



# THE **ESSENTIAL**

# FEMINIST READER

*Edited and with an Introduction by*

ESTELLE B.  
FREEDMAN

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*Estelle B. Freedman*



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FOR JOHN

# INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a recent term, coined in the nineteenth century, but its intellectual history goes back over half a millennium. Simply defined, feminism is the belief that women have the same human capacities as men. While this claim may no longer seem controversial, the “woman question” has provoked spirited debate in Western culture since at least the fifteenth century. At that time, deeply held beliefs about women’s physical, moral, and intellectual inferiority justified patriarchal laws requiring female obedience to fathers and husbands. In response, critics began to argue passionately that the common humanity of women and men far overshadows the biological distinctions of sex. This central insight has evolved over the centuries into a variety of feminist ideas that continue to inspire political movements throughout the world.

Even when men held formal power, however, women across cultures found myriad ways to transcend or resist patriarchal rule. Elite women could enjoy wealth and political authority through their connections to powerful male relatives. Some women reigned as queens. More commonly, women’s contributions to household production gave them leverage within their families. Buddhist and Catholic religious convents in Asia, Europe, and the Americas provided an alternative to marriage and opportunities for women to claim spiritual authority. When denied formal education, women still created poetry, music, and

art. And in villages from Africa to North America, women's social networks attempted to regulate male authority, as when they publicly shamed abusive husbands.

Two features distinguish feminism from women's individual efforts to claim spiritual, familial, or political authority. First, feminism explicitly rejects the legitimacy of patriarchal rule. Second, feminism initiates social movements to alter laws and customs. A series of historical transformations over the past six hundred years—including democratic politics and industrial growth—made feminist critiques both possible and necessary. Intellectually, a new worldview associated with “modernity” questioned inherited dogma and favored individual reason. From this foundation a political theory based on individual rights encouraged the rejection of rule by elites in favor of representative government. Simultaneously, the shift from agriculture to manufacturing, from rural to urban life, and from family economies to market systems based on wage labor reinforced the critique of social hierarchy.

In the fifteenth century, humanist ideas about the capacity for reason inspired European women to question their relegation to second-class status. Exceptional women who had access to learning, like Christine de Pizan, used their knowledge to try to refute the negative depictions of their sex as evil, ignorant, or frivolous. With the expansion of learning in Europe during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, both women and men questioned restrictions on female education. By the late eighteenth century, democratic theories inspired revolutions that overthrew monarchical rule in the United States and France. The ideal of individual rights also encouraged social movements to abolish slavery in the Americas, to emancipate serfs and Jews in Europe, and to extend suffrage to adult males. In this climate, feminists questioned the patriarchal privileges retained by men. Along with these political ideas, the transition from a family to a market economy, which gradually drew women into wage labor, further fueled feminism by creating a double bind for women, as mothers and as wage workers. Feminism responded to the contradictions in women's lives wrought by capitalist economic growth, as well as to the limitations of democratic political ideals.

Feminist critiques of patriarchy took various forms, depending on

whether they originated in liberal, socialist, or other traditions. In the early 1800s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States and John Stuart Mill in England extended liberal political ideals when they championed education, property rights, and full citizenship for women. By 1900 an international women's movement advocated these goals in urban areas of Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia, where Francisca Diniz, Qasim Amin, and Kishida Toshiko publicly argued for a wider sphere for women beyond the family. At the same time, socialists from Friedrich Engels in Germany to Alexandra Kollontai in Russia rejected "bourgeois feminist" campaigns for legal rights in favor of organizing women within trade unions and establishing revolutionary socialist states. Throughout the world, grassroots women's movements formed when workers and peasants organized, as Domitila Barrios de la Chungara of Brazil illustrated in the late twentieth century.

Movements for racial and social justice also inspired critiques of patriarchy, along with insights into the connections between hierarchies based on gender and race. In America, activists from Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper in the nineteenth century to W.E.B. Du Bois and Pauli Murray in the twentieth century sought full participation of African American women in U.S. society. Within the anti-apartheid movement, the Federation of South African Women insisted that national liberation include women's emancipation. The revival of feminism after the 1960s, known as the Second Wave, witnessed the flourishing of identity politics among women of color and lesbians. Those living with multiple identities, Gloria Anzaldúa and others explained, illuminate the inseparability of efforts to achieve racial, sexual, and gender justice.

