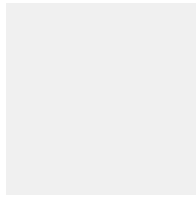


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## Feminism at the Crossroads



What are the goals for today's feminists? Can idealism change the world or is now a time to be pragmatic?

**Finn Mackay** | Activist, founder of the London Feminist Network



Feminism is at a crossroads. On the one hand, pop stars such as Beyoncé and Miley Cyrus have proudly declared themselves feminists. On the other, feminist writers and activists are subjected to a terrifying barrage of threats and abuse from online commenters. In November 2014, the gender pay gap for all UK employees (full-time and part-time) was the lowest on record. Meanwhile, according to a 2013 survey by the UK government, approximately 85,000 women are raped on average in England and Wales every year. Is feminism still a radical tool for positive change? Or can it only serve to support the status quo?

Finn Mackay is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of the West of England. In 2004 she founded the London Feminist Network, one of the largest grassroots feminist activist organisations in the country.

We spoke to Mackay about feminism's successes and its future challenges, and why idealism still matters.

**A common picture of today is that women's rights have never been better. Do you think this is a fair representation, or is the fight for gender equality more urgent than ever before?**

A lot of progress has been made, but this hasn't been handed to us on a plate or bestowed upon us by successive benevolent governments. The rights we have were hard won and they were won by feminist activists before us, going back generations to the first wave of feminism in the 1900s. In the 1970s during what is known as the "second wave" of feminism, activists secured for us vital services such as refuges and helplines, which provide support today to women, children and men affected by domestic abuse, rape and sexual violence.



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The irony is that this great legacy is now in danger of being swept away from under us as ideological cuts in the name of austerity remove funding for women's refuges for example. Women's Aid alone has to turn away around 200 women and children every day, simply due to lack of space, yet cuts to refuge places continue apace. The numbers of women being killed by their violent male partners and ex-partners has not decreased as far as we can tell. The numbers of rapes being reported has also not decreased; in fact it has risen. These are the numbers at the sharp end, the brutal statistics that are an ultimate measure of our so-called equality.

**With figures such as Beyoncé claiming today to be feminists, to what extent has the term, and feminism more broadly, lost its radical edge? If it has, how should we respond to that situation if we are to keep feminism alive and kicking?**

There is a misconception in the media that any woman who has a job must be a feminist, that any woman who has a lot of money must be a feminist, that any woman in a powerful position must be a feminist. What this shows is that out there in the public consciousness people associate feminism in some way with the power and success of women; that in itself is not a bad thing. But, feminism is a political movement, with decades of complex political theory and examples of successful activism and varying campaigns and achievements.

Not everyone is feminist, not everything is feminist, not every comment or decision that a woman makes or takes is a feminist comment or a feminist choice. I was unemployed for a few years and claimed benefits; that doesn't make me an expert on Marxist political theory. Most women would support the basic aims and tenets of feminism – I think that is uncontroversial. If more women are resisting and mocking the well-worn stereotypes of feminism and claiming this political label for themselves then that is a positive move. I hope that people follow that up by learning more about the exciting history and present of feminism as a global social movement.

**Increasingly, we are given a picture of feminism that endorses the status quo: feminism is about increasing the number of female CEOs. Do you think this is a fundamental task for feminism, or should it demand greater changes in our social structure?**

As long as our system is the way it is then we have to improve representation within such institutions because to do otherwise is to support blatant and basic discrimination, which we cannot tolerate or accept. I would rather a world without war and militarism, I would rather a world without prisons, I would rather a world without the so-called 'super rich' elite controlling our common wealth and natural resources. Feminism has critiqued all of these structures and rightly so. However, at the moment I do believe that women should be able to serve and be promoted in the army just like the men in the army because I cannot support sex discrimination in employment. I would rather no young men or women were sent off to fight wars for the riches of the few.

