

Feminism and Feminist are eight-letter four-letter words. Why?
Annette Lawson for Feminism in London, October 25 2014

Hello Feminists!

Because I am really an **ex**-academic but a current activist and you will have a current academic (and also activist) after me, I am going to stay in the political world for my 15 minutes.

Feminism is an eight-letter four-letter word. And so is feminist, I say. But far from bad-mouthing you when I use the words, I am calling you to be proud. For me, the words are wonderful – they inspire me with a reminder of *foremothers* and not only forefathers; of women who were brave; of women who were thinkers and wrote; of women who worked in factories and then decided to seek decent conditions by withholding their labour when commanded to work; of women who from time immemorial have refused to lie down and think of England or, for any other country, while some man felt entitled to possess them not for their pleasure, but his alone. Alas, it also makes me think of those who died struggling for their freedom, their development, their right to make choices and decisions for their own lives and those of their children. And worse, of the millions who today fear for their bodily and their emotional safety not as an irrational, unfounded fear but because it is still all too often a real and terrible experience.

These successes and these fears are part of the reason feminism and feminist have a bad name and can become swear words used to scar and defeat us.

So when I pose the question, ‘why’? Why are these eight letter words used as four-letter swear words, my answer is, fear.
Fear of loss. Fear of danger.

A young student told me only ten days ago in the safe space of the Feminist Library, that she was afraid to call herself a feminist or even to discuss feminism with her peers – males and females - because the reaction was too irrational and too painful – mockery and distaste. But she also feared to apply the label to herself because she was afraid that some of the good things she might want like promotion, success and so on, would be more difficult to achieve – that such a label sets up further barriers. She does not mean that she would have a concrete wall instead of one made of sticks that she could just blow down like the little pigs, but sociologists in the room know that Durkheim in the late nineteenth century already described social facts as having the same reality and toughness as walls in the physical environment. So, so far, and perhaps lacking the sisterhood for support and the tools to help her climb those walls or walk through (because they can become permeable), she is silenced. Her story recognises the power of structures – economic, political and social and man-made – which still prevent women from achieving their own aspirations.

Then there is unconscious fear, and this is about misogyny – the hatred of women that may be masked with social niceties but so often scratches, snarls and erupts –

especially terrifying when least expected. This is the unconscious male terror of Woman – she who gives life may also take it away, she who has two mouths is feared because surely her vagina too is ringed with teeth and in sex not only his penis but he, himself, will be devoured. He will experience not only ‘the little death’ but death itself. This is the myth of the *vagina dentata*. Mirò painted a series of three canvases called Woman; in one the entire centre consists of a great oval slash. Just above it are fangs from a gaping mouth. Both holes occupy almost the whole canvas. Mirò also indicates with his little splash of fiery red or orange, sexual desire, thus placing his un-depicted Man in a state of simultaneous longing and fear.¹ Jacqueline Rose, extracting from her book² in the Guardian review,³ writes in similar vein of Man’s terror of Woman and of the difficulty the infant boy has of becoming a man because he must overcome, leave aside, his period as female – as part and parcel of his mother’s body – just a baby, sexless and gender-less like his sister inside a woman’s uterus. He loves his mother deeply but cannot possess her nor grow to be really like her. Hate and Love are indeed opposite sides of the same coin and it is quite possible that my friend the student might have been followed from the pub where she dared to talk about feminism, and might then have been raped to show her what power she lacks, what *real* sex is like and to punish her for speaking out because she would have broken the imperative that *he* knows who may speak and who not. And about what. That’s another set of walls built as a social structure that oppresses Woman and supports Man.

And yet, we could argue that ‘feminism’ is actually rather acceptable these days – look at all the new web sites started and run by young women – UKFeminista; the F word, 50:50; Oii My Size, No More Page 3, Everyday Sexism – even Mumsnet which is also often laugh aloud funny. As is Chimanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *Purple Hibiscus*, who was advised by a Nigerian man (she points this out although she is, herself, Nigerian, because, she says, Nigerians are particularly good at giving unwanted advice) that feminists were unhappy women who could not get husbands. So she decided to call herself a Happy Feminist and then moves through Happy African Feminist and Happy African Feminist who does Not Hate Men and Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels for Herself and Not for Men, and so on until she lands back home and is a feminist; and is now calling for us **all** to be feminists.⁴

These women have thrown off the baggage – the burden placed on them by media portrayals (with some truth to them) that a true feminist would need to live among other women, rejecting even her own male child, because fundamental root and branch transformation of patriarchy had to be made to happen – in the 1970s. They are reinterpreting what it might mean in the 21st century to be a feminist. And they are beginning – or some are – to learn that you have to turn your fury which is otherwise impotent – into politics. You have to – what?

¹ Annette Lawson (1988) *Adultery: an Analysis of Love and Betrayal*, Basic Books, p.50

² Jacqueline Rose, (2014) *Women in Dark Times*, Bloomsbury

³ Jacqueline Rose, The Guardian Review, Saturday, October 18, 2014, p.4

⁴ Chimanda Ngozi Adichie, The Guardian Review, Saturday, October 18, 2014, p.1-4

Turn Fury into Politics – the title of a project NAWO recently completed working with young women 16-25. They were already angry but they did not know what to do with that anger. They knew they hated the way their bodies were portrayed, the way their male peers looked at pornography in the playground; the fact that non-one was interested in what they had to say. But not what to do with this rage. In our project they produced a manifesto – wonderful! (copies available here: <http://www.nawo.org.uk/young-womens-manifesto-text-and-support/>).

So become an Activist. Another 8-letter word.

Right now we have every reason to be working to change the world – locally here in the UK as UKIP rants, we suffer from cuts while new ideas – some feminist - about how the economy might be run differently despite the deficit, fall on deaf ears; and we live in a culture where all crime is going down except violent crimes against women. One where men buying women to satisfy their sexual ‘needs’ is ‘having a laugh’, rather than making a woman into an article in the super market which you buy without having to have any real engagement or human relationship. Perfect. One where a paedophile would not be allowed to work near children even if he was a teacher when he came out of prison, but a footballer who still thinks he did nothing wrong when he raped a drunken girl, is, within a couple of days of serving his time, being offered £20k a week modeling the good guy to little boys and their fathers.

There is an election in 7 months’ time.

But also globally -

Beijing+ 20 takes place next week in Geneva and then in New York at the UN in March next year. The Millennium Development Goals end in 2015 and women all over the world are working to make the post-2015 agenda transformative with human rights and specially women’s rights – including our reproductive and health rights - at the centre of it all.

So, if you are not already, please join the world of Feminist-Activism. Proudly. Be proud to go out, take up a cause and proclaim your feminist-activism. And Never, Never, Ever Give Up.