

FAILED FEMINISM

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Chapter One

The story of Veselinka Malinska (North Macedonia)

Winter came early to Kumanovo in 1917. The town crouched under occupation, its cobblestones worn by the boots of armies that had marched through Macedonia for centuries. In a narrow street off the marketplace, a child was born, Veselinka Georgieva, the daughter of a modest family who had no idea their quiet newborn would one day walk through history as if it were her own field.

As she grew, so did the contradictions around her. Macedonia's soil was rich, its people poor, schools taught obedience while the streets whispered about freedom. Veselinka's schooling revealed a restless brilliance. Teachers called her curious, impatient, and unwilling to recite lessons she did not believe. The end of the 1920s found her devouring pamphlets passed hand to hand among students, written in smuggled Serbian or Bulgarian, that spoke not of nations but of justice. By sixteen, she had joined the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia, drawn less by ideology than by the promise that ordinary people might one day breathe without fear. The first test of conviction came swiftly. At nineteen, she was arrested, accused of spreading subversive literature and attending illegal meetings. Her cell in Skopje was damp and bare, the air thick with chalk dust from the plaster walls. Yet she later said that prison had taught her "clarity of purpose." The authorities had meant to silence a girl; they had instead fashioned a revolutionary. When she was released, she refused the comfort of retreat. She continued her studies first at the Trade Academy in Niš, later at the Higher Economic and Commercial School in Zagreb, and finally at the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade. In every city, she found the same undercurrent: students meeting in cafés, whispering news from Moscow or Madrid, dreaming of a world where class and gender no longer marked destiny. She organized debates, distributed leaflets, and, more dangerously, began to lead. To the party, she was the kind of young woman propaganda could never invent: educated, articulate, fearless. To the police, she became a file thick with reports.

The mid-1930s were years of tightening regimes. In Belgrade, the authorities raided apartments at night, and in Zagreb, they shadowed students leaving libraries. Malinska adapted. She learned the discipline of secrecy, how to burn a letter without smoke, how to memorize codes, how to speak through suggestion. She was already living the life of the underground before the war made it official. By 1937, she had been elected to the Local Committee of the Communist Youth in Kumanovo. Her political education deepened through the contradictions of Yugoslavia itself, a country divided by ethnicity and language, stitched together by repression and faith in the myth of unity. For Veselinka, the idea of liberation could not be confined to national borders. It had to include women who worked unseen, peasants who owned nothing, and children who had never held a book. That vision, simultaneously intimate and vast, set her apart. She was not content with slogans. She wanted to learn how power functioned: who controlled production, who owned the press, who wrote the laws. In later interviews, she recalled that her decision to study economics was “a way of learning the enemy’s language.” It was the first sign of the strategist behind the idealist. In 1939, the war in Europe ignited. The young student from Kumanovo, now in her early twenties, stood at the edge of history’s storm. The networks she had helped to form became arteries of resistance once the occupation began. Arrested again briefly in Belgrade, she slipped from custody under disputed circumstances; some said she bribed a guard, others said sympathetic students forged a release order. However, she escaped, she carried within her the certainty that her personal safety no longer mattered. She returned to Macedonia under false papers in 1941, a messenger between Belgrade and Skopje, traveling by train with coded notes sewn into the hems of her dresses. She was twenty-four. Outside, the continent was collapsing into barbarism; inside, her resolve was turning to steel. The girl who had once distributed leaflets in secret was now prepared to carry orders across the front lines.

Looking back, it is impossible not to see the inevitability: that the child born in occupation would live her youth in defiance, and that the prison intended to humble her would instead become her initiation. When she would later stand at the founding session of ASNOM in 1944, she would do so not as an ornament to the revolution but as one of its architects forged first in the damp cells of Skopje, then in the student cafés of Zagreb and Belgrade, and finally in the conviction that freedom, once imagined, cannot be unlearned.

Chapter Two

“A Doctor Between Walls”

The story of Draga Ljocic (Serbia)

Draga Ljočić Milošević was born in 1862 in Serbia, a country still awakening from centuries of Ottoman shadow, its cities cobbled, its laws rigid, and its women expected to speak softly, if at all. From the beginning, Draga did not conform. She learned early that ambition was a dangerous companion for a woman, but she embraced it nonetheless. She dreamed of medicine, a field almost entirely male, cloistered in traditions that considered female intellect either unnecessary or suspect.

