Who's Afraid of Feminism?

Feminism is a very misunderstood word. Many people—men and women alike—are scared of it. The confusion and misunderstanding comes partly from the male-dominated media, which has widely misrepresented feminists as "bra-burning," "manhating or bed hopping," "family-destroying" women.

These images are reinforced by other forces and groups that see the emancipation and liberation of women as a threat. As a result, feminists are often attacked and dismissed as "middle class," "westernized," and "rootless."

As a result, many, who have not even given feminism any thought at all or who have imbibed the false propaganda against feminism, are too quick to say that they are not, or that somebody isn't a feminist. Or that someone who is should be feared and avoided, or simply shunned and ignored or, at the very least, humoured and patronized.

***Women in Action** culled these questions and answers from the book* Kali for Women *by Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan to help you know for sure what feminism is. Read and decide: Are you a feminist?*

FEM•I•NISM (fem´ə nism), an awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women in society, at work, and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change these conditions.

Q: What, really, is feminism?

A: Unlike many other "isms" feminism does not derive its theoretical or conceptual base from any single theoretical formulation. There is therefore no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times. The definition thus can and does change because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perception and actions.

This means that feminism meant one thing in the 17th century (when the word was first used) and that it means something quite different in the 1980s.

It can also be articulated differently in different parts of the world and, within the country, differently by different women depending on their class, background, level of education, consciousness, and others. Even among similar kinds of women, there are different currents and debates in feminist thinking, particularly with regard to the reasons, that is, the historical roots, for us today.

In a South Asia workshop, women from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka accepted this deifinition of feminism: "An awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women **and men** to change [these conditions]."

In this definition, anyone who recognizes the existence of sexism (discrimination on the basis of gender), male domination and patriarchy and who takes some action against it is a feminist. Note however that the mere recognition of sexism

Illustrations by Sandra Torrijos.

is not enough. That recognition has to be accompanied by action, by a challenge to male domination.

But this action can take any form. For instance a woman's decision not to be humiliated or to educate herself and pursue a career or her decision not to have children are as feminist as the actions taken in the most recognized struggle. In other words, you do not have to belong to a group to be a feminist although in order to do anything effectively, it is much better to be part of one.

Q: What is the difference between early and present day feminists?

A: The main difference between the two is that earlier, the struggle was for the democratic rights of women. These rights include the right to education and employment, the right to own property, the right to vote, the right to enter parliament, the right to birth control, the right to divorce, etc. In other words, earlier feminists fought for legal reform for a legally equal position in society.

Today, feminists have gone beyond mere legal reforms to end discrimination. They are working towards the emancipation of women. Feminism, therefore, now includes the struggle against women's subordination to the male within the home; against their exploitation by the family; against their continuing low status at work, in society and in religion and culture of the country; against their double burden in production and reproduction. In addition, feminism challenges the very notions of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive, biologically determined categories. In its essence, present day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home.

But it must also be made clear that it is not enough to simply ask for women to be equal with men in the community. What good will it do for a peasant woman to become equal to a peasant man who is himself brutalized, exploited and oppressed by society. Feminists, therefore, are not only asking and fighting for the "equality" of women but for a just and equitable society—for both women and men.

Q. But is this struggle relevant today? After all women now have many democratic rights—education, employment, franchise and more. Recent policies have resulted in the liberation of women. They have brought women out of the home and into the workforce and have made them economically independent. What then is the problem, and do we still need feminism?

A. While some women have indeed benefitted from these changes, their number is small and needs to be increased. Feminism is for more women coming out of the home and into the workforce, **if they want** and need to work.

But at the same time we are against policies which allow and perpetuate the exploitation of women's labor: the payment of low wages, the prevalence of unhealthy working conditions, overwork,

arbitrary hiring and firing, denial of freedom of association, sexual exploitation, etc.

But it needs to be added here that economic independence, although very important for women's emancipation is not enough. Even economically independent women are subordinate to their men and families and face discrimination at home. The fight for economic independence is, thus, just one aspect of the women's struggle.

