

Commencement, May 31, 1971

Gloria Steinem, 1956

THE POLITICS OF WOMEN

Friends and Sisters - It's strange to come back to my own college as commencement speaker. It's a little unsettling for me. At our graduation ceremonies in 1956, when I sat before this platform in cap and gown exactly as you sit before me now, I had no such ambitions, nor even such dreams.

Had I been asked, "Why not:", I would not have known the answer. "Because speaking at commencements is for other people," I might have said, providing I took the question seriously at all. And in my head, I would have pictured a man behind this podium - a man probably old and definitely white - because I had internalized, without conscious thought or formal instruction, the racist and sexist values around me.

The non-white men and the female human beings I had seen in everyday life were usually dependent on acceptance by white men in some overt or subtle way. I did not look like the ruling class; I was maybe even biologically and therefore immutably inferior to it (unlike black men whom one insisted, if only intellectually, were just as good). And that was that.

Of course no one asked me why my imagination couldn't stretch to commencement speaking, any more than they asked me why I didn't consider being a politician, a business executive, an engineer or even a writer. The dark '50's I'm afraid were not brightened by much encouragement of women to be ambitious or autonomous or to dream unfeminine dreams. A more representative question was asked me by a vocational advisor when I brought up the subject of law school. "Why study three extra years and end up in the backroom of some law firm doing research and typing," she said, with great good sense, "when you can graduate from Smith and do research and

typing right away?"

Smith did not invent the '50's anymore than it invented the patriarchal and the racist system under which we continue to live. There have been many foresighted and courageous individuals who have worked to make this campus a more human place than the world around it. In my day for instance, there was not one black woman in the class, even though two-thirds of the applicants from the area around Washington D.C. where I lived, were black.

When I asked a professor here why the black women had not been accepted, he explained that one had to accept only the strongest and ^{the} most outstanding, because it was going to be so hard for them in later life because there were not enough educated black men to go around. It's interesting isn't it how often racist arguments are used to support sexist standards, and vice-versa. In fact, there was not one black or non-white human being on the faculty or in the administration, and Smith, a college with feminist beginnings, was so lost to them that the administration offered as a supposed inducement to prospective students that the faculty was 75 percent male. The main excuse for educating us at all was that we would then educate our children. Indeed, the assumption was that we ourselves were children; creatures who were rarely encouraged to use in the real world all the knowledge that was being stuffed into our heads; creatures who were punished if they were not in their houses every week night by 10:15

As you can see much has changed. Through scholarship and recruitment programs we white women are less ghetto-ized here. Black women are joining us in growing numbers, and may even eventually represent the percentage that black Americans do, at

least that percentage in the overall population. Some restitution is being made for the fact that here, as at most American institutions, we have been studying white history; history written for, by and about white men. There is a Black Studies program, and I understand that Smith is now the only woman's college to offer a black studies major. I am ^{very} proud of that.

We are beginning to learn something even about ourselves as women. I didn't know until last year, for instance, that the library had a fine collection of feminist literature. I believe women even use it now. There are a few Women's Studies courses, though still far short of the potential major and ^{full} department that Women's Studies should be. We are even beginning to recognize that women come here as adults, that if they chose not to enter college, they would be voting for the President, working for a living and becoming parents at the same age. Women's students have many fewer rules now, and hopefully soon they will be ^{totally} in charge of their own lives. College, after all, should be the beginning of adulthood, not an artificial prolongation of life as a child.

But there has been a larger change of consciousness in the past few years, a change in which Smith, as a woman's college, should have been taking the lead. We have been discovering in all areas of academic study and personal experience, that the so-called masculine-feminine differences are largely societal, not biological at all; that those differences have application only to reproduction (supposing one chooses to reproduce), and that they have no meaning for education, job selection, or life style. Indeed, that the myths of feminine inferiority have been used largely to suppress the talents and strengths of half the human race.

In the words of Florence Kennedy, a distinguished black lawyer who has fought many such sex and ^{race} discrimination cases and with whom I have been lecturing on the women's movement, "There are only a few jobs that actually require a penis or a vagina. Nothing else should be restricted or colored by sex."

