

## WHAT IS WOMEN'S OPPRESSION? By Charlotte Bunch-Weeks

"The tragedy was, nobody ever looked me in the eye and said you have to decide what you want to do with your life, besides being your husband's wife and children's mother. I never thought it through until I was thirty-six, and my husband was so busy... the three boys were in school... I thought that my own growth and evolution were over."

New England Housewife to Betty Friedan  
in *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 72

In claiming their freedom, what are the problems and oppressions that women are challenging? First, women in the U. S. encounter the problems common to our industrial society: the pressures of a competitive, profit-oriented society where human needs and creativity have low priority, a sense of meaninglessness in most work and even leisure activities. The lack of control over one's life and the powerlessness of all but the elite in the face of big business, big government, big cities, big school systems, all affecting one's daily life yet remaining controlled by a small powerful few. Some women also experience the particular oppressions of their class or race, as blacks, migrant workers, or the poor.

In addition, women experience certain oppressions and limitations as women—in the mundane roles that they are trained for, encouraged in, and expected to fulfill. Although the specific forms vary among different classes, most women are channeled in childhood into some combination of the same basic roles that our society defines as feminine and as woman's proper sphere. According to a scheme initiated by a Washington, D.C. woman's group, these roles are: sow-socializer-sweeper (or Mother-Housewife), sex-seller, secretary, spender, civic actor, and social-psychotic.

All women are taught to see being a mother-housewife as their primary purpose in life, to define themselves, their identity and interests in terms of others (boyfriend-husband-lover and children). Mother-housewife involves four major functions: sow, socializer, sweeper and soother. The sow bears babies. The socializer rears children up to age 12, not only in the home but also in daycare centers, nurseries, and elementary schools. The sweeper is responsible for household maintenance which is usually boring and demands only a small portion of one's creativity. The soother is a good comforting wife—she makes life pleasant for him, she follows his career, she prepares his social life and she boosts his ego to make him feel important; she melts away the alienations of his work and the world, helping him evade reality so that they can both perform as cogs in the society without demanding change in its dehumanizing structures. Even when the woman also

works she still is automatically expected to perform these tasks, unless she can afford to hire other women as servants. The reduction of women to appendages to their children and husbands often results in psychotic and alcoholic women, neurotic and "mother-nagged" children, women aimlessly shopping for hours to end their depression, and husbands who find their wives a bore.

Although the demand to be mother-housewife is always seen as a woman's number one job, they are often encouraged to do other things as well. Some women are led to view themselves primarily as sex-sellers and all women are encouraged to perfect some "storebought" images of sexiness. The sex-seller has found that women are important, not for their own worth, but as objects that can entertain men and sell products. A woman can sell her body as a call girl. She can compete in a beauty contest for one of few scholarships available to women, she can work as a subtly sexy airline stewardess or as a come-on for selling every product from cigarettes to farm machinery. And, she can buy all the products necessary to keep up the sexy look! Yet, woman's pleasure in sex has largely been denied or ignored. Her sexuality and femininity reduced to a commodity and she to an object, rather than someone to really love and be loved.

For help in this you can find economy by buying. Shopping has become something of a profession for women who have their hair done and dress up to shop, gather volumes of tips and coupons, and spend many dollars and days in public, at the shopping center. "Buying is a great ego-fortifier for many of us" croons one woman advisor. (Dr. Joyce Brothers, *Good Housekeeping*, May, 1968, p. 45.) Advertisers have spotted the market value of keeping women in their place, a bit frustrated and without purpose, since "properly manipulated, the American housewife can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy she lacks by the buying of things." (Ad man to Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 208.) The spender controls little of her life, but she is Queen of her shopping list!

The woman who wants "to do something with her life" is encouraged to be a civic actor, to volunteer for community work as an outlet for her energies. On the surface, the civic actor is busy and out of the woman's trap. Usually, however, she has been pacified. Still doing "women's work" in a position that relieves and contains her excess energies, she rarely moves into real power and influence. Further, civic action groups are themselves often ineffectual, unable to touch where real

decisions are made and thus only creating an illusion of power and meaningful involvement.