Over the past six hundred years, wherever the principles of individual rights or social justice gained legitimacy, critical thinkers have incorporated women into these new worldviews. From the woman question in early-modern Europe to the feminist debates of the past century, a variety of philosophical and literary texts document this rich literary tradition. The following sixty-four selections represent a small sampling from this heritage, necessarily omitting some major works but introducing others that should be better known. Along with influential treatises, speeches, and reports, they include selected works of fiction, drama, and poetry chosen for their articulation of feminist



political ideas. The majority of these works originated in Europe and the Americas, but writers from every region, both female and male, have contributed to this history.

Reading these documents over time and across countries reveals both persistence and change in feminist thought. The earliest writers refuted arguments about the natural inferiority of women and justified female education. Later texts, responding to the effects of democratic and industrial revolutions, reiterated these concerns but incorporated as well new arguments for political rights and economic opportunities. In recent decades feminists have addressed the inseparability of race and gender in determining women's identities, and they have increasingly named health, reproduction, and sexuality as political, and not merely personal, matters.

Feminist writers could not ignore the fact that religious and scientific institutions took for granted the notion that women were inferior to men. In Western culture, the representation of women as frivolous, evil, or dissipated rested in part on the myth of Eve bringing sin into the world, but images of female decadence and ignorance could be found in Chinese and Indian civilizations as well. These beliefs in women's incapacity for virtue and learning helped justify male control over daughters and wives, whether through law or through customs such as female seclusion. In response to negative stereotypes, writers from Christine de Pizan in fifteenth-century France to Qiu Jin in twentieth-century China compiled litanies of mythical and historical heroines who exhibited learning, valor, virtue, and piety. Other writers, including Li Ju-chen and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, used satire and fantasy to question male dominance. Over the centuries, and building on earlier feminist texts, Mary Wollstonecraft, Ding Ling, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and others insisted that women's common humanity with men overrode the biological fact of sexual difference. They argued that only social custom, and particularly economic dependence on men, produced the negative qualities associated with women and the superiority assumed by men.

Across cultures and centuries, education recurs in feminist thought as the key to creating virtuous and capable women who reject mere ornamental roles. If "the mind has no sex," as François Poullain de la Barre wrote in 1673, women had the capacity for reason and, with

education, they could contribute to social progress. For Mary Wollstonecraft, Flora Tristan, and Anna Julia Cooper, creating better mothers initially justified female education. Writers from Harriet Taylor Mill to Virginia Woolf suggested that men would also benefit from the perspectives of educated women. Far more radical was the suggestion that education would prepare women to become full citizens, a prospect that even Wollstonecraft considered daring. Only gradually did feminists justify education for women's own development, as did Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 1890s. By the 1960s, Betty Friedan reiterated Stanton's claims, reframing them in the psychological terms of self-actualization, or achieving one's full potential. In the interim, expressions of women's rising consciousness echoed internationally in prose, song, and poetry, such as Yosano Akiko's observation in 1911 that "All the sleeping women / Are now awake and moving."

Building on access to education, calls to extend the political "rights of man" to women gathered force in the nineteenth century. Where representative governments replaced monarchical rule, working-class men and slaves struggled to achieve citizenship. For women within antislavery movements, such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the plight of slaves, along with constraints on women's political efforts, triggered feminist consciousness. Feminism as a form of emancipation from slavery remained a central metaphor in the women's rights movements that formed in Europe and the Americas. Another recurrent rationale for women's rights, first articulated by the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier, declared that the progress of a civilization could be measured by the level of its women. His statement echoed in Kishida's speeches in Japan in the 1880s, de Beauvoir's classic *The Second Sex* in the 1940s, and the charter of the Federation of South African Women in the 1950s. Over the course of a century, middle-class women's campaigns persuaded most democratic governments to extend property rights and suffrage to women. These once radical demands, for which women like Susan B. Anthony and Emmeline Pankhurst risked imprisonment, are now considered basic human rights.

Measuring civilizations by the status of women provided ammunition for Western feminist politics, but it encouraged ethnocentric attitudes toward the rest of the world. In the nineteenth century Europeans imagined that they led the march of civilization across the globe, justifying colonial rule because they brought enlightenment to

otherwise savage peoples. Feminist writers such as Harriet Taylor Mill reflected these views, while some colonial subjects exposed to European education also accepted this hierarchy of civilizations. Thus the Egyptian male feminist Qasim Amin urged the rejection of local customs, such as female veiling, because they signified cultural inferiority to European styles, even as he insisted that Islamic law granted women's rights.

