

### **Gloria Steinem - Handout #3**

**Source:** Gloria Steinem, *Living the Revolution*, May 31, 1970. Vassar College.

[1] President Simpson, members of the faculty, families and friends, first brave and courageous male graduates of Vassar- and Sisters...

[2] But this is the year of Women's Liberation. Or at least, it the year the press has discovered a movement that has been strong for several years now, and reported it as a small, privileged, rather lunatic event instead of the major revolution in consciousness—in everyone's consciousness—male or female that I believe it truly is.

[3] It may have been part of that revolution that caused the senior class to invite me here—and I am grateful. It is certainly a part of that revolution that I, a devout non-speaker, am managing to stand before you at all: I don't know whether you will be grateful or not. The important thing is that we are spending this time together, considering the larger implications of a movement that some call "feminist" but should more accurately be called humanist; a movement that is an integral part of rescuing this country from its old, expensive patterns of elitism, racism, and violence.

[4] The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to un-learn. We are filled with the Popular Wisdom of several centuries just past, and we are terrified to give it up. Patriotism means obedience, age means wisdom, woman means submission, black means inferior—these are preconceptions imbedded so deeply in our thinking that we honestly may not know that they are there...

[5] Part of living this revolution is having the scales fall from our eyes. Everyday we see small obvious truths that we had missed before. Our histories, for instance, have generally been written for and about white men. Inhabited countries were "discovered" when the first white male set foot there, and most of us learned more about any one European country than we did about Africa and Asia combined.

[6] I confess that, before some consciousness-changing of my own, I would have thought the Women History courses springing up around the country belonged in the same cultural ghetto as home economics. The truth is that we need Women's Studies almost as much as we need Black Studies, and for exactly the same reason: too many of us have been allowed from a "good" education believing that everything from political power to scientific discovery was the province of white males. I don't know about Vassar, but at Smith we learned almost nothing about women.

[7] We believed, for instance, that the vote had been "given" to women in some whimsical, benevolent fashion. We never learned about the long desperation of women's struggle, or about the strength and wisdom of the women who led it. We heard about the men who risked their lives in the Abolitionist Movement, but seldom about the women; even though women, as in many movements of social reform, had played the major role. We knew a great deal more about the outdated, male-supremacist theories of Sigmund Freud than we did about societies in which women had equal responsibility, or even ruled.

[8] I don't mean to equate our problems of identity with those that flowed from slavery. But, as Gunnar Myrdal pointed out in his classic study, *An American Dilemma*, "In drawing a parallel between the

position of, and the feeling toward, women and Negroes, we are uncovering a fundamental basis of our culture." Blacks and women suffer from the same myths of childlike natures; smaller brains; inability to govern themselves, much less white men; limited job skills; identity as sex objects—and so on. Ever since slaves arrived on these shores and were given the legal status of wives—that is, chattel—our legal reforms have followed on each other's heels. (With women, I might add, still lagging considerably behind. Nixon's Commission on Women concluded that the Supreme Court was sanctioning discrimination against women—discrimination that it had long ago ruled unconstitutional in the case of blacks—but the Commission report remains mysteriously unreleased by the White House. An Equal Rights Amendment, now up again before the Senate, has been delayed by a male-chauvinist Congress for 47 years.) Neither blacks nor women have role-models in history: models of individuals who have been honored in authority outside the home.

[9] Before we go on to other reasons why Women's Liberation is Man's Liberation, too—and why this incarnation of the women's movement is inseparable from the larger revolution—perhaps we should clear the air of a few more myths.

[10] The myth that women are biologically inferior, for instance. In fact, an equally good case could be made for the reverse. Women live longer than men. That's always being cited as proof that we work them to death, but the truth is: women live longer than men even when groups being studied are monks and nuns. We survived Nazi concentration camps better, are protected against heart attacks by our female hormones, are less subject to many diseases, withstand surgery better, and are so much more durable at every stage of life that nature conceives 20 to 50 percent more males just to keep the balance going. The Auto Safety Committee of the American Medical Association has come to the conclusion that women are better drivers because they are less emotional than men. I never thought I would hear myself quoting the AMA, but that one was too good to resist.

