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Girls! New feminism needs you!

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Abstract:

Feminism in the UK has evolved from a minority movement into a way of life for mainstream women and from an ideology into a pragmatic view for achieving equality. Women, however, still need to feel comfortable enough about the movement to publicly identify with it and have men by their side.

Full Text:

For all women's successes, equality is not yet won, argues Natasha Walter, summing up the claim of her new book. Opposite, we throw open the floor to debate

Does feminism have a place in Britain today? Girls are doing better than boys at school. More women are in paid work than men. We have seen women striding into the corridors of power: among them a prime minister, a head of M15 and a Director of Public Prosecutions. We see young female singers talking gleefully about girl power and women taking control of all aspects of their lives: suing employers for discrimination, bringing up children on their own, or deciding not to have children at all. In this brave new world does a movement for women's rights have a place?

I believe that it does. Because beside women's growing freedom lies another truth, the truth of their continuing inequality. Women are still poorer and less powerful than men. More women than men live on benefits. Women still suffer abuse and violence at the hands of men from which they can find no redress; only one in ten of all men accused of rape gets convicted; only one in ten rapes is reported in the first place. Women are still in a tiny minority in the British establishment: they make up just seven in 100 university professors, four out of 100 general surgeons; four out of 100 company directors. And women may be working more, but they are still not reaping the rewards: 31 per cent of working women are paid less than 4 [pounds sterling] an hour, compared to 11 per cent of men.

In the last couple of decades feminism has often been seen as a debate that seeks to interrogate women's personal lives rather than a movement that seeks to right these concrete wrongs. This is partly the fault of the media; but some feminist writers and commentators, especially the American writers who have dominated feminist debate over the last few years, have concentrated on personal and psychological issues at the expense of social and political and economic problems. So feminism has often been seen as a debate only about the ways women dress or talk or make love, rather than as a movement that enables women to attack material inequality and abuse.

But women's real impatience with inequality is building up in Britain. Women in politics and journalism and community groups and all kinds of homes and workplaces are talking again about the need to get women out of poverty, to reorganise working life so that men and women can become equal players and to overhaul the way that women who have suffered rape and domestic violence are treated. They are looking for concrete changes throughout society.

This fierce, impatient feminism needs to be recognised. I call it the new feminism because it looks very different from the feminism of previous generations. For a start, it can no longer be confined to any kind of ghetto. It is everywhere. In the seventies feminism could be identified with a clearly defined women's liberation movement. It has since fragmented and splintered; but splinters of it are lodged in the hearts and minds of almost every woman in Britain. We should not be diverted by the fact that few women call themselves feminists into believing that feminist beliefs appeal only to a minority of women. In survey after survey the vast majority of women, especially young women, say that they would like to see more equality between the sexes at home and at work.

I would also argue that feminism today is not just a middle-class movement. It is often taken for granted that modern feminism appeals only to middle-class professional women. As I researched my book and set up interviews with women from all kinds of backgrounds and in all kinds of occupations, I was struck by the fact that real anger at inequality, real desire for change, and a real sense of women's growing potential, were being articulated by all the women I spoke to. I heard those ideas just as strongly, if not

more strongly, from women who worked as cleaners in south London or as members of community groups in Glasgow as from lawyers or journalists or MPs.

My sense that feminism cannot be seen as appealing only to middle-class women is backed up by survey information. For instance, one recent MORI poll showed that women in social groups D and E are more likely than AB women to say that feminism has been good for women.

Not only does feminism now appeal to women throughout Britain; we have also begun to see the possibility that men and women might work side by side in the cause of equality. We hear a lot about the pain that many men feel at giving up their traditional political and economic power, but much less about the optimism with which many younger men look into the future. During the 20th century feminism has given women the keys to the masculine kingdom, to money and power and paid work. During the 21st century we may see feminism giving men the keys to the feminine kingdom, to the enjoyment of a respectful role at home and in local communities.

If feminism is to consolidate its mainstream appeal, it is time to bury some of the old myths about feminists. Time after time when I talked to young women about feminism they expressed unease about identifying with a movement that is still seen as being puritanical and manhating. "I couldn't be a feminist. I like glossy magazines," one would say. "Oh no, I'm not a feminist. I don't think men are all bad," said another. It's time to enunciate the fact that feminists are diverse; they can be all sorts of women. They can love individual men, or hate them. They can wear baggy jeans, or they can wear slip dresses. This straightforward statement of feminists' diversity may seem obvious to many of us, but it is time to shout it out loud, so that women throughout Britain can feel easy about identifying with their movement.

These are the two most important characteristics of the new feminism. First, feminism is no longer a minority movement. It has broken through to the mainstream and lives in the hearts of the majority of women in Britain. Second, feminism should not be seen as an ideology that seeks to control women's personal or sexual lives, that puts pressure on women to dress the same or talk the same or dream the same dreams. Pragmatism, not purity, is the mark of the new feminism. Because feminists now have an urgent and long-awaited task ahead of them: to deliver nothing more, and nothing less, than equality.

