

Feminism and Political Power

Keynote Speech to the KEGME Summer Program

By Margarita Papandreou



Eppie Skiadaressis (left), Margarita Papandreou and Eleni Stamiris

Photo: Savvas Stathakis

If we say that politics means an involvement in the public sphere for social, economic or political purposes — either for creating change or for preservation of the status quo, then women have been involved informally for many years and, most recently, in the large political movement of women's liberation.

Despite this involvement, we observe that the system of every country reflects almost exclusively the male vision of how the members of its society should function. This can be said without exception, because there is no society in the world which is not patriarchal, which is not male-dominated. In other words, men have produced the society they want and have developed the rules and regulations to maintain the status quo. The role that women have been given in this society up to now has little to do with our biology. Decisions were taken long ago that were economic and political; then an appropriate mythology was produced for our second-class status which subsequently became deeply embedded in the culture of all societies. In some societies, particularly Western, the myth is that women are weak, emotional and brainless, and have to be cared for and controlled. In other societies, we are viewed as a powerful force for evil, for destruction — and, therefore must be held back, down, under control.

More than a thousand years ago in Greece, an entire meeting of the church synod was devoted to the question of whether a woman was a human being or an animal! It was finally settled by vote, and the forces who asserted that we belong to the human species won by one vote. It was a rather academic exercise: life did not change for the woman-dash-human after that historic debate. She was still held down, controlled, enslaved. In all societies she was exploited by the system, either as unpaid labor in the home or as cheap labor in the marketplace. We women have lived for so long in such a different social, economic and cultural world than men that we can only be described as a *dependent culture* within a male system.

This woman's culture has its own norms and standards of behavior which are passed on from generation to generation. It rests on sex differences in values and interests — the same basic results are seen in almost all cultures — women score high on scales for esthetic, social, and religious values. Men get their high marks for politics, economics and technology. These *socially induced* character-

istics make a difference in male and female culture. If society developed the culture which had the *value system* of Women's World — that of non-violence, of caring and nurturing, of non-oppressive personal and institutional relations — well, let's just put it in simple, dramatic terms: there would be food for the starving Africans; half a million women would not die of maternal causes every year; child mortality rates would drop; and there would be resolution of conflict through non-violent means. These so-called 'feminine' values are sorely needed in giving birth to a new ETHOS, a new era. We would be a *much better world* and we would be a *viable* world.

Now I come to a key question for feminists. How do we manage from a position of relative powerlessness to change our societies? To realize this vision of the world? How do we manage to make those changes, when we are not in positions of power to do so? And, if we need to get into decision-making centers, how do we do that without compromising our own value system? Let me start out by making a few definitions to set the framework for my talk.

I would like to make a distinction among three terms: sisterhood, the women's movement, and feminism. Worldwide or global sisterhood can be defined simply as a concern and a personal care for women as a group all over the map, a compassion, an understanding, an empathy. It is the way in which we relate to each other. We offer each other the love and support that we have been socialized to lavish primarily on husbands and children. It is a consciousness that even with all the things that divide us — class, religion, color, cultural traditions — we do share things in common as a gender group. We are the least educated, lowest on the economic pyramid, bear the child-raising and household responsibilities, have minimum political and decision-making power in the public sphere, etc.

These are the grounds then for sisterhood, our similarities. The worldwide women's movement can be considered the organized arm of sisterhood, a loosely-networked federation of women's organizations, in resistance to humiliation, inequality and injustice. A strategy for this women's movement is where feminism comes in. Feminism embodies the awareness of the special oppression and exploitation that all women face as a gender group. Feminism also means the willingness to organize and fight against women's subjugation in

society and for the elimination of sex-based injustice. Feminists must decide what exactly is wrong, whose fault it is, and what should be done to make matters right. Hard decisions have to be made, a political-ideological framework developed, and priorities decided. Above all, we must have a vision, an image of the kind of world we would like to live in if we had the power to mold it — a new form of social organization which would create a different kind of society.

