THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT—TOKENS VS. OBJECTIVES

By Amitai Etzioni

As far as recognition is concerned, Women's Liberation has made it. Although the movement is a relatively new one, most Americans have at least a vague idea of its demands and aims. In a media-oriented society, such public notice is a substantial and meaningful measure of success. Now, however, the movement must focus on the more difficult business of getting its demands met. Unfortunately, the piecemeal victories it has won so far are almost liabilities, for with them goes the danger of losing momentum and perspective. Will the women's movement be able to keep token achievements in their proper place and to focus its eyes on more distant, more substantial objectives?

Before attempting to answer these questions, let me discuss the achievements of the movement thus far.

To begin with, in the matter of employment, the press has been quick to banner "firsts"—the first female chairman of the U.S. Traffic Commission; a woman appointed to serve on the President's Council of Economic Advisers; four young women serving as pages in the U.S. Senate, and so forth. Each instance shows that women can now achieve high positions in heretofore exclusively male domains. But, in fact, such isolated achievements are really only symbolic, for they do little that is concrete for the hundreds of thousands of women affected by job distributions on the basis of sex. A woman jockey—another "first"—will not open doctor's jobs to thousands of nurses, or allow hundreds of thousands of secretaries to compete on an equal footing with men for assistant-manage posts, or alter the fact that while most primary school teachers are female, most high school teachers and most principals are male.

Nevertheless, women now hold a larger proportion of desired "male dominated" jobs. The progress is impressive when compared with the situation in the past, but it falls far short of liberationists' goals. Thus, while the proportion of women scientists has grown over the last five years from 8 to 10 per cent, a 25 per cent increase, parity is still a long way off.

The number of women doctors in the United States increased by 1.6 per cent over ten years, but they still represent only 7.6 per cent of all doctors. The proportion of female doctors is higher not only in the U.S.S.R. but also in Sweden (15.4 per cent), Denmark (16.4 per cent), and West Germany (20 per cent). The number of female medical students is slowly rising, but not at a rate that outstrips that of population growth, thus suggesting that medicine will continue to be an almost exclusively male domain for at least the next decade.

Among teachers, from 1920 to 1945 the ratio of women increased, but since 1945 it has slowly declined. By 1967 it had reached a level similar to that of 1866! Seven out of ten women teachers continue to serve in elementary education while only two out of ten teach in secondary schools.

According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, the median wage for women, as compared with that for men, has been declining in recent years. It was 63.9 per cent of the men's average in 1955 and 60.8 per cent in 1969, having fallen to as low as 58.2 per cent in 1968. (More recent data, which would cover the years in which the movement became more active, is not yet available.)

Probablly the most dramatic development in the area of employment thus far has not been in actual reallocations of jobs, but in the fact that the women's movement has found in the federal government an unexpected ally. The Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has been actively aiding the fight against sex discrimination and is pushing hard to make colleges and universities open all departments and faculty ranks to women. Emotions have run high, debates have been ardent, but the new hiring and promotion of women have been quite limited in both numbers and scope.

In dealings with the law, women have been treated as less competent than men for centuries. In March 1972, Congress approved a constitutional amendment that declares that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." The amendment has yet to be ratified by the necessary three-fourths of the states. If ratified, however, the amendment would greatly ease the legal battles women must wage when discriminated against. So far their legal base for action has often been shaky, especially when compared with that of litigations involving discrimination based on race or creed.

For this reason, HEW previously found it necessary to rely on administrative directives and sanctions rather than on court actions. Presumably, once the Twenty-seventh Amendment is ratified, there will be greater reliance on the courts as well as a more vigorous application of the full range of federal sanctions.

The need for litigation, new administrative rulings, and new state laws is still great. For every state in which progress has been made, there are four in which little has been done. Even in such relatively progressive states as New Jersey and Arizona there are still many "sexist" laws. For example, California recently empowered teenagers to buy and sell stocks in their own right, but husbands still control the disposition of their wives' holdings. Although the California Supreme Court invalidated statutes prohibiting the employment of women as bar-tenders and excluding women from jury duty, Missouri still prohibits women from working with moving machinery. New York State sets the maxi-
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mum weight a woman can lift in a foundry at twenty-five pounds.