When a woman fails to find fulfillment in these "proper" woman's roles, she can become a social-psychotic. Among the affluent, this leads to the psychiatrist's couch; for the poor, this may mean prison or a state institution. For the majority, this is minor illness, pill popping, drugs, drink, and some forms of aberrant behavior like shop-lifting or suburban prostitution rags. In general, our society accepts the social psychotic as long as she views herself as a failure as a woman and deals with that individually rather than questioning the roles to which women have been assigned or the society that maintains them.

These roles are not all necessarily bad, but they are used to channel women in certain directions, regardless of choice. Automatically assuming that a woman does these things denies her right and need to make fundamental political and personal decisions about her life, which may or may not involve such roles. Further, the roles do not exist in isolation and, as is most clear with the spender, they have been manipulated to serve existing economic and political structures, rather than the interests of the individual woman or the good of the total society.

### Why Does Women's Oppression Persist?

"Most of us would rather be some poor man's mistress than somebody's own little scholar."

Robert Van Fleet in response to Miss America Protest, "Female Firebrand," N.Y. Post, Sept. 9, 1968.

If these roles are dehumanizing and limiting to women, why have so many women accepted them, even found them satisfying at times? Through the process of socialization, women are told from the cradle up that these roles and traits are "feminine," the essence of being a woman. The home, church, schools, media, advertising all ring with the message: Be a woman, be... Through these various institutions women are taught and rewarded for behavior that fits certain expectations of "woman" and are discouraged from pursuing inappropriate ideas about their roles. Thus, a woman learns what society says a woman is, seeks fulfillment where she has been told women will find it, and discovers that accepting her place brings rewards, security about identity, and a modicum of satisfaction.

Even when this socialization breaks down and women are frustrated with their roles, many are too insecure to break with tradition and try something new. In women's training, their abilities and instincts for other than "women's roles" are not usually developed.

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therefore, many women do not have the skills demanded in new situations and come to accept the conventional notion that women are not competent in such matters as mechanics, science, and political leadership. Accepting this judgment, most women do not expect other women to excel and are often personally threatened by women who do go beyond the accepted limits. Thus, rather than supporting one another, women often hate and undermine each other, especially in public situations. (For documentation of women's self-prejudice, see "Are Women Prejudiced Against Women," *Transaction*, Phillip Goldberg, April, 1968, pp. 28-30.) Isolated from or dealing other women, most women depend on "their men" for support, economic and psychological, and for judgment about important matters. The vicious cycle is then maintained—most women remain in their places and do not develop new possibilities or abilities since they are insecure about their ability to venture into unknown territory, especially without their usual support from men. Thus, hesitancy about women breaking out of their old roles is built into some women as well as men.

If women are clearly socialized to perform and accept these limited roles, then we must ask why: How does this socialization support the existing social system? Who benefits from it? Some women are examining how their roles support the present social structures and how that system in turn supports and perpetuates their oppression. Some of the questions being debated are: Does the elimination of women's oppression necessarily imply revolutionary change? If so, of what nature? Can change needed in other areas of society come and still leave women's situation oppressive? Are there basic differences between men and women that justify some role assignments or have these only been manipulated to keep everyone in his proper niche? Can women work on their oppressions with other groups also interested in change or will men inevitably move to protect their own privileged, though also dehumanized, position over women?"

Not one overall social analysis of the connections between women's oppression and the social system yet exists. However, work moving in that direction has been done in

such areas as: the relation of women's roles to developments in the economic structure over the years; the exploitation of women as consumers and as a reserve labor pool to depress rates; the function of the family as basic social unit in our society; sexual repression and the demands of capitalist society.

Although analysis is far from complete, the work done clearly suggests that women's roles are hardly accidental, but are essential functions of the present social order. Unless basic change is brought about in our society, someone must continue to perform those functions—to consume excess products, to soothe away frustrations of an alienating work structure, etc. If we seek not only to end women's oppressions as women but to change the society so that these dehumanizing functions are no longer necessary, work to change women's situation must be closely related to efforts to change society generally. This requires more analysis and experimentation with how various changes in society affect women and how women can cooperate with other forces working for change.

## Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

LIBERATION  
by  
Vivian Lewis McCain

The upbeat of life  
has a message for me  
Music to dance to, ACTION,  
and to be free

LIBERATION  
What is it?

It's not the words written on a line  
It's not dialogue at a table while we dine  
It is life itself —  
It's what we do  
That leads to liberation for me and you.