Moving the Mountain

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AMERICA SINCE 1960

Flora Davis

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IN MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER,
MARION BALL,
WHO DIED BEFORE
THE SECOND WAVE BEGAN

This book is
my end of a
conversation that
we were never
able to have.

And so, in the spring of 1968, the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) was founded in Cleveland. As its first activity, it sponsored a talk by Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, who spoke on sex discrimination in jobs and education. The women of WEAL would devote most of their energy and abilities to ending discrimination in those two areas.

Though Boyer's departure from NOW caused some hard feelings, they dissipated rather quickly. Boyer wrote to Friedan and other NOW members to explain that she wasn't trying to set up an organization that would compete with NOW. She wouldn't ask NOW members to join WEAL; if they wanted to join, they would have to approach her. She knew WEAL could pick up members elsewhere.

Summing up the impact of the 1967 conference a year later, Friedan wrote that ". . . the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion were and are the two gut issues of the women's movement essential to real security—and equality and human dignity—for all women. . . ." The ERA and abortion would, in fact, become the focal issues in the struggle between feminists and antifeminists.

NOW's victories during the 1960s jolted the old stereotypes about women. They opened doors so that eventually many women would be able to work as police officers and mail carriers, as astronauts, engineers, and surgeons. However, the liberal feminists were basically reformist: They focused on opening up the male world to women at all levels. By 1968, a much more radical form of feminism was taking root in the United States as women's liberation groups began to spring up around the country.

chapter 4

The Birth of Women's Liberation

The women's liberation movement developed independently from liberal feminism. It was sometimes referred to as the younger branch of the movement because most of the women who founded its early groups were in their twenties. Rooted in a different political tradition than the liberals, many had worked in the civil rights movement or had been campus radicals, vehemently opposed to the war in Vietnam. When it came to tactics, they thought in terms of civil disobedience—revolutionary tactics designed to force revolutionary changes.

The women's liberation movement got under way in 1967, and reached a peak of intensity in the early 1970s, but most of its original groups had disappeared almost entirely by 1975.* Those eight short years from 1967 to 1975 were a unique period in the history of feminism. The joy, the yeastiness—the sheer, creative chaos of those years—were extraordinary and had a permanent impact. Women's lives, and men's, would never be quite the same.

* This chapter describes the movement's growth; chapter 8 traces its decline.

It was a time of fierce passions and endless debates. Women's liberation was still in its infancy when disputes erupted between women (sometimes called politicos) who believed that the nation's political and economic system was responsible for women's problems, and radical feminists, who argued that the main problem was male supremacy, and that even a government based on socialist principles wasn't likely to make much difference as long as it was dominated by men.

Radical feminists were a minority in most women's liberation groups at first, but they soon became the movement's major theorists and cutting edge. Their insights first shocked the public (and other feminists), then gradually began to change people's thinking. They were outrageous, articulate, and angry, and they got the attention of the press. Virtually ignoring many legal inequities, they turned their attention to people's private lives and condemned the patriarchal system that gave men the right to dominate women. Their ideas brought thousands of new recruits into the movement, swelling the ranks of NOW chapters as well as women's liberation groups. Ultimately, many liberals and politicos began to think more like radical feminists.

One could argue that for a few years during the late 1960s and early 70s, there were two competing feminist movements—liberal feminism and women's liberation.* It's true that the two developed independently and had somewhat different goals. However, the goals overlapped and women of different persuasions often worked together. At least in retrospect, the second wave appears to have been just one, highly complex movement from the beginning. The competing factions were like tributaries of the same river: Though they arose under different circumstances, from the first they were fated to mingle.

THE ROOTS OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

During the sixties, tens of thousands of young Americans came to think of themselves as radicals who were part of "the Movement." By that, they sometimes meant the civil rights movement, sometimes the New Left, and sometimes both.†

Because many early women's liberationists were Movement

* In Western Europe, the same factions developed in many countries.

† The term "New Left" was coined by the SDS to distinguish student political groups which were loosely socialist from old-line Marxist organizations such as the Communist party.

veterans, to understand women's liberation, one must know something about its roots in the broader Movement. The experiences young women had there explain how they came to be gripped by a vision of radical equality; why many distrusted both the government and liberal feminists; why white and black women who had been in the Movement had different attitudes toward feminism—and, at times, an uneasy relationship with one another; and why some radical feminists turned against the sexual revolution.

SNCC: The Vision of Radical Equality

The gains that blacks made in the 1960s—and the justice of their struggle—kindled the idealism of the young. Because Western nations were experiencing great affluence, for a time almost anything seemed possible. Young people came to believe that society could be changed fundamentally for the better and that, given the abundance they saw all around them, a decent life should be within the reach of all.

For the young, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was the key civil rights organization. It was founded in 1960 by black college students, who had begun to stage sit-ins at southern lunch counters that refused to serve African-Americans.

In its early days, SNCC was profoundly influenced by Ella Baker, an older woman who helped the students organize. Baker had held key positions in two other major civil rights organizations and she had strong ideas about how a grass-roots movement should operate. Those ideas subsequently influenced both the New Left and feminists and are alive in the women's movement today.

As Baker saw it, the major barrier to grass-roots organizing was the fact that most people submitted passively to authority. She believed that virtually everyone—no matter how humble—had some potential for leadership, and she convinced SNCC's student leaders that their task was to go out into rural communities and help them develop their own leaders; they must teach the people to make decisions, to take responsibility for themselves and be ready to accept the consequences, so that before long they would no longer need outside help. Though most SNCC field workers were black, city-bred college students, inspired by Baker's vision of radical equality, they tried to approach uneducated rural people with open minds and learn from them.

SNCC itself was also run according to principles of radical equality.* At meetings, everyone's opinion counted, and in making decisions the staff generally struggled to reach a consensus. This sometimes led to long, exhausting debates—or to sheer chaos. However, Mary King, a SNCC staffer, felt that "SNCC was grounded in the purest vision of democracy that I have ever encountered." Close-knit, utopian, predominantly (but not entirely) black, the organization was known to members as "the beloved community," and those who belonged to it shared an intense experience. Rage, fear, and idealism were all part of it, because SNCC was forged in fire. During the early sixties, violence erupted across the South as whites lashed out at African-Americans. Black activists were jailed and beaten, and some were murdered. The federal government failed to act and the press paid little attention.

In 1964, SNCC's leaders took the step that brought hundreds of young women south: They set out to recruit white college students to help with "Freedom Summer," a voter registration drive. They hoped that if SNCC's field workers included white students, the government would provide some protection and the media would cover events. More than 800 college volunteers, male and female, went to Mississippi to work for SNCC in 1964. They lived in the black community and were often harassed by local whites.

Historian Sara Evans wrote that most of the women came home "seared by an experience that marked a turning point in their lives." Many learned to distrust the authorities. Three civil rights workers disappeared that summer, among them one of the student volunteers. Six months later, the sheriff and deputy sheriff of Neshoba County were among those arrested for the crime. Though the FBI had worked hard to find the killers (two of the victims were white), a number of black activists were also murdered that year, and the agency apparently had no interest in those cases or in other violent incidents at SNCC projects.† Some

* In the 1960s and 70s, radicals were more likely to speak of *participatory democracy* than of radical equality. The term referred primarily to the way groups made decisions: not by majority rule but by consensus, and not by elected representatives but by all members, meeting face to face. According to the group ethic, all should feel like equals. I prefer to write of radical equality because *participatory democracy* seems dated, and in the 1990s many feminist groups still believe in radical equality, though usually in some modified form.

† That summer, 1000 civil rights workers were arrested, 80 were beaten, 4 were critically wounded, and 4 were killed; 37 African-American churches and 30 black homes or businesses were bombed or burned.

women also became leery of liberals because many seemed faint-hearted in their support for civil rights and were slow to oppose the Vietnam War, and because their goal was to reform the system, rather than to replace it.

