

Courageous American Feminist: Phyllis Chesler

by Michael Curtis



Anything men can do women can do as well, maybe better, was the declaration of the British writer Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published in 1792. She denied the prevailing attitude that women are naturally inferior to men, and insisted that women and men should be equally educated, and that equality of men and women should exist in political, social, and economic life. It wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that the effort to establish the struggle for the emancipation of women emerged in the United States and Britain.

Since what is called the First Wave of Feminism in the U.S. the feminist movement has articulated a variety of arguments

concerning the nature of female emancipation, equal rights for women, gender discrimination, the identity of women, equal pay, the social construction of gender roles, and the political and cultural role of women throughout the societies in which they live.

Like all other social and political movements, the feminist movement has been divided, full of factions and strong personalities presenting a different and changing focus on the issues of women. Among American feminists, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Kate Millett, Barbara Seaman, Gloria Steinem and others played prominent competing, sometimes rival, roles concerning those issues.

Some issues such as whether gender roles are due to social conditioning remain relevant and controversial. Others, once thought central to feminist theory and the subject of heated debate such as the question of "essentialism," whether biology determines women's capacities, and what this entails, has been largely dismissed.

Among the most courageous of contemporary America feminists is Phyllis Chesler whose voluminous writings are infused with her singular and colorful personal life. Her story is unusual, in that, starting as an unsophisticated, young Jewish girl in New York she ran away from home and religion to marry a Western educated Afghani, and went with him to Kabul, where she discovered he was not a knight in shining armor. She suffered abuse as his Muslim family enforced the cruel, traditional gender rules of Afghanistan and the Islamic faith. She was a virtual prisoner in the family home. She was fortunate to escape from Afghanistan, from where she returned to the United States, and eventually became a well known a professor of psychology, feminist psychologist, and public intellectual.

Chesler's dominant quality is courage, the willingness to speak the truth to sister feminists, even if it opposed conventional feminist principles, as well as to the world in

general. She is no shrinking violet; she does not express herself in a still, small voice. She holds definite opinions but is not an imperious dogmatist. There is no mistaking her point of view, expressed in a commanding and direct way, about political and social affairs. If her views are striking and controversial she is eager to debate them. But she is forthright both about the way that women may hurt each other, and even more about what she sees as the wrong direction of contemporary feminists, especially those she sees as “left-wing post colonial” writers whose main target is white Western men.

Her new book,