THE STALLED REVOLUTION

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Is Equality for Women an Impossible Dream?

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2018

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-193-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-190-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-192-8 (Epub)

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PREFACE

The seven years since the publication of our first edition have been difficult for women. The Government's austerity programme reduced funding for many services which women value, including SureStart and Refuges. Families lost allowances for a third child.

The Covid-19 pandemic put great pressure on women with children and with caring responsibility for older dependants. Lockdowns meant parents had to take on home schooling, most of which fell to mothers. Women living alone suffered feelings of isolation and worse. Women working in care homes and hospitals worked very long hours, often without adequate safety protection.

The pandemic was followed by a severe cost of living crisis, which plunged many families into debt and some into destitution. Child poverty increased for the first time in a generation. Physical and mental health deteriorated and waiting lists lengthened.

During this dark period, little time or energy was left for campaigning to improve women's rights. So, the revolution which started with the votes for women victory continued to stall.

Our hope is that the worst is over and rebuilding can now begin. The #Metoo campaign proves that fresh victories can be won. But, we need to show a strong sense of priorities if we are to find a just solution to the conflict over trans and focus again on policies which deliver better opportunities to all women.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When Sheila Rowbotham first decided that there should be a Women's Liberation conference in 1970, her intention was "to put women back into history".

The Stalled Revolution is a tribute to the women who have made Britain a better place. We record their struggles and we celebrate their victories.

In the course of writing our book, we interviewed many people and talked informally with many others. All were helpful, informative and encouraging. We are extremely grateful for their support.

In particular, we wish to thank Violet Aitchison, Marie Bailey, Pauline Barrie, Kim Beat, Karen Butler, Bea Campbell, Sophie Coleman, Miriam David, Jo Delaney, Carole Easton, Richard Ennals, Jane Everton, Heather Fallows, Christopher Forster, Jan Fraser, Michaela Gaitskell, Sophie Gilpin, Kate Harris, Philip Hedley, Jack Hodgkinson, Ashleigh James, Annabel Jones, Susanna Jones, Glenys Kinnock, Katie Learmonth, Deborah Mattinson, Christine Megson, Paul Miller, Ricky Romain, Elizabeth Roberts, Sheila Rowbotham, Jan Royall, Lynne Segal, Sam Smethers, Hazel Taylor, Maia Thomas, Ann Traynor, Suzy Tutchell, Sarah Veale and David and Jane Whitworth.

Colleagues and friends also kindly read and commented on sections of the book and we thank them for giving their time so willingly: Marianne Coleman, Jayne Grant, Beatriz Lees, Margaret Littlewood, Jane Miller and Liz Nichols.

In the following pages, we name many extraordinary women. We dedicate our book to them and to the thousands more whose names may be forgotten by history but whose achievements illuminate our lives.

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THE ON-OFF REVOLUTION

In 2018, the Government agreed to erect a statue of Millicent Fawcett, who had campaigned for Votes for Women in the previous century.

The statue was intended, somewhat belatedly, to mark one of the most important events of the 20th century. On 6 February 1918, Royal Assent had been granted to the Act that allowed women to vote in Parliamentary elections. Later in that year, over 8 million women voted for the first time in a General Election.

Many newspapers evidently did not expect their readers to know much about Millicent Fawcett. One paper ran the headline:

> *'Who was Millicent Fawcett, the woman behind Parliament Square's first female statue?'*[1]

Millicent Fawcett led the Votes for Women campaign for nearly 30 years. In 1918, she and her allies won a glorious victory and, at that time, she was one of the most famous women in Britain.

But her fame has not lasted.

Emmeline Pankhurst, the other great leader of the campaign to secure Votes for Women, is rather better known.[2] Most people have heard of the suffragettes, whom she led, but they know very little about the nature of their struggle. When the film, *Suffragette*, was shown in 2015, the prejudice shown by the British establishment and the hardship suffered by the campaigners caused gasps in many cinemas.

