

OUR GILDED BRACELETS –SEX, SHAME AND SELFISHNESS AHEAD?

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What lies ahead? Note the ambiguity in even that simple sentence. What lies, ahead? I can think of a few. 'Feminism has gone too far'; 'women are equal now'; women who use child care harm their children; It is not fashionable to describe oneself as feminist and extremely popular to assert that we are 'post-feminist' now. And there is nothing new in this. Rebecca West wrote, 'People call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.' Not a lot has changed in the decades since.

My thesis is that a tablet of feminism a day is the aspirin that keeps women's rights in circulation.

Speaking of clots, I have a new GP. When my old one sold her practice – she was an emotionally intelligent woman who was fed up with working 80 hour weeks, a third of it on paperwork – I chose a local bloke, because I am open-minded, and to be magnanimous when he seemed unfamiliar with my bog-standard medication and wrote down my weight wrong (I swivelled his screen when he wasn't looking – 55 Kilos? He's dreaming'). My specialist smiled, when he read his referral (thoughtfully dictated in my absence and posted on) and wondered aloud whether he knew who I was. He does now. I wrote up what followed in the Age newspaper on May 16th.

At my second, and last, consultation – he rang and asked me to see him about some 'new developments' in treatment for my condition - my new physician did four risky things.

- (a) He asked me about my work: Deputy Managing Director and Special Counsel to the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment, I explained: a network of progressive/defensive business leaders that was set up by the Business Council of Australia and the Chamber of

Commerce and Industry, twenty years ago, as a prophylaxis against the Australian government's intentions to establish the Affirmative Action Agency, which would require big business to report, annually, and publicly on how well women employees were represented in the workplace, and the progress of special programs to improve it. We still help employers to manage diversity in the workplace, though the AAA was established, did make a difference, but a few years lost its teeth

Silence, then

- (b) He volunteered his views on feminism, social workers, and the Left. Some assumptions there, of course: I'm a lawyer, actually. I sighed and said little.

Then

- (c) After advising me that I was under far too much pressure and needed to get a life – quite rightly– he blew it.
- (d) He asked me whether I preferred 'girls or boys'. I answered appropriately. I explained the distinction between politics and sexuality, and then I went home and stewed, and it wasn't rhubarb.

Then I published his story in my column.

My doctor doesn't have to be a feminist, but he shouldn't be stupid. Feminists aren't lesbians. Strong, well-educated, confident women, even those who work in men's traditional domains or professions don't have to call themselves feminists – though of course they ought to believe, at least, in the competence of women and their right to justice and respect, and be prepared to support other women. And nobody makes a sexist remark to me with impunity.

I was sensitive that week. A couple of books had just been launched: in one, WonderWoman, written by a disappointed Australian journalist called Virginia
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Haussegger, she asserted that our feminist foremothers were frauds who had peddled a lie, that women could 'have it all', both work and family equality. In another, What Women Want Next, lots of men exulted over the 'admission' by its author, Susan Maushart that feminism doesn't make you happy.

But it's a bit rich, isn't it, to blame feminism for women's difficult and sometimes disappointing lives?

Wonder woman is tired.

Haussegger's complaint, that 'having it all' means an agonising un-ending juggle, is absolutely valid. It 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, even some of ones that I work for, who find notions of paid maternity leave, preserving women's jobs so they can come back after they have stopped bleeding, got the feeding routines in place and bonded with their babies even though the bright young man who performed so well in their jobs is 'going places' and they want to keep him, or they have decided to make her position redundant; or who find family-friendly working hours and part-time or job-shared work downright irritating.

Family friendly workplaces and working conditions are still an extra offered by some wise, but too few, employers. And women who don't get them have recently been told by the Victorian Court of Appeal, finally writing off Victoria Schou's five year battle for justice, that it is not necessarily discriminatory not to allow a woman to work from home sometimes because her child is ill, forcing her to choose between caring for a sick dependent family member and her job. The test, according to the three men on that bench, is whether or not the condition – in that case, requiring a Hansard editor and all other staff to work on the premises while Parliament is sitting rather than doing the editing from home using that new-fangled gadget, the modem – is reasonable, not whether the alternative was doable, too. The alternative proposed must be as efficacious as the condition, given the employer's business objectives. Making promises to allow it but then not bothering to carry them through, is not a

matter for anti discrimination law at all, the court said, but a matter for management, with which the law is not concerned.

