

# Becoming a Feminist after Forty

By Nancy Wilkinson

Women have been becoming feminists for many years — yet it seems that very little is known about how women develop a feminist awareness, or about what changes a woman undergoes as she does so. Dr. Margaret Schneider, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and I decided to pursue this question. In 1990 we interviewed women on the subject of how they became feminists. As these interviews progressed, I became aware that the stories I was hearing from older women seemed different from those of younger ones. As I am an older woman myself, I became very interested in this phenomenon. I decided to look at whether in fact these experiences were different and, if so, how. Although the study included both older and younger feminists, this article will focus only on the experiences reported by the *older* participants.

The women in this part of the study were all between the ages of forty and fifty-six. They were self-selected in that they responded to a poster asking for volunteers who were willing to discuss how they had become feminists. All were either graduate students or recent graduates of undergraduate programmes. All were married and had raised, or were raising children. The method used was that of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Open-ended questions were used because I was interested in accessing the meaning which the women attributed to their experiences and changes. For example, I began by asking each participant how she had become a feminist. I followed her answers by asking further probing questions, such as: what did this mean to her; what were her feelings at the time; how did it further her development; what changes did this event bring about for her, both in her life and in her awareness; what, for her, was the meaning of being a feminist?

Because this was an exploratory study using qualitative methods, the sample of research participants was small. The total number of women interviewed between the ages of twenty and fifty-six was six in pilot interviews and ten in the study. Older women accounted for three of the latter group. Because of the small number, the results, while interesting, are not generalizable and point mainly to the need for further research.

## Results

Changes were grouped into the following categories: changes in attitudes, changes in behaviour, and a combination of changes in attitudes and behaviour. All the women experienced changes in all of these areas.

### CHANGES IN ATTITUDES

#### Attitudes to Self

Joanna's (all names are pseudonyms) story is representative of this group of women before they experienced the changes which led to and accompanied the development of their feminist consciousness. She is a married woman with children. She states she grew up "feeling liberated." She said: "It never occurred to me that women couldn't do what men do." In spite of this, she recounts resenting her mother because "I wasn't the first thing in her life." (Gillian also felt her mother did not do a good job and she determined to "do it right." Joyce saw her mother as too subservient to her father and determined never to do the same). Joanna states that this affected how she later chose to marry and her belief that, if she had children, she should be there for them. At the same time she actively pursued studies in a male-dominated profession. She did marry, had children, left studies

and found herself in an extremely abusive relationship. She states she became depressed, first blaming her husband and then herself. She says:

*My self esteem went down, down, down. I thought 'if I could be more beautiful ... a better cook ... more understanding, then he wouldn't complain.' I kept trying to please. I thought of committing suicide, I became hopeless.*

All the research participants experienced a growth in self-esteem. Each had reported blaming themselves before changing perspective. As one woman reported:

*I began to realize there's nothing wrong with me, what's wrong is the institutionalization of marriage as the norm.*

All reported experiencing a change in identity. They began to identify themselves as persons separate from their roles. In their own words:

*I got to know myself, a separate identity" ... "My kids are wonderful but they are not any more the whole of me ...*

Becoming aware of the right to experience anger was another change in attitude to self which was particular to this group of women.

For all of these women the factors precipitating change, precipitating the development of feminist consciousness were intense. A 1975 study of personal change (McGinnis) found that such change occurred after a "state of alert" — that is, when persons experienced a sense of disequilibrium. This state of disequilibrium happened "when former

conceptions of selves or the world were challenged" (p.147). One woman's sense of both herself and her world was considerably challenged when she learned of her husband's infidelity. Joanna experienced violence in her marriage — something she had never expected. The third married late in life. After having experienced herself as successful in her career, she found her experiences in the role of housewife and mother depressing; her view of herself radically changed. She also experienced little understanding or support from her spouse. All these were very painful experiences, which appear to have initiated the growth or change process. McGinnis identified an intense change process as one characterized by "emotional upheaval and sustained reflections," "all engrossing efforts and struggle" and "radically new patterns of action" (p.147). The results for all three were a great deal of painful self-examination, questioning

all their former values and beliefs, questioning, and in some cases, leaving their marriages, searching for new meanings for their lives and for new or modified lifestyles. All this continued over a period of years. Both the precipitating factors and the processes appeared intense.

Change in self-image seems to me a key factor before other changes can become possible. As in Joanna's case, until women are aware that we are 'worth it,' that we indeed can consider our own needs as well as others', where is the incentive and the rationale for change?