Her pursuit of knowledge carried her far from Belgrade to Zurich, where she joined a small cohort of women medical students, a group so rare that professors sometimes regarded them as curiosities rather than scholars. Draga excelled. She absorbed anatomy, surgery, and pharmacology, mastering the knowledge that would later become both her shield and her weapon. When she graduated, she returned to Serbia with a degree that had never before been held by a woman in her homeland. But recognition was not a gift of education. Serbia's hospitals, steeped in patriarchal bureaucracy, refused to welcome her as a colleague. She had to fight merely for the right to practice medicine to convert her diploma into authority. When the Ministry finally allowed her to work, the battlefield became her proving ground. In wars that tore through the Balkans, Draga moved among wounded soldiers, her hands steady, her mind alert, saving lives with courage that required no validation. Yet the world she had fought to enter remained a hall of mirrors, achievements reflected but rarely honored. In peacetime, she was assigned to the women's ward at a Belgrade hospital, entrusted with responsibilities equal to those of the chief physician, but paid only as a low-ranking assistant. When she demanded justice, rank, and pay corresponding to the work she performed, the hospital's response was not promotion but expulsion. The system that had tolerated her in extremis could not tolerate her insistence. The doors she had opened were closed to her feet. Draga's story illustrates the paradox of individual breakthrough within systemic stagnation. She fought not just disease but the limitations of patriarchal institutions. She

advanced professional ambitions, but broader structural change lagged. The women's movement in Serbia was too fragile at the time to defend her, and the society she had challenged offered neither apology nor restitution. Still, her activism left a mark. Draga was instrumental in establishing the first women's gymnasium in Belgrade, a school that gave the girls the chance to pursue education and professional development. She opened doors, yet the doors of equal opportunity remained barred to her own life. She became a symbol of progress, yes, but also of the betrayal that the system reserves for those who insist on equality too early.

When she died in 1926, Draga left behind a legacy both luminous and cautionary. She proved that knowledge, courage, and determination could challenge the rigid social order. But her life is a warning: being first is not enough. Being brave is not enough. Without structural equality, society can still erase you. Her triumphs were personal victories, her defeats were lessons in the limits of early feminist movements. Draga Ljočić's story reminds us that feminism must not only celebrate pioneers but also confront the barriers that outlive them. She opened paths, but the pathways she created were only partially accessible, leaving future generations to finish the work she began.

Chapter Three

“Between Elite Voices and Silent Majorities”

The story of Kallirroï Parren (Greece)

She was born on Crete in 1861, in the village of Platania near Rethymno, where the Aegean breeze carried both salt and unsettled futures. Kallirroï Siganou (later Parren) entered a world where women were meant to be seen and not heard, taught to adorn but not to address. Her education was exceptional for its time, its tutors, languages, the promise of more, but that very promise also set her apart from the majority of Greek women whose lives were shaped by labor, land, silence, and tradition.

In Athens, she attended the distinguished Arsakeion School, and soon she found herself teaching in Greek-language schools in Odessa and Edirne, rooms filled with students, chalk dust, and masculine expectation. She returned to Athens with ambition, not simply to teach, but to transform. She believed the press could open doors, she believed women could walk through them. On 8 March 1887, Kallirroï published the first issue of *Efimeris ton Kyrion* (“The Ladies’ Journal”), Greece’s first newspaper written and edited entirely by women. The first run sold out, the readership extended beyond Athens, and for a moment it seemed that women’s voices would ripple across Greek society. The weekly dealt with education, employment, prison conditions, and the status of women professionals, it proclaimed new possibilities. Yet it also revealed its boundaries. The audience was literate, urban, middle-class. The voices were hers and voices like hers. Many Greek women remained absent, those in the villages, the fields, the workshops, whose day-to-day lives were not part of this new tapestry. She founded organizations, the Union for Women’s Emancipation (1894), the Union of Greek Women (1896), and later the Lyceum of Greek Women (1911). She lobbied for girls’ admission to the University of Athens and pushed for women’s appointment in public offices, especially in prisons, where female inmates had no guardians but male guards. Her strategy was powerful, showing women could govern, teach,