The age of consent (at which a person can marry without parental approval) is lower for women than men in most states. Often women cannot keep their maiden names on official documents such as driver's licenses. In four states married women must prove their "fitness" to a court if they seek to set up their own business.

But some progress is being made. A new HEW directive rules that any exclusion of women from work because of pregnancy is a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and requires that miscarriages, abortions, and childbirth be covered, like other temporary disabilities, by health and insurance plans. On November 22, 1971, the Supreme Court held that an Idaho law giving preference to males as executors of estates was invalid under the Fourteenth Amendment. There will be numerous local litigations before these new interpretations are widely followed, and, according to one recent overview, "there are still more than one thousand state laws that discriminate against women's rights to property, inheritance, guardianship, management of earnings, and the control of the family's wealth."

In the matter of elected office, the press (especially New York City publications) is rich in pictures of and quotes from the hyperactive Bella Abzug and presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm. (Ms. Chisholm got a trifling 4 per cent of the primary vote in Florida.) In Boston there is Louise Day Hicks for the press to tout, and in Maine there is Senator Margaret Chase Smith. However, when it comes to a hard count of numbers and power, the total is far from encouraging. Ten years ago there were two women in the U.S. Senate and eighteen women Representatives; now there is only Senator Smith, and there are but eleven women in the House. According to Evelyn Cunnungham, the head of Governor Rockefeller's special women's advisory unit, only thirteen of the sixty-three separate agencies in the New York State government have women in jobs above the rank of secretary. The situation in most other states is no more attractive. It seems that it will be a long time before the United States has a woman president as India and Israel have. In fact, a 1972 poll showed that 40 per cent of all Americans would be less likely to vote for a female presidential candidate than for a male, even if the woman had equal qualifications.

The newly formed National Women's Political Caucus encourages women to play active roles in support of candidates, identifies and promotes feminist issues, attempts to gain the support of male candidates for feminist platforms, and has tried to get women to run for office.

The major effort currently being made by the caucus is an attempt to have at least as many women as there are men in each state's delegation to the two major conventions. A significant success was scored toward this end when Larry O'Brien, chairman of the Democratic party, pledged that the national committee would instruct all state parties to show "reasonable representation" of women in their ranks. Any delegation that does not include at least 50 per cent women could be subject to challenge at the Democratic convention in Miami. The delegations would then have to prove that the delegates were chosen openly and without discrimination. A national Democratic convention that is 50 per cent female is highly unlikely, but delegations have been notified that the burden of proof for compliance with party rules lies directly on their shoulders.

The male presidential candidates have paid at least lip service to the feminist party's women's issues in some of them. George McGovern, has gone so far as to espouse some feminist policies, such as national legalization of abortion. In a recent ranking of the candidates by a feminist newsletter, Senator McGovern received a 100 per cent rating for his Senate votes on women's issues. Senators Humphrey, Jackson, and Muskie did not score as well—not because of votes they cast but because they were absent for two or more votes that involved feminist issues.

In the division of household labor, very significant changes have occurred, but chiefly within a small circle of those who are in one way or another close to the movement. In these families, if both spouses work and there are no children, household duties tend to be divided almost equally. At least some changes have penetrated more deeply into society. In traditionalist family circles, for example, husbands will, more often than in pre-Liberation days, lend a hand with diapering, shopping, washing the dishes, and many wives now seek employment outside the home.

In matters of sex, the movement's opposition to women's playing a passive role in the sex act may have found a relatively mass following, or, more exactly, may well have caught on with an unrelated movement toward sexual freedom and experimentation. Far less popular is the notion advanced by some extremists that all heterosexual genital relations are a form of exploitation of women. It is unlikely that many American women have turned to each other or to masturbation for their sexual gratification.