Moreover, the figures with regard to women's participation in government and policy making are, in fact, appalling. No South Asian country has had more than a handful of women members of parliament since independence than India. The presence of a few women in important public positions in no way proves that the overall status of women is satisfactory.

Q. Isn't the real reason for inequality in the workplace the fact that women are less productive than men because they are more concerned with home life?

A. Capitalism uses this argument based on the view that a man, as the head of the household, is paid a "family wage," that is, a wage that covers subsistence for himself, his wife and his children. According to this view, women engaged in productive work are merely supplementing the family income and can therefore be paid less than men, even for work of equal value.

The reality is somewhat different. Studies have revealed that in many countries, as many as 25 to 40 per cent of all families either live primarily on the earnings of women or are single-parent households headed by women. Most of these women live in poverty or hold poor paying jobs, are discriminated against in the workplace by the exact same capitalist patriarchy's assumption referred to above.

It is also true that in addition to work in the factory, field or plantation, women have to spend many hours attending to household chores—cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water and gathering firewood, child care, and so on. Women therefore experience the double burden of "paid work" as a part of the workforce and "unpaid work" in the home. This double burden also makes it difficult for women to get better jobs, to get trained and to move up the professional ladder.

Q. But surely, if we want to develop, we have to tolerate these forms of exploitation for some time. Once we have developed, the negative features will disappear.

A. There is really no guarantee that the negative features will disappear with development. Past experiences show that in most cases, this does not happen. The model of development followed in developing countries is based on the capitalist development that has reinforced and intensified gender-specific roles as well as the exploitation of women.

For example, in Europe, the home had earlier been the centre of production. Food, clothes, soap, candles, and many more were produced at home and women played an important role in this production as well as in agriculture and animal rearing. With the Industrial Revolution, the role of women changed. On one hand, poor women were forced to work in factories and mines as cheap labour and reproduced the next generation of workers. On the other hand, women of the bourgeoisie were kept at home as housewives and their role was limited to producing heirs. Dissenting independent bourgeois women who refused to conform were ostracized and penalized. With this, the ideology of the exploitation of poor women and the seclusion of rich women was perpetuated. Given the nature of development in Third World countries, these same tendencies already exist here and are likely to continue.

Q. Can you briefly explain the word patriarchy because one hears it so often.

A. The word itself means the rule of the father or the patriarch. It refers to a social system where the father controls all

members of the family, all property and other economic resources, and makes all major decisions. Linked to this social system is the belief or the ideology that men are superior to women; that women are and should be controlled by men and are part of men's property. This thinking forms the basis of many of our religious laws and practices and explains all those social practices which confines women to the home and control their lives. Our double standards of morality and our laws, which give more rights to men than to women, are also based on patriarchy.

Today, when one uses the word patriarchy, one refers to the system that oppresses and subordinates women in both the private and the public sphere.

Q. Would you call a woman who decided to be just a housewife a feminist?

A. First of all, feminists will not say "just" a housewife, knowing what and how much a housewife does. Feminists do not belittle or look down upon housewives or housework. In fact, one of our major struggles is to have housework be recognized and valued so that women who do it are recognized, valued and respected. Once housework gets the recognition and the value that are due it, men would not only start acknowledging it but might also start doing it.

A woman who chooses to be a housewife and feels that her individuality and talent are fully utilized as such can still be a feminist. Being a feminist does not necessarily mean working outside the home. All it means is having a real choice based on equal opportunities. The element of choice, of a woman's own will, is what is important. Some feminists feel though that if women could really choose not to be fulltime housewives, we would not find so many doing this work.

So the decision to become a housewife must be genuine. The decision should not be made because of conditioning, or because of indirect or direct pressure from others, or because there are no other options available. At the moment however, it is very difficult to determine which is a "conditioned" decision and which is a free one. Because of our upbringing and because of our conditioning, our aspirations have been limited and stultified and this conditioning is sometimes so well internalized that it is difficult to say what a free choice actually is.

Having said this we would like to reiterate that a feminist can choose to be a full time housewife if that is what satisfies her, provided she can retain her independence and her individuality, and provided her partner does not wield power over her because she is not earning. There must be equality and mutual respect within the home. Feminism is not about prescribing what women should or should not do; feminists are fighting for a society where women have the freedom to choose, where they are not forced to be housewives, where they are not pushed into typical "feminine" roles and low paid "feminine" jobs, and where they are treated with respect.

