Feminism emerges, family changes

This is the seventh in a series of 15 articles exporting "American Families in Transition." In this article, Professor Catharine R. Stimpson, who has published totaley on the women's movement, explores the varieties of feminism and how they affect the family.

1980, 1982, by the Regents of the University of California.

By Catharine R. Stimpson apocial writer

Few social institutions are more misunderstood than the family, few social movements more misunder-stood than feminism.

social movements more misunderstood than ferminism.

Both the family and feminism are
comies creatures of history, influenced
by race and class, nationality and religion. One really should speak, not of 'the
family' and 'feminism. Both also provoke
opinions and passions that may obscure
a clear picture of their relationship.

For many, the relationship between
feminism and the family is antagonistional family, like other social institutional family, like other social institutions and the family is antagonistion these who regret the changes.
Opponents of 'womens' lib' offen fabel it a destructive force that threatens
the security and sanctity of traditional
family roles. In a national poil in 1977,
40 percent of the respondents thought
that the family was breaking down and
that the women's movement was largely to blame.

Even a woman whose family life is

ly to blame. Even a woman whose family life is miserable may recoil from her percep-tion of feminism, based largely on neg-ative stereotypes portrayed by the me-dia. Even supporters of economic, legal and political rights for women may stop short of supporting domestic changes.

IN TURN, ever since the 19th century, many formlasts have claimed that the family is a sufficient form that the family is a part of the form that he family is a part of the form that he family is a part of the family he fa

Selects about the family in some detail. They have helped to expose the physical abuse and they have traced psychological patterns which show that many women find motherhood constricting rather than fulfilling, and that children need not be deprived if people other than their natural mothers care for them.

STUDYING women's work, feminists

This series, written for Courses by Newspeper, a program of Uni-versity Extension, University of California, Ban Diego, was funded by a grant from the National En-dowment for the Humanities.



Families in Transition

have shown how burdensome it can be. The jobs women hold in the labor force—such as clerical workers, who are often expected to wait on their male bosses—tend to be low-paying, on-crous extensions of their domesite role. Even with outside jobs, women continue to do most housework as well.

Despite such realities, feminists have not universally condemned the fan.lly, They recognize that many families have worked well for women, that many women have done well within families. For example, black and filipanic families in America have often been flexible, supportive networks that were necessary for an findividual's survival.

Nor are feminists alone when they analyze family stress, tension, and hostility. Freud, for example, cast the family drama as a human trauma. But Freud was no feminist.

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The construction of the control of the women whose identity had the women whose identity and discount of the women whose identity had been abound up with the standard they receive for those efforts, and by the consequences of family life for women's power, autonomy, dignity and health.

and health.

FEMINISTS also cheerfully accept the fact that irresistible historical currents — like the entry of a majority of women into the labor force — are directing us toward alternative family forms. Indeed, feminism is more the effect than the cause of these forces.

Perhaps more than any other group, feminists seriously think about and experiment with new ways in which peculiantly the complex of the family, their activity in changing it may seem particularly frightning.

To be sure, feminists disagree about the family, Some declare it Osbolette machines will replace mothers as the rearers of children. Others predict that the family will change, but we will not abandon stable, infilmate groups in which different generations live together.

er. A few also assert that the bond be-tween mother and child is a unique mingling of nature and nature, of phy-slology, psychology and culture. Oth-ers, far greater in number, argue that fathers as well as mothers, communal groups as well as the family, can love and parent children.

BUT FEMINISTS HAVE reached a rough consensus on other questions. They reason that women ought to claim their share of human freedom. They ought to be able to decide, without paying a social price. If and when they will become mothers. They ought to be able to choose, without penalty, if they will be heterosexual or not. Constructing a family ethic, the women's movement endorses the principle of equality, it assumes that adults who live together ought equitably to

share pleasure and power, love and do-mestic duties, delight and drudgery. Paradoxically, more and more wom-en who do not call themselves femin-

Paradoxically, more and more womcon who do not call themselves femintist are now acting on some feminist
principles in their over-robust
for all married American women
are now in the public blory force. In
both the public sphere of the outside
world and the private sphere of the
known women are finding egalitarianism more attractive.

Although most women still favor
marriage, over half believe that being
a parent is not essential for martial
happiness. If women are ralaing children, they are more often blurring the
traditional division of labor between
girls' work, usually around the house,
and boys work, rarely around the
bouse.

IN BRIEF, history is apparently closing a gap between what many American feminists would like them to do. Not surprisingly, women are less were the property of the surprising that they once the surprising that they once the surprising that they once the surprising that the surprising morning, a middle-aged woman attended a Jecture about American women, their work and their families. When it ended, she spoke up. She had gone back to school, asho said, and had never been happier. Then one day her son had come home,

sat in the kitchen, looked up and asked,
What about some bacca and eggs?
The woman commented, 'I looked
back at him, and I supped, I told him
to make them himself. He was grown to
make them himself. He was grown to
have a frijen pan attached to my hand
for the rest of my life.
She added, 'He haan't gotten over the
shock yet.'
She added, 'He haan't gotten over the
shock yet.'
Feminism may be as shocking to
many people as that mother was to her
son. Both are firmly saying that we
have asked too much of mothers and
given too little, that our public and our
private lives are undergoing, slowly,
erratically, but irreversally, an evolution if not a revolution.
The better part of wisdom, they are
saying is to see, not to smear, that process and to realize that ferminism is not
a scapegoat, but a sympathetic, active
witness to profound changes in the
ways in which we grow up, toil, dream
and tove.

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Catharine R. Stimpson is currently Professor of English, Rutgers University, having taught at Barnard College from 1963 to 1980, a well-known speaker and writer on well-known speaker and writer on the women's movement, she is the author of "J.R.R. Tolkien" and of poetry and fiction. Her book series on women, gender and society for the University of Chicago Press will begin publication in 1983.



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