The reason I make these distinctions is that the support of women in general under 'sisterhood' does not mean necessarily the support of all women to political office. In the case of politics, it is not sufficient that the candidate just be a woman: she must be a woman with feminist goals, demands and principles. Women in political positions will be deciding on issues that concern our lives, our children's lives, and the life of society: their political orientation is critical.

Since I will be talking about feminism at the global level we must realize that to support feminism is suspect in many countries, such as Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Arab countries, and dictatorial Latin American countries. It was suspect in Greece when my family and I returned from six years in exile after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. The word 'feminism' was connected to the well-known simplistic version of bra-burning, hatred of men, sexual promiscuity, destruction of the home and family. This version, of course, had been fed to the people not only by a male-dominated society, but also by a *junta*-controlled press and the ultimate in patriarchal societies — a military dictatorship. When the dictators took over after a *coup d'état* in April 1967, one of their very first acts was the abolition of all women's organizations. I always say that this had its bad and its good side: bad because women were not allowed to organize on behalf of their liberation, but good because it demonstrated the power of women when organized and the fear that this instilled in a dictatorial régime. Recently the courageous women of Chile have been demonstrating this power. And it is the women who are overthrowing the dictatorships, the oppressive régimes. The women of the Philippines with Cory Aquino. The brave mothers of the disappeared of Argentina. And the women of South Africa with the dynamic, committed Winnie Mandela.

So, women in general, but feminists in particular, are seen as a threat to a patriarchal system of power. Another reason feminism is rejected is that it is perceived

by the socialist countries as a reform movement in capitalist societies; that is, it does not challenge the political-economic system on which inequality is based, but merely tries to improve the status of women within the existing capitalist order.

But no matter how you couch the objections to feminism — in political-philosophical terms, in fancy or unfancy language — it is the feminists' insistence on the right of women to develop their full

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human potential and to have control over their reproductive functions that has offended the patriarchal mentality, not to mention economic interests that may be hurt by losing female unpaid or poorly paid labor.

One gets tired of all the put-downs of feminism. *Feminism is the most powerful revolutionary force in the world today.* And feminism is urgently needed in a world that is not working, is dangerously out of control and is losing a sense of what it means to be human. In getting to the heart of sex bias, we are challenging the social fabric of a society, its political orientation and its political authority. And, we are challenging all systems.

What does feminism have to say about the burning political, economic, social issues of today? We do have another approach. How do feminists look at the arms race, nuclear power, international relations, development in the Third World, the value of women's work, budget allocations of the countries we live in? Don't we have a new, a different perspective? An enlarged vision of human experience?

I will be talking about societies in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, where electoral politics are possible, where the individual is free to organize to achieve power. First, let's see what we have done so far. We've done a lot in terms of global consciousness-raising. We've accomplished changes in laws. We've eliminated barriers to upward mobility in ca-

reers. We have reached higher levels of educational attainment. We've broken into "male" fields. We've hit out at and reduced the stereotyping of women.

We have not yet been able to break into, in any significant way, that bastion of male power — the traditional political arena — electoral politics. In a recent questionnaire by World Priorities, answered by 58 countries on percentages of representation of women in National Legislatures and Executive Cabinets, Greece came out 41st on the list. The countries high on the list were the Nordic countries, where there is a deep feminist consciousness and commitment to social justice. From all the indicators of power, we can hardly claim that there has been a revolution, although the concept of equality between the sexes is revolutionary. What we have is an "unfinished revolution."

In order to complete this revolutionary process we must develop a strategy which is concerned with the gaining of power. Generally, we don't like such terms. The word POWER itself sounds too male. Power for us, however, represents the capacity to change, to change ourselves and our environment. We are not interested in exploitative power, but in a mutual strengthening. Because of our understanding of the misuse and abuse of power, since nine times out of ten we were the unwilling victims, we developed non-hierarchical organizations which helped us individually to liberate ourselves. That was fine, but not enough.