I thought before I came here that Smith, with its feminist beginnings, would be turning out whole human beings; that this would be a free place where repressive myths were being examined. The myth, for instance, that men need fulfilling work in addition to marriage and children, but that women for some mysterious reason, do not. I had written a whole Utopian speech about new social and political forms that would grow from this change. I thought we had understood the ultimate truth: that our inferior position all these hundreds of years had not been ordained by God or by biology, but was and is, in the purest sense, political.

For two days I've been talking here to women students, to women faculty and ^{to} faculty wives and I've discovered that women are still sometimes tracked into so-called feminine occupations; that the vocational office still routinely asks how many words per minute you can type, though the vocational office of Amherst or Harvard does not; that the male supremacist teachings of Freud may be dead, I hope, but that some professors are still condescending to us out of minds that Freud and other male supremacists have formed; that the faculty is still 70 percent male, and that some of the females on it have doubts about the way in which tenure is awarded, or part time female teachers are used; that encouragement of women's studies has often had to come from students or faculty wives, not from the college itself; that there is little emphasis on informing women of the real prejudice that they will meet, much less giving them the philosophical and tactical tools to fight;

that there is still fear of so-called abnormal sexual behavior, whatever that means, whether it is too heterosexual or not heterosexual enough; that women students are still made to feel that they have to worry more about combining marriage and a career than men do. The sense of a wide range of alternatives for women has increased, but not enough. We are still being given skills and knowledge, but not being encouraged to use those skills and knowledge in the world as full human beings.

So let me say to you some of the things that I wish so desperately someone had said to me. It would have saved me so much time and so much heartache.

First of all, we have been reading, for the most part, white male history. As Virginia Woolf once said bitterly, "Anonymous was a woman." It seems to me in both high school and college we generally start at about the time of Chalemagne, right smack in a period of patriarchy and racism. In that period, however, so graciously dismissed as pre-history it turns out that we have other things - a gynocracy, ^{so} ^{is} as ^{delightfully} ^{called}, and indeed for the first half of human history more or less from perhaps 12000 to 8000 B.C. there's a lot of reason to believe that women were superior, certainly equal and possibly superior; that women were worshipped because we have the children. We somehow ^{ourselves to} have allowed ^{to} be talked into the notion that the bearing of the children is an inferior function but in those early days it was worshipped. Men's ceremonies imitated it. ^{in other words} It was ^a time of womb envy, not penis envy, and that this continued until the discovery of paternity, a day I like to imagine as a big light bulb over somebody's head and they sang "Oh That's Why." Scholars are now in fact beginning to believe that women discovered paternity several years before they told anybody about it as they wanted to preserve their independence.

With the discovery of paternity, with the end of the notion that women bore fruit like trees when they were ripe, came a whole lot of institutions we will very readily recognize: the idea of ownership, for instance of property and of children; the origin of marriage which was really locking women up long enough to make sure who the father was and the subjugation of women as the primary political subjugation. We were the means of production - the original means of production. And as we were locked up in the ~~original~~ institution of marriage and for the bearing of children as the notion that the state owns the body of a woman, a notion that we still see in our abortion laws. As that grew women became the first subjugated group and the group which all others were to follow in pattern. We were given the jobs ^{to do} that the men did not want to do. That's called feminine. That is still the definition of feminine work - jobs which men do not want to do. And as other tribes and races were brought into this situation, they were as captured peoples given the role of women. So there has always been a very close parallel between all second class groups and especially it is visible in this country with females and with the largest second class groups, which is black. I don't mean to compare the suffering. No one would compare the suffering and Gun ^{who} made this parallel ^{thirty} years ago did not do that. Black people lose their lives and women lose their identity ^{ies}. But there are many many parallels when it comes to myths. We are both supposed to have smaller brains, passive natures - childlike natures, to be unable to govern ourselves - God forbid that we should try to govern a white male; to have special job skills - we are awfully good at detail work as long as it is poorly paid detail work. When it's brain surgery, we are suddenly not so