heal, and thus legitimise their place in public life. But the strategy was limited, it argued not for the dismantling of class, rural marginalisation, or ethnic exclusion, but for the inclusion of women like her into the existing structures. By the 1890s, Kallirroï was calling for women's right to vote. Yet the state remained unbowed. In November 1917, her newspaper ceased publication. She was exiled to the island of Hydra for her political stance, her voice silenced by the very system she had sought to engage. In exile, she published novels under the pseudonym "Maya," writing of educated women seeking autonomy, but still within the frames of elite belonging. Her story is not one of failure of will. She opened doors, led newspapers, and founded clubs. But from the Failed Feminism vantage point, it is precisely how she opened those doors and for whom that matters. Her feminism advanced the cause of women who shared her class, education, and language, but did not always address the vast majority of Greek women whose exclusion stemmed from labour, geography, ethnicity, illiteracy, or poverty. Her mission reveals how early feminist movements could make space for some, while leaving structural barriers intact for most.

In 1940, she died in Athens, leaving a legacy both inspiring and incomplete. Kallirroï Parren reminds us: you can be the first, you can speak, you can organise. But unless you dismantle the foundations of exclusion, the structures will still lean one way, and many will still stand outside the threshold.

Chapter Four

“The Promise and the Prison”

The story of Musine Kokalari (Albania)

In the winter of 1917, a girl named Musine Kokalari was born in Adana, far from the Albanian highlands, though her family hailed from there. A patriotically minded, educated family of Gjirokastër origin returned to the motherland when she was young, and Musine grew among books and folk songs and a library her brother ran. Even as a youth, she sensed that the words women spoke or did not were part of a broader resistance.

While others her age were navigating arranged futures, Musine was writing. Her first collection of short stories, *Siç më thotë nënua plakë* (“As My Grandmother Tells Me”), appeared in Tirana around 1941, a slim volume of ten tales in the Tosk dialect, focusing on the lives of ordinary women, the laundress, the wife, the daughter still bound to a patriarchal tradition. She became the *first Albanian woman writer* in a nation that still expected its women to remain silent. But literature alone was not enough for her. In 1943/44, she co-founded the Social Democratic Party of Albania, publishing *Zëri i Lirisë* (“The Voice of Freedom”) on January 1st 1944, and demanding a pluralistic, democratic society. She pushed against both foreign occupation and the gathering shadow of totalitarianism. Her voice rang clear: “I don’t need to be a communist to love my country... I think differently from you, but I love my country.” Yet when the communists seized power and proclaimed women’s emancipation, Musine found her promise turned into a prison sentence. In January 1946, she was arrested, tried by a military court, and sentenced to 20–35 years for “agitation against the state.” She endured sixteen brutal years in the infamous Burrel prison, followed by decades of internment in Rrëshen, forced labour, surveillance, poverty, and isolation. Meanwhile, the regime boasted of women’s liberation. This is feminism cut on a crooked line. Musine achieved startling firsts, a pioneer, writer, and political founder, but she did not arrive in a system ready to change. Her feminism, anchored in individual agency, clashed with state-controlled narratives. The machinery that claimed to uplift women silenced her instead.

Her short stories depicted ordinary women, yet even they remained a narrow portrait, leaving out ethnic minorities, rural labourers, unpaid caregivers, and migrant women. Her political activism was brave, but the structure she challenged was ruthless. Her later years were quiet in a forced sense. In the 1970s, she wrote in secret, completing a manuscript, *Si lindi Partia Social-Demokrate* ("How the Social Democratic Party Was Born") in 1972 despite surveillance and suppression. When cancer struck in 1980, medical care was denied. She died in August 1983, virtually erased, remembered only in fragments.

Musine Kokalari's life testifies to the disjunction between breakthrough and transformation. She opened doors, raised voices, but she entered a building still locked at the top. Her story shows that feminism can be made a spectacle while the system remains unshaken, and the brave women become its first casualties.

Chapter Five

“The Guillotine of the Feminist Promise”

The story of Olympe de Gouges (France)

Paris, 1791. The air was thick with the echoes of drums, slogans, and the tremors of a nation unfolding. “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” blared across the barricades and the pamphlets. Yet behind the brilliant façade of revolution stood a question no one dared ask: Does this freedom include women?

