attributed simply to capitalism; even a revolutionary change in the economic system would fail to end the oppression of women in their view.[8] For Radical feminists the cause lay with men, or the system of patriarchy maintained by male violence. Consequently they focussed much more on the biological basis of the female condition and on the nuclear family as the key institution for maintaining male control. Ultimately they believed that only the ending of the tyranny of the family role would achieve real freedom.[9] This implied that women must control their own sexuality, emancipate themselves from traditional assumptions about female passivity and begin to make choices about their sexuality; they argued that it was equally legitimate for a woman to be celibate, heterosexual, bi-sexual or lesbian. Since most feminists came to share this belief in choice for women, the Radical critique was less divisive than it might appear, though in time their increasing emphasis on lesbianism as the most desirable expression of feminism did create friction within the movement.

Issues and Campaigns

In view of the devolved character of women's liberation it was inevitable that the activists would focus on a wide range of issues and that the priorities would change over time. For the sake of simplicity this account will consider these campaigns in three groups dealing with marriage,divorce and violence, sexuality, and economic grievances.

As we have seen, by the 1960s the traditional institutions of marriage, the family and motherhood had attracted a good deal of criticism among women generally; and for feminists of all kinds they appeared to be the key to female subordination and the chief expression of women's exploitation. For younger women the immediate solution lay in postponing or rejecting marriage and maternity in favour of either a career or some alternative personal relationship. Yet marriage continued to gain in popularity until 1972 when the peak was reached. Moreover, it was even more common amongst women than men; whereas up to the 1940s 15 per cent of women remained lifelong spinsters, and 8 per cent of men, by the 1970s only 5 per cent of women and 7 per cent of men did so.[10] Subsequently as marriage lost popularity it was to a large extent simply replaced by cohabitation. By 1983 some 12 per cent of unmarried women aged 18–49 were cohabiting, for some of whom this offered an alternative to and for others a route towards marriage.[11] For those who did marry the marital state lost a good deal of its permanency

Table 11. 1 Petitions Filed for Divorce in England and Wales 1956–1985

1956-60	137,400
1961-65	188,200
1966-70	284,400
1971-75	608,800
1976-80	812,400
1981-85	884,800

Source: A.H. Halsey, *British Social Trends* (1988), p. 80

at this time in view of the rising divorce rate. However, not all feminists welcomed this, for it still seemed likely that easier divorce would offer men a Casanova's Charter. In fact, large numbers of women availed themselves of the 1969 divorce reform which enabled them to escape after three years from a marriage that had irretrievably broken down. In enacting this measure parliament was almost certainly motivated primarily by a belief that the existing law actually undermined the whole institution of marriage by prolonging unhappy marriages and thereby causing distress for all concerned. Reform certainly unleashed a wave of petitions from those previously trapped in unsatisfactory relationships.[12] As a result, by the early 1970s about 10 per cent of couples were divorcing compared with 7 per cent in the 1950s; by 1974 19 per cent of marriages ended in divorce after ten years. (See Table 11.1.) Nonetheless, marriage remained popular, and almost half of divorced people had remarried within five years. This adherence to traditional relationships indicated the limits of the influence of Radical feminism amongst the female population; moreover, the more that women could count on escape if things went wrong, the less likely they were to reject the whole idea of marriage. Nonetheless, the availability of divorce must be counted a major liberating factor for women in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

In spite of this, many women continued to be the victims of male violence inside and outside marriage, and this increasingly formed a key campaigning issue for feminists. After Erin Pizzy set up the first centre for battered women in 1971 some ninety such centres were created by 1976, and the attention attracted by the problem led to the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act of that year which offered women some protection against husbands and partners. However, the reform scarcely diminished the need for refuges, and fem-

inists extended the campaign against male violence in several ways. Recognising that women often failed to report cases of rape, they opened the first rape crisis centre in London in 1976, and the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of that year helped to make it less traumatic for victims to approach the police in order to bring charges. This in turn highlighted the unsympathetic attitude of the courts, hence the campaigns run by Women Against Rape to expose examples in which guilty men were let off or lightly treated on the grounds that their careers ought not to be damaged by their actions. Finally, feminists identified pornography as effectively responsible for encouraging violence against women and argued that it was a form of violence in itself; this led to the organisation of street protests in Soho, Leeds, Manchester, Bristol and elsewhere to expose the commercial exploitation of sex by shops and cinemas.

