



The Feminist Connection

There are women who believe that to be feminist is to be vegetarian. Where are they getting that idea? by Carol Wiley

illustrations by Meinrad Craighead

Trudy has worked for women's rights for years. A member of the board of directors of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in a big city, Trudy would be considered a mainstream feminist by anyone's standards. She has a career with a major U.S. corporation, and her personal views and volunteer work reflect all the usual feminist causes: shelters for battered women, equal pay for equal work, sympathetic political candidates. But only recently has Trudy considered adding another aspect to her feminism—giving up meat.

Why does Trudy think there's some connection between feminism and vegetarianism? There are two reasons: The first, Trudy says, is that "animals have been subjugated similar to the ways women have been subjugated for thousands of years, and a true feminist is concerned about a fairer deal for women and for every life in this world." Her second reason is just as important. "What also impressed me is that if we take all the grain the animals need for food, we could feed all the hungry people in the world," says Trudy. "That's a feminist

reason, because most of the starving people in this world are women and children."

There is no well-defined movement called "the vegetarian feminists." Don't expect to see Trudy's NOW chapter (or any other NOW group for that matter) actively promoting vegetarianism anytime soon. However, there does seem to be a growing idea among feminists that vegetarianism is an important part of feminism. We found that women's groups—whether traditional feminist, spiritual, environmental, lesbian or animal-rights-oriented—are beginning to draw a connection between feminism and a diet that doesn't support killing, disease or environmental devastation, factors generally associated with a culture that places humans (and men in particular) at the top of a hierarchy of living things. These women

believe that meat is a symbol of the oppression of animals, the environment and, ultimately, women.

Vegetarianism as a feminist issue is admittedly a radical concept for most people. It is not, however, a recent one. Many activists and suffragettes in the early women's rights movement in this country were vegetarian, and ethical vegetarianism was integral to their feminist values.

Examples abound in the feminist literature of the late 1800s and early 1900s. For instance, in an 1870 issue of *Shafts*, a British feminist vegetarian newspaper, writer Edith Ward argues that "the case of the animal is the case of the woman." At the 1907 National American Woman Suffrage Association conference, the national treasurer was chastised for wearing a hat replete with plumage and was ordered to put it away for the remainder of the conference. As one demonstrator remarked: "Nothing would persuade me to eat a chicken, or to connive at the horror of trapping innocent animals for their fur. It causes a thrill of horror to pass through me when I attend a woman's suffrage convention and see women with ghastly trophies of slaughter upon their persons." Feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth frequented a vegetarian health institute, where at one banquet they lifted their alcohol-free glasses to toast: "Total Abstinence, Women's Rights and Vegetarianism." Writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Mary Shelley and Virginia Woolf also used vegetarian images in their works to promote nonviolence and to elevate women's position in society.

Vegetarianism also has been associated with lesbian activists throughout the women's movement during the past 100 years, according to some historians. Vegetarianism as a rejection of male dominance is still an issue in the lesbian community. Brett Garrett, founder of the Gay and Lesbian Vegetarians of San Diego (as far as we know, the only vegetarian society for homosexuals in the United States), reports a rapidly increasing female membership; 33 women joined the group during the two months we spent researching this story. One member said 10 women in her lesbian community have become vegetarian in the past year.

Yet even though there *is* a history of vegetarianism among feminists, vege-

tarianism has never been required for inclusion in the ranks of women's rights activists; indeed, feminist vegetarians were the exception, not the rule. Gloria Steinem's suffragette grandmother was a vegetarian, for instance, yet she continued to serve meat to her family. (And Steinem served veal at her much-heralded 50th birthday party.) Susan B. Anthony, we read, rushed back home after a two-day visit with vegetarian friends, making no bones about her desire to sink her teeth into a great hunk of steak.

Is it any different today? Although still a radical concept, vegetarianism



as a feminist issue is once again surfacing. To understand why, it is necessary to comprehend the nature of feminism today, a decentralized collection of local or regional groups that work on individual issues. In addition, the term "women's issues" now includes some different things than it did as recently as the 1970s.

The Gloria Steinems and the Betty Friedans of that era broke ground for the current generation of women, a generation that has taken feminism a step further. Friedan describes the evolution of feminism in her book *The Second Stage* (Summit Books, 1981). In the 1970s, women may have gotten the wrong idea of what equality means, Friedan says. They may have denied their womanhood—by delaying childbearing, for example—in their fight for the right to enter the workplace on equal footing with men. But in the 1980s, women fought to regain their womanhood by demanding maternity leave without penalty. In other words, women realized that they did not want to be like men (who had their own problems), but that both women *and* men needed to change so that society could incorporate feminine values.