good anymore. And these parallels are very important to understand because it helps now that we have just barely begun to understand how deeply racist this society is to say when we speak of women in a general way to put in the place of women the word of any other minority group in this country, and to see what it is that we are really talking about. As this patriarchy began to take over many of the institutions we recognize today began. But I think the important thing is ^{to recognize} that it was a political subjugation and and that the truth is as women realized in abolitionist times and as I think there is a great effort to keep us from realizing today white women have more common cause with other second class groups in this society than they do politically with white men. We have more to gain by making those kinds of coalitions except of course with those men whom we welcome who are willing to give up their white skin and their male privileges. If we are to change this society in the deepest kind of way, then all of us who have been marked by looking different for whatever reason, for cheap labor must stand up together and say, "No More." And we must resist those efforts that are made to turn us against each other. It is happening in many parts of the country, for instance, that there are political slates of the outs - white women, black women, black men, Portoricans, Chicaxnos who are forming slates together to try to break the hold of the white male on the state legislatures and on other political bodies. We must realize first something we haven't up to now, and again there has been a kind of effort to keep us from realizing it, which is that women are sisters; that we have many of the same problems; that the class divisions that the men have made for themselves apply to men but don't apply to us. The wife of a rich man is not usually a powerful person; she is often an ornament and a child. She often comes to realize

in the middle of the movement that she may have more in common with her maid that she does with her husband. There are housewives who are suffering from the system designed to give the employer two for the price of one. Housework is after all the only work that is only noticed when you don't do it. It is ^{the} definition of women's work which is shit work and what ^{women} are saying now they want that it is dignified labor whether it is performed in your own kitchen or someone else's kitchen. Housewives and domestics are organizing together for a decent wage so that they don't have to end up begging or asking for alimony which in our system is ^{really} more like ^{clearly} war reparations. It is a common cause ^{clearly} with black women because it is ~~exactly~~ a racist society most of the women who are poor are members of some minority group and they suffer even more from the policies that deny them legal abortions; that send them to their deaths in botched abortions ^{at} in a rate greater each year than men die in Vietnam. Abortion is our number one health problem, us women. It is not the common cold and it isn't all those things for which there are telethons on television. It is abortion. Two out of three adult women in this country have had an illegal abortion, and the laws which ^{still} insist that the state owns the bodies of women are very very inhuman, and especially for poor women. Poor women have also to deal with forced sterilization which must be our twin concern along with the legalization of abortion because they are very often bargained with, especially welfare mothers. If they can have an abortion, they can have a welfare check if they will be sterilized. And in many cases in New York State as well as southern states, women are sterilized without their permission when they go into hospitals for other purposes.

I think that black women are an example to white women;

they have always had to be much stronger and more courageous than we and also black men tend to understand this desire for freedom and equality on the part of all women better than white men, at least by their own example. As Bobby Seale says in Seize the Time, "In a panther house everybody does the dishes and everybody sweeps the floor and everybody makes the revolutionary policy, because real manhood does not depend on the subjugation of anybody."

Hispanic women have even more of the machismo problem to deal with than the rest of us (machismo, which I guess can be best defined as sexual fascism).

Women in prisons also have special problems. First of all they are often given longer sentences for the same crimes. They are often arrested in situations where men are not. Prostitutes for instance, are arrested; their customers are not. And because they have less access to bail they are more likely to become subject to preventive detention.

Addicts also have a special kind of problem because so many of them are women. It is very difficult to count the addict population in this country but it is thought that there are four times more women addicts than men. We are less happy with our situation therefore more likely to become addicts. We are more likely to be addicted by others because we have a way of paying for it; we can become prostitutes. And women who are already prostitutes are often addicted by their pimps in order to make them controlable. Otherwise prostitutes might be (to quote Florence Kennedy again) "the last female entrepreneurs in America." But the pimp makes an effort to addict the women in order to make them controlable yet there are very few facilities for women addicts. Most of them are for men; I know of none that are only for women and the inequality of the situation is getting steadily worse.

There are beautiful women who have their own kind of problems because they are objects much more than anyone else. It's a kind of "You get the liquor; we'll get the girls," kind of psychology which means that women are interchangeable moving parts; that a beautiful woman is much less likely to be taken seriously as a human being than a less attractive one. And the unattractive ones have fundamentally the same problem because all that they are, all that they try to do, is written off with the argument, "Well they are only doing it because they can't get a man." We have the same problem which is that we are both being defined only by our skins and only by our attractiveness as women and so called beautiful and so called ugly women have a common cause and should not be divided one from the other.

