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Editor's Notebook: What is Feminism? A Local View

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What Is Feminism? A Local View

The Women's Movement has been with us for fifteen years now, and the feminist consciousness seems to bombard us from all directions. In one recent edition of the Sunday Globe alone, Gloria Steinem, editor of Ms. magazine, asserts that women are still victims of the caste system, while Natasha Josefowitz, a professor of management, exhorts women who want to succeed in the work force to be "physically and verbally assertive." We learn that Phillips Exeter Academy has established a Committee to Enhance the Status of Women, while a Globe editorial takes Esquire magazine to task for including only three women in an anniversary issue which claims to feature the work of "fifty of America's foremost living writers." Another editorial castigates Kevin White and David Finnegan for referring to the city of Boston as "She."

From a more local perspective, what do Bridgewater freshmen think about the feminist movement? I conducted an informal survey by asking the sixty students in my freshmen English Composition classes to write essays defining feminism and explaining whether or not they are feminists.

My dictionary defines "feminism" as "a doctrine that advocates or demands for women the same rights granted men, as in political and economic status," and most of the students adopted a similar definition. Yet when it came to explaining whether or not they were feminists, their essays revealed a curious tentativeness and ambivalence. Surprisingly, many of those who defined feminism in a way that showed sympathy with its objectives states categorically that they were not feminists. Marie, for example, describes the goals of feminists in language that suggests approval:

Their beliefs are that women should have as many rights as the men do. This can pertain to salaries, higher positions in jobs and supporting a family.

Paradoxically, she then appears to disassociate herself from these goals by adding, somewhat hesitantly, "I would not say that I am a feminist." The contradiction appears in more dramatic form in Jeannine's essay:

Feminism is an idealistic view of life, it is an attempt to have women recognized as equal to men. From the start of recorded history, women have been treated almost as pets. The Romans didn't even consider women as citizens . . . In today's society, many people feel women should stay home, 'barefoot and pregnant.'

But, having composed a diatribe worthy of the most militant feminist, Jeannine appears to recant:

I don't put myself in the category of feminist, although I do feel that women and men should have the same opportunities.

Joe is more logical, but no less ambivalent: he realizes that if he supports the goals of feminism, he must be a feminist, but he is reluctant to admit it. "I am in favor of passing the E.R.A., and I believe women should always be treated as equal to men," he writes, then adds with uncertainty, "and if this defines a feminist, I must be one."

Richard's essay illuminated another aspect of the new meaning of feminism: the suggestion that its adherents become masculinized.

I saw a woman at the health club yesterday, pressing one hundred and fifty pounds over her head. She had a haircut reminiscent of Moe of "The Three Stooges," a husky body and bulging biceps. "Feminist," I thought. There I was with my subconscious mind coming into play. That was the image I always had of feminism.

Although only a few were able to articulate the fact, many of these students were responding to the newer suggestions of the term "feminism": to them it connotes the refusal to acknowledge that women are different from men in ways beyond the biological, the denial of femininity. Butressing these ideas are perhaps also the visual images of angry women who issue bewildering lists of demands and who regard men as enemies, and of controversial points of view on such highly charged issues as abortion and homosexuality. The defeat of the E.R.A., the continuing strength of the anti-abortion movement, and the fact that the Reagan Administration has shown little interest in women's rights suggests that these students' views may reflect attitudes in the nation as a whole. If this is the case, the connotations of the term "feminist" may, ironically, have become negative enough to undermine the very causes its adherents seek to promote.

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