A (Qualified) Defense of Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is not committed to a number of philosophical positions for which it is frequently criticized, including abstract individualism, certain individualistic approaches to morality and society, valuing the mental/rational over the physical/emotional, and the traditional liberal way of drawing the line between the public and the private.

Moreover, liberal feminism's clearest political commitments, including equality of opportunity, are important to women's liberation and not necessarily incompatible with the goals of socialist and radical feminism.

Introduction

Because I am committed to socialism, I do not think of myself as a liberal feminist and would not defend liberal feminism without important qualifications. On the other hand, I want to defend certain aspects of liberal feminism because I am also committed to some traditional liberal principles, such as equal opportunity for self-development and a modified version of Mill's principle of liberty, and to many liberal feminist reforms. In addition, I hope that my defense of liberal feminism will help to demonstrate that feminism has out-grown the political traditions from which it emerged, and that traditional political categories are no longer very useful for understanding the similarities and differences among feminist analyses, strategies and goals.

What Is Liberal Feminism?

If it is true that feminism no longer fits comfortably into the traditional political categories, it is somewhat artificial to be talking about liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is an historical tradition that grew out of liberalism, as can be seen very clearly in the work of such feminists as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, but feminists who took principles from that tradition have developed analyses and goals that go far beyond those of 18th and 19th Century liberal feminists, and many feminists who have goals and strategies identified as liberal feminist by such writers as Jaggar and Struhl (1978), Eisenstein (1981) and Scheman (1983) reject major components of traditional liberalism. For these reasons, instead of trying to define liberal feminism

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precisely, I will give a brief description of the political commitments most clearly identifiable as liberal feminist and then focus on the allegedly liberal feminist views that have come under recent criticism.

I can safely say that liberal feminism is not committed to socialism, or it would be socialist feminism. Liberal feminists usually are, however, committed to major economic re-organization and considerable redistribution of wealth, since one of the modern political goals most closely associated with liberal feminism is equality of opportunity, which would undoubtedly require and lead to both. (I will return to this subject later.)

The liberal feminist tradition, like most other feminist traditions, has always asserted that the value of women as human beings is not instrumental to the welfare of men and children and that it is equal to the value of men, and demanded various forms of public and private recognition of it, including respect for women's freedom and privacy. Liberal feminists have always promoted equality of legal rights for women, and have more recently demanded an end to de facto discrimination on the basis of sex, 'enlisting the State in attaining that goal. Liberal feminists have the traditional liberal beliefs in the power of education as a means of social reform and its importance to human fulfillment, and, since Mary Wollstonecraft, they have demanded education for girls and women equal to that offered to boys and men.

Liberal feminism is frequently criticized for its alleged commitments to the philosophical assumptions and developments of the liberal tradition from which it grew. Any evidence that liberal feminists do not have these commitments can be interpreted as showing the inconsistency of liberal feminist theory (as it is by Jaggar [1983, 37:28]), but it seems to me more interesting and optimistic to interpret it as showing that liberal feminism is a philosophically better kind of liberalism. In any case, I will start my defense of liberal feminism by arguing that it is not committed to a number of philosophical positions for which it is criticized, including abstract individualism, certain kinds of individualistic approaches to morality and society, valuing the mental/rational over the physical/emotional, and the traditional liberal way of drawing the line between the public and the private.

Then I will argue that liberal feminism's clearest political commitments: to the promotion of women's greater recognition and self-value as individuals, to equality of opportunity, to the promotion of equal education for girls and boys, to ending sex prejudice and de facto discrimination, to equality of legal rights, and to the use of education as a major tool of social reform, are important to women's liberation and not necessarily incompatible with the goals of socialist and radical feminism.
Liberal Feminism and Abstract Individualism

In "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," Naomi Scheman describes the individualist assumptions of "the ideology of liberal individualism" in this way:

Thus, it is supposed to be a natural fact about human beings, and hence a constraint on any possible social theory, that, no matter how social our development may be, we exist essentially as separate individuals—with wants, preferences, needs, abilities, pleasures, and pains—and any social order has to begin by respecting these as attaching to us determinately and singly, as a way of respecting us.

Classical liberal social theory gets off the ground with the observation that individuals so defined are in need of being enticed—or threatened—into enduring and stable association with one another. (Scheman 1983, 231)

In Feminist Politics and Human Nature, Alison Jaggar characterizes abstract individualism thus:

The assumption in this case is that human individuals are ontologically prior to society; in other words, human individuals are the basic constituents out of which social groups are composed. Logically if not empirically, human individuals could exist outside a social context; their essential characteristics, their needs and interests, their capacities and desires, are given independently of their social context and are not created or even fundamentally altered by that context. This metaphysical assumption is sometimes called abstract individualism because it conceives of human individuals in abstraction from any social circumstances. (Jaggar 1983, 28, 29)

As I interpret Scheman, she is asserting that a component of abstract individualism is the assumption that human beings do not, by our nature, desire society for its own sake. Thus, we "need to be enticed or threatened into enduring and stable association." This is not clearly part of Jaggar’s conception of abstract individualism, but in another passage she does criticize "the liberal assumption that human individuals are essentially solitary, with needs and interests that are separate from if not in opposition to those of other individuals" (Jaggar 1983, 40).

Jaggar seems to hold that abstract individualism includes the assumption that human beings’ most important characteristics, including some
important needs, interests, capacities and desires, are not caused by
the society in which we developed as children or live as adults. Scheman
makes it clear that she thinks abstract individualism does not deny that
our development is social. By this I assume she means that abstract
individualism can acknowledge that the needs, interests, capacities and
desires which each individual has are, at least in part, caused by the
society in which s/he develops. Jaggar does not appear to concede this
much to abstract individualism, since she says it assumes, among other
things, that individuals' "essential characteristics . . . are given in-
dependently of their social context and are not created or even funda-
damentally altered by that context" (see passage quoted above). Later
she says: "If we reject abstract individualism and suppose instead that
human desires and interest are socially constituted, then we can expect
that the members of any society are likely to learn to want just those
things that the society provides" (Jaggar 1983,43).

Scheman and Jaggar seem to agree that abstract individualism in-
cludes the assumption that human individuals can be conceived of out-
side a social context because their characteristics, including their needs,
desires and capacities, can be adequately described without reference
to their social context. Note that this assumption differs from the claim
that our social context does not cause our most important character-
istics, and it does not imply that claim. Society might cause us to have
many characteristics that are neither socially defined nor dependent on
society for their continuation in us. Nor does this assumption imply
that we do not desire society as part of our nature, since we might desire
association with other individuals without desiring a particular kind
of association that could only be described by reference to a social con-
text, e.g. we might all want to be members of some human group. The
assumption that individuals can be conceived of and adequately describ-
ed without reference to our social context does, however, imply that
our social positions and relationships are not essential characteristics
of people, that we can be understood and identified apart from them.