Most of these so-called feminine values were considered women's issues a few years ago but are now considered mainstream: maternity benefits, family

leave and day care in the workplace. But feminine values include not just equality or family issues; they seem to be expanding to include a reverence for all life and for the environment, and groups have sprung up to address these issues.

Many of these groups consider themselves feminist first and foremost; their other concerns arise from their feminism. As one feminist writer says: "There are a variety of perspectives in the feminist movement today. That makes sense because there's no one way a woman lives today, so feminist theory will have a variety of ways of developing. . . . It's all interconnected."

Connie Salamone, a long-time environmentalist, writer, and vegetarian animal-rights activist, agrees. "Women don't come to vegetarianism through mainstream feminism itself," Salamone says. "Women are coming to vegetarianism through the various factions of feminism: spirituality, environmentalism, animal rights and health."

If mainstream women ever recognize vegetarianism as a feminist issue, it will more than likely be as the result of work by the so-called ecofeminists. Since the 1970s these women have been making the connection between the oppression of women and humanity's domination of the environment. Many ecofeminists are concerned particularly about the devastating effects of meat-based agriculture on animals and the Earth. These are the ecofeminists who are making vegetarianism an issue.

There is no national women's group called "The Ecofeminists" and there's no place to send a check if you want to join up (although you'll find quite a few ecofeminists in your local Greens group). "The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to represent women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution," writes Caroline Merchant in the *New Internationalist*, a journal on global affairs. Because women have the ability to bear children, they are perceived to be close to nature, Merchant writes. Childbearing also brings with it women's desire to provide a healthy home and community for their families. "Ecofeminism is a response to the perception that both women and nature have been devalued in Western culture and that both can

be elevated and liberated through direct political action," Merchant writes.

Ecofeminism is essentially an international grassroots ecological movement to restore and maintain the Earth's natural resources. One example of ecofeminism is the tree-hugging movement in India, where women preserve community forests by hugging trees in defiance of approaching bulldozers. Another example is women in the United States who band together to protest toxic waste dumps in their communities.

Although their numbers are difficult if not impossible to gauge, ecofeminists are the most vocal vegetarians among women's groups, most likely because society's treatment of animals and nature are blatantly similar to the traditional treatment of women.

Not all ecofeminists make a point of this animal connection, however. Salamone, for example, is well-known in ecofeminist and vegetarian circles for her animal-rights sympathies; indeed, her early writings and personal campaigns always pointed to the connection between the oppression of women and animals. But Salamone now has pretty much abandoned that argument. Instead, she now concentrates on the environmental issues surrounding meat production, presenting it as one more way humans oppress nature. Make no mistake—Salamone is still very much an animal-rights activist, but she believes it is too radical an issue for the average American.

"The vegetarian-feminist connection won't come through the animal-rights argument to the mainstream," says Salamone. "But it *will* come through the presentation of environmental ethics, because that way it's not moralistic, not personal, and everyone has already adopted that ethic.

"The ecofeminist ethic of Earth as home is more appealing," Salamone continues. "Now I ask, 'Are you hurting the Earth?' not 'Are you personally killing animals?' People don't want to be attacked personally. If you're being oppressed, you don't want to be told you're an oppressor. Women don't want to carry that burden."

Carol J. Adams considers herself an ecofeminist first, an animal-rights activist second. Her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Continuum, 1990), approaches vegetarianism from the perspective of what could be called

"species oppression." In other words, she says, women and animals have been oppressed in similar ways throughout history. Not the first to make the feminist-vegetarian connection—activists such as Salamone and colleague Nellie Shriver have been focusing on this issue for almost 20 years, and the suffragettes certainly made the connection—Adams is probably the first to receive national *mainstream* attention.

"A mythology permeates all culture that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity," writes Adams, a lecturer on animal rights and a theology professor at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. Meat is considered masculine and is associated with virility, she says; vegetables, fruits and

grains are considered feminine and second-class. That's because men traditionally have been the hunters, and in hunter societies, men have always dominated. Those with power—typically males—"have always eaten meat," Adams writes, while the rest of society—women, children, people of color, whoever is considered second-class in the culture—have had to make do with what's left. As a result, meat became a symbol of power.

Examples of cultures in which meat is the food of the powerful can be found throughout the world and throughout history, Adams says. For instance, women in the Solomon Islands raise

pigs but are permitted to eat them only if their husbands give permission. Ethiopian women prepare two meals: one for men and a second, often containing no meat or other substantial protein, for themselves. In Indonesia, where meat is widely available only during festivals, it is considered men's property and is doled out according to the number of men in the household.

