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It's Time For Feminists To Get In Not Lean In

(Closing speech given at the Feminism in London Conference 2014, held on Saturday 25th October at the Institute of Education, London, UK).

Our Movement is in resurgence. It is truly a great thing to witness. We are all part of history unfolding, and what we do now, in thirty years time, will be what fills the history books of the future; so we need to think about what we want written on those pages, and what part all of us are going to play in it.

We all have an opportunity to meet together again, and raise our voices for women. Saturday 22nd November marks the tenth anniversary of the revived London Reclaim the Night march and I urge everyone to be there. Ten years we have been marching. Ten years we have been closing down the streets to speak up for women. Ten years we have been taking back the night for all those women looking over their shoulders, for all those women who go out to spite their fears and for those who stay in because of theirs. We march for all those women who survived, the warrior women, who have faced male violence, and faced it down, who have thrived, and who make it through, whether that's every day or every year or every decade.

Reclaim the Night is a chance to speak out against the many scandals we've witnessed this year. Events that have been turned into scandals of the BBC, or of political correctness or of local authority failings. Meanwhile, the real scandal of course is the epidemic of male violence meted out to women and children. The real scandal is that this violence will always be a symptom of patriarchy; especially if we never call it out, especially if we never call it what it is. It is not 'gender-based violence', because it is not about all genders neutrally and equally, nor is not because of religion or race, nor is it because of the BBC, nor is it because of multiculturalism. It is because of male violence. It is because that violence is the foundation of the system of patriarchy, as well as the product of it.

It was not race or religion that united the rapists and child sex abusers in Sheffield, Rochdale and Rotherham, it was their sex. This is an overwhelming fact that everyone is perhaps too nervous or too blinkered to call out, allowing the media yet again to ignore the very real issues of male sexual violence, and of the institution of prostitution, in favour of a cheap chance to whip up populist racism and xenophobia. The common denominator the perpetrators shared is actively ignored and covered up because to acknowledge it is to acknowledge the reality that something has gone far wrong with how we define maleness and masculinity in our culture. That something has gone far wrong with what we accept as natural behaviours. That something has gone very wrong with our cultural attitudes towards girl's sexuality and bodily integrity. That we are very wrong when we write off power, control, sexual aggression and violence as an essence of being biologically male. If we faced these failings collectively, we would be forced to question the very heart of our make-up,

the system of sex-rank, which divides people up into oppressor and oppressed, into predator and prey. We would be forced to consider answers, answers like Feminism.

There has perhaps never been a better or more urgent time to join together and make those answers heard. Because despite the horrors we face, it is also true that now is a great time to be a Feminist. We see our presence in those places where we were not before. We see Feminist commentary, albeit too often only on the most obvious issues: on motherhood, on equal pay, on violence. Our challenge is to make space for Feminist theory on those issues, but also far beyond; to make space for the wisdom that our politics and our perspective can offer.

Because the mere presence of our language in the mainstream, does not mean that it is correctly used, much less widely understood, sometimes the very opposite. Our language is often used against us, as Feminism is turned into a brand, as our complex political theory centuries in the making is reduced to catch phrases and slogans, manipulated to sell us everything from trainers to gym membership, manipulated to sell us lies; lies about our bodies, lies about our selves, lies about our potential, lies about our power.

And in such a culture, everything becomes Feminist; and anything can be Feminist, and as a consequence Feminism becomes nothing, becomes meaningless. This is of course the very point, this is of course the very intention. In such a culture any choice a woman makes becomes a Feminist choice, simply because a woman made it. This neatly fits into a background, of course, where choice has become a new religion, a new mantra. As if choosing between ever increasing layers of capitalist dross can ever be a choice at all. And this is a Feminist issue, just like all the others, because while not everything is Feminist, Feminism is about everything.

Right now, we also must take heart that the backlash against us, however it is played out, in all its various ways and on all its many stages, only highlights our power and potential; it only highlights our threat. The fact that the dominant culture has shifted from denying our existence and telling us our movement is dead to trying to tell us what our movement is and should be, is a sign of our success, is a sign of our momentum. We cannot be ignored any more, so now a new tactic is to acknowledge and incorporate, to celebrate and saturate, to dilute and water down our Movement and attack it at its radical roots all the while claiming to accept it – or at least a certain version of it. But ask yourselves what our Movement has to look like in order to be accepted by a culture that looks like this. Ask yourselves why we would ever want to fit in with a brutal, violent, compassionless system. Ask yourselves what truly revolutionary movement is ever going to be anything but threatening.

