The First Feminists

by Judith Hole & Ellen Levine

The contemporary women's movement is not the first such movement in American history to offer a wide-ranging feminist critique of society. In fact, much of what seems radical in contemporary feminist analysis parallels the critique made by the feminists of the nineteenth century. Both the early and the contemporary feminists have engaged in a fundamental reexamination of the role of women in all spheres of life, and of the relationships of men and women in all social, political, economic and cultural institutions. Both have defined women as an oppressed group and have traced the origin of women's subjugation to male-defined and male-dominated social institutions and value systems.

When the early feminist movement emerged in the nineteenth century, the "woman issue" was extensively debated in the national press, in political gatherings, and from church pulpits. The women's groups, their platforms, and their leaders, although not always well received or understood, were extremely well known. Until recently, however, that early feminist movement has been only cursorily discussed in American history textbooks, and then only in terms of the drive for suffrage. Even a brief reading of early feminist writings and of the few histories that have dealt specifically with the woman's movement (as it was called then) reveals that the drive for suffrage became the single focus of the movement only after several decades of a more multi-issued campaign for women's equality.

The woman's movement emerged during the 1800s. It was a time of geographic expansion, industrial development, growth of social reform movements, and a general intellectual ferment with a philosophical emphasis on individual freedom, the "rights of man," and universal education. In fact, some of the earliest efforts to extend opportunities to women were made in the field of education. In 1833, Oberlin became the first college to open its doors to both men and women. Although female education at Oberlin was regarded as necessary to ensure the development of good and proper wives and mothers, the open admission policy paved the way for the founding of other schools, some devoted entirely to women's education (Mount Holyoke opened in 1837; Vassar, 1865; Smith and Wellesley, 1875; Radcliff, 1879; Bryn Mawr, 1885). Much of the ground-breaking work in education was done by Emma Willard, who had campaigned vigorously for educational facilities for women beginning in the early 1820s. Frances Wright, one of the first woman orators, was also a strong advocate of education for women. She viewed women as an oppressed group and argued that, "Until women assume the place in society in which good sense and good feeling alike assign to them, human improvement must advance but feebly." Central to her discussion of the inequalities between the sexes was a particular concern with the need for equal educational training for women.

Laurie McLaughlin

"Until we dare to write 'Women — all women — are the prolitariat', I am afraid that we will remain the underclass that we are. We will remain splintered — divided from one another. And we will fail to make the revolution."

— Barbara Deming
from "Remembering Who We Are"

It was in the abolition movement of the 1830s, that the woman's rights movement as such had its political origins. When women began working in earnest for the abolition of slavery, they quickly learned that they could not function as political equals with their male abolitionist friends. Not only were they barred from membership in some organizations, but they had to wage an uphill battle for the right simply to speak in public. Sarah and Angeline Grimke, daughters of a South Carolina slaveholding family, were among the first to fight this battle. Early in their lives the sisters left South Carolina, moved north, and began to speak out publicly on the abolition issue. Within a short time they drew the wrath of different sectors of socitey. A Pastoral letter from the Council of the Congregationalist Ministers of Massachusetts typified the attack:

"The appropriate duties and influence of women are clearly stated in the New Testament .... The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection.... When she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer... she yields the power which God has given her... and her character becomes unnatural."

The brutal and unceasing attacks (sometimes physical) on the women convinced the Grimkes that the issues of freedom for slaves and freedom for women were inextricably linked. The women began to speak about both issues, but because of the objections from male abolitionists who were afraid that discussions of women's rights would "muddy the waters," they often spoke about the "woman question" as a seperate issue. (In fact, Lucy Stone, an early feminist and abolitionist, lectured on abolition on Saturdays and Sundays and on women's rights during the week.)

In an 1837 letter to the President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society — by that time many female anti-slavery societies had been established in response to the exclsionary policy of the male abolitionist groups — Sarah Grimke addressed herself directly to the question of woman's status:

"All history attests that man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind; and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought, and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is his inferior.... But I ask no favors for my sex.... All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy."

The Grimkes challenged both the assumption of the "natural superiority of man" and the social institutions predicated on that assumption. For example, in her "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes"... Sarah Grimke argued against both religious dogma and the institution of marriage. Two brief examples are indicative:

"...Adam's ready acquiescence with his wife's proposal, does not savor much of that superiority in strength of mind, which is arrogated by man."

"...man has exercised the most unlimited and brutal power over woman, in the peculiar character of husband — a word in most countries synonymous with tyrant.... Woman, instead of being elevated by her union with man, which might be expected from an alliance with a superior being, is in reality lowered. She generally loses her individuality, her independent character, her moral being. She becomes absorbed into him, and henceforth is looked at, and acts through the medium of her husband."

They attacked as well the manifestations of "male superiority" in the employment market. In a letter "On the Condition of Women in the United States" Sarah Grimke wrote of:

"...the disproportionate value set on the time and labor of men and of women. A man who is engaged in teaching, can always, I believe, command a higher price for tuition than a woman — even when he teaches the same branches, and is not in any respect superior to the woman.... (Or) for example, in tailoring, a man has twice, or three times as much for making a waistcoat or pantaloons as a woman, although the work done by each may be equally good."

The abolition movement continued to expand, and in 1840 a World Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London. The American delegation included a group of women, among them Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In Volume I of the "History of Woman Suffrage," written and edited by Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage, the authors note that the mere presence of women delegates produced an "excitement and vehemence of protest and denunciation (that) could not have been greater if the news had come that the French were about to invade England." The women were relegated to the galleries and prohibited from participating in any of the proceedings. That society at large frowned upon women participating in political activities was one thing; that the leading male radicals, those most concerned with social inequalities, should also discriminate against women was quite another. The events at the world conference reinforced the women's growing awareness that the battle for the abolition of Negro slavery could never be won without a battle for the abolition of women's slavery:

"As Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wended their way arm in arm down Great Queen Street that night, reviewing the exciting scenes of the day, they agreed to hold a woman's rights convention on their return to America, as the men to whom they had just listened had

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THE QUICHE IS THE THING

W. Shakespeare

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Deborah Kamali will observe her seventeenth birthday March Ninth