This lack of knowledge is extraordinary. The campaign by women to secure the right to vote in Parliamentary elections is one of the most momentous and inspiring stories of the last 200 years. It changed the status of

women in Britain and was the first great victory in a wave of reform which has swept, in fits and starts, through the 20th century and beyond.

THE SECOND WAVE

The suffrage campaigners believed that their victory would be followed by rapid progress towards a world where the views and interests of women would be given the same importance as the views and interests of men. That did not happen. In the late 1920s, the Great Depression dominated social and political life. The revolution stalled and it was not until the 1970s that there was the second great upsurge of feminist feeling that became known as the Women's Liberation Movement.

The pioneers of the Women's Liberation Movement have no statues to record their achievements and, although many of these pioneering women are still alive, they are even less well-known than Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst. This is partly the result of personal modesty. The Women's Liberation Movement was self-consciously egalitarian. It elected no leaders and rejected the cult of personality. But its achievements are all around us.

The Women's Liberation Movement inspired two great Acts of Parliament that were passed in the 1970s: the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act. Britain is far from being an equal society, but many of the opportunities enjoyed by 21st-century women can be traced back directly to the foresight, persistence and the courage of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The Movement aimed to transform the way women are regarded and treated. Changes in popular culture illustrate the Movement's achievements. Pictures of nude women were taken down from workplace walls, so called Beauty Contests lost their popularity and eventually even the much-watched Benny Hill TV Show, with its cohort of young women squealing as most of their clothes were "accidentally" removed, disappeared from our television screens.

Surprisingly, the work of the Women's Liberation Movement has fallen out of the popular consciousness. There appears to be an assumption that these changes in the role and status of women arrived automatically as a matter of course. This is a dangerous piece of mythology. If we do not recognise the significance of the campaigns that won these important victories,

we may delude ourselves into thinking that further improvements will come without effort.

There is also the need to establish a proper balance in our recollection of British history. It was said by a writer[3] in the New Yorker magazine and repeated many times since that the women's movement was the most successful revolution of the 20th century. Yet it is scarcely celebrated in Britain.

Counting the number of statues in London gives an insight into the narrow-minded prejudice that the campaigners faced. Altogether there are about 1,500 statues, almost all of them marking the achievements of men. Including the Fawcett statue, there are now seven depicting women. This compares with 25 statues which honour and celebrate horses!

EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN

We were able to interview many of the most committed members of the Women's Liberation Movement. Rather than describe their achievements, they chose to offer advice and encouragement to women campaigners.

> *Sheila Rowbotham told us that, "it is no longer enough to point out what we don't like. We have to work out what sort of society we do want."*
>
> *Lynne Segal looked ahead: "We do not simply want equality with men; we want to change the value system… We have visions of a better life."*
>
> *Bea Campbell says we must persuade people to be open to change: They should, "be prepared to be enlightened, enraged, amused and above all provoked."*[4]
>
> *Miriam David insisted that, "it is time for another women's movement… It seems to me that feminism is everywhere and yet nowhere (is it) influential or powerful."*[5]

Of course we had to rely on the printed record to recall the Votes for Women campaigners, but it is obvious that they were remarkable. Millicent Fawcett was an elegant and intelligent member of the British political class, demure when she wanted to be but with a turn of phrase that could skin an opponent.

She was generous and often funded parts of the campaign with her own money. Everyone speaks of the warmth and humanity which inspired a wonderful admiration and loyalty in her supporters. On her death, one supporter wrote that,

> *"We were unspeakably proud of her."*[6]

Emmeline Pankhurst was a very different character, single-minded to an extraordinary degree, feared by the Government and demanding unquestioning obedience from her followers. Slim and beautiful, Rebecca West called her, "a reed of steel."[7]

Pankhurst was a compelling public speaker although Ethel Smyth, Emmeline's close friend, tells us that her other skills did not always match her soaring oratory. As part of the suffragettes' campaign of militancy, Emmeline Pankhurst recommended smashing the windows of the powerful. Unfortunately, during an afternoon of intense and hilarious practice in Ethel Smyth's garden, Emmeline Pankhurst never hit the target once. She had to leave the stone throwing to others.[8]

The achievements of the Votes for Women campaigns and the Women's Liberation Movement were hard-won. Emmeline Pankhurst was repeatedly jailed and frequently on hunger strike. However, perhaps because of her fame, she was never forcibly fed. Other suffragettes fared worse. The process was so gruesome that, after being forcibly fed for a fortnight, most prisoners were in a state of collapse. There are terrible stories of hardship. Emmeline's daughter, Sylvia, was forcibly fed twice a day for five weeks. Constance Lytton had her health destroyed in prison and, like many others, she never fully recovered. Voting rights for women were earned by pain and suffering.

