

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Women who do and women who don't join the women's movement

Edited by
Robyn Rowland





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**Women who do and women who don't
join the women's movement**

First published in 1984, *Women who do and women who don't join the women's movement* asks a variety of women – some of whom chose to align themselves with the women's movement, others who chose not to – to write about their lives and the reasons for choices they have made. Where do the differences lie in the experience of feminists and antifeminists? Can clear dividing lines be drawn which place two groups of strong, intelligent women on opposing sides in the battle to survive in a 'man's world'? In tackling these questions, the contributors create a diverse pattern of women's interpretations of 'being female', with, surprisingly, similarities emerging between the two groups, particularly in terms of their experience of 'self'. This book will be of interest to students of women's studies, gender studies and sociology.



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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published in 1984
By Routledge & Kegan Paul plc

This edition first published in 2024 by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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A Library of Congress record exists under ISBN: 0710202962

ISBN: 978-1-032-71258-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-71271-0 (ebk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-71269-7 (pbk)

Book DOI 10.4324/9781032712710

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Routledge & Kegan Paul
London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley

First published in 1984
by Routledge & Kegan Paul plc
39 Store Street, London WC1E 7DD, England
9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA
464 St Kilda Road, Melbourne,
Victoria 3004, Australia and
Broadway House, Newtown Road,
Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN, England
Typeset in Baskerville 11pt by
Academic Typesetting Service, Gerrards Cross
Printed in Great Britain
by T.J. Press, Padstow

Parts I and III © Robyn Rowland 1984

Part II copyright © 1984

*Mary Stott, Teddi Holt, Ann Curthoys, Bobbi Sykes,
Juliet Mitchell, Gwendolyn Landolt, Jocelyne Scutt,
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Margrit Eichler, Peggy Seeger, Brinlee Kramer, Laura McArthur,
Yvonne Carnahan, Connie Purdue, Gloria Bowles, Joanna Bogle,
Dale Spender (each contributor having copyright in her own
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

*Women who do and women who don't join the women's
movement.*

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

*1. Feminism. 2. Women - Psychology. 3. Feminists -
Case studies. I. Rowland, Robyn.*

HQ1154.W8893 1984 305.4'2 83-24502

ISBN 0-7102-0296-2

For Caroline,
and for my grandmothers,
Christina and Mary



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Preface

‘With or without blindfold, madam?’

I have been a feminist in action and spirit since adolescence when I first came to understand the way power operates between girls and boys when dating, and how hard it was to be ‘a good girl, a proper girl’ and still keep ‘them’ interested. It was a question of how to be desirable without being used, and no one seemed able to answer it. There was no sense of fair play about relations between the sexes at all. Fairness is to give equal validity to, equal time to, equal space to, a person or idea, and then make your decision without reducing or obliterating the other. I also railed at being told not to argue and that I, as a girl, knew nothing. I took up competitive swimming and that helped the anger as well as making me strong. I kept it up for twelve years and became the first woman at the University of New South Wales to win a swimming blue. So who said anger was unproductive!

Work has always fascinated me and continues to do so. I find that in work I can create a special relationship with myself that is challenging and exciting. Ideas are living things, flexible, flowing, or taut, depending on their mood and treatment. This is, of course, mainly the work I do ‘after hours’. I work hard and enjoy it, but have always resented working three times as hard as my male colleagues for no greater rewards and lower pay.

My own articulation of what it means to be a woman in this unequal society of ours, was a gradual process. It took time and thinking and reading and arguing to develop an understanding of power and the *fact* that men as a group dominate women and have much greater control over their

own lives than do women. As individuals, most men acquiesce in this system of male dominance which ensures that they are well looked after, dressed nicely, have their mothers' Christmas presents bought for them, and receive continuous emotional patching, soothing and support, without which they could not function. When denied this, much foot-stamping takes place. On the other hand, there are a few men who try to yield that dominance which is theirs purely by right of sex, and who listen and understand. For these men, their socialization towards violence and pettiness when denied their every want, is continuously fought against. But this takes the kind of emotional effort that all women make daily.