#### Attitudes to Women

In this category the women reported developing an awareness of women's issues as distinct from social ones, and from this awareness moving on to question their own socialization and the values by which they had lived their lives. From

here they moved to develop new values. Gillian reported that after very painful events, emotional upheaval and struggle, she began to read about women's situations, to correspond with feminist friends and so to learn. She says:

*I had the ground pulled out from under me (when she learned of her husband's infidelity) ... later I read Betty Friedan (The Feminine Mystique) and there I was ... I began to identify with other women ... It required me to re-examine all my previously held assumptions of life ... I began questioning and then rejecting the wifemother role as the be-all of life ... I saw that the causes were ... society ... and that my own attitudes were outdated. I began to be aware of how my former views were shaped.*

Women also reported developing a greater bond with women. This was expressed as a valuing of others' experience and their own. It appears that awareness or knowledge of women's situation leads directly to this sense of a bonding or sisterhood. Feminist writer Sandra Bartky states: "In the realization that others are made to suffer in the same way I am made to suffer lies the beginning of a sense of solidarity with other victims" (1975, p.431).

#### CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR

Participants reported changes in taking control, that is, in initiating and in making decisions for themselves. Joyce, who had long been frustrated in her roles and who had felt the need for at least some temporary space to question and evaluate her situation, stated: "I took power over my own life. I got an apartment and moved out."

Joanna asserted:

*I started to act instead of defend myself all the time. I ended the physical violence" (when she began to call the police) ... "I told my husband I was quitting my job (part-time) and going to school—I realized I had the power and I took it.*

These women began to actively take control to make decisions to change their lives.

Their changes in behaviour in terms of other women involved both questioning



Deidre Scherer, *Affirmation*, 1989, non-woven fabric, dyes, thread, 9" x 8"

themselves and gently questioning other women. This change is subtle and is best expressed by Joanna: "Before, women supported each other to 'put up with' or 'make do.' Now we support each other to make changes."

### Personal Behaviour and Lifestyle as a Woman

All the women changed in this area. Two moved out of their marriages for up to one year. All shifted from the conventional roles of wife and mother as they had known them. Feminist writer Robyn Rowland reminds us of a point often overlooked. "It is frightening to try and build equality into a marriage that often began with different and unequal ground rules." Eichler writes: "As the confinement of the old structure has crumbled, so also has its security and predictability" (1984, p.220).

What these women were doing took great courage.

### COMBINATION OF ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR

#### Job/Study

In the area of job/study, all these women made changes. Two returned to graduate studies. One entered and graduated from undergraduate university studies and obtained employment in which she enjoyed both satisfaction and good benefits. She stated: "Now I've got a job I like ... with the same benefits that men get! ... I can go out and get myself an apartment if I like!"

All reported an increase in feelings of independence and career satisfaction.

#### Relationships with Men

All stated that they had re-assessed and changed their commitment to husband and marriage. The movement here appeared to be from reliance on men for understanding and support to more bondedness with women and more independence from men.

### DISCUSSION

A study in 1975 (Stephenson, 1975) which found that interest in 'women's lib' or feminism arose only after women experienced problems in their own roles as women, appears true also for the older

women in my study. All had been home-makers, all began their journey by blaming themselves for not performing their roles adequately. The theme which seemed common to these women was that of the impact of social roles upon them and of their socialization for those roles. Feminist Helen Levine comments on the socialization which women in this age group underwent: "...being Somebody's wife or Somebody's girlfriend or Somebody's mother eventually negates a woman's ego and her potential contribution to society at large" (1989, p.201).

It is not surprising that these women had perceptions of losing themselves, that they had lost their self-esteem. It appears that the risk, for a woman, of adopting this primary role as the sole purpose of life, is that if she feels she has failed as a wife and mother, she herself becomes a failure. Given this evidence, it is not surprising that older participants in this study — all of whom had seen themselves primarily as wife, mother or home-maker — experienced very intense change processes. To question their roles was to question their very selves.

A consequence of 'becoming' the role, as Joanna stated, was to put others' needs first and their own last. Women then learn there is no one to care for their needs, and gradually they come to not even feel them, to know that they exist or that they have a right to them. Joanna, when she did assume control, said she realized she could return to school and quit her part-time job because her mother was sending her money. The interesting point here is that Joanna's mother had *always* sent money, but Joanna felt powerless and was unaware both of her right to have needs and her right to take her own power. When Gillian talked of learning that she had the right to experience anger, she had moved from the perspective of the all-nurturing role, to one where she could also nurture herself. The women's taking control over their lives also appeared to arise out of their experiences of personal lack of control in their traditional roles. Their perceptions of women's issues also appears to have come from their painful experiences in these roles, as did the changes they initiated with their husbands.

For older women in the study, the factors which stimulated the change process, the intensity of the processes, and the changes themselves appear to have been directly related to the effect upon them of

their social roles, as well as the socially-induced expectations of themselves in these roles.

This study was limited in several ways. The study was an exploratory one and the sample, as noted earlier, small. Because participants were self-identified in response to a poster, the sample did not contain never-married women or women living in lesbian relationships.

One important implication arising from this study, however, is the need for support for women coming to feminism by all routes — but especially for older women, for whom the journey seems to be an especially painful one: it appears to involve a questioning of one's values, of one's very life and history. A second implication is the need for mentors — for women new to feminism to see older women in a variety of roles which do not reflect society's stereotypes. This is especially important for older women as they move out of the questionable security of familiar roles and expectations with which they were raised.

### References

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