

In the air

Remember wimmin?

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Remember when women were „wimmin“? Remember the joyfully deviant spelling coined by the women's liberation movement to make the point that we were not merely „men with wombs“?

The use of the spelling „wimmin“ gave rise to serious discussions about the importance of language in the feminist struggle – a debate that has meanwhile been blown out of the water in the war against „political correctness“.

We still observe Women's Day – a dreary annual event that exists because equality does not – but where have all the wimmin gone?

The movement evolved during the late sixties and its beginnings were promising. Strong wimmin spoke out and wrote powerful texts. Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking *Le Deuxième Sexe* had been around for two decades when Germaine Greer's feminist bible *The Female Eunuch* appeared in 1969; two years later, Juliet Mitchell situated feminism in the wider context of contemporary revolutionary struggles in her *Women's Estate*; Gisèle Halimi's impassioned plea for the liberation of women *La Cause des Femmes* appeared in 1973. And writers such as Marilyn French or the great Susan Sontag never failed to speak out for the cause. The mood was optimistic: we would overcome.

Twenty years later, disillusionment had set in. Susan Faludi reported on the deadly effects of post-feminism in her book *Backlash: The undeclared war against women*, while Naomi Wolf described how society's emphasis on glamour, youth and beauty served to subjugate women in her prophetic polemic *The Beauty Myth*. Critic Camille Paglia lambasted „victim feminists“, calling for a new, more robust kind of feminism, in *Sex, Art and American Culture*.

These voices have fallen silent. Is it over? Have our aims been achieved?

The wimmin's movement put feminist issues – flexible working hours, part-time working, family planning, sufficient maternity and parental leave, adequate childcare facilities – on the political agenda and was thus at the origin of many of the measures since enacted by EU and national legislators. And the EC Court of Justice has honed the legal tools with which women can combat direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace.

It was assumed that once these issues were resolved, women would become equal partners with men in running society. We would be fully integrated in

the world of work, gradually make our way up the hierarchy and in due course be equally present at the only level that really counts: decision-making.

This has not happened. Forty years on, the deciders are still men.

Part of the reason, it seems, is that the very measures we fought for have turned against us.

You will only hear it spoken in the strictest confidence and you will never see it in writing, but many employers will think twice these days before taking on a woman – let alone placing her in a position of responsibility – because of all the time she can potentially be absent on leave and need to be replaced. Which costs money.

Another, more important, reason is that many causes of inequality simply lie beyond the reach of legislation: the attitude towards women of nearly all religions, the unequal burden of domestic responsibility and, most significantly of all, the role being foisted on women by current socioeconomic and geopolitical „necessity“.

Jobs are becoming scarcer in our developed countries and women are no longer welcome in the workplace –

although most homes need two salaries to pay their way. The geopolitical agenda is altogether more sinister. The needs of the military-industrial complex, as typified by the warmongering policies of the current American regime, require men and women to return to their traditional roles, with men being warriors and women producing babies (for cannon fodder), keeping the home fires burning and making themselves beautiful for men's pleasure.

To this end a certain amount of social engineering is necessary.

First, the image of men as warriors – and war in general – have to be made attractive. So the traditionally masculine values associated with combat, physical strength and the use of force are glorified in blockbuster films such as *The Alamo*, *Gladiator*, *Troy*, or *Alexander the Great*.

Women are not natural supporters of war, having at heart the safety of the offspring they have carried for nine long months. Their preference for „jaw-jaw“ over „war-war“ makes them potential enemies of the forces that need conflict in order to thrive. It is imperative therefore that women be kept out of public life.

Women are to be sent back into the home, but have to be persuaded it is their own choice.

The stay-at-home agenda is skillfully marketed and presented both as a maternal duty – psychologists write papers „proving“ that children do better if mummy stays at home – and an attractive „freedom and leisure“ option. Articles are constantly appearing in the papers about the virtues of free time and the evils of the workplace. And high-flying women enthuse in interviews about the spiritual and physical fulfillment they enjoy since they gave up their job to be at home with their loved ones.

The Beauty Myth is also sold as choice. Think of the myriad advertisements that feature young beautiful women in sexually explicit roles. The wimmin's movement protested against the commercial exploitation of women's bodies and things improved. Now the same images are back in even more extreme forms. It is not exploitation, we are told, but sexually liberated women exercising their free choice.

But the message that comes across is not of liberation in any form whatever...

Where have all the wimmin gone, just when they're needed most?

There is a spot on Luxembourg TV devoted to equal opportunities that concludes with words – spoken by a man – to the effect that equality is the future.

Yes, I mutter to myself, the distant future. And then only maybe.



Sexually liberated?