How is this abstract individualism, distilled from Jaggar and
Scheman's descriptions, related to liberal feminism? Scheman seems,
in the following passage, to believe that liberal feminism has some com-
mitment to abstract individualism as she has described it, and that this
commitment has political implications that are threatening to the status
quo but also wrong-headed.

The fear arises from a recognition of the fact that men
have been free to imagine themselves as self-defining only
because women have held the intimate social world
together, in part by seeing ourselves as inseparable from

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it. The norms of personhood, which liberals would strive
to make as genuinely universal as they now only pretend
to be, depend in fact on their not being so. . . . Thus,
the fear aroused by liberal feminism’s ideal of opening
to women the same sort of autonomy previously reserv-
ed for men is, I think, a real one.

There is every reason to react with alarm to the pros-
ppect of a world filled with self-actualizing persons pull-
ing their own strings, capable of guiltlessly saying ‘no’
to anyone about anything, and freely choosing when to
begin and end all their relationships. It is hard to see how,
in such a world, children could be raised, the sick or
disturbed could be cared for, or people could know each
other through their lives and grow old together.

Liberal feminism does have much in common with this
sort of ‘human potential’ individualistic talk, but it is my
suspicion that it was in reaction to the deeper, and more
deeply threatening, insights and demands of feminism
that the current vogue for self-actualization developed—
urging us all back inside the apolitical confines of our
own heads and hearts and guts. (Scheman 1983, 240-241)

Jaggar (1983, 42) argues that liberal feminism provides an implicit
challenge to abstract individualism” by focussing upon the ways that
male supremacy molds women’s interests, needs and wants. Ultimate-
ly, however, she interprets this implicit challenge as an inconsistency
of liberal feminist theory, which she sees as based upon essentially the
same view of human nature as modern non-feminist liberalism. Because
Jaggar (1983, 33,35) views liberal feminism as fundamentally an at-
tempt to apply liberal principles of political equality and individual
liberty to women as well as men, and because she sees these principles as
deriving from the liberal conception of human nature as she interprets
it, understandably she views liberal feminism as having some commit-
ment to the same conception of human nature. According to Jaggar,
this conception includes not only abstract individualism but “normative
dualism, . . . the view that what is especially valuable about human
beings is their ‘mental’ capacity for rationality” (1983, 40), the belief
that this capacity is possessed in approximately equal measure by all
men (or people), and “the instrumental interpretation of rationality
which holds that an individual can make a rational choice between a
variety of means to a given end, but that one cannot give a rational
justification for any particular rank ordering of ends” (1983, 41). I
will discuss the question of liberal feminism’s commitment to these
additional beliefs about human nature and values shortly, but let us look first at whether liberal feminism is committed to abstract individualism.

I see no reason to attribute commitment to abstract individualism to liberal feminists unless they express such a commitment or it is implied by other positions they adopt. Jaggar says that the liberal principles of political equality and individual liberty are derived from a view of human nature which includes abstract individualism, and if they must be, then liberal feminists are committed to abstract individualism. Therefore, it is important to examine the plausibility of the claim that these principles important to liberal feminists imply a commitment to abstract individualism, and I will do this first. Later, I will present two examples, one historical and one contemporary, of feminists committed to the liberal ideals of political equality and individual liberty who do not derive them from a view of human nature which includes abstract individualism.

I take it that the liberal ideal of political equality includes legal equality and equal rights to political participation and that the liberal ideal of individual liberty means (roughly) freedom of thought, expression and action within the limitation that we do not harm others. How might it be argued that a commitment to these ideals commits one to abstract individualism? Let us consider a few plausible possibilities.

It might be maintained that the only philosophical justification of the liberal ideal of political equality is some view that human beings are equally valuable in virtue of some basic characteristics or capacities we all share, regardless of our social backgrounds and present social contexts. Such a view seems to imply that societies do not create some of the most important characteristics or capacities of human beings, since there are so many different kinds of human society and so many possible positions in them, and the view generalizes over all human beings. Thus, this view appears to imply Jaggar’s version of abstract individualism.

However, this view is not the only possible justification of the liberal ideal of political equality. One might maintain that political equality is the best system for helping people to protect their own interests, or that it makes the best provision for most people’s happiness or self-development (see the discussion of J.S. Mill and Carol Gould below), whatever their interests, happiness or self-development consist in. One might claim that it has proven dangerous to the interests, happiness or self-development of human beings to allow others to make major decisions affecting their lives without their representation or consent. Alternatively, one might defend political equality between any two groups (such as men and women) on the grounds that there is no prov-
en correlation between membership in one of the groups on the one hand and, on the other hand, capacity to participate in government, to exercise political rights and to make decisions that protect the interests of oneself and others. All of these alternative justifications are compatible with the assertion that there are no characteristics or capacities that all human beings share. Indeed, they are compatible with the view that many of the important characteristics of individuals are created by their societies and/or manifested in their social relationships.

It might be maintained that the only philosophical justification for political freedom or individual liberty is some view that all, or at least most, human beings can best decide for themselves how to develop themselves or accomplish their own well-being. This view seems to imply Jaggar’s version of abstract individualism, because it implies that society could not affect individuals so profoundly that they would not be their own best guardians, e.g. by causing them to want things that make them unhappy or giving them persistent false beliefs about the consequences of certain decisions. However, liberals can and frequently do concede that human beings are often bad at ensuring our own well-being or development, but argue that since history seems to indicate that we are even worse at ensuring other people’s, the best arrangement is individual liberty with the limitation that one does not harm others or interfere with their similar liberty.

Incidentally, one does not have to hold that there is no objective basis for criticizing people’s values and ways of life (within the limitation that they do not violate the rights of others) in order to defend individual liberty. Jaggar is wrong when she says:

Individuals are entitled to set their own ends and, so long as they do not violate the rights of others, there are in principle no limits to what they may want to do or believe they ought to do. In principle, therefore, liberals are committed to the belief that individuals are fulfilled whenever they are doing what they have decided freely to do however unpleasant, degrading or wrong this may appear to someone else. (Jaggar 1983, 174)

One can hold (as J.S. Mill did) that there is an objective basis for criticizing people’s choices, persuading them to live in certain ways, and even teaching them certain values at a young age, but that it is wrong to interfere with the conduct of the lives of adults so long as they are not harming others. I may well believe that I know for certain what is best for you and that I should under no circumstances force you to do it or prevent you from choosing something I know is bad for you. This commitment to non-interference may be based on the political concern
that to interfere on behalf of good opens the door to interference on behalf of evil, or on the belief that there are some goods, perhaps the most important ones, that cannot be forced upon people or that are only good for us when we choose them. For example, I may be convinced that a friend of mine should not stay with an alcoholic husband who constantly mocks and belittles her, even though she believes that her staying is best for both of them, but I may be equally convinced that no one should force her to leave him and that it would not be good for her to be forced to leave him.

