ISSUES IN FEMINISM

An Introduction to Women's Studies

SHEILA RUTH

SECOND EDITION

Issues in Feminism

An Introduction to Women's Studies

Sheila Ruth

Southern Illinois University–Edwardsville

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Preface

When I was first preparing *Issues in Feminism* in 1978, I wrote:

> *Women's studies was born out of the women's movement, which was born out of the concrete experience, realities, and possibilities of women's lives. No matter how much a part of the traditional, "respectable" university the research, faculty, or students of women's studies become, we never lose sight of our beginnings or continuing rootedness in women's liberation, because it is the rootedness in its issues that gives impetus and meaning to our work.*
>
> *Those of us engaged in what is currently called women's studies (research and learning in a feminist context) have come along different routes, yet almost without exception each of us is here because at some time in our personal history we have specifically experienced events or ideas that have propelled us into a reappraisal of our lives as women. Generally it was the power of those experiences and the shock of the appraisal that created in us the desire and the commitment to know more about women, womanhood, and the consequences of gender definition.*

In the years since this book's beginnings, a great deal has changed: society has changed; women's studies has changed; I have changed.

The eighties have been the decade of the reactionary. In national politics and in social attitudes, progressive liberalism has been forced into retrenchment, and feminists find ourselves in an environment that *seems* overtly more accepting but is actually more hostile. More women work than ever before, are in the professions, have educations, and have seen some small improvements in income. It is more respectable not to marry, or to be a single parent, and "liberated women" are fixtures in television series. Yet, E.R.A. was defeated in 1982 and is rarely heard of today; affirmative action for women has been all but destroyed after the Reagan years, and we are losing ground in reproductive autonomy. Many women are increasingly poor. Worse, our young people are for the most part apolitical, and many young women—perhaps most—believe that feminism is beside the point, all important battles having been settled.

Nonetheless, the seeds of the activism of the sixties were sown in the fifties, and perhaps our losses in the eighties will shock more women back into action in the coming decade. If that is to be so, women's studies is faced with a vast responsibility.

In this decade of retrenchments, the fortunes of women's studies have been mixed. On the one hand, we have grown. More than two-thirds of American colleges and universities have women's studies programs, a growing number with graduate offerings. The National Women's Studies Association, founded in 1977, now has over 3,000 members,

a journal of its own, growing influence. In the late 1970's, careful women did not profess an interest in feminist scholarship until they had received tenure, and ambitious women avoided the field altogether. Today there are chairs in women's studies, joint appointments, and visiting lectureships. Women's studies today has luminaries, canons, "schools of thought," and a vast literature.

Let us not be mistaken, however, about our "place." We still live on the margin. Many programs continue to survive on the voluntary overwork of their faculty; many ambitious young academics still think it prudent to avoid association with us, and we have had only the slightest impact on the traditional content or the traditional faculty of the traditional disciplines.

For those of us involved in women's studies, our growth presents a two-edged sword. On the one hand, we have matured and grown in sophistication, having developed language, terminology and concepts that help us to be more accurate in our analyses. We have opened up new areas of investigation. Very important, we are sensitizing ourselves to our own blind spots, sharpening our awareness regarding diversity among women and regarding the complexity of our subject. As women's studies has survived now over twenty years, we are seeing second-generation feminist scholars, many of whom have been attracted to women's studies by the power of our scholarship and our classrooms rather than by direct experience in the women's movement.

On the other hand, although few would not delight in our growth, we must continue to be wary: sophistication must not be allowed to degenerate into the vacuity we deplore in other fields. Today's young scholars must be encouraged to anchor their work firmly in the world outside the classroom. Today, as in the past, if we lose our rootedness in the women's movement, in concrete social action, we will lose not only our passion, but our heart and our meaning.

As time and society and women's studies have moved along, so have I. Women's studies is 20ish. I am 50ish. Having been instructed by my work and my colleagues (dare I use the word *sisters*?), I am losing some of my blind spots. I am becoming, for example, keenly aware of my own particularity—a white, middle class, professional, midwesterner crusted around a working class, Jewish, loner Bronx kid. I understand better what that enables me to say and what I should leave for others to say. I tend to be more careful in my speech, measuring, qualifying. I have given up what Mary Helen Osborne calls "certitude"; I know how much I don't know. I hope that is reflected in this new edition.

What has not altered is my passionate belief in the women's movement, in the need for social change, in the possibilities of the future. I am still an unregenerate feminist rooted, by choice, in the spirit of (dare I use the word?) women's liberation. I hope that, too, is reflected in this new edition.

