

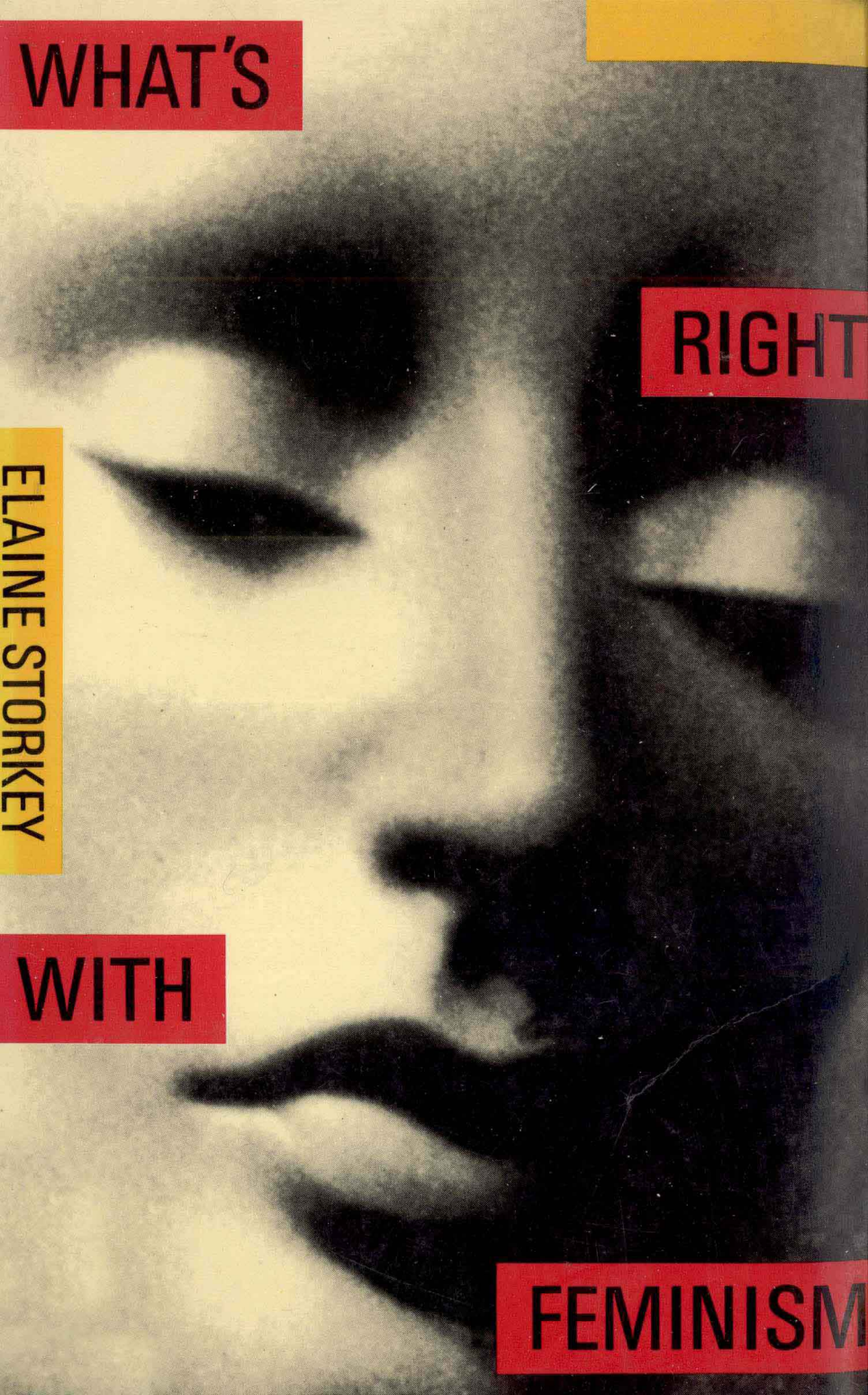
WHAT'S

RIGHT

ELAINE STORKEY

WITH

FEMINISM



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Elaine Storkey

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN
WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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First published in Great Britain 1985 by SPCK