Perhaps the liberal ideals of political equality and individual liberty are supposed to commit liberals to abstract individualism because they imply that there may be something important to safeguard politically on behalf of individuals. If all the important psychological characteristics of individuals, including capacities and needs, are entirely socially constructed or determined by their social context, then what basis could there be for protecting the individual in and from society? If society entirely constructs the individual, then society cannot violate the individual, except perhaps by means of its own internal contradictions, e.g., by creating individuals who need certain conditions and then depriving them of those conditions. There can be no moral objection to a highly controlled society, indeed to any society that is internally consistent in this respect, unless one has a view of human nature that includes the possibility that some important characteristics of individuals, especially capacities or needs, are not entirely socially constructed. Yet surely this latter view of human nature is not abstract individualism, or if it is, then most people, including most socialists, are committed to abstract individualism. If some of our capacities or needs are not socially constructed, the individuals might have some interests to protect in and from society. This is not to assert that individuals have no fundamental desire to be part of society, nor that none of their important characteristics are caused by society, nor that their most important characteristics and interests can be described independently of their social context.

Interestingly, Jaggar says:

"Socialist feminism is committed to the basic Marxist conception of human nature as created historically through the dialectical interrelation between human biology, human society and the physical environment. (Jaggar 1983, 125)"

If human nature is created in such a dialectical relation, surely we can place the dialectic at risk by allowing society to suppress new natures when they emerge. Since it is unlikely that everyone in a society will
change in the same way at the same time, we cannot provide the conditions necessary for changes in human nature unless we give sufficient protection to individual interests. This problem has been recognized in liberal theory. Some traditional liberal thinkers have tended to view human nature as essentially unchanging in its important characteristics, but others (like Mill) have been concerned to safeguard the possibility of change by not allowing any society, no matter how harmoniously constructed in relation to present human nature, to have such control over the lives of individuals that new natures could not emerge, develop and spread. Unless one believes that human nature will change no matter how unusual individuals are treated, anyone who wants to allow for the possibility of major changes in humanity must be concerned about political liberty. A concern to allow for changes in human nature might also lead one to conclude that political equality is a good principle to adopt, on the grounds that it can, in the right conditions, promote the sort of diversity that leads to dialectical movement, and that to allow some people more political rights than others endangers the freedom to change.

I have found no good reason to believe that the liberal ideals of political equality and individual liberty commit everyone who holds them to abstract individualism. Furthermore, I can offer two examples of feminist philosophers committed to these liberal ideals who do not derive them from a view of human nature which includes or implies abstract individualism. Although there is not room here to discuss or quote from their work at length, I think the reader will find these examples illuminating and relatively straightforward.

In *The Subjection of Women*, J.S. Mill (1870) derived the necessity for women's political equality with men from two convictions: that women need political equality to safeguard their own interests and that political inequality interferes with the happiness of both women and men. In addition, Mill argued that women must have liberty of action because it is necessary to their happiness, both as a means to fulfilling their desires and because freedom of choice is, in itself, an important ingredient of happiness.

Mill did not hold the components of abstract individualism as Jaggar and Scheman describe them. First, he took the position that human beings, by our nature, desire association with others for its own sake (Mill [1861] 1957, 40). Second, in *The Subjection of Women*, Mill makes one of his most persuasive and detailed arguments that many of people's important characteristics, including their capacities and desires, are shaped by the society in which they are raised (pp. 141-144). Indeed, he states that we cannot know what the natural differences between the sexes are until women and men are social equals (pp. 38, 41,
125). Thirdly, although Mill did believe he knew some things about human nature that were relatively independent of social context, such as that people are happier when they can make important choices about their own lives, he did not believe that all the most important characteristics of individuals could be described independently of social context. There are at least two facts about individuals that were vitally important to Mill and could not be described independently of social context: how strongly they desire the welfare of others ([1861] 1957, 41-43) and whether they can interact with others as equals (1870, 81, 148-153).

For a modern example, consider the value framework offered recently by Carol Gould in "Private Rights and Public Virtues:"

I think the preeminent value that ought to underlie the feminist movement is freedom, that is, self-development. This arises through the exercise of agency, that is, through the exercise of the human capacity of free choice, in forms of activity undertaken to realize one's purposes and to satisfy one's needs. Such activity is manifested both in social interaction and in human work as a transformation of the natural world. On this view, each human being is regarded as an agent with a capacity for free choice and self-development. In this respect, all individuals are equal. Since they are all equal in this way, there is no reason for one individual or for any class of individuals to have more of a right to exercise this capacity for self-realization than any other. Thus, there are no grounds for making differences in gender the basis for differential rights to self-realization. The equal rights of women and men are thus grounded in the nature of human agency itself. (Gould 1983, 3-18)

I do not know whether Gould would identify herself as a liberal feminist, but from the equal right to self-development she concludes that we have an equal right to participate in the decisions of government and in decisions in the economic, social and cultural domains (Gould 1983, 6,9). Thus, like most modern liberals and most feminists, Gould extends her concern for equality beyond the traditional liberal ideal of political equality, but she includes this kind of political equality among her goals. She also says that free choice is necessary to self-development, and that it requires the privacy of individuals and "freedom to arrange their personal relations without the interference of institutions or of the state" (Gould 1983, 10. See also pp. 5-6, 13.). She therefore supports a version of the liberal ideal of individual liberty.
By saying that self-development is grounded in social interaction and in work, Gould implicitly rejects the view that society does not create our important characteristics, and the view that individuals can be adequately described without reference to our social context. Furthermore, she would not hold that human beings do not by nature desire society, because that would imply that we do not desire the conditions necessary for our self-development, which she says include “the full development of both individuality and community” (Gould 1983, 17). Thus, she does not hold any of the components of abstract individualism as Jaggar and Scheman describe it. Both Mill and Gould illustrate the possibility of a commitment to liberal principles of equality and liberty which is not based upon beliefs about human nature which include abstract individualism.

