



## THE RISE OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION: MAKING POLITICS PERSONAL?

**Events:** Although an organized women's movement first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, focused on the campaign for female suffrage, it was not until the 1960s that it was regenerated through the birth of the Women's Liberation Movement. Often viewed as the 'second wave' of feminism, this reflected the belief that redressing the status of women required not just political reform, but a process of radical, and particularly cultural, change, brought about by 'consciousness raising' amongst women and the transformation of family, domestic and personal life. Protests designed to challenge conventional stereotypes of 'femininity' took place: for example, at the Miss America pageants in 1968 and 1969 (where, by throwing stiletto shoes and other symbols of oppression into a 'freedom trashcan', demonstrators claimed a great deal of publicity and also acquired a false reputation for bra burning), and at the 1970 Miss World beauty competition (where, in front of millions of television viewers worldwide, about fifty women and a few men started to throw flour bombs, stink bombs, ink bombs and leaflets at the stage). This radical phase of feminist activism subsided from the early 1970s onwards, but the women's movement nevertheless continued to grow and acquired an increasingly prominent international dimension.

**Significance:** The 'first wave' of feminist activism, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was framed within a largely conventional notion of 'politics'. As the primary goal of feminism during this period was 'votes for women', it complied with the idea that politics takes place within a 'public' sphere of government institutions, political parties, interest groups and public debate. Female emancipation was therefore defined in terms of access to the public sphere, and especially the acquisition of political rights already enjoyed by men. One of the central themes of the 'second-wave' of feminism, however, was that it sought to challenge and overthrow traditional thinking about politics, both about the nature of politics and where it takes place. Radical feminists in particular objected to the idea that politics is rooted in the public/private divide. In the first place, they argued that associating politics only with activities that take place in the public sphere effectively excludes women from political life. This is because, albeit to varying degrees, all contemporary and historical societies are characterized



by a sexual division of labour in which the public sphere, encompassing politics (as conventionally understood), work, art, literature and so on, has been the preserve of men, while women have been predominantly confined to a 'private' existence, centred on the family and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, if politics focuses only on public activities and institutions, the sexual division of labour between 'public man' and 'private woman' appears, somehow, to be a natural fact of life, rather than a mechanism through which the system of male power is established and upheld.

Nevertheless, the most influential feature of the radical feminist critique of conventional view of politics is that it emphasizes that politics takes place not only in the public sphere but also, and more significantly, in the private sphere. This idea was advanced through the slogan: 'the personal is the political'. By redefining politics in terms of power, control and domination, radical feminists portrayed family and domestic life as the crucial political arena because the dominance of the husband-father over both his wife and children conditions girls and boys to accept quite different social roles and to have quite different life expectations. The patriarchal structure of family life thus reproduces male domination in society at large, generation by generation. If, from this perspective, women are going to challenge patriarchal oppression, they must start with 'the personal'. Instead of primarily addressing problems such as the under-representation of women in senior positions in public life, they should focus on their underlying cause: the contrasting stereotypes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' that are nurtured within the family and which accustom men to domination and encourage women to accept subordination.