

Feminism: We are not calling for equal inequality

FINN MACKAY 4 November 2013

"Feminism is only frightening to those who gain the most from oppression, to those who would stifle the human spirit and hold the world in stasis. The rest of us really do have nothing to lose and everything to gain". Finn Mackay speaking at the [FiL Conference](#)

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Our conference has covered a vast array of topics, all of which are feminist, all of which are feminist issues. Because every issue is a feminist issue; because this imperfect world is our world too, and in it we have a 53% majority stake. There is nothing in politics, war, peace, culture, business, law, development – that does not touch us too. Despite the fact that we are so often unrepresented in these areas, and in the decision makers who shape them. That is why events like this gathering are so important, spaces where we can build on our politics, listen to our voices and ideas, and believe in the solutions we already know we have.

The last couple of years have seen a sea-change in the representation and visibility of feminism in our media and culture. Almost every day there seems to be some form of feminist response or commentary in our media. This has come about through grassroots activism. Through our collective movement, through imaginative campaigns, public mobilisation and direct action, we have managed to direct attention to those issues we think are important, we have managed to make news, not just comment on it. This too is a sign of a movement in resurgence, a movement with power; where we can do more than just firefight, we can be proactive, can go on the offensive so to speak and dictate our own agenda.

There are many out there of course, who find this offensive. They find the strength of our movement offensive, they are offended by the power of feminism, they are offended by women's autonomy at all. These are the people who try to silence women, in social media, on Twitter and Facebook, in comments pages, on websites, on blogs, spreading hate and lies. It is not just that people disagree with our opinions, it is that they resent us having an opinion at all.

Men voice their opinions in the media every day. Often they receive criticism as a result. And that's what debate is about, and when we walk out onto the pitch we accept that too. But all too often people don't engage with women commentators on this level, and when I say people, I mean men. Too many men don't engage with women on that level, they quickly, so quickly, descend into threats – and specific threats: threats of sexual violence.

This serves to remind women that they are there to serve men, and that they have strayed into intellectual territory or made claims to their autonomy that offend those who dare to presume authority over us. Threats of sexual violence are the lowest common denominator which attempt to set in stone a chasm between women and men; which attempt to remind women that whatever their achievements, whatever their opinions, they are still women – and thus can be objectified, humiliated and terrorised by men as a group.

Increases in sexual violence and increases in the sexual objectification of women actually follow women's advancements, follow women's equality gains, follow women's progress, or incursion, into previously male-only areas – be that areas of thought or practice. The purpose of sexualised violence and the representation of sexual violence in our culture, is to put women back in their place, to reduce women, in spite of everything we have managed to gain, to an object for the male gaze, an object that can be taken, stolen, used and broken. This violence occurs partly to alleviate the rage of men as a group, where that group perceives women's progress towards equality as an assault; an assault on their fragile superiority. It is attack as a form of superiority-defence, based on the suppressed knowledge and very correct conviction that women are human too and cannot be kept down forever.

These threats are also, as we know, not hollow threats, and too many women understand that. But this is precisely what so many men fail to understand; not those woman-haters who abuse and rape, they know what they do, but much more generally, those who from their vantage point, or ad-vantage point, of male supremacy, fail to understand that even if they: don't mean it, even if they: are just saying, even if they: protect women, even if they: would never do anything to hurt a woman – they hurt women with their sexism, their victim-blaming, their so-called jokes, and their casual threats. Because, we cannot know who means it and who doesn't. We don't know who will follow through with their threats and who won't. We have to remember that, and carry on thinking about the countless remarks, comments and asides from faceless men and boys who probably forgot their pathetic contributions the minute they hit 'send'. Such is the luxury of male supremacy, such is the luxury of having never felt like prey.

This expansion of this representation of sexual violence in our culture, and the visibility of such threats, is an inevitable kick back from male supremacy or what feminists term patriarchy. This kick back or backlash is to be expected. It means we are doing our job, that we are doing enough to be noticed. Feminism is a radical and revolutionary movement. Our Women's Liberation Movement is a global political movement for the liberation of women and society based on equality for all. We seek to question, challenge and end male supremacy and that, is revolutionary, it is world changing.

And any movement that threatens the status-quo becomes a concern to the groups that benefit most from the status-quo staying just as it is; and we must remember that nobody gives up power voluntarily. That is why our movement will be a constant struggle, may always be in struggle, certainly in our lifetimes. But the women who shaped our movement long before us, who smoothed the path for us to march here to our own moment in the spotlight, they knew then what we still know now; that nothing lasts forever, and that change is inevitable.

