

Betty Friedan the Activist Feminist

by Michael Curtis



The world is full of political and social movements advocating particular goals, whether civil rights, environmental, sexual and gender, vegetarian, or religious or revolutionary. Some of the most formidable, are the numerous feminist movements and ideologies that have been present over the years with different objectives and aims , all concerned in some way, with the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. They seek to overcome gender stereotypes and ensure equal opportunities for women as for men have.

The feminist movements go back to at least the 15th century when the French poet and author Christine de Pisan denounced misogyny and called for respect if not equality for women.

Interestingly, she is still remembered and is featured in one of the 39 place settings for famous women in the 1979 art work *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago.

Many 19th century writers, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Anne Bronte, George Eliot, wrote of the restricted life, misery and frustration of women. However, the most cited early influential feminist is Mary Wollstonecraft whose work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792 is an advocate of women's rights, that men and women should be treated as rational beings, that women should be educated and deserve the same fundamental rights as men, though she did not explicitly argue that men and women are equal. Other women played an influential role in the feminist movement, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton who organized a convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 on women's rights, and Susan B. Anthony who, among other things, helped pave the way to the 19th Amendment of 1920.

One hundred years ago on February 4, 1921, Betty Friedan, originally Bettie Naomi Goldstein, was born in Peoria, Illinois of immigrant parents from Russia and Hungary. After graduation from Smith College then a women's institution, where she was trained as a psychologist and a fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley she became a journalist, mostly for leftist and labor union publications. In 1957 for the 15th Smith reunion, she conducted a survey of the graduates, their experiences and satisfaction with their lives. As a result, she began publishing articles about "the problem that has no name." She sensed, as a wife and mother of three small children, something was wrong with the way American women were trying to live their lives. The shores, she wrote, are strewn with the casualties of the feminine mystique.

Friedan became a leading figure in the feminist movement, with remarkable and surprising success of the publication in 1963

of her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, depicting the role of women in developed societies. The problem lay buried, unspoken, in the minds of American women, a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century. The thrust was challenging, that women are as capable as men for any type of work or career. The book is usually regarded as the spark of "second wave" feminism, thus differentiate from what is commonly called "first wave" feminism, the call for women's suffrage, education, and social participation to make them better wives and mothers. Friedan based the case for women's rights on "the basic human need to grow." She herself had married and lived the life of the suburban housewife that was everyone's dream at that time.

Friedan was not so much a theorist or a scholar on the lines of Simone de Beauvoir, the pioneer of philosophical feminism, as both a relator of the consequences of a personal story told in language of normal culture, and as an activist in the women's movement, leading the path to social change. Her first important act was co-founding and becoming the first president, 1966-1970, of NOW, the National Organization for Women, stating the name and the purpose of the organization on a napkin in her hotel room, and advocating the legal equality of men and women.

Friedan was in constant motion, lobbying for enforcement of the Civil Rights Act and the Equal Pay Act, and for women to have equal access to public places, such as the Oak Room at the Plaza hotel in New York. Friedan was instrumental in the rejection by the U.S. Senate of Harrold Carswell for the Supreme Court because of his insensitivity to problems of women and his record of racial discrimination and his opposition of the Civil Rights Act.

Friedan organized on August 26, 1970 the Women's Strike for Equality, and led a march in New York, "don't iron while the strike is hot," which attracted thousands of people. It

chiefly promoted equal opportunities for women in jobs and education, but some of the attenders also called for abortion rights and creation of child care centers.

Among her other organizational efforts Freidan helped in 1971 form the National Women's Political Caucus, an advocate of the equal rights amendment to the U.S. constitution that had been passed by both houses of Congress, but not ratified by all the states. She founded the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion laws, known as Nara. She also played a crucial role in condemning antisemitism in the international women's movement. Raised in a Jewish family though an agnostic in her own life, she condemned the attempts at the meeting in Mexico City, and the meeting on November 10, 1975 which sought to declare that Zionism was racist. She declared she was a woman, an American, and a Jew.

She took part in the ad hoc committee for human rights which objected to the Zionist-Racism resolution of November 10, 1975. The following day she declared herself a woman, American, and a Jew, and said, " I have never been a Zionist until today."

Freidan has to be acknowledged as a giant in the international feminist movement but she is subject to two major criticisms, ideological and personal. She encountered not only different intellectual and strategic opposition points of view, but also animosity.

It was clear from her early writing she was mainly concerned with middle class married white women, with economic issues, especially equity in employment and business, and less on working class and black women and issues of abortion, rape, lesbianism, and pornography. At first, she was uncomfortable about both abortion and homosexuality, it was not what the women's movement is all about. But she moderated her views on these issues, though for long she was a little uneasy about the feminist movement's narrow focus on abortion as if it were

the single, all important issue for women.

Friedan was a moderate in a changing feminist movement, and she is still to be honored in the present feminist "third wave," which looks at women's condition as intersectional in which race, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, nationality are all factors.

Friedan is not irrelevant. She changed the personal lives of countless women throughout the world, as well as the course of history. She was a tough but difficult person. She was abrasive, egoistic, aggressive, bad-tempered, sometimes selfish. Germaine Greer spoke of her as pompous and that she always wanted the praise she thought she deserved. However, all political and social movements are divided with conflicting personalities who have different priorities and agendas, with mixtures of love and hate. The feminist movement is notable for internecine quarrels, even if some of them are power struggles played up in the press rather than in life.

Friedan was a force in so many different ways. She not only changed the life of so many women in the U.S. but also internationally. She was in her life a communal builder, as shown in her Sag Harbor commune on Long Island where she mixed intellectual, academics, and black and white public figures in the community in which she usually spent the summer months. In this age when the Me Too movement is becoming potent, and the number of women seeking office is increasing, and a new, third feminist wave indicates the differences with past eras and generations, Friedan is to be honored as the pilot of the Second Wave.