Her name was Olympe de Gouges. Born Marie Gouze on 7 May 1748 in Montauban, France, she emerged from modest roots, was taught early that status limited destiny, but dreamed anyway. As husbands, salons, theatres, and revolution swirled around her, she chose another path, she picked up the pen. She wrote plays, speeches, pamphlets, attacked slavery, condemned the death penalty, and demanded reform. But above all, she asked: if all men are born free and equal (as the 1789 Declaration said), then what of the women? In September 1791, she published the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (“Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne”). In that declaration, she proclaimed that “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights.” She demanded the right to vote, the property right, the right to speak, to act, to be citizens, not as shadows or whispers, but as subjects of their own lives. She did not merely ask to sit at the table, she demanded a voice in how the table was built. And yet. The revolution that tore down thrones erected new walls. Olympe’s words, incendiary in a world still clinging to gendered chains, made her dangerous. She sided with moderate Girondins, opposed the radical Montagnards, and called for a plebiscite rather than terror. In 1793, she was arrested, tried, and guillotined on 3 November. The blade that promised liberty for the people cut the woman who asked for it. In the immediate wake of her death, the feminist clubs that had begun to stir were banned. The state that claimed to have emancipated its citizens refused citizenship to half its people. The symbol of equality became the silencing of her voice. Olympe de Gouges stands not just as a martyr to revolutionary zeal but as evidence of the deep fracture between formal rights and

real inclusion. The revolution embraced a universalism that in fact excluded women. Her fight for equality revealed the “hidden grammar” of patriarchy still embedded even in claims of freedom. From one perspective, Olympe’s life is a triumph, the first woman to write a declaration of rights, a firebrand of abolition and gender equality. From another, it is a cautionary tale: the revolution succeeded in redrafting constitutions but failed to redraw the map of power. Her feminism pressed open a door, only to find it locked from the other side. Her story exemplifies Failed Feminism in its starkest form: bold individual breakthrough, system unmoved. She wrote a declaration for women, but the very state that raised the cry of “brotherhood” refused sisterhood. She demanded equality and died for her insistence, the system continued, unbowed, rebuilding without her.

When the guillotine fell, it punished more than Olympe, it punished the hope that a revolution could liberate all its population. The new citizen remained male, the new subject remained unequal. And the feminism she embodied became, in the system’s hands, a story to be told later, not a change to be lived now.

Chapter Six

“Power, Patronage and the Illusion of Emancipation”

The story of Elena Ceaușescu (Romania)

She was born Lenuța Petrescu on 7th of January 1916, in the rural village of Petrești, Dâmbovița County, Romania, the daughter of peasant farmers, parchment stacks of poverty, and a system that spoke of equality but acted otherwise. Her early education concluded in the fourth grade. She moved to Bucharest, worked as a laboratory assistant and a textile factory worker, and joined the communist youth organizations. In 1939, she met Nicolae Ceaușescu, the future General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party.

Her rise, from factory floors to the heights of state power, mirrors a story many feminists want to tell, a woman who breaks every barrier. In 1974, she was inducted into the Romanian Academy, and in 1980, she became Vice-Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Romania, a woman at the heart of state power in Eastern Europe. Her presence heralded a new age of female leadership, an icon of equality. But beneath the façade of modernity, and the medals and titles, lay a system that used her image to reinforce power rather than dismantle patriarchy. In the regime’s propaganda, she was “The Best Mother Romania Could Have” and “Engineer, Doctor, Scientist.” Yet the many reductions of women lived differently, in the severe food rationing of the 1980s, in maternity wards emptied of care, in villages slated for forced “systematization” and uprooting. Elena’s public power was enormous, her feminist impact was negligible. Her authority was absolute, yet it served a patriarchal, autocratic system that compressed women’s lives, not liberated them. She exercised personal power: she sat on the Politburo, enjoyed the privileges of the elite, influenced foreign policy, and supervised scientific institutes, even though her scientific credentials were dubious and her honours were often symbolic. But ask: Did she foster structural change for women? Did she crack open the corridors of factory labour, household drudgery, rural ill-health, and educational exclusion? The answer is no, her feminism was co-opted, her advancement part of the apparatus she helped build. Her image was also used to mask a profoundly unequal society. The regime boasted of high female employment and women’s professional

advancement. But behind those statistics were penalized mothers, absent care, forced abortions, and orphanages swollen after the ban on birth control. Women's emancipation existed as a slogan, not as an experience. Elena's position reinforced the myth that women had arrived at equality when the vast majority remained behind. When the uprising of December 1989 came, she and Nicolae fled by helicopter, were captured, and executed on 25 December, her end as dramatic as her image was fabricated. Her power ended in a few hours, but the structural inequalities she embodied still survived.