In symbolic issues some rather de-
ceptive progress has been achieved by the movement. The Liberationists’ desire for women to be addressed as Ms. (a title equal in ambiguity with Mr. in that it does not indicate whether the person addressed is single or married) appears to be gaining slow acceptance. Nevertheless, it is used today mainly in metropolitan centers and by a few government agencies, and even the fashionable mass media have not adopted it. *Time* magazine recently explained that it had decided not to switch to Ms. because Miss and Mrs. convey valid information. But *Time* recognized some justice in the feminists’ complaint and is ready to consider the use of a more precise appellation for men, if one is devised.

Women reporters are now allowed into some locker rooms, fewer men seem to hold doors for women or tip their hats, fewer women are referred to as “girls” or sent to talk to each other after dinner, but even these changes are limited largely to thin layers of upper-middle-class, college-educated, chiefly white, urban groups. A recent study shows that only 12 per cent of women and 15 per cent of men think that men should not hold a door open for a woman or give her a seat on the bus. Even in the highly sophisticated Northeast, only 22 per cent of the men say they would like to drop the old forms of courtesy.

Such, then, is the snail’s progress the movement has achieved to date. The next question is: How are militant women accepting this state of affairs? The answer seems to vary from one women’s organization to another. It shifts with the seasons, too (most protest movements slack off in July and August), and it varies among leaders. Gloria Steinem, for example, is less moderate than Betty Friedan, while Bella Abzug is more radical than both. The straight, or heterosexual, and the gay, or homosexual, leaders naturally have separate answers, and black and white “sisters” fight out their differences in, among other places, the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*. But one theme is common to most of the concerned groups and individuals—a preoccupation with mannerisms, titles, and symbolic issues. Actually, it seems that the more the movement is frustrated in its efforts to change the socio-economic-legal structure of America, the more it concerns itself with images.

I am not suggesting that these efforts are wasted or senseless. Far from it. Women’s Liberation ideologues and strategists have advanced some fine, sociologically refined arguments to explain why there is a good deal more to image remaking than meets the eye. For example:

Redoing images helps “raise conscious.” That is, it makes us aware that built into our habits and expressions are hidden assumptions that we tend not to review consciously and that we can change only if they are continually flashed before our eyes. More self-awareness helps women overcome internal hangups that render them passive or inferior. Women are being alerted to the fact that they need no longer pass themselves off as “dumb” in order to please a date; that they no longer need to accept courtesies that are actually veiled humiliations; and that they, as well as men, can initiate a relationship.

The movement seems to realize that men need to be liberated, too, that their fate is not to be envied or imitated. Like blacks, women wonder what happens when their struggle is won.
movement has to achieve a balance between symbolic gesturing and socio-economic action. I think that the Women’s Liberation movement—partially because a significant thrust of its purpose is to achieve interpersonal changes and also because it is still forming a base—will continue to put more emphasis on these new “bread-and-butter” issues. Although it will work harder to achieve total parity for its members than did, say, a union of coal miners in the 1830s, the movement still seems, at least to me, excessively entangled in image politics. It too often seems to confuse token achievements with major breakthroughs, gestures with societal changes, and changes in titles with changes in entitlements.

The interminable debates about policies, positions, and pronouncements (“Should we kick out the lesbians?” “Is Gloria Steinem ripping off the movement?” “Should we work with black and red liberation movements?”) that absorb a large part of the movement’s energy tend to disregard an iron law of sociology that states that the fate of all popular movements is determined largely by historical forces they do not control. Several forces have affected the rise of Women’s Liberation and will continue to shape its future. One of the most important is the improvement in and the public and personal acceptance of birth control techniques. This technical and scientific breakthrough increases a woman’s opportunity to achieve equality in sexual freedom and to limit the number of her children. Another force is the automation of household services, which frees women to invest more time in other pursuits. Increased automation of the role of muscle power in more and more jobs, and this opens them to women. Finally, the spread of college education and the heightening of political awareness have helped consciousness raising (most Women’s Liberation members are college educated). These aids to the movement cannot be credited to the movement. They represent the forces of historical change.

Equally important for the future of the movement is the increased concern among Americans with the quality of life. A “feminization” of society—a greater concern with esthetic, moral, educational, cultural, and interpersonal aspects (as against quantitative economic growth and international power) will tend to reduce the sectors in which men traditionally have been strongest, and it will build up those areas in which women have been more deeply involved. Factories and armies will become less central; schools, family life, theater, art, and books will become more so.

