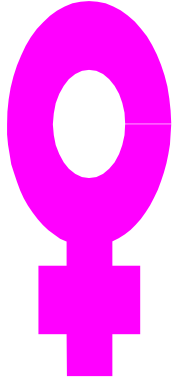


## The Women's Movement Today

We live in times that are not auspicious for progressive people. We have all internalized defeats and, I think, been undermined by them. We have had setbacks, but we can take heart from the fact that despite the enormous power of the U.S., people all over the world, and here in the U.S., continue to resist. I will speak of just a few examples that have been particularly heartening for me.

—In September 1997 a million black women marched in Philadelphia to demand respect for women and an end to racism and sexism. What is perhaps particularly inspiring about their demonstration is that they did it themselves, with very little media attention or financial backing.

—In Chiapas, women and children have stopped the Mexican military from entering their villages, in order to prevent more massacres like the one that took place in December 1997. Possessing little more than their moral courage, they positioned themselves in front of a military force that was armed to the teeth—and they were successful.



—Here in Chicago, the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) initiated protests against the Promise Keepers. For the last two years WAC has gone to Soldier Field when those disgusting men—mainly white despite their best efforts to recruit men of color—have gathered to restore the patriarchy.

And now, the Promise Keepers have had to let their staff of 345 go due to lack of money. WAC played a very important role, along with other groups like NOW, in exposing the patriarchal reality that lies not too far below the smiling, I just want to be a good father and husband, image the Promise Keepers would like to project of themselves. It's amazing what a few determined women can do!

Although these actions are all different, what unites them is that they indicate the willingness of people to stand up for what they believe in against huge odds and the knowledge that when women organize we make a difference. I am not saying that the model is small numbers, but it may be part of the reality we are working with now. It's not easy to organize in this day and age. But, if we do it will make a difference. Our goal must be to transform these small numbers in to larger ones. And this we can only do if we join together.

One of my favorite songs from the 1970s was "Still Ain't Satisfied" by The Red Star Singers. Well, I am not satisfied. We live at a time when attacks on welfare mean that poor women and their children are going to get poorer and hungrier. We live at a time when the female prison population is growing at disproportionately high rates. The rate of violence against lesbians and gays in the city of Chicago is growing just as Maine voted to repeal a law that made it illegal to discriminate against lesbians and gays. I want to be part of a woman's movement that is willing to take risks, that joins in solidarity with all oppressed people's in the U.S. and around the world, and that fights for all women. This is why campaigns to end the use of third world women's underpaid and overworked labor are so important—they show what real solidarity is all about.

Women's liberation does not mean being equal individuals in an unequal society but rather working as a movement to build a new society based on social, political, and economic justice. The task before us could appear daunting, but won't it be a great one to be part of?

*A speech given at Depaul University on*

# International Women's Day\*



March 8th, 1998  
By Dr. Margaret Power  
Prairie Fire Organizing Committee

Happy International Women's Day to everyone here! I teach history at a local university where I started a class in U.S. women's history. At some point in the semester I always ask the students, how many of you are feminists? My school is about 88% male and as a result, unlike most women's history classes in this country, my classes usually are about one-third male. Out of twenty-five students, typically three or four of the women and one or two of the men say they are feminists. I ask them what it means to be a feminist and usually they answer that it means to support equality or to think that women should have the same chances as men do. Then I ask the rest of the class, why aren't you feminists? They respond with the typical stereotypes of what it means to be a feminist: feminists are too radical, they hate men. Perhaps, the students think, feminists are a bunch of lesbians. If so, they don't say it. They seldom know or understand very much about the history of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s and what they do know echoes their image of feminists today. Many of them usually "know" that women burned their bras, an event that simply never took place but which epitomizes the trivializing process that so much of the history of the 1960s has been subjected to in this country.

What many of these young women don't realize (although I certainly hope that by the end of the semester this is less true!) is that a lot of them are at this school, studying to be engineers, computer scientists, architects, in short, non-traditional feminine careers, precisely because there was a women's movement that fought for their right to be there.

I have spoken about these students at my school not because they are unique, but because they are representative. Instead of questioning the system, women hope to obtain an equal share in it. This is a problem because it weakens us as a movement. In fact, it hinders the possibility of developing a movement and it ties us to and legitimizes a system which is based on privileges and power for some, and impoverishment and oppression for the majority. This mindset, however, is a great help to a capitalist system.



\*The date for this commemoration has been attributed to one of the first organized actions by working women anywhere in the world. On March 8, 1857, hundreds of women workers in garment and textile factories in New York City staged a strike against low wages, long working hours and inhumane working conditions. Again, in 1909, women working in these same textile factories rose up in a strike that eventually led to shorter work hours, better pay and the right to unionize. The 1909 strike began on March 8, in commemoration of that earlier effort. The first decision to remember this day as International Women's Day came in 1910, when the Women's Socialist International met in Copenhagen, Denmark.

