

# The Impact of Feminist Publishers on Women in Publishing Industry

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## **Abstract**

This paper asks whether the introduction of feminist publishing into the mainstream book industry has improved the prospects of the many women in the industry. Feminist publishers such as Virago and Pandora sought to widen the horizons for women's stories being told. Figures such as Carmen Callil wanted to break the silence around women, and to break the monotony of masculine stories being told so often. The article asks why these feminist publishers came into being and, more importantly, whether they changed anything for women in the industry. It will use some prominent case studies to try and reach these conclusions.

## **Key Words**

Virago, Pandora, Sheba, Second Wave Feminism

## Introduction

In the 1960s a woman's place was heavily linked to domesticity, her main priority being homemaking. Those who managed to escape the confines of their home had limited opportunities in the workplace, such as being a teacher, nurse or secretary only, and being subjected to sexual harassment and derogatory treatment from their male counterparts was considered the norm. The publishing industry was no different, as a male dominated sector, women and female literature was disregarded and women were not taken seriously.

With the women's liberation movement fighting for workplace equality, such as access to senior roles and better jobs, salary equality and implementing anti-discrimination laws, feminist publishing soon came into play helping to change the perception of women in the workplace from passive assistants to people with value. Carmen Callil founded Virago in 1972, which is the largest feminist publishing company in the UK, and this paved the way for several other feminist publishers to also step in. The significance of feminist publishing has changed the position of women in the industry drastically; instead of merely being assistants, secretaries or PR girls, women now hold senior positions in large, mainstream publishing companies.

Although the mainstream publishing world welcomed the popularity of feminist literature and publishing as a business niche, mainstream co-optation and corporate paternalism continue to threaten the survival of these presses. Being a feminist press has its challenges, as funding is sparse, independence is no easy feat and being dictated as an imprint has its pressures also. For this reason, this article will focus on key case studies Virago, Sheba and Pandora to examine the issues and pressures they faced as feminist publishers. Feminist publishing has risen as a niche market and has achieved a lot for

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women, including the growing significance, importance and value of women's literature as well as creating opportunities for women in senior roles and positions that were not available to females previously. However, outside of feminist publishing, have women really been given the same opportunities as men? This article also aims to explore whether women really are equal to men in the publishing industry as a whole and not just in a niche aspect of the industry dedicated to women.

### **WHY WE NEEDED FEMINIST PUBLISHING**

Women in the workplace were seen as 'chicks' perceived merely as 'fluttering tinkerbells, good for making tea and providing sex' (Callil, 2008). The publishing industry in particular was a very male dominated environment, men were in responsible for publishing, reviewing, editing and production and women had no input. Females did not have the opportunity to choose which books to publish and in order for literature to be taken seriously, women were pressured to adopt a 'masculine aesthetic' to avoid being disregarded. Even when female writers assumed a male perspective with a topic that followed the masculine aesthetic, there was still a 'fair chance that [the book] would be packaged frothily, the cover of their work undermining the content' (Callil, 2008).

In addition to the women's liberation movement, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* captured the frustration and plight of university educated housewives who were confined to the constraints of domesticity, unable to reach their full potential and suffocated by the boredom of being a homemaker. Friedan challenged the accepted notion of housewives being 'content to serve their families and by calling on women to seek

fulfilment in work outside the home. Her shocking and moving writing, although aimed at upper-middle-class white women, struck such a chord with women everywhere that it was seen as helping spark the 'second wave' feminist movement, particularly in the USA. Moving beyond the first wave suffrage movement pushing for women's right to vote, the new generation aimed to move equality into the personal lives of women. Although laws were put into place to protect women in the workplace, it was clear that this would not be enough. She encouraged feminists to meet up and find other ways to overthrow the patriarchy that was dominant in work environments. Thus, Friedan founded and launched the National Organisation for Women.

Within the publishing sector, women were also growing tired of the derogatory and dismissive attitude of their male counterparts. Marsha Rowe, an Australian working at Ink newspaper in 1972 had enough of being perceived as a 'chick' and being treated as 'fluttering tinkerbells, good for making tea and providing sex' (Callil, 2008). Irritated by her experiences, Marsha held women's meetings and from these meetings Spare Rib, a feminist magazine, was born. Working alongside Marsha, Carmen Callil, moved and inspired by her colleague, set out to start up Virago, which would soon help change the view of female publishing within the industry as whole. Callil founded Virago in order to 'break a silence to make women's voices heard to tell women's stories my story and theirs' (Callil, 2008) and through her Virago Modern Classics, succeeded in her goal.

#### **CASE STUDY: VIRAGO PRESS, PANDORA, SHEBA**

Best known for its Modern Classics series and reprints of neglected women's novels, Virago aimed to combat the feminine tradition, including 'writers of vast ambition and great achievement: mistress of comedy, drama and storytelling of the domestic world [they] knew and loved' (Callil, 2008). Callil wanted to move beyond published work that revolved around the small domestic world depicted in work, such as Jane Austin's novels and instead aimed to celebrate women and women's lives, spreading the message of 'women's liberation to the whole population and knock on the head forever the idea that it was anything to do with burning bras or hating men' (Callil, 2008). Virago's Modern Classics did exactly this by 'illuminating women's history in a way that would reach to a wider audience' (Callil, 2008).

Mainstream publishing, understanding the value and market value of women's literature and feminist writing in such a liberating climate at the time were quick to support and, in effect, jump on the bandwagon of feminist publishing. Thus, Virago did have affiliations with mainstream publishers but is now wholly independent. However, as a whole feminist presses are not easy to sustain and many other publishers have experienced the hardships and challenges that come with funding a feminist publishing company.

