

The Feminist Manifesto

He Yin Zhen

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Men and women have been unequal in this world for a very long time. In India, widows immolate themselves to sacrifice their lives for men; in Japan, women prostrate themselves in the service of men. In Europe and America, even though people practice monogamy and thereby proclaim equality, women are rarely able to partake in politics or vote. So, is there any substance to their “equal rights”? When we look back at China, our men practically treat women as subhuman beings. In ancient times, after a tribe defeated another group, they [the tribesmen] would truss up the women, bind up their bodies with pillories, and take them as concubines. This is how men became masters and women slaves. That period can rightly be called the age of [men’s] plundering of women. In due time, since stealing other people’s women was likely to induce conflicts, people developed the custom of sending deerskin as an engagement “gift.” The ancient marriage rites that mandated the groom’s family deliver betrothal gifts to the bride’s side are remnants of this earlier kind of “property-marriage. Women were clearly regarded as a form of male property. Men are human, but women are merely chattel. That period can be called the age of [men’s] trading of women. From these two root causes, inequality between men and women became entrenched. The specific forms this inequality has taken can be traced from the four institutions from the past.

The first is inequality in marriage. In ancient times, the more respected a man’s position in society, the more wives he had. For example, during the Yin [Shang] dynasty (16th–11th century b.c.e.), the Son of Heaven could marry twelve women; his marquises, nine; high-ranking aristocrats, three; other titled men, two. During the Zhou dynasty (1046 –256 b.c.e.), the Son of Heaven had one queen, three helpmates, nine consorts, twenty-seven women of family, and eighty-one ladies of honor. These constituted his wife and concubines. Does this not indicate that in effect over one hundred women were married to one man? Since then, there have been no limits placed on the number of imperial concubines the emperor might retain. Honorable and illustrious families especially hoarded a lot of concubines. This is the first aspect of male-female inequality.

The second is inequality in status between husband and wife. Since men managed to expand their power, they became all the more vigilant against women. They invented the motto, “Once a woman becomes a man’s wife, she remains so for life.” A woman is thus allowed to serve only one husband. What is more: “The husband is high as the wife is low; the husband is to heaven as the wife is to earth. The wife cannot do without her husband as the earth cannot do

without Heaven.” As a result, a woman follows her husband’s noble rank in life, and she takes her husband’s family name, and she posthumously receives her husband’s promotion to a higher rank. Women are made into men’s subsidiaries. Song dynasty scholars followed this reasoning when they spoke of “shoring up the yang [male] and diminishing the yin [female].” This is the second aspect of male-female inequality.

The third is inequality in work and responsibility. The character for “woman” (fu 女) is glossed as fu 女, or “to serve.” The “woman” character is composed of a woman holding a broom. The Book of Rites (“Quli”) makes it clear: “In presenting a daughter for the harem of the ruler of a state, it is said, ‘This is to complete the providers of your spirits and sauces’; for that of a great officer, ‘This is to complete the number of those who sprinkle and sweep for you.’” It seems, in this way, ancient women considered serving and obeying to be their obligation. Furthermore, men concocted the teaching that women should not step out of the inner quarters so as to deprive them of their freedom. From then on, women did not have responsibilities aside from managing the household; being educated and talented was deprecated; [as a consequence,] they have taken being servile to be a natural state. This is the third aspect of male-female inequality.

The fourth is inequality in the system of rites. When a wife dies, the husband observes mourning for only one year, but a widow must mourn her husband for three years, and in the coarsest attire (unhemmed sackcloth). And she is to extend the same severity in mourning her husband’s parents. But when she mourns her natal parents, she observes rites of the lesser grade (of one year and wearing sackcloth with even edges). [The Confucian classic Great Learning says,] “It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.” But the mourning rites do exactly that! Even worse is that in ancient times, a daughter’s mourning rites for her mother would be downgraded from three years to one if her father was still alive. This was most egregious. This, then, is the fourth aspect of male-female inequality.