Gradually our organizations became strong pressure groups for changes in laws and practices. That was fine, too, but also not enough. It was what we've always done. Haven't we always worked behind the scenes to influence those who hold the power? In our families, with our fathers or our husbands; in the public sphere, with our lobbying? I don't want to put this lobbying effort down: it is essential, critical and must continue. But now we must also get into positions, become an integral part of decision-making, decide ourselves, on an equal basis with men, on the direction of our societies and of the world.

A problem in gaining power is that the very thing we want to transform — changing the relation of the genders to political power and reproductive labor — is one of the major obstacles in gaining power. It is very difficult to organize a campaign, attend meetings, write brochures and read political theory while washing diapers, dispensing cough syrup, cooking meals, nursing sick relatives, cleaning house and

providing for the emotional needs of family members (to mention only a few tasks of women).

And yet we have to do it if we are to make feminist principles a way of life. I believe that if the Women's Movement is to increase in power, both as a lobbying force and for moving its spokespersons into traditional political positions, then it must become more of a mass movement, more of a grass-roots movement. It means

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not only getting in touch with the average woman, the truly dispossessed woman, the racially discriminated-against woman, the factory worker, but also incorporating her in the Movement. It means learning from her how she perceives changes that would make her oppression less, her life more decent, how she looks at the struggle for equality, what she likes about it, what she finds threatening about it.

This would be a second stage of consciousness-raising, but at a more sophisticated level. The first was to bring about an awareness that we had problems in common as women; the second would be to discuss priorities in attacking these problems by letting those speak who have up to now had the least opportunity to participate in the struggle for equality. This involves community organization which will bring us to a broadening of our concept of "women's issues" and propel us into a social reform platform that will suit the needs of more and more women. And it will bring more and more women into the Movement.

A key issue for women today in the Western world is full employment — that is, an expansion of the economy. And at the same time that we want to be able to make a decent living and have our economic independence, we want to balance this with the demands of child-raising. If we are to be practical and hard-nosed about gaining posts in electoral politics, then we must recognize that in all Western

democracies (in fact, in all societies), economic issues are of enormous importance to women. We have come to accept too readily that a certain percentage of people will be unemployed, that the right to work is not also a human right — which means full employment. We forget that the percentage represents human beings, individual lives and, increasingly with the feminization of poverty, *women's* lives.

Fighting for alternative economic pol-

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cies, while at the same time focussing specifically on jobs for women, would join women's issues with a broader social issue for men, the youth who are also unemployed, and give new meaning to feminism. In Greece, our women's organization has been encouraging women to engage in self-help projects, particularly co-operatives as one way of subverting the effects of female unemployment during the international economic crisis, but also, I may add, as a means of achieving a form of collective power which can be turned to political advantage.

The strategy in the early stages of the contemporary women's movement, to fight for equality, equal rights and opportunities with men, was I believe a good, specific and understandable goal, and immediately delineated a line of action and a series of targets that we could all work for.

Perhaps we didn't always clarify that equality encompasses values of inter-relatedness, cooperation, and reciprocity, rather than rough competition and self-interest. Perhaps we didn't also clarify that the present system has allowed violence and oppression to enter the family in male/female, child/parent relationships, and that we are not anti-family when that unit, whatever form it may have, provides the environment for the expression of feelings of warmth and tenderness, of closeness and mutuality. Perhaps we didn't make clear that feminists are not against biological motherhood, nor

against mothering: *in fact, feminists make the best mothers.* We are against the use of motherhood to keep us powerless.

Perhaps we didn't pay enough attention during our struggle for equal rights to that heavy sack, that sandbag, we carried on our backs — the responsibility for the house, the children, the oldsters. So when the doors were finally opened to us (which they have been to a considerable extent) for education, for entry into so-called 'male' jobs and professions, for political participation, etc., there we were, standing at the door, a man next to us, we — our bag — a staggering weight, as we moved ahead side-by-side to take advantage of our new opportunities.

