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The Sexual Revolution Within the Second Wave Feminist Movement

Abstract

In North America, between 1947 and 1991, the sexual revolution revealed itself as a period of discovery, experience, and exploration to differing degrees. Despite the new found freedom for women that arose amidst the revolution, the distress of sexual violence and oppression persisted and became a prominent concern for feminist liberation groups, who, within the revolution, fought against the sexual oppression and violence which had been present in their lives, but were otherwise silenced prior to the movement. This paper provides evidence of the multiple different media outlets women used to spread their message of equality, with great emphasis placed on how liberators utilized these outlets to achieve sexual freedom by protesting two of the greatest forms of reproductive oppression: the abortion law and banning of the birth control pill. This paper also comments on the correlation between the sexual revolution and sexual violence, documenting how the rise of the sexual revolution promoted a surge in the discussion of sexual violence, as well as a rise in preventative measures. While this argument certainly takes precedence, there is also a discussion regarding the attempts to delegitimize this positive relationship by placing the blame of sexual violence on the rise of the sexual revolution. To debunk this myth, the argument is put forth that the sexual revolution provided a platform for victims of sexual violence.

Keywords

feminism, sexual revolution, second wave feminism, abortion, the pill, birth control, sexual violence

As CNN's Ryan Bergeron so perfectly articulated in his broadcast *The Seventies. Feminism Makes Waves*, "sex was everywhere in the 1970s,"¹ and the women's liberation and second wave feminist movements were no exception. Nineteen-forty-seven to 1991 was a crucial period for the female minority in North America discovering their voice and the 'feminist stage' was the perfect atmosphere for them to express their demands. Within the emergence of a new generation of women eager to bask in their sexual identities came the birth of the sexual revolution. Despite the freedoms and experiences that arose in the sexual revolution, the nagging horrors of sexual violence and reproductive oppression persisted and became a prominent concern for feminist liberation groups. Within the revolution, women fought back against sexual oppression, abuse, violence, and reproductive oppression.

A 1973 BBC Radio 3 broadcast stated that "[l]iberation now is what you might call the theme song for women of the 1970s."² Feminism played significant role in North American society for countless decades, dating back to the early 1900s when women fought for the right to vote. The women's liberation campaign that emerged in the 1960s was a time when feminists began to emphasize their desire for equality, especially regarding their sexual and reproductive freedoms.³ During a period of rapid progress and improvement, liberators utilized every type of media and form of communication in their grasp to deliver their messages of freedom. "Ads appeared across [provinces] on television, radio, newspapers, billboards and transit shelters and promotional material such as posters and pamphlets [were] distributed and generated a positive response"⁴ to the issue of sexual responsibility and birth control. Specifically, the Vancouver Co-Op radio station was very active in their support of the women's liberation movement in British Columbia, claiming that "women's music, art and issues would always have their place on our airways."⁵

Prior to the women's liberation movement and through years of oppression and a rigid society-based pressure to remain abstinent until marriage, a woman did not necessarily have the

¹ Ryan Bergeron, "The Seventies. Feminism Makes Waves," *CNN* 17 August 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/22/living/the-seventies-feminism-womens-lib/>.

² BBC Radio 3 Broadcast, "The Long March of Everywoman," 30 September 1973, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/70sfeminism/10424.shtml>.

³ Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), xiv.

⁴ "CBC Censorship on Sexuality Education Ads," *Action: A Bulletin from the National Action Committee on Status of Women*, November 1986, 1.

⁵ "Co-op Radio Advertisement," *Kinesis*, 1 September 1985, 32, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/kinesis/items/1.0045713#p31z0r0f:sexuality%20AND%20women>.

luxury of deciding to what extent she would exercise her sexual freedoms. According to CNN political commentator Sally Kohn, in early 1960 over half of the nineteen-year-old women in America who were unmarried had never been sexually active, whereas, by the late 1980s, with the women's liberation movement in full effect, two thirds of all women had "done the deed by age 18."⁶ Much to society's dismay, women were sexual beings, and as author Stephanie Coontz in her work *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* argued, they "had the same sexual desires as men and the same right to satisfy them."⁷ Simply, feminists and revolutionists felt an overwhelming desire to claim their rights as women and to "define and express [their] sexuality and choose [their] own lifestyle."⁸ What is astounding about the feminist movement is the speed with which it progressed as it re-established the terms of sexuality and set a new standard for what was normal sexual behaviour for women. Brian Masters, in his book *The Swinging Sixties*, perfectly captured this transformation when he pointed out that "a young woman used to be ashamed if she was not a virgin when married; in the 60s, she would be more likely to feel shame if she went inexperienced to the marriage bed."⁹ The revolution flourished with the aim to recognize the female need for sexual freedom, but this was far from their lone concern, for, as Kohn stated, it "defined desire...not only for individual bodily autonomy, self-expression and pleasure but a desire that society fully reflect and respect [women's] freedom."¹⁰