[11] A second myth is that women are already being treated equally in this society. We ourselves have been guilty of perpetuating this myth, especially at upper economic levels where women have grown fond of being lavishly maintained as ornaments and children. The chains may be made of mink and wall-to-wall carpeting, but they are still chains.

[12] The truth is that a woman with a college degree working full-time makes less than a black man with a high school degree working full-time. And black women make least of all. In many parts of the country New York City, for instance, woman has no legally-guaranteed right to rent an apartment, buy a house, get accommodations in a hotel, or be served in a public restaurant. She can be refused simply because of her sex. In some states, women cannot own property, and get longer jail sentences for the same crime. Women on welfare must routinely answer humiliating personal questions; male welfare recipients do not. A woman is the last to be hired, the first to be fired. Equal pay for equal work is the exception. Equal chance for advancement, especially at upper levels or at any level with authority over men, is rare enough to be displayed in a museum.

[13] As for our much-touted economic power, we make up only 5 percent of all the people in the country receiving \$10,000 a year or more. And that includes all the famous rich widows. We are 51 percent of all stockholders, a dubious honor these days, but we hold only 18 percent of the stock—and that is generally controlled by men. The power women have as consumers is comparable to that power all of us currently have as voters: we can choose among items presented to us, but we have little chance

to influence the presentation. Women's greatest power to date is her nuisance value. The civil rights, peace, and consumer movements are impressive examples of that.

[14] In fact, the myth of economic matriarchy in this country is less testimony to our power than to the resentment of the little power we do have.

[15] You may wonder why we have submitted to such humiliations all these years; why, indeed, women will sometimes deny that they are secondclass citizens at all.

[16] The answer lies in the psychology of secondclassness. Like all such groups, we come to accept what society says about us. And that is the most terrible punishment of all. We believe that we can only make it in the world by "uncle Tom-ing," by a real or pretended subservience to white males.

[17] Even when we come to understand that we, as individuals, are not secondclass, we still accept society's assessment of our group—a phenomenon psychologists refer to as Internalized Aggression. From this stems the desire to be the only woman in an office, an academic department, or any other part of the man's world. From this also stems women who put down their sisters—and my own profession of journalism has some of them. By writing or speaking of their non-conformist sisters in a disapproving, conformist way, they are essentially saying, "See what a real woman I am," and expecting to be rewarded by ruling-class approval and favors. That is only beginning to change.

[18] With women, the whole system reinforces this feeling of being a mere appendage. It's hard for a man to realize just how full of self-doubt we become as a result. Locked into suburban homes with the intellectual companionship of three-year-olds; locked into bad jobs, watching less-qualified men get promoted above us; trapped into poverty by a system that supposes our only identity is motherhood—no wonder we become pathetically grateful for small favors.

[19] I don't want to give the impression, though, that we want to join society exactly as it is. I don't think most women want to pick up slimline briefcases and march off to meaningless, de-personalized jobs. Nor do we want to be drafted—and women certainly should be drafted: even the readers of Seventeen Magazine were recently polled as being overwhelmingly in favor of women in National Service—to serve in an unconstitutional, racist, body-count war like the one in Indochina.

[20] We want to liberate men from those inhuman roles as well. We want to share the work and responsibility, and to have men share equal responsibility for the children.

[21] Probably the ultimate myth is that children must have fulltime mothers, and that liberated women make bad ones. The truth is that most American children seem to be suffering from too much mother and too little father. Women now spend more time with their homes and families than in any past or present society we know about. To get back to the sanity of the agrarian or joint-family system, we need free universal daycare. With that aid, as in Scandinavian countries, and with laws that permit women equal work and equal pay, men will be relieved of their role as sole breadwinner and stranger to his own children.

