Goals Of Women’s Liberation Movement Essay, Research Paper

The Women´s Liberation Movement (WLM) exploded into existence in the late 1960´s in America after a period of relative inactivity in feminism during the 1950´s and quickly spread to Europe, soon holding annual demonstrations in London. It was a ‘movement´, not an organisation and consisted of numerous women´s groups, all campaigning for different feminist goals. This analysis aims to discuss and debate whether ‘equal access to the same goals as men´, a liberal feminist statement, adequately embodies the goals of the WLM during the 1960´s/70´s. It will examine the British WLM, the 7 demands they made in the 1970´s and how these demands relate to this statement. Various groups within the American WLM will also be examined with reference to how their demands compare with the statement. The analysis attempts to show how WLM demands, in the U.S. and Britain, are a reflection of the goals of a multifaceted movement and are inadequately represented by the statement. The three main trends within the WLM were socialist feminism, liberal feminism and radical feminism; each saw women´s problems in a different light and stressed different solutions. The American WLM´s origins in the civil rights movement meant that, in the early days, there was a leaning towards the pursuit of equality. The British WLM´s origins were more influenced by the working-class struggle. This meant liberal feminist goals were not by any means the only goals of the WLM. Initially, socialist feminists predominated in the British WLM as it grew out of the social protests of the 1960´s, but by the end of the 1970´s radical feminism became more influential (Watkins et. al. 1992). Liberal feminists concentrated on equal rights and attempted to bring about change in legislation and government policy. For example, London Women´s Liberation Campaign For Legal and Financial Independence campaigned for equality in the social security system; women, on marriage (and cohabiting couples), were assumed to be dependants of their husbands and were prevented from claiming benefits in their own right (1979). Radical feminists saw the system of male dominance over women (patriarchy) as women´s problem. They saw separatism and campaigns against pornography and male violence towards women as the way forward. For instance, in 1977 women began to ‘Reclaim the Night´ by marching through Soho in protest against male intimidation and violence (Soho Sixteen Support Sisterhood, 1978). Socialist feminists saw women´s problem as being a combination of male domination and class exploitation and saw the end of capitalism as being instrumental to achieving gender equality. Rowbotham argues that the idea of patriarchy is inflexible, unlike the concept of Marxism, which is more fluid and results in a true abolition of hierarchy. For her it´s not sexual difference that is the problem but the inequalities of power given to the sexes within the capitalist structure of society (Rowbotham, 1979). These different outlooks within the WLM are reflected in the 7 demands established during the 1970´s by the British WLM, the original 4 of which were made at their first conference in 1970. The first demand was for equal pay and the second for equal education and job opportunities, both liberal feminist goals, which tie in with the title statement. In 1970 women´s average gross weekly earnings were just 54.5% of men´s (Coote and Campbell 1987). In 1968 women trade unionists finally made an impact on the Trade Union movement, when female workers at the Ford car factory in Dagenham, Essex went on strike, campaigning for their work to be classed as semiskilled like the men, rather than unskilled. They achieved pay concessions but remained ‘unskilled´ (Rowbotham, 1990). This limited success had a formative effect upon the newly emerging WLM. Although the Equal Pay Act came into effect in 1970, improvement was slow and employers simply changed the women´s job descriptions to carry on paying them less than men. This was addressed by the 1984 Equal Pay Act, which enabled equal pay for work of equal value. This act enabled the women Ford workers, after a fight, to achieve equal status with men and a pay rise. Women achieved equality of employment and education with men, in the eyes of the law at least, with the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, an idea conceived in the first WLM Conference in 1970 (Coote & Campbell 1987). The third demand was for free contraception and abortion on demand, and the fourth for free 24hr nurseries, under community control, both of which are socialist feminist demands. The statement does have some parallels with socialist feminism, as they too want equality, however, they see the end of capitalism as a key means of achieving this. At the first WLM conference in 1970, at Ruskin College, Oxford there was a crèche run by men. Many feminists spoke at the conference including socialist feminist Audrey Wise, who described her equal relationship with her husband (ibid.). Juliet Mitchell, another socialist feminist, sees the end of the conventional family as a key step towards women´s liberation within communism (1981). In 1975 a radical feminist preamble was added stating the right of all women to a self-defined sexuality, along with another 2 demands. These were the liberal feminist demand for legal and financial independence and the radical feminist demand for an end to discrimination against lesbians. The radical feminist demands reflect a move by some towards lesbian feminism as many saw hypocrisy in living with men, the enemy. The final demand, for freedom from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status and end to laws, assumptions