In her 1969 book ‘Sexual Politics’ the outstanding Radical Feminist theorist Kate Millett wrote that the true test of any revolution will be in changing attitudes. But more than this, that is the very foundation of any revolution, it is the fundamental prerequisite of any revolution.

Institutions do not fall from the sky or grow from natural roots in the earth. They grow from seeds planted in the culture long ago, watered and tended by the media, by powerful elites, by ignorance, prejudice, habit, greed and convenience. Institutions are not magical entities, they are merely people, just groups of human beings. Human

beings with norms that can be changed, human beings with values that can be changed; human beings with hearts and minds that can, must and will be changed by people like you and you are already doing it. That is how revolutions are built.

Because, remember, that for those at the top of the heap, it is never easy to see the heap, but just to take in the great views and to enjoy the fresh air. Meanwhile, it is those most affected by the system who can see it for what it is. It is those most affected by the system who can see the cracks in it, who know best how we can take it down and re-build. And that is why we cannot afford to lose out on women's leadership, on women's direction, on women's power and skills. And that is why we must not abandon the greatest asset our Movement has: women-only space and women-only organising. That is where our roots are, that is where our Movement grew, from the ground up. That is what made us, make what we have of our Movement today.

We cannot afford to lose out on the skills and talents of half the population, of our 52% majority due to nothing but prejudice, but backwardness, but a misplaced sense of superiority. For our leaders would do well to understand that being in dominant positions within the status-quo, being a majority in terms of mainstream power, and having superiority in terms of riches is not the same thing at all as being superior. Though many of those in power believe it is, and indeed too many of those not in power believe that lie too. But in fact the practice of patriarchy as a form of social governance has brought us to the brink of a planet crisis. A planet that has seen half of its natural wildlife die off in the past forty years alone, a world where a handful of the richest people own more wealth than the poorest half of the population, a country where our social sector workers are on strike for a pay rise of 1% while MPs award themselves 11%. The current model is bankrupt, it is bust, it is cracked wide open.

So what will take its place? This is where Feminism comes in, because Feminism has always been about vision. Because knowing where we're going is half the battle. Know what kind of world we need to build and we can end this man-made war against us, against our Sisters, against the world, against nature, against humanity itself. It is a war we never started, but it is one we are going to finish, and win.

And if need be, it will be a revolution of stealth, in the face of, in the brazen face of, the overt misogyny that finds no need to hide itself. If need be, then it will be a peaceful revolution, in the face of base and brutal violence and aggression.

But this is no time to do a Russell Brand and throw our hands up in despair. That is not the answer. In fact, whatever question he is the answer to is not one worth asking. Certainly I never asked for him, and he is not what my revolution looks like. While most of us would never choose the present parliamentary system it is the one that we have in the interim, before the revolution cometh. And opting out, is giving up. It is highly unlikely that there are many politicians who deserve your precious vote, but that doesn't mean that the ideologies they represent don't make a difference to billions of innocent people. Tell all those people suddenly required to reapply for their sickness and disability benefits that it makes no difference which party is in power. Tell all those people suddenly left with no local transport system, no local bank or presented with a doctor's surgery run by Virgin Care, that it makes no difference who is in power. Yes, it is undeniable that there isn't much clear and clean ethical water

between the major, mainstream parties today and their variations in policies may seem a drop in the ocean, but in a country of sixty million, those paper thin differences create a storm. A whirlwind, which drops down on the most vulnerable, the most voiceless and disadvantaged, which attempts to rip the hearts out of our communities.

So this is no time to 'lean in', this is the time to get in. Get in and make a difference. Stand as local councillors, join political parties, join Trade Union branches, stand as MPs, become school governors and court magistrates, join local health boards. And I don't just mean the major political parties either, for there are smaller parties trying to do things differently of course. There are the governments in the Celtic nations, trying to do things differently. They too need Feminist ideas, they too need Feminist direction. So wherever your heart leans, let your voice follow; the important thing is to be heard. Meanwhile, the powers-that-be have a concern to maintain the brutal status-quo and they rely on us opting out, they rely on us rejecting their petty lip service to participation. Let us play them at their own game then. Don't overlook any opportunity to make a difference, even if it is from within, because all forms of resistance are good and we need all the help we can get – insider and outsider. We need to be outside the courts and assemblies with banners and placards, but we also need to be within them, in wigs and gowns, in robes, in uniforms, in power; playing patriarchy at its own game and winning for women in whatever way we can. Yes, of course, these systems aren't perfect, but we live in an imperfect world, so why would we expect our institutions to be any better?