**Practical Forms of Individualism**

Since liberal ideals of political equality and individual liberty need not be derived from a view of human nature that includes abstract individualism and do not imply such a view, I see no reason to attribute a belief in abstract individualism to liberal feminists unless they express such a belief or it is implied by other positions they adopt. But does liberal feminism promote a kind of practical individualism, an individualistic approach to living like that ascribed to it by Scheman in the passage quoted above, in which individuals are too absorbed by their own “self-actualization” to care about or take any responsibility for other people’s happiness?

Scheman’s description is, I think, a caricature of both the human potential movement and liberal feminism’s commitment to individualism. A commitment to the value of individuals and their self-development, or even to the ethical priority of individuals over groups, does not commit one to narcissism or egoism or to the belief that one’s own most important characteristics are somehow independent of one’s relationships with other people. Indeed, liberals have long defended liberty and equality partly on the basis of their benefits to human relationships. One of Mary Wollstonecraft’s ([1833] 1967) major arguments for women’s education and opportunity to develop as independent individuals was that, with these benefits, women would be better wives and mothers. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill (1870, 66-70, 170-174) argued that some of the worst consequences of inequality between the sexes were in the damage done to people’s relationships and the potential unrealized in them, especially the relationships between women and men and those among men. *Ms.* magazine, which is very representative of modern liberal feminism, contains a large proportion of articles
which focus on relationships, discussing the damage done to them by inequality and presenting proposals for making them more egalitarian. (See Ms. Vol XI.) The liberal feminist tradition hardly supports the narrow sort of individualism attributed to it by Scheman.

What, then, is the content of liberal feminism’s individualism? Central to liberal feminism is the assertion that women are valuable in themselves, as individual human beings, and not just as sources of pleasure and providers of services for men and children. Note that one can believe this and also consistently believe that all or many of the most valuable characteristics of all individuals, including women, are created and manifested in their relationships with others, but that women’s relationships have placed too much emphasis on their pleasing and taking care of others and not enough on their engaging in equal or reciprocal interactions.

In her critique of liberal feminism, The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism, Zillah Eisenstein makes a similar observation about the function of individualism in feminist theory:

Individualism posits the importance of self-sovereignty and independence as a universal claim and therefore can be used to justify women’s independence from men. . . . Feminism uses the individualistic stance against men because men inhibit women’s self and collective development; it need not extend this vision to premise women’s isolation from one another. In other words, the liberal conception of an individual with rights and of women’s independence from men are important contributions to feminist theory. The points must be distinguished from the ideology of liberal individualism that posits the isolated, competitive individual. (Eisenstein 1981, 154)

The possibility of women’s coming to value ourselves more as individuals with needs and desires of our own and less as nurturers and sources of pleasure to others raises the specter of women’s becoming “selfish.” This is not, I think, because selfishness would necessarily result, but because present relations in our culture are built so firmly on the assumption that men will indulge in certain kinds of emotional and practical selfishness and women will aspire to pleasing men and acting out the role of selfless nurturer. Insofar as women’s identities and interests are subordinated to the family and their relationships with men, men are able (and encouraged) to avoid taking equal responsibility for childcare, housework and other forms of service work, and for maintaining emotional relationships. Thus, it may be difficult for us to imagine a woman’s giving up the selfless role without imagining her
exchanging it for the selfish one, but that is not the only possibility. A woman may accept doing her share of nurturing and giving pleasure but refuse to do more than her share. Such a change appears selfish and uncaring only if we assume that men are incapable of responding by taking greater responsibility for their own and their children’s nurture and emotional life, i.e. for doing their share.

The possibility that women might no longer identify ourselves primarily as nurturers, sources of pleasure and maintainers of relationships is very threatening to the present division of labour and responsibility. This might account for the strong resistance liberal feminists have always encountered (from men and women) when they attempt to apply liberal principles of liberty and equality to women, even where men have adopted these principles for themselves. The hopeful prospect this possibility presents—of widening the sphere of one’s identity, interest and responsibility and of valuing one’s own experience as highly as that of others—may also account for liberal feminism’s popularity among North American women, since liberal feminism puts a great deal of emphasis on women’s value as individuals. This hypothesis is an interesting alternative to the theory that liberal feminism is more popular in North America than socialist or radical feminism because of its greater apparent compatibility with capitalist ideology.

One might think (as Jaggar [1983, 193-194] does) that since modern liberal feminism advocates equality of opportunity it is committed to a meritocratic model of society and a competitive form of individualism, in which each of us is pitted against the others in striving for our own narrow self-interest. Although it is probably true that some liberal feminists hold these three commitments as a package, and although it has been tied to them historically, equality of opportunity is a broadly applicable political goal that is not necessarily attached to either meritocracy or competition.

Equality of opportunity is a promising solution to a certain kind of problem of distribution. When desire for something exceeds the supply of it and need is not an appropriate criterion, or not appropriately the sole criterion, for sharing it, equality of opportunity may be an excellent solution. This sort of problem does not arise only in capitalist or other competitive economic systems. Some things cannot and others should not be distributed equally, or even on the basis of need, such as the job of surgeon or the use of electron microscopes or the finest musical instruments. Any society is likely to confront this kind of distribution problem, and equality of opportunity is a way of ensuring that those who are capable of doing a job well or making very good use of a scarce resource will be chosen to do so. There need be no competition involved, since distribution can be based on demonstrating a certain level of pro-
iciency, and a society can commit itself to providing the appropriate work or the scarce resource for everyone who attains that level.

When authority or power (and sometimes wealth) are the scarce resources distributed by equality of opportunity, a so-called meritocracy results. The name is somewhat deceptive, since merit in the sense of moral desert is frequently not involved. In any case, many people who support equality of opportunity as a way of creating and selecting doctors, scholars, plumbers, musicians and childcare workers would not also support it as a way of distributing political authority and power or wealth. If wealth were distributed according to need and political power were shared, let us say by means of participatory democracy, equality of opportunity to do other things would not produce a meritocracy, nor would it have to foster a competitive form of individualism.

Thus, the political implications of equality of opportunity lie in the answer to: opportunity to do what? If the answer is: to acquire wealth, then creating equality of opportunity amounts to cleaning up capitalism so that it is sex-blind (or race-blind, or whatever, depending on whose opportunities are to be equalized), and we do not know if or how this would be possible. If the answer is: to develop as full a range of our capacities as possible, then bringing about equality of opportunity may require creating an egalitarian socialist society. There are, of course, many possible answers in addition to these two rather extreme ones. However, even under some conservative answers to: opportunity to do what?, creating equality of opportunity seems to require major changes in the structure and distribution of work and the distribution of resources. Thus, as Jaggar (1983, 194) points out, equality of opportunity can be a political goal which appears safely reformist and turns out to have rather radical implications. I will return to this subject later. At this point, I hope only to have shown that calling for some kinds of equality of opportunity, for example, equal opportunity for women to engage in all forms of training and work (a popular demand of liberal feminists), does not commit liberal feminists to either a meritocratic model of society or a competitive form of individualism.

