

Fault Lines in Feminism

About five years ago, books began to appear celebrating what was then called the "rich diversity" of the American women's movement. Since then, diversity has become disintegration, and both friends and foes have started to ask themselves, "Is feminism dead?" The truth is that at least many of the divisions have been here all along, and under the common label "feminist," at least three quite different views can be discerned. Worse yet, their policy implications are in serious tension with each other.

The liberal feminist insists that women can and should achieve excellence in whatever they do, and that the relevant standards should not be in any way bent to accommodate women. They get upset if fewer pushups are required of female military officers than are expected of male officers at the same rank. Such feminists tend to be feisty and independent minded -- ready to compete and win according to the same professional standards as men. All they ask is a fair playing field and no favors. They tend to oppose things like legally mandated paid maternity leaves since these involve treating women differently from men and may disadvantage women professionally by making employers more reluctant to hire them.

Then there is what I will call the capital "F" Feminists. They talk a great deal about "patriarchy," analyze everything in terms of the power relationships between men and women, and are constantly discovering new ways in which women are being disempowered and rendered subordinate to men. Some think women are kept in thrall by implicit threats of rape. Others think they are brainwashed by the media and fashion designers who make them hate their bodies and try desperately to please men. One Feminist locates the problem in the fact that women are socialized into "compulsory heterosexuality." Another finds women's tendencies to fall into relationships which involve a kind of one-sided emotional caregiving to be the root of their

oppression. Just as Marxists saw everything through the lens of class and found the proletariat everywhere oppressed, this sort of feminist sees everything through the lens of gender, and finds women everywhere oppressed. They are the ones who talk most about women as victims. Laws protecting women from sexual harassment are an example of the sort of policies they particularly favor.

"Difference feminists" also want to counteract the devaluation of women by our male dominated society, but they want to celebrate the sorts of values traditionally associated with women. Until recently, masculine ways of thinking have been taken as normative, and women have been judged to be defective because they don't think and act like men. But women have something distinctively feminine to contribute and this is a good thing. A female teacher, for example, might do her job in a different way than a male one, being perhaps more quiet, encouraging and maternal in her style.

If we are to survive and flourish as a community, difference feminists argue, we need to pay more attention to feminine voice values. The "masculine voice" (to use Gilligan's term) tends toward an individualistic and competitive vision of social life, with a strong emphasis on justice, fairness, and playing by the rules. The "feminine voice," by contrast, places a high value on caring and taking responsibility for others, and enjoins us to preserve the complex web of relationships in which we find ourselves, and to resolve conflicts by communication and by seeking consensus. The policy implications of difference feminism are broadly communitarian: social policies should be designed to maintain social bonds by supporting families and strengthening communities so that the needs of the most vulnerable members of our society -- children and the elderly-- can be met. Instead of regarding caregiving roles as low status or degrading to women, they argue that many women find them fulfilling and would favor policies

that support women who are struggling to combine work with family obligations, such as "mommy track" jobs, and flexible hours for parents.

The claim of the Feminists to speak for women has become less and less credible. Their silence about sexual harrassment when someone they like engages in it has discredited them in many women's eyes. And simple statistics show that politically active women are widely distributed across the political spectrum. Concerned Women for America (a conservative group) has more than twice the membership of NOW (600,000 compared to 280,000), and National Women's Coalition for Life -- an umbrella organization not including CWA -- has 1.2 million members.

Where do we go from here? We must think seriously about what is genuinely in the interests of most women, and concentrate on that common ground. A movement which is perceived as hostile to men, indifferent to the needs of children, unwilling to acknowledge the reality of any differences between men and women, or disposed to portray women as helpless victims will not get far with most women, let alone men. And in order to be politically successful, a women's movement must be willing to distance itself from some of the colorful extremists who claim the right to speak for women and to define who is and who is not a "feminist."