HISTORY OF THE EQUALITY ISSUE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

by Janine Sade

National Organization for Women, Crisis and Split, up to Formation of

THE FEMINISTS:

The issue of equality within the women's organizations did not start to emerge significantly until about a year and a half after the renaissance of the feminist movement in 1966. A good example of this is the history behind the split in NOW, National Organization for Women, in the fall of 1968.

NOW was founded in October of 1966 and was set up with a president at the top, vice-presidents, secretary, and treasurer, etc., then a board of directors. These people were also the chairs of the various committees which had been set up to study and act on issues, as well as for the committees on membership, finances, etc. Some of the members felt that this pyramidal structure in which power filtered down to the general membership from a small clique at the top followed the same hierarchical structure which has been oppressing women outside the organization. It seemed to those women that a primary step in their fight against inequality should be ending the same in their own organization. A by-laws committee consisting of eight members, including Ti-Criss Atkinson, the then president of the New York chapter of NOW, therefore proposed the elimination of all offices, the organization then operating on the level of committees, the chairs of which would rotate and be chosen by lot from the general membership. It was hoped that in this way the organization would more closely approach the ideal of participatory democracy.

When it was found on September 18th of 1968 that the Organization would lose its tax exempt status if the formal structure were different from that of the other chapters, the proposal was amended to keep the structure but to change the implementation of the structure so that every member would have greater participation in the organization. The committee proposed that the effect of the oppression by the upper echelons of the hierarchy might be diluted by multiplying the numbers of persons occupying each executive position, each assuming office on a frequently rotating basis. This would not have altered the tax-exempt status, but would still have equaled the power distribution somewhat.

On October 17th, 1968, a general meeting of the New York chapter of NOW was called to vote on this issue of implementing the new by-laws. The motion was defeated by a vote of 2-1. This vote, however, was a turning point in the development of the radical movement in New York City. On the same day, President Atkinson handed in her resignation, issuing statements at the same time from which the following are excerpts:

"This issue of inequality of treatment is, I think, the most basic issue in the problem of women..."
"I am resigning my office because after (the referendum) as the final proof, I realize that by holding these offices I am participating in oppression itself. You cannot destroy oppression by filling the position of the oppressor. I don't think you can fight oppression from the inside. Since I have failed to get rid of these power positions I held, I have no choice but to step out of them."

Two days before the split in NOW, a meeting had been called to try to smooth out the differences in ideology within the group. At this time Betty Friedan, the national president of NOW said: "I want to get women into positions of power." This statement concisely summarized the aims of NOW with relation to its goals for women in our culture. Ti-Grace Atkinson, at the same meeting stated: "We want to destroy positions of power... not get up into those positions." The two opposing positions here were prophetic for the present endeavors of NOW on the one hand, and the radical feminist movement on the other.

The small group of dissenters who not only disagreed with the desirability of the hierarchical system as embodied in NOW, but also wished to leave the parent organization and found a new group of their own became "The October 17th Movement," named after the day of the split in NOW. This later to become what is now THE FEMINISTS in which the structure of the group is the most laterally-oriented and egalitarian of all the contemporary radical groups. We shall go into this at greater detail later.

Many women who were later to be members of THE FEMINISTS were members first of other radical groups such as "Redstockings" and "Women's Liberation." The early groups of the Women's Liberation Front (some formed after the Chicago conference of New Politics in 1967 and the Conference on Women in 1968), and Redstockings, which was founded in February, 1969, show the transitional phases in the attempt to achieve equality of rights and responsibilities between all members in a group.

The early groups, unhappy with the NOW-type hierarchy, tended to have no structure at all. They were small, so that every member could be heard, but the tendency was towards a takeover by those with the most insistent voices. In Group 2, for example, this became such a problem that a couple of women who felt that they and other women were not being heard and were not having much to do with the creative work brought this up at a meeting. The group was concerned about this but felt that these women had a psychological problem. Shortly after that the group was dissolved (February 27, 1969) and the main body of the group formed a study group while many of the dissident members left to join Redstockings which had been formed in early February.

Redstockings was also a group with little structure. The chairwoman rotated until everyone had taken her turn, instead of being chosen by acclaim as in the previous groups. The work was still being parcelled out to volunteers, however, which tended to result in those experienced in leadership or in a certain field getting the more creative jobs, while others found themselves typing or operating the mimeo.
The same group of people who were dissatisfied with the so-called structureless, but actually oligarchic, character of the other Women's Liberation groups were unhappy with this similar result in Redstockings. They proposed, therefore, that a lot system be adopted, as in THE FEMINISTS, whereby work was allotted on the basis of drawing lots. This was voted in, but subsequently fell into disuse. At about the same time the practice of "consciousness raising" was introduced into Redstockings. Many women have the impression that their bad experiences are mainly a matter of their own personal, bad luck or mismanagement, but when these experiences are shared, patterns start to emerge and it becomes evident that personal problems are often political ones. This excellent method of sponsoring political consciousness began to be the main activity of the group, however, and some members who wished for a more varied action program and a more egalitarian structure slowly dropped out of Redstockings and joined THE FEMINISTS over the summer and fall of 1969.

We have seen how the hierarchical-type structure, as exemplified in the NOW concentrates the power and initiative at the top with the broad base of the general membership bearing the load. The structure might be represented by a triangle. The oligarchic-type structure, which eventually emerged from the originally almost structureless Women's Liberation groups and Redstockings, might be represented by a rectangle, sitting on its small end. The lateral or egalitarian-type structure in which all members have equal participation in all aspects of political activities, such as THE FEMINISTS have attempted to set up, might be represented by a rectangle sitting on its long side.

In THE FEMINISTS there are no permanent officers: A different chairwoman is chosen by lot for each meeting, no person taking a second turn until all members have chaired. A recorder and treasurer are chosen by lot for one month. In this way tyranny by any one person does not develop and no one comes to be identified with a position of power.

As far as the general work of the group is concerned, it has been roughly divided into two categories: the creative and the routine. Under the title of creative would fall such jobs as writing position papers, giving lectures or press conferences, or appearing on radio or TV. Routine work includes the typing, envelope addressing, and errand-running which keep the wheels of the movement turning. The lot system works in the following way: On slips of paper, the names of each member are placed in two envelopes representing the two types of work. Then a job comes up, a name is chosen at random from the appropriate envelope. That person's name would not then be put back into the envelope until everyone has had a chance to do that type of work. This eliminates unfair exploitation and helps to develop each individual's capacity for creative work. THE FEMINISTS feel that the initial inefficiency and (sometimes) lowering of quality are made up for by the subsequent increase in skills of the entire group. The method encourages the development of the multi-dimensional individual and the political skills—public speaking, for instance—give women the self-confidence and capability which so many of us, as women, lack. A group operating in this manner has a high survival factor because, of its adaptability; it will not collapse because of its "leaders" being picked off by judicial arrests, and can't be forced into unwanted channels through particular strong member threatening to quit if the group doesn't wish to follow her ideas. People who do have specialties are resource people; they can be drawn upon for advice. This promotes cooperation and inhibits competition.

WE ALL HAVE TO PULL TOGETHER IF WE'RE GOING TO WIN THE REVOLUTION! 11/21/69