Freedom Summer also opened many women's eyes to sex discrimination, but black women reacted differently than whites. To the African-Americans, gender bias seemed trivial compared with racial prejudice. Most had grown up in communities where older women were greatly respected: Always the backbone of the black churches, they were now the mainstay of the civil rights movement as well. Though its formal leadership was almost entirely male, women often predominated in boycotts, demonstrations, and voter registration drives. A few had become famous—Rosa Parks, for example, whose refusal to sit at the back of the bus sparked the Montgomery bus boycott, and Fannie Lou Hamer, a SNCC field secretary who was jailed, beaten, and permanently disabled in 1963 but went on to become one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Though most of SNCC's leaders, too, were men, compared to other civil rights groups it was relatively free of sex bias, at least where black women were concerned. A few of them—such as Ruby Doris Smith, Diane Nash, Cynthia Washington, and Donna Richards Moses—were part of the inner circle or were project directors. They seemed to assume that they could do anything the men could do, even if it meant facing physical danger.

Most of the white female summer volunteers were given little responsibility and were assigned to do office work or to teach in one of the "freedom schools." That may have been partly because it seemed safer to give them less visible jobs. Their presence in the black community stirred up southern whites, who were enraged at the very idea that the women might be having sex with black men. However, sexism was undoubtedly involved as well. Notes taken by those who interviewed prospective volunteers before the summer suggest that the women were often judged on their looks—and some were rejected for being too outspoken.

Some of the black women in SNCC objected to the fact that men held most of the leadership positions, but to others that seemed irrelevant. Some weren't even aware that the white female volunteers were being given the least responsible jobs. Many of the black women resented the white women anyway, because SNCC's black males seemed to prefer them as sex partners. Cynthia Washington, a black project director, recalled that "We did the same work as men . . . usually *with* men. But when

we finally got back to some town where we could relax and go out, the men went out with other women. Our skills and abilities were recognized and respected, but that seemed to place us in some category other than female."

For many white women, sex was part of the experience of Freedom Summer. SNCC, the beloved community, was seen as a model of what the world could become, and in that context a sexual connection between a black man and a white woman seemed the ultimate expression of love and equality. However, there were also white women who were harassed because they said no, and a few who said yes found that their morals were questioned and they were asked to leave. The sexual double standard was strong and was complicated by racial tensions—for example, when a black woman dated a white man, the other men berated her. In retrospect, the whole experience taught some women of both races that in too many cases, the sexual revolution simply freed men so that they could use women. That conclusion would ultimately find expression in feminist theory.

At the end of the summer, eighty white volunteers stayed on. SNCC had rarely had more than a hundred members before, most of them black. Because many of the whites who stayed were women, racial and sexual tensions continued to build—they would ultimately contribute to the decision to expel whites from the group. However, SNCC was experiencing many other problems, as well. As it nearly doubled in size, factions developed, and its informal, almost leaderless structure and practice of making decisions by consensus no longer worked well. In addition, after years of being subjected to white violence, many members were bitter and ready to reject nonviolent social protest as a tactic.

THE KING-HAYDEN PAPER

In November 1964, SNCC held a staff retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, that became a milestone in feminist histories. Mary King and Casey Hayden, two white staffers, had drafted a paper protesting the position of women in SNCC and they had it distributed anonymously—they were afraid of being ridiculed. In it, they described a number of incidents in which women had been passed over in favor of men,* and went on to note that "the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman

* For instance: "Two organizers were working together to form a farmers' league. Without asking any questions, the male organizer immediately assigned the clerical work to the female organizer although both had had equal experience. . . ."

problem because of the assumption of male superiority. Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep-rooted and every [bit as] . . . crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro." Though some staffers made fun of these statements, others were supportive.

The King-Hayden paper is sometimes described as the first blow struck for women's liberation. Surprisingly, in 1987, Mary King more or less repudiated that idea, arguing that to emphasize sex discrimination in SNCC "overlooks the truly significant roles women played, the responsiveness of SNCC to women leaders . . . and the fact that, by and large, the movement was peopled by women. . . ."

King insisted that she and Hayden never meant to make a major issue of their status in the movement. Rather, they were primarily concerned—as most SNCC staffers were then—about the future direction of the organization. There was much debate at the time between those who wanted strong, centralized leadership and those (including King and Hayden) who wanted to retain SNCC's loose, highly democratic structure. King anticipated that if SNCC's local groups were more or less autonomous, some might take up women's issues. However, she was swimming against the tide, because SNCC was about to opt for a centralized, hierarchical structure. As women's liberation groups would eventually discover, it was difficult to undertake organized political action while maintaining radical equality within a large group. James Forman, executive director of SNCC, suggested that the organization had confused fighting for a better society with "SNCC as that better society itself."

THE DREAM OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

The dream of the beloved community would haunt other social movements for years. Long after Freedom Summer, many SNCC staffers and volunteers still hungered for the feeling that they were part of something bigger—a close and supportive group and a meaningful struggle for change. The United States was probably the most individualistic nation in the world, and that hunger for community was a motivating factor, seldom recognized, in many of the conflicts of the seventies and eighties. Again and again, young people set up leftist or feminist groups, collectives or communes, with the idea that they could create a model of a better society and then use it to transform the world around them.

Women of the New Left

In 1965, two things happened that led many young whites to shift their attention from black civil rights to other issues. SNCC's leaders began to talk of black power, and whites were less and less welcome in the organization. At about the same time, the Vietnam War began to override all other problems for college students, as President Johnson stepped up the draft. As a result, the college-based "New Left" expanded vigorously. It was a loosely connected network of campus groups that were intent on reforming everything from the universities themselves to the nation's political and economic systems. In general, the student radicals were against racism at home and American imperialism abroad. They were basically anticapitalist and wanted to see society's resources distributed more fairly. Once again, feminists-to-be were involved, and once again they learned lessons about sexism.

For the young, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was the key New Left organization. It had been trying to organize poor urban blacks in the North while hammering out a critique of American society. Now, with feeling against the draft running high, SDS entered a period of explosive growth. Eventually, it would have over 10,000 members at colleges around the country. Students who had been to the South often provided the leadership and suggested tactics and ideology.

Though women had had their problems in SNCC, by all accounts the SDS was much worse. Typically, the men made the decisions while the women made coffee and did office work. Nevertheless, some SDS women played important roles in the effort to mobilize the poor. In several cities, they successfully organized welfare mothers into stable pressure groups, and because they *were* successful, they gained in self-respect. That, in turn, increased their resentment when radical men treated them like clerical help—or sex objects. By 1965, women in the community-organizing groups had begun to talk among themselves about "the woman question."

There were some intriguing parallels between the events that led women's liberationists to organize and those that triggered the resurgence of liberal feminism. In 1965, Mary King and Casey Hayden (the authors of the anonymous paper protesting the position of women in SNCC) mailed a long memo to forty women activists, eloquently describing the gap that existed in the Move-

ment between the ideal of equality and the sex caste system that kept women in subordinate positions. The memo was published in *Liberation* magazine in the spring of 1966, and it may have done as much to ignite the women's liberation branch of the movement as Betty Friedan's book did to spark liberal feminism. Yet Mary King recalled years later that, though she and Hayden thought it might be possible to develop a women's network within the Movement, "Even in our fantasies, we had no hope that a [women's] movement would develop."

King acknowledged that they were mistaken about several things. In the memo, they wrote that "The [sex] caste system is not institutionalized by law." At the time, they didn't realize how many laws discriminated against women. They also believed that the sex-caste system was "volitional," and that men and women could do away with it in their personal relationships simply by agreeing that it was unjust. Like Betty Friedan, they underestimated the social forces at work and male resistance to change.

Though occasional workshops on "the woman question" were held during SDS meetings in 1966, organizing didn't actually begin until the summer of 1967, when a small group of Chicago women got together to draft a list of demands to present at a convention of the National Conference for a New Politics (NCPC). The NCPC was a fledgling political organization, and the convention was its attempt to unify various groups, including SNCC, the Black Panthers, and the SDS, behind a single coherent program.