This edition published 1986 through special arrangement with SPCK by
William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Mich. 49503

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Printed in the United States of America

Edited by Tim Dean

This book was first published in the United Kingdom in conjunction with *Third Way*, an evangelical monthly magazine that seeks to provide a biblical perspective on politics, social ethics, and cultural affairs. Further information may be obtained from *Third Way*, 37 Elm Road, New Malden, Surrey KT3 3HB, England.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Storkey, Elaine, 1943-
What's right with feminism.

Includes index.

1. Feminism. 2. Feminism — Religious aspects — Christianity. 3. Women in Christianity. I. Title.
HQ1154.S685 1986 305.4'2 85-29170

ISBN 0-8028-0177-3

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Introduction

The explosion of women on to the radical scene in the 1960s was regarded as part of the baggage of the age, part of the intense reflection and rejection of so many traditional social values. The media, anxious as ever for sensation, enjoyed the caricatures they created and, greedy for amusement, fanned the flame of male chauvinism, stereotyping all women who took a serious interest in the issues as bra-burners. Then as the counter-culture slowly melted away, and its leaders and gurus, in more conventional dress now, found less radical ways of expressing their belief in an alternative society, so the aggression, outrage and anger of the Women's Liberation Movement seemed also to evaporate into a reluctant acceptance that oppression was here to stay. Consequently, radical feminists withdrew into the security of their communes, and society reasserted the *status quo*, trying to forget they had ever happened. Successive governments concentrated on unemployment and inflation, bringing old answers to old questions. In a country with three and a half million unemployed, who has the luxury to consider the arguments of a handful of intellectual women?

Yet this is only half the story. In fact no society ever 'returns' to a former state. Insinuations, accusations and denouncements once made on such a large scale and so vociferously cannot easily be forgotten or dismissed. For whatever reason, some people have listened. Where arguments were persuasive, with or without the help of the media, then those who had no other direction found their sympathies roused and a long-term cause to espouse. Those with discontented lives, themselves often the victims of male harshness or prejudice, felt the warmth of identity and a recognition of their own situation. Those ready to attach themselves to anything disapproved of by the conservative orthodoxy had yet another pie for their thumbs, and those merely carried away by the attitudes of their peers found interesting slogans to mouth, and actions to copy. But further afield the issues have been brought into the consciousness of many other serious-minded members of the community who are able to recognize the injustice of a situation, and who can

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see through the ridiculousness of the media presentation to the deep, underlying issues. Many who would not in any clear way have identified themselves with the women's movement nevertheless accepted that in many areas their case was substantiated and that change must come. What could not be achieved for the women of that generation can be started for the next, and as research exposes area after area of inequality, so education programmes begin the desocialization of sex roles. Everything, from early reading schemes to sexual behaviour, from careers advice to ideas of parenthood, comes under scrutiny with similar findings thrown up: we are handing on misleading stereotypes about the capabilities, appropriate education, and moral obligations of the different sexes. We are therefore now seeing the *quiet* revolution, as offensive material is weeded out and replaced, but one more far-reaching than anything which took place in the heady days of discovery and consciousness-raising. It is in the middle of this quiet revolution where most women are called upon to make some response in their own lives to the ideas of the feminists that many are confused, and with traditional values still apparently upheld, but shifting beneath them, unable to say where they stand. Not least among these are Christian women, those single, married, with children, those contemplating marriage, those with adult families, those committed to a career, those in student circles. As a Christian, a woman, a worker, a wife and a mother, I have written this with them in mind. I am grateful to my Open University students and colleagues for stimulating ideas and sharpening my own perspective in this area. Diane Bailey contributed more than she realized. So did the women who attended my courses at Calvin and Covenant Colleges. I have also been grateful for the sisterly support of Kathy Keay, Miriam Sampson and Margaret Old who offered valuable comments to the first draft and Sue Fishwick who helped with typing. During the last week of writing my parents, James and Anne Lively, helped us at home. To two people, however, very special thanks are due. Tim Dean urged me to write this book and supported it enthusiastically throughout, even when very ill with leukaemia, and Alan Storkey has been in the project at every stage, clarifying the text, typing the manuscript, preparing the index and loving the author.

