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# Struggles Over Leadership in the Women's Liberation Movement

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The first independent women's liberation groups began to emerge in the United States in late 1967, inspired by the Civil Right Movement and other great upsurges for freedom around the world. Women came into the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) with ideas about leadership formed in groups ranging from hierarchical churches to anarchistic counter-culture hippie communes. Its early leadership came mostly out of political organizations that fell somewhere in-between: civil rights, peace, free speech and student movements. Many had ties with the New Left, the Old Left or both. Many were in rebellion against what they perceived as oppressive "male" leadership, meaning that they were often left out of the decision-making process, while doing most of the clerical and other support work. This diversity of experience—much of it unpleasant and some of it outright oppressive—made fractiousness over leadership inevitable.

This chapter explores some of the theoretical and ideological struggles over leadership in the Women's Liberation Movement during its heyday—including my own experience, sometimes as follower, sometimes as leader. It will show that when the growth of the movement called forth a need for more structured organizations with accountable leaders, it was met with a resistance that contributed greatly to radical feminism's inability to unite, fight and survive.

My account of the first year of the women's liberation movement focuses largely on New York Radical Women (NYRW), partly because, as a member, I have first hand knowledge of its history. Also NYRW was one of the hotbeds in which many of the theoretical and strategic questions that marked 1968 were debated and developed, including consciousness-raising, "the personal is political" and "the pro-woman line," and

where much practical independent WLM activity was organized, from the Miss America Pageant Protest to the journal, *Notes from the First Year*. Other women's liberation groups went through similar experiences with local variations.

## Beginnings: New York Radical Women

NYRW, one of the earliest independent women's liberation groups in the U.S. and the first in New York City, was called together in late 1967 by Shulamith Firestone and Pam Allen. Initially the group was small enough to meet in the tiny apartments of its members. Unlike some early women's liberation groups, members of NYRW were not attached to any university community as either students or professors so were not as heavily influence by the academic milieu. Most worked for a living and did not identify as students, though some were or had been active in, or supported, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other student organizations. Neither were they the mates of Left male leaders, as were the founders of WLM groups in some cities.

All the founding members of NYRW had leadership experience in some form, though certainly with differing degrees of expertise in various capacities. NYRW members had felt hampered in attempts to exert—or in some cases be recognized for—leadership in mixed groups of men and women, not just in "the Movement," but in society in general. However, there was no concrete theory of leadership explicitly discussed in the WLM in its very beginnings. It was tacitly agreed the off-putting abstract, theoretical speeches and "revolutionary" posturing that many Left men engaged in was not what we wanted for leadership in the WLM. We wanted a movement that was concretely related to our lives at all times.

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On January 15, 1968, less than two months after its first meeting, NYRW held an action at the Jeanette Rankin Brigade, a large women's peace march held in Washington, D.C. to protest the Vietnam War. NYRW's plan was to convince the old-line women's peace activists, such as Women's Strike for Peace, that "playing upon the traditional female role in a classic manner" of mother and wife was not a very potent means of achieving peace. NYRW called upon women to unite to fight their own oppression and achieve some real power because "it is naive to believe that women, who are not politically seen, heard, or represented in this country could change the course of a war by simply appealing to the better natures of congressmen." (Firestone, 1968)

Whatever struggles over leadership erupted among radical feminists at the Brigade action were more faction against faction over contending political lines than against individual leaders or against leadership per se. A few may have grumbled at the content of her speech, but, as far as I know, no one condemned Kathie Sarachild for being a leader when, representing NYRW, she addressed a post-march convention in which she first used the slogan, "Sisterhood Is Powerful." When some 500 women broke off in disgust from the convention into a more radical counter-congress, the feminists were taken by surprise. In her assessment of the Brigade action in *Notes from the First Year*, Firestone showed recognition of what happens when leadership is not prepared to step into a situation and provide direction. She wrote that "we were not really prepared to rechannel this disgust, to provide the direction that was so badly needed. ... [We] learned the value of being able to size up a situation and act on it at once, the importance of unrehearsed speaking ability." (Firestone, 1968)

### Consciousness-Raising and Leadership

From its inception, NYRW had operated with no formal structure. However, leaders of those advocating various strategies quickly emerged following the Jeanette Rankin Brigade action when it became necessary to decide what the group would do next. Some wanted to study the status of women by reading various books, a sort of study group. Others clamored for an immediate action, but could not find one compelling to the group. Still others wanted to study women's situation and build women's liberation theory from the ground up by studying the experience of our own lives. So many falsehoods had been written about women, we argued, that we must test everything by our own life

experiences, discussing and analyzing our feelings as a guide to the truth.

Leadership at this point was a matter of having enough vision to point the way and enough verbal agility and persistence to convince others to take the same path. The faction advocating consciousness-raising won out, though not without ongoing dissention. Some women formed study groups and action groups on the side, but most also continued to participate in the weekly NYRW consciousness-raising meetings. Women's liberationists were under constant pressure from the SDS and other Left organizations to prove themselves as revolutionaries, and consciousness-raising came under attack as so much "navel-gazing." It took a good deal of courage and determination not to give in to that pressure.