There is one feature of the movement that sharply distinguishes it from any move for social change that has preceded it. Unlike movements sparked by radical minorities, youth, the aged, the “gay,” labor, regional groups, and others, the potential base for Women’s Liberation is a majority group. As a group, women are the sources of affection and the frequent recipients of affection of every kind. For example, women have always been more in favor of peace than men have, as polls from World War II to Vietnam show. Should our obsession with nationalism decline, feminine sensibilities will count for more. And as their tastes, talents, and judgment become more accepted, so should their role as public leaders, in both elective and appointive office.

The greater the concern for beauty and quality, the greater the likelihood that women will play a more important role in shaping our future society. If, on the other hand, a reaction sets in, demanding that all “nonsense” about “hippie” and feminine values be discarded and efficiency again be given its first priority, then concessions to social justice, willingness to make up for past discriminations, and readiness to experiment would be curtailed rapidly and sharply.

The attitude of the women’s movement toward the forces seeking to transform our modern industrial society into a more humane one is complex and often ambivalent. The cross currents arise out of the movement’s involvement in both a “class struggle against men,” and the genuine liberation of both women and men. Thus, on the one hand, the movement wants all women to have the same rights and opportunities that men have. It demands that women be allowed to do anything with which the movement is running numerous courses for carpenters, mechanics, welders); that conditions be created so that women have the same opportunities to do fulfilling work as men now have (hence the demands for day care centers, equal division of household duties between husbands and wives, and removal of barriers to women’s careers); and that women should have the same sexual freedoms as men. (Recently, a feminist wrote, “If your husband has a mistress, or mistresses, aren’t you entitled to have a lover, or lovers?”)

On the other hand, the movement seems to understand that men need to be liberated, too, and that the male fate is not to be envied or imitated. Like blacks, women are wondering what happens when their struggle is won. Will they all end up dashing to work in a competitive world, seeking some illusive status and measuring their success against their take-home pay, to finally collapse at the end of the day in a neurotic exhaustion, using liquor and the television set as psychiatric first aids for winding down?

Let me draw a parallel.

The essence of our society is consumption as the source of meaning for life. To buy products and services is the reason we are supposed to work and work at the routinized jobs that produce consumer goods. If most Americans, at least the affluent half, would say, “Enough is enough,” and buy a new car only once every ten years, or ride a bicycle or walk, and share appliances, and get out of the fashionability game, all Americans could live quite comfortably working three hours a day, and cease to allow work and consumption to absorb most of their energy.

Similarly in the realm of personal conduct, rather than seeking to eliminate the double standard by applying “traveling salesman standards” to both sexes, Women’s Liberation might seek a new basis for the family, one that can survive at least the years essential to child rearing. It is easy to declare that women are entitled to all the orgasms they are capable of” or that, with opportunity for employment secured, they may divorce a man as easily as a man may divorce a woman. But it seems mistaken to assume that out of the destruction of all taboos and a freeing of our biological desires, a wholesome and, indeed, tolerable society and life will arise. For the pursuit of maximum biological satisfactions, there arises first a restless fatigue and then pain. From the destruction of the traditional family comes interpersonal anarchy. It is easy to talk about stabilizing meaningful, voluntary, interpersonal relations, but without some institutionalization, they are difficult to achieve. And while the frequent rotation of partners spells freedom to some, it also spells misery to many others.

At this early stage, it is acceptable and natural for Women’s Liberation to be much clearer about what it does not wish; yet eventually new desiderata will have to be fashioned, or the reaction to normlessness will most certainly not please any liberationists, male or female.

As I see it, we are not faced with a question of whether Women’s Liberation will soon evolve into a major societal force or merely ebb, leaving behind a few token changes, worn-out slogans, and die-hard movement activists. No, the major question seems to be in what direction will this force apply itself? Will the women’s movement inadvertently have the effect of propelling up the old sexist order, or will it become a partner in transforming America into a more humane, just, civilized society for all? That is a question worth pondering.