We reject male-female polarity and male-female stereotypes. Every girl should have the freedom and opportunity to do and be what she wants to do and is capable of

doing. Because she is born a girl, dolls and pots and pans should not naturally be her only toys, nor should she be shoved into dresses which do not allow her limbs to move, or be confined to the four walls of a home, or be forced to be subdued and submissive because she has to adjust to her husband's family. The concerns of feminists are as simple and reasonable as these.

However, feminist concerns are not only the few narrow "women's" issues like rape, wife-beating, contraception and equal wages. Feminists believe that everything in the world concerns women because everything affects women. Since feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just, social and economic order nationally and internationally, all issues are women issues. There is and has to be a women's point of view on all issues and feminists seek to integrate the feminist perspective in all spheres of personal and national life. Women must therefore take a position on everything—whether it is nuclear warfare between two countries, ethnic and communal conflict, political, economic and development policies, human rights and civil liberties, or environmental issues. In fact, despite their limited human and other resources, women's organizations are already involved in many of the above issues.

Q. Don't feminists destroy peaceful homes?

A. Take a closer look at so called "peaceful" homes and see how peace hides women's demolished individualities. A home is peaceful only for so long as women endure the injustice and the inequality.

Is a woman who starts resenting her uneventful life, the drudgery and the mindless repetitiveness of domestic work and the annual childbearing a home breaker? Is a woman breaking a home if she wants to live also for herself, to follow her own dreams and ambitions, if she does not want to be an ideal, submissive, sacrificing, self-effacing wife? Or is it the man who insists that she negates herself in this way, the real destroyer?

While most feminists are not against the home and the family, we do take the position that the only way to save both is to change the nature of female-male relationship within them. Peace and harmony can no longer be maintained at the cost of women. We cannot talk of democracy outside the family and yet allow male dictatorship inside it. In fact, we believe that real democracies and egalitarian societies can only be established if we practice democracy, equality and mutual respect within the family. Real peace in society can only be established if we experience peace at home.

So, yes, many feminists may actually destroy homes. But they do it in the same way as peasants or workers disturb the harmony of a village or factory when they stand against a landlord or an industrialist. After all, one person's peace may be another person's poison.

Q. But are feminists against motherhood?

A. Feminists are not against women having children. But motherhood should not be considered to be every woman's destiny nor should womanhood be equated with motherhood. Feminists believe that every woman should have the choice of whether or not to have children. At present such a choice does not exist in many developing countries—legally, socially or psychologically—and our struggle therefore is for women to obtain it.

But most women see motherhood as their destiny. This is due both to the lack of alternatives and to the glorification of motherhood. Women are admired for their ability and desire to sacrifice for others. This has been a psychological trap for women. Such glorification is like the sugar-coating on bitter quinine and women, for generations, have fallen for this bit of sugar and accepted a role that has immobilized them. Women do not have

special limbs to look after children nor do they have special glands which produce love and care.

Although only a woman can bear a child, anyone can bring it up or mother it. Motherhood means looking after, nurturing and caring for another human being. It means helping another person develop physically, emotionally and mentally. Such mothering can be done by anyone, even by a man. The ability and capacity to mother is not biologically determined.

Besides, if the world really considered motherhood to be the most noble of activities—if that is what you got Nobel prizes for—men would not have allowed women to monopolize it. For all their praise of such an activity, men are averse to practicing it themselves.

Feminists believe that children would grow up better if they get the best from both their parents. Mothering would then—and only then—become truly creative, joyous and fun for everyone concerned.

Q. Are feminists manhaters?

A. Feminists do not hate men but are against patriarchy, male domination and the maleness in men—and in those women who might imbibe similar behavior patterns—which is expressed as domination, aggression, violence, etc. We are against men who do not accept women as their equals, who treat women as their property or otherwise view them only as commodities.

Unfortunately, most men do dominate and do have such qualities in them. This is true even of the most ardent "democratic" and "socialist" men who, while fighting for equality in society, refuse to accept equality within the home and interpersonal male-female relationship.

