

Feminist Believes Identity Is Lost Among Society's Traditional Roles

Editor's Note: The writer is vice president of special projects for the Metropolitan Detroit chapter of the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.).

By MARY JO WALSH

Why am I a feminist? The question behind that question is actually: Why are some women feminists while others are not? There must be as many answers as there are women. I can only give mine by relating some of the experiences that have caused me to think as I do now.

When considering marriage at the tender age of 32, I received a great deal of unsolicited advice about how difficult it would be to give up my freedom. Loss of a certain measure of my identity is a problem; loss of freedom is not. Jim and I have come to realize that as long as society's ideas of marriage roles remain as they are, togetherness is the original impossible dream.

We began married life living up to the usual expectations, and the rigid roles separated us almost from the minute we walked back down the aisle. After the first dinner in our new apartment, I got up to do the dishes and Jim sat down to read the paper. As we both had done our own grocery shopping, cleaning, cooking and dishwashing for years, it was a surprise to me that these tasks weren't shared in marriage. Wrapped up in the idea of becoming a good wife, I swallowed my resentments and played the role.

FOR THE first few years, I was ashamed of myself and afraid it might be considered "unwomanly" to dislike doing these jobs alone. Since then I have been able to discuss this with my husband, and such things have changed around our house.

Soon after marriage financial surprises cropped up. We thought we would get one credit card from the store I used and one from the store he preferred. I would pay my bills and he would pay his; then we would compare our spending and work out a budget. No store would give me a credit card in my name. The bills all came in addressed to

Jim, even from the dress shop. The stores explained that it was company policy for a married woman to have only the credit rating of her husband, even if she were employed full time. As far as the business community was concerned, I was merely a satellite of my husband.

WHEN THE telephone directory came out, we turned to see if our new number was listed. It was there, all right, but I had forgotten that the wife isn't listed at all. I was beginning to feel like a non-person.

When I returned to work after marriage, some of my co-workers, thinking I would be pleased, put a new song on my office, reading "Mrs. Smith." It wasn't their fault. Society has really romanticized the name thing, i.e. songs that promise bliss, "When you change your name to mine . . ." etc. When my co-workers heard that I would continue to use my own name professionally, they immediately insinuated that I didn't really love my husband.

They asked him what he thought about it. His answer was consistent with his fairness. He said he wouldn't want to change his name for love or anything else, adding that he wondered why this was expected of women.

KEEPING ONE'S own name in this society is only acceptable for prominent women. If you are a queen, a doctor, or a movie star, it is all right. Being none of the above, I am constantly questioned by people who imply that retaining my maiden name is rather eccentric. Some prominent women and all men are entitled to the same name for a lifetime. We ordinary Janes are supposed to change our names and love every minute of it.

A few years after my marriage, a friend's husband died suddenly and she was left to support their four children. Though a brilliant woman who had graduated from college with honors, she was unable to find a job. Grief-stricken, she asked me, "Why is it other women don't care about those of us who are left as heads of households?"

I ASKED her if, while hap-

pily married, she had ever really cared about the plight of such women. The answer was "No." After discussing for hours, we concluded that it was important to become more sensitive to the problems women face in this society.

In order to do that, we had to first become more knowledgeable. We realized we had never sorted fact from fiction about our own sex. For instance, it is often said that women are poor drivers. The National Safety Council's statistics prove otherwise. It is also often believed that women are not ideal employees, as they will probably miss more work than men because of pregnancies and their children's illnesses. The U.S. Dept. of Labor reports, however, that women have excellent attendance records, even though they are found largely in rank and file jobs where the absentee rate is often the highest. Then, too, there is the belief that women bosses are harder to work under. But frequently women supervisors are not allowed to advance further up the promotion ladder. Persons frustrated by such unfair working conditions, whether men or women, may very well be more difficult personalities.

WOMEN HAVE been encouraged to take part in their own put-down — the question of age, for instance. There are several reasons given as to why women should hide their age. What are women afraid of in aging? Well, for one thing, we are told that we are less attractive when we are older. Unless we have lived utterly worthless lives, the knowledge we've gained and the experiences we've had, must necessarily make us more interesting persons as we grow older. Feminists are helping women value themselves, not only for their appearance, but for their inherent worth as human beings.

Women are sometimes reputed to be devious personalities. Often it is because we believe that the best way to get things we want from a man is to pretend everything is his idea.

THIS IS basically dishonest. However, we're advised to use this method as it is not consid-

ered "feminine" to act aggressive. Aggression is a normal human trait, and when used well, is a healthy component of any personality. We should reject this notion and begin to relate honestly.

I HAD HEARD the term "sisterhood" and it had sounded strange because women are so often told they do not like or trust each other. Though I had been subjected to the pervasive idea that women must compete against each other for the approval of men, I had valued the companionship of women, as well as that of men, throughout my life. It seemed certain that sisterhood would come naturally to me.

I heard a Detroit feminist on a local television show. She was discussing the fact that we had only one woman in the

Senate compared to 99 men, and 12 women in the House of Representatives compared to 420 men. She said perhaps one of the reasons for this was that women had suffered a prolonged "model thirst." We have seen few women in leadership roles, making us feel that members of our sex are not suited to be leaders. Also we are told frequently that only certain careers are best for women, while a variety of careers are suited to men. She said the group to which she belonged, the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.), was trying to do something about this. I felt myself thinking, "Hey, I'm one of you; let me in." My recently widowed friend and I called her, joined N.O.W. and found, somewhat

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Seeking Human Liberation

Mary Jo Walsh, 37, believes Women's Liberation implies a change that does not come without conflict. She sees the feminist movement as a powerful force to accomplish human liberation.

Feminists Want Choice In Life

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to our surprise, that the members were some of the nicest and most rational women we had ever met.

IT WAS explained to us that N.O.W. is working for equality for women, not for women's supremacy. To say that women are better than men is just making the same old mistake reversing the sexes. N.O.W. has both female and male members.

Women's Liberation is trying to resolve the problems created by sex-imposed roles concerning parenthood, house-keeping and breadwinning. Women's Liberation means human liberation.

The feminists I know don't want to be men. We would, however, like one privilege traditionally given men: The privilege of making a choice about what our life's work will be. We hope that when people marry in the future, the roles

of homemaker and breadwinner will either be shared, or decided on the basis of individuals talents and inclinations, and not on the basis of sex. Both sexes are, after all, members of the same species. The biological differences are pleasant and undeniable facts of life. However, they have more limited implications than we have been ascribing to them.

Women's Liberation implies change, and change never comes easily or without conflict. However, the changes will be for the better and the conflict is basically healthy, as men and women are beginning to communicate in some ways that they never have before. Also, women are coming to have more respect for themselves and for each other.

The feminist movement is a much-needed force for good in our society, and I am glad to be a part of it.