Mind over Body, Reason over Emotion?

Liberal feminists are often criticized for adopting mainstream, male-biased values, for assuming in their demands for equal education, equal rights and equality of opportunity that what is most worth having and doing is what men think worth having and doing. Jaggar says:

Liberal feminists assume that most individuals are likely to discover fulfillment through the exercise of their
rational capacities in the public world and consequently these feminists emphasize the importance of equality of opportunity in that world. . . . Liberal feminist assumptions rest on a devaluation of women’s traditional work and indeed of the labor of most working people. (Jaggar 1983, 188)

Jaggar particularly emphasizes the fact that the liberal tradition valued individuals for their capacity to reason, and she places liberal feminism firmly in the tradition which values the rational over the emotional and the mind over the body. Much has been written about the connection between that system of values and the oppression of women, whom men have tended to identify with the emotions and the body. If liberal feminism is committed to that value system, it might be a very serious force for conservatism. My own impression is that liberal feminists are divided on this issue, and to understand how they are divided, it is necessary to look at various approaches to that value system.

A way of looking at the world which divides human faculties into reason/emotion or mind/body, and human activities into rational/emotional or mental/physical, and then places greater value on reason, the mind and rational and mental activities can be, and has been, criticized on two bases. First, one might argue that it is artificial and inaccurate to divide human faculties and many human activities in this way, that reason and emotion, mind and body are so intermingled and integrated in most human activities that such a division is rarely applicable and usually obscures the complexity of real people and their behaviour. Second, one might argue that, having made these distinctions, it is wrong to value reason more than emotion, mind more than body, the rational and mental more than the emotional and physical, since all are equally necessary to human survival and the richness of human experience.

In addition, one might, without necessarily challenging the accuracy of its divisions or the wisdom of its placing value where it does, argue that this traditional system of values has been misapplied to women and their activities. Liberal feminists have long maintained that women have the same capacity to reason as do men, are no more emotional by nature and no more determined by our bodily processes. This Jaggar acknowledges. However, liberal feminists, including Wollstonecraft and Mill, have also argued that many of women’s traditional activities, especially childcare and management of a household, require reason and the exercise of the mind to a far greater degree than men usually recognize, and, as Mill (1870, 105-111) claimed, confront us with over-
whelming evidence of women’s equal, if not superior, mental capacities. Thus, even if one accepts (as Mill essentially does) or fails to challenge this traditional system of values, one is not committed to devaluing women’s traditional work or the skilled labour of most working people. Of course, most women and many men also perform many relatively unskilled tasks (such as washing floors and collecting garbage), and in this value system such tasks are not valued in themselves, although they may be valued for their necessary results. Notice that this view does not imply that people who perform a lot of unskilled labour should be valued less than those who do not, nor that they should be paid less, nor even that they should have to do this work, since someone who holds this view might also think that unskilled labour should be phased out wherever possible (without putting people out of work) or shared equally by everyone.

Where do liberal feminists stand among all these possible positions? One thing is certain: ever since Mill there have been many liberal feminists insisting upon the value of women’s work in the home. Recently in Canada, liberal feminists have been prominent among those calling for pensions for homemakers and reform of the marriage and divorce laws to acknowledge the financial contribution to the family of women’s work at home. Clearly, not all liberal feminists accept the de-valuing of women’s traditional work. However, it is not clear on the basis of these facts alone whether they accept the general system of values we have been discussing. Fortunately, other evidence is available. In their concern to eliminate sex-role conditioning in child-rearing and education and to stop the stereotyping of adults, liberal feminists have neither simply striven to raise girls more as boys have been raised nor simply asserted that women have traditionally male characteristics. They have also striven to give boys some of the advantages of girls’ traditional upbringing, notably permission to have and express tender and vulnerable emotions and encouragement to behave in nurturing ways towards others, and they have affirmed the legitimacy of men’s having traditionally female characteristics, especially emotional expressiveness and competence in housework and caring for children.11 Their taking this position on sex roles shows that many liberal feminists recognize that there are virtues in both traditionally female and traditionally male characteristics, and it also shows that they do not de-value the emotions or women’s traditional labour to anything like the degree that the culture in general has de-valued them.

Some liberal feminists denigrate housework, childcare and many of women’s traditional activities and characteristics, and want only a chance to succeed in a traditionally male arena of activity. For that matter, some Marxist and radical feminists have similar attitudes and
ambitions. This is perfectly understandable when we consider how many women do traditional work because they had little or no choice, how easy it is to become trapped in it, and how little recognition or reward it usually receives. We do not have to attribute their point of view to the value-system of the liberal tradition, but even if we do attribute it to that, it is clear that many other liberal feminists have not just accepted that value system but have challenged it.

Liberal feminists' concern to eliminate sex discrimination and gain equality of opportunity for women to engage in traditionally male activities need not arise from a belief that these activities are likely to be more fulfilling for everyone than traditionally female activities. It frequently arises from the belief that people should, as far as possible, get to do the work they want to do and are capable of doing, and that no one should have to settle for work s/he is not challenged by or dislikes doing. As Mill (1870, 186) said, "If there is anything vitally important to the happiness of human beings, it is that they should relish their habitual pursuit."

**The Public and The Private - The Pornography Issue**

One area in which liberal feminism has clearly expanded the outlook of liberalism and improved upon traditional liberal theory is in drawing the lines between the public and private spheres of life and between legitimate and illegitimate interference by the State. That those lines cannot simply be drawn at the family, because individuals sometimes need the protection of the public (or the State) from members of their own families, has been implicitly or explicitly recognized by liberal feminists since Mill. As Jaggar (1983, 198-199) points out, liberal feminist practice has tended to diminish the private sphere, although liberal feminists tend to retain a theoretical commitment to the right to privacy. Anita Allen (1983) argues that such a commitment may be very valuable to women, and I would like to point out here that a commitment to privacy and individual liberty does not necessarily place liberal feminists in opposition to other feminists on one of the major feminist issues of our time—pornography.