PART ONE

THE FEMINIST CASE

Modern Western society, argue the feminists, unlike its pre-industrial counterpart, is a society in which women are dependent, manipulated, vulnerable, passive and exploited and men are dominant. Society is designed by men for men, and women are seen as functioning to uphold and support the male domination. Thus, woman's work, whether at home, in the factory, in the office or hospital echoes daily her total dependence upon the subordination to the man. In this section, then, I want to look at the description feminists give of women's exploitation at work, in the home, in the professions, educationally, before the law and in the Church, and glimpse at some of the contributing factors behind these. In the next section we shall look more in depth at what they see to be the root causes of the inequalities.

1: Women at Work

'The problem of unemployment would be solved if all the women who did not need to work gave up their jobs for the men.'

I have heard this posited as a serious suggestion more than once, which indicates not only a worrying naivety about the causes of unemployment, but also considerable misunderstanding about the reasons why women work or the part they play in the economy as a whole. It betrays also an unexamined assumption that 'work' is done by men, and that women, by implication, ought to be doing something else. From the outset then we need to examine the role of women at work and the kinds of jobs they do. We shall then be in a better position to discuss discrimination against women in the labour market.

Some statistics

Figures for the British labour market are compiled by taking those in employment along with those registered as unemployed and receiving benefit.¹ On these figures women have made up about 40 per cent of the work force since the mid-seventies. Nor are these predominantly single women. Between 1961 and 1981 the total number of people in the labour force increased by over two million: an increase entirely due to the number of married women taking up work or registered as looking for work. By the 1980s about 60 per cent of all married women were in paid employment, dropping only to 58 per cent among women of child-bearing and child-rearing age. Yet even this figure is a conservative estimate. Women who work in a private domestic capacity in other people's homes are rarely recorded in the official statistics. Nor do government figures recognize those women who are looking for jobs but are not eligible for unemployment benefit. As long ago as 1965 a Government Social Survey revealed that only 16 per cent of women had not done any paid work since marriage. All indications are that this figure has dropped very much more since then.

This movement of women into the labour force is not a phenomenon peculiar to Britain. Women's participation in

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employment has risen throughout the EEC. Both Denmark and France have a higher percentage than the UK of women who work outside the home. Similarly, in the US women now make up about 40 per cent of the work force. The increase in married women working there is particularly marked. It is estimated that in 1940 only 9 per cent of women with school-age children sought employment; by 1975 this had risen to 52 per cent. The percentage for women with pre-school children is now approaching 40 per cent.

What these figures show then is that women are not merely a 'fringe' element of the labour market. Nor is work outside the home incidental to most women's experience. In Britain more than ten million women (compared with fifteen million men) are in paid employment. Much of our economy depends heavily on women's labour. Yet even early in the 1980s of this enormous female work force almost three quarters were crowded into the distributive trades and service industries. (This marked a substantial increase since 1959 when only 58 per cent of women had been employed in these areas.) Similarly, of those in manufacturing over one half worked in only four industries: food, drink and tobacco, electrical engineering, textiles and clothing. So the increasing movement of women into paid employment has for the most part taken place within those industries already characterized by high female employment. Whole areas of work have been marked off specifically for women. In fact, from 1911 to 1979 women's share of skilled manual work almost halved, whereas their share of unskilled and lower paid jobs more than doubled. Yet again this is echoed in the United States, where one study showed that half of all working women were employed in just twenty-one of the 250 occupations listed by the US Bureau of the Census.² What was more, just five occupations: secretary, domestic worker, book-keeper, infant teacher and waitress accounted for a quarter of all employed women. It is easy to see, then, that the continuation of 'women's jobs' makes it easier for employers to justify the difference in wages given to men and women. The British Equal Pay Act stipulates equal pay for equal work, but if the only people carrying out a certain task are women they have no comparative man's wage to argue from.

