

# Sisters Under The Skin

Has feminism gone soft?  
Or disappeared altogether? **Rosalind Coward** and **Sarah Mower** launch our debate with two, sharply-contrasting assessments of feminism into the 1990s



**'Women remain the demarcated sex, half the population whose identity is precariously constructed on sexual worth'**

Rosalind Coward first became active in the feminist movement in 1971 alongside many of her contemporaries at university. After leaving, she became a founder of *M/F* magazine, a theoretical quarterly feminist journal. A former lecturer in media studies, she is now a freelance writer with two young children. She presents *Natural Movements*, a **BBQ** programme about alternative lifestyles, on February 1.

It's inconceivable to me that the next few years will not bring conflict about women's position. For in spite of the rhetoric of post-feminism, many of the social factors which gave rise to 70s' feminism are still in play. There may be a new stratum of successful professional women and there have been some advances towards equal pay, but the fact is, women are still at the rough end of an unjust society. They remain the private 'carers' of dependents (whether it is the elderly, the sick or children) and, with divorce rates soaring, they are doing that work increasingly on their own. And women also remain the demarcated sex, half the population whose identity is precariously constructed on

sexual worth, with all the dangers and vulnerabilities which that brings.

We live in times which distort both women's work and women's sexual vulnerability. Sexual exploitation is not currently a fashionable term. But it has been ever-more coercive in the 80s, with sexual masochism a dominant representation of women. The justification has been that the post-feminist woman knows what she's doing and can take risks. The power-dressed working mother has become another cliché of the 80s. She's in every film and every advert; she's the subject of endless interviews in the magazines. She laments the 'tensions' for the working woman and the inadequacies of childcare provision.

But these stories are no longer told from the point of view of the women doing the work. That perspective is not longer fashionable. Think back to the books which fed the spirit of the 70s' women's movement, like Fay Weldon's *Down Among The Women* and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*. These belonged to a whole genre tackling the reality of women's lives; they were tales of depressing marriages, hard work with children and lack of

fulfilment.

Yet that feminist criticism has not been carried through into the mainstream of 80s' imagery. Now, domestic life is hidden, distorted and glamourised: something of a paradox, since there are far more women in public life. It is acceptable to show the 'servant class', as in recent adverts for coffee and the *Yellow Pages*. It's also acceptable to show men looking after children, like the deeply implausible stockbroker in *Capital City*, television's yuppie drama, who was left with a tiny baby while his wife 'sorted herself out'. But it is not acceptable to show the hard graft of women's work.

**Yet the reality is that more and more women are having to cope on their own, with a massive increase in single mothers through the 1980s. Single parenthood immediately puts women at greater risk of poverty than a two-parent family. Of the million single-parent families, 90% are women, of whom 50% are on benefits. Are these figures simply evidence of a small, socially-insignificant sub-class or the thin end of the wedge? I believe it's the latter. Many women hover above hardship only by virtue of having a partner or sustaining a job and employing another woman. When women work, their domestic work is taken on by other, badly-paid women, no less subject to the isolations and hardship of the 'real mothers'.**

This underlying inequality between men and women has been aggravated by declining services and increasing environmental problems. The quality of life, far from having improved for many women, has become much more difficult and pressurised. Changes in retailing patterns have shifted local shopping facilities towards large supermarkets, which encourage spending and require private cars; both of which tend to militate against the single woman. There are far more things for women to worry about, especially in relation to children: anxieties about water, pollution, increased traffic; even changes in educational policy and provision are shifting more responsibility on to the home (ie, the woman). It's as if women are required to provide a basic humanity and happiness against the odds.

But why, if it is the case that women's social position has not hugely improved, has feminism failed to speak to that tension and conflict? And will it do so in the 90s?

One factor which has subverted feminism's appeal is precisely the consolidation of professional women within the middle classes. There are more women who, by virtue of their jobs (rather than inheritance), are able to sustain a middle-class identity in their own right, as opposed to being middle-class by marriage. Relative hardship may have declined but relative affluence has increased, creating a class of wealthy

women. These women share problems common to all women (childcare, domestic work, being sexually vulnerable) but they remain, objectively speaking, a highly privileged sector. And, problematically, feminism is often associated in the public mind with that sector of society, mainly because those women have utilised feminism to fight their professional battles.

This economic difference is only one of the many differences (race and sexual orientation being others) which have ripped apart the assumption that feminism could speak for all women. But this sense of difference has not been used productively to transform the aims and objectives of feminism. In the mid-80s, a rhetoric of oppressions, with its attendant guilt, silenced that aspect of feminism which spoke to ordinary women's discontents. Now, if women perceive themselves as 'ordinary' - neither specially disadvantaged nor sharing the ambitions of the ultra-powerful women - they do not feel addressed by feminism.

It's no coincidence that much of the support for green politics comes from women. This is not simply a concern for mother earth and an anxiety for their children's future. It is also a political response to an invidious social position, where women are required to fill the gaps in crumbling families and declining environments.

Yet environmental politics may prove too frail a vessel for this discontent in the 90s. Feminism always carried the uncomfortable message that women's disadvantages were connected with the unequal power relations between men and women, and with how social resources were controlled. With men still failing to take domestic responsibility and no changed priorities in terms of social provision for women and children (either from the left or the right) that message is still relevant. It remains to be seen whether it can be translated into a socially meaningful form for the next decade.