For many feminists the major single advance in this period was the greater availability and acceptance of contraception in the form of the contraceptive pill which was on sale from 1961 onwards; it could be obtained on the National Health Service from 1963. In 1969 the Family Planning Act allowed local authorities to give women advice on birth control and contraceptive supplies, and the Family Planning Association went further in 1970 when it began to offer contraceptive advice to anyone over sixteen years regardless of marital status. As a result , by the end of the 1960s birth control had become the general practice among younger couples. There are, however, two qualifications

Table 11.2 Contraceptive Methods in Current Use Among Ever-Married Women Aged 16–40 Years 1970–1983 (percentage)

	1970	1975	1976	1983
Pill	19	30	32	29
IUD	4	6	8	9
Condom	28	18	16	15
Cap	4	2	2	2
Withdrawal	14	5	5	4
Safe period	5	1	1	1
Abstinence	3	1	0	1
Total at least one	75	76	77	81
Not using any	25	24	23	19

Source: A.H. Halsey, *British Social Trends* (1988), p. 50

Table 11.3 Birth Rates per 1000 Population in England and Wales 1960–1977

1960–65	18.1
1966–70	16.9
1971–75	14.0
1976	11.9
1977	11.6

Source: A.H. Halsey, *British Social Trends* (1988), p. 40

to be made here. As Table 11.2 shows, women still used a wide variety of methods, among which the pill, though the most common, was far from being typical. Fears about its effects upon health after 1977 also diminished its use slightly. It may well be that the availability of the pill during the 1960s had the effect of promoting the use of all forms of contraception in the long term, especially condoms.

The trend towards contraception had important implications. Initially it seems to have checked the birth rate, which had been buoyant in the 1950s but fell steadily down to the late 1970s before rising slightly again (Table 11.3). More fundamentally the use of contraception was widely regarded as the most significant form of empowerment for women in that it gave them the control of their own bodies that feminists desired. Pregnancy was not the inevitable consequence of marriage; it could be postponed until later in a woman's life; and pre-marital sex was now seen as desirable because it would enhance sex within marriage. Not surprisingly many feminists celebrated the new freedom from passivity and subordination which this gave them. On the other hand, sexual permissiveness reawakened misgivings among those who felt that freedom imposed new pressures upon women to conform to a heterosexual feminism. Was female sexuality, after all, not fundamentally different from that of men?[13] If it was, then greater freedom for women could not be a solution for everyone. This encouraged feminists to consider whether satisfying emotional relationships were not more easily attainable with other women. This line of thought was complemented by the growth of the Gay Liberation Front after 1971 and by the increasing acceptance of same-sex relations among men. As a result, in 1974 women's liberation agreed to incorporate a sixth demand in the original programme, seeking an end to discrimination against lesbians and the right to define one's own sexuality. In the process many

feminists expressed strong reservations about their prominence which they believed would alienate many women from the cause. Tactics pointed to a separation of the economic-political campaigns from questions involving sexual orientation. Nonetheless, it proved impossible to exclude lesbian issues from the agenda of the movement.

Despite the wide acceptance of contraception, feminists continued to believe that the control of women's bodies would remain incomplete without access to abortion. Ever since 1936 an Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRS) had existed in Britain, but the legalisation of abortion enjoyed little public support from women's pressure groups apart from the Women's Co-operative Guild. Despite this, abortion was so widely practised that by the 1960s public concern over the dangers to the health of women who resorted to illegal backstreet abortionists paved the way for reform. Eventually David Steel introduced a back-bench bill in 1967 with the tacit support of the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, which allowed women to have abortions under the NHS within twenty-eight days of conception and with the consent of two doctors. There was no question at this time of conceding abortion on demand, partly for fear of undermining parliamentary support for the bill and partly because the scheme depended upon the co-operation of the medical profession which could not be taken for granted. As a result, in 1967, 9,700 NHS abortions took place, in addition to 10,000 private ones and an unknown number of illegal operations. The total rose to 22,000 in 1968, 75,000 in 1970 and 128,000 by 1980. However, the steep rise cannot be seen simply as an increase since thousands of abortions which hitherto took place illegally now came under the NHS.