Jaggar says:

The liberal feminist commitment to liberty and the inviolability of private life places liberal feminists among most other feminists in their opposition to restraints on contraception, abortion, homosexuality, etc. The same commitment, however, separates liberal feminists from most other feminists on the issue of pornography. . . . Pornography presents a special problem for liberal
feminists because of liberalism’s historic commitment to freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Liberal feminists may be ‘personally’ or ‘privately’ revolted or titillated by pornography, but they have no ‘political’ grounds for opposing it unless it can be shown to have a direct causal connection with the violation of women’s rights. (Jaggar 1983, 180)

I have argued elsewhere at length (Wendell 1983) that a very good case for restricting the display and availability of pornography that portrays violence and coercion and the production and distribution of pornography that is created with children or by other coercive means can be made on the basis of Mill’s principle of liberty alone. Mill’s principle allows us to interfere with expression when it causes serious harm to others, provided that the harm cannot be prevented by acceptable means other than restricting the expression. I do not know exactly what Jaggar means by “a direct causal connection with the violation of women’s rights,” but even though we have relatively little information now about pornography’s effects on people’s behaviour, we can see that unrestricted production, display and availability of pornography causes serious direct harms that cannot be prevented by acceptable means other than placing restrictions on it. Furthermore, restriction by the State is not the only possible form of opposition to pornography. Many people committed to freedom of expression passionately hate the messages about women, men and sexuality that most (even non-violent) pornography conveys, just as they hate many messages about other aspects of life conveyed by popular culture and the media, and yet they believe that it is better to oppose such messages with alternative messages and with education that promotes a critical attitude toward pornography than to involve the law. Liberals have other political commitments besides their concern for individual freedom, and they are not usually reluctant to use that freedom to promote their own views about how to treat oneself and other people morally.

**Liberal Feminism’s Political Commitments and Women’s Liberation**

**Women and individualism**

I have said that liberal feminism is committed to promoting women’s recognition of their own value as individuals and public and private recognition of that value by others. I have argued that this does not mean that liberal feminism is encouraging women to become selfish, to seek their own interest without concern for other people’s welfare. Yet might not selfishness be the practical outcome of promoting
women’s greater value as individuals, especially in a society which bases men’s value so much upon competition?

We cannot dismiss the possibility that as women become more concerned with our value as individuals, we will lose the special moral emphasis on care and responsibility that Carol Gilligan (1982) has identified in her studies of sex differences in approaches to moral problems. Interestingly, some of Gilligan’s subjects seem to regard the idea of doing justice to their own needs, desires and rights as virtually taboo. In placing emphasis upon care and responsibility for others, they seem to forget that they too are people with needs and rights. Surely there is now good reason to believe that they forget or avoid this because girls and women are taught that pleasing and taking care of others is what gives them worth, and that a good woman is a selfless woman. Gilligan (1982, 149) says, and I agree, that mature moral development for women involves an integration of the concept of rights and a recognition of their own rights, which will enable women “to consider it moral to care not only for others but for themselves.” What many women are striving for is a balanced, complex interplay between concern for oneself and concern for others, which includes the understanding that one’s own welfare is not and cannot be independent of the welfare of other people. A way of thinking and living that integrates self-value and care for others is not easy to achieve in a culture that constantly presents a dichotomy between selfishness and self-sacrifice. However, asserting the worth of women as individuals at least creates the possibility that we will move toward such an integration, while leaving women with self-sacrifice out of fear that we will switch over to selfishness is too hopeless a solution for me to accept.

Women’s developing greater individualism is not only in our personal interest but also politically important at this time, as many socialist and radical feminists, as well as liberal feminists, recognize. Women are not likely to demand rights and freedoms they think they do not deserve. Nor are women who feel that their own worth comes from taking care of others likely to demand that men take equal responsibility for the welfare of children, the sick and the old.

Self-sacrifice and over-identifying with others also interferes with women’s abilities to work together, to co-operate in opposing oppressive social institutions and creating alternatives to them. Too often we carry self-sacrifice into the women’s movement when we have stopped sacrificing ourselves for men but have not learned to take our own needs and desires seriously. Such self-sacrifice is not a gift freely given; it carries with it the same load of resentment and unrealistic expectations of reward that were there when it was given to men. In addition, if women in feminist political and service organizations try to take too
much responsibility for other women’s welfare, we make it difficult for them to find the strength and skill to take care of themselves. Then the helpers exhaust themselves, and those they set out to help continue to feel weak and helpless. In political practice as elsewhere, there is not a simple choice between being selfless and being selfish. It is possible to respect one’s own needs and desires while also taking a keen interest in other people’s and remaining willing to make some sacrifices, if necessary, for them. Learning to strike this balance is the basis of co-operation, and for most women, it means giving up the moral ideal of self-sacrifice.

Equality of opportunity

I have argued that equality of opportunity is not a goal just for competitive economic and social circumstances, and that its political implications depend on the answer to: Opportunity to do what? Interestingly, if one gives some rather conservative answers to this question and advocates, for example, equality of opportunity to gain prestige, power and wealth, one finds that achieving it would require major changes in North American societies, as Jaggar points out:

In identifying barriers to women’s achievement, liberal feminists have become increasingly aware of ‘internal’ as well as ‘external’ barriers. They have seen how the total environment of male supremacy shapes women’s perceptions of themselves; molds women’s interests, needs and wants; and limits women’s ambition, determination and perseverance. Liberal feminists conclude that equality of opportunity requires equality in children’s early education and environment. (Jaggar 1983, 194)

I think it can be shown, and I have argued elsewhere (Wendell 1976), that creating even equal employment opportunity for women and men requires giving girls and boys the same early education in the following respects:

a) Girls and boys must be given the same (or equally good) conditions for developing basic skills and knowledge.

b) Girls and boys must be given the same information about the jobs and roles available to them.

c) Girls and boys must be given the same (or equally good) means of acquiring whatever special skills and knowledge are necessary to all the professions.

d) Girls and boys must be given the same (or equally good) conditions for physical development.
e) Girls and boys must be treated the same in the matter of their psychological development; i.e. neither sex should be influenced more than the other to develop or not to develop particular psychological traits or desires.

Jaggar draws attention to the fact that liberal feminists could argue for state control of every aspect of life on the basis that it would be needed to create all the necessary educational conditions for equality of opportunity, and such a position would, of course, be incompatible with liberal feminism’s commitment to individual liberty. On the other hand, liberal feminists could see the creation of these conditions as a long-term project to be accomplished partly by state control, e.g. over public educational institutions, and partly by such personal and political efforts as persuading parents and other adults to change their child-raising practices, informing young people of their choices and encouraging them to develop their capacities, and drawing attention (especially in the media) to a wide range of possible role-models.