This book is designed for beginners in feminism and women's studies, for those who have not yet had the experience of recognition and reappraisal, or who have had it only in the most inchoate way. The text and readings included here not only impart information but seek as their foremost goal to precipitate in the reader an awareness of the self versus gender definition. This is a primer in the most exact sense: it is directed at the prime, the spring, the level of consciousness out of which come the need and the decision to know. It aims to engage students by revealing the gender issues imbedded in the most familiar facets of life—family relationships, work, education, media, religion, popular culture. The ideas presented here comprise a first course in women's studies that is first both logically and existentially.

The experiences we have, the awarenesses we develop, and the manner in which we develop them are rarely ordered according to the patterns of academic disciplines. Reality, after all, is not disciplinary. Neither is this book, since it attempts, at least in part, to present ideas as life might. The readings are interdisciplinary, ranging across many fields of study and chosen to reveal issues in their interrelatedness. I have not necessarily selected the most recent pieces, the most erudite, or even the most reputable. I brought together statements from past and present that are representative of the prevailing notions that have had terrific impact on the lives of women (and hence men). These readings, diverse as they are, go together. They have been selected for their collective power to provide a picture of the pattern of ideas about women. The readings are meant to educate in the broadest sense; not only to bring students face to face with their experience now, but

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also to provide them with a context, the sources of current beliefs in the ideas of the distant and not so distant past.

The theme of this book in both text and readings is twofold. First, in order to understand ourselves and our world we must be aware of all the notions regarding women, from the academic to the popular, from the scientific to the pseudoscientific, from the complex to the simplistic and from the thoughtful to the downright silly. Second, understanding can emerge only from critical analysis grounded in a sensitivity to even the homeliest events of our day-to-day lives.

After a short discussion of the nature of women's studies, we begin with an explication of the major themes of sex-role arrangements—the images of male and female ideals, the roles and expectations of gender as they have been expressed in various aspects of our culture and as they criss-cross with class, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and other social categories that have resulted in extraordinary discrimination. We begin with these images, the Mars and Venus ideals, because in a variety of cultural forms they are at the root of social beliefs and attitudes toward the sexes. They have great explanatory value, both for the traditionalist, as justification for current behaviors, and for the feminist, as a schema to be explored. Then, following the presentation of some classic theories of why gender bifurcation and asymmetry exist, the images of ideal masculinity and femininity are traced through their appearances in such pertinent and affecting aspects of life as family, sexuality, education, work and politics. Here, in the parts of our life we feel most deeply, the images are revealed in all their distortion and power. I hope that if students can recognize the destructive potential of the traditional images and stereotypes in their own lives, they will seek alternatives.

Although what follows covers a range of areas, from psychology to economics, from politics to anthropology, its place is primarily in the humanities. The driving questions in the issues presented are: What does this mean? How does this affect the quality of our lives? What would be better? Why does it matter?

If there is a discipline involved in the book, it is philosophy. Its process is to pose questions, articulate varying responses, assess them, set the stage for further questions, and so on—the Socratic approach, all in the quest for knowledge. Its consequence is growth in wisdom and spirit. Nonetheless, what we will be doing here is women's studies, a nondisciplinary, multidisciplinary, counterdisciplinary feminist exploration of the conditions of our lives, where we ourselves set the boundaries of what may be asked and of what we may ultimately do with the answers we devise.

To complete a project like *Issues in Feminism* requires many kinds of help and support. I am grateful to many colleagues who have reviewed the manuscript and offered guidance and suggestions, especially Joseph J. Arpad, California State University at Fresno; Susan Arpad, California State University at Fresno; Anne M. Butler, Utah State University; Carol Coburn, University of Kansas; Joan Hagman, Concordia College; Annis H. Hopkins, Arizona State University; Louis Levesque-Lopman, Regis College; and Betty C. Safford, California State University at Fullerton.

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—Sheila Ruth

Contents

Chapter 1 An Introduction to Women's Studies 1

Gerda Lerner, A New Angle of Vision 17

Bette-Jane Raphael, The Myth of the Male Orgasm 19

Jesse Bernard, Women 21

Bell Hooks, Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory 33

National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), Constitution: Preamble and Statement of Purpose 40

Part I Consciousness: Concepts, Images, and Visions 43

Chapter 2 The Dynamics of Patriarchy 45

Michael S. Kimmel and Michael Messner, Men as "Gendered Beings" 56

Brian Easlea, Patriarchy, Scientists, and Nuclear Warriors 59

Anthony Astrachan, Dividing Lines: Men's Response to Women's Demands for Equality and Power 72