and institutions that perpetuate male dominance and men´s aggression towards women, was added in 1978. This was also a radical feminist demand and reflects the swing in influence within the WLM towards the end of the 1970´s. The U.S. WLM grew mainly from the ‘National Organisation for Women´ (NOW) started by Friedan in 1966 (Watkins et. al. 1992). At their first national conference in 1967 NOW made a statement of the goals towards which it was fighting, it´s ‘Bill of Rights´. This contained many proposals similar to the first 2 British WLM demands, which could be said to reflect the statement ‘equal access to the same goals as men´. It also included Socialist feminist demands, however, such as abortion on demand and easier access to contraception, which they argue will free women from the home (Morgan 1970). Mitchell, however, points out a problem raised by this issue, that of availability of contraception resulting in women´s greater exploitation as ‘sexual objects´ (1981). One of NOW´s main goals during the 1970´s was to bring about an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), for which they mobilised huge support across the country. The ERA´s aims also resonate through the statement, ‘equal access to the same goals as men´. It was hoped the ERA would prevent discrimination on the basis of sex and it was an important symbol for the WLM. Political support, however, faded and in 1982 the ERA was defeated, bringing great disappointment to women across the country and marking the end of the U.S. WLM (Ryan, 1992). NOW was not by any means the only women´s group campaigning in the American movement, however. The radical feminist group ‘SCUM´ (Society for Cutting up Men) came from a completely different perspective to this. They called for revolution and the destruction of the male sex (which they believed to be genetically incomplete females) and reproduction only of and by females (Morgan, 1970). This separatism is widespread in radical feminism; Shelly writes that, “A woman who is totally independent of men – who obtains love, sex, and self-esteem from other women – is a terrible threat to male supremacy” (1969, p.343). Firestone, like SCUM, believed that women´s subordination was routed in biology (Ryan, 1992). However, Millet argued that it is through socialisation that women are subordinated (1977). ‘The Redstockings´ were another, less extreme, radical feminist group, developed out of NOW. Seeing all men as benefiting from women´s subordination, they demanded that men give up their male privileges and fight for women´s liberation (Morgan, 1970.). The original U.S. radical feminist groups had all but disappeared by about 1975 but the Redstockings reorganised and continued campaigning (Ryan, 1992). ‘The Feminists´ also helped to make up the WLM in America. They sought to end the practise of marriage, which they saw as similar to slavery and an institution that tricked women into surrendering their right to freedom in reproduction and domestic labour. ‘WITCH´ also saw marriage as a slave-like existence for women while demonstrating against various corporate enterprises working to oppress women and society in general. It had strong liberal and socialist feminist elements to its goals and objected to the differential treatment of girls and boys, as they are growing up, and double standards for women and men. The U.S. WLM also campaigned at the 1968 Miss America contest. Their goal in doing this was to end the contest, which they considered to be degrading to the women involved and they objected to other aspects of the contest, including its competitive nature and inherent racism (Morgan, 1970).

There were multiple reasons for the WLM arising, including the growth in academic analysis of personal life (e.g. Laing who saw the family as oppressive) and the booming economy, which created a feeling of optimism and the illusion that anything could be accomplished. Mitchell wrote of women being in ‘relative deprivation´. They had been educated and subsequently had high expectations leading to discontent when they were confined to the home, or to low-paid, low status jobs and many women sought to change their position through the WLM (Mitchell, 1981). There was also an influx of women from different political movements (e.g. The Student Movement, Anti-War Movements and Civil Rights Movement), which they found to be male dominated and oppressive. These many origins the WLM had resulted in different goals and these goals caused divisions between the feminists within the movement and ultimately resulted in its splitting in the mid-70s. Many radical feminists disassociated themselves with the WLM due to its tendency to try to work within the system (McLean, 1996). Black feminism emerged to address the fact that the WLM had focussed upon white women´s experiences and ignored the experiences of black women or generalised their own experiences, treating them as universal. Black feminists wanted equal access to the same goals as men as well as between black and white people (Beale, 1969). Socialist feminist writers such as Tension argued that the WLM was being controlled by middle-class women and excluded working class-women (1978). In conclusion, to say that the statement ‘equal access to the same goals as men´ adequately describes the goals of the WLM would be to overlook major sections of the movement in Britain and America. Although this statement does represent some liberal feminist goals within the movement, those of radical feminists and socialist feminists are ignored, along with those of black feminism, which was born out of the WLM. In short, the WLM campaigned for women´s uniqueness to be recognised and not just for equality (Rowbotham, 1989).