"The New Feminism" by Natasha Walter is published by Little, Brown on 22 January, 17.50 [pounds sterling]

RELATED ARTICLE: THE NEW FEMINISM: WHAT IT MEANS TO US

Marcelle d'Argy

Smith All most of us ever wanted was equality of opportunity and to be treated with respect. In the late 1990s we appear to be achieving many goals. Women smile at each other more confidently and in our personal lives we're turning our backs on the male dinosaurs who won't adapt to a more equal way of doing things. But is there really a "new feminism" as Natasha Walter would have us believe? Yes, women are more assertive, they know about anti-discrimination legislation and they're prepared to stand up for their individual rights. But is there a feminist movement? And how many women define themselves as feminists?

The word is one of the most unpopular in the language. Something to do with media coverage, perhaps? It's seen as hostile to men. Viewed as aggressive, confrontational and anyway a rather dated concept. God knows how you disabuse women -- and men -- of this idea. Too many women are either bored with the argument, don't think there is an argument, are utterly complacent, don't want to get involved with other women or don't want to risk alienating men. For all the strikingly impressive women of all ages I meet who are prepared to stand up and be counted, I know ten, twenty times their number who just don't give a damn.

It's fascinating but perhaps no surprise that the recent MORI poll showed that women in social groups D and E are more likely than AB women to say that feminism has been good for women. The majority of AB's, those nice Daily Mail readers with manicured lives, have precious little idea what feminism has achieved for them.

I'm wistful for the American way. Successful, glossy, high-achieving, famous women from all walks of life there count themselves publicly as feminists. They'll fly across the country to attend a rally, a march, a conference. They'll risk making politically sensitive statements as they speak of inequalities from public platforms. They've imbued the feminist movement with a kind of strong, sexy power that gets taken seriously by women, men, the media and politicians. Feminism there has a magnetism and glamour.

But, ouch, this is Britain. Much as I welcome Natasha Walter's book and applaud her argument, I fear she hasn't tapped into anything new. Yes, British women are more confident and more economically independent than our mothers. Yes, we read everywhere that the future is female. But mostly we're being carried along on a tidal wave of European legislation with stout women and men battling for equal rights for all. New feminism? I don't think so.

Marcelle d'Argy Smith is the editor of "Women's Journal"

Susan Elkin

Of course I'm a feminist. In fact, since my husband works for me in an employed capacity as PA, research assistant and housekeeper, I have personal "liberation" sewn up better than most.

But no "movement" can get round two pertinent facts. First, most men are physically stronger than most women. Could I, even if I wanted to, work as an airport baggage handler, for example? I doubt it. Second, the only way the human race can produce young is out of the bodies of women. And it is plain daft to pretend that these factors do not influence the way things are.

Natasha Walter's obsession with rape puzzles me. Dreadful as rape is, thankfully it affects only a small minority of women. And how on earth does she know that 90 per cent of rape cases go unreported? By definition that information is unobtainable.

In terms of equality of opportunity, we've come a long way in a few decades. But surely no one expected an overnight revolution to overturn instantly the sexual inequalities that have prevailed for centuries?

Girls are now educated to believe that they can do anything their brothers can do. Consequently numbers entering medicine, the law and accountancy are almost even. In a few years' time many of these young women will have risen to senior positions. It hasn't happened much yet, but it will. I'm much encouraged by the record-breaking 120 women MPs.

Child rearing -- especially if women are to be encouraged and allowed to spend some time at home with their children, as I believe they should be -- may mean that women are older than their male colleagues before they reach full promotion potential. Perhaps, therefore, it is ageism that we should be targeting rather than sexism. Why waste energy fighting a battle that is already won?

Susan Elkin, 50, is a freelance writer and part-time teacher, married for 29 years and mother of two adult sons. She has long been the main family earner

Lauren Laverne

I would love to say that I can identify with Natasha Walter's "new feminism", that I can feel the swelling current of my peer group's dissatisfaction pushing us all towards some 21st-century egalitarian ideal. But, for me, life just isn't like that. I'm not saying that I don't respect the ideals and impact that feminism has had on my life and the lives of every woman fortunate enough to live in places where the principles took hold. Hell, one of my earliest memories is teaching my dad to cook Yorkshire puddings when I was four years old because my mam was at Greenham Common for the weekend. I do call myself a feminist. I certainly believe that women should settle for nothing more and nothing less than equality. Nor am I naive enough to claim that equality has been achieved or, worse still, that the opportunities are there and it's up to us laydees to take them.

What I believe is that the old feminism (from Pankhurst and up) has gradually created a situation where most people accept that women and men should have equal rights, or at least where this is the attitude considered to be "normal" and "reasonable" -- the party line adopted by politicians, newsreaders and daytime TV presenters. Women and girls of my own generation were brought up with high expectations of ourselves. We could wish to be ballerinas and surgeons in equal numbers..., we probably didn't, but then one definitely has the nicer outfit.