Chapter 3 Images of Women in Patriarchy: The Masculist-Defined Woman 80

Robin Morgan, Know Your Enemy 92

St. Thomas Aquinas, Whether Woman Should Have Been Made in the First Production of Things 95

Sigmund Freud, Femininity 97

H. R. Hays, I Am Unclean . . . 109

Simone de Beauvoir, Woman as "Other" 115

Chapter 4 Talking Back: Feminist Responses to Sexist Stereotypes 123

Audre Lorde, The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action 138

Theodora Wells, Woman—Which Includes Man, Of Course 141

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own 143

Robin Morgan, Cross-Cultural Rebellion 149

Gena Corea, I Have a Motherland 151

Maya Angelou, . . . To Form a More Perfect Union 153

Chapter 5 The Origins of Female Subordination: Theories and Explanations 154

Charlotte J. Frisbie, Anthropological Perspectives on the Subordination of Women 163

Genesis 173

Susan Brownmiller, Rape 176

Friedrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State 179

Gerda Lerner, A Working Hypothesis 187

Sally Slocum, Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology 198

Part II Sexism Realized: Women's Lives in Patriarchy 205

Chapter 6 Women's Personal Lives: The Effect of Sexism on Self and Relationships 207

Kim Chernin, Obsession: The Tyranny of Slenderness 230

Shulamith Firestone, Love 239

E. M. Ettorre, A New Look at Lesbianism 243

Betty Friedan, The Problem That Has No Name 252

Janice G. Raymond, Fetalists and Feminists: They Are Not the Same 257

Kristin Luker, The War Between the Women: Arguments about Abortion 262

Susan Griffin, Rape: The Power of Consciousness 272

Unknown, "The Rape" of Mr. Smith 283

Gloria Anzaldúa, Immaculate, Inviolate: *Como Ella* 285

Chapter 7 Discrimination: The Effects of Asymmetry on Social Institutions and Their Effects on Us 287

Elyce J. Rotella, Women and the American Economy 298

Lenore J. Weitzman, Women and Children Last: The Social and Economic Consequences of Divorce Law Reforms 312

Ruth Sidel, Day Care: Do We Really Care? 336

Susan Gluck Mezey, Women and Law From a Feminist Perspective 346

Riane Eisler and Allie C. Hixson, The Equal Rights Amendment: What Is It, Why Do We Need It, And Why Don't We Have It Yet? 357

Chapter 8 Distortions In Understanding: How Patriarchy Affects Our Mind 372

Rita Freedman, Myth America Grows Up 384

Nancy M. Henley, Mykol Hamilton, Barrie Thorne, Womanspeak and Manspeak: Sex Differences and Sexism in Communication, Verbal and Nonverbal 394

Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, Susan M. Stuard, Restoring Women to History 407

Elsa Gidlow, The Spiritual Significance of the Self-Identified Woman 414

Part III Women Move 419

Chapter 9 Feminist Activism: Issues, Events, Documents 421

Rediscovering American Women: A Chronology Highlighting Women's History in the United States 431

Kim Blankenship, Update—The Process Continues 442

Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman 444

Abigail and John Adams, The Adams Letters 450

Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, Historical Precedent: Nineteenth-Century Feminists 452

Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions 460

Sojourner Truth, Ain't I a Woman? 463

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Speech Before the Legislature, 1860 465

Susan B. Anthony, Constitutional Argument 471

Emma Goldman, Marriage and Love 476

Margaret Sanger, Woman and the New Race 480

Karen Sacks, The Class Roots of Feminism 485

Kate Millett, Sexual Politics 496

National Organization for Women, NOW Bill of Rights 503

Mim Kelber, Declaration of American Women, 1977 505

Barbara Jordan, What Will You Reap; What Will You Sow? 507

Bibliography 508

Index 521

1

An Introduction to Women's Studies

What Is "Women's Studies"?

In the middle to late 1960s, a scattering of courses focusing on feminist issues began to appear on college campuses. In 1970 the terms *women's studies* or *feminist studies* were first used to refer to them. Against strong resistance, two or three courses developed into thousands of courses, into programs, into a whole new educational and intellectual enterprise.

According to a study by Florence Howe, in 1980 university faculty were teaching more than twenty thousand such courses in institutions all over the country.[1] Programs existed on all levels of study from the undergraduate minor to the doctorate. We can also expand the extent and size of women's studies if we consider the thousands of noncredit courses offered through extension and continuing education programs and those offered in other countries.

In 1977 the number of people involved in feminist research had grown so large and their interests were so diverse that it became necessary to establish some formal means of communication and support. In January of that year, delegates from institutions all over the country participated in the founding of the National Women's Studies Association. By 1987 it had roughly three thousand members![2]

For contemporary university education and for some high schools, women's studies is a fact of life. But what is the nature of this new enterprise? What precisely does it do?