It's for older women who are often more radical than young ones. Perhaps you can see that here today in the alumnae classes. My own class which is in the heart of its nesting period is perhaps more conservative, and of course we grew up in the dark fifties, than the women here who are forty or fifty years out. They have been through the system: they know. The women who are young sometimes say radical things but don't act upon them, because secretly they are preserving their ability to marry a rich man and be a parasite and not upset the system too much. We'll look to our older sisters who have done that and who know that that is not a human or possible solution, no matter how rich he is. We have to have work of our own.

Students who are made to feel like half people and who do not recognize perhaps that their situation is political. We were talking yesterday about what one might consider a typical political situation. You are going to a movie with a friend of yours, a woman whom you like and respect. You've decided to do something together that evening; a man from Amherst or elsewhere calls you. The man is four

foot two, has terminal acne and no redeeming features of any kind, but you go because you have been made to feel like half a person. Well of course, men and women need each other and love each other and will continue to, but we do not need men any more than they need us

Love has almost been politicized out of existence. It really is only possible between equals. And as soon in a relationship as you need him more than he needs you, a lot of other things begin to happen - a lot of not very attractive things; a lot of Uncle Toming and giggling and pretending you don't know what you really know, and saying, "How clever of you to know it's Tuesday." A lot of men who don't know whether they are loved for themselves or for their social identity and their wall-to-wall carpeting.

Sex is probably the same kind of situation. We have somehow arrived, through this power situation, at this political situation between men and women, at a stage in which there is one subject and one object. Sex has almost become a kind of sado-masochistic relationship. Men have ^{be} become ^{be} so dependent on the idea of superiority that they think they cannot get along without it. I assure them that they can and that however used they may have got to submission, cooperation is better.

There is a problem with men that we must understand as their problem, just as white racism is ours to deal with; sexism is man's problem to deal with. They have come to be, through no fault of their own, so dependent upon the idea that no matter how bad things get they can count on their superiority to two kinds of people - all women and non-white men; that they are very shaken up and very understandably dismayed to discover that they will have to compete with all human beings on the basis of merit but they will have to solve their problem or move over, and we will try with humor and

compassion to help them solve it.

Now that you have become alumnae, you are the people of whom this college, you are the people of whom it has been said to you so often "but what will the alumnae think?" So I hope that you will place your own energies and any pressures at your disposal to "making of this college a women's college and not a school for girls".

Women need to know all the choices of life available to them. Couldn't there be a freshman orientation course that tells us that, that makes use of our wonderful alumnae who have been brave and courageous and gone out into the world that does something to enlarge the choice from the idea we have in our heads that somehow it's a job or it's marriage and there's nothing inbetween. Couldn't we be concerned with the education of older women and of poor women, of ways to get them into this institution, to give them its benefits and to give us the benefit of their presence. Couldn't we discuss in our Political Science courses and elsewhere the problem of the masculine mystique. How much has that influenced our foreign policy. How much of the reason that we are in Viet Nam is because of the masculine mystique - the notion that masculinity depends upon the subjugation of other people, that it depends upon saving face after all possible national interests has disappeared. It is a legitimate subject for discussion but it is one that is not discussed and here of all places it should be. Shouldn't we talk about the politics of marriage - that in a real partnership the wife's work is just as important, the husband is as likely to move to another city if his wife has a great opportunity, as she is to move for his - that it is truly a partnership, both responsible for the house and both responsible for the children - that now we have

a kind of situation in which the children suffer from too much mother and too little father and that for awhile, at least, we should start to talk about parenthood and not about motherhood.

The politics of religion, why is it that God always looks so exactly like the ruling class? As the position of the priesthood goes up, you find, in all great religions, whether it's Hinduism or Catholicism, that the position of women goes down. The priesthood has always taught that women are unclean, second class, and to be avoided at all costs. "Perhaps jealous of our power", as an Indian anthropologist once said rather charmingly, "for the priesthood has always been jealous of the spiritual fulfillment which men achieve upon the breasts of women, perhaps it was a primitive form of birth control ", but, in any case the priesthood has systematically taught the inferiority of women.