The attitude that meat is men's food also led to the opinion that men *must* have meat. In our own society, it's not unusual to hear a woman say, "I could do without meat, but my husband *has* to have his steak." Can you imagine a "ladies' luncheon" serving a 16-ounce sirloin? (You *know* the men's golf outing barbecue isn't serving watercress sandwiches.) If meat is the food of the powerful, the powerful apparently obtain strength from meat. Even today, that macho mentality prevails. Remember the trendy early-'80s saying "Real men don't eat quiche"? A vegetarian man is still seen by some as a sissy or weak. Our society has even singled out protein as the symbol of strength; protein builds muscle, and the best source of protein, we're taught, is meat. Therefore, bodybuilders and construction workers and all those other macho types need meat. "Sexism," wrote anthropologist Louis Leakey, "is roughly inversely proportional to vegetarianism."

The mythology that links meat with masculinity also is a result of society's objectification of women and animals, says Marti Kheel. Kheel, an ecofeminist and Greens member, is founder of Feminists for Animal Rights, a vegetarian group that now boasts 1,500 members

on the West Coast and has new chapters forming in the Midwest, the East Coast, Florida, Colorado and Vancouver, Wash. "Women and animals became objects, valuable only as defined in their relationship to men in this culture," Kheel says. "They are seen as instrumental for men to obtain happiness.

Their function is to serve men's needs. Objectification derives from the patriarchal world view in which violence against women and violence against animals are the norm."

Using animals as food or for scientific research are two examples of objectification; slaughtering a living being for food is considered normal in our society, and animal research is believed



Adams: Meat as oppression.



Kheel: Violence is the norm.

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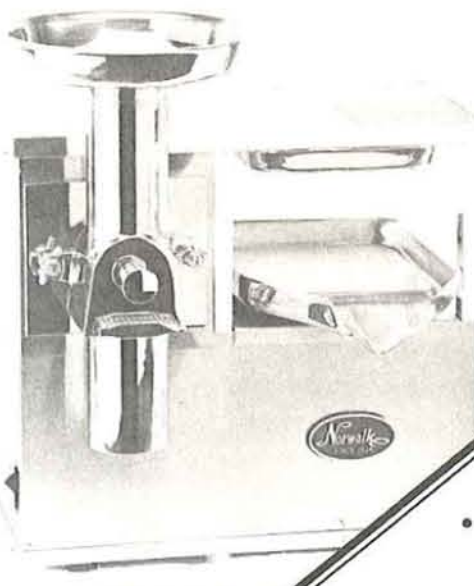
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to be necessary for safe medical practice. Domestic violence is an example of the objectification of women; although for years it wasn't talked about, domestic violence was—and still is—quietly tolerated. "At least he doesn't beat you," goes the saying to the complaining wife.

Even language reflects the similarities between society's view of animals and its view of women. Consider the terminology: Unable to see a woman as a person (or an animal as a living being), a man describes himself as a "leg man" or a "breast man." Singles bars are "meat markets." *Playboy* magazine made women into bunnies, with certain private parts of their bodies named after different animals. "Women who have been raped or who are the victims of domestic violence routinely say they feel like pieces of meat," says Adams. As long as language is infused with these terms, oppression will exist.

Becoming vegetarian, say feminists such as Adams, Kheel and Salamone, signals a rejection of the violence and oppression that society has wreaked on women for thousands of years.

The ecofeminist philosophies of the Earth as home and the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life also are part of the philosophy of the feminist spirituality movement, and may explain why an estimated 40 percent of women involved in the movement are vegetarians.

Those who ascribe to feminist theology incorporate a supreme reverence for the Earth in which humanity is a part of nature. Destroying the environment or killing animals—even for meat—is unacceptable to many women in this movement.

"It is important for us to be vegetarian because it is part of the recovery from the patriarchal culture we live in," says spiritual feminist Linda Pinti.

"In [our] world view, the sacredness of all life is central," says Pinti. "Oppressed groups identify with other oppressed groups, and animals have been on the bottom. In that regard, there's a lot of overlap with the animal-rights movement."

Overlap is a key word when discussing not just the feminist-vegetarian connection, but feminism as well; issues that are central to the ecofeminists, for example, are also important to the spiritual feminists, and mainstream feminist groups aren't yet addressing them. "Women won't come to vegetarianism through mainstream feminism because that's a social justice movement," says Salamone.

Vegetarianism isn't seen as a social justice issue in the mainstream, but vegetarianism is an issue for many members of NOW. *Vegetarian Times* found vegetarians working in NOW offices around the country, and learned that a full 50 percent of the women who attended the Illinois state NOW conference last year asked for vegetarian meals, a percentage that has grown steadily over the past two or three years. Although there is no way to know why these women selected vegetarian meals, it is comforting that half the women asked for them, and pleasing that NOW asked for a preference.

Adams believes there are several reasons why the mainstream doesn't yet see vegetarianism as a feminist issue. "First, this is a meat-eating [male-dominated] culture; everything says it's acceptable and unproblematic to eat meat. Second, there's the belief that animals are alive for us to eat; we can't seem to believe in their existence except in relationship to meat. Third, meat eating is seen as a private decision. Lastly, our culture believes that we're animals of prey and that it's natural for us to eat meat."