Because women's studies is still very young—only about twenty years old—it is difficult to suggest an absolute definition. Scholars are just beginning to articulate and explain the challenging new insights and methods that are developing within the field. Women's studies is a field that has few models; it consciously rejects many traditional forms of inquiry, concepts, and explanatory systems; at the same time, it is developing traditions and authorities of its own.

You will learn in this chapter how feminist reseachers are discovering that the historically accepted theories and explanations—even the methods of pursuing knowledge—are rife with prejudice and misunderstandings about women in particular and humanity in general. Committed to pursuing tolerance in methodology and interpretation so we can avoid the danger of creating more rigid principles of research, as feminist thinkers, we are extremely hesitant to impose limits on the work of others who seek to restore balance and find clarification. Therefore, we place a high value on freedom and self-determination. Ideologically, and often temperamentally, we are suspicious of hierarchies and structures of control whether in social relations or intellectual pursuits. Self-disciplined freedom and cooperative efforts, we believe, are more apt to produce constructive results in most endeavors.

Thus, most of us try to support and be open to ideas and approaches different from our own.

You will see that openness and freedom from prejudice is not easy to attain, and the work is far from complete. Serious errors have occurred. Among the *isms* with which we have struggled are racism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, classism, ageism. Yet we are becoming more sophisticated in our analyses. As we grow, we encompass and integrate more diverse perspectives, enlarge our understanding, and become more accurate.

For all these reasons—the newness of feminist research, the hesitancy to embrace constricting standards, and the unusually strong desire for tolerance, experimentation, and growth—the ideas, methods, curricula, and theories of women's studies exhibit great diversity and resist easy definition. Those of us now working in women's studies have called it variously a process, a field of inquiry, a critical perspective, a center for social action, and/or the academic arm of the women's movement. It is all of these and more.

The "Study of Women"

For centuries, women have been "studied." Aristotle concluded that we were "misbegotten males," conceived instead of men when the winds were not propitious. Aquinas decided that since women were at least necessary for procreation, God had not after all made some terrible mistake in creating us. Freud determined the vengeful, castrating, penis-envying character of us all, and the philosopher Karl Stern theorized about our "nonreflective," cosmically tied life of nature.[3]

Such concepts in the past study of women reflect the nature of most of these studies: They were carried on almost exclusively by men working together in institutions and disciplines absolutely closed to women. An examination of the many traditional works on women reveals certain characteristics:

- Women are generally looked *at;* we rarely did our own looking and still more rarely were we asked for our opinions or expressions concerning our own experience. Those expressions that women have offered have tended to be ignored or debunked unless they reinforced existing beliefs.
- Women are generally "studied" in a separate section or subsection of a work, as though we were some kind of extra appendage or anomaly, not readily understood within the general context of the inquiry. In Aristotle's *Politics,* for example, following a discussion of human excellence is a separate section asking whether women as well as men might have "excellence," and if so, in what this excellence might consist.[4] (He decided that women are admirable when obedient and silent.) An *Introduction to Islam*[5] contains fifteen chapters describing the fundamental beliefs and practices of the "people" of the religion. One chapter is entitled, "The Muslim Woman." As we might expect, no chapter exists on "the Muslim man."
- Professional and academic studies of women reflect the prejudices and attitudes that exist in the wider culture. Without women's own perspectives and statements to balance and uncover the historical fund of ignorance and superstition surrounding our lives, conventional (misogynist) wisdom has been carried into research by so-called authorities on the subject, has hardened into accepted theories, and has ultimately become science. As science, these myths about women have been used to justify all sorts of oppression from witch hunts to clitoridectomy.

Until recently, the accepted studies of women from primitive times to the present have examined women as if we were senseless, semihuman creatures unable to speak for ourselves; we have been prodded, dissected, categorized and filed, researched and resolved. No wonder the traditional products of the "study of women" are distorted and counterproductive.

Such an approach to understanding women's lives necessarily produces poor information. Reverse the gender, treating the male as the adjunct of humanity instead of the female. Can you imagine a history of westward expansion containing a chapter on the pioneer husband or the pioneer male? Or how would you evaluate an analysis of masculine attitudes on impotence that was researched and written entirely by women based on their observations alone and with no input from men?

Women's Studies and Feminism

What transforms the "study of women" into women's studies is reflected in the terms themselves. In

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the "*study of women*," women are objects; in *women's studies*, we are subjects.