To reinforce this argument it is often pointed out that as well as being crowded into a few sectors of employment

women are also located in the lowest paid jobs in industry. Women comprise 90 per cent or more of all clerical workers, nurses, canteen assistants, store cashiers, cleaners, laundry workers, domestic assistants, but about the same proportion or more of all surgeons, solicitors, architects, bankers, consultants, engineers, senior civil servants, university professors, airline pilots, chartered accountants, managers, judges, etc, are men. Even in jobs where women make up the majority of employees they form only a minority of those in senior positions. Thus, in primary school teaching in the mid-seventies 78 per cent of the teachers were women, yet only 43 per cent of headships were occupied by women. In non-professional occupations the situation is even more unbalanced. In catering women account for 73 per cent of the total labour force, yet only 16 per cent of the managers. In clerical occupations, even though around 99 per cent of all typists, shorthand writers and ancillary secretaries are women they comprise only 14 per cent of office managers.

Equal pay?

It comes as no surprise therefore to learn that in 1982, twelve years after the Equal Pay Act was passed, and six years after it became legally enforceable, the average earnings of a full-time woman employee were two thirds that of the average man. If we were to take into account the much higher earnings of many employers, the vast majority of whom are men, the proportion would be even smaller. The General Household Survey in 1980 calculated that a woman with GCE 'A' levels earned on average less than a man with no qualifications. Of course almost half of all married women work part time, and it is in this area where the greatest inequalities occur. No job security, no pension rights, no holiday pay or sick leave and low hourly rates are features of many women's working experience. Sylvia Walby argued in 1983³ that the reason unemployment rates among women were lower in the UK than in many EEC countries was that part-time workers worked under such poor conditions that they were particularly attractive to employers.

Many feminists insist that, far from improving the position of women at work, the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act have left some women in a worse situation. The era of the 'token woman' came into existence,

where a woman was sure to be included in a short list or on a panel where the job in question could be suitably filled with either sex. But it did not open the door for employment equality. Moreover, instead of a gradual levelling of men's and women's wages, jobs were re-graded, supervisory posts introduced where previously there had been none, and wage differentials remained much as before. In *The Equality Report*⁴ produced by the National Council for Civil Liberties, Jean Coussins tells of the firm which paid higher wages to male toilet attendants than to female toilet attendants on the grounds that 'a male toilet attendant had to approach the job from a labouring point of view and a female from the housekeeping point of view'.

Stereotypes and status symbols

The lower pay and lower promotion prospects are not the only features of women's work which attract attention, however. There is a strong argument that, especially in white collar jobs, women are often used to enhance the status of men. Just as the success of the male breadwinner a century ago could be measured in the size of his domestic staff, today the importance of the successful man can be indicated by the number of people he can put between himself and the public. This stands out very clearly in the National Health Service, for example, where the hospital consultant (usually a man) has junior doctors, nursing staff, secretaries and receptionists for patients to wade through before they can be admitted into his presence. Similarly, although for different reasons, a businessman can see his glory reflected in a retinue of attractive women, answering his telephone, typing his memos, filing his reports, answering his correspondence, making his coffee and soothing his nerves. 'Impossible man,' reads the advertisement, 'chaotic and demanding, wants unflappable, dedicated secretary, with a warm personality and sense of humour . . .'