The abortion law is an example of a reform which effectively pre-dated women's liberation; consequently the chief task for feminists subsequently was to *defend* the status quo rather than extend it. Hence in 1972 the old ALRS gave way to the National Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign which in turn became the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) in 1975; it organised public demonstrations under the slogan 'A Woman's Right To Choose'. The campaign also highlighted the uneven implementation of the legislation; it was, for example, more difficult to get an abortion in the north than in the south of England. Above all the NAC had to fight off hostile bills in 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980 and 1982 introduced in order to undermine the 1967 Act. By the late 1970s the number of abortions had stabilised, and opinion polls showed that a large majority accepted the new status quo, though only 18 per cent of people supported abortion on demand. The defence of the law against the backlash from a vocal minority of anti-abortionists,

especially after a change in the political climate, was one of the lasting achievements of women's liberation.

By contrast, the results of campaigns over economic issues were less dramatic in the short term, though here feminists were undoubtedly working with the grain of events and opinion. Significantly, when Benjamin Spock revised his manual on baby and child care in 1973 he removed the original bias against working mothers – a good illustration of the tendency for influential books to reflect changing attitudes rather than to initiate them. Feminists adopted a wide range of tactics including direct action, strikes, co-operation with trade unions and legislation. At this stage they were beginning to take advantage of the opportunities created by structural changes in the British economy; this is best illustrated by female participation in the labour force which increased from 37.5 per cent of women in 1961 to 42.6 per cent in 1971 and to 45.5 per cent by the 1981 census.

However, feminists were largely absorbed by the terms and conditions of women's employment rather than by its extent. The enactment of the Equal Pay Act in 1970, which was implemented from 1975 onwards, proved to be disillusioning. In the first three years the wages of female workers rose from 50 to only 52 per cent of men's. Some feminists drew the conclusion that they were unlikely to achieve much through a trade union movement still dominated by men and lacking interest in women's grievances and aspirations. They found an alternative in focussing on the remuneration of women who worked unpaid in the home, arguably the most exploited and numerous group. This line of argument echoed the campaign waged for the 'endowment of motherhood' in the 1920s by Eleanor Rathbone who had also regarded equal pay as a very distant and elusive goal. During the 1970s the Campaign for Wages for Housework attracted great enthusiasm and also the support of the press; however, it was rejected by Socialist and Radical feminists who considered that it pandered to traditional notions of women as essentially domestic. As a result, Wages for Housework remained a rather separate and marginal part of the movement.

However, this issue forced Socialist feminists to address the charge that it was futile for women to rely upon trade unions to promote their interests. In fact these years were marked by a series of attempts to engineer greater co-operation between female workers and the unions. During 1970–2 Socialist and Marxist groups promoted campaigns to improve the wages of very low-paid women and to encourage them to join unions. At first this was undermined by the hostility of union officials and hampered by the inability of manual workers to share the

broader ideological objectives of the middle-class feminists. Nonetheless, dozens of strikes occurred among low-paid women during 1973–4. As this was a period of general militancy provoked by opposition to the government's trade union legislation, the prospects for closer collaboration across gender lines were good. The big general unions such as the TGWU, the AUEW and the GMWU recruited large numbers of women, as did white collar unions including NALGO, NUPE and COHSE. Moreover, in 1981 the Trades Union Congress belatedly recognised the importance of women by increasing its female delegates from two to five, admittedly out of a total of forty-one! In 1974 it also produced the Working Women's Charter campaign, a ten-point programme which covered wages, conditions, promotion, training, child care, maternity leave, family allowances and contraception. In 1978 the TUC even gave its support to the demand for easier abortion.

This rapprochement between feminism and the trade union movement had important long-term political implications, though during the 1970s the gains were not striking even under a Labour government. Meanwhile, women's liberation added a fifth item to its programme in 1974 – the Financial and Legal Independence of Women. This was intended to overturn the various regulations and laws which effectively made women the dependants of men in respect of taxation, pensions, national insurance, supplementary benefits and mortgages. Despite minor modifications to social security, however, discrimination in these areas largely continued into the 1980s. Frustration over women's employment and economic status stimulated pressure for another extra demand in the women's liberation programme – the provision of twenty-four-hour child care. This appeared more radical than it was, the aim being to make limited child care available to facilitate women's employment even during inconvenient hours, not, as critics alleged, to encourage women to abandon altogether their responsibilities as mothers. Despite the clearly recognised need, the politicians continued to take refuge in the plea that a national policy would be expensive. As a result many women's groups took matters into their own hands by organising voluntary creches and nurseries run by local collectives. But the issue underlined the failure of the movement to command real political influence.