Members of the Women's Liberation Movement did not have to endure prison and few were arrested, but they had to take more than their share of abuse. Most of the press made little attempt to understand the Movement's motives. Instead of reporting the policies they preferred to libel the women. Supporters of the Movement were portrayed as hairy, man-hating harridans with no sense of humour and no chance of attracting a man. It was a ridiculous, inaccurate and unworthy calumny but, in the way of such insults, it still hangs around the necks of female activists like a lead necklace.

Once again victory was followed by disappointment. For a second time, the revolution stalled. In the 1980s, rising unemployment following Margaret Thatcher's accession to power created new problems which took greater

attention and priority. The work of the Women's Liberation Movement was never completed, and there was another gap of almost 50 years before the #Metoo movement created a third wave of campaigning intensity.

#METOO

The #Metoo movement established a new focus for the campaign. The suffrage campaign had the narrow objective of achieving Votes for Women. The Women's Liberation Movement sought to increase women's rights. The #Metoo campaign emphasised the need to protect women from sexual assault and abuse.

The nature of campaigning also changed. The suffrage campaign was essentially political, with demonstrations and civil disobedience putting pressure on Government; the Women's Liberation Movement also used political agitation but shifted the emphasis to self-help by groups of women in local communities; #Metoo gained worldwide publicity through the individual testimony of its many supporters, mainly by a multitude of posts on social media.

The suffrage campaigners and members of the Women's Liberation Movement were in personal contact and they greatly valued the deep feelings of companionship and solidarity which this close contact produced. So far, #Metoo has tended to work remotely, using social media to contact vast numbers of potential supporters, most of whom never meet.

Time will tell whether #Metoo will be followed by a third period when the revolution stalls. What women need is a sustained campaign which brings the prospect of continual and wide-ranging improvement.

Violence against women is common in Britain. Each year, the number of rapes runs into scores of thousands and hundreds of thousands of women are assaulted in their own homes. On average, two women are murdered each week by their partners or ex-partners. Too many women have to accept verbal and physical abuse as a normal part of their lives. Young women at many universities have had their student years ruined by the so called lad culture of disrespect for women.

Discrimination against women is much less obvious than the blatant injustice that was prevalent a generation ago, but women still face an accumulation of disadvantages. Perhaps they are not told of the best job opportunities, perhaps they get on the short list but never quite get the job and

perhaps their best ideas are either disregarded or purloined by men who take the credit.

Women tend to occupy the worst paid jobs in our society and have little legal protection. Because women are taught from birth to be obliging, their compliance is taken for granted and their complaints are often ignored. Even women with great talent and ambition find it difficult to navigate their way to the top of a society that has been so obviously fashioned by men for the convenience of men.

Women in the finance sector, whom we quote in Chapter 7, have been taught by experience exactly how 21st-century discrimination operates – always denied and usually concealed.

> *"They tell us this place is a meritocracy but men are taken more seriously and always seem to get the best opportunities and the best jobs."*[9]

And when women have children the discrimination gets noticeably worse.

Some of this unfairness can be put right by enforcing the rights that are already on the statute book – for equal pay and for protection against discrimination. Making sure that more women are in positions of power in our companies and important institutions would also help. So would ensuring that the House of Commons contains as many women MPs as men. But these reforms, while valuable, will not, on their own, produce the new and better world which most women want.

