

A Letter to the Editor: A Response to Miles on the Limits of Feminism

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Angela Miles' article, "Women's Challenge to Adult Education" (May, 1989) reflects a rather one-sided view of the virtues and accomplishments of feminism. Arguing that feminism and the women's movement offer a guiding philosophy for present and future practice in adult education, Miles makes some bold assertions both about the virtues of feminist ideology and the desirability of imposing a feminist world view on adult education theory and practice.

For Miles, and presumably for other committed feminist adult educators, the marriage between adult education and feminism has so far been a relatively uncomplicated one. Because a social activist stance has improved the lot of women, Miles argues, so can social activism improve the lot of adults in their education generally. This is a somewhat dubious claim in so far as one might place equal validity in the competing proposition that if there have been substantial improvements to women's (and men's) lives over the past fifty years or so, it is not so much a result of rising levels of educational attainment or social activism as it is a result of economic progress and the consequent emergence of a post-industrial, relatively affluent, middle-class society. One might well propose that all the feminism of the past century has not done as much to increase women's choices as has the invention of the washing machine. [Lest this last point be viewed as sexist, it should be pointed out that "sexist" is a key feminist buzzword and a leading weapon in the feminist rhetorical arsenal for belittling, besmirching, and befuddling their "enemies"—traditional society and men. For feminists, sexism is a system which oppresses women in order to preserve the hegemony of men—what feminists believe is the essential principle of human history. In other words, "sexist" is a pejorative way of saying "gendered." Since it is men who are held to be oppressing women, sexism also equals male chauvinism. Women are therefore rarely accused of being "sexist," for who would accuse blacks of being racist? But men are almost invariably sexists.]

It is hard to quibble with the fundamental decency of Miles' social activist impulse, or to deny that social activism whether it emanates from adult educators or the helping professions generally has not accomplished significant good in many areas. However, if we are to

embrace feminism, surely we should not do so uncritically. Beside its real accomplishments must be placed the limitations and failures of feminism. Only a balanced view will produce the kind of outcome Miles envisions. A good starting point is to outline what I deem to be feminism's accomplishments followed by a brief discussion of paradoxes and contradictions inherent in feminist thinking.

Feminists have played a major role in opening doors to women in employment, education and sports as well as providing a guiding philosophy to many women in their prolonged and bruising penetration of the corporate and academic worlds. Feminism has provided a supporting framework to sustain many women through a difficult period of uncertainty regarding their sex roles. Feminists formed an important part of the Canadian constituency for abortion rights from the sixties onward. They are in large part responsible for the attention focussed on the crime of rape and the underlying misogynist attitudes of men. They have thrown the spotlight on the syndrome of battered women. They have relentlessly hammered home the inadequacy of all intellectual disciplines that fail to take into account a female point of view. History, sociology, anthropology, psychology and other academic areas will never be quite the same.

These and other positive changes and viewpoints brought about by feminism have had a generally beneficial if not disquieting effect on both men and women. However, as with all social movements, there is a degree of ambiguity surrounding feminism's achievements. This awareness is brought home when one rereads, for example, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* a generation later. One realizes how thoroughly feminism has replaced the feminine mystique with a mystique of its own in all the areas Friedan examined, such as education, psychology, advertising, and journalism.

Unfortunately, feminism, despite its more widespread acceptance throughout society, still embraces only a small corner of the human experience as an intellectual approach. And it is this distinction, that is, between feminism as a politically inspired social movement and feminism as ideology and as an intellectual approach, which needs to be sorted out by adult educators before they take Miles' recommendations seriously. I would argue that to enlist feminism in the cause of social change is misguided for a number of reasons.

First, all ideologies are vehicles for attaining power, but how much is actually changed in society once power has been attained by the upholders of the ideology has historically depended upon a great many factors. Indeed, the question of what does or does not count

as a change in the status quo has itself become an issue of ideological dispute. By assuming a social activist stance, Miles is asking adult educators to confront the status quo head on. This in itself is a somewhat paradoxical request given the fact that feminists themselves have from time to time expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes and gains women have made over the past twenty years or so, particularly in the areas of employment, pay equity and so on. It seems that the "status quo" is ever-changing and illusory.