Unfortunately for the goal of unity, tensions between blacks and whites dominated the convention. African-Americans demanded half the votes and half the committee slots, although only about one sixth of those attending the meeting were black, and in the end, the white majority gave them what they wanted. However, when a women's caucus demanded 51 percent of the committee seats, on the grounds that women were 51 percent of the U.S. population, and also tried to raise other women's issues, they weren't even permitted a hearing.

In Washington a little over a year earlier, women had founded NOW out of frustration when they weren't allowed to present resolutions at a conference. The young radical women, faced with a somewhat similar situation, also began to organize as a result. The Chicago group grew rapidly and within six months had spun off four others. Women's liberation groups also cropped up independently in four other cities in 1967 and 1968.

HOW TO ORGANIZE A MOVEMENT

To become more than a local phenomenon, social movements need some way to communicate with potential supporters. Just as the liberal feminists built on the existing network of women's rights organizations, women's liberationists used the Movement. For instance, in 1967, when Shulamith Firestone and Pam Allen set out to form New York Radical Women (NYRW), they recruited members from a local SDS women's caucus and at a regional SDS meeting. Meanwhile, Chicago women, traveling widely to New Left conferences and demonstrations, were helping to spread the word. New Left publications carried reports—sometimes derogatory—of the women's demands at the NCPC convention and of the new groups that were forming. During 1968, as young women learned by one means or another that in other places radical women were meeting to discuss their issues, they began to form their own groups in virtually every major city in the country.

The women's liberationists also used a national antiwar meeting to make contact with one another. In January 1968, a coalition of women's peace groups called the Jeannette Rankin Brigade staged a protest in Washington, a combined demonstration and convention that drew 5000 women. Radical groups from Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C., decided to hold their own demonstration during the convention. They objected to the fact that the Brigade was presenting women primarily as wives and mothers of fighting men, "tearful and passive," as Shulamith Firestone put it, and basically powerless. To dramatize their point, they staged a funeral procession at Arlington Cemetery carrying a dummy of "Traditional Womanhood," laid out as if for burial. Kathie Sarachild gave an impassioned speech on behalf of the NYRW contingent, attacking the old ideas about women, and calling for a grass-roots movement "so that we can have independent lives." A pamphlet written by Sarachild proclaimed that "sisterhood is powerful."

The demonstration succeeded beyond the New Yorkers' most ambitious dreams. Five hundred radical women soon left the main convention to meet as a counter congress. No one was prepared for such a massive response and there was chaos. The NYRW women had no coherent program or action to suggest, nor did anyone else. Nevertheless, new women's liberation groups soon formed in several cities. The demonstration in Washington deepened a split that was already developing among radical women between radical feminists and politicos. Many of the New York City politicos felt that the mock funeral was irrelevant to the antiwar effort, which was their first priority, and in the months that followed they began to meet separately as a subgroup. Similar factions also developed in Chicago and in other places.

Women's liberation activists launched several publications in 1968 that helped build the movement. In March, Chicago women published the first issue of *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, a newsletter that reached radical women all over the country and that generally presented the politico point of view. In June, the radical feminists of NYRW brought out *Notes from the First Year*. At about the same time, two women from Gainesville produced a document that came to be known as "the Florida paper." Though they had had no contact with the New York group, it was obvious that they'd been thinking along similar lines. They questioned the traditional goals of women's lives—love, marriage, children. Declaring that men were the enemy, they recommended that their female readers try karate, periodic celibacy, and living in women's communes. Both the Florida paper and *Notes from the First Year* were widely read, though in the beginning politicos tended to scoff at them, pointing out that they were about personal issues rather than the serious stuff of politics.

In August 1968, twenty women from various cities met in Sandy Springs, Maryland, to discuss their issues. Arguments between politicos and radical feminists erupted again and again. Then, as the women set about planning a much bigger conference in November, there was a debate over whether to invite some of the radical black women who were involved in civil rights or welfare rights groups but not in women's liberation. Some white activists said that they must be included if feminists wanted to understand how all women were oppressed, but others pointed out that many black women scoffed at the whole idea of women's liberation. The white feminists were afraid that if they talked in front of black women about the oppression of white middle class housewives, there would be "snickers and sneers." They were feeling defensive because New Left males so often insisted that women's issues were trivial compared to racism and the Vietnam War. Some of the women argued, too, that they needed time to analyze their own oppression. Afterward, they could have a conference that would include the black women. That was more or

less the way it was left, and when more than 200 women from thirty-seven states and Canada met in Chicago over the Thanksgiving weekend that year, black women's groups weren't represented.

In retrospect that seems like an important missed opportunity. However, radical black women probably wouldn't have come to the conference if they'd been invited, according to Charlotte Bunch, because of the impression they had of the women's liberation movement—many saw it as bourgeois or felt that fighting racism had to be their priority. Bunch was a member of the Washington group that organized both the Sandy Springs meeting and the Thanksgiving conference. Over the next two years, her group, the D.C. Women's Liberation Movement, tried unsuccessfully a number of times to draw groups like the Black Panther women into women's caucuses. For a while, the feminists did work closely with the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) on the issue of health care at D.C. General Hospital, but the NWRO women—who were predominantly black—weren't interested in becoming involved in other issues as well.

"I had lots of conversations with black friends . . . about feminism," said Bunch, "and they were not unsupportive of my doing it, but they weren't interested themselves. In the black movement, women were simply not at a point where it made any sense to them to join us. . . . They often didn't like the way they were treated by the black men, but they didn't feel alienated from their own movement the way some of us did from the white antiwar movement."

Bunch also suggested that when activists first begin to explore their issues, a period of separation may be inevitable. White feminists needed time to define their own problems. "In terms of racism," Bunch said, "I think the worst mistakes came later." Over the years, white women made too few efforts to build coalitions with women of color and to understand and address their issues. Thus, the second wave remained largely a white women's movement until the 1980s, when women of color, who had organized their own groups, demanded that white feminists give more than lip service to their issues.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN ALL ITS VARIETY

It's difficult to generalize about the women's liberation movement because it developed so differently in different cities. Charlotte Bunch suggested that to some extent, feminists' priorities reflected regional interests.

In New York, women's liberation groups were creative, volatile, combative—perhaps hyperstimulated because the city was the media capital of the nation. Believing passionately in their own brands of feminism, women fought for the chance to define the issues for the press. In the process, many were "trashed" because their groups were committed to the SNCC ideal of radical equality, and those who strove to be leaders or to stand out in any way were distrusted.

The New York movement grew largely through fission. Feminists organized, debated the issues passionately, and arrived at a point where they disagreed over goals or tactics; then the group split into two or more grouplets, and these offshoots typically continued to grow until they, too, splintered. Thus, by mid-1969, NYRW had disappeared but had spun off Witches (politicos) and Redstockings (radical feminists). Meanwhile, Ti-Grace Atkinson had emerged from a major confrontation within the New York chapter of NOW to found The Feminists. In 1969, disaffected members of that group joined with Redstockings dropouts to form New York Radical Feminists (NYRF). Virtually all the groups were wonderfully innovative in developing both theories and tactics (more about that later).

There was more conflict in New York than anywhere else in the country, partly because in smaller cities there weren't enough activists that groups could afford to split. Where factions developed, they generally pursued their own projects within the group or if the group split, the offshoots often worked together.

In Washington, D.C., women's liberationists—highly conscious of what Congress was up to—were policy-oriented and tended to see issues in terms of the whole nation. According to Charlotte Bunch, the movement in the capital wasn't as defined by ideology because Washington itself was a city more interested in pragmatic politics than in systems of belief. Boston and San Francisco, on the other hand, had major academic communities, so movement theory and ideology loomed large there. Chicago's liberationists, with midwestern practicality, tended to focus on bread-and-butter issues such as day care.

