

May Sinclair: Idealism-Feminism and the Suffragist Movement

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Abstract

Never heard of her? May Sinclair is one of the least appreciated founders of feminism by her contemporaries as evidenced by the lack of the appearance of her ideas in contemporary debate and anthologies documenting feminist views. This is unfortunate because she offers a unique and valuable contribution to feminist ideas through her involvement in the universal suffrage debate and the development of her idealist-feminist arguments. Her ideas continue to offer a unique solution to the antagonism between men and women. She is, by her own accurate description, of a class which maintains a psychic, conscious identity beyond limiting conditions.

May Sinclair (England: 1863-1946) and Sir Almroth Wright (Ireland: 1861-1947) developed strong parallel interests in philosophy, literature, science, and feminism, but their interpretations of these areas led Sinclair and Wright to diametrically opposed viewpoints. Nicely, their individual conclusions coalesce in public defenses of their distinctive positions on feminism and the suffrage movement: Sir Almroth Wright argues for physicalism as the basis for the established societal roles of men and women in his March 27, 1912 letter to the London Times, whereas May Sinclair defends the reconciliation of the sexes through the distinctiveness of the prompting Life Force in her 1912 essay Feminism.¹

¹ Although the main focus of this paper is on the specific debate between Wright and Sinclair as expressed in his *Times* letter and in her essay, "Feminism," complementary works by each are used for further clarification of the issues. Sir Almroth Wright used the *Times* letter as a basis for a more sustained argument in *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage*. May Sinclair's novel *The Tree of Heaven*, in which the character Dorothea becomes involved in the suffragist movement and all the issues surrounding this movement at the time, complements Sinclair's arguments in "Feminism."

In this paper, I first present the context of the clash between May Sinclair, philosopher and woman of letters, and Sir Almroth Wright, philosopher and man of science, over the concept of feminism and the suffrage movement. I then identify the particulars of Sinclair's attack on Wright's physicalist position as the basis for his arguments against feminist demands for change, power, and the vote. Next, I examine the question of whether or not Sinclair's Idealist philosophy is able to include a defense of feminism as well as the individual feminist role within the suffragist movement, showing Sinclair's unique solution to the antagonism between men and women. Finally, through the findings of this inquiry, I conclude with new understandings of the significance of May Sinclair as a philosopher and a woman of letters in the development of feminism.

Sir Almroth Wright, a distinguished medical doctor and researcher, ranking with the immunologists Pasteur, Ehrlich and Metchnikoff, is credited with developing "an entirely new school of medicine, that of therapeutic immunization by vaccines" (Colebrook 977). His first degree in 1882 was in modern literature and he thought of taking up literature instead of medicine; he wrote more than one hundred and thirty scientific publications "with the most scrupulous regard to literary quality" (977). As an essentially self-trained philosopher, Wright developed a new system of logic of the human mind and philosophy in a posthumously published manuscript Alethetropic Logic (1953). Recognized as a respected authority on the Old Testament and a champion of Protestantism, Wright has been described as "almost theatrically puritanical in his attitude to food and drink, and blatantly prejudiced against women" (Reid 5).² George Bernard

² Reid follows this comment about "Sir Almost Wright," as Wright was characterized by some critics, with the following story: "The man who probably perpetuated Wright's popular fame was George Bernard

Shaw had numerous conversations with Wright; he even ridiculed Wright's views of women in the character of Sir Colenso Ridgeon in The Doctor's Dilemma. "In The Doctor's Dilemma, Shaw takes Wright's view of the inferior and irrational feminine mind and applies it remorselessly to his gallery of scientific men" (Holroyd 160). Having a keen interest in the social and political issues of his day, especially issues surrounding women's suffrage, he published both an influential letter to the Times, March 27, 1912, and in 1913, The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage (7). The Times article is said "to have caused the whole of the Irish vote in Parliament to swing against universal franchise" (Reid 149). At the very least, this belief indicates the influential place of Wright in the suffragist debate. Among many honors, including several honorary degrees from universities across Europe, Wright was knighted and elected FRS in 1906 (Colebrook 978). Wright brought these considerable credentials and esteemed reputation to the debate on the suffrage movement.