As NYRW set about developing consciousness-raising as a tool for both organizing and advancing women's liberation theory, the group's structure and decision-making remained informal. Meetings were freewheeling, yet amazingly productive. We did soon institute the practice of going around the room to answer the consciousness-raising question, not only to encourage everyone to speak, but, more importantly, to keep focused on the topic at hand. The only rules were to tell the truth and not to discuss someone else's testimony outside the group. Consciousness raising proved an effective method to unite women as it broke down the isolation so important to the authority of male supremacy. As women learned that there was a pattern to their oppression and no longer saw their problems as personal, they developed political solidarity and were motivated to try to change their conditions.

Those who could best vocalize their own personal experiences with insight and analysis and/or had the facility to draw out and make astute political observations and analysis from the often conflicting testimonies of others were doing the work of leading. And it was, indeed, hard work. At this point, attacks on leadership began to emerge in the form of complaints that some of these women "talked too much" and that it was more important to "hear from the quiet women." Others objected to having their experiences analyzed and questioned at all, even though that was necessary for successful consciousness-raising. To a large degree, these criticisms came from those who wanted "small groups" with "free space" to "heal and restore ourselves to wholeness" (Allen, 1970) because women were supposedly "damaged" by their oppression. This focus on individual psychology represented a major

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ideological split from those who maintained that women were oppressed, not damaged, and needed a theory and strategy to free women from oppression.

Sometimes, of course, some women did “talk too much” without saying anything new or interesting. Once the dam of silence was broken, it was hard for some women to control their desire to talk. Sometimes other women really did want to know what “the quiet women” thought. More often, however, the complaints against the “women who talked too much” and “dominated the group” was actually a veiled criticism of the political conclusions being drawn from the testimony, an early form of the challenge to leadership that would eventually become so destructive to the movement.

This ruse became personally apparent to me one evening when we were talking about manual labor. A woman recounting her experience in a back-to-nature commune declared that women got more respect from men in situations where women did manual labor, like carrying water. I blurted out that my mother, as a farmer’s wife, had done a tremendous amount of physical labor and all it had gotten her was calluses and old before her time, not respect. Because I was considered one of the “quiet women,” I, and almost everyone else in the room, was shocked when the woman who had been advocating manual labor as the route to women’s liberation turned to me and said sharply, “You talk too much.”

Barbara Leon described the effect of some women demanding that others shut up so they could “hear from the quiet women” as follows:

I was really interested in the discussions of male supremacy although I didn’t contribute much—at times out of indecision, not knowing where I stood on certain issues and wanting to hear more before I made up my mind, at other times because of [the] conflict over how involved in this movement I wanted to be. But what made me really uncomfortable were the discussions on “what was going on in the group.”

There were women in the group who seemed to be supporting me. They criticized others for being dominating and monopolizing the meetings. In the middle of a discussion, they would break in to say that those talking were not giving others a chance and would then add, “Let’s hear from the quiet women.” I knew that that meant me. I felt that I should be grateful and yet I would wince every time

I heard that phrase. ... It got to the point where I didn’t even trust my own perceptions of what was happening. I felt angry and patronized by the women who were claiming to represent my interests. I felt attacked whenever another woman was accused of dominating me—since that implicitly meant I was easily dominated, weak, damaged, etc. Yet I continued to believe that it was for my own good and to wonder why it only made me feel worse. I also ignored my positive feelings toward those women who were supposedly “dominating” me. (Leon, 1972:13)

Since the act of following often leads others, following as well as leading came under attack because being “second through the door,” often shows others the way. Even one person unifying with a leader makes it easier for others who actually agree with the leader’s position but hang back until they see the numbers grow. Agreeing with a leader who was being attacked could mean being labeled her “dupe” by those who wanted to stop the group or movement from going in the direction she was advocating. This was a put-down of both the leader and her perceived supporter, and made it necessary for both to stand up to these charges in addition to defending their political position. Because feminist theory was so new to me in the early days of the movement (I hadn’t even heard of Simone de Beauvoir, while many of the leaders in NYRW had already read *The Second Sex*), I was often “second through the door” and often referred to as a “dupe.” Besides smacking of anti-Communist cold-war McCarthyism and its “guilt by association” overtones, this is perhaps more insulting to the “follower” than to the leader. It assumes the “follower” has no mind of her own and, once presented with the arguments, is too stupid or gullible to make a wise decision. Who, under that definition of a follower, would want to admit to being one?

By the spring of 1968, some 30 or so women were packing the weekly NYRW meetings, which had outgrown living rooms and were being held at the office of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a progressive organization for which I then worked. Out of necessity, we had progressed to meeting in a central place on a regular basis where other women could find us. Still operating without a formal structure, the group was admittedly noisy and difficult at times, but it remained fascinating and productive. The larger size meant a broader range of experiences was fed into our consciousness-raising hopper. Some women,

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however, still agitated for smaller, more intimate groups. Those who thought women's oppression was a political problem and were determined to build a mass women's liberation movement welcomed the larger meeting with its broader perspective, despite its difficulties.