A highly publicized and effective channel women utilized to make strides in terms of their sexual freedoms was through their battle for reproductive rights. The revolution was sponsored by the fight to dismiss the abortion law and to legalize and embrace the contraceptive option of the birth control pill, which was symbolic of freedom. A woman's ability to reproduce appeared to be both a blessing and a curse, for although it provided the opportunity to bring life into the world, it also acted as a restraint for some women who wanted to experiment with their sexual boundaries. Once "the Pill" became widely available, North American women of the 1960s and beyond

⁶ Sally Kohn, "The Sex Freak-Out of the 1970s," *CNN*, 21 July 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/21/opinions/kohn-seventies-sexual-revolution/index.html>.

⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 136.

⁸ Myra Marx Ferree and Beth B. Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement Across Three Decades of Change* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 118.

⁹ Hilary Fawcett, "Fashioning the Second Wave: Issues across Generations," *Studies In The Literary Imagination* 39, no. 2 (2006): 101.

¹⁰ Kohn, "The Sex Freak-Out of the 1970s."

submerged themselves in their sexuality and, according to Susan Brownmiller, author of *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*, became “the first generation of women to embrace the Pill, as they were having more sex and having it earlier than any previous generation of American women.”¹¹ The fight for the legalization of the birth control pill was not purely sex driven, as it was also tied to an ever-growing demand for women to feel as though they were masters of their own bodies. Despite the victory of legalizing the birth control pill, in both Canada and the United States, laws halting abortion were still present in women’s lives.

Birth control pills did not guarantee 100 percent success in preventing unwanted pregnancies. Such pregnancies occurred frequently, and with laws in place to prevent abortion, women were essentially, once again, trapped. Lucy Komisar, in her book *The New Feminist*, outlined the obvious need and “want to repeal the laws which restrict[ed] the right to abortion so that no woman [would] be forced to bear children against her will.”¹² The Supreme Court of Canada’s decision to dismiss the abortion law in 1988 was met with great excitement from female liberation groups, evident in a Toronto International Women’s Day rally pamphlet titled “Yes to Choice,” which described the end of the abortion law as “a tremendous victory for women and was won by the force of the women’s liberation movement. [They] celebrated this stage of the struggle, [and they] continued to fight for [their] reproductive and sexual freedom.”¹³ Successful legalization of abortion was the final piece women needed to gain full control over their bodies—or so they assumed. What was not, and is still not, in women’s control were the actions of others. Although victorious in terms of their own sexual safety, women were still susceptible to dangers of sexual violence and harassment.

An accurate statement commenting on the history of female abuse would be that the women’s liberation movement, in their efforts to release women sexually, unearthed an awareness surrounding the issue of sexual violence, and in doing so, brought attention to a desperate need of justice for victims of silent oppression, stretching back decades. The reality of sexual assault and sexual harassment is a difficult concept, as it is often laced with emotion. Misconception regarding

¹¹ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: The Dial Press. Random House, Inc, 1999), 24.

¹² Lucy Komisar, *The New Feminist* (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc, 1971), 4.

¹³ “Yes to Choice,” *International Women’s Day Toronto: Women Unite to Fight Racism, Sexism and Economic Inequality March and Rally Pamphlet*, 1988, http://riseupfeministarchive.ca/wp-content/uploads/March8Coaliti0n-TorontoIWD-1988Broadsheet.pdf_

the relationship between the rise of sexual freedom and the rise of sexual violence, and the belief that the revolution's freedom caused an upsurge in harassment, has been argued and supported a great deal. What remains in the dark is the fact that the issue of sexual violence was nameless and faceless for many years prior to the sexual revolution, as it was not a new issue when it finally received the attention it deserved through the revolution. According to Dorothy Cobble's book *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*, "women's bodies have been violated for centuries by rape, harassment and assault. The size of the problem before the women's liberation movement is unknown precisely because so few women complained."¹⁴ The argument that women becoming more sexual caused a rise in sexual violence is arguably absurd and appears to be quite the opposite, as the sexual revolution seems to have provided a platform for assault victims to express their sufferings.