Sir Almroth Wright stepped into a raging debate in the Times, which began with an editorial condemning what was described as an "outrage" when some shop windows were broken in East London by suffragists. This editorial identified "militant hysteria" as the root cause of the suffragist agitation and suggested "that doctors have direct knowledge of this hysteria through their medical consultations with militant suffragist patients" (Wright, "Letter"). The Times' use of the passionate words *outrage* and

Shaw, who modeled his character, Sir Colenso Ridgeon, in The Doctor's Dilemma, on the doctor scientist, and gave the phrase 'stimulate the phagocytes' to Edwardian hypochondriacs. Shaw had been visiting Wright's laboratory when one of Wright's assistants happened to say that yet another patient had applied for treatment that afternoon. Shaw then turned to Wright and asked him what would happen if more people applied for help than could properly be looked after. In his dogmatic fashion, Wright answered: 'we should have to consider which life was the best worth saving.' Shaw put his index finger to his nose and said: 'Ha! There I smell a drama – there I smell drama.' The doctor's dilemma had crystallized. When he went to see the play, Wright walked out. He thought it a travesty of his true beliefs and work" (Holroyd 160).

hysteria suggested from the outset of the debate that suffragist agitation was viewed as an unthinkable and appalling violation of the male social and political establishment. The controversy heated up when Dr. Leonard Williams responded in the letters column of the Times, claiming to have empirical evidence of the “suffragist hysteria” connected to women’s physiological emergencies (Carre-Smith).

In opposition, Dr. Ellie Sayers entered the debate, trying to provide a scientific focus to dispel the bandwagon effect around this malaise. She claimed that the argument was created through rhetoric, rather than demonstrated by science, to account for suffragist behavior described as an “outrage” (Sayers). As the debate progressed through various issues of the Times during March of 1912, Sir Almroth Wright’s letter of March 27 fueled the anti-suffragist paranoia by cataloguing women who suffer “militant hysteria” as (i) those who “take advantage of physical violence,” (ii) those who are “strangers to joy, women in whom instincts lay suppressed have in the end broken into flame,” and (iii) the incomplete, for whom “one side of their nature has gone through atrophy” (Wright “Letter”).³ Wright agreed that these are the type of women “Dr. Leonard Williams’ recent letter brought so distinctly before our eyes – the women who are poisoned by misplaced self esteem” (Sinclair, Feminism 13).

On the basis of his widely-recognized professional status as a scientist, Wright’s arguments against feminism would hold credibility, and his position would establish him as a spokesman for populist objections to the suffragist movements (Sinclair, Feminism

³ Letters objecting to Wright’s views occur on March 30, 1912, from T.H. Baty and Emily Lutyens, March 30, 1912, as well as from Silvanus P. Thompson. May Sinclair wrote a letter of June 17, published in the Times on June 19, which focuses on the treatment of women as political prisoner. “It ridiculed the government’s acknowledging the leaders of the militant suffragist movement as political prisoners by removing them to the first division, and so practically admitting the justice of their claim, while classifying the obedient rank and file as common criminals. In terms of the logic of comparative guilt, the militant

13).⁴ So, the continued credibility of the suffragist movement relied upon a retort from an equally qualified and respected feminist. May Sinclair entered the fray with a castigating response to Sir Almroth Wright in Feminism, published by The Women Writers' Suffrage League. As one of the popular novelists of the early twentieth century in England and the United States, Sinclair wrote twenty-four novels, two major works of philosophy, poems, short stories, translations, and reviews.⁵ She knew and encouraged a wide circle of writers including Bertrand Russell, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Ford, T.S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle, Dorothy Richardson, Violet Hunt, and Charlotte Mew; like them, she “strove to uncover the mysteries of the individual psyche and the differences between the individual woman and the individual man” (Barash 415). During her only formal schooling at Cheltenham Ladies' College between 1881 and 1882, Sinclair began studying philosophy under Dorothea Beale, developing and later defining her views against the reigning realism in A Defense of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions (1917) and distinguishing between primary and secondary consciousness in The New Idealism (1922). Raised in a strict, religious Victorian family, Sinclair used the “philosophies of Plato, Spinoza, and Kant as ways to resist Christian dogma and to search for a more universal truth” (Barash 414). For her work in philosophy, Sinclair was distinguished by election to membership in the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy in 1923. In her philosophic and literary works, May Sinclair brought “together the compact, imagistic language of poetry and the hard, moral

leaders would probably plead ‘more guilty’, because they must be held more responsible than the rank and file” (Boll 97).