In many cities during those early years, there were divisions of one sort or another between politicos and radical feminists. However, the factions—and the issues—were far from clear-cut. In the broadest sense, activists disagreed about whether women were oppressed by the nation's political system or by male su-

premacy. Politicos were generally more closely tied to the New Left, and many favored some form of socialism. Yet the groups usually identified as politico also had nonsocialist members and members who had never been particularly interested in any kind of politics. Furthermore, some radical feminists were strong socialists—they believed women were oppressed both by men *and* by capitalism, but they felt that male supremacy was the first and most fundamental problem.

On one level, the debate between the factions was over priorities, about where feminists should invest their energy. On another level, many politicos dismissed the radical feminists as hopelessly antimale, while the feminists insisted that the politicos too often played to an "invisible audience" of New Left men.

The history of the women's liberation movement in Boston provides some of the clearest examples of the issues (and gut feelings) that divided politicos and radical feminists. Boston women eventually formed two of the better known and more creative women's liberation groups, Bread and Roses, which was politico in its orientation, and radical-feminist Cell 16. Their story also captures the sense of limitless possibilities that lit up those early years.

BOSTON POLITICOS

It was a radical feminist who first broached the possibility of a liberation movement to a key Boston New Left activist. In the fall of 1967, Kathie Sarachild came to Boston to visit Nancy Hawley, an old friend who had been one of the founders of the first chapter of the SDS. Hawley was married and had a small child, and she recalled that when Sarachild began to talk to her about her own evolution as a feminist, "I couldn't understand what she was saying and how it was relevant to me. . . . I kept thinking to myself that she was just talking about women because she didn't have a man and *I* was happily married and didn't have to worry about *that*!" However, Hawley did think about it, she explained, "as I always thought about stuff that Kathie raised for me."

A few months later, Hawley got into a conversation with a couple of other politically minded women "about us, as women." They found the subject as gripping as she did, so in April 1968, she invited a handful of friends to meet at her house on an evening when her husband was out. "We talked about our families, our mothers, our fathers, our siblings; we talked about our men. . . . For hours we talked . . . and left feeling high." The group met every week through the spring and summer of 1968 and eventually grew to include about twenty women. In June, during a local antiwar conference, Hawley presented a paper on women's oppression.

Hawley, like many other young radicals, had parents who were very concerned about politics. Growing up, she assumed that getting involved in a political group was "just something you did." All through college, when she was heavily committed to the New Left, she felt "that I was working for other people and that my needs were put aside. It really was when Kathie first started talking to me about women's issues that . . . I felt I had reached home."

The Birth of Cell 16

In the summer of 1968, even as Hawley's group was meeting, so was another small band of feminists. Roxanne Dunbar launched the group by placing an ad in an underground newspaper. It announced the formation of "a Female Liberation Front . . . To question: all phallic social structures . . . To Demand: free abortion and birth control on demand—communal raising of children by both sexes and by people of all ages . . ." Though Dunbar, like Hawley, had a New Left background, her ideas on women's issues were much more radical. The group she created, originally called the Female Liberation Front, eventually took the name Cell 16.

Betsy Warrior was a welfare mother when she attended that first meeting of Female Liberation. Warrior had dropped out of high school in tenth grade to work in a factory. A battered wife for seven years, she applied for welfare after her divorce because she had no one to leave her child with while she went out to work. She came to the first meeting of Female Liberation Front "just to see what it was like." There were about eight women present, and Warrior listened with a startled sense of recognition as they put into words many of the ideas about women and men that she herself had had.

The women of the Female Liberation Front got off to a fast start with the two projects they were to become known for. They began to take classes in karate—a decision that grew out of discussions of rape and women's vulnerability—and they started to publish *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation*.

Warrior recalled that she and a friend hawked the early issues

of the journal on Harvard Square with three small children in tow. "It was like a circus," she said. The Black Panthers were there and people from New Left groups and local communes, all selling their literature. It was a time and a place open to new ideas; still, many people found those advanced by Female Liberation too extreme to take seriously. Nancy Hawley remembered thinking that "it was one thing to be for women's liberation but another to be against men. . . . So I laughed. . . . But it made an impression." A blunt editorial in the second issue advised women to learn karate for self-defense, to remain single and avoid having children, to give up traditional surnames because they were men's names (a father's, a husband's), and to foreswear make-up and dressing to attract men.

Though the split between politicos and radical feminists was partly over priorities—over whether women should spend their energy attacking the political system or attacking male power—there sometimes seemed to be an undercurrent of fear in the reactions of the politicos. According to Betsy Warrior, the political women "considered us man-haters and weirdos. . . . I think they probably despised and feared us because we were articulating their own doubts." Hawley acknowledged that "it was very personal for many people who were for the first time struggling with issues in their relationships [with men] that hadn't surfaced before."

Exponential Growth

The handful of Boston women who attended the 1968 Thanksgiving conference in Chicago included Hawley, Roxanne Dunbar, and others, and there was friction between Dunbar and some of the others. Hawley also remembered feeling acutely uncomfortable when some participants declared that the nuclear family was a trap for women. She was pregnant and very much aware that this was the first time since her oldest child was born that she'd been away from her family.

Back in Boston, the women (most were politicos) held an open meeting at MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) to report on what had happened in Chicago. Forty women came and before the evening ended, they decided to meet again a month later. One hundred women turned up the next time; 150 the time after that; and then 200. It was exciting, said Hawley, but also overwhelming, and large meetings didn't satisfy the need most of the women felt to come together in small numbers

for intense discussions. Meanwhile, the women who had begun meeting at Hawley's home the previous spring had split into two groups, because two factions had developed—politicos and radical feminists.

In the spring of 1969, some of the women who had been meeting at MIT got together with the Female Liberation Front to hold a conference at Emmanuel College. Unexpectedly, more than 600 people came. Kris Rosenthal, one of the MIT organizers, recalled that the Female Liberation group seemed so militant that some of the other women were afraid they would alienate newcomers. However, the group's karate demonstrations apparently made a deep impression.

A generally snide article in *New York* magazine described the opening karate session this way:

> Abby [Rockefeller] and two fellow Movement women, Jayne West and Dana Densmore, like three pajamaed Statues of Liberty, stomp and punch their way across the Emmanuel College gym in Boston. Zapping the air, they move in unison: a perfect chorus line except for their prison-matron eyes, gritted teeth, clenched fists, and war cries. The unbleached canvas of their Korean peasants' uniforms snaps smartly with each blow. They even bow after the movements.

Later, Rockefeller split a board with her head on the second try. Even the politicos were impressed. According to the radical feminists, karate offered fringe benefits such as physical fitness and self-confidence, but the main point of it was self-defense.

After the conference, many women were eager to join Female Liberation, which had been renamed Cell 16. However, its members were reluctant to expand the group. Because they'd already spent months analyzing women's issues, they were afraid that newcomers might treat them as leaders and that a hierarchy might develop. They believed in radical equality.

The MIT group was also beset with new recruits. Their next meeting drew several hundred women. The enthusiasm was contagious but the numbers, almost unmanageable. There was some danger that the strategic moment would get away from them. That summer, some of the women began to talk about how to organize Boston's growing population of feminists. The discussions dragged on for months. Some, who wanted to build a mass movement, argued that even women who were totally naive about politics might come to see the need for a socialist revolution once they were part of the organization. However, others vehe-

mently rejected the notion of a small, elite, political cadre steering the politics of the masses. They not only disliked hierarchies but were unwilling to create a structure that might one day put power into the hands of some individual or of a small, militant group. (They may have had Cell 16 in mind.)

Nevertheless, it seemed clear that even minimal organization would give feminists more clout. If small groups of women, tackling projects on their own, all said they were from the same organization, that organization would become a power base for everyone, and when any group succeeded, all could share the sense of accomplishment.