Elena Ceaușescu is not a feminist failure in the sense of lacking ambition; she had ambition, power, and visibility, but she is the epitome of Failed Feminism because her ascent did not destabilize the system that oppresses women. She shows how a woman may reach the pinnacle of power in a patriarchal regime, yet serve that regime's reproduction of gendered, classed, controlled lives. Her life asks: What does it mean for feminism to succeed? If one woman rises but the many remain invisible, has the system changed or simply rearranged its decorations? Elena's mirror is chilling: it reflects individual ascent but hides collective stagnation.

Chapter Seven

“The Mirage of Liberation”

The story of Betty Friedan & The Feminine Mystique (USA)

The spring of 1963 in the United States carried a peculiar tension: the economy was booming, suburbia blossoming, and the post-war dream for many Americans seemed within reach. On February 19, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which struck a chord by naming “the problem that has no name”, the deep unhappiness of middle-class white women in a society that told them their role was stable, domestic, and sufficient. She spoke for one audience: the educated housewife, the suburban mother who could afford the luxury of asking whether the perfect home made her happy.

Friedan had herself been a student at Smith College, a journalist, a married woman, and a mother. She represented an aspiration. In her book, she examined the rigid domestic ideal: women expected to find fulfilment in homemaking, but felt trapped instead. She drew on interviews, statistics, history, and psychology to argue that the “feminine mystique” denied women their capacity to grow, contribute, and define themselves on broader terms. Her voice awakened many, stirred the early second-wave feminist movement, and helped galvanize the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. But in the glow of this breakthrough lies the shadow of what she did not address. Her feminism, powerful in its moment, also reveals the structural limits of the movement she spearheaded. The woman who gave voice to the bored, educated housewife did not speak for the African-American mother who had always worked outside the home or the Latina domestic worker whose identity was bound to labour. As one critic put it, “She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women.” The book centred on a particular class-race position: white, middle-class, suburban, educated. Many women were not in that category; they were city factory workers, rural black women, immigrant women, or single mothers, and her narrative did not embrace them. The omission matters. A movement that begins with “all women” but

speaks only to some creates its own exclusion. The American women's movement of the 1960s saw significant advances: more women entered universities and professions, birth control became legal, and feminist consciousness spread. Yet for many working-class or minoritised women, the promise of liberation was still distant, the wage gap, racial discrimination, unpaid care work, and forced domestic labour remained. Friedan's focus on the housewife's plight missed those layers. In launching NOW and other initiatives, Friedan sought to bring women into the American mainstream of equal partnership with men. Yet the mainstream she described was one defined by white male structures, boardrooms, professions, salaried work, not the alternative economy of unpaid care, informal work, or intersectional discrimination. The *Feminine Mystique* asked: Why can't I use my brain? But it did not fully ask: Who is using my body? Who is doing my care work? Who is constrained by my colour?

Today, scholars argue that Friedan's work remains foundational but incomplete. Her voice opened a door, but many women still stood outside. Her feminism provided a framework for many, but her omission of class, race, and sexual difference meant that the movement she helped ignite would need subsequent waves. Her story is a study in the paradox of progress: a breakthrough for many, a stagnation for others. Betty Friedan's legacy is therefore double. She changed the conversation, and she left the conversation half-written. Her feminism succeeded for some but failed for many. The housewife, no longer invisible, became visible, the factory-worker, the domestic helper, the rural woman, the woman of colour, their experiences still sought recognition. In that gap lies the unfinished business of feminism.

Chapter Eight

“Echoes of Tuxedos”

The story of Marlene Dietrich (Germany, USA)

In the glare of the silver screen and the flash of camera bulbs, Marlene Dietrich emerged not just as a star but as a statement. Born in Berlin on 27 December 1901, then known as Marie Magdalene “Marlene” Dietrich, she crossed borders, languages, genres, and gender expectations. The world watched as she donned top hat and tails, smoke curling from a cigarette, gaze steady and unbending. She did not ask permission; she asked a question. But too often, the question turned into a spectacle, and the substance slipped into shadow.