However, feminists believe that just as women are not naturally more caring and nurturing, men are not naturally aggressive and domineering. They are, in fact, as much as victims of their own consciousness and of society's conditioning as women are. The problem is that most men do not appear to recognize this and few want to struggle to liberate themselves into becoming more human and truly democratic. Moreover, any move by women to help them recognize this, they consider antagonistic.

Q. If men's liberation is so connected to women's liberation and if they are trapped by the system, why are they so fearful of feminism?

A. Men fear feminism and are against a change that would also help them because basically, the present situation suits them in obvious ways. Since feminism challenges male superiority and domination in society, at work and in the home, and since it questions male authority based not on ability but on gender, it forces men to review their attitudes, their behavior, and their position. This is neither easy nor pleasant. No ruler willingly gives up authority.

There are other fears as well that men have had about independent and competent women. They are afraid women will compete with them for jobs. If you define women's role essentially as that of housewives, then you can hire them when their labour is required and fire them when convenient and necessary. If the definition of women's role changes and if their competence and capacity to assert themselves improve, then such discrimination will not be possible. People will get jobs according to their competence and not because they are male or female.

Capitalism is also against feminism because once women become conscious of their rights, they will no longer tolerate the low-paid, least-skilled jobs that they are presently confined to. They will also resist becoming voracious consumers and fight against being seen as sex objects.

In short, men fear the societal change that feminism proposes because it will make them lose present and clear advantages. They do not know that feminism will provide them with other advantages that they are not yet aware of.

Q. If men will also gain from the feminist movement, why do women generally organize themselves into all-women groups?

A. The women's movement is built on the assumption that women share a common interest. While the feminist movement proposes a society that would be beneficial for all, it is necessary that at ceratin stages of the struggle and while working with other movements, women understand the nature of their oppression and plan strategies to change the situation among themselves. The rationale of this is no different from that used in support of the autonomy of other oppressed classes. We do, for instance, support the autonomy of class, ethnic and national movements and so on. This distinction is even more valid for the women's movement because the problem here is far more complex and long term. It ultimately requires not the triumph of one group over another—in this case, female over male—but a rethinking and restructuring of all aspects of society. Other classes can achieve their aims within patriarchy. They can achieve victory by overcoming or eliminating their antagonists.

But the women's movement can do none of these. It must resolve and overcome class and other differences within itself. If it must change the essence of society, it must convert the antagonist. In this sense, the women's struggle is the most difficult struggle of all and women must identify for themselves the process that it will take.\ In other words separate women's organizations are a necessary and important stage in the struggle, **but they are only a stage.** Slowly the movement will integrate itself with movements for fundamental changes in society and in the mode of functioning of existing institutions. But even while we have separate women's groups, feminists welcome and value the support of sympathetic men. We join the struggle of working class and peasant groups, of groups fighting for civil liberties and human rights and the environment, and the struggle of the minority.

In conclusion, feminism is not only necessary for our society but it is also very exciting for all those who participate in the process of defining, articulating, shaping and living it. It is exciting precisely because it challenges us to review, refine and change the most intimate of relationships, the most personal of beliefs, the most inarticulated areas of our minds and hearts. For the first time we have an "ism" that suggests profound changes in society at every level, including the personal. Feminists believe it has the potential to provide us with the direction that other "isms" have failed to provide.

Feminism is exciting also because it is not defined by someone else, somewhere else, for us. All of us can and have to participate in the process of finding its meaning for ourselves. Although people feel feminism, they have not yet been able to collectively articulate it as an ideology in order for it to have the collective power to bring about the kind of change we are looking for.

But the present fluid state of this emerging ideology is not a bad thing because, for the first time, a way of life is being tried out at every level before it is formulated as theory. For us, this is an important process of learning and discovering, a process which is necessarily slow and faltering. That is why there are differences even among feminists. We are all learning and are at different stages of the process. To the opponents of feminism, this uncertain but unfolding status of the ideology may be a negative point. But feminists see it as a positive one because then, the ideology, when it finally and eventually arrives, will have been tried and tested.