If we thought that twenty years of sex discrimination laws would change the way employers and judges think, think again.

God knows

Meanwhile, in Australia, an imposing ex-footballer Cardinal called George Pell constantly reminds good Catholics that women's role is biologically determined, ideally Mother or virgin (without the capital); secondary to Man's, and does not involve the direct exercise of power. No doubt there are similar pulpit pronouncements here. I rejoice in my Protestant heritage, though the Presbyterian Church of my youth has metamorphosed into something else, in Australia, even seeking to de-ordain its few women ministers on biblical authority. Fortunately, I had already moved on, by then. I don't have to agree with religious leaders' views of women's competence and roles. But I do worry about the growing, explicit, regressive religious influence on modern politics. The Christian absolutists fill me with as much alarm as the growing power of Islamic regime.

Religion is an institutionalised system of ritual, myths and behavioural requirements, which derives its power from being bundled up with quasi-historical events. It is the story of faith, not faith. It is a knot of metaphors and symbols and institutionalised traditions, whose shared experiences enable individuals to share their indescribable, numinous encounter with a divine presence. And arising out of community, every religion evolves with that community. Mohammed's revelation of egalitarianism and moral accountability was revolutionary for the tribal society of his day. Religion is always redefined by following generations. Orthodoxy and divisions come too, along with competing interpretations, ideas, and expressions of faith. When these are associated with war, dispossession, colonisation and cultural upheaval, not surprisingly religion becomes a rallying point of political and social definition. It becomes fixed. It becomes politically useful, especially when times are hard.

Times are hard. I think women's greatest challenge is to capacity of 'religion' to legitimate the separation and subjugation of women. It is all too easy to dismiss Islam for this reason: yet I have met many strong, faithful Muslim feminists. We foolishly suppose that Islamic culture is incompatible with liberalism, pluralism, individualism and respect for human rights, our own enlightenment heritage. Islam is still being misused to rationalise totalitarian regimes, it is true, but it is also true that Western civilisation, supposedly secular, has a religious underbelly. One glance at the church-going proclivities and rhetoric of political leaders in the US - and Australia, too – should tell us that Christian evangelism is still at work, and there are fundamentalists there, too.

Controversial Australian historian Keith Windschuttle recently argued [in Which Enlightenment, a book review published on 23rd March 2005 (www.newcriterion.com)], that understanding how religion, moral philosophy and egalitarian assumptions shaped modern politics in the English-speaking world is important for making sense of the blind forces tearing societies apart. He suggests that we have unconsciously assumed a British form of Enlightenment into our political philosophy. Unlike the European or French version, founded on the absolute separation of church and state, in ours, religious values are often implicit, largely because of the influence of Protestant reformers of the 19th century such as John Wesley, founder of Methodism, who saw the only way to overcome prejudice, passion, bigotry and wickedness was for the integration of religion and reason. So the Methodists – and many other Protestant sects of the late 18th and 19th centuries - got stuck into education, science, medicine, literature, servicing the poor and prisoners, seeking to incorporate these conjoined values into what we now call civil society. This unacknowledged value set underlies much of modern democratic governance today.

What democracies do is secularise – that is, identify certain responsibilities as belonging to political, not theological, institutions. Australian anti-discrimination law, which I work with every day, is a good example. It both

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protects religious minorities from prejudice and injustice, and also exempts religious institutions and practices from most of its prohibitions as well, even if they excuse women's subjugation, are privately intolerant to other religions, and limit those who may participate in religious rites or the privileges of priesthood.

In democratic societies, objection or disobedience of a law may not be blasphemous. Democratic societies are pluralist, even if they are shaped by religious traditions, whether Christian, Hindu or Islamic or something else. Civilised societies do not eradicate religion, but secularise government, by thoughtful distinction between disparate civil and religious domains, by government on the one hand, and by religious leaders too. For religion is a kind of mirrored window into the cloud of unknowing. Those who look in, see first themselves and through this, the infinite. No wonder, then, those newly visible women surprise and offend the men who have dominated the prospect for so long. The (male) editor of Newsweek is still alive and working, as no doubt are those who wrote the story, and its source. But in Nigeria in 2002 when a young, female, British-trained journalism graduate called Isioma Daniel filed a story for ThisDay newspaper about the Miss World beauty pageant, she had a different experience.