Dietrich’s androgynous image was radical: it challenged the masculine/feminine categories of the early twentieth century. In the 1930 film *Morocco* she wore a man’s tuxedo, leaned into the camera, and rewrote the rulebook of glamour. The exhibition “Marlene Dietrich: Dressed for the Image” notes how she declared, “I dress for the image. Not for myself, not for the public, not for fashion, not for men.” Her style became a form of resistance, a visual code that said: woman, yes, but also beyond woman, beyond gender. And yet, here is where the story of feminism meets its contradictions. Dietrich achieved individual transcendence, but did she enact structural change? She became a symbol for the empowered woman, but symbols live on posters, not always in policies. She did not rise from a campaign demanding equal pay for women workers, or the rights of domestic labourers, or migrant women in the United States. Her stardom belonged to cinema’s elite, to global glamour, to international fame, not to the factory-floor, the farm-field, the household still bound by unpaid work and invisibility. During World War II, she stood opposed to Nazism, performing for Allied troops, renouncing her German citizenship and becoming a citizen of the United States. Her courage was real, her career at its peak, her image iconic. But the structures of Hollywood, the studio system, the racial divides and the commercial machinery of fame still

constrained her. She was celebrated for breaking into male attire and male roles, yet the system around her remained built on male networks, male power, and male profits. Her androgyny became commodified. The tuxedo, the cigarette, the torch song, and the costume of rebellion turned into a fashion trend. Her image inspired generations of queer and gender-nonconforming artists. But the fashion of rebellion often becomes the packaging of resistance, not its completion. Her story tells us: when feminism becomes image, the visible act of boundary-breaking may hide the invisible act of boundary-maintaining. Dietrich once said: "I dress for the image... I get my jeans in a public store, men's, of course, I can't wear women's trousers." In that self-statement lies both freedom and limitation. She claimed choice, but within a system that still measured success by box-office receipts, by star power, by visibility. She moved among the elite, not always among the masses. The Failed Feminism lens asks: What happens when a woman becomes an icon rather than a change-maker? Dietrich's glamour didn't dismantle the gendered labour divide, didn't rewrite pay equity, and didn't remake the immigrant woman's life in America or the rural woman's fate in Germany. The tuxedo on her back was a statement, but the factories still employed women at lower wages, the households still bore the full burden of care, the minority women still waited for equality, the star had declared. In her later years, Marlene Dietrich faded from the screen, but never from cultural memory. She died on 6 May 1992, at the age of 90. Her legacy remains luminous and contradictory. She reminds us that a feminist breakthrough can be profound and personal, and yet still co-opted by structures that resist transformation.

Her life asks us: If one woman crosses the boundary, who follows? If she wears the tuxedo, who still wears the apron? If she sells the image of empowerment, who still pays the price of invisibility? Marlene Dietrich's mirror glitters, but the reflection it offers may still exclude many.

Chapter Nine

“Between Liberation and Control”

The story of Katti Anker Møller (Norway)

In the autumn of 1868, in Hamar, Norway, a girl named Cathrine “Katti” Anker was born. Daughter of educator Herman Anker, she studied at Sagatun High School, where ideals of popular education, community, and change hung in the air. She witnessed her mother’s body falter under repeated pregnancies, and she saw the weight of social expectations that bore down on women in invisible ways. From early on, Katti recognized that the freedom preached by her society, political rights, national independence, and educational access did not always extend to the body, the womb, the child-bearing years.

Her activism matured in the early twentieth century. She travelled, lectured, wrote articles, most notably her 1915 lecture *Moderskapets frigjørelse* (“The Liberation of Motherhood”) in which she declared:

“Grunnlaget for all frihet er rådighet over egen kropp og hva i den er. Det motsatte er en slaves tilstand.” (“The basis of all freedom is control over one’s own body and what is in it. The opposite is the state of a slave.”)

She argued for women’s right to make choices about pregnancy, motherhood, and sexual life. In 1913, she became one of the first to demand decriminalization of abortion in Norway. Two years later, the “Castberg laws” (1915) were passed in the Norwegian parliament, reforms which, in large part, she influenced. Children born out of wedlock gained inheritance rights, and unmarried mothers gained recognition. By 1924, thanks to her persistence, the first Mothers’ Hygiene Office (Mødrehygienekontor) opened in Oslo, offering contraception advice, hygiene education, and support for women estranged from the dominant social norms. Katti believed that educating women about birth-control, giving them responsibility and means over their own bodies, was central to emancipation. She founded the phrase “frivillig moderskap” (voluntary motherhood) and sought to free women from the structural trap of