⁴ Wright's erroneously connecting expertise from one domain to another without any direct relationship between these areas is a fallacious strategy commonly called “Improper Appeal to Authority”. See Trudy Govier, A Practical Study of Argument (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1985).

questioning of idealist philosophy” (415). Sinclair used both the strength of her language and philosophical acumen to vanquish Sir Almroth Wright’s arguments against the suffragist movement.⁶

In Feminism, Sinclair attacks Wright’s limiting physicalist position, his defective argumentation, his pseudo-science, and his irrational defense of exclusive male power. Wright’s physicalist attack on the suffragist is based on a description of a natural, material, conventional contract implicitly formed between the sexes and a sustained questioning of the inherent intellectual ability of women. Sinclair argues against Wright’s explanation that the relationship between the sexes is founded in a contract to which the woman contributes gentleness, personal refinement, modesty, and joyous maternity, and the male provides physical and material support – a contract which is infringed “when the woman breaks out into violence: when she jettisons her personal refinement: when she is ungrateful: and, possibly, when she places a quite extravagantly “journalistic rhetoric” (Wright, The Unexpurgated 20) in place of sound scientific argumentation to produce an *ad hominem* high estimate upon her intellectual powers” (Sinclair, Feminism 1). Sinclair also attacks Wright’s explanation that the operation of women’s minds is based on emotional reflexes, providing gratification and producing “neural distress” whenever intellectual analysis or judgment is attempted (Wright The Unexpurgated 36). He believes that it will be impossible to educate women to become the intellectual equal or better of men because their starting point is so far behind the male’s inherent ability (40). His implicit conclusion is that the suffragists upset the

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the works of May Sinclair, see Hrisey Dimitrakis Zegger’s May Sinclair, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976). An earlier work by Theophilus E.M. Boll, Miss May Sinclair: Novelist, is also useful.

⁶ Notice the David and Goliath differences between the authority commanded by Wright and Sinclair.

“natural” order of society, create false aspirations for women, and create conditions which cause antagonism between the sexes. This is a version of the defective fit-by-nature argument.

Sinclair points out Wright’s overall defective argument form, developed by using a fallacious attack on “a whole class, a whole sex” (Sinclair Feminism 1), and by a *questionable generalization* based on the single instance of “the outrage.” Sinclair charges Wright with capitalizing on his reputation and the position as a man of science to portray misplaced pseudo-scientific views as if they were scientific, and “using biased rhetoric and examples to support his opinion and suppressing all the rest” (1) while unscrupulously appealing to the instincts, emotions, and momentary prejudices of the “man who reads the papers.” Sinclair argues that Wright’s legitimate expertise in physical science lends illegitimate weight or esteem to his criticisms of the suffragist movement. As Sinclair points out in Feminism, “the man (not medical) who chuckles over his pronouncements in the papers, thinks that this sound logic and physiology; that it is the psychology of sex!” (4). Sinclair charges that Wright, a man of science, is decidedly unscientific when he used an insufficient sample to preclude any reliable generalization and adequate testing of his hypothesis. She further charges that he does not attempt to defend his hypothesis against alternative hypotheses; that he uses facts that fly in the face of his views; and that he classifies according to his own attitudinal prejudices, leaving out any counter evidence that does not reconcile with these biases.⁷

⁷ Wright’s defective line of reasoning is almost a case of “wishful thinking” on the part of a committed physicalist. The identification of a non-existent physical cause (hysteria) is used to account for the mental instability which creates violence and social disorder in the suffragist movement, issuing in a conflict or war between the sexes and, finally, providing a reason for the continued disenfranchisement of women. This line of reasoning is distinguished by the lack of any attempt to provide empirical support for any part of it. A rhetorical claim (hysteria) is used to support a line of reasoning which requires empirical verification.

Sinclair concludes that Wright's defective reasoning panders to the lowest level of the 'man who reads the papers' and encourages conflict between the sexes.