My mother told me when I was a kid that 'you can do *anything* if you try hard enough'. I said scornfully that I wouldn't be able to lift a car! My mother stared me hard in the eye and said: 'If you *really* wanted to, you could.' And she believed it - and in that moment, so did I.

My father said that debating is a skill which leads to a mastery of yourself and helps to give you a balanced view of things. He said there are many sides to an argument and you have to listen and weigh up the pros and cons. I might add that he still manages to have very strong opinions on most things! I call it obstinacy, he calls it persistence - but I bought the theory of balance.

Only my faith in women, with all their strength, their gentleness, their faults; my concern for listening to all points of view; and my tenacity and belief in doing the impossible, could have made me continue this book once it was started. There are dangers here for us all. Some feminists will be appalled that so much space has been given to the 'enemy', but may find it more difficult than they thought to condemn the women along with the ideas. Antifeminists may feel that they have misguidedly wandered into alien territory, but might find their similarities with feminists more disturbing than they anticipate. There may also be a feeling of uneasiness which it is difficult to articulate clearly, and in many ways the book is unnerving. There is also the anxiety about how it will be used, but I have no control over that. The enemies of women have always used our own words and actions against us - this will be no exception.

This is not a book meant to divide. I want to take a look at what women think the women's movement represents *now*, not back in the 1960s, and where they feel its strengths and its weaknesses lie. I want to know *why* some women can have similar experiences, yet one becomes a feminist and the other an antifeminist. What this book shows is that the 'goodies' and 'baddies' according to each 'side' are not always so clearly identifiable. And why should it be so straightforward? Women's lives and experiences, their values and their personalities are not clear, single and so easy to understand.

There are opinions in this book which I fiercely agree with and there are those I would sternly condemn. But I have tried to present them all in their own light and to give validity to the experiences and opinions of all the women concerned. I have aimed for 'balance'. No woman has been 'set up': I refuse to accept the role of surrogate oppressor.

The book begins with a discussion of the women's movement as a social movement, and an analysis of its origins and the major issues involved in its struggle. The antifeminist 'backlash' is then discussed, and its platforms are presented. This introduction is intended to supply a social context or background to which the experiences of the contributors can be related. There follows a series of short chapters written by women who relate positively or negatively to the women's movement; and their voices bring the issues alive, creating a diverse pattern of women's interpretations of being female. In the conclusion I draw together some of the issues on which the contributors agree and disagree, and attempt an answer to the question of why women choose feminism or antifeminism.

This has been a rewarding but difficult enterprise and I have been faced with issues often side-tracked as 'too difficult'. I have warm feelings for the women who are part of this book, and some have become friends. I have felt, and still feel, that I stand between two firing squads, but life and intellect are nothing if they lack challenge and the need for personal courage. More women now than ever before, feel vulnerable and encroached upon by aggressive values that fail to produce the warm, loving and caring society which the future could and should hold for us all. More women are

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fighting back. I share with that great writer, feminist and humanitarian Adrienne Rich, the 'dream of a common language'. I hope that after the inevitable debate over the issues here subsides, we will have reached a stronger consensus among women about the needs and rights we have, and a clearer vision of the future our daughters might demand.

Acknowledgments

In the production of a book, there are always many people who create the fabric of support so necessary for a person to write. I thank them all.

Particularly I want to thank my parents, Gwen and Norm, who gave me their love, strength, and positive attitudes; and who equipped me for my chosen tasks in the thousand ways that parents can, often without knowing and most often with little reward.

For over ten years, I was also fortunate enough to have the friendship, love and *real* emotional support that all people crave in their most intimate relationship. An unusual man, Trevor Irwin helped me to create a challenge out of obstacles and to strive always for excellence.

And to Dale Spender, whose encouragement and friendship I value so dearly, my thanks for initial discussions on the idea for this book, though I must absolve you from a part in its final form. And for being Dale: full of boundless energy, wit and humour; who makes laughter an essential part of revolution.