I also think that it is vitally important that women enter the institutions which are supposed to support the most vulnerable in our communities. I applaud the work of feminist solicitors, feminist police officers, feminist prison governors, feminist teachers, feminist youth workers, feminist probation officers, feminist social workers. These are imperfect professions and imperfect institutions, but I'd rather more people committed to social justice go into them, otherwise we leave it to rows of faceless yes-men, content to take their wages from G4S and ask no questions.

**In your closing speech at the Feminism in London Conference, you claim that “feminism is about everything”. In what way does feminism offer a point of criticism to such a wide range of issues and why is this important for feminism?**

Feminism provides answers to the pressing social problems we face today and yet the wisdom it has to offer is not widely known nor consulted. Eco-feminism for example provides us with a way to understand the links between patriarchy and militarism and environmental destruction. This is not the same as saying that “everything is men's fault”; it is no way as simple as that, nor as reductionist. Feminism urges us to look at the root causes of problems, and many if not all of those come down to patriarchy and capitalism – the two being interrelated and mutually dependent. Feminism has provided critiques of racism and imperialism, of war, of class inequality of children's inequality and so much more. Feminism is about humans and humanity, it is a tool box for us to use and refer to so that we may all change, so that we can become humane and try to reverse the damage that a failed patriarchy has already caused.

**Towards the end of the 20th century a range of feminists emphasised the importance of living differently as an individual to criticise oppressive gender norms. Do you think that personal transformation alone can be the vehicle of emancipation, or do we need to utilise more communal forms of protest?**

Feminism is a social movement, it is political. That means it is collective. Political struggle must be collective if it is to succeed. We live in an increasingly individualised world, which makes people feel alone, which teaches people, wrongly, that only they are to blame for structural problems. In order to feel less alone and to stop blaming ourselves for structural problems which put barriers in our lives, we join political movements to collectivise our experiences and together work out solutions for everybody's benefit. That's what women did in the second wave in what were called 'CR' or consciousness raising groups and it is really important that we start to do this again. Living

differently and living by example is important, it is personally fulfilling (though also challenging and in some cases dangerous) and it is inspiring to self and others, but we will not change the world alone. One of the oldest and most powerful social movements in the world is out there and has been growing in the UK since the early 2000s – join it!

**We increasingly recognise that the fight for gender recognition and equality holds a multitude of different genders. To what extent do you think it's the task of feminism to fight for the rights of other gender and sexuality groups?**

Feminism is a political movement for the liberation of women and society based on equality for all people. Women identify as many genders, sexualities, ethnicities, social class, faiths etc. Lesbian women organise within the broader feminist movement and one of the seven demands of the second wave women's liberation movement in the UK calls for an end to the discrimination against lesbians and for a woman's own right to define her own sexuality. Feminism will only be as strong as the bridges it builds and sustains with and between other social justice movements. Not every activist can do everything and not every group can do everything but it is important that feminist politics are brought into and are able to enrich all other movements. Feminists are present in organisations for LGBT equality for example and LGBT activists are present in feminist groups. This kind of solidarity is important. Most feminist groups today are mixed and explicitly state that they are open to people of any sex and gender identity, in fact many feminist and women's groups today are open to men. This is good but it must not detract from the still vital importance of women-only space. Self-organisation is a political right for all oppressed groups.

**A central task for feminism today is to offer criticism of the many ways in which a patriarchal society violates equality. Do you think that feminists also need to have a positive idea of what a truly equal world would be like?**

In order to get to the better world we know is possible we need to have an idea of what it would look like, so yes, that kind of theorising is vital. I like to call that project a project of aspiration and we should set our bar high so that we can more quickly get somewhere near to it. I am often called idealistic or out of touch because I can envision a world without the prostitution industry, for example, but visions and ideals are what have driven progress throughout history. We work in the here and now but we must never stop imagining the future differently; politics is that vehicle between what is and what could be, that's why everyone should get involved.