The Turning Point?

It has been argued that by the later 1970s women's liberation had lost some of its momentum and was suffering from dwindling support. This

pessimistic view does, however, reflect the short-term difficulties arising out of the deterioration of the economy and the change in the political climate around 1979.[14] It was not yet apparent that the economic turmoil of the next few years would in fact leave women the beneficiaries in many ways; nor did it appear that either legislation or alliances with the unions were really delivering concrete gains. As we shall see in the next chapter, from a longer perspective this looks unduly pessimistic.

However, it is fair to say that by the end of the 1970s the movement was increasingly divided between economic causes on the one hand and the issues of sexual politics on the other. In these circumstances the absence of overall leadership appeared a major weakness, and women's liberation showed some signs of turning inwards in order to debate its strategy and purpose. In many ways this was comparable to the dilemmas of feminism during the 1920s; following major legislation and disillusionment, some loss of momentum was almost inevitable. The problem lay precisely in the fact that the government was not completely resistant to women's demands; it managed to some extent to defuse the issue by making what appeared to be major concessions but which only went a limited way to satisfying the reformers' grievances. The nub of dissatisfaction lay in the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. The latter was condemned by many feminists as a fraud both because it contained loopholes and because the means of enforcement appeared wholly inadequate. Responsibility lay with the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, and with industrial tribunals. But the officials who ran these bodies were widely felt to have been insufficiently energetic in pursuing cases of discrimination; the courts were often unsympathetic, and in any case many women remained reluctant to come forward to press their claims. For example, during 1976 only five out of twenty sex discrimination cases were successful; and of the one hundred and ten equal pay cases taken to tribunals only thirty-one succeeded.

It was therefore particularly frustrating that, according to the opinion polls, the public believed that the legislation had largely resolved women's grievances. Inevitably the government concluded that it could now afford to ignore pressure for further change from feminists. Women's liberation was in the classic dilemma of a pressure group when dealing with politicians. Having become almost fashionable the cause was in some danger of being tamed by closer association with the system. A succession of propagandist initiatives such as International Women's Year in 1975 and International Women's Day underlined the problem.

This situation crystallised the choices facing the movement. Feminism could indeed become part of mainstream politics and in the process expect to lose some of its revolutionary potential, or it could keep its distance and preserve its integrity; certainly some feminists reacted by becoming more suspicious of conventional politics and by seeking a more radical agenda. In effect this implied placing less emphasis on the economic-social reforms and giving a higher priority to sexual politics, the latter being less susceptible to incorporation by the politicians. This shift was encouraged by the deepening disillusionment with the Labour government in its declining years, by the deterioration in the economy and by cuts in public spending which heralded a wider attack on the welfare state.

One effect of this was to accentuate the anarchic tendencies in women's liberation. It ceased to function as a co-ordinated national movement and became increasingly a series of campaigns linked loosely by feminist journals and common personnel. When national conferences were held, sharp divisions emerged between Socialist and Radical feminists, with the result that the movement to some extent turned its energies inwards and away from the general public. The debate also produced a polarisation between heterosexual feminists and lesbian feminists in which the latter were more aligned with the Radicals. Radicals and lesbians shared a desire to complete women's liberation by excluding male influence and by seeking direct confrontations with male authority. By 1978 several of their demands had been incorporated as a seventh item in the movement's programme, in particular the demand for freedom from violence, intimidation and sexual coercion by men. But the critics felt that this threatened to make all men the enemy rather than simply male institutions. Similarly the assertion of the right of every woman to self-defined sexuality was seen as giving precedence to lesbianism. The most extreme formulation of this view argued that to engage in heterosexuality was to maintain male supremacy.[15] The implication was that a real feminist ought to be lesbian and thus achieve a revolutionary change by withdrawing all forms of co-operation with men. However, this left many feminists feeling that they were being forced to defend relationships with men because of their heterosexuality. 'Until women stop attacking all men, branding them as rapists and batterers', wrote Erin Pizzy, 'we will never have a women's movement which truly represents all women. Believe it or not, most of us like men.'[16] However, two qualifications must be made about what appears to have been a dangerous polarisation of views. Many women continued to work at local level on practical

self-help schemes without being distracted by theoretical debates about feminism. Secondly, the changes in the external political climate around and after 1979 went a long way towards suppressing the disagreements by realigning feminist forces along a more structured and politically-orientated strategy.