Finally, for their endless patience, kindness and care, thank you Judy, Bev, Janene, Ella, Natasha and Antionetta. Now *that* is a pool of real energy.



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Part one
Introduction



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I The women's movement as a social movement

The modern women's movement began as early as the eighteenth century but experienced a peak of activity during the campaign for the vote for women.¹ Since the 1960s it has again experienced a resurgence in Western countries. A 'backlash' against the movement is now occurring and it too has its precedent. In the 1920s under reaction, the movement became dormant and many feminists joined the peace movement.² It is worth remembering, though, that it was in 1923 that the Women's Party in America succeeded in getting the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) introduced into Congress. Now the ERA has been defeated after nearly sixty years of struggle. This book is timely then when we consider that women's groups have played a powerful role in its defeat.

A social movement has been defined as a group of people with a purpose which will bring about change and whose influence is 'spreading in opposition to the established order in which it originated' (Gerlach and Hine, 1970, p. xvi). A significant amount of power 'can be mobilised outside the power structure of a society' which can exert surprising pressure on that power structure (*ibid.*, p. 218). Both personal and social change result from social movements which, Carolyn Sherif comments, are often initiated by groups trying to deal with 'social problems that have been generated by contradictions and inequities in the ways different aspects of life are organised' (1976, p. 366).

The development of social movements passes through a number of stages. Social unrest springs from an awareness of

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social inequality and a personal discontent. These problems are seen as social problems needing collective action, rather than as individual issues with personal solutions. This occurs during a period of strong national political activity, when governments are repressing protest.³ A person with doubts about the existing social order is more likely to be sensitive to experiences of social injustice and will be ready to accept the need for change.⁴

Individuals then seek groups with whom to identify and communication networks are established. These encourage group formation and the recruitment of others. They develop on the basis of common problems and so their initial energy is centred on these issues and on expressing their anger and frustration. Carolyn Sherif notes that in these early stages of a movement, people are 'inwardly more united, more clear, and concentrate their tactics on what they are *against*' rather than what they are for (1976, p. 380).

As Betty Friedan indicated in 1963, during the 1960s women were experiencing 'the problem that had no name'. These were well-educated middle-class women who felt that in the process of marrying and having children they had lost part of themselves, or even their sense of self-identity.

There was at this time in Britain, America, and Canada, and a few years later in New Zealand and Australia, general social unrest in the form of a civil rights movement, a black rights movement and an anti-Vietnam movement. There is a strand of liberalism within the women's movement which stresses the rights of the individual and autonomy,⁵ and this period constantly emphasised 'self'. Part of this was a reaction to the terrors of war which had sunk into the minds of people and led them to question their authorities.

Women too questioned *their* authorities who had made childbearing a burden; had made sex unsatisfying because clitoral orgasm was 'infantile'; had made them slaves to the suburban mod-con image of capitalist society in which they were the main consumers; and had used them as sex objects to sell the very products they were encouraged to buy.

Women in the civil rights movement and the New Left also became disillusioned with their roles: they were the dishwashers of the revolution. Stokely Carmichael had made his oft-quoted statement that the only position for women in

the black movement was prone. In Britain, Juliet Mitchell wrote 'The Longest Revolution' for the *New Left Review* (1966) pointing out that women and the 'woman question' had been left out of their analysis and therefore their vision of the future. In Australia Zelda D'Aprano chained herself across the doors of the Commonwealth Building in Melbourne as a protest against the lack of equal pay for women. Marian Simms wrote of Zelda: 'The politics of experience had transformed her from a socialist into a feminist' (1978, p. 94). If the first wave had been motivated by the failure of the Abolitionist movement to deal fairly with women, the second wave was spurred on by disillusionment with the civil rights movements and the New Left.

But the New Left had strong networks which women utilised. Women's caucuses and professional groups were formed and women's newspapers re-emerged. A number of major organising bodies developed in each country, e.g. the National Organisation of Women (NOW) in North America in 1966; the National Women's Co-ordinating Committee (NWCC) in 1970, and the National Joint Action Campaign for Women's Equal Rights (NJACWER) in 1969 in Britain; and Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) in 1972 in Australia. Networking linked women. It was and still is one of the most valuable contributions of the women's movement to the breaking down of women's isolation.