In the late spring, Shulie Firestone decided it was time to get some of our ideas down on paper for distribution to other women and proposed that we write and publish *Notes from the First Year*. There was no committee or editorial board charged with overseeing the publication, though Firestone did much of the editorial pulling-it-together work. It was pretty much open to anyone in the group who wanted to write something, though there was some group debate on some items. Nevertheless, through a good deal of cooperative work, it was mimeographed in time for Firestone to take it to Paris in June, where she hoped to deliver a copy to Simone de Beauvoir. Again, I don't recall anyone complaining about Firestone's leadership on this project. We were excited about disseminating our ideas and letting others know about our group and what we were doing.

#### Leadership and the Protest of the Miss America Pageant

As the WLM became more public, friction over the issue of leadership sharpened. What went on within the group was one thing; how the group would be represented to the public became a much more serious matter. The entry of the mass media into the stir meant major difficulties as well as new opportunities. The September 1968 protest of the Miss America Pageant, with its need for spokespersons both during and after the action, took the internal struggle over leadership to a new level and greatly exacerbated tensions.

New York Radical Women, which spearheaded the protest, decided that no one would talk to male reporters. This was partly because some felt the protest was more likely to get favorable coverage from a woman and partly because we wanted to force the media to send women journalists, who in 1968 were relegated to the society pages and rarely sent out on assignments. A few women with some amount of celebrity and media connections felt they did not have to abide by the decisions of the group and spoke to the press at will. This set them up as spokespersons, not only for the protest, but also as favored media contacts for the future. Since we failed to designate spokespersons from amongst our own ranks, the self-

appointed ones were able to speak for the group with impunity.

Some women had joined the protest at the last minute and had not been in on the earlier discussions of why we opposed the Miss America Pageant and our decision to make sure that contestants would not be made the target of the protest. It somehow never crossed our minds to write up NYRW's official position in a flyer to give to the protestors who joined us as well as to the observers. This would not have guaranteed compliance, as a number of the posters and anti-woman<sup>1</sup> slogans, such as "Miss America Sells It" and "Miss America Is A Big Falsie," came from women who had attended the meetings. However, it could have been cited as the official position of the group. Instead, the anti-woman faction wrote up its own flyer, which was distributed without feedback from NYRW.

The experience of our first major action aimed at the general public forced us to focus on some of these leadership problems. Practice was making necessary some reconsideration of our loose approach to organizing. In "A Critique of the Miss America Protest," written soon after the action, I wrote:

A spirit of every woman "do her own thing" began to emerge. Sometimes it was because there was an open conflict about an issue. Other times, women didn't say anything at all about disagreeing with a group decision; they just went ahead and did what they wanted to do, even though it was something the group had definitely decided against. Because of this egotistic individualism, a definite strain of anti-womanism was presented to the public to the detriment of the action.

We tried to carry the democratic means we used in planning the action into the actual doing of it. We didn't want leaders or spokesmen. It makes the movement not only seem stronger and larger if everyone is a leader, but it actually is stronger if not dependent on a few. It also guards against the time when such leaders could be isolated and picked off one way or another. And of course many voices are more powerful than one.

Our first attempt was not entirely successful. We must learn how to fight against the media's desire to make leaders and some women's desire to be spokesmen. Everybody talks to the press or nobody talks to the press. The same problem came up in regard to appearances on radio and

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television shows after the action. We theoretically decided no one should appear more than once, but it didn't work out that way. (Hanisch, in Crow, ed. 2000:378)

Although many of us were not yet ready to give up our utopian ideal of a leaderless movement, it began to become clear in the aftermath of Miss America Protest that this hope was itself part of the problem.

Until then, most resistance to leadership in the group had taken the form of sniping complaints that some women were "dominating the group," "talking too much," "being too judgmental," and "acting like men" by interrupting and not giving everyone a chance to speak. Conversely, the "quiet women," like myself, who were often learning from what was being said by those who "talked too much," and were not yet always able or ready to enter the fray, were set upon for being "too feminine" and "too passive." Frustrating and painful as the various charges were, the group managed to continue to function. Attacked in other struggles as "Commies," "Nigger-lovers," "traitors," and so on, these seasoned activists might have weathered this also had the success of the Miss America Protest not brought about new conditions for which the group, unstructured and without a chain of command and rules for participation, was not prepared.

After the Miss America demonstration, NYRW was asked to send a representative to appear on the popular David Susskind television talk show. Because of our lack of a quick and unified decision-making structure, the show, not NYRW, managed to select the spokesperson, based largely on her attractiveness. This caused additional rancor in the group, not because we felt their choice represented us badly, but because the decision was taken out of our hands. The woman they chose had not been at the protest, while the woman many in the group wanted to have represent us had been instrumental in its planning and had helped hang the Women's Liberation banner from the balcony during the live coverage of the pageant. Even though the protest had been my idea and I, too, had helped hang the banner, I was relieved that I didn't have to be the spokesperson. Although by then I had a much better grasp of feminist theory and had begun to speak up and contribute more in NYRW, I had no illusions that I would do well on a live talk show.