Equality with men was the cry of the Votes for Women campaigners, and it found an echo in the demands of the Women's Liberation Movement. Achieving equality is necessary but, through the ages, female activists have realised that equality with men is not enough. Because of the social and political failures of our society, many men lead cramped and depressing lives. There is no advantage in joining them in their misery. A new liberation campaign should have a loftier purpose. Women should not limit their ambition to what men have: they should focus on what women need.

Aspiring to this higher and perhaps utopian purpose means that it is not just the symptoms of inequality and discrimination that must be dealt with. As Veronica Jarvis Tichenor writes:

> *"To strike at the heart of the gender structure, we must… aggressively disrupt and reconstruct assumptions that lie at the very core of who we think we are."*[10]

Assumptions about gender stereotypes are often unreasonable, but they buttress our sense of identity and are difficult to eliminate. Men are thought of as leaders and women as followers; men are self-confident and women are diffident; men are rational and women are emotional; women are good with babies and men are good with figures; women do the cooking while men go off to do something which they think is more important. Both sexes are trapped in stereotypes that limit aspirations and make us all fearful of change.

DOUBTS AND RELUCTANCE

According to the famous story in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, King Alfred fell asleep when he was left in charge of baking the cakes and let them burn. Although Alfred was no misogynist, there remains a tiny suspicion that he might have neglected his duty because he was an important man, and baking was not his responsibility.

Fashions change and, nowadays, most men would probably attend to the cakes, or at least set a timer to prevent them burning. Most men now profess a commitment to gender equality. Nevertheless, the number of men, who actually promote reform, remains depressingly small. And to be fair, in this book, we stress the fact that, although help and support from men is welcome, women have to take charge of the campaign for their own liberation.

It is, therefore, dispiriting to find that there still appears to be a reluctance in some women to challenge inequality. It is never easy to summon the energy to fight against such heavy odds. The pioneers who led or were involved in the great women's campaigns of the past century had to find the strength and to persevere against taunts, insults, physical abuse and innumerable inexcusable setbacks. However, the truth is that the jibes did not only emanate from those in power but were thrown at them by the general public, by other women and even by their own families. Have we women in the 21st century lost some of that resilience or is something else holding us back?

One distressing notion is that the important battles have been won. Many women are now told at an early age that equality is a reality and, if they try hard enough, they can rule the world. Young women are under enormous pressure to succeed and, when they fail, feel they have no one to blame but themselves.

So, perhaps it is not surprising that some women throw their hands up in despair and follow Nigella Lawson back into the kitchen.

FEMINISM

What inspired the Votes for Women campaigners and the supporters of the Women's Liberation Movement was that deep belief in the rights and entitlement of women which we call feminism.

Jude Kelly, Artistic Director of London's South Bank Centre says,

> *"I'm convinced that feminism needs to be a big, bold, baggy overcoat that can accommodate each fully rounded female."*[11]

It is hard to disagree with such an inclusive statement, but many women still find the coat to be uncomfortably restrictive. The concept of feminism as a liberating force is still misunderstood and mistrusted. Attitudes vary from acceptance of the word as a beacon signalling an empowering sense of freedom to doubts and fears about humourless harridans challenging the very notion of womanhood.

Throughout this book, we endeavour to rehabilitate and reclaim feminism.

The feminism we espouse is straightforward and should be uncontroversial. When we met Brenda Hale, the acclaimed President of the Supreme Court put it this way:

> *"A feminist is someone who believes women are equal to men in terms of potential and entitlement."*[12]

It is a wise and simple description requiring no further explanation. The problem arises when we try to make this belief a reality. Equality and improvement do not come about just because we state their inherent fairness. Being a feminist may imply the need for action. Not everyone is eager to campaign but supporting those who are prepared to fight on our behalf is a necessary contribution that every woman can make.

In *I call myself a feminist: a view from 25 women under thirty* published by Virago in 2015, Martha Mosse says:

> *"Feminism is fairness."*[13]

Kate Nash writes:

> *"I personally think our generation has sat back a bit, because we could… I feel like it's our responsibility together to start making a noise, taking action. We need to have a more 'fight it' attitude, get angry, make some waves, be loud."*[14]