

Did feminism get it wrong? It didn't. People do.

Wednesday, May 11, 2005

Moira Rayner

'People call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute': Rebecca West said it, and I think so too. A daily dose of feminism is the aspirin that keeps women's rights circulating.

Speaking of clots, I have a new doctor. When my old GP sold her practice - she was an emotionally intelligent woman fed up with 80-hour weeks - I chose a local bloke, for I am open-minded, and to be magnanimous when he seemed unfamiliar with my (bog-standard) medication and wrote down my weight wrong (55 kilos? He's dreaming.) My specialist smiled when he read his referral and wondered aloud if he knew who I was. He does now. At my second, and last, consultation he (a) asked me about my work; (b) volunteered his views on feminism, and (c) after advising me that I was under far too much pressure and needed a life, (d) asked me whether I preferred 'girls or boys'. I explained the distinction between politics and sexuality, and then went home and stewed, and that wasn't rhubarb.

My doctor doesn't have to be a feminist, but he shouldn't be stupid. Feminists aren't lesbians, and women don't have to call themselves feminist, and it's a bit rich to blame feminism for women's difficult and sometimes disappointing lives, which provoked Virginia Haussegger's book, *WonderWoman*. 'Having it all' is, as she says, an agonising, unending juggle, and will continue to be, while careers are based on men's practices and freedoms, and 'family-friendly' working conditions are an extra offered by some wise, but too few, employers.



Thanks to Bill Leak at the Australian

Meanwhile, Australia's Cardinal Pell reminds good Catholics that women's role is biologically determined, ideally Mother or virgin, secondary to Man's, and does not involve the direct exercise of power. I rejoice in my Protestant heritage. I also worry about the growing, explicit, regressive religious influence in modern Australian politics. Does it strike you as strange, that with a federal budget promising enduring surpluses, i.e. wealth, it should now be the time for limiting women's access to abortion and IVF, racking up single parents' (mostly mothers) work obligations, and enhancing the rights of fathers in the Family Court?

Why, given the unintended and enormous effect on working men of the vast social changes of the last fifty years, should we blame it on no-fault divorce, and crack down on women? Women are not responsible for globalisation or the economic and technological development that wants the kind of casual, part-time workforce women are willing to be part of, so that they can continue to care for family members. Women need to be able to work, because economic dependency is bad for human beings, and sometimes they just want a job, or have a career, because they like it. It's called choice.

Feminism doesn't make women happy or men feel undervalued: it helps women stand up for themselves, beside their men, and support others affected by discrimination and injustice. Feminism questions practices that denigrate other human beings because of their sex, and has given us tools for identifying, analysing and objecting to them. As a law student in the 1960s, I had a lecturer who delighted in the bullying 'Socratic method' and making young women students argue the facts of sexual cases, smirking as we blushed and the men sniggered. Then, he was a bully. Today, I can name him as a sexist and a sexual harasser.

Feminism is not a middle-class indulgence: it demands respect for the human rights of all women. It challenges the assumptions associated with the great world religions, which subjugate women. Last month, Saudi Arabia's top cleric banned the widespread practice of forced marriages, pointing out that the Qu'ran prohibited it. Feminism requires law reform. On 15 April the Governor of Washington State signed a new law that will allow pregnant women to divorce. Feminism states that women are citizens. On 21 April the Kuwaiti legislature considered, and on 4 May rejected, a bill that would have given women the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections. Feminism names sexual crimes against women. On 25 April an Afghan woman was reported murdered for 'adultery,' because she had applied to divorce her husband who had returned from a five year absence, unable to support her. On 3 May three Afghan women were raped and strangled as a 'warning' to all women to stop working for aid groups. And in April, in Australia, a religious leader called Faiz Mohammed told a Bankstown audience that a raped woman deserved it, because she had 'displayed her beauty to the entire world. She degraded herself by being an object of desire.' On 9 May, another Muslim leader who had publicly criticised his outrageous remarks was deposed by the Sheik's supporters.

Did feminism get it wrong? It didn't. People do. Women need to remember that every gain for women's rights is fragile. It is an old lie, that women's equality is in the pipeline, and that all women need do is work hard and wait to be recognised. In times of great uncertainty, it is easier to recreate a subclass than to face up to personal challenge.

Writers like Susan Maushart, author of *What Women Want Next*, agree that feminism doesn't make you

happy, but it does give you something to sit on. Feminism, as she says, 'has led us to the banquet table, but the meal we make of it is up to us. What women have always wanted is what women now have: the power to shape their own destinies . . . Sure, wreaking vengeance for the injustices of the past was kinda fun while it lasted. But we're over that now.'

Maushart's book is worth reading for the chapter headings alone - 'Having our families and eating them too' is my personal favourite - but particularly for her dark, dirty, dangerous sense of humour. A good feminist needs to laugh a lot. A sexist might see a virago dentata. I'd call it a winning smile.

About the author

Moira Rayner is special counsel to the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment Limited, a lawyer and a writer.

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Published Comments

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thank you Moira for an inspired article. I will use it for my third year history class on 'The Making

of the Modern Australian Women'. It makes clear, succinctly and without sentiment, what feminism is in the context of a developed society in the early 21st century. The definition of feminism occupies a great deal of time in this subject - this article will make my job a lot easier.

josie castle

Thursday, May 12, 2005

Goodonyer Moira. What you plead on behalf of your consisters might well be adopted by all amiable male eccentric rationalists who suffer the slings and narrows of trads with and without balls.

You bolster my optimism.

Keep it up!

nigel clarke

Thursday, May 12, 2005