Bread and Roses

Bread and Roses was finally founded in September 1969. It was named for a famous strike: In 1912 the women of Lawrence, Massachusetts, struck a textile plant for "bread" (money) and "roses" (a good life). Though the new organization's charter used the phrase "socialist revolutionary," no one made any attempt to define either word. Kris Rosenthal speculated that the group's organizers may have been afraid that if there was a discussion of exactly what "socialist" and "revolutionary" meant, vast differences of opinion would surface.

Bread and Roses was basically a loose network of small collectives. That was the form feminism took in many major cities in the United States and Europe. Nancy Hawley estimated that at one point Boston had more than thirty groups "and new women kept coming and coming." Most of the collectives held weekly meetings, and there was also a weekly mass meeting for everyone. All groups were encouraged to develop their own projects. Thus, over the next few years, women from Bread and Roses took part in antiwar demonstrations and taught courses on auto mechanics; some wrote and produced feminist plays, while others met with suburban housewives who called the Bread and Roses office to ask if someone would come and tell them about women's liberation. Periodically, there were zap actions—for instance, when a local radio station, in asking for volunteers, mentioned that it could use some "chicks" to do typing, feminists called on the manager and dumped live baby chicks on his desk in the name of Bread and Roses.

Most new members were recruited at orientation sessions, which were held one evening a week at a coffeehouse. By that time, consciousness-raising had been invented in New York

(more about that later), so C-R groups were formed on the spot for those who were interested. Eventually, these groups were expected to vote on whether to join Bread and Roses. "Some of them decided to, in which case they got on the telephone tree," said Jane Mansbridge, one of the organizers, "and some of them decided not to. In that case, the individual members of the group could still attend meetings." Mansbridge remembered the telephone tree as "some pieces of paper"—phone numbers used to make contact with the various groups. It wasn't the most efficient system in the world. Mansbridge noted that "none of the organization really worked. . . . But for all of us, there was this sense of creating brand-new things."

During the early 1970s, many of the politicos came to agree with the radical feminists' basic analysis of patriarchal power, and the conflicts between socialist and radical feminists petered out. However, the factions still had different priorities. Many politicos became involved in the campaigns for day care and for abortion rights. They also tackled the labor movement and founded women's unions around the country. For a few years, the unions flourished, but in the midseventies, leftist sects attacked more than twenty of them. Determined to pull women back into the class struggle, the leftists joined some unions and then almost literally talked them to death with endless arguments about the correct political line. The sects also destroyed some women's liberation groups and women's centers (chapter 8).

Probably, the politicos' most significant achievement was their contribution to nonsexist education. In some cities, they taught classes and organized whole schools for adults that offered courses in everything from karate to women's history; many activists eventually became academics and pioneered women's studies on college campuses.

THE INVENTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Radical feminists owed many of the insights that were their hallmark to consciousness-raising sessions. C-R, as it came to be called, was developed in 1968 by New York Radical Women. An organizing tactic that would shape the movement for years to come, it was at first scorned by many politicos and the women of NOW.

Kathie Sarachild recalled that Ann Forer, a member of NYRW, first spoke of the need to raise consciousness during a meeting

shortly after the group was founded. To explain what she meant, she began to talk about how her own thinking had changed—and her consciousness had been raised—as she considered the pressure on women to be attractive to men. Sarachild recalled:

> . . . I just sat there listening to her describe all the false ways women have to act: playing dumb, always being agreeable, always being nice, not to mention what we had to do to our bodies with the clothes and shoes we wore, the diets we had to go through, going blind not wearing glasses, all because men didn't find our real selves, our human freedom, our basic humanity "attractive." And I realized I still could learn a lot about how to understand and describe the particular oppression of women in ways that could reach other women in the way this had just reached me. The whole group was moved as I was, and we decided on the spot that what we needed—in the words Ann used—was to "raise our consciousness some more."

Sarachild saw C-R as a way to start a mass movement for women's liberation. She recalled that politicos initially worried that it would turn women against men, while NOW members felt that it substituted talk for action. In fact, C-R led directly to two of the most effective actions feminists ever staged: The discussions on attractiveness inspired the famous Miss America protest, and an emotional session on abortion prompted the first speakout, where women testified in public about their own experiences.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, thousands of C-R groups formed around the country. The women who joined them found that consciousness-raising challenged many of their basic assumptions about themselves and their relations to men. The gurus of the New Left, especially Frantz Fanon, had described the way people internalized their own oppression by buying into the stereotypes created by the larger society. Because they believed in their own inferiority, it didn't occur to them to challenge the system. For example, women who believed that females really were less capable than males were unlikely to become feminists. Consciousness-raising was a powerful way to change such beliefs. As women talked in small, homogeneous groups about various issues, they discovered that problems they'd thought were theirs alone were shared by all—and created by the male-dominated culture.* However, Sarachild and others in NYRW had

* C-R groups discussed such topics as the lessons girls learned from their parents about a woman's proper role, what various religions had to say about women, and so on.

believed that C-R should do much more. Their idea was that, as women came to understand that their problems had political and social origins and couldn't be solved by individual action, they would move on to consider what kind of collective, political action to take. If C-R didn't lead to collective action, it was simply a form of therapy, aimed at changing women themselves rather than at changing society.

In the end, consciousness-raising drew thousands of women into the movement. Within a very few years, most of its critics had embraced it enthusiastically.

THE FIRST SPEAKOUT

The idea of holding "speakouts" also grew out of consciousness-raising. In 1968, during a C-R session, several NYRW women talked about their abortions. Most had never told their stories to anyone before, except perhaps to a few close friends, because abortion was a crime almost everywhere (except in certain circumstances, such as when the woman's life was in danger). The open discussion had a tremendous impact on everyone present and suggested to some that public testimonials might be an effective way to arouse support for the repeal of restrictive abortion laws.

Early in 1969, some women, including Kathie Sarachild, founded Redstockings.* They intended it to be a radical feminist action group under the umbrella of NYRW, and for their first major action, they targeted a legislative hearing on abortion reform. An all-male committee of the New York legislature had invited fifteen "expert" witnesses to testify—fourteen men and a nun. A few minutes after the hearing began, Sarachild stood up and demanded a chance to speak, on the grounds that women who had had illegal abortions were the only true experts on the subject. Predictably, the committee refused to listen.

Balked only temporarily, Redstockings organized the first speakout a month later. At a public meeting held in a church, twelve women described their own abortions to an audience of over 300. One told of paying $900 for an illegal operation. Another recalled that she applied to ten hospitals before she found one willing to give her an abortion—provided she'd agree to be

* The name Redstockings was a synthesis: It mixed "the red of revolution" with *Bluestockings*, a derogatory name given to some first-wave feminists.

sterilized at the same time; she was then twenty years old. Afterward, women in the audience stood up and told their own stories. The abortion speakout became the model for speakouts on other sensitive subjects, such as rape, sexual harassment, and incest. Each exposed unfair laws and misogynist attitudes.

RADICAL FEMINISM, IN THEORY

During the late 1960s, radical feminists plunged into print to challenge many basic assumptions about women. They focused on the family, the division of labor within the home, and sexual relations between women and men, pointing out that all of these areas were organized so that males could dominate females. Some of the earliest expressions of radical feminism were collected in *Notes From the First Year*, published by NYWR in 1968. Together with *No More Fun and Games* and the Florida paper, *Notes* broke new ground.

Critics, including politicos, said the issues radical feminists raised were trivial and personal; the radical feminists replied that the personal *was* political, because it helped to maintain a power structure based on gender, and because to do anything about it, women must organize. The insights of radical feminism ultimately brought thousands of new recruits into the movement. However, their major theories were hotly disputed at first by other feminists.