Also essential to reaching even such a modest goal as equal employment opportunity is ending de facto sex discrimination in higher education, training, hiring and promotion for all occupations. Liberal feminists have sought the help of the State in preventing de facto discrimination by legislation against it and implementation of affirmative action programmes. Yet discrimination takes so many forms, some of them quite subtle, and can occur at so many points in a person’s career, that it cannot be completely prevented so long as sex prejudice still exists. Ending sex prejudice requires both putting an end to sex stereotyping, i.e. to attributing and assigning characteristics and behaviour to individuals on the basis of sex, and changing the value system that undervalues the activities, achievements and characteristics of women or associated with women. As I have argued elsewhere (Wendell 1980), both steps are required to bring about the end of sex discrimination.

Having started with the relatively conservative goal of creating equal employment opportunity for women, we find that to achieve it we must bring about two major social reforms: giving girls and boys the same early education and ending sex prejudice, which in turn will require major redistribution of resources and vast changes in consciousness. Other reforms may also be necessary to achieving this goal. For example, many women are handicapped in reaching their employment goals by having to work a double day because of the unequal division of labour at home. Thus, it may be necessary either to get men to take equal responsibility for childcare and housework, or to socialize the labour women do at home so that it does not have to be the responsibility of individual women, in order to create equal employment op-
portunity. Most of the more general answers we could give to ‘opportu-
nity to do what?’, such as opportunity to develop one’s full capacities
or opportunity to have both satisfying work and a happy family life,
would certainly seem to require an end to women’s double work-day
and fair redistribution of responsibility for childcare and housework.
Equality of opportunity turns out to be a more radical political goal
than it might at first appear.

It is notoriously difficult to assess the long-term consequences of
working for social reforms. In “Feminism: Reform or Revolution?”
Sandra Harding (1976), who identifies herself as a socialist feminist,
argues convincingly that the reform/revolution dichotomy is not a
useful guide to political actions, and that those of us committed to re-
making society should assess reforms as strategies toward the feminist
goal of a non-oppressive society. Charlotte Bunch, who defines herself
as a “radical,” in that she is committed to fundamental changes in soci-
ety, and who says, “The primary goal is women gaining power in order
to eliminate patriarchy and create a more humane society” (Bunch 1981,
196), offers five criteria for evaluating reforms on the basis of their
contribution to that goal: “1) Does this reform materially improve the
lives of women, and if so, which women, and how many? 2) Does it
build an individual woman’s self-respect, strength, and confidence? 3)
Does it give women a sense of power, strength, and imagination as a
group and help build structures for further change? 4) Does it educate
women politically, enhancing their ability to criticize and challenge the
system in the future? 5) Does it weaken patriarchal control of society’s
institutions and help women gain power over them?”

Of the three major reforms required to bring about equality of
employment opportunity, I find giving girls and boys the same early
education the most difficult to assess along the lines Harding and Bunch
suggest. This is because the consequences of this particular reform de-
pend so heavily on our success in dealing with the kind of sex prejudice
which undervalues women’s traditional activities, achievements and
characteristics. If this prejudice, essentially the value-system discussed
on pages 78-81, has a great deal of influence in the process of bringing
about the same early education for girls and boys, that reform is likely
to consist of trying to raise girls the way boys are now raised (with all
of its vices as well as its virtues) without trying to give boys, and girls,
any of the good elements of girls’ present upbringing. Placing equal
value on women and the strengths and virtues traditionally associated
with women is essential if this liberal reform is not to result in the in-
creased masculinization of all society, which would, I think, be un-
acceptable to most socialist and radical feminists as well as to many
liberal feminists.
Ending sex discrimination and prejudice are long-term goals that surely must be an essential part of anyone’s plans to create a more humane and less oppressive society. Liberals might be criticized, by those who want to bring about a society in which the State is either unnecessary or utterly transformed, for enlisting the State in the fight to end sex discrimination and undermine prejudice. Yet it is not clear why we should not enlist the State’s help now, no matter what we want or believe its long-term fate to be. Liberal feminists want the State to help bring about changes in behaviour and consciousness that they hope will become virtually permanent, passed from generation to generation as sex prejudice dies out; eventually, it is hoped, the State’s involvement will have become unnecessary, because sex prejudice will have become a rare eccentricity.

Ending women’s double work-day by fair re-distribution of responsibility for childcare and housework and the other labour women perform at home is surely a goal that meets both Harding’s and Bunch’s criteria for good reform. In fact, it is high on the agenda of most radical and socialist feminists. Many would argue that it is not possible to achieve it in a capitalist economy. If that is the case, then liberal feminists committed to kinds of equality of opportunity that require ending the double work-day and also committed to capitalism will have to choose between them. I think, however, it is an open question whether this or any of the other reforms supported by liberal feminism can be achieved within capitalism, a question which can be answered only by trying.

Equality of legal rights

Liberal feminists have long been committed to achieving women’s equality with men in legal rights. This commitment is frequently criticized by socialist and radical feminists on three grounds. First, equality under the law is far from sufficient to guarantee that women will not be oppressed, even by the legal system, since access to freedom and justice is determined in large part by access to social and economic power. Most liberals are also aware of the insufficiency of legal equality to end women’s oppression, if only because, as de jure class, race and sex discrimination has been reduced over the past 150 years in the English-speaking world, the power and pervasiveness of de facto discrimination have been revealed. Second, legal equality can be used to cover up or rationalize other kinds of inequality, including de facto discrimination and the more subtle ways in which women’s choices are limited. “After all,” it can be said, “there are no rules preventing them from doing anything they want, so women must not be trying hard
enough, or perhaps women don't really have what it takes to get what
they want." Third, since many socialist and radical feminists are com-
mited to abolishing or transforming the State completely, it seems to
them futile and perhaps a betrayal of their ultimate goals to work for
legal reforms.

These objections to working for legal equality must be weighed
against its benefits. The immediate benefits to individual women of
moves toward legal equality have been substantial. For example, re-
cent reforms of the marriage laws in some Canadian provinces have
guaranteed for the first time that women who have contributed their
labour to making the family farm or business successful will not lose
everything if the marriage breaks down. A good argument can be made
that most legal reforms have not produced the beneficial effects on in-
dividual women's lives that were expected of them, but we must ap-
preciate what legal equality can do for some women when we see them
winning back jobs they lost because of sexual harassment, winning
monetary compensation because of wage discrimination, and winning
the right to be considered on an equal basis with men for jobs from
which they were previously excluded.