Even from this cursory review it becomes very clear how men oppress and subjugate women. It is not hard to fathom why men would want to bully women; but why, one might ask, are women so willing to submit? Could it be that the power of social customs and the teachings of pedantic scholars have come to bind and restrain women? Let me put it plainly so that all my companions in womanhood understand: men are the archenemy of women. As long as women fail to be men’s equals, anger and sorrow will never be requited. Therefore, let me spell out all the things that women need to strive for one by one:

- The first is monogamous marriage. If a man has more than one wife, keeps concubines or mistresses, or is predisposed to whoring, then his wife can use the harshest laws to restrain him, so much so that he would die by women’s hands. If a woman willingly serves a husband with multiple wives, the entire womenfolk would rise up against her. If a man only has one wife, but his wife has extramarital affairs, both men and women should rise up against her.
- The second is that after a woman marries, she should not take her husband’s surname. Even if she retains her maiden name, it is still unfair because it is her father’s surname but not her mother’s. Therefore, women like us who are living in the present age should fashion our surnames from both the father’s and the mother’s [surnames]. After we overthrow the Manchus, neither men nor women should keep a surname. That would be the principle of supreme justice.

- The third is that parents should value sons and daughters equally. Daughters are no different from sons, and a daughter's offspring are full-fledged grandchildren. This way the entrenched custom of slighting daughters and valuing sons would end.
- The fourth is that soon after birth, daughters and sons should be raised without discrimination. As they grow, they should receive equal education. As grownups, they should shoulder equal responsibilities. All affairs in society should be women's business.
- The fifth is that if a couple fails to get along after marriage, the man and wife can separate. Until then, neither should take up with someone else lest they violate the first goal above.
- The sixth is that first-time grooms should be paired with first-time brides. When bereaved, a man can remarry, but only to a woman who has married before. Likewise, a bereaved wife can remarry, but only to a man who has married before. If a first-time bride assents to marrying a man who has married before, womenfolk should rise to censure her.
- The seventh is to abolish all the brothels in the world and let go all the prostitutes under the sun to clean up the environment of lasciviousness.

We champion these seven goals, not because we women want to snatch power and rights into our hands, but because Heaven endows natural rights equally to men and women. Since men and women are both human, the lack of equality is unjust and contradicts the principles of nature; ultimately, what women strive for should not stop short of supreme justice for all.

But people may counter my suggestions by raising three common objections. The first is that women endure the toil of childbirth and afterward have to exhaust themselves in raising the children; thus a woman's work and responsibilities are by nature different from men's. Those who think so do not understand that what I am proposing is not merely a women's revolution but a complete social revolution. The women's revolution is but one aspect of the social revolution. After the social revolution is accomplished, after birth, all children would be raised in public child care facilities; accordingly, mothers would no longer have to raise their children by themselves. Once relieved of this task, women could assume responsibilities equal to men's.

The second objection may be that since there are more women than men in the world, it is unfair to mandate that one person can take only one spouse. But those who object thus do not know that women are more plentiful because they never fight wars. Active military duty is without fail a male prerogative; therefore their numbers dwindle by the day. Now, as women, would we rather not unleash destruction and die on the battlefield for posthumous honor than be oppressed to death as obedient concubines? If women indeed carried out the [social] revolution, after the violence ended, the number of women would certainly be the same as the number of men.

The third argument one often hears is that since men have many wives, why shouldn't women have multiple husbands as a form of redress? The misunderstanding here is that we women desire equality and will get it, not by [the passive means of] reform or boycotting, but by the application of brute force to coerce men to make us equal. But polygyny is a major male transgression. If women choose to emulate them, how are we to defend ourselves when men accuse us [of transgressing]? A woman who has multiple husbands is virtually a prostitute. Those women who are

now advocating multiple husbands use the pretext of resisting men, but their real motivation is to give full rein to their personal lust, following the path of prostitutes. These women are traitors to womanhood.

In sum, men and women are both human. By [saying] “men” (nanxing) and “women” (nüxing) we are not speaking of “nature,” as each is but the outcome of differing social customs and education. If sons and daughters are treated equally, raised and educated in the same manner, then the responsibilities assumed by men and women will surely become equal. When that happens, the nouns “men” and “women” would no longer be necessary. This is ultimately the “equality of men and women” of which we speak.

People in China have recently come to believe that for women to reach this goal, they must apply themselves to herald—even ahead of men— racial, political, economic, and other revolutions; they must not allow themselves to lag behind men again. According to their view, the revolution between men and women should proceed side by side with racial, political, and economic revolutions. [They believe] if they succeeded, women could establish the first real regime of “women’s rights” in the world. If they failed, women would perish with men, never to be subjugated by them again. I think this is a narrow-minded view. Whether people agree with me or condemn me is not my concern here.

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