Increasingly, however, feminists questioned the narrative of European progress. In Africa, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti pointed out that European colonial rule had undermined, rather than elevated, women's authority in Nigeria. At international feminist conferences, activists such as Shareefeh Hamid Ali rejected the ethnocentric and patronizing assumptions expressed by many white Western women. In the post-colonial world, women from developing regions continued to define liberation on their own terms. Some Islamic feminists championed modest dress as an improvement on the sexualized fashions of the West. As the American poet Adrienne Rich realized, given the legacy of colonial domination by Western nations, feminists had to question Virginia Woolf's dictum that "As a woman I have no country" and recognize their own cultural biases. By the end of the twentieth century, women from the developing regions increasingly assumed leadership in articulating feminist goals, as they did at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

Along with the quest for self-representation and full citizenship, feminists have targeted economic dependence on men as a source of women's secondary status. In the nineteenth century, middle-class women's inability to manage property or control wages left them in a childlike position, a theme explored by Henrik Ibsen in his 1879 play *The Doll's House*. Most feminist economic critiques, however, concentrated on working-class women. Liberals John Stuart Mill and Susan B. Anthony, socialist Flora Tristan, and radical anarchist Emma Goldman all condemned limited opportunities for self-support, low wages, and the consequent plight of those working-class women who were forced into prostitution. Drawing on Engels's account of history, Alexandra Kollontai insisted that the socialist state would emancipate female workers. Other socialist women, such as the Chinese writer Ding Ling and the Bolivian activist Domitila Barrios de la Chungara, recognized as well the importance of changing the attitudes of revolutionary men.

Despite progress in the areas of education, employment, and suffrage, feminists struggled to resolve the conflicts faced by wage-earning women who raise children. In the early twentieth century both W.E.B. Du Bois and the Swedish feminist Alva Myrdal insisted that women should not have to choose between wage labor and maternity. Most working women, however, have not had the luxury of making such a choice. In the 1970s socialist feminists such as the Italian theorist Mariarosa Dalla Costa proposed paying wages for housework. To ease the dual burdens of female labor, the United Nations has encouraged male responsibility for parenting, but only recently have men such as Jonah Gokova of Zimbabwe advocated shared parenting as a means of undermining patriarchy.

Feminist writers have also identified the female body as a source of both oppression and empowerment. "One is not born, but becomes a woman," de Beauvoir famously wrote. Because cultures have elaborated on biological differences to reinforce gender hierarchy, feminists have looked skeptically on theories of natural femininity. Early texts deplored women's ornamental function and the focus on female beauty at the expense of female intellect. In the nineteenth century, as the authority of medical science expanded, women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman expressed discontent with their treatment from this male-dominated elite. Margaret Sanger's birth control crusade soon placed reproduction at the center of feminist politics by rejecting involuntary motherhood. By the late twentieth century, women's acknowledgment of their illegal abortions in Europe and of female genital cutting in Africa brought once private health concerns into public view. In the United States, revelations of continuing sexual harassment inspired younger women, such as Rebecca Walker, to declare a Third Wave of feminism.

Despite the association of women's rights with free love—stimulated in part by the personal lives of writers such as Wollstonecraft and de Beauvoir—most feminists wanted to improve, rather than reject, the institution of marriage. Until the late twentieth century, control over reproduction took precedence over sexual liberation. Emma Goldman voiced a rare alternative when she insisted that women's emancipation must include love and passion. After the 1960s, however, explorations of female passion proliferated as feminists attempted to redefine sexual empowerment. Hélène Cixous portrayed the emancipatory energies of

writing as an expression of the female body, while lesbian feminists in Europe and the United States conceptualized female sexual pleasure without dependence on men. Outside the West, the assertion of lesbian rights remained controversial, as evidenced by debates over their inclusion in the platform at the U.N. Conference on Women in 1995.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, feminist ideas have evolved from pleas for educational opportunity to claims that women's rights, broadly defined, are human rights, a creed adopted by the United Nations and most of its member nations. No one political theory or strategy delineates feminism. Arguments that women's unique capacities as mothers justify their inclusion in civic life endure, but they have been supplemented by the universalistic tenets embodied in equal rights laws. Gender-specific policies—such as “affirmative action” to redress historic inequalities in the workplace, or *parité* to increase the representation of women in public office—seek equality by acknowledging the different treatment of men and women.

In response to persistent challenges to its goals, feminism continues to evolve. Young women still confront stereotypes about evil and ignorant girls and they remain vulnerable to sexual violence. Third Wave feminists face the dilemma of affirming female sexual agency in cultures that market the hypersexuality of young women. In those parts of the world now plagued by political and economic instability, women struggle simultaneously for daily survival, democracy, and personal sovereignty. For millions, the goal of literacy remains elusive. By attempting to empower these women, feminism contributes to the broader project of redressing global inequalities. On every continent, contemporary feminist theorists, artists, and activists carry on the tradition documented in this collection, seeking full human rights for all women.



## ABOUT THE EDITOR

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