Carolyn Sherif has noted the need for referent groups in a new movement, with whom people can identify. The early consciousness-raising (CR) groups fulfilled this need. Women met and communicated their problems, and their 'bill of gripes'. They came to understand that social structures had defined their role for them and that others were also dissatisfied with that role. The slogan 'the personal is political' emerged, and meant, for example, that when a woman is *forced* to have sex with her husband it is a political act because it reflects the power dynamics in the relationship: wives are property to which husbands have full access. With the support of others like them, women were creating new, positive self-images.

Another important aspect of the CR groups was that women began to talk with each other. They discovered that women were interesting, stimulating and likeable. They felt

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a collective caring and a collective power: a belief that 'sisterhood is powerful'.

The women's movement thus re-emerged from both personal and social sources, and sought change in both areas. The basic problem was seen to be - what caused the inequalities between the sexes and how could they be changed. But groups within the movement differed in their answers to this problem and essentially two approaches to change developed: a reform of the existing structures, or an overturning of them in revolution.

2 Membership and structure of the women's movement

Like most social movements, the women's movement is not homogeneous but consists of numerous groups with different aims. Their one overriding similarity is that they seek changes in our society which give women a choice of lifestyle and help them to fulfil their potential as individuals. Feminist writers have labelled these groups according to their ideologically based approaches to social change.

Shulamith Firestone in 1972 delineated three basic groups of feminists: conservatives, politicians, and radicals. The *conservative feminists* are those concerned, in her words, with 'the more superficial symptoms of sexism' (1972, p. 39). They would be represented by NOW in North America and in Australia by WEL. These groups are structured and seek to reform the existing legal, social, political and employment situations. Since Firestone wrote her book, various governments have established departments or advisers on 'women's affairs'. Women working in these positions are often labelled 'femocrats', an ambivalent term. Whatever feelings women may have about the value of these positions, for many they do offer psychological and practical support, and often manage to change existing laws or situations which are discriminatory. Equal Opportunity Boards and anti-discrimination legislation have been created as toothless tigers, but they can often aid the individual even if they cannot change the position of women as a social class. Although many middle-class women have availed themselves of these support structures, working-class women are often

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too intimidated by employers and by fears of job loss to use the system.

Firestone's second group, the '*politicos*', are basically women whose primary loyalty is to the Left or the black movement. For them, feminism is a tangent or 'secondary in the order of political priorities and must be tailored to fit into a pre-existent (male-created) political framework' (*ibid.*, p. 41). She argued that people in the Left and black movements refused women the right 'to organise around their oppression *as they see and define it*' (p. 40, her italics). In the case of the Equal Opportunity Board, discussed above, they could argue that class was an essential and primary component in the working of such middle-class oriented committees.

The *radical feminists*, described more favourably by Firestone, are those who see 'feminist issues not only as *women's* first priority, but as central to any larger revolutionary analysis' (p. 43). They are revolutionary in their belief that change in the oppressed position of women can only emerge through a total overhaul of the social system. Radicals see men, marriage and the family as oppressors.¹

Again the dynamic of reformist versus radical (or revolutionary) emerges. However, Jo Freeman points out that this division is misleading and simplistic and that 'it is structure and style of action rather than ideology that more accurately differentiates the various groups' (1979, p. 561).

If we consider the aspect of structure, it is clear that the *conservative* feminists working within bureaucracies or institutions are involved in hierarchical situations. They often belong to groups which are traditionally structured. But the method used by the *radical* arm of the movement was the 'rap' session or consciousness-raising (CR) group, which purportedly had no hierarchical structure. Jo Freeman sees the 'rap' group as the most valuable contribution of the women's liberation movement to social change, in that it caused personal attitudes to be questioned. She comments that 'once women have gone through such a resocialisation, their views of themselves and the world are never the same again even if they stop participating actively in the movement' (*ibid.*, p. 562). CR groups also encouraged women to learn