So let us not be apologetic about the radical facts of our movement. We don't need to apologise for women-only space, which makes our movement strong; which makes us strong. We don't need to apologise for the fact that we do want change, that things cannot stay the same, that this is a necessity for our future, if we are to even have one. So it is time we stopped adding disclaimers to our work, assuring people that they don't have to do anything differently, that they don't have to change, that feminism isn't a threat.

Our movement is indeed a threat. It is indeed threatening. For what is the point of a social movement that doesn't envision a different world, what is the point of a social movement that doesn't try everything in its power to make that vision a reality? And also, what would be the point of a feminism that simply sought equality with unequal men? With men who face discrimination too, at every level.

With men who face racism, homophobia, class oppression; with men who are underpaid, homeless, laid off, written off and filling up our prisons, with men who cling to violence as their source of masculinity or control when all else has failed them. Who wants equality with that? No feminist I know.

Likewise, we are not calling for equal inequality. This applies to those of us who are opposed to so-called 'lad's mags' and 'Page3', because they are blatantly sexist, because they are blatantly gendered, because we don't go into shops and see rows of magazines portraying men in the same way. But this fact doesn't mean that we're advocating the sort of equality where men are also demeaned and objectified. And when we speak up against such sexism it is a political argument, it is not because we are prudish moralists, or because we have a problem with nudity or sex. We know that objectification has nothing to do with sex, and everything to do with sexism. Our movement has in fact fought for centuries for the right of women to enjoy and express their sexuality free from the double standards which aggrandise men for sexual activity and shame women for the same. This was actually one of the Seven Demands of our UK Women's Liberation Movement, agreed in 1975: the right of all women to define their own sexuality.

So we do need to correct the myths that are told about our movement and our politics, we need to challenge the lies told about feminism and feminists. We do not need to minimise our movement, we do not need to try to appease men. We do not need to add disclaimers when we talk about male violence or the normalisation of pornography and the sex industry, clarifying that we don't mean all men, that feminism doesn't hate men, and that men have nothing to fear from us. As if it isn't the case that we are the ones who have most to fear, and that often, it is them. As if it isn't us who have the most to lose – as if too many have not already been lost, lives lost directly through the blunt use of violence, or lives affected indirectly, through the violence of representation as nothing more than object.

So to those who benefit in silence and varying degrees of privilege from the unequal and twisted status-quo, we need to say, yes. Yes, you are right, feminism is a threat to you; our movement is here to take away your power, the power you stole from so many. Our movement is here to change your world, and save it for all of us.

But this very situation is fuelled of course by one of the most popular lies told about our movement, the lie that feminism is man-hating, that feminists are man-haters. Feminism does not hate men. Feminism contains a great respect for the humanity of us all, by pointing out what should be obvious – that all men are not this way or that, that all men are not violent or war-mongering. Our political theory explains that male violence is in fact a form of social control, one that it is profoundly political, and not in the least biological.

Another lie told about our movement is that feminism makes women into victims. This is the lie that ours is a negative, pessimistic and disempowering movement, what some people call "victim feminism".

Let us be clear. It is not feminism that turns women into victims. It is the men who choose to abuse women, who choose to violate women, who presume a right to buy women. It is those men who make women into victims; not feminism. Feminism is here to stop that process, to end the violence of male domination. We respond to individual experiences with the aim of collective change for all. That is what empowerment looks like.

It is not pessimistic or negative to name our oppression. It is liberating. Ours is a movement of billions of women, which says: no, it wasn't your fault, it wasn't because of what you were wearing, it wasn't because of who you dated, it wasn't because of how much you had been drinking, it wasn't because of how late you walked home. Ours is also a movement which feels every loss, we feel every indignity, we feel every assault – because this is about you, and also because this goes beyond you; because this is about all of us. It is about every woman made to feel that she wasn't worth as much as a man; every woman made to hate her body; every woman made to question and judge herself simply due to her sex alone; every woman denied opportunities or directed away from them; every woman made to feel she was lesser, second class.

What we all share as women, despite our vast diversity is our experiences of sexism in a world of male supremacy. What we should also share, but too often don't, is our involvement in a collective movement of resistance to that oppression.

Homophobia, misogyny and a lack of faith are what hold women back from identifying with one of the oldest and most powerful social movements the world has ever known – their own. It is up to all of us to challenge that misogyny, to restore the faith in our personhood, our own potential, our own humanity.

For what is shameful about social justice, what is embarrassing about dignity and worth, what is wrong with demanding a stake in the world we have built? Feminism is only frightening to those who gain the most from oppression, to those who would stifle the human spirit and hold the world in stasis. The rest of us really do have nothing to lose and everything to gain; a revolution still to finish, and a world to win.

This is a slightly edited version of the speech Finn Mackay gave at the close of the [Feminism in London 2013 Conference](#), October 26th.