Radical feminists took on the institution of marriage, both in what they wrote and with public protests. Ti-Grace Atkinson concluded that love was "the psychological pivot in the persecution of women" and that marriage must be destroyed. On September 23, 1969, her group, The Feminists, made headlines by invading the New York City marriage license bureau armed with leaflets and accompanied by the press. They recommended eliminating marriage and raising children communally. Meanwhile, some activists took new surnames, rejecting the patriarchal tradition by which a woman bore her father's name until she married and her husband's after that.* However, not all radical feminists were antimarriage. The "pro-woman" faction within Redstockings maintained that the real problem was male supremacy within the family—that was what had to be changed.

* Kathie Sarachild, who was originally Kathie Amatniek, invented her own matrilineal surname during the 1968 Thanksgiving meeting. Because her mother's name was Sara, she hitched "child" onto that to become Kathie Sarachild—child of Sara.

Radical feminists also challenged people's assumptions about sex itself. Anne Koedt's radical feminist classic, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," created a furor. In it, Koedt disputed the common belief that all normal, mature women had vaginal orgasms and that a woman who needed clitoral stimulation to have an orgasm was frigid. "There is only one area for sexual climax . . . the clitoris," Koedt wrote. "All orgasms are extensions of sensations from this area. . . . this leads to some interesting questions about conventional sex and our role in it. Men have orgasms essentially by friction with the vagina, not the clitoral area. . . . Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men. . . ." Liberal feminists and many of the socialists were embarrassed, even appalled, by this emphasis on sex. Betty Friedan insisted that "the point is not to focus on the kinds of sexual orgasm, but on the basic human relations that need to be changed." However, for some women, Koedt's insights were a revelation.

One of the most basic issues radical feminists addressed was the question: If women are oppressed, who or what is oppressing them? As noted earlier, some blamed men—for instance, Beverly Jones and Judith Brown argued in the Florida paper that all men benefit from "the male mystique" and that each man "rests his ego in some measure on the basic common denominator, being a man." However, other radical feminists, including Kate Millett, author of *Sexual Politics*, blamed sex roles instead. According to the sex-roles theory, which surfaced in Sweden in the early 1960s, both women and men were trained from birth to behave in particular sex-stereotyped ways, and men were as damaged by this training as women were. Many liberal feminists and politicos adopted this explanation.

In naming the oppressor, feminist groups often defined the kind of action they were likely to take. Thus, during the 1970s liberal NOW sponsored men's consciousness-raising groups in the hope of re-educating men. Many of the radical feminists felt it was a lost cause, because males weren't likely to give up their power and status willingly. Reforming men was "a little too much like the chickens trying to educate the chicken farmer," as novelist Marge Piercy put it.

Many radical feminists believed that male supremacy was the earliest form of oppression and the root of all other forms, including racism; thus, sexism must be tackled first. This theory thoroughly alienated many women of color.

How did men come to be the dominant sex? According to Ti-

Grace Atkinson, they got the upper hand because women had the burden of reproduction and men "had the wit to take advantage of that. . . ." In her 1970 book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone said much the same thing: "The heart of woman's oppression is her childbearing and child-rearing roles." Pursuing the argument to its logical conclusion, Firestone insisted that women must be freed from "the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available. . . ."* However, biological explanations for male dominance were almost a form of heresy to most activists, including many radical feminists. During the early years of the second wave, both branches of the movement were committed to equality feminism. Intent on undermining sex stereotypes, feminists denied that there were any truly significant differences between women and men.

If women were oppressed, why didn't more of them *feel* oppressed? Some radical feminists argued that females were brainwashed into believing that women were inferior and that men were meant to dominate. Parents, the media, the whole culture, conspired to deliver the message. However, the socialization theory didn't convince everyone, and Redstockings were divided on the issue. Some members believed in the importance of brainwashing, but others (the "pro-woman" faction) argued that most women tolerated their subordinate role because of "continual, daily pressure from men. We do not need to change ourselves, but to change men." The pro-woman group was determined to focus on what men did to keep women down and on organizing to fight that, rather than on what women must do to change their thinking, which they saw as a form of "blame the victim." They were also afraid the brainwashing argument would be used against women, who might be refused jobs, for example, on the grounds that they weren't aggressive enough, because they'd been brainwashed to fit the traditional feminine role.

From the outset, women's liberation groups were often torn by conflict. The battles over theory and tactics were painful for the women involved and sometimes damaging to the movement. Even activists who believed that feminism must include many different points of view often lost sight of that fact in the heat of the moment, as they struggled to reach agreement on a theory or a course of action.

* In the 1980s, when medical researchers began to move reproduction out of the body into the lab, many feminists called it a new form of tyranny.

In retrospect, it's clear that the second wave needed all of its various factions, from the radical to the relatively conservative, for feminists tackled an incredible spectrum of issues. A social movement that's too cautious, afraid to work outside established channels, has a very limited impact; one that's too radical—that uses revolutionary tactics to pursue revolutionary goals—unites the opposition and is almost certain to be crushed. A movement that includes both extremes and many groups in between has the best chance. From the late sixties on, the second wave was highly diversified, and that was one of its strengths.

chapter 5

Experiments in Radical Equality

Many things separated women's liberationists from liberal feminists. The women generally came from different generations, had cut their teeth politically under different circumstances, and their priorities were seldom the same. Nevertheless, it may have been as much style as substance that made them incompatible. Liberal groups were organized along traditional, hierarchical lines: Members elected officers, voted on major decisions, and large meetings always had a chairperson. Most women's liberation groups, on the other hand, were determined to operate without leaders and to arrive at decisions by consensus.

The commitment to radical equality that was characteristic of women's liberation was carried to harmful extremes in some groups. However, when it worked, it generated such a powerful experience that eventually it influenced liberal feminists as well. Ideas that had originated with Ella Baker in SNCC, although much modified, were still part of the *zeitgeist* of the movement in 1990. It is important, therefore, to understand why women's liberation groups insisted on radical equality in the first place, how

it went wrong, and why the basic principles survived in spite of that.

WHY RADICAL EQUALITY?

In the 1960s, young people all over the United States and Western Europe got together to form left-wing collectives run in a highly egalitarian fashion. They established free schools, health clinics, law communes, underground newspapers, food co-ops, and women's centers, as well as activist political groups.

In the United States, SNCC was the model for radical equality for many Movement people, but the SDS also made "participatory democracy" a central tenet. The founders of the SDS believed that people must have a direct say in the decisions that affected their lives—must be allowed to cast their own votes rather than merely choosing representatives to decide things for them, because even democratically elected hierarchies couldn't be trusted.

Most middle-aged Americans couldn't understand what made radical equality so appealing. Political scientist Jane Mansbridge suggested that the idea gripped the young because many of them felt powerless to affect the course of their own lives. The institutions that controlled society hadn't responded to their demands, and they believed that liberal democracy had failed them. Actually, some people have experimented with participatory democracy in almost every era, according to Mansbridge. Probably the oldest form of human organization, it's a fundamental element in everyone's experience because friendships operate on the same general principles. Friends treat each other as equals, establish no hierarchies, and seldom vote on decisions because a formal vote would only call attention to divisions within the group and might deepen them.

For feminists and others, group experiments with radical equality served several purposes. They were convinced that meaningful change had to begin on the personal level. In addition, when it worked well, radical equality created a close-knit, supportive group; alienated as they were from the mainstream, many activists needed that sense of support.

EARLY EXPERIMENTS

Women's liberationists invented their own versions of radical equality in the late sixties and early seventies. Once again, some of the most creative thinking and some of the hottest conflicts occurred in women's liberation groups in New York City. Their history illustrates the promise and the problems of attempting to create, in microcosm, an utterly just society.

The problems first surfaced irrepressibly late in 1968 in—of all places—the New York chapter of NOW, a bastion of liberal feminism. NOW-New York, the organization's largest and most vigorous chapter, had more than 300 members, who governed themselves according to a traditional hierarchical structure. Day-to-day decisions were made by an executive board that consisted of elected officers and committee heads; it met once a week. The general membership gathered once a month for meetings that sometimes drew 200 women.

