

Why Study Feminism?

by Judy Chicago

In my early days of professional practice, I encountered considerable gender discrimination, notably in repeatedly being told that “one couldn’t be a woman and an artist too”. Because I was brought up in a political household in which there was a belief in equal rights for women, I had an awareness that what I was up against was plain old sexism. But whenever I tried to discuss this, I was admonished with the question: “what are you; Some kind of *suffragette*?” as if this was a disease.



As a result, it took me almost a decade to begin to learn about women’s history, which I turned to in a desperate effort to discover if any women before me had encountered obstacles similar to what I was facing. Along the way, I learned that many women before me had not only had the same experiences but had written and theorized about them, creating a body of knowledge that empowered and inspired me. It is this largely unknown information that is embodied in *The Dinner Party*.



It is popular today to claim that “*feminism in passe*” which - in my opinion - is simply a modern-day version of the attitude towards the suffrage movement in my day. Recently, I was asked by a forty year old woman artist to act as her graduate advisor, to which I agreed. She is very talented and until she was 34, she pursued her career in a single-minded way. Then she got married and within a few years, gave birth to two children. Her career came to an abrupt halt as she struggled to balance art, marriage and motherhood.

It wasn’t only a matter of time though that was an issue. More important was the fact that whenever she went into her studio, she felt guilty about not being with her children and whenever she was with her children, she felt guilty about not making art. Suddenly, she realized why feminism is important and began reading the substantive literature by women who had faced and overcome the same feelings. She also turned to me because her other advisor to tell her to “keep going” when she didn’t know where to go.

The renowned historian Gerda Lerner often bemoaned the fact that women do not know what women before them thought and taught (and I would add, created). As a result, women are caught in a cycle of repetition. They go through life experiences that others have had and theorized about without being able to build upon those theories. That is why feminism is important, especially - though not exclusively - for women. Feminism represents a body of knowledge that allows us to break the cycle of repetition and live our lives based upon KNOWLEDGE rather than IGNORANCE. Many people have told me that seeing *The Dinner Party* changed their lives. Their viewing experience demonstrates what knowledge can do.

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