*...if you would like to discuss any of the ideas presented in this speech, or learn more about the work we do please contact us...*

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## *Living in a capitalist society...*

Part of living in a capitalist society is that we have internalized many of this system's approaches to life and definitions of reality. When these young women I mentioned above spoke of themselves, and rejected any link with feminism, in effect what they refused to recognize was the power and importance of collective struggle. By collective struggle, I mean the efforts of numbers of women to change the current reality of oppression for a more equal and just one. Instead of understanding the impact that the women's movement has had on them, they believe they are at the university exclusively or predominantly as a result of their individual efforts. Of course, these women have worked hard. It is not easy to be a woman and study at a technical school. Most of their professors are men; most of the students are men. I admire them all, and I don't believe I could do what they are doing. Yet, it is also the belief that individual rather than collective effort brings results that prevent us from building a stronger movement.

Why is it that so many people in this country attribute their conditions to their own individual efforts or blame the situation of others on their lack of efforts? One major reason is because of the system in which we live. We live in the most powerful capitalist nation in the world today, and this reality, and the history of what the U.S. has done to people in this country and around the world to achieve this status, has affected us all.



*Let's  
build a*

Many people think that imperialism is a thing of the past or a policy that other countries followed. But it is not. When I say that the U.S. is an imperialist nation I mean that since its origins as English colonies along the Eastern seaboard, the U.S. has invaded other peoples' nations, taken over their lands and resources and used them to enrich the U.S., all the while impoverishing the people it has invaded, forcing them to labor for our benefit, not their own, and then retaliated against those who resist this control. In previous centuries, U.S. settlers stole Native American land and the U.S. cavalry and settlers massacred the indigenous population. Today, Puerto Rico is still a U.S. colony, one third of its land occupied by the U.S. military, and 15 Puerto Ricans who fought this colonial oppression are imprisoned in U.S. jails. Certainly, the face of imperialism changes. Today, U.S. corporations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund lead the charge against the peoples of the world, but the ongoing enrichment of this nation at the expense of many others continues. Those of us who are white and live in an imperialist nation share in the benefits of an imperialist system, although class effects the extent to which we share in the spoils. Yet, despite class differences, our sharing in the imperialist theft is a reality that we frequently choose to ignore or just accept.

## *Speaking as a white woman...*

Speaking as a white woman, I think that in order to build a movement we need to recognize the multiple levels of power relationships in which we live and operate. Perhaps it comes easier to us to understand and oppose how we are oppressed as women than it is to come to terms with how we benefit from being white. Yet, I think that in order to build a women's movement that is successful, that truly challenges our oppression as women, we need to understand that thinking of ourselves as women is only part of the picture. We must also fully consider the multiple realities of diverse peoples in this country and around the world, and our relationships to them.

## *The Women's Movement Today!*

This, to me, is what International Women's Day is all about. It means standing in solidarity with women from all walks of life and from all regions of the world. But, what does it mean to stand in solidarity with women? That, I think, has not been easy for the women's movement to figure out.

However, I can give one positive example of women in this country doing this. In the last few decades U.S. corporations have increasingly abandoned this country because they can find cheaper labor in other countries. In many countries, such as Mexico, El Salvador, or Indonesia, U.S. clothing companies have set up shop and hired young women to work long hours, in difficult conditions, for very little pay.

Their conditions and lives may seem to be far away and beyond our reach or influence. But collective movements can make a difference. One way to stand in solidarity with our sisters around the world is to demand that the companies pay these women a decent salary, provide them with healthy conditions in which to work and medical care, abolish child labor, and, if they don't, to boycott them. Recently, groups in El Salvador and in this country joined together to demand that the Gap clothing stores pay their Salvadoran workers a more just wage. Our combined efforts, and lots of hard work, paid off. The Gap has agreed to improve conditions for workers in their factories in Central America.



*Women's  
Movement!*

I have been asked to address the question: Do I think a women's movement exists in the U.S. today? My answer is yes and no. The activities that took place yesterday in celebration of International Women's Day, the conference here today and all the other activities that are taking place this weekend here and around the country, in addition to all the work we all do year round, indicate that yes, a movement does exist. At the same time, how many of us really feel ourselves to be part of a movement? Some of us are members of groups, some come to activities, but I bet very few of us think, hey, I am a member of the women's liberation or feminist or whatever we call it, movement. Why is that?

We need to understand that the oppression we experience as women is a dynamic that operates in many situations. We need a vision of ourselves as a movement, with demands, goals, and a plan of how to get them. But why don't we have that? There was one in the 1960s and 1970s. What happened? We live in a very sophisticated and resourceful society. We confront a force that has a tremendous amount of experience at manipulating, buying off, repressing, and subverting. We live in an imperialist society and that means that some of us can get the benefits of it, even if that means that we ignore at whose expense we do so. But if we want women's liberation, this is too high a price to pay. For example, how can we turn to the police as our friends or protectors, and ignore the role they play in cases of domestic violence? Or how they treat people in the black and latino communities of Chicago? In those communities the police function as an army of occupation who repress and brutalize people when they see fit to do so. We need to understand the reality lived by people in these communities and join with them in their demands to end police brutality now. Specifically, we can support the efforts of the Mothers of the victims of police brutality, such as the group Justice is Blind?