If these are criticisms of the women's movement, then that is a sign of the present basic robustness of the movement. If we are in a period of criticism, it is because while working to hold on to our successes — and successes there were — Nairobi confirmed that — we are also searching for new directions and appropriate strategies. We are not dogmatic; we are not rigid. *Change is integral to feminine experience.*

How, for example, do we now equalize our burdens, our responsibilities? One possibility is to divide that bag and spread its weight evenly between man and woman. In Sweden considerable progress has been made in this direction, as in other Nordic countries. We know, of course, that the man considers reproductive labor too time-consuming and, furthermore that if he is doing it while the woman is out politicking, he considers it a serious reduction of his masculinity. The two most difficult changes to make in terms of equalizing our responsibilities are (1) relations within the family and role delegations and (2) entry into the structured political arena. Here I am calling the entry into politics not only a right, but a responsibility.

Another way is for the community to take over the bag — through child care centers, old age homes, government-paid aid in the house for disabled children, etc. Still a division of domestic work is essential, even with the community help, because no public employee is going to come in at three o'clock in the morning and calm a baby with an acute earache. To accomplish this sharing requires more work on the changing of attitudes and the economic independence of the woman: not only that she must earn "something," but also that her financial status become comparable to his. It also requires that countries in the Western world that haven't already done so, develop a na-

tional child care plan, paid maternity leave and job protection, so that we can truly balance the demands of child-raising, work, and politics. Women will mobilize around this issue, a necessary concomitant of jobs outside the home.

In order to get our spokespeople into decision-making political bodies, we have to have a strong and dynamic movement, a growing organization. That is why I emphasize the Second Phase — the

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community organization, grass-roots phase. In electoral politics today in most democracies, organizational support is a key factor in a victory. Charismatic leadership is another, and money still another. The importance of organization for women is primary, both before an election and after. I cannot stress this enough. The movement is both a means for achieving political office and the conscience of those who reach office. This answers my earlier question: How do we not compromise our value system in the power struggle? A broadly-based movement will be our candidates' super-ego. It will give the woman who achieves position in a male-dominated environment the strength and courage to stick to her feminist agenda. We don't have money and we are not enchanted by the notion of charismatic personality leadership roles. When I say we don't have money, perhaps I should correct myself. We are, as a gender group, poorer than men. But money does exist. We are not accustomed to putting that money to political purpose. We have not yet learned to support ourselves, at least on any grand scale. Where are the campaign funds for feminist candidates? Where are the foundations, originated by a woman or women, for furthering women's studies, research on women, scholarships? Where is a feminist strategy board, a think tank? A feminist Institute on Foreign Affairs? Most political movements have such organs.

While I have been dwelling on issues

within our countries that seem to be of more immediate domestic concern, all actions of feminist organizations have *international* meaning. Feminists throughout the world watch, study, learn, get ideas from feminist actions in other countries.

On international goals, we have the opportunity to form coalitions with the peace movement, the ecological movement, the movement against hunger in the world, and others. The peace movement especially is a natural home for feminists. Our history confirms this: the Pankhursts, the Ashtons, the Schwimmers, the Jane Adams's in the past; and recently, the Greenham Common Women of Great Britain, women of the Nordic countries and women in Greece. The looming threat of nuclear devastation demands our participation in peace activities, activities for survival. The connection between militarism and sexism is of great concern to us. Patriarchy is a system of values of competition, aggression, denial of emotion, and violence. These values are particularly prevalent in war, where the competition is through force, where there are victors and victims, losers and winners. It is a *Weltanschauung* — a belief which tries to smother the human capacity to care. We must press the peace movement into asking the question, "Is peace possible in a patriarchal world?" This will force peace educators to explore the links between denial of women's rights and the war system, and the dependence that both sexism and militarism have on violence.