In this climate, therefore, it is not surprising that some men who work with women see women's existence at work primarily in terms of being of service to themselves, and there are clearly more unpleasant aspects to this for a minority of women. For some men indeed this implies that the women should be available for any service the man requires, and sexual harrasment at work is becoming a recognized

problem. It is not particularly that this is a new phenomenon; it is more that women are now less prepared to accept this as a necessary feature of their work lives. Harrassment in fact takes many forms. It may be merely whistles and comments with sexual innuendo which are served up day by day from the men they work with. It may be bottom-slapping, thigh-pinching, being physically handled or stroked by particular men. It may even reach the form of sexual intimidation, persistent requests for dates or weekends away. Many women in all kinds of work have to endure the presence of female nude pin-ups, often covering a large area in some shared workplaces. Often new pin-ups are brought in and shared around the men in front of the women, who thus feel their own sexual privacy being violated and undermined. Yet women are made to feel 'prudish' or unreasonable if they protest. The problem is widespread. In a group of women I spoke to, all working in different locations and at different jobs, and coming together simply on an Open University course, no fewer than half claimed to have experienced unpleasant sexual overtones at work, and two out of thirty had left their jobs because of it. The ones who had not experienced harrassment were the ones who worked alongside men as equal colleagues, or who spoke of being with 'tolerant' or 'unusual' bosses. The fact that even their non-harrassment was explained in this way gives weight to the feminist argument that the sphere of work is still *defined* by men, even though women now make up such a large force within it. Part of the definition of their work for some women is that men behave in this way towards them, and they must accept it as a given. In some cases which reach the courts it is evident that the penalty for not complying with the demands of the male hierarchy can well be unfair dismissal for some women.

Training and job security

Two other considerations still remain in relation to women and work. The first concerns training. Although as long ago as 1964 the Industrial Training Act made training available to a wider number of people, it is argued that this has not substantially increased the woman's chances either in the job market or in promotion prospects. Training has not been available through government training centres, well provided

for, but in commercial colleges where little has been done to encourage women to look beyond the usual clerical work. As far as day-release is concerned the picture is the same. In 1973 under 11 per cent of women in employment were on day release, against almost 40 per cent of men. A similar trend was evidenced in apprenticeships. 110 women held apprenticeships to skilled craft occupations, compared with 112,000 men. Even by 1981 women represented 74 per cent of those studying hairdressing, but only 0.5 per cent of those in construction and welding.

The other consideration concerns job security and employment. We live in an age marked by insecurity of tenure and distanced decision-making. A lifetime's work may be prematurely terminated through a take-over. People whose whole life revolves around work in one small urban area of Britain, might find everything is altered by a set of decisions made by unknown people half a world away. In this climate job insecurity amongst women is the most marked. During the period 1974 to 1981 male unemployment in England and Wales rose around 300 per cent, an appalling figure. However, during the same period female unemployment rose 800 per cent. In a financial crisis or cut-back, those with least muscle are often the most expendable. The services of the odd cleaners, ward orderlies, the extra secretaries, a few nurses, girls on the check-out tills, part-time teachers, can most easily be dispensed with. At the same time, it is often the very cheapness of some of these services which prevents unemployment amongst women rising much more.

If this is an accurate representation of some of the inequalities experienced by women at work, the curious question is, why do they persist? With changes in the legal position of women at work, and an ever-increasing number of women entering the work force, why does it seem to many that equality is further away now than a decade ago? The answers given to this often reveal the different perspectives which are found in both the feminist and non-feminist camps. Is it that women are simply poorly unionized; that the male unions are more concerned to look after themselves, and that even in unions where women make up the majority of the membership they comprise only a tiny minority of its officials (see the CPSA for example)?⁵ Is it because women in the end are temperamentally unsuited to work, and that this sphere

is not their 'natural' domain? Is it that they are merely the pawns of a capitalist economy, seen as a 'reserve army of labour' to be called in and out of the labour market as the needs of the economy dictate? Is it that they have been so domesticated by a patriarchal society, that their own self-image and definition are couched in terms of keeping home? Is it that successive societies have failed to think in a contemporary way about the relevant role of women in their generation? Is it that Christians have been too ready to support the status quo of a male hierarchy without carefully examining their assumption in a biblical light? We shall begin to unpack these responses in more depth later in the book.

One issue we might briefly open up here, though, is that a key response focuses on how women's work is seen by men, and often by women themselves; in other words, on the ideology of work.