**Sarah Mower is the fashion editor of The Independent. She first encountered feminist ideas through a lecturer of hers at university in 1976. Her career in Journalism started on Honey magazine in the early 80s, where she often wrote on women's issues. Since then she has worked with The Guardian, The Observer and Vogue. She is married without children.**

In the 90s, the popular way of looking at feminism will be as a mindset as pickled in the past as a 70s' perm. Many women who got a buzz out of calling themselves feminists at every opportunity in the early 80s have given it up. While they enjoyed (let's face it) going on abortion and anti-nuke marches and thrilled to the belief that all women were good and right, times have changed - and so have we.

It we are to be honest, feminism is no longer worth shouting about as a means

of identifying oneself: it's just been part of growing up. We are no pushovers, but neither are we ideological head-butters, like our older sisters could often be.

The new generation of feminists-by-any-other-name are subtler and more tentative, which means we are a bitter disappointment to an older generation of feminist pioneers. Yet do we not have a right - even a duty - to learn from the past and to look clear-eyed at the actual conditions of the present? To ask uncomfortable questions and be honest according to our own lights?

Apart from bestowing a generalised confidence that womanliness has its own intrinsic strength (far less brittle than masculinity), the legacy of feminism feels pretty shaky in many other areas. These days, central certainties about the sisterly connections between all women are frequently impossible to substantiate, beyond our own circles of trusted friends.

In the last decade it has been conclusively apparent that all women are not good and right by mere virtue of their sex - the examples are too obvious to name. When it has been time to do women down in child benefits and preventing the development of tax-free pre-school childcare, women have been there to do the job. When it has been time to support and inspire a dictator's excesses, there has always been a woman at his elbow, with special expertise in deepening the misery of other women. There's no getting away from this. Blaming women's betrayals on patriarchy is the most dishonest of evasions.

Is the fact that feminist thinking has failed to alleviate poverty (which means, largely, single mothers' poverty) in Britain in any systematic way a sign of the failure of feminism itself? Proof that it is not powerful enough, alone, to work miracles or even to put brakes on the sliding from bad to worse? In truth, should feminism be seen as no more than a subset of the embattled Left as it struggles to survive in Mrs Thatcher's 'post-socialist' Britain?

**And yet, viewed another way, feminism on the brink of the 90s is a triumph that is gathering ever-more momentum. In certain areas of Thatcher's individualistic 'enterprise economy', feminism - if you understand that as meaning women taking control of their lives and work - has flourished. A high - and rising - proportion of small businesses are owned by women, who understand the market of women's needs and who want to organise their working lives, as they choose, around their families. (Large, traditional, male-dominated companies are increasingly left looking stupid for taking neither aspect of modern business into account.)**

Stealing the march on the big boys is one contemporary woman's delight. So is the prospect that many of the feminist dreams of the 70s may become routine reality in the 90s, by sheer dint of demographic change. Creches and other employers' childcare schemes, as

well as flexible working hours - and, in many sectors, more attractive pay - will be used to secure the working loyalties of women when the youth labour market dries up, as it is already doing.

The down-side is said to be that only those who are already doing ok will benefit, like the parents who work for the National Magazine Company, who receive extra payment for pre-school childcare (- so should they be begrudged it?). Yet other initiatives are helping 'ordinary' women, such as the scheme at the Boots' factory in Cambridge, where mothers can choose to work school hours only.

And it's hardly as if feminism, in these modern times, scarcely dares show its face. Feminist publishers are a run-away success, feminist writers are stars and their work big box-office material. With Meryl Streep about to headline in the Hollywood version of *She-Devil*, and *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* showing on tv, women's consciousness is hardly being marginalised. Even in the infamous case of *Blackeyes*, whatever else Dennis Potter was criticised for, it was not for seeing sexism per se as a proper subject for debate.

For further proof of the mainstream nature of women's concerns, you only have to look at *Cosmopolitan*, that block-buster of the women's magazine mass market: it's been crusading on behalf of feminist issues for years.

Far be it for me to paint a glowing picture of women's achievements under Mrs Thatcher. We know many are worse-off than they were. But does it follow that those middle-class women who have succeeded, who feel stronger and happier now, should be ashamed, done down as collaborators and sellers-out? If these women do not count as 'real' feminists and role models, who now does?

At least when there was a camp at Greenham, we knew what the ultimate feminist was supposed to be and do - and knew what we were feeling guilty about if we weren't down there doing something about it. Since feminism now seriously lacks any such focus, there is little to measure oneself and others against; yet the successful are nevertheless disparaged in greater or lesser degree. Added to the dour censoriousness of hardliners there are recriminations from the tabloid press. Successful feminist women? Aren't they the ones who made it by exploiting nannies?

Is it any wonder that fewer and fewer women, however independent and however strong their feelings about certain rights and wrongs may be, want to call themselves feminists? The term already has a dated air about it.

Yet let it not be forgotten that the tenets of feminism were never written in tablets of stone. One of its virtues should be that it is organic and can adapt, compromise and metamorphose according to the needs of the times. That, if anything, will ensure its survival - if not the usage of its name.



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