Pandora, an imprint founded in 1983, is closely affiliated with Routledge and Kegan Paul (RKP) and has the closest relationship to mainstream press. Although the editorial staff worked independently, they used RKP's resources, such as marketing, production and distribution, meaning that Pandora was able to produce many glossy paperbacks with only 3 editorial staff members. Despite their editorial independence, however, every manuscript had to be approved by RKP management, which proved problematic on some occasions as a

few of the board members were 'unsympathetic to feminism' (Young, 1989). On one occasion when this had consequences for Pandora was in 1987. They wanted to have their own catalogue to be used as a crucial marketing tool to differentiate its more popular books from RKP's academic list, but this proposal was denied. This demonstrates that money and support from larger companies do come with strings attached.

On the flipside, however, Sheba, a small independent collective founded in 1981, focusing on working class, race and lesbian issues also saw its challenges as an independent company. Small underfunded feminist presses not only suffer long term, but also day-to-day. Sheba's major source of income came from grants from government sponsored arts councils as well as money generated from book sales. With Margaret Thatcher's government however, bodies supporting arts were soon abolished, resulting in many arts groups closing. Fortunately, Sheba were able to get grants and funding to groups that took over the Greater London Council's role as providing funding, hence they were able to stay open. However, this funding could easily disappear, especially when noting the challenges Sheba faced publicly addressing scandals and political conservatism that directly affected Sheba's publishing decisions and editorial freedom. For example, in 1987, there was a public outcry against a children's book entitled *The Playbook for Kids About Sex*. It was dismissed and slammed by Conservative party speeches and by the public outraged at arts funding being used to fund radical and controversial literature.

The lack of priority and significance shown towards feminist presses and publishers highlights the issue that despite its contribution to academia and its historical significance, women studies and feminist literature and issues are still disregarded and dismissed.

### **HAVE THINGS REALLY CHANGED?**

The position of women at work, particularly in publishing has changed drastically since the 1960s. A lot of this success is owed to the achievement of these feminist presses. Women are now in senior positions not just within feminist publishing houses, but also within mainstream publishing. The perception of women has been altered from passive tea-makers to people who are able to offer valuable insight and contributions to literature and the publishing industry as a whole. However, outside of feminist presses, have women still managed to obtain complete equality within the workplace, or are they still hindered?

Unfortunately, women are still hindered in other areas of the publishing industry that are mostly male dominated and perceived to be areas of publishing that are considered to be more serious and masculine. For example, when looking at academic publishing where there is a close connection between academic publishing by faculty members and gaining promotions, tenure, salary increases and professional recognition, there is a clear gender divide. Women publish significantly fewer books than men. As a result, women are not granted these promotions, receive a lower salary than their male counterparts and are more likely to be in lower professional positions, such as being assistants of associate professors (Mathews and Anderson, 2001).

According to a survey of full-time university and college faculty at 384 institutions, 43 percent of women in colleges and 20 percent in universities had never published a journal article, whereas the same was true of only 23 percent of men in colleges and 7 percent in universities (Mathews and Anderson, 2001). However, these shocking statistics are not suggestive of women having any less ambition than men in the industry. The same survey also highlighted that 54 percent of female faculty members and 58 percent of male faculty members considered becoming an authority in their field important. In addition to this, 44 percent of females and 46 percent of males considered obtaining recognition from their colleagues to be important. Possible reasons for this gender divide, despite the ambition to achieve the same goals could be because women are more likely to work in non-tenure track, part time or temporary positions and often lack the institutional support and resources necessary to move further up the academic publishing ladder. Further still, even when there is an equal amount of support and resources available to both men and women, women tend to be more involved in activities that prevent them from continuing with their research, and this detraction is not the same for men. Examples of this are women being more likely to work in roles such as advising, administrative work or serving on departmental committees. Additionally, women are also pulled from their work due to child rearing, child bearing, caring for an elderly relative or supporting their spouse. Having said that, family responsibilities have less of an effect on women's publishing activity than the aforementioned reasons (Mathews and Anderson, 2001).

This lack of a female voice in academic publishing means that there is a 'marginalization of the voices, perspectives and methods of women in top academic publications' (Mathews

and Anderson, 2001). As a consequence, this means there is a complete lack of insight into women's experiences in this part of the industry. In addition, women's research topics of choice are 'not typical of traditional notions of what many reviewers and editors consider to be the best or most rigorous research' (Mathews and Anderson, 2001). Further still, aside for *Women & Politics*, few articles about women and politics have been published. As a result of this exclusion, women are also less likely to be included in the 'types of professional and social networks that define the life of a department' (Mathews and Anderson, 2001). Additionally, the top 15 political science journals were examined and it was found that only 24 percent of all articles published between 1983 and 1994 had at least one female author. Only 18 percent of the articles examined had one female author only. In contrast, over 80 percent of the articles had a single male author or a male lead author – they dominated the publications in every journal except *Women & Politics*, in which around 83 percent of the articles had one female author (Mathews and Anderson, 2001). This exclusion of female contributions to academic publishing demonstrates that articles relating to women and gender have much less chance of being published in top ranking political science journals, which are not directly concerned or specifically targeted at issues relating to such topics. As a consequence, women and gender issues within this sector are marginalised, excluded and given much less significance, meaning that valuable insight into these topics and the experience of women in these sectors is ignored and lost.

## CONCLUSION

Feminist presses have opened a door in mainstream publishing to the plight, experiences and potential of female writers and publishers and have also created

opportunities available for women that were not present previously. In this light, the achievements of key feminist presses, such as Virago and Sheba, and imprints such as Pandora are promising for the future of feminist publishing. This is especially so considering the hardships and challenges faced in starting up such companies before obtaining funding and combating issues with editorial freedom.

Despite the opportunities and achievements, however, there is still a clear gender divide in other areas of the publishing sector. The stigma associated with feminine writing and presses must still be addressed.

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