Why work?

The point most frequently made is that a woman works for pin money, for luxuries: a new car, better holidays, private education for her children. This may well be the experience of some women but for the large part the evidence questions it. Professional women are more likely to work because they are totally involved in their job, because their own understanding of themselves is wrapped up in their identity at work. Women who do work largely to supplement their husbands' wages do so increasingly from a sense of *necessity* rather than desire for luxury. Moreover many women only have one income: particularly the single, divorced and separated. Other allegations are that women see their work in terms of companionship, sociability, an escape from the boredom of the home. This may well be true again for some women, but it is equally true for some (and probably more) men. Then it is argued women work for social and family reasons; therefore they are more likely to take time off work to look after children, and are consequently unreliable employees. A brief look at the statistics, however, reveals that women's absence from work through 'sickness' and related causes is nevertheless much lower overall than that of men.

One point does remain substantial, however, and that is that women's work is still seen by both men and women as

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secondary to their domestic roles. It is suggested frequently that women arrange work round the family whereas men arrange their family lives around their work. To some extent this is true even of young single women, who often take jobs with marriage and family life as a long-term view and their job as an occupation before and after this period. So it is to this aspect of home, marriage and family life that we now turn for the next argument in the feminist case.

Notes

1. All statistics referring to the British labour force are taken from *Social Trends* 1983, the *Annual Abstract of Statistics* 1983, the *General Household Survey*, or *Department of Employment Gazette* April 1981.
2. Quoted in Francine D. Blau, 'Women in the Labour Force: An Overview' in J. Freeman (ed.) *Women: A Feminist Perspective* (California, Mayfield Publications, 1975), p. 221.
3. Sylvia Walby, 'Patriarchal Structures: the Case of Unemployment' in E. Gamarnikov (ed.) *et al, Gender, Class and Work* (Heinemann 1983) p. 160.
4. Jean Coussins, (ed.) *The Equality Report* NCCL, Kings Cross Rd, London, 1975.
5. Table quoted in *Women: Directory of Social Change*. Wildwood House, London, 1978. The USDAW with union membership as 54 per cent of the whole, has only five full-time women officials over against 147 men. CPSA with 65 per cent membership women has two women out of fifteen of its officials.

2: Wives and Mothers

The male breadwinner: the family centrepiece

Ninety per cent of men and women in Britain marry at least once; 80 per cent of all men and women have one or more children and live with them for eighteen years or more. Kinship and marriage therefore structure most people's domestic arrangements for much of their lives. Even so, census figures indicate that fewer than one sixth of all households in Britain contain a married couple with dependent children where the father only is employed and the mother is a full-time housewife. Yet still the idea of the 'male breadwinner' as the economic focus of the family persists. In fact, in many working-class families where wives work full time, the wife's wages might account for 40 per cent or more of the family income, and are thus essential to the family's economic survival. Interestingly, studies suggest that equality in decision-making between husband and wife is significantly greater here than in families where wives' earnings are lower than their husbands. This of course is interpreted by feminists as evidence that authority in the family is based more on an ideology of economic power than on Christian ideas of 'headship'. It is for this reason then, the argument goes, that the myth of the male breadwinner persists: it reinforces the domination of the husband and keeps the wife as theoretically 'dependent' even if this is not true in actuality.

The centrality of the man in marriage is therefore a popular theme. Just as the paid work a woman does is seen in relation to the family, the unpaid, non-domestic 'services' she renders echo this male centrality: 'Dorothy is the best wife any hard working writer ever had. She types all her husband's business letters and manuscripts, criticises his work and reads books for him. She is also a splendid cook and housekeeper and lively and amusing talker.'¹ Many wives help their husbands in their occupations and their leisure lives, entertaining business guests, making sandwiches for the cricket club, keeping an appointments diary, acting as a personal assistant, taking phone messages, handling callers, chauffeuring, answering correspondence. A wife will often 'take over' family duties of her husband too: remembering his parents'