We were also inundated with letters, many of which never got answered because we had not set up enough structure even to handle the mail. Many of us

never saw the letters or even knew they existed until much later, and then discovered they had not even been saved for history.

The desire to include all women and a fear of being "elitist" and "undemocratic" stopped us from setting up any kind of membership criteria. Women unknown to us began to show up at our meetings and tried to impose their own agenda. Some were from Left sectarian groups who had come to realize that the Women's Liberation Movement had tapped into a possible new constituency with revolutionary fervor. They attempted to redirect the WLM away from fighting male supremacy and to use it as a recruiting ground. Some of the new women who came in during this period had little or no previous movement experience and were easily confused by the struggles they witnessed. Furthermore, newcomers trailed well behind the group's knowledge and we often had to spend time repeating and explaining what was already understood by the rest of the group, which was inefficient and caused resentment.

Most critical, however, was that the leadership ante was raised with the advent of the media's newly found interest in the group. Many women who had played around on the edges of the WLM, who had been reluctant to be infamous feminists, were suddenly quite willing to be famous feminists, when rewards of money and power were offered. Some realized that the more outrageous their statements, in the name of the new movement, the more press attention they could garner. Others were happy to "interpret" the new movement with their own personal spin. Opportunism on a grand scale was gathering strength, as was interest on the part of the governmental powers. In the last days of planning for the Miss America Protest, we saw police cars parked outside our meeting place where they had never been before. We assumed they were listening in on our meetings.

Together all this was enough to eventually swamp the radical feminist agenda and cause chaos, like a disorganized army being routed. Without an agreed upon and recognized chain of command that could genuinely speak for the Movement and muster our forces from groups scattered across the country, we were unable to fight back effectively. To make matters worse, what had been an anti-leadership tendency began to erupt as a full-blown ideology.

### The Structuralist Takeover

The structuralists were the proponents of an idealistic

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ideology insisting on a “structureless” (non-hierarchical) movement with no leaders and absolute equality within the groups. They were called “structuralist” by their opponents to point out that they were actually not only in favor of structure, but were trying to enforce an anarchistic, ultra-egalitarianism structure that pushed for individual development over changing the objective conditions for the masses of women. This anti-leadership ideology rapidly gained credence in the WLM. (It also had currency in the New Left and the counter-culture, where it took on various forms.) Attacks on leaders for leading became common, supplanting what could have been instructive debates on the political directions which those leaders represented and what kind of leadership was needed for greatest effectiveness. Hidden leadership meant it was difficult to openly assess and judge a leader’s work on political grounds, thus making personal attacks the easiest means of challenging her.

Although the legitimate aversion to the patterns of leadership women had experienced both in the Left and in general society and the very real problem of opportunism needed to be addressed, questions about how to have effective, representative leadership were ignored. Instead, many proclaimed leadership itself to be “male.” As Catha Mellor and Judy Miller argued in 1969:

In every group or grouping we’ve been in, those women who by some chance have acquired the typical “male” traits of aggressiveness, forcefulness, articulateness, loud voices, and especially public self-confidence, have become the leaders. This reinforces the female tradition of expecting leadership to always have these qualities. Those who are more typical “feminine” (i.e. passive, not self-confident, inarticulate, “illogical,” soft spoken) don’t see themselves as leaders any more than they did in the male oriented student movement. To compete with such “male” leadership as already exists in WL would be difficult until the whole problem is out in the open and those who unconsciously lead because they have more of the above-mentioned traits pull themselves back. New styles and definitions of leadership then emerge from the more passive “feminine” women. (Mellor and Miller, 1969)

The structure devised to be the “great equalizer” of this perceived inequality was the lot system. Rather than making a logical assessment of who was the best person to do a particular task—and what was best for

women’s liberation—the group simply drew lots.

The lot system made its first appearance in New York Radical Women shortly after the Chicago Women’s Liberation Conference, held Thanksgiving weekend of 1968 in Lake Villa, Illinois. By then, NYRW had grown to a solid core of about 20 to 30 women who came regularly, with weekly meetings reaching 50 to 60 or more. Some women thought the group unwieldy and wanted to split into smaller groups by drawing lots. Almost all the founders wanted to keep the large group, or split along lines of the people one wanted to work with, if such a split was really necessary.

It was decided by a majority vote that the group would split—and split by lot—in the name of democracy. Many were afraid it was “elitist” to want to work with certain women with whom they shared a common political direction. The result was the first division of the original militants into several groups where they were less effective. This was a victory for those who favored the disconnected, random, therapeutic small group devoted to individual self-development (“change yourself”) over the more political consciousness-raising cell devoted to building theory and developing feminist consciousness (“change the world”) as the organizing form of the movement. Many women eventually decided to ignore the lot that they drew, but there was no reverting to the old NYRW with its large and lively political debates and challenging political thought that had resulted in so much important theory and activity.