Nevertheless, I suspect that the greatest benefits of legal equality are
not the immediate benefits to individuals but the long-term contribu-
tions that both the public struggles for legal equality and the recogni-
tion of principles of equality in the laws of the land have made toward
changing people's beliefs and attitudes. Consider the long struggle
(which is not yet over) to reform the rape laws, the enforcement methods
by which they were applied, and the treatment of rape cases in the
courts. Some rape victims have surely benefitted directly from im-
provements in the way they are treated by the police and prosecutors,
and from changes in court procedures and standards of appropriate
evidence. Rape victims used to be (and many still are) on trial for their
chastity and sexual morality, as though there were a presumption that
they were more responsible for the actions of an accused rapist than
he was. In many places in Canada and the United States, the legal situa-
tion of the rape victim has improved considerably, but still everyone
admits that relatively few rapists are convicted (an estimated 2% in
Canada), and even fewer serve a significant prison term. However,
consider the enormous improvement in awareness, especially among
women, of the realities of rape, compared to most people's attitudes
and beliefs about it fifteen years ago. At least some of that improve-
ment has come from the public efforts to reform the legal system. People
have begun discussing the issue of responsibility openly, and more and
more victims are refusing to accept guilt and shame for having been
raped. When the law supports them in its judgment, by changes in the

criminal code and in the opinions expressed by judges, people begin to re-examine attitudes they took for granted. The law is a public expression of what behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable in a society. For many citizens, unfortunately, it is the standard of morality; few people will condemn actions the law condones. In most matters, the law is a weak tool for forcing people to behave in the ways we want them to, but I see the law, and the public struggle to reform the legal system, as powerful forces for changing consciousness.

Those who fear that obtaining legal equality will fool women into believing that we are the social and economic equals of men are underestimating women and, I think, not paying enough attention to the historical evidence. Surely history shows that oppressed groups do not tend to be satisfied with legal equality, and that obtaining it helps to uncover the other sources of oppression. Whatever ideological uses the dominant groups can make of legal equality, they have hardly succeeded in convincing everyone that the other aspects of oppression are illusions.

**Education and reform**

The major purpose of some and the most effective result of many liberal feminist reforms seems to be changing women's and men's beliefs and feelings about ourselves, other people and the nature of our interactions with one another. It is, of course, a liberal tradition to hope to improve social and economic conditions in large part by educating individuals. Behind this tradition lies a faith in the moral potential of human nature. The reformer who counts on the efficacy of education believes that when people know the nature and causes of their own and other people's unnecessary suffering, and when their ability to care for themselves and others is cultivated, they will be moved to create a better society. This view of human nature is very different from the picture, often attributed to liberals, of psychologically isolated individuals pursuing their narrow self-interest, but it is at least as much a part of the liberal tradition. It is also a view shared, implicitly or explicitly, by most feminists, whose strategies rely heavily on the power of changing people's beliefs and feelings.

**Feminist Strategies**

What are the alternative strategies open to feminists? We can convince women and men to end our oppressive relations or coerce them somehow into ending them. Liberal feminists accept and even advocate a certain amount of coercion by the State, for example, to prevent sex discrimination. In practice, in representative democracies, State coercion
requires the support or tacit acceptance of a majority or near-majority of the people, and most liberal feminists remain committed to the principle of majority rule, modified, of course, by guaranteed minority rights. It is also noteworthy that however much socialist and radical feminists may believe that consciousness is determined by material conditions and power relations, few are willing to advocate a minority’s changing them by coercing the majority, except perhaps when lives are in immediate danger. Feminists tend to shun this strategy for two reasons: women have too often been betrayed and victimized by vanguard politics, in which a minority decides and enacts what it thinks best for the majority; and we are suspicious of coercion and violence as means to a non-oppressive society. The reasons for these two attitudes are too numerous to discuss here, but I think anyone familiar with the literature of the women’s movement would agree that the attitudes are very strong and widespread among feminists.  

If coercion of the majority is to be avoided, then changing consciousness is the immediate basis for feminist strategy. We must convince the majority of people to change oppressive institutions, unfair distributions of resources and power, and the other social inequities which cause unhappiness and corrupt our personal relations. The question then becomes: What are the best ways to change consciousness? It is still an open question. Certainly no one knows enough about it yet to say that working for the reforms liberal feminists advocate is not one of the most effective strategies toward ending women’s oppression in North America.  

Qualifications  

For reasons too numerous and complex to discuss here, I find liberal feminist analyses of the nature of women’s oppression and the conditions which perpetuate it inadequate. Furthermore, I am committed to ultimate goals that most liberal feminists would reject, especially ending private ownership of the means of production. In addition, liberal feminist principles are rarely applied on a global scale, and it seems clear that much of the oppression suffered by women in poor countries is due not to their inequality with men in their own countries (which is not insignificant), but to their inequality with those of us who live in wealthy countries.  

Yet, despite these qualifications, I support wholeheartedly the liberal feminist reforms I have discussed, and I suspect that to struggle for them is the most effective strategy for our time and place, the best way to move here and now toward a just and compassionate society in which freedom flourishes.
I wish to thank the members of the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy who attended the 1984 Conference in Montreal and the editor and referees of Hypatia for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. The fact that early feminists concentrated on eliminating legal inequities should not be taken as a sign of their relative conservatism. The power and extent of de facto discrimination rarely becomes apparent until most of the de jure discrimination has been removed.

2. For another, similar, definition of abstract individualism, see Carole Pateman (1979, 25).


4. Throughout The Subjection of Women, Mill describes the ways he observed political inequality causing unhappiness and preventing happiness among women and men in his own society. See especially Chapter IV.

5. For a good discussion of this point, see M. Rivka Polatnick (1984).

6. The explanation of this point is too complex to deal with here. See Susan D. Wendell (1976, chapter II).

7. In her justly harsh criticism of meritocracy, Jaggar seems to miss this point. See Jaggar (1983, 193-197).

8. This is not just a liberal tradition, of course, but many liberals, including Locke and Mill, are in it.

9. See, for example, Sandra Harding (1983).


11. This is clear, for example, in Ms., especially in the magazine’s section: “Stories for Free Children.”


13. For a discussion of discrimination and affirmative action as a means of preventing it, see Susan Wendell (1980).


15. Frances Olsen (1983) has argued that many legal reforms of the family and the marketplace that have benefitted some women have had side effects that worked against many women’s interests; in the end, however, she does not deny that many individual women’s lives have been substantially improved by legal reform, only that legal reform is sufficient to create the kinds of relations among people that she wants to see.

16. See The Canadian Human Rights Reporter for some inspiring evidence of this kind.

17. 1984 figures from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

18. Consider the influence of the New Bedford, Massachusetts, case alone.

19. In a Harris poll commissioned by Ms. in March, 1984, 57% of a representative sample of 1006 American women felt that the organized movement for women's economic, social and legal equality had just begun. See Ms., Vol. XIII, No. 1, July, 1984, p. 56

20. For a good discussion of this issue see Sheila Rowbotham (1979).
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