What are we Complaining About?

OK, so you’ve heard it all before. OK so you’re bored.

But meantime we still get less pay for the same work as you. We are less likely to get jobs which are at all meaningful, in which we have any responsibility. We are less likely to be educated, less likely to be unionised.

The present set-up of the family puts great strains on us. Either we are struggling to combine badly paid work with bringing up a family or we are unable to do work for which we’ve been trained.

The manifesto printed here was produced by one Women’s Liberation Group in the United States. It gives some idea of how such groups see the situation of women and the ways that situation can be improved. Contrary to the lurid pictures painted by sections of the mass media, and accepted at face value by many on the left, such groups do not project themselves as aggressive, bra-burning, man-haters.
The area of taboo on our sexuality is much more extensive and the double standard still pervasive. Some women never experience orgasm.

So what are we complaining about?

All this and something else besides. A much less tangible something... a smouldering, bewildered consciousness with no shape... a muttered dissatisfaction... which suddenly shoots to the surface and explodes.

We want to drive buses, play football, use beer mugs not glasses. We want men to take the pill. We do not want to be bought with the bottles or invited as wives. We do not want to be wrapped up in cellophane or sent off to make the tea or shuffled into the social committee.

But these are only little things. Revolutions are made about little things. Little things which happen to you all the time, every day, wherever you go, all your life.

So we don’t know how to find one another or ourselves.

We are in different classes. Thus we devour and use one another. Our ‘emancipation’ has been often merely the struggle of the privileged to improve and consolidate its superiority. The women of the working class remain the exploited of the exploited, oppressed as workers and oppressed as women.

We are with families and without them. Hence we distrust one another. The woman with a home and children is suspicious of the women with no ties, seeing her as a potential threat to her territorial security. The single woman feels the married woman is subtly critical because she is not fulfilling her role as homemaker, her ‘function’ as child-bearer. She feels she is accused of being unable to be a woman.

They tell us what we should be. As we grow up, especially from puberty we are under intensive pressure to be ‘acceptable’... not to put ourselves outside the safety net of marriage. From small girls we are taught that failure means not being selected by men... the shame of being a wallflower.
The sign of intelligence and subtlety is a contractual bargain as we hand over our virginity for a marriage document, a ring and the obligation of financial support. Orgasm is a matter of merchandise, and remember they don’t like us to be too clever. Well she might go to university but men want someone who can cook.

The emphasis in our education tends to be much more on integration, the encouragement of active criticism, of intellectual aggression is rare. The cautious virtues predominate. We are in an intellectual double bind. We are assumed to have nothing to say, find it difficult to assert that we want to say something, are observed to say nothing, are assumed to have nothing to say.

To stray from the definition of what they want is to risk being rejected in a double sense. There is a ‘moral’ force behind this urge to conform. The girl who is critical of the stereotype presented to her can be condemned not simply like a boy as a rebel, but as a slut as well. The latter is much more difficult to cope with. There is still the whole dirty, frightened, patronising world behind slut, tart, old slag, nymphomaniac, dolly, bird, chick, bit of stuff, bit of crumpet, old bat, silly cow, blue stocking. These words have no male equivalents.

The girl who for some reason breaks intellectually is in a peculiarly isolated position. She finds herself straddled across a great gulf, which grows wider, while she is pulled both ways. A most perilous and lonely condition, comparable to that of a black or working class militant. In the process of becoming interested in ideas she finds herself to some extent cut off from other girls and inclines naturally towards boys as friends. They do more interesting things, discuss wider topics. She really defines herself as a boy. Other girls appear curious and rather boring, passive and accepting. She has little to say to most of them. The social contempt in which women are held confirms this.

They tell us what we are.

The image is constantly reaffirmed. The books she reads and the films she sees are almost invariably by men. One is simply not conscious of men writers or men film makers. They are just writers, just film makers. The selected image of women they create will be taken straight by women themselves. These characters ‘are women’.

Through this process, the educated girl probably takes her ‘emancipation’ as being beyond question. The suffragettes hap-
pened a long time ago. Men will readily accept her as different, an exception, an interesting diversion. She lives in fact as a man. There might be a hint of strain over her virginity, the discovery of a strange duplicity lurking still in men.

But no connection is obvious. She cannot see a condition of women. It is not until she becomes older, grows less decorative, has babies, that the rather deep cracks in the gloss of 'emancipation' appear. She has the rest of her life to explore the limits and ambiguities of her 'freedom'.

And what a spurious freedom.

Marxists have quite rightly always stressed that the subordination of women is part of the total mutual devouring, process called capitalism. No one group can be liberated except through a transformation of the whole structure of social relationships. But subordination is not an affair of economics or institutions only. Nor is it only to do with contraception, abortion, orgasm and sexual equality, important as these are.

It is an assumed secondariness which dwells in a whole complex of inarticulate attitudes, in smirks, in offsides, in insecurities, in desperate status differentiation. Secondariness happens in people's heads and is expressed every time they assume no one would listen. It is located in a structure in which both sexes are tragically trapped. The man as much as the woman, for each time he tries to break through, he meets the hostility of other men or the conflicting demands of those women who prefer the traditional sex game. It is only women who can dissolve the assumptions. It is only women who can say what they feel because the experience is unique to them.

Only women can define themselves. To define yourself you have to explore yourself, you have to find yourself as a group before you can say how you regard yourself as a group. It is only by understanding your situation as a group that you can relate it to the system through which you are dominated.

This means a certain withdrawal into the group and a realisation on the part of the elite of a common identity. This means that just as the white middle class Cuban found he was a spic and the black PhD that he was a nigger, the privileged woman has to extend beyond her elite consciousness to learn the extent of her common condition with the underprivileged woman. Only then can women really challenge the external definitions imposed on
them, become sufficiently conscious to act and thus be recognised as being there.

The enemy is not identified as man. This is as futile as a black-white, student-worker conflict. The ally is not the woman who supports and benefits from capitalism. It is all people who are being crushed and twisted, who want space and air and time to sit in the sun.

But the oppressed have to discover their own dignity, their own freedom, they have to make themselves equal. They have to decolonise themselves. Then they can liberate the colonisers.

Men, you have nothing to lose but your chains. You will no longer have anyone to creep away and peep at with their knickers down, no one to flaunt as the emblem of your virility, status, self-importance, no one who will trap you, overwhelm you, no etherealised cloudy being floating unattainable in a plastic blue sky, no great mopping up handkerchief comforters to crawl into from your competitive, ego struttings alienation, who will wrap you up and smother you.

There will only be thousands of millions of women people to discover, touch and become with, who will say with a Vietnamese girl: “Let us now emulate each other”, who will understand you when you say we must make a new world in which we do not meet each other as exploiters and used objects. Where we love one another and into which a new kind of human being can be born.