Beginning in about August 1968, there were heated conflicts within the chapter. Muriel Fox, a board member, recalled that "for a while there, nobody dared miss the weekly board meeting because there might be a vote to do something that they didn't believe in." At the center of the most significant controversy was Ti-Grace Atkinson, who had been elected president of NOW-New York in December 1967. At the time, Atkinson was a graduate student at Columbia University. A contemporary news report spoke of her "dreamy, softly sexy style," and Betty Friedan later recalled her own first impression: "[Ti-Grace's] Main Line accent and ladylike blond good looks would be perfect, I thought, for raising money from those mythical rich old widows we never did unearth." Instead, Atkinson was to become famous as one of the most militant of the new American feminists—but before that, she tried hard to push NOW into a more radical stance.

As a graduate student on a campus with a high-profile SDS chapter, Atkinson had become a convert to participatory democracy. Convinced it would be good for NOW, she proposed to the national board that instead of electing officers, NOW chapters should hold lotteries at frequent intervals and allow members to draw lots for the leadership positions. To no one's surprise, the board turned down the proposal. Betty Friedan pointed out that if leaders were selected by lot, members would have no way to

hold them accountable. They could do exactly as they pleased, knowing that their post would pass to someone else anyway in a very short time.

Atkinson admitted defeat at the national level but pressed for a restructuring of the New York chapter. Matters came to a head at a general membership meeting on October 17, 1968, when the faction led by Atkinson attempted to revise the chapter's bylaws so that its offices would be filled on a rotation basis. Jean Faust, the first president of the chapter, recalled that during the debate on the proposal, "the dissident group claimed that all women were equally talented and should have equal opportunities to hold leadership positions." What they didn't understand, said Faust, was that the chapter needed to have some people who would assume daily, continuing responsibility for the work of the organization.

The proposal was defeated, and Atkinson resigned from NOW and went on to found The Feminists, a new, radical feminist group. Over the next few years, they became famous for their stand on issues such as marriage and for a lottery system that resembled the one NOW had spurned. On a regular basis, The Feminists rotated positions that were part of a formal hierarchy in most organizations—for example, at each meeting they drew lots for the job of chairing the meeting. In addition, tasks were assigned by lot, and members who already had desirable skills—they'd done speechwriting, for example—were actually requested not to put their names in the pool for those assignments but to be ready to help when asked. Obviously, this system sacrificed efficiency, but it did help some members develop new abilities. Many women had never before had a chance to chair a meeting, write a speech or press release, or in general find out what they might be capable of.

At the heart of the lottery system was a deep suspicion of leadership itself and of anyone who had power over others. As Atkinson put it in her letter of resignation from NOW, "We want to get rid of the positions of power, not get up into those positions . . . the power relationships we have among ourselves are a good indication of what we *really* want in the world at large."

As the women's liberation movement evolved, many feminists became convinced that it was simply natural for women to operate without hierarchies—without "power trips." They pointed out that females were brought up to handle relationships very differently than males, with more emphasis on cooperation and

much less on competing and oneupmanship.* Even liberal feminists liked that idea, and it became widely accepted within the movement that feminists should play down hierarchies.

TRASHING: THE MOVEMENT'S "McCARTHY ERA"

Radical equality turned out to be a mixed blessing for women's liberation. Groups that functioned without a hierarchy often generated an intense feeling of community, an almost ecstatic closeness. The leaderless format was especially good for consciousness-raising groups, and the intensity of the experience was partly responsible for the enormous impact they had on their members. However, some women's liberation groups became preoccupied with internal issues of power and carried their aversion to hierarchies to extremes. Women who stood out from the rest for any reason were accused of elitism and "trashed." Within the movement, the period from 1969 to 1971 became known as feminism's "McCarthy era" because of the dogmatism of some groups.

Trashing was a form of character assassination, an attack on a woman's personality, motives, or commitment to the cause. Sometimes those trashed were activists with strong personalities, who were charged with behaving like "male heavies"—in other words, with trying to dominate a meeting or a group. In other cases, so-called "media stars" were trashed for elitism. Women who wrote articles on the movement and had them published or had feminist plays produced were apt to be attacked as opportunists who had risen to prominence on the backs of their sisters.

Because many women's liberation groups refused to identify any of their members as leaders, that left reporters free to make their own selection, and—especially in New York—the media zeroed in on a few charismatic personalities. These women appeared on television talk shows, were interviewed by the press—and were often fiercely resented by other feminists. Author Kate Millett noted that the movement sent "double signals: you absolutely must preach at our panel, star at our conference—implying, fink if you don't . . . and at the same time laying down a wonderfully uptight line about elitism."

* In the 1980s, the idea that women had a different, more egalitarian management style turned up in books written for the business community.

Though resentment of the media stars was partly motivated by envy, there was also a group ethic involved. Well aware that some people had had more advantages than others, many women's liberationists assumed that if all women just had equal opportunities, all would be equal in ability. Sometimes it worked that way, and women who had never had much self-confidence were transformed. A member of Jane, a Chicago abortion collective, talking about the impact the experience had on her, explained that "I can do things that I never felt I could do. . . . All that crap about how you have to be an expert . . . it's just a ruse to make you feel incompetent in your own life." Many young people saw expertise as one more way of maintaining the old hierarchies. This resulted, at times, in narrow-minded anti-intellectualism (in China, it resulted in the Cultural Revolution).

Many groups, determined to ensure absolute equality, used the methods pioneered by The Feminists in allotting menial tasks and more important responsibilities. They assumed that everyone could, and should, do a little of everything. Though this sometimes worked nicely, at times the principle was carried to extremes. Robin Morgan worked on the New Left newspaper *Rat* during a period when it was being produced by a women's collective. A published poet, she readily agreed when the collective decided it would be elitist for any member to sign her name to what she'd written. Later, accused of writing in a style that was still identifiably hers, Morgan actually tried to "worsen" her writing. She even acquiesced when asked not to write at all but to stick to proofreading and other, more mundane tasks to give others a chance. However, after about a month of that, she quit the paper because, as she put it, "something cracked open inside me. . . ."

Why Trashing Occurred

Few feminists understood that in trying to function without a hierarchy, they were tackling something very difficult. As political scientist Jo Freeman pointed out, despite the best intentions, virtually every group eventually developed its own *informal*, invisible power structure. Many were dominated by a handful of close friends. At meetings they listened to one another more attentively, interrupted less often, and backed up one another's arguments. Between meetings, they got together to discuss issues and activities and share information. Other members who found themselves locked out of the inner circle were baffled and frus-

trated. When, as sometimes happened, it was the working-class women who wound up on the outside, class differences became another divisive issue.

Some women undoubtedly expected too much. They were drawn into the movement by the talk of "sisterhood" and the promise that here, at least, there would be no hierarchies. Author Susan Brownmiller, a key figure in women's liberation circles in New York, explained that "they were horrified and hurt to discover that even within the women's movement we weren't all equal, that some people suddenly were on television . . . that some had articles printed." It seemed that they had landed at the bottom of yet another heap, but this time their anger was fueled (and legitimated) by the belief that in a women's group there should be no elite.

Why was there so much free-floating hostility in the movement? Some of the anger was misdirected frustration. As Jo Freeman said, "Trying to change an entire society is a very slow . . . process in which gains are incremental, rewards diffuse, and setbacks frequent." The outrage that many activists felt needed an outlet, and other women were more available as targets than men were. Feminist attorney Flo Kennedy described the result as "horizontal hostilities."

In the early 1970s, according to Brownmiller, "The antileadership thing . . . took up more energy than anything." Some women's liberation groups were undermined by their own authoritarianism and the practice of trashing.

THE "OUR BODIES, OURSELVES" COLLECTIVE

Radical equality was definitely not an unmitigated disaster, however. Long after most women's liberation groups had faded from the scene, feminist collectives kept forming. Many found ways to apply the principles of equality less rigidly and thrived as a result. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective is perhaps the best example. It was twenty years old in 1990, and continues to be one of the most influential advocates for women's health in the country. Especially in the early years, members were often invited to talk to other feminists about how to work effectively as a collective.