Noting Muslim objections to the pageant as both insulting to women and offensively begun during Ramadan (in a Christian part of the country) she wrote, and her editor published: 'What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them.' Hundreds of youths promptly went on the rampage, burning cars, buildings and attacking anyone thought to be Christian; more than 200 people were killed, thousands were left homeless, the newspaper and her government blamed her and only her, she copped a Fatwah and is now living in exile, somewhere in Scandinavia.

For God's sake!

The feminist blame game

I worry, too, at the assumption that even when the economy is booming, as it is in Australia right now, it is always a good time to crack down on women. The Australian federal treasurer has just brought down a budget that promises surpluses and lasting wealth, and yet it has also focused on (i) deliberately fostering a backlash and threatening to limit women's access to abortion; (ii) planning to deny access to assisted reproductive technology, based on age (over 42? Only three cycles for you!) and sexuality (lesbians aren't infertile so they shouldn't have it at all); (iii) racking up single parents' (75% of them women) obligations to find work, and (iv) further enhancing the rights of fathers in the Family Court.

This implies, to me, that there is no coherent alternative view to the conservative one, and a desperate need for women to find a new voice in political debate.

There is a group of reasonably well-educated city dwellers who agree on a range of important current issues - against the war in Iraq, for the dignity of minority groups and just treatment of asylum-seekers; rejecting mandatory detention of children; wanting economic and social benefits such as cost-free, first-rate health care and education, child-care and social supports; standing for the eradication of poverty, civil liberties, the rule of law and human rights. I am one of these. We have clear positions on abortion, gay and women's rights, racism, family values, and indigenous self-determination. We go to each other's rallies. But our influence depends on the government of the day. There are no great philosophers propounding a new way of looking at life - beyond productivity, reproductivity, and materialism. What there is, is too often predictable and simplistic, and evokes no response in ordinary people, who believe our positions have nothing to do with their lives.

There is a reason for this. We have been through a social tsunami that started 40 years ago, with liberation - women, gays, indigenous and ethnic minorities - that changed our lives, from the way we look and speak to how we work and communicate and consume.

The first and greatest dumper, which we underestimated, was to white men's work. Women moved out of our traditional roles, raised our awareness and became visible, vocal and equals, while men looked on in surprise, discomfort and anger.

Then came the family - divorce, reproductive choices - and when gays and lesbians came out of the closet we found they were our sisters and sons. Safety nets went down under globalisation. Jobs went with new technology and competition. There has been enormous cultural change since the 1960s, urged on by development, investment, the protest movements - and some damn fine rock'n'roll.

To the majority of the people, these changes were upsetting, and to many alarming, even a frightening violation of the laws of nature or even of God as explained in the churches we used to attend.

This gave the right a magnificent opportunity: to present themselves as the champion of "the people", voicing their anxieties about the pace of change, and offering a retreat to the vague certainties of "traditional values" and "the family". They gave the airwaves to white men's rage about their loss of certainty and purpose; trained the economists of the future and created institutes, magazines and think tanks flush with money supporting right-wing writers to stir popular fear and turn it into anger against the "chattering classes". The initiative was won, and cemented in place. The so-called left lost out to the moral certainty of the right.

I suspect that feminism has its own internal battles to find new "positions" because the others have, in a true sense, become "correct". On key social issues, our views are so ill thought through that it is easy to charge that we are out of touch with the real concerns of the ordinary working men and women. Worse, some of the most disadvantaged people – indigenous in Australia, Maori, ethnic and religious women – believe that feminism is not for

them, because their issues are different, and their men are too vulnerable and too wounded, to be abandoned.

It is human to want to belong to a group, especially when times are hard. We are comforted by the company of like-minded others, especially comrades from old battles. We do not like to be called "traitor". But it is treason not to try to grow and change, and become as relevant in the new societies as we were in the old.