We must understand how and why violence has become so much a part of our lives — violence in the home, muggings, rapes in the streets, terrorism throughout the world, confrontation between nations. We are really a world at war: the huge international arms traffic, the immense budgets of defence departments, the fleets travelling the world through international waters, the forty or more local wars that are raging now. *We are on a war system.*

A new mode of thinking, a mode that feminism is in the process of developing, is essential to a world where conflict is solved by non-violent means. Feminists are trying to transcend the dichotomous thinking that has produced the 'we-they' syndrome that divides and factionalizes the world, that polarizes it and feeds the war system. Human beings make distinctions between good and evil — 'we' being virtuous and noble, 'they' being incapable, unreliable, corrupt. In the feminist world of tomorrow, all people would be looked at alike and all people would have the responsibility to nurture, to build trust, to enhance life, and to participate in politi-

cal and community affairs.

Efforts such as the Women's Coalition for a Meaningful Summit, an *ad hoc* Committee formed in the U.S. prior to the Geneva Summit, and now continuing its activities in anticipation of the second meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev, are vital initiatives by women and need to be supported and internationalized.

Women are not at the peace table. We are not there where our commitment to peace, our capacities to find solutions through dialogue, debate, and our sensitivities to human needs, human rights are sorely needed. Therefore, we still must pressure — from the outside — for considerable improvement in relations between the superpowers, for a process of confidence-building and trust. Feminists can make clear that one does not have to agree with the political or economic system of a country in order to like and understand its people. One does not have to assume that one must blast a population off the face of the earth because it has different cultural values, a different organization of its society.

Also, at the international level the Movement must get involved in issues of development. For those of us in the privileged Western world (I use that term to mean that we are better off in both our economic human rights — being aware, of course, of the Third World *within* advanced cultures, the racial and ethnic minorities, the impoverished female segments), have an obligation, a moral duty, if you like, to explore what can be done to reduce the enormous gap in wealth between rich and poor nations, and as concerned women, to give serious attention to the special needs and situations of women in these countries to determine whether development has improved their lot or worsened it. If development continues along the lines of the present world order, women will continue to have a subordinate position in the development and the gap economically between men and women will widen. Development in the Third World has actually reduced the power of women and made them more dependent on the system and less self-reliant since the structure of agriculture has changed and most economies have moved from agrarian-based to industrial-based economies.

We can ask the question, "What are the development policies of our countries toward the less-advantaged nations?" Have we taken into consideration the plight of women and what happens to them under certain development programs? Do we finance projects that

worsen the status of women (which often seems to be the case)?

I have tried in a short period of time to cover a vast territory — to describe what broad issues are vital to us, how we must continue to build our movement to strengthen our power to be change-agents, and why we must also have our spokespersons in the traditional decision-making political structure.

We are entering a new phase of feminism — call it Grass Roots Feminism, call it Feminism 2000, call it Global Feminism, call it Life-Preserving Feminism, call it simply New Phase Feminism. Whatever it may be, it will make history, as did the First Phase of Modern Feminism. Its horizons are unlimited. Never before have women become possibly the only salvation for the survival of humanity.

I would like to conclude by telling you about a recent flight I made from Dallas to Chicago. I sat next to a young man, very appealing, and as so often happens with passing acquaintances, people you never expect to see again, we told each other our life histories. At some point he turned to me and said, "You know, I would like to be an activist: I would like to fight for a cause, but I'm not that type." I inquired, "What type would you say you are?" "A dreamer," was his response.

"My dear young friend," I said, "the very first condition for being an activist is that you be a dreamer. Without dreams, without a vision, there can be no hope, and hope is the essence and motivating force in the struggle for social change."

I told him that the feminist movement has a vision. We understand, first of all, that we have but one earth, shared by one humanity. This globe is home to all — all people, all life, all laughter, all love, all music, all art. We will make it a woman's world, not in the sense of control, or power, or dominance, but in the sense of revolutionary vision that we have, a revolution of the human spirit. Those values that we call women-centered values — caring and gentleness, equality, justice, dignity, compassion — will be diffused throughout society.

Perhaps my young friend will join the movement. I would welcome that. The stronger we become, the more certain we will succeed. We will use that strength to plumb the depths of the human capacity to reach beyond ourselves — to accomplish the "impossible." We will move into positions of power to make the difference, to be a humanizing force with life-preserving objectives. We can do it; we must do it.