Women's studies has a feminist base. Feminists do not agree among themselves on one all-inclusive and universally acceptable definition of the term *feminism*. Depending on a number of factors, *feminism* can mean different things and have a variety of functions. We shall see later that several different theories of feminism exist, and considerable discussion centers on what it means to be a feminist, what goals feminism should have, and how feminists should behave. Feminism may be a perspective, a world view, a political theory, a spiritual focus, or a kind of activism. Actually, one learns best what feminism means by listening to the statements of women who perceive themselves to be feminists and by understanding how they respond to events and conditions.

Just how much range in meaning there can be for the term is reflected in this partial list of the definitions of "Feminism" as reported in Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler's *Feminist Dictionary*:[6]

"May be defined as a movement seeking the reorganization of the world upon a basis of sex-equality in all human relations; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex, would abolish all sex privileges and sex burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of woman and man as the foundation of law and custom."

Theresa Billington-Greig, "Feminism and Politics," *The Contemporary Review*, Nov. 1911

". . . has as yet no defined creed . . . [Is] the articulate consciousness of mind in women . . . in its different forms of expression."

"The Freewoman" 1911, *Votes for Women*

"Feminism at heart is a massive complaint. Lesbianism is the solution. . . . Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution. No feminist per se has advanced a solution outside of accommodation to the man."

Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 1973

"Begins but cannot end with the discovery by an individual of her self-consciousness as a woman. It is not, finally, even the recognition of her reasons for anger, or the decision to change her life, to go back to school, to leave a marriage. . . . Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to the fathers and recognize that the world they have described is not the whole world. . . . Feminism implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male-created ideologies, and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition."

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 1976

"A method of analysis as well as a discovery of new material. It asks new questions as well as coming up with new answers. Its central concern is with the social distinction between men and women, with the fact of this distinction, with its meanings, and with its causes and consequences."

Juliet Mitchell and Anne Oakley, *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, 1976

"Is a mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics, a way of asking questions and searching for answers, rather than a set of political conclusions about the oppression of women."

Nancy Hartsock, "Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy," in Zillah Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, 1979

"Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women; women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement."

Barbara Smith in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 1981

"Is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society, so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."

Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 1981

"Is an entire world view or gestalt, *not just a laundry list of 'women's issues.' Feminist theory provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives, and a feminist perspective can affect the world politically, culturally, economically, and spiritually."*

Charlotte Bunch, *Learning Our Way*, 1983

> *"Third World feminism is about feeding people in all their hungers."*
>
> Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, 1983

From Alice Walker we have the strong, jubilant definition of a *"womanist,"* a variation on the term *feminist*.

> *Womanist 1. From* womanish. *(Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or* willful *behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge.* Serious.
>
> 2. Also: *A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."*
>
> 3. *Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself.* Regardless.
>
> 4. *Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.*[7]

Notwithstanding our diversity, certain beliefs, values, and attitudes are common to all feminists. These might be articulated as follows to set a context for comprehending the rich variety of feminist/womanist thought.

- *Feminism* means literally *"womanism."* As feminists we value women, not in the hypocritical fashion of centuries of male-dominated cultures in which women were valued for the work they could produce, the price they could bring, or the services they could render; nor do we value women provided they behave according to some externally imposed set of requirements. Rather we value women in and of themselves, as ends in themselves, and for themselves.
- As feminists we value the fact of being women as highly as we value the fact of being human. We do not accept the cultural images of women as incompetent, petty, irresponsible, or weak. In contrast, we affirm our capacities to be strong, capable, intelligent, successful, ethical human beings. Many of us believe that our history and special forms of experience have set the conditions for making us particularly "excellent" human beings.
- As feminists we value autonomy for ourselves as individuals and for women as a group. We mean to develop the conditions that will enable us to control our own political, social, economic, and personal destinies.
- As feminists we reject attitudes that regard the traditionally ascribed masculine characteristics of aggression, power, and competition as good and desirable and the ascribed feminine characteristics of compassion, tenderness, and compromise as weak and ridiculous. We tend to reject both the practice of separating human qualities into two categories—one of them for men and one for women—and the valuing of one of those categories above the other. Instead we recognize that all such characteristics may appear in either sex, and we evaluate each of them on its own merit.
- As feminists we understand that the majority of beliefs and attitudes regarding women both in our own culture and in most other cultures are false or wrongheaded, based on myth, ignorance, and fear. It is necessary to replace inaccurate myth with reality and ignorance with knowledge about women created by women, first for women and finally for all people.
- As feminists we point out that for centuries we have been denied our rights as citizens and as human beings. The right to vote, the right to

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