It is true that such debates may be seized upon by their enemies, or misrepresented. But if we cannot have those debates, we become the enemy.

There is no sin in admitting that the vast social changes of the past 40 years did have some unintended consequences. Sexual "freedom" does sometimes result in premature and nasty sexual exploitation. There is no simple answer to the evergreen issue about law and order: though we have tidily divided, the "right" into demanding more police and mandatory imprisonment and that children be punished as adults, the left response with reason, there has been no real debate. We properly argue that "lawlessness" is a furphy, with stats to prove it, but anyone who has been intimidated on a train, or knows someone whose handbag got snatched, will give credibility to experience over "facts".

Of course, divorce laws were discriminatory and women should choose when to have children and to work, but what is wrong with admitting that this sometimes makes it hard on children, too? Why shouldn't we both acknowledge that racism and poverty do drive a lot of children's anti-social behaviour, from skipping school to using drugs, getting pregnant and petty crime, and admit that, as Lillian Rubin points out in *The Transcendent Child*, such choices are not inevitable, and some kids do not create that destructive amalgam of personal behaviour, slum culture and social conditions? And do something about that?

It is far, far easier to blame 'all the disappointments and struggles of middle- and working-class men – on no fault divorce, feminism and the loss of family certainties.

But women are not responsible for globalisation, or the economic and technological development that demands the kind of casual, part-time workforce women are willing to be a part of so that they can continue to care for family members. Or have a life, like my retired woman GP.

Women need to be able to work, because economic dependency is bad for human beings. And sometimes they just want a job, or to have a career, because they like it. It's called choice.

The future of feminism

Feminism doesn't make women happy or men feel unvalued. It helps women stand up for themselves, and if they choose too, beside their men, and to support others affected by discrimination and injustice, because they know how it feels. There's a short poem by John Donne that goes like this:

I thought if I could draw my pains
Through rhyme's vexations, it would them allay.
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce:
He tames it, that fetters it in verse.

Feminism is one way to make sense of a world that has little sense in it.

It questions practices that denigrate other human beings because of their sex, and has given us the tools for analysing, identifying and objecting to them.

As a law student in the 1960s, for example, I had a lecturer who delighted in the bullying 'Socratic method' of teaching law, which included making young women students explain and dissect the facts of the sexual cases to illustrate fine points of evidence or criminal law, smirking as we blushed and the men

sniggered. Then, he was just a bully. Today, I can name him as a sexist, and a sexual harasser.

Feminism is as useful in identifying and naming wrongs done to people, by groups of people. It is not a middle-class indulgence. It demands respect for the human rights of all women. It is about straining the stew caused by the misuse of power through a colander and leaving the substance exposed for what it really is.

It challenges the assumptions associated with the great world religions, which subjugate women. In April, Saudi Arabia's top cleric banned the widespread practice of forcing women into marriages, pointing out that the Koran prohibited it.

Feminism demands reforms to the law. On April 15th the Governor of Washington State signed a new law that will allow pregnant women to divorce, in the land of the free.

Feminism asserts that women are citizens. On April 21st the Kuwaiti considered and on May 4 rejected a bill that would have given women the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections. This month it passed laws that enables them to run for parliament – but at a cost. The new law requires that candidates must conform to Islamic law. Who is to decide what that means?

Feminism names crimes that are specific to the already victimised, especially sexual crimes against women: rape as a weapon of war for example, but closer to home, hard-hearted and deafness to the rights claims of women. In 2004 I launched a report pulled together a group of women lawyers and academics analysing the asylum claims of women who were subjected to specifically female discrimination and persecution such as rape, forced abortions, or punishment because their husbands or fathers or brothers were political activists, in the Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia. Footnote this.

They do not even get to make these claims: the men heading their families
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make their own, and if they fail, so do theirs. If they are made they are not acknowledged as well founded, fear of persecution that is, or that women are a 'class' – especially women who complained of being subjected to and not protected by their country's laws from domestic violence.