Sexual abuse and harassment were an unfortunate reality and a notable number of women during this period had, at one point or another, found themselves a victim of some degree of abuse. Complaints regarding sexual harassment, which were defined as "unwelcome sexual advances and requests for sexual favours,"¹⁵ usually emerged from the workplace. In a workplace dominated by males, female employees certainly must have been aware of the deaf ears on which their claims of assault would have landed had they become vocal prior to the revolution. The notion that sexual harassment was a silent battle for women for several years is not a shock, as sexual harassment, at all levels, is still a relatively taboo topic. Susan Brownmiller described the harassment women faced as "every woman in a big city lived with routine street harassment. You couldn't make your appointed rounds during a typical day without an incident of some kind or another, like a catcall, 'Oh sweetheart, what I'd like to do to you!'"¹⁶ Sexual assault was a confusing and shameful experience for many women, for if the trauma of the attack was not enough, there always seemed to be a never-ending flow of accusations regarding a woman's actions and appearance pre-attack. "'Boys will be boys' and 'she must have asked for it' are still common responses"¹⁷ to sexual violence, as if to imply the attack was somehow brought on by the woman and her biological makeup. Disregarding sexual attacks and labeling them as typical male behaviour appears to be

¹⁴ Cobble, *Feminism Unfinished*, 116.

¹⁵ Ferree, *Controversy and Coalition*, 166.

¹⁶ Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, 195.

¹⁷ Ferree, *Controversy and Coalition*, 168.

both a form of disrespect to men who do not condone such conduct, and an approval for such violence towards women.

When considering the outrageous harassment and violence some women endured, it is clear how and why the revolution emerged. Unfortunately, despite feminists' efforts to offer "new strategies addressing various behaviours on the continuum of sexual violence, workplace harassment [and] rape...antifeminist backlash has attempted to trivialize the issues with claims that...women are 'whining' about outcomes they have either invented or imagined."¹⁸ Claims such as these were a direct reflection of the suppression women faced, for even when they did voice their struggles, they were condemned as dramatic or accused of lying. Some antifeminists stated that the sexual revolution made women more susceptible to sexual mistreatment. Ferree and Hess describe how "the sexual revolution of the 1960s...in the assumption that buying a woman dinner entitles a man to sex, made women more, not less, vulnerable to sexual exploitation."¹⁹ Perhaps this comment says more about the backwardness of select figures in society than it does about women or their sexuality. By shifting blame onto another, in this case the sexually oppressed, the pressure of blame was taken off the legitimate culprit—the sexual harasser.

There was a common theme of rallying for support amongst North American women's liberation newspapers and pamphlets. In almost every issue, a reader was bound to discover a tale of an oppressed or assaulted woman, followed up with a technique or plan to end the violence. In the March 1st, 1981 edition of the Vancouver *Kinesis* newspaper, an article titled *Harassment at Home and on the Job*, stated that "in response to rape and sexual assault on the streets, women across the country have organized Take Back the Night marches in defiant protest."²⁰ Liberation newspapers told the stories nobody else was willing to tell, which in turn, sparked a domino effect. If an abused woman was to read of another woman receiving justice for how she was wronged, then she may have been more apt to speak out. A newspaper article first published in the *Vancouver Sun*, then again in the *Kinesis* liberation newspaper, titled "Woman Knocks Rapist Unconscious," reported that a "woman, 30, was awakened at 2:35 am by a man who entered her apartment bedroom...and attempted to sexually assault her. She offered considerable resistance...and

¹⁸ Ferree, *Controversy and Coalition*, 166.

¹⁹ Ferree, *Controversy and Coalition*, 44.

²⁰ "Women Bear the Burden of the High Living Cost," *Kinesis*, March 1, 1981, 11.

rendered the man unconscious.”²¹ Women voicing their pain and suffering have been drivers of change. The collection of troubled and abused women’s stories sparked reform and consideration within society, essentially allowing for achievements such as the “building of a substantial consensus in the United States that women ought to be able to walk the streets in safety and to feel secure in their homes and workplace.”²²

Why have women historically been suppressed, silenced and oppressed in all spheres of their lives, including their sexuality? Why was there such extreme anxiety over women exploring their sexual boundaries? With the rise of the second wave feminist movement, came the birth of the sexual revolution, where women discovered “the right to determine [their] own sexuality.”²³ Despite this accomplishment, CNN’s Kohn brings light to the reality “that rape and sexual assault remain so prevalent, and that access to birth control, abortion and sex education are so actively still contested are reminders of how far we have yet to go.”²⁴ Evidently, the fight for sexual liberty is a complicated matter, but due to the efforts of the second wave feminist movement, and present day movements, perhaps answers to these questions can soon be discovered.

²¹ “Woman Knocks Rapist Unconscious,” *Kinesis*, March 1, 1978.

²² Ferree, *Controversy and Coalition*, 165.

²³ “Choice,” *International Women’s Day Toronto Pamphlet*, 1978, 2, <http://riseupfeministarchive.ca/wp-content/uploads/March8Coalition-TorontoIWD-1987Pamphlet-1.pdf>.

²⁴ Kohn, “The Sex Freak-Out of the 1970s.”

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