Otherwise, what is our alternative? Who do we want working with and for those people who have been most failed by the very system set up to supposedly protect them? Who do we want in our social infrastructure on which all of us depend? Rows of faceless, bureaucratic yes men content to work in prisons run by G4S, content to work in education authorities run by arms companies, content to take their wages without question, without insurrection, without noticing and publicising the perils of privatisation? No. As long as those systems are there we need to be in them, if for no other reason than to bear witness, than to know, than to decipher how to affect change. We cannot afford the luxury of standing up on the moral high ground for in our current state there is no high ground. We are all complicit in varying degrees of militarisation, of imperialism, of environmental destruction, because that is part and parcel of living in the world as it is, thanks to decisions made long before us by people who never represented us. Don't sit back so worthy and wait for a system you feel more comfortable with because that is a long way off and the world needs your contribution right now.

Our enemies certainly don't sit back, and they manage to make and sustain some mysterious alliances when they share agreement on curtailing freedom, on limiting fundamental human rights, including women's rights. Have you noticed how so many religions are suddenly brothers in arms when it comes to denying women access to safe and legal abortions, to denying women their bodily integrity? Have you noticed how UKIP stand on a platform of withdrawing from the European Union while working in the European Union? And into the void created by the blinkered, careerist cowardice of the mainstream, major political parties have stepped these and other right-wing, racist, hateful nationalists who pretend to be men of the people while turning the people against one another. It is obvious, if you look, if you really see, beyond the hysterical media coverage that nobody seems that bothered about

immigration while they have a regular income, and a decent local school their children can go to, and a decent local health service, and local amenities which work. The main issue here is the distribution of wealth from the bottom to the top; a method of distribution we may just as well call what it is: theft, stealing, fraud on a mass scale. And the Somali or Polish family living down the road are not responsible for those policy decisions. They do not manage the banks, they do not control the pension funds, they do not set the minimum wage, they do not turn over blank cheques to fund the building of Trident missiles, weapons of mass destruction, nor sell off our health service to the highest bidder.

In the run up to the general election 2015 it is up to all of us to participate in politics, and as politics is nothing and everything but life itself, then that means all of us because it affects all of us. And we can all do something because we are all influential, whether we influence one person or hundreds, whether we influence online or offline, this revolution is kept going by changing the mind of one person at a time, by changing one person at a time, for the better. All we have to do is keep passing on this torch; do not believe the lie that we are powerless, that we can make no difference, for if that were really true there would not be such a well-oiled propaganda machine trying to persuade us of the very opposite. There would not be such outrageous and blatant efforts to divert us away from the very questions we need to be asking, the questions that Feminism poses, the questions that our politics have never been frightened to ask. And if there were not truths in those questions, and if they did not resonate with so many, then there would not be such resistance to the answers that Feminism provides.

Yes, patriarchy is an institution, and a long-standing brutal one at that. Yes it is insidious, in how it affects every area of our lives, in how it gets into our very heads. It is an institution, it is insidious, but it is not invincible because change is inevitable. Everyone involved in this Movement is already changing things, every day. By loudly and proudly proclaiming your Feminism. By calling out sexism when you see it. By educating others. By giving others permission to voice dissent, when you articulate yours. By blaming perpetrators and not victims. By pointing out simple truths, and in naming them, bringing them to the table, putting them on the agenda. This change we are witnessing is being led by women, within a Movement that is made up of politicised and empowered women. And at the same time this Movement is working to politicise and empower women. That's what's going to secure this revolution, that's how we're going to finish it, just as it started, one woman at a time.

All these change-makers are what liberation looks like; and the world looks beautiful right now. Keep this Movement moving. Keep passing on the torch, that's all we need to do. Never give up.

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Campaigns to support:

End Demand UK: campaigning for a world without prostitution, sample letters to your MP and other tips for taking action
www.enddemand.uk

50:50 Campaign: petition and campaign for women's representation in Parliament
<http://www.change.org/p/petition-for-debate-to-get-a-parliament-of-around-50-50-men-women>