Women know what it means to be singled out for persecution and cruelty that is especially targeted on their sex. On April 25 an Afghan woman was reported murdered for 'adultery', because she had applied to divorce her husband who had returned from a five-year absence overseas, and was unable or unwilling to support her. Her father arranged it as a matter of family honour. On May 3 three Afghan women were raped and strangled as a 'warning' to all women to stop working for aid groups in that country.

And in April, in Australia, a religious leader called Sheikh Feiz Muhammad told a Bankstown, NSW audience that a woman who was raped deserved it because she had 'displayed her beauty to the entire world. She degraded herself by being an object of desire.'

On May 9th the sheikh's supporters deposed another Muslim leader who had publicly disassociated himself from and criticised his outrageous remarks.

Did feminism get it wrong?

I don't think it has. People do. Women need to remember that every gain for women's rights, even in Australia or New Zealand and other developed, stable economics and democracies, and is fragile. Feminists need to work on a kind of feminism that takes into account the experiences of women of all faiths, cultures and situations in every part of the world, and finds a golden thread that pulls it together.

It is an old lie, that women's equality is just in the pipeline, and that all women need do is work hard, and wait to be recognised. It is an even older one that a surrendered woman may safely rely on the kindness of men, even her kin, or her community. In times of great uncertainty it is much easier to recreate a

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subclass, or blame one for its personal disappointments, than to face up to the realities of changing lives and personal challenges.

Writers such as Susan Maushart, author of What Women Want Next, agree that feminism doesn't make you happy, but it never promised to, but it does give you something to sit on. People are happiest, not with material rewards but with feeling good about themselves, and believing that their lives have meaning.

As she says, feminism '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.

Feminists aren't into revenge any more. That was phase 1 of the women's revolution, and it was necessary to be angry. Maushart says, and I agree with her, 'Sure, wreaking vengeance for the injustices of the past was kinda fun while it lasted. But we're over that now.'

Indeed we are. We are on the cusp of the greatest challenge of all. Changing the world, and making it a better place.

The greatest risk to the future of feminism is those women who assume the battles are won, and seek to replicate the old boys networks with privileged loops of old girls' networks – jobs for friends from school, a feature of Western Australian life! – or by privileging mates, without respect either for merit, or the rights of other groups of women who are still on the outer – poor women, women with poor educations, women struggling with the second shift at home after a full day at work, women in fear of their very souls if they step out of some line created by a demagogue in a pulpit. We haven't got it all – we can't have it all – we don't want it all, but we do want to be there.

What lies ahead? Endurance, which we need in the ongoing campaign to make women focus on their biological function and sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others; sex – we're still going to have it, though a lot less if we

keep working at this rate; shame, I believe, that we have not yet found a feminism that allows Aboriginal and other indigenous minorities in their own lands a sense of respect and solidarity with their men that is appropriate to their history and culture; resistance, both to the unfulfilled demand that all women be respected as people and participate fully in a society that reflects our experiences, and to the resilient myth that men's unhappiness is women's fault; work, and lots of it, both in the home, and in the public domain – our gilded manacles. The world of work is still managed by men and masculinist models of employment to which productivity and growth the only ends, in which relationships, and women's child-bearing and caring responsibilities are a distraction and a management problem to be minimised; discussion, especially about the most valuable lesson of motherhood, that there are other ways to live than by productivity alone, which Susan Maushart perceptively identifies as perhaps the greatest difference between men and women; and relationships, which are in the end what matters most to us. Happiness remains a goal, not an achievement. So it will always be. The greatest challenge is to find who we are as women, and as people.

A happy ending

Susan Maushart's book is worth reading for the chapter headings alone – 'Having our families and eating them too' is my personal favourite, after 'The girlfriend's guide to guilt and depression' and 'the last blow job?' and, 'Are you happy now?' which is a woman's guilt for asking, 'what about me?' I find it hard to pick, but I treasure her writing, particularly for her dark, dirty, dangerous sense of humour.

Subservient people smile a great deal – just observe the demeanour of any woman in a job interview. The panel doesn't grin: the applicants do. But I think a good feminist laughs now, and laughs a lot. This means showing her teeth. This strikes fear into a sexist heart: *virago dentata*, he calls: a powerful woman: flee.

But show 'em, girls. That's the true definition of a winning smile.