Sinclair's criticisms of Wright's defective argument lead her to condemn his notion of a physiological disorder or hysteria as the cause of deviant behavior in women. His pseudo-scientific views to defend the unsupported claim that militant suffragists suffer from a disease, a viral hysteria, which causes violent behavior. Wright associates this disease with militant suffragists who oppose prescribed, socially acceptable domestic roles, creating a divisive conflict between women and men, and establishing by their violent behavior that they are incapable of rationally exercising the franchise to vote (Wright, The Unexpurgated 84-85). Sinclair finds the development of this notion bizarre: what starts out as a "claim" for the cause of violent suffragist behavior soon becomes the "root physical cause," identifying, without empirical support, suffragist behavior as a disease transmitted on the basis of organized social connections between women aiming at substantial political change. Sinclair condemns Wright's cure for the suffragist disease: a return to the traditional state in which women accept their God-given domestic, child-bearing, sexual roles.

Sinclair attacks Wright's defective argumentation and pseudo-scientific procedure as false premises which lead to two false conclusions. First, Wright falsely concludes a position of the separation of the sexes. He argues that the unity of the sexes is based on women accepting a passive, subservient, defined social position and that only man should be in positions of authority, leadership, and power. According to Wright, any alteration of this established order leads to the separation and conflict between the sexes, prompted by women who are guilty of fighting for some misplaced self-esteem which, when

frustrated, produces hysteria, chaos, and violence. Second, Wright falsely concludes that women are incapable of exercising economic and political power. This claimed failure – in the case of the Canadian debate about women’s right to vote – produced the view that giving women the right to vote would give husbands two votes essentially, which disadvantages bachelors. He maintains that it is both against the nature of women and the rules of society for women to desire to move out of their compliant, dependent, domestic roles.

Wright argues against economic equality, maintaining that it is against woman’s physical makeup to work equally and reliably side by side with men. Further, because it is contrary to the economic well-being of a marketplace that is rightfully controlled by men, woman’s nature should prompt her to seek fulfillment in the non-economic, domestic sphere. Finally, Wright also argues against women exercising political power, maintaining that the exercise of political power offends woman’s refined nature because it includes the possibility of the rational and morally acceptable use of violence, either indirectly through voting-in representatives who are morally positioned to punish political offenders, or through acting as one of these representatives who have the right to exercise violence. The suffragists, according to Wright, have demonstrated through their irrational, hysterical, violent behavior that they are neither capable of the rational exercise of political power nor capable of choosing representatives to exercise that power (Wright, The Unexpurgated 84).

Sinclair condemns both these conclusions because they are based on faulty premises and because they do not accurately represent the changing social reality. She not only identifies the defects in Wright’s arguments but also the defective motivation for

his conclusions. Sinclair points out that ultimately Wright's irrational argumentation is motivated by fear – fear that women, in their attempts to achieve economic and political power, will understand that power is both gained and held through the exclusive right to use morally justifiable, physical force to maintain power – and fear that either the representatives elected will be women or the men elected will be subject to the political power of women.⁸ Sinclair's astute and caustic evaluation of Wright's position concludes that he adopts illogical premises in the hope of defending and protecting the source of male economic and political power - the vote. She recognizes that Wright's desire to deny women the power of the vote forces him to use defective argumentation to characterize women as irrational, illogical, and non-spiritual and to establish a bogus disease to account for why women use violence to gain economic and political power.

Sinclair's attacks on Wright's physicalist position and its implications to feminism and the suffrage movement are prompted by her Idealist philosophical perspective, valuing individual consciousness as the initial reality to be achieved by the human person. She makes a distinction between men and women whose acquaintance with Life Force – which she defines as the unified will of the consciousness and the body – prompts them to full and complete self-awareness.⁹ Although men and women are distinguished by different translations of the Life Force, they can finally achieve unity at

⁸ In "Defense of Man," *English Review*, July 1912, Sinclair points out that although there may be contemporary differences between the material manifestations of the Life Force in men and women, with women exhibiting a higher spiritual role, in the past, men were the progenitors of spiritual/religious movements. Spiritual completeness could be achieved if men re-focused their manifestation of the Life Force away from the mere accumulation of wealth back to their spiritual beginning, with the help of women.