One of the groups that formed out of this breakup of NYRW was not a lot-assigned group, but one made up of some who drew the lot and others who went to the group anyway. Later to take the name Redstockings, it continued to build on the radical consciousness-raising tradition of NYRW, putting out literature that further developed the earlier group’s radical analysis of the condition of women, including the pro-woman line. It led some major innovative actions that put consciousness-raising principles and practice to use in a public way, including disrupting a New York State legislative hearing on abortion composed of 14 men and a nun. Redstockings proclaimed women were the experts on abortion and soon afterwards held their own famous speakout in New York City, where women testified in public for the first time about their abortions—then still a crime. These actions were a critical spur to passage of the liberal New York State abortion reform law of 1970.

Making a step toward greater organization, Redstock-

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ings established a set of principles, a statement of purpose and orientation sessions for new members, all in the hopes that only those women who were in political agreement would join. But those who disagreed to the point of wanting to change the group's direction came anyway, including the structuralists who succeeded in imposing the confining lot system so that the pro-woman radical feminist politics that the group was formulating could effectively be kept from the public.

Some of these structuralists joined Ti-Grace Atkinson who, though a well-known media spokeswoman herself, had left NOW on the same anti-leadership grounds to form The Feminists. The group operated strictly on the lot and disk systems of anti-leadership rules and regulations plus several more, including a rule that only a third of the membership could be married or in a relationship with a man, a foreshadowing of the separatism that would soon help decimate the WLM. The Feminists described their system in a handout to prospective members:

The Feminists is an organization without officers which divides work according to the principles of participation by lot. Our goal is a just society all of whose members are equal. Therefore, we aim to develop knowledge and skills in all members and prevent any one member or small group from hoarding information or abilities.

Assignments may be menial or beyond the experience of a member. To assign a member work she is not experienced in may involve an initial loss of efficiency but fosters equality and allows all members to acquire the skills necessary for revolutionary work. When a member draws a task beyond her experience, she may call on the knowledge of other members but her own input and development are of primary importance. The group has the responsibility to support a member's efforts, as long as the group believes that member is working in good faith. A member has a responsibility to submit her work for the group—such as articles or speeches—to the group for correction and approval.

Members who [are experienced in writing and speaking] are urged to withdraw their names from a lot assigning those tasks. [Those] who have once drawn a lot to write or speak must withdraw their names until all members have had a turn.

Each member is guaranteed, and in return is

responsible for, equal development on all levels by the lot system and is expected to participate in equal amounts, both as to tasks and hours, with all other members in all the activities of the group. (The Feminists, 1969:115)

Had the structuralists confined the lot system to their own groups, the damage would have been limited. But they sought to impose it on the WLM as the test of what was radical—or even feminist. At the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York City, May 1, 1970, The Feminists distributed a leaflet demanding that all participants accede to the lot system or they were not real feminists:

[The lot system] says women—all women—are capable of power—of leadership—but that we no longer want the male values imposed on us—that of hierarchy. It also says that—unless controlled—women—in an anarchic situation—will grab control—and dominate others—become “stars”—cater to the press—and enter into a position they could not have outside the movement—on top!

Only you're on top of us. So get off our backs. Become Feminists! (Fury, 1970)

Leadership also became tied to class in an artificial and sometimes self-serving way. A group called “The Class Workshop” was organized as a caucus in the New York WLM. It included many members of The Feminists. While visiting New York in 1969 or 1970 (I had moved to Florida to organize women's liberation groups in the South), I was allowed to attend one of their meetings, since I came from a rather poor background. In order to dictate absolute equality, the group not only used the lot system to assign tasks, but they handed out disks at their meetings to make sure nobody talked more often than anyone else. Each person received an equal number of disks to be thrown into the center of group each time she spoke. When the disks were gone, the member could no longer speak.

The meeting was boring and awkward and at its end most of my disks were still in my hand. I could not see how one could develop one's speaking abilities in such tightly controlled conditions that did not at all resemble the rough and tumble of the real world. The disk system actually structured consciousness-raising in such a way that it lost its dynamism. Debate, judgement and even comments on what someone said—all critical to political development—were not allowed. There was little of the to and fro of debate, which gives people a

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chance to build on their knowledge by truly investigating an idea. Consciousness-raising under the disk system was deadly for theoretical progress, an imperative for motivating and stimulating members politically.

I was also disturbed that speaking ability could be so completely linked to class. Though I considered class a factor, and I often envied the poise and self-confidence with which the more affluent and secure seemed to move in the world, I knew it wasn't the whole explanation. I remembered the eloquence of Fannie Lou Hamer, who addressed the whole country on national TV during the 1964 Democratic Convention, and many other of the poor, uneducated—even illiterate—leaders of the Mississippi freedom movement who would rise to the occasion with wonderful speeches. Although I felt uncomfortable sometimes as a "rural hick" among well-educated, urban members of the WLM, I had learned that something besides class background gave people the ability to speak in the language of revolution. It had a lot to do with clarity of direction and purpose and the ability to put into words thoughts and feelings that spoke simply of the actual conditions and hopes of the oppressed. It also had to do with being dedicated and willing to take a clear and firm position on the issues and to take risks.