involuntary reproduction. Yet here the story begins to go south. Katti's feminism, though radical and pioneering, also carried the marks of its time and its limits. In the 1920s and 1930s, her ideas entered the same airspace as eugenics. Scholars note that although she was not explicitly focused on eugenic goals, she participated in the first International Eugenics Congress in London, and her discussions around "production of children under culture" echoed eugenic thinking about "improved national stock". The mothers' hygiene offices served both public-health and birth-control aims, but also became tacit mechanisms of population regulation. On one level, women's liberation; on another, control over whom the society wanted to reproduce and whom it considered expendable. Her activism emphasised motherhood as central work: she argued that "women's most important occupation is the mother's work" and proposed state support for mothers, not only wage labour. But in conceiving motherhood as a woman's highest role, she risked reinforcing the very structure she aimed to dismantle: the equation of woman with mother, house, and child. Her feminism embraced women's autonomy, often through their role as mothers, rather than abandoning those roles. By the mid-1930s, Katti's public presence waned. She withdrew from the limelight as her ideas became controversial, her alliances fragmented, and the politics of welfare and fertility intensified. Meanwhile, the very women she sought to empower, single mothers, domestic workers, rural women, and women of minority status, often remained outside the core of her reforms. The "voluntary motherhood" she mainly envisioned applied to women within reach of education and resources; the poorest and most marginalised still lacked effective structural access. In this sense, her feminism did not break the foundations but offered relief within the old house. From the perspective of Failed Feminism, Katti Anker Møller's story stands out for its dual nature: she expanded possibilities for women, but she also accommodated systems of control. She petitioned for reproductive rights, yet the rights she sought existed within frameworks that monitored reproduction, valued certain lives and capacities over others, and left many women still disenfranchised. Her activism became part of the public health apparatus as much as the women's rights constellation. When she died on 20 August 1945 at Thorsø Manor, she left a legacy of change and contestation. The playgrounds were altered, the laws passed, but the ground underneath remained uneven. Katti reminds us: a feminism that negotiates with power, even revolutionary power, can still reproduce its dominion. She dimmed the glare of enforced fertility, yet the glare of selective surveillance remained.

Her life asks: When liberation is framed as a choice between motherhood and no motherhood, whose agency is honored and whose is ignored? When reproductive rights are enforced as public policy, who writes the policy, and whose bodies carry its weight? Katti Anker Møller is a pioneer, but a pioneer within limits. Her feminism achieved openings, but not the complete transformation of the terrain on which women walked.

Chapter Ten

“The forgotten mother”

The Story of Regina Bishingti (Cameroon)

The wind that passed through Bambui in 1930 carried the scent of soil and quiet strength. In the heart of Metulla'ah Quarter, a child was born to Pa Waku and Ma Ngengang, a girl who would one day stand against history's silence, not with speeches or rifles, but with bare hands that fed, built, and refused to surrender. Her name was Regina Bishingti Waku, later known simply as Mami Regie, a name that would come to mean mother, leader, and revolution, all in one breath.

Her childhood unfolded under the open skies. While her brothers herded cows, she followed, learning the stubborn rhythm of labour. She grew into the contradictions of her time; Cameroon on the brink of colonial transition, women praised as life-givers but forbidden from shaping the life around them. Her first rebellion was simply existing beyond the roles written for her. A young girl herding cattle and sleeping in open fields at night to protect the herd from thieves and wild animals. Marriage came early, and with it, displacement. The young bride was given to Pa Paul Ngwa, a war veteran returned from faraway deserts where he had fought under a flag not his own. His medals glimmered with irony; freedom for others, captivity for himself. Together, they built a life that moved like the wind: Kumba, Likomba, Tiko, Bamenda. He found work as a foreman, then a clerk; she found purpose in survival. Their love grew in the small moments: him returning home every weekend, her waiting by the fire with food and laughter that defied the distance between them. Then, history turned its knife. In 1960, while politicians debated reunification, Regina was waging her own war. Her husband collapsed from internal ulcers, two surgeries deep into danger. She moved to Upstation Bamenda with her baby son, walking miles each day to deliver food and care to his hospital bed. In another ward, her sister-in-law lay dying of the same illness. By the time Regina buried her, grief had carved a permanent silence into her gaze, but not defeat. She returned to her rounds, balancing motherhood and duty like two fragile pots of water on her head. The years that followed refused mercy. In 1966, a fire swallowed up her husband's house in Bamenda. He escaped through a window with only the clothes on his back. All their achievements, memories, wedding photos, letters, heirlooms, turned to ash. The next year, death came again, this time for Rufinus, their bright son taken suddenly by malaria. And when her husband, haunted by war and loss, began to drift into what today might be called PTSD, she stayed. No one named it, no one offered help. But she understood: his silence was another kind of wound. She carried the household alone, her strength disguised as routine.