Most feminists, Adams says, still haven't shaken these underlying assumptions of our patriarchal culture. "Feminists have been acculturated that way as well," she says.

"But mainstream feminists may be resistant to vegetarianism for other reasons too," Adams adds. "Women are only now claiming their own autonomy and freedom. Vegetarianism is seen as a restriction of that freedom. But we have to ask ourselves: Do we want to define our autonomy as male privilege in female garb? Or are we going to restructure our autonomy to mean something different? An autonomous person can't achieve her freedom at the expense of other beings.

"There's also the notion that feminists should be politically tolerant," Adams continues. "'Forcing' vegetarianism [by serving only vegetarian meals or making vegetarianism a requirement for membership] is seen as politically intolerant," which may explain why NOW offers a meatless meal as an option, rather than just serving a vegetarian dinner.

For many vegetarian feminists, an "option" isn't good enough. "We want to make it a political issue," says Adams. And Kheel agrees: Removing meat from the tables of all feminist meetings is one goal of her organization, Feminists for Animal Rights.

Still, most mainstream feminist groups have only so much money, so much time and so many people: It makes sense

continued on page 80

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Hunger and Balance

continued from page 58

without stopping, but often our bodies simply stopped on their own, and no amount of internal prodding could get them to move until they were ready. Carl apologized each time he stopped for air, though his apologies were unnecessary—I, too, was glad for the needed rest.

Gradually, the ground changed beneath us, and we moved over wind-blown snow between towers of black, grey and pink granite, the summit still far away. At what we thought would be the last hill, we found that the mountain dropped away—that we had to lose and regain 500 feet, and cross an expanse of one-half mile to reach the last steep fin that cut through the sky. This drop was the Football Field; it is so discouraging that many people turn back at this point. But after an hour's effort, we walked carefully on the knife-edge ridge that is the peak of Denali. To our left was a drop of 700 feet, and to our right was 10,000 feet of air.

Carl waited for me on a flat spot beneath a mound decorated with makeshift flags. A bandanna, a Tibetan prayer flag, and bits of colored ribbon festooned the summit. We locked arms, and stepped among them.

It was 10 to 15 degrees below zero, and a small cloud hovered to the south. Immense glaciers flowed in every direction away from us; the green of the tundra seemed a mirage, and rivers and lakes shimmered within it. Mount Hunter, where we had landed at Kahiltna Base only nine days before, was hard to distinguish from the lesser peaks of the Alaska Range. Mount Foraker was a shining mound to the west, far below.

We had made it; we stood with our arms in the air, reaching to the sky. I looked across the tundra that reached out all around to a hazy infinity. Somewhere within my line of sight were great bears, large and wild and forever hungry. We were among them, and I felt their wildness and their power, but I did not share their hunger. Deep inside I felt a fullness and a balance that only increased as we slowly descended the great mountain.

Brad Werntz is a climber who has participated in expeditions to South America, Mexico, Tibet, and throughout North America. Recently graduated from Northwestern University, he is a free-lance writer living in Madison, Wis. He is really not all that afraid of bears.

The Feminist Connection

continued from page 65

for them to rank their issues, and when they do, vegetarianism and animal rights simply aren't part of the agenda (although, at least in Illinois, the state NOW chapter usually signs animal-rights petitions that come before the state legislature). Feminists may even be suspicious of animal rights, Adams says, because they may believe that the issue of animal rights detracts from what they see as the "real" work of the feminist movement.

Yet, adds Adams, "the whole idea that something has to be either/or isn't true. Vegetarianism doesn't displace other issues." Adams, for instance, runs a hotline for battered women in addition to her animal-rights work. Vegetarianism is a personal statement that certainly could be made while attending to all the other feminist issues.

Kheel would take the idea one step further: "We're talking about liberation from patriarchy. We need to be touching on all oppressions. Animal rights is a key one. If there's a panel on wife or child abuse at a conference, for example, there should also be a panel on the abuse of animals and how it connects. They're often the same."

Getting the mainstream feminist movement to stand still long enough to see the connection, however, isn't easy. During a lull at a feminist rally last spring in Chicago, two women were discussing the vegetarian-feminist connection. A NOW official who'd been eavesdropping couldn't help but interject that she saw no connection whatsoever and considered the whole thing silly. Is it?

"Oh, no," says Trudy. "I don't think it's at all frivolous. You can't be a feminist without being a humanist. There's more to feminism than climbing the corporate ladder."

More, we're finding, than we realized. Clearly the "second stage," as Friedan described it, is upon us; issues surrounding feminism have broadened since the 1970s to include a respect for and an incorporation of feminine values in society. Through this window, vegetarianism couldn't help but surface.

For more information:

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