### Fighting the "Tyranny of Structurelessness"

Fed up with the attacks and aware that the movement was losing its political depth and forward thrust because it was unable to speak with an organized, powerful voice, some women began to fight back publicly against the anti-leadership ideology. In the spring of 1971, for example, Lynn O'Connor, in declaring the establishment of a group built around *The Woman's Page*, a West Coast feminist newspaper, wrote:

Hidden leaders have just as much power as acknowledged leaders but they don't have to be responsive to the rest of the organization. A leader who is not recognized as such, openly, is free to abuse his or her power and not take any responsibility. This is one kind of insidious, destructive leadership running rampant in the left-wing and women's movement today. It follows a distinct pattern. First there is a great deal of liberal talk about the evils of leaders, and the organization proudly spreads the word "we have no leaders in OUR group." Then, slowly, the individuals who are very serious about their work, who take initiative and feed energy into the organization, are driven out. They are told that their hard work and initiative

are "elitist", "arrogant", and inhibiting to others. In fact, this tactic serves to remove all of the real ("indigenous") leaders from the group and leaves it wide open for the opportunistic concealed leaders who then manage to keep the group from moving at all.

Another kind of leadership that has been working against our interests in the left-wing and women's movement is the "star" who does nothing but public self-promotion via the press, and passes as a representative of the movement but in fact represents no one at all (except fellow strivers) and prevents those who might really represent people from appearing in the public eye. Consequently, the information passed out to the public is usually the bullshit of a petty opportunist star type who has nothing but contempt for most people and manages to convey that contempt and drive away potential allies.

In order to pursue our real work, strong responsible leadership is an absolute necessity. ... Masses of people who the left runs down as "apathetic" will be full of energy and work effectively and well with real leadership behind them, but to allow that to take place, we must be rid of the opportunistic striving prison-guard type leaders who make it their business to stop real work and make people feel inadequate. (O'Connor, 1971)

*Woman's World*, a New York-based radical feminist newspaper edited by Kathie Sarachild and Barbara Leon, reprinted "The Prison Guards Stand in My Way" in its first issue in April of 1971 and carried several other articles decrying the suppression of leadership. Other feminists, too, who had been attacked for leadership briefly united with the California group. Sifting out the truths within the ranting style of *The Woman's Page* was often difficult, however, and its sectarian approach made it impossible for many good feminists to join them. The paper's counterattack on "prison guards"—of both the anti-leadership and opportunist varieties—eventually cut such a wide swath in the WLM that few feminists were left standing. The alliance fell apart when accusations of prison guarding were extended to its allies and eventually to its own members. The common bond of having been trashed as leaders was not enough to hold the alliance together in the face of major political differences, including over the direction in which feminism should go. *The Woman's Page* eventually declared itself a vanguard group (a tendency also happening with groups on the Left) and

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clerical workers to be the vanguard of the working class. It then metamorphosed into The Second Page, becoming a group of both women and men concerned mainly with fighting capitalism, leaving feminism as a secondary concern.

Among others who fought back against “the tyranny of structurelessness” was Joreen Freeman whose paper by that name was published in 1972:

To strive for a structureless group is as useful, and as deceptive, as to aim at an “objective” news story, “value-free” social science, or a “free” economy. A “laissez faire” group is about as realistic as a “laissez faire” society; the idea becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish hegemony over others...because the idea of structurelessness does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones. .... For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities, the structure must be explicit, not implicit. This is not to say that formalization of a structure of a group will destroy the informal structure. It usually doesn’t. But it does hinder the informal structure from having predominant control.... We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group, only whether or not to have a formally structured one. (Freeman, 1972)

### The Lesbian Vanguard

Another challenge to the leadership of the original, militant radical feminists came in the form of lesbian separatism. Lesbians, and sometimes proponents of celibacy, began to complain in consciousness-raising groups that women talked too much about sex and relationships with men, and the attendant issues of abortion, housework and child care—crucial topics that had grabbed the attention of masses of women and caused the WLM to mushroom. Instead they pushed for discussions of “divisions among women,” and often for the abandonment of consciousness-raising itself. “Straight women,” wrote Julia Penelope Stanley, “even those who call themselves ‘feminists,’ are still tied to men and dependent on their tolerance and goodwill, which is why they cling to issues like equal pay and birth control. A woman who has no vested interest in men wouldn’t bother.” (Stanley, 1975)

Most early feminists had supported lesbians, at least as one of the ways women lived their lives under male supremacy. Since any woman who is a feminist is assumed to be a lesbian by many anyway,

it seemed important to most radical feminists to do away with discrimination against lesbians. There were very few tensions between lesbians and so-called “straight women” until late 1969 when some lesbians began to create a separatist theory and movement in which lesbianism began to supplant feminism by claiming that women who were—or wanted to be—in relationships with men were “sleeping with the enemy” and “male-identified.” The conclusion of this argument was that women who wanted men for mates couldn’t possibly be real feminists and had no place in the WLM, especially in its leadership. Charlotte Bunch proclaimed lesbians to be the vanguard of the feminist movement: “Lesbianism is the key to liberation and only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance” (Bunch, 1972). Or as one slogan put it, “Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice.”