Why, then, should adult educators follow in the footsteps of the feminists? No doubt one of the paramount reasons for feminism's single-minded attack on the status quo is the desire for absolute equality between the sexes. Feminists have demonstrated that they will not rest until both sexes are equally represented in all occupations. Feminist concern with equality coupled with their goal to achieve a genderless society rests on the assumption that the sexes are inherently alike in everything. If the sexes are not doing all of the same things with the same frequency, it is believed that some injustice must be at work to cause this disparity. The feminist devaluation of everything feminine encourages women to believe that all things worth having in this world are possessed by men—aggressive personalities, prestigious jobs, and freedom from childcare. The feminist goal of remaking society in their own image suggests a level of state intervention irreconcilable with the respect for human liberty that is basic to adult education practice. I would think the prospect of increased state involvement in adult education would be of concern to many adult educators for whom local initiative and voluntarism are paramount.

The inherent radicalism of feminism, implicit in Miles' article, is decidedly out of step with the views and aspirations of many contemporary women despite the impression given by feminists to the contrary. It is questionable to what extent organized political feminism speaks for women or for progress. Rather, it may be that feminism today reflects the views of an embittered minority which has since forfeited the respect of the "transitional" generation of its parents and has now lost the pulse of the rising generation.

Another aspect of feminism which would make it difficult to accept as a guiding philosophy for adult educators is that feminists have a way of making all relations with men difficult and good relations virtually impossible. How can an ideology which purports to blame men for women's oppression expect to win the trust and acceptance of men? Feminists have the delightful capacity to find oppression where the generality of humankind finds only an accepted condition of things. Thus, Kate Millett, in her book *Sexual Politics*, for whom

the oppressive system is called "patriarchy," takes the view, "that those who do not know that they are oppressed have been deeply conditioned by society." "It is interesting," she remarks, "that many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning." A better proof than this, ought certainly to be found, since the conclusion of the argument is taken for granted in the premises, and we thus have a *petito principii*, a fallacy commonly committed in the service of a dogmatism. Dogmatism is necessary in feminist discourse since there is only one correct way of construing a human situation. The same could be said, of course, for other ideologies.

This view of blaming men, whether explicitly stated or not, is a guiding feminist tenet, and has forced feminists into denying the most obvious facts of human biology and psychology. It has the potential to generate female chauvinism and hate-mongering as seen in the movie *The Color Purple* in which tearing a newborn baby from its mother's arms is depicted as typical, everyday male behaviour. Not only is the feminist perspective anti-male, it also devalues female experience by denying the authenticity of women's experience under "patriarchy," that is, before the "Feminist Era."

While Miles extols the "new knowledge" revealed by feminist psychologists and is eager to integrate this knowledge into the adult education curriculum and the teaching-learning process, she ignores the fact that feminism is a failure as an explanation for male psychology and behaviour. Adult educators must ask to what extent feminist psychology is appropriate for men given its anti-male orientation. Freed from the check of men's input—just as misogynists in past centuries spouted their nonsense without fear of women's objections—feminist psychologists have arrived at a view of men and masculinity that almost parallels the worst misogyny of past centuries. The qualities feminists input to themselves are perversely reflected in their descriptions of men. Readers familiar with the work of Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, to name only two prominent feminists, will recognize how each female attribute is treated as a virtue and is counterbalanced by an equal number of male attributes treated as vices: cooperation by competition; connectedness by separateness; pacifism by aggression, intuition by logic; until finally the feminist lexicon reads like a mirror image of the very prejudice against which it allegedly detests.

Instead of arguing for a recognition of the centrality of both masculinity and femininity to the human experience, feminist psychologists insist on extolling the virtues of the latter at the expense of the former. This anti-masculine perspective can hardly

be expected to hold much appeal for males who, after all, make up the other half of the human race. The considerable challenges facing adult education cannot be undertaken unless men and women, working together, recognize that humanity cannot be understood in terms of either sex alone.

It is hoped that even the most enlightened kind of feminism, such as that expressed by Miles, will prove itself capable of providing a balanced understanding of gender issues. For the moment, however, one must remain sceptical for even if it is able to better reflect women's point of view, feminism will likely continue to attach secondary importance to the male point of view. One wonders how such an ideology can be so construed as to appear compatible with the education of adults.

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