Well I'm happy to say that the situation is reversing itself. The position of the priesthood is going down and the position of women is going up. Radical nuns are taking over the pulpits from priests because we now know there is no reason why a woman should be a nun and a man a priest or a woman a nurse and a man a doctor or a woman a typist and a man a boss. Perhaps a whole generation of us should fail to learn how to type. Protestant women are now voting in the church (that's a great revolution, you know), Jewish women are rewriting the prayers (especially those ones in which Orthodox Jews thank God every morning for not being born women.). The politics of motherhood, we have seen that the state regards us as the means of production. Isn't it interesting that motherhood becomes sacred - that the Madonna image is prevalent whenever the state needs workers and the state needs soldiers.

Motherhood is not an instinct, if it were we would not need to be told to do it, it would be like taking one's hand from the fire. Sex in human beings has never been as directly related to conception as it is in animals. Human beings are the only animal that can experience orgasm at times when they cannot conceive. So perhaps God, perhaps she had something else in mind~~g~~ for us. Obviously it is important that we repeal all these obscene laws against abortion and that birth control be readily available.

But perhaps it is just as important to stop the brainwashing that we do of each other--whatever it may be it should be a personal and an honorable solution. Not everyone should be a parent, anymore than everyone with vocal chords should be an opera singer.

The politics of volunteerism is something we should consider. After all, the idea of volunteering really got started because men could not stand that challenge to their ego in a social status that a wage earning wife provided. I suggest that we volunteer only to change the system, not to perpetuate it. That we stop the endless reading to invalids and working in hospitals. That we volunteer only to force the government to pay for those things which it indeed has the money to pay for if it would only start paying for life and not death.

I think one of the questions before us now is the integration, the sexual integration of Smith College. I think perhaps the truth is, as we know in our hearts, that we are not ready for it yet. Our heads are not together enough yet as women to be integrated. That this college has to turn into a real college for all women, as it is in many areas, that it has to become, again, a feminist institution, a radicalizing institution, so that when we integrate we will understand that we are not receiving the benefit of the

great intellectual male presence which is going to validate our classroom experience, but that we have to offer the elements of the female culture, (and there is a female culture,) which the males very, very badly need. Perhaps primarily it is that for cultural reasons not biological ones, we are not hung up on the idea of violence, on the idea of subjugating other people through economic means or through violent means and that is a great contribution that we can make. In positions of power for the next fifty years until we get ourselves straightened out and men's identity depends less upon violence, women are going to be very valuable in positions of political influence.

So, because I think that my presence here today is a small part, a very small part of a change in the heads of students, I am happy to be here. I am not happy to be here because I am one of five women commencement speakers in the history of Smith College, (that says a great deal because it is the students that choose the speakers and we have all the time chosen members of the ruling class, people who didn't look like us. Fortunately the recipients of honorary degrees, like the recipients of other Smith degrees have always been women and so we have been able to see, as you will see here today, many brave and courageous and talented women come before us). But the commencement speakers have almost always been men. The last women speaker was twenty-seven years ago. She was a captain in the WAVES. It was during World War II and I believe they couldn't find a man.

I am honored to be here today as part of that beginning and because I believe that in honoring me you are really honoring

yourselves. So perhaps if we live this revolution everyday, and it is a revolution we live every day, that stretches all the way from thinking about calling ourselves Ms. (which is pronounced M-i-z I understand instead of Miss or Mrs - after all Mr. is enough to identify a man, why should we always be identified by our role). It stretches all the way from that, to the demand for justice and equality in all areas of life which is guaranteed to revolutionize the economy. Even if women were paid equally for the work they already do, it would revolutionize the economy, because a women, a white woman with a college education working full time makes less money then a black man with a high school education working full time. There are other kinds of suffering involved, I don't mean to equate the two things, but it is true that women earn only about sixty per cent of what men earn for doing the same work and that black and minority women earn very, very much less.

By standing up, by refusing to be cheap labor pools anymore, whether it's in the kitchen or in the office, or in the factory, or on the campus, we will revolutionize this system, we will revolutionize this economy, we will humanize it for more compassionate distribution of goods and services and of human opportunities.

If we do, perhaps we will have a chance for a third kind of period. After all we have had five thousand years of a kind of superiority of women, we have had five thousand years of patriarchy and racism, perhaps we have a chance for five thousand years of humanism. And perhaps, if we really live this revolution everyday, historians will look back at this time and say that for the first time the human animal stopped dividing itself up according to

visible difference, according to race, according to sex, and
started to look for the real, and the human potential inside.

Thank you.