⁹ This kind of engagement occurs as the individual's will focuses on the energy of the Life Force: "It is through his will, through his need, want, desire, interest, affection, love, that he appears as self-determined. It is his will or energy that, whether in resistance or obedience, knits him to the forces of the 'real' world outside himself. It is his will that in submitting or aspiring, in adoration or longing, links him to the immanent and transcendent Reality, that he calls God" (Sinclair, *A Defense* 69)

the level of spiritual consciousness. These individuals are engaged in the world, creating the world and their place in it, through interaction of the primary (content) and secondary (reflective) consciousness, aware of the Life Force which connects the individual to the unified (spiritual) consciousness (Sinclair, *Feminism* 33).¹⁰ There is no passive detachment from the conscious lives of others for either men or women and no reliance for meaning outside of the spiritual self. This grounding of reality in the Ideal and the consciousness is the foundation for Sinclair's defense of feminism.

While promoting this unity between the sexes, Sinclair's feminism, at the same time, distinguishes a feminine uniqueness – a respect for life and death. Woman is the reservoir of the vital Life Force; through it woman makes use of the unified energies of her body and mind. Like the poet/seer, her mystical understanding of the world transcends apparent physical conflicts based on material, economic, social and political distinctions which make no real difference to the possibility of psychic unity and harmony – a reconciliation between the self and the divine Absolute.¹¹ Through the creative impulse of the Life Force, woman promotes humanity, not only in the physical manifestations of childbirth and child nurturing, but also in the translation of the creative impulse into other life-promoting activities of the intellectual, visionary, and mystical woman committed to social and political change (33) in order to promote a unified consciousness (14).

As part of Sinclair's defense of Idealist-Feminism, Sinclair supports the individual, personal feminist commitment to social and political change. Sinclair's

¹⁰ Rebecca Kinnamon Neff suggests the importance of Sinclair's mysticism in "'New Mysticism' in the Writings of May Sinclair and T.S. Eliot," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 26:1 (Spring, 1980). pp. 82-108.

philosophical perspective on feminism supports the reconciliation of the sexes; as she says, “I am not an ultra-feminist, and I do not think that the suffrage movement is a war of one sex against another ... I hold no brief for women against men” (30-31). Sinclair’s particular brand of feminism includes men and women together as suffragists whose actions are guided by consciousness in a triumph of the recognition of the Life Force. The equalizing factor between men and women is the common connection to the Life Force and the conscious respect for this unifying force. By necessity, this respect for the Life Force translates into practical affairs to address economic, political, *and* social inequalities between men and women.

In her defense of the individual’s commitment to Idealist-Feminism, Sinclair explains how the individual is able to connect with the collective; therefore, Sinclair’s Idealist-Feminism supports the individual’s involvement in the suffragist movement. Idealist-Feminists join the collective movement in a particular act or acts when the act is in response to a legitimate prompting and expression of the Life Force (Sinclair, *Feminism* 46). In this way, the Idealist-Feminist philosopher, May Sinclair, answers the major charge against Idealism: the Idealist-Feminist need not be detached from the world of practical affairs. This individual, unlike the myopic physicalist, moves towards practical problems with a conscious awareness of the conscious whole, analyzing the pieces from within this unity rather than desperately trying to make physical connections with no apparent rationale behind this attempted unity. Because Sinclair’s defense of Idealism logically connects to her defense of feminism and leads to her defense of the

¹¹ “There is everything in that everlasting readiness to bring forth; everything in those profound and intorissable wells of instinct, in the stream of the Life Force, of which woman is pre-eminently the reservoir” (Sinclair, *Feminism* 30).

suffrage movement, there is no contradiction between Idealism-Feminism and the suffragist movement.