[22] No more alimony. Fewer boring wives, fewer child-like wives. No more so-called "Jewish mothers," who are simply normal ambitious human beings with all their ambitions confined to the house. No more wives who fall apart with the first wrinkle, because they've been taught their total identity depends on

their outsides. No more responsibility for another adult human being who has never been told she is responsible for her own life, and who sooner or later comes up with some version of, "If I hadn't married you, I could have been a star." And let's say it one more time because it such a great organizing tool, no more alimony. Women Liberation really is Men's Liberation, too.

[23] The family system that will emerge is a great subject of anxiety. Probably there will be a variety of choice. Colleague marriages, such as young people have now, with both partners going to law school or the Peace Corps together: that's one alternative. At least they share more than the kitchen and the bedroom. Communes, marriages that are valid for the child-rearing years only . . . there are many possibilities, but they can't be predicted. The growth of new forms must be organic.

[24] The point is that Women's Liberation is not destroying the American family; it is trying to build a human, compassionate alternative out of its ruins. Engels said that the paternalistic, 19th Century family system was the prototype of capitalism—with man, the capitalist; woman, the means of production; children the labor—and that the family would only change as the economic system did. Well, capitalism and the mythical American family seem to be in about the same shape.

[25] Of course, there are factors other than economic ones. As Margaret Mead says: No wonder marriage worked so well in the 19th century; people only lived to be fifty years old. And there are factors other than social reform that will influence women's work success. "No wonder women do less well in business," says a woman-executive. "They don't have wives." But the family is the first political unit, and to change it is the most radical act of all.

[26] Women have a special opportunity to live the revolution. By refusing to play their traditional role, they upset and displace the social structure around them. We may be subject to ridicule and suppression, just as men were when they refused to play their traditional role by going to war. But those refusals together are a hope for peace. Anthropologist Geoffrey Corer discovered that the few peaceful human tribes had a common characteristic: sex roles were not polarized, boys weren't taught that manhood depended on aggression (or short hair or military skills), and girls weren't taught that womanhood depended on submission (or working at home instead of the fields).

[27] One final myth: that women are more moral than men. We are not more moral, we are only uncorrupted by power. But until the leaders of our country put into action the philosophy that Bobby Seals has set down until the old generation of male chauvinists is out of office—women in positions of power can increase our chances of peace a great deal. I personally would rather have had Margaret Mead as president during the past six years of Vietnam than either Johnson or Nixon. At least, she wouldn't have had her masculinity to prove.

[28] Much of the trouble this country is in has to do with the Masculine Mystique: the idea that manhood somehow depends on the subjugation of other people. It's a bipartisan problem.

[29] The challenge to all of us, and to you men and women who are graduating today, is to live a revolution, not to die for one. There has been too much killing, and the weapons are now far too terrible. This revolution has to change consciousness, to upset the injustice of our current hierarchy by refusing to honor it, and to live a life that enforces a new social justice.

[30] Because the truth is none of us can be liberated if other groups are not. Women's Liberation is a bridge between black and white women, but also between the construction workers and the suburbanites, between Nixon's Silent Majority and the young people they hate and fear. Indeed, there's much more injustice and rage among working-class women than among the much-publicized white radicals.

[31] Women are sisters, they have many of the same problems, and they can communicate with each other. "You only get radicalized, as black activists always told us, on your own thing." Then we make the connection to other injustices in society. The Women's Movement is an important revolutionary bridge. And we are building it.

[32] I know it's traditional on such an occasion to talk about "entering the world." But this is an untraditional generation: you have made the campus part of the world. I thank you for it.

[33] I don't need to tell you what awaits you in this country. You know that much better than I. I will only say that my heart goes with you, and that I hope we will be working together. Divisions of age, race, class, and sex are old-fashioned and destructive.

[34] One more thing, especially to the sisters, because I wish someone had said it to me; it would have saved me so much time.

[35] You don't have to play one role in this revolutionary age above all others. If you're willing to pay the price for it, you can do anything you want to do. And the price is worth it.