rebecca West, who had just been attacked by a man who labelled her an ‘arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!’ The suffrage campaign, Woolf fears, ‘must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion’. After all, she remarks, ‘women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size’. In fact, she insists, most women have little idea how much men actually hate them. ‘The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation’, she remarks dryly, ‘is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself. An amusing book might be made of it.’ But the writer, she adds, ‘would need thick gloves on her hands, and bars to protect her of solid gold’. And, after all, what seems amusing now ‘had to be taken in desperate earnest once . . . Among your grandmothers and great-grandmothers there were many that wept their eyes out.’

Glancing at a modern novel by the fictional writer ‘Mary Carmichael’, Woolf comes upon the words ‘Chloe liked Olivia’, ‘And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature.’ That is to say, women in fiction up until that time had almost always been seen in relation to men. Reading on, Woolf learns that these two women share a laboratory, ‘which of itself will make their friendship more varied and lasting because it will be less personal’. And she exclaims that Mary Carmichael may be lighting a torch where nobody has yet

been, exploring a place where ‘women are alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex’.

In perhaps the most memorable pages of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf sums up her argument about how women's talents have been – and often still are – frustrated and wasted. She contemplates a number of greatly talented women from the past, from the Duchess of Newcastle to George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë – who were deprived of ‘experience and intercourse and travel’ and so never wrote quite as powerfully and generously as they might have done. Woolf invents the hauntingly effective figure of Shakespeare's sister, as gifted as her brother, but inevitably disappointed, mocked, and exploited by men. Like her brother, Judith arrived hopefully at the London theatres, but soon ‘found herself with child . . . and so – who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? – killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.’ But ‘she lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed’.