The Boston group grew out of a workshop that Nancy Hawley presented during the women's liberation conference at Emmanuel College in the spring of 1969. Her subject, women's health,

aroused so much interest that some participants began to meet regularly to discuss it. Ultimately, they decided to do research on health issues and pass the information on to other women. In 1970, at the collective's expense, the New England Free Press published the newsprint booklet that would ultimately become the best-selling *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. In a fresh, unpretentious way, it combined medical information with vignettes of women's personal experiences. The subjects it covered ran the gamut from sexuality, venereal disease, and pregnancy to "Women, Medicine, and Capitalism." Though the book was never advertised, it sold more than 200,000 copies over the next few years. As the money began to come in, the New England Free Press reduced the price of the first printing from 75 cents to 30 cents so that it could reach more women.

During the summer and fall of 1971, New York publishing houses began courting the group, and that initiated a difficult decision-making process. The book would reach many more women if it were published commercially, but the price would inevitably go up so that poor women could no longer afford it. In the end, the collective decided to accept the publisher's offer but with several stipulations. They agreed among themselves that all the money earned as royalties would be used to support health education projects for women; and they had clauses written into their book contract that set a ceiling on the book's price and allowed a 70 percent discount for clinics or other nonprofit organizations involved in women's health counseling. In 1972, the collective incorporated—it had to, in order to sign the contract. At the same time, it closed its ranks to outsiders, freezing its size for almost a decade at twelve members.

Our Bodies, Ourselves was published by Simon and Schuster in 1973, and over the next seventeen years sold more than three million copies in English and eleven other languages. To the women of the collective, the money was a responsibility. Judy Norsigian, a member of the group, recalled that "we started giving money to other women's health projects—we saw ourselves as a mini-foundation."

Over the years, the women of the collective remained committed to the principles of radical equality. Though small decisions were left to subgroups responsible for particular tasks, the big ones were still made by consensus at the weekly meeting of the whole collective. Vilunya Diskin, a member, explained:

"On any issue that we have to decide, we've always gone around the circle, with everyone saying their feelings and ideas.

You get in the habit of listening. Many, many times, I've been in the group and had my opinion, and couldn't wait to tell it to everyone—and then changed my mind three times as I waited for it to be my turn. It makes you understand how you can look at the same issue in many different ways."

Sometimes, if several people were against something everyone else favored, the discussion continued until all felt they could "live with" the majority decision. Sometimes, if those in the minority felt very strongly, the rest agreed to go along with them. Sometimes, the matter was shelved for a week or so, to give everyone a chance to mull it over. And once in a long while, when the decision-making process dragged on for too long, the group agreed—by consensus—to put the matter to a vote. In the aftermath of a particularly difficult decision, the members occasionally felt burned-out for a while. According to Norsigian, decision by consensus took longer, "but when you're done, you have much more support in the group for the decision that was made." Consensus also tended to wring all pertinent information from the group. Diskin added that "with practice, you get adept at it."

Hawley recalled that it was hard in the beginning to believe that conflict over issues would lead to something good, that it wasn't going to become trashing. She said, "At different points in our history, we pushed things under the rug because we didn't know how to handle them. There have been a couple of striking times when that didn't happen and I think we grew enormously from those times."

Leadership was the issue on one of those occasions. In the early years, Hawley did more work than anyone else, and for a time she more or less led the group—for instance, at meetings she was the one most likely to win others over to her point of view. Finally, someone challenged her. In the ensuing discussion, Hawley realized that she was ready to pull back and let others take the lead, and the others came to understand that if they wanted more influence in the group, there was a way to get it. Diskin said, "In a structureless group, the way you get power is to do work. The more you do, the more powerful you become. . . . Power isn't finite, either. There's plenty to go around. You want more power, you think of another project."

In the beginning the women assumed, as other feminists did, that everyone should do all jobs and that—given the chance—all could probably do them equally well. Hawley said, "We weren't acknowledging the fact that some people preferred certain jobs,

or that some people were better able to exert leadership and more interested in doing that. . . . Over time we recognized all that."

At first, the members weren't paid for work they did, but eventually they rejected "volunteerism," as other feminists were doing. From that point on, some worked for the collective and others had outside jobs, and everyone was paid by the hour when they worked on group projects. Because there was no hierarchy and all were paid at the same rate, there was little incentive to compete and every reason to help one another out. Though there was no way to fire someone who wasn't doing her share (a major stumbling block for some other feminist collectives), that became a problem only on a few occasions.

Looking back, members of the collective identified three major factors that kept the group together over the years. Hawley mentioned "the richness of the connection between us. We've not only worked together but held one another's hands through divorces, new marriages, babies, operations." Norsigian cited the fact that "we produced something that generated money, which we therefore had a responsibility for." The third factor was that the group was unusually homogeneous. All the members were white and college-educated and most came from a strong ethnic background where families were important. The collective became a kind of extended family for them.

In addition, the collective stayed flexible—the women didn't insist that every single decision had to be made by consensus, for example—and it stayed small. In a large group, decision by consensus can become unbearably time-consuming.

FEMINIST UTOPIAS

The ideal of radical equality took root in the women's movement to a degree that it never had in the New Left. As Jane Mansbridge said, women were good at relationships—usually, better than men. Many women's liberationists believed that if they could learn to work together effectively in their own group without a hierarchy, they could use what they'd learned to change the outside world.

"Unfortunately, the experience wasn't transferable," said Charlotte Bunch. In 1973, she was one of a group of Washington feminists who founded a journal called *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*. Over a period of years, the women experimented with group structure. They were determined to be nonauthoritarian,

yet, unlike many collectives, they wanted to encourage individual leadership and believed that some responsibilities couldn't be shared. Thus, they practiced "horizontal leadership." Tasks and responsibilities were clearly defined, but every staffer handled both creative and mundane tasks in her own area, so that no one got only the best or worst jobs. Unusual financial arrangements increased the sense of sharing. Members with well-paid jobs in the outside world tithed—they made monthly contributions to support the journal, each deciding for herself how much she would give. Some others with less earning ability actually worked for *Quest* and were paid salaries. As the women saw it, some people gave more money, while others gave more time, and they were all partners in the venture.

Quest's core group stayed together for almost five years. They began to disperse in 1978, not because of conflicts within the group, but because some members wanted to move on to other projects. The publication survived until 1982. The big disappointment for the founders was that "we didn't know how to transfer what we had to other people," said Bunch. The group originally intended to form a national organization based on the egalitarian principles they developed. That never happened. Other feminists, too, found that there was no way to translate the models they'd created in microcosm to the outside world. "All the same," said Bunch, "I think the collectives were enormously important in the lives of the people involved . . . because they carried into the world the principles and values they developed there." As individuals, working in universities or corporations, many feminists tried to share perks and power more evenly and made a point of acknowledging that other people's work was important, no matter what their position.

The second wave of feminism was about power: not only about how it was distributed in society, but how it might be used differently. Traditionally, those high on the ladder of hierarchy used their power to control what others did and were admired for it. In the women's movement, what many activists valued was the ability to *empower* others—to find out what their needs and hopes were and work together toward mutual goals. That became the feminist ethic for women's liberationists and liberal feminists alike. As with any ethic, it sometimes received only lip service.

Throughout the 1980s, small feminist groups still operated—almost automatically now—in a roughly egalitarian fashion. Women who achieved positions of authority often chose to organize their staff in a kind of flattened hierarchy that spread responsibility around. Meanwhile, under pressure from feminists of color, many activists were beginning to look at power from a different angle. Instead of focusing on relationships that set one individual above another, they were looking at systems of domination that put one group above another—men over women, whites over people of color, heterosexuals over gays, and so on. The basic problem, they now argued, was the ideology of domination, which assumed that such hierarchies were natural and inevitable.