Even though Sinclair thinks consciousness and the Life Force must be considered as the starting point, she does not preclude action right up to and including the point of violence if that action is based on conscious deliberation (43). Accepting violence is neither a giving in, nor a concession to, nor an addition to, her theory; it is a fundamental condition. Sinclair maintains that life must be protected at all costs. If the Life Force is violated, violence is allowed. In this way, the use of violence to protect life is fundamental to Sinclair's definition of the Life Force. Moreover, a movement to violence expresses a joining of the individual consciousness into the conscious collective spirit, allowing individual consciousness to experience happiness and even ecstasy in this joining with the collective soul. Certainly, Sinclair, the Idealist, is concerned that the individual acting within a movement is not destroyed at the conscious level, for this destruction could indeed happen when an individual is submerged into the collective of the herd, losing control of individuality at the conscious level and becoming absorbed into the irrational Vortex. In such a situation, both the individual and the collective will fall into a state of chaos. Violence ensuing out of a state of chaos feeds on itself and does not connect to any real, long-term changes in both material and spiritual conditions. But "the end – if it indeed can only be accomplished through violence – will justify it; the justice of History, which judges only after the event, will defend it as it has defended similar violences in the past. ... The Suffragists have tried rose-water - oceans of rose-water - and it has done nothing for them. No wonder if they have abandoned it."¹²

¹² The Vortex draws characters into its chaos; individual consciousness is detached from psychic unity and submerged in the undefined and directionless movement.

Sinclair's endorsement of active engagement in the feminist struggle entitles her to a prominent place in the history of the feminist movement. But even within her own lifetime, the decline in the general reputation of Idealism and the surging popularity of physical realism marginalized the strength of her vision. Among her contemporary feminists, her distinctive voice for the mediation and reconciliation of the differences between men and women seemed ambiguous and timid against the voices strident for the separation of the sexes. Within the feminist movement, the depth of her intellectual, critical, self-reflective involvement in the movement separated her from those feminists concerned with single-minded political action.

As a feminist philosopher and woman of letters, May Sinclair offers a unique solution to the apparent antagonisms between men and women. Sinclair's vision of the world is an integrated whole, only appreciated through an understanding of her multi-faceted approach in support of a feminism that includes both men and women. Her unified approach in support of feminism from this multi-faceted base provides a critical perspective which advances feminism beyond a mere physical movement to a higher spiritual consciousness. In Feminism, Sinclair makes several significant contributions to the development of feminist philosophy and literature. She plays a major part in an important debate on the issue of universal suffrage. As an Idealist-Feminist philosopher, Sinclair develops a powerful, logical position against the defective, biased view of the anti-suffragist, Sir Almroth Wright, demonstrating through her essay Feminism that controlled intellectual involvement is preferable to a biased emotional response. She elevates the debate beyond the rhetoric of the man 'who reads the papers.'

Sinclair infuses Idealism into the suffrage debate to forge reconciliation through the Life Force of the conflict between men and women. She logically demonstrates the place of violence within the feminist movement while arguing for the rational debate among individuals within the movement. These philosophical tenets contribute to the self-reflective growth of the feminist movements. Although Sinclair recognizes the need for material change, she is not satisfied with only material change: she demands a transformation of the involvement of the individual at the conscious level, seeking spiritual unity. She speaks to men and women on an intellectual and emotional level, involving them in the depth of her ideas through the dramatization of the concepts using fictional characters.

Sinclair's major contribution to the debate on feminism and the suffrage movement is her clear focus on the identification of the root struggle between men and women in the debate on the vote and the proposed reconciliation of this struggle. She identifies the cause as the fear that if men lose their exclusive right to vote, they will also lose their exclusive right to exercise violence in support of that power.¹³ Sinclair herself represents the personal embodiment of the woman feared by male power – a passionate woman in control of her psychic life, conscious of divine reality, beyond the illusions of temporally bound pseudo-science and of a class which maintains a psychic, conscious identity beyond physical limiting conditions, creating in full communion with the Life Force, like the mystic poets and musicians – and the suffragist.¹⁴ As a participant in the

¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft makes a similar claim about the violence and fear. See: Jim Gough's "Mary Wollstonecraft's Argumentative Strategy" in Post Scriptum, vol. 2, Issue 5, July, 2005.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Janet Panuska, retired Professor of English Literature, Red Deer College, who by her enthusiasm and dogged determination fired my continuing interest in pursuing this work on the writings of May Sinclair. I owe her my continuing need to pursue the almost forgotten early feminist writers, whose ideas should not be lost in contemporary feminist debates.

initial debate on feminism and the suffrage movement, Sinclair is a model for feminist leadership; May Sinclair defines, evaluates and demonstrates the individual's conscious agreement to participate in self-definition and self-fulfillment in the feminist movement.

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