By the early 1970s, the Women’s Liberation Movement was giving way to lesbian vanguardism and to the rising tide of cultural feminism. Many movement women turned to an all-woman alternative culture, with lesbianism at its core, where men were simply irrelevant and to be ignored. The era of the collective fight against male supremacy was supplanted by the era of attempting to escape from it. “Liberation” was deleted from the Women’s Liberation Movement. The “women’s movement” stood in its stead, with no definition of itself, except perhaps, in the self-serving and age-old rhetoric of women’s natural superiority to men. A woman with whom I shared a panel in the early 1990s pointed to the progress of the “women’s movement” by stating gleefully, “Feminism today is anything a woman says it is.”

### The Liberal Takeover

By the time some women’s liberationists had begun to figure out and combat the anti-leader tendency, organized and well-funded forces had moved into the leadership void with their own “leaders” and agenda. This rush by the media—and to a debatable degree, government counter-insurgency organizations<sup>2</sup>—to fill the leadership gap with their own spokespersons, effectively cut off the original, radical movement from its constituency.

The media had not only singled out certain spokespersons, they “promoted” women from within their own ranks to speak for the WLM. As Kathie Sarachild pointed out in *Feminist Revolution*, a book published by Redstockings in 1975, which exposed

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this takeover as part of its analysis of the decline of the WLM:

Many media women themselves were becoming the movement's representatives to the media, whether self-arranged or picked by the men in control. Most notable and powerful among these is Gloria Steinem, who started as a reporter for New York, the magazine which then backed the first preview issue of *Ms.* magazine. But there were others who first reported on it, then joined it, and then became the main source of feminist opinion instead of the founders they used to quote. They suddenly found the anti-leader line convenient whereas formerly they had searched for leaders to write about, attacking women who resisted uncontrolled exposure as examples of alleged female passivity. But suddenly a means of establishing authentic [leadership]—that is, chosen, leaders and groups that actually represented themselves—would threaten their unique and newly acquired position of access to media channels themselves. Gloria Steinem, so clearly the main feminist political leader chosen from the media and for the media, began to come out for "leaderlessness," using her position as leader to enforce that trend for others. (Sarachild, 1978:31)

Although Gloria Steinem has occasionally come out with some good feminist soundbites, she has never broken new ground or been accountable to any women's liberation group and is truly a media phenomena. What's more, when authentic leaders, like Betty Friedan, a founder of the National Organization for Women, and Redstockings have pointed this out, they have been accused, even by other feminists, of merely being jealous of Steinem's looks or fame. Attributing political criticism of leadership—or perceived leadership—to psychological motives also has contributed to the favoring of celebrity spokespersons over authentic leaders.

Gil Scott Heron used to sing, "The Revolution Will Not Be Made on Television," but even many radicals have forgotten that they can not depend on the corporate media to carry their ideas out to the public in their original form. As the definition of leader has narrowed to mean public "speaker" and "writer," the invaluable, but often less glamorous, work of organizing and theorizing—and the dozens of other crucial skills women have to offer—are no longer acknowledged and supported and have fallen off the Movement's radar screen.

As the early radical feminist ideas, and the leaders behind them, were pushed aside to make way for a safer, less demanding, individualistic feminism, the development of groups into organizations prepared to deal with the very real power of the ruling classes—both economic and sex—was blocked. The creativity of both the authentic leaders of the movement and the masses of women they had been rousing to action was cut off. The "celebrity leadership" that filled the void raked in support and money that should have gone to further development of women's liberation groups that were actually organizing women to fight for their liberation. Instead, groups and individuals who survived the takeover more or less intact have run into roadblocks at ever turn and have great difficulty getting their ideas out to a broad audience.

With the original leadership, work and ideas of the WLM no longer readily available, the revisionist "interpreters" of the movement have been free to remove it from its exciting, radical roots of fighting male supremacy. The feeling that the impossible might be achieved through knowledge, clarity, unity, and struggle has suffered a staggering setback.

### Conclusion

By 1975, thousands of women had dropped away from the Women's Liberation Movement, in large part because it no longer spoke to their needs and their hopes. Not wanting to abandon feminism completely, some joined—or went back to—the more liberal groups, such as the National Organization for Women, because their hierarchical structures and financial bases had allowed them to survive. Many of the leaders who had given the movement its impetus dropped away, discouraged and disgusted by both the personal attacks and by the disruptive, blocking tactics of those who have made it nearly impossible to even hold a public meeting that focuses on male supremacy and women's liberation.

Loose decentralization can accomplish much under certain conditions, such as during the great consciousness-raising period of women's liberation when groups sprung up like grass. The genius of these early radical feminist consciousness-raising groups was that, though anarchist in form, they were at least partially democratic centralist in function. The raw data gleaned from the experience of all women in the group was analyzed and formulated by a leadership (however unacknowledged) and immediately fed back for further discussion. Even with only mimeograph and

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ditto machines—instead of the Internet—ideas spread like wildfire across the country and around the world in newsletters, position papers, journals and letters, and through word-of-mouth, conferences, and progressive organizations.