Not just her own biological children, but children from distant lands who had come to school in Bambui Village but could not afford rent or food. Regina's home became a haven and a strong room of dreams for them. Family children were not left out. Her home was always teeming with children and people. Villagers knew they could always get a meal and water to drink, wayfarers knew they could always get a room to stay the night and some good food and water. Before long, her home became known for decades as "Embassy." Regina never learned to read, yet she taught a generation the power of education. Every coin she earned from sewing or selling akra bean cakes fried at dawn went to school fees and books. Her children and all others in her home studied under the weak glow of a trukang, a kerosene lamp built from a milk can, while she sewed into the night, mending their uniforms, and the clothes of other villagers, and, unknowingly, mending the future. Her house in Bambui became a school, a workshop, a refuge. Women gathered to learn seamstressing, trading, and the quiet art of dignity. Out of these gatherings, she built a savings circle, a Njangui Group, where women pooled money to buy seeds, share labour, and survive bad seasons together. Decades before the world called it "microfinance," Regina had invented it on her veranda. She shared her 15 hectares of land with those who had none for agriculture. She taught girls to sew and to save. The local traders, hungry and footsore, always found a warm pot at her fire. Women in her neighbourhood and across the village could always come to her farms to harvest cassava, cocoyams, sweet yams, plantains or bananas, or mud fish from the natural pond by the stream at the foot of her compound, to cook for their children on difficult days. But behind this domestic tenderness, another revolution brewed. Regina was no mere homemaker; she was one of the Mueh-Fimbuen, Mother of the Fimbuen: leader of a powerful Female Regulatory Society tasked with keeping justice and order in the village. They ensured that all village laws, norms, and values were implemented and respected by all; they organized and caught stray animals destroying crops during the farming season, and they could summon and unseat even the Fon if his authority went out of control. In the early 1960s, the Fimbuen women stripped themselves bare in protest, their bodies painted with defiance, marching to the governor's office to demand fairness. Later, during Cameroon's tumultuous early 1990s, when the opposition leader Ni John Fru Ndi was placed under house arrest, she organized food supplies for him and others detained with him. Her feminism was not in books or banners; it was in actions, consistent and defiant. Yet, when she died, the country that had benefited from women like her had no record of her name. No speeches, no plaques, no mention in history books. The same land she helped feed and sustain through decades of hardship erased her gently, like chalk from a blackboard. Feminism, the loud, urban kind that filled conference halls and foreign reports, never reached her village. It spoke the language of liberation but not of women who fought oppression through cooking pots and cooperative savings. It celebrated icons; it ignored the invisible. Regina was one of those invisibles. Still, her influence lingered like perfume in a forgotten room. She led the Catholic Bona Mors society of the St Peter's & Paul's Parish Bambui, preparing souls for both life and death. She was so committed to this course until aging caught up with her and her responsibility passed on to the younger generation. She cooked for seminarians after Sunday Mass and, by so doing, became the Mother of so many priests through the ages. She raised many children from her village and neighbouring villages who would later cross oceans, carrying her lessons in their veins. She believed in fairness so deeply that she lent her land to

strangers, fed and sustained several communities, trusting that justice, even when denied, was still sacred.

In the final stretch of her life, when the world outside grew noisier with politics and promises, she remained steady. Her hands, calloused from decades of stitching, still mended clothes; her eyes, dimmed with age, still softened at the sight of children studying. When she left on December 5th, 2021, she left quietly, as she had lived, without monuments, without applause, but not without a legacy. History might forget her name, but the soil remembers her footsteps. The women she trained remember the sound of her voice: firm, low, unwavering. The Bambui village and its environs remember the warmth of her fire. And somewhere in Bambui tonight, a young girl sews under the bright light of an electric bulb. She doesn't know it yet, but she's holding a thread that stretches all the way back to Mami Regie; the woman who stitched a revolution out of cloth, courage, and the conviction that no one, not even history, could unmake her story.

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