Consciousness-raising groups used broad democratic participation to bring about unity of thought and deep agreement among members. These loosely structured groups taught women that their problems were political, not personal, that even the differences among women had political roots. This knowledge built unity where competition had previously flourished.

“A hundred flowers bloomed” as ideas and theories contended. Some of the ideas turned out to be invasive weeds, however, and these informal groups were not organizations capable of taking on the repressive apparatus of either men as a class or the state when the inevitable backlash set in. Consciousness-raising groups did a fairly good job of fulfilling the first part of Chinese revolutionary Mao-Tse Tung’s advice to “divide our forces to arouse the masses; concentrate forces to deal with the enemy,” but the anti-leadership ideology helped dismantle attempts to move to the second part.

The history of the Women’s Liberation Movement shows that more structured forms are necessary to assure the development of the organized strength needed to accumulate and eventually take power—assuming the goal is to take women’s fair share of power to meet the needs of all, not just to “empower” individuals.

It also shows that, although structure and organization are necessary, over-structuring a situation can also be detrimental. For example, when too many rules were applied to consciousness-raising (disk systems, being non-judgmental, no interruptions), the democratic spontaneity necessary for creativity was lost and the leadership, which did much of the analyzing and formulating, was suppressed.

Of course there were many reasons in addition to “the leadership problem,” that the Women’s Liberation Movement fell apart, but without leadership, organization and the discipline that goes with it, no gains for women can be defended and furthered. Sometimes I wonder if those of us in nations spoiled by the fruits of imperialism, and now trying to understand and adjust to our current financial fall from grace, are ready for that kind of discipline, for even as we call for it, we

often do not practice it. We need to acknowledge that the competitive system of capitalism has a thwarting effect on even the most dedicated among us. In “The Double Standard of Organization,” Elizabeth Most, contrasted our resistance to structure with the well-organized opposition:

What the individual is most afraid of, must avoid at all cost, is organization. Organization calls up regimentation, the specter of automation, blue ants. The worst enemy of individuality is structure.

... A glimpse through Alice’s looking glass to the other side, seeing the double standard at work, may help turn us “little” Americans around. The “big” Americans are organized within every inch of their roles and careers. They are companies, corporations, combines, consortiums, conferences, cartels, and conglomerates. (Most, 1978:160)

Creating the organizational structures, theories and formulas to attain our goals is no easy task and one that cannot be learned by any preordained short cut. We can’t know ahead of time exactly what forms of organization will work under present world, national and local conditions or precisely how to go about building them, but we now have experience of our own, as well as much useful history from past revolutionary struggles. Fortified with this knowledge, we need to get back to organizing, to uniting women around a program for liberation.

We may find that “one size fits all” doesn’t work for all situations and all stages of struggle. An elected hierarchy and Robert’s Rules of Order may not always provide the best solution. We will no doubt also find that structure does not solve all the problems of leadership and democratically selecting our leaders does not solve all the problems of opportunism. But many of us have learned that leadership is necessary to win, and that it is crucial that leaders be democratically chosen, acknowledged, valued, encouraged, supported—and held accountable. We now face the challenging task of creating the organizations, structures and leadership to get us where we want to go.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Anti-woman” and “pro-woman” refer to two competing political lines in the WLM. Anti-woman means the theory that women are damaged, brainwashed, conditioned and consent to their own oppression. The pro-woman line says that women are not damaged and do not consent to their oppression, but act in certain ways in order to survive or cope with their oppressors, as in “women are

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messed over, not messed up." Anti-woman here refers to those who blamed, attacked, or made fun of the contestants. For a further discussion of "The Pro-Woman Line," see "The Personal Is Political" (Hanisch, in Crow ed. 2000:113.) and "Consequences of the Conditioning Line" (Leon, 1978:66).

<sup>2</sup> In 1975, Redstockings publicly questioned Gloria Steinem's sudden positioning as spokesperson for the WLM, given her involvement as founder and director of a CIA-funded front group, the Independent Research Service, which recruited and sent anti-communist young people to the world youth festivals in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The extent of U.S. government interference in the WLM has still to be fully documented, but there is no doubt that it existed. For example, the Rockefeller Commission Report of June 1975 exposed an executive branch counter-insurgency program—aptly named "Operation Chaos"—which listed the WLM among its targets. FBI files obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show that many individual feminists and WLM groups were spied upon.

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### SOURCE NOTE:

Several of the sources used in this chapter are out-of-print, including the book *Feminist Revolution*, which was first published by Redstockings in 1975 and by Random House in 1978. *Feminist Revolution* and many early WLM documents are available from the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives Distribution Project, P.O. Box 2625, Gainesville, FL 32602-2625 U.S.A. or on the web at [www.redstockings.org](http://www.redstockings.org).

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