Feminism has given modern women a glimpse at equality -- at equal ambition. They quite rightly expect it. But does this constitute a movement? Just because they share a principle? Is everyone who opposes the death penalty part of a movement? Most people seem keen to dissociate themselves from political movements, and if the women in Waiter's study told her that they were not part of a movement how can she justify creating a manifesto to help them "identify them selves with their movement"? Couldn't the reason that they didn't feel part of a feminist movement be that it was seen as a political cause rather than because it was "puritanical and man-hating"?

I just think that you can write anyone into anything if you really want to, and I haven't really felt a "fierce, impatient feminism" around me. If I did, I would be its keenest supporter.

Feminism does have a place today. I think a movement is still needed, but perhaps we're at that odd stage between sexual equality becoming a largely universal principle that we live by and sexual inequality being the unsatisfactory reality. It doesn't seem as urgent; it's been identified as wrong and is meant to be changing. People can live with that.

Lauren Laverne, 19, is the singer with the pop group Kenickie

Sukhvinder Stubbs

Natasha Waiter's piece seems to tell us as much about her own personal struggle against "fundamentalist" feminism in the form of her mother in the seventies as it does about the women's movement as a whole. Her experiences appear to be adverse and help reinforce the caricature of feminism in its "Triassic" period -- puritanical, man-hating, hairy armpits, dungarees, etc. Before getting too carried away with the notion of "new" feminism, however, we should acknowledge and respect that it was necessary for feminism to go through this initial stage in its dialectical process, in the struggle for some sort of independent identity.

Indeed, there is a temptation to believe that once the initial points of what was quaintly known as the "women's lib" movement were taken on board, the battle against sexism was won and that the issue is therefore dead and buried and need occupy us no longer. Once the argument had been won intellectually, it might have seemed it was no longer necessary for any crass tub-thumping. Thus, "new" feminism could very subtly be confused with "post" feminism. There's a parallel with the western triumphalism that greeted the "end" of apartheid in South Africa. Would that these matters were so nicely conclusive -- they aren't.

That said, Natasha has a point. No woman should feel that in dressing attractively or wanting to have fun she is somehow compromising the spirit of feminism. If women feel somehow ashamed to call themselves feminists because of the ancient, frumpy associations of the word; or, worse, imagine that they are not worthy of the purism the word apparently implies, then feminism has a failure to answer for. If the very word feminism still has middle-class, ivory-tower connotations, Natasha has done us a service in exploding them. The intellectual argument has been won -- feminism's duty now is to involve all women in the continuing struggle for social inclusion, with no ideological strings attached. The statistics, however, point up the urgent need for relevant and practical

responses to the continuing unequal lot of women. Feminism is not a minority cause -- it is a majority cause.

Sukhvinder Stubbs, 35, is chief executive of the Runnymede Trust, the independent think-tank on race relations and cultural diversity which this year celebrates its 30th anniversary

Joan Ruddock

Natasha Waiter's piece provides a timely and useful analysis of contemporary Britain. It will be familiar to many new Labour women.

We came to government on a wave of woman-power -- women voting for our party in equal numbers to men for the first time in 50 years. The priorities, expressed to us in our pre-election "listening to women" tour, were precisely those identified by Natasha Walter. Regardless of class or background, women told us they wanted control of their lives and the ability to balance personal needs and responsibilities with jobs and careers. As a consequence the first three priorities adopted by the Ministers for Women are child care, family-friendly employment and action on violence against women.

In my experience, too, while many women would never call themselves feminists, they now share the aspirations of those of us who do. Whether this phenomenon needs to be codified as "the new feminism" or not is a matter of opinion. But its existence, and the transformation of women's lives that underpins it, cannot be disputed.

The previous government signally failed to respond to the changing agenda. By contrast women identified strongly with new Labour's vision of a country that would become modern, fair and strong.

Natasha Walter cites examples of the inequalities of women in Britain today as justification for the continuing existence of a movement for women's rights. I agree, but much of the inequality is institutionalised and requires action at the heart of the government. That is why we are beginning to put in place mechanisms to ensure that every policy-maker, in every department, considers the impact of policy change on women and acts accordingly. Only then will government play its part in achieving Natasha Waiter's and my goal of "nothing more and nothing less than equality".

Joan Ruddock MP is Minister for Women

Anne Applebaum

Natasha Walter's argument about feminism hangs upon a single sentence: "Beside women's growing freedom lies another truth, the truth of their continuing inequality." From there, she goes on to claim that a feminist political movement is still necessary, in order to battle that inequality. But does inequality between men and women actually exist? Alas for Natasha Walter's thesis, it does not. Men and women are of course not the same: men and women succeed for different reasons, and fail for different reasons. Girls do better in school, women live longer and find it easier to stay employed. On the other hand, they are more prone to be on benefit, and to work in poorly paid, part-time jobs. Men earn more than women, and hold more executive jobs, although they die earlier, stay unemployed longer, and are more likely to be in prison.

Some of these difference are explained by biology: men are more violent, women interrupt their careers to have children, women are more likely to be single parents. Some are explained by time: not enough of it has elapsed since the widening of educational and professional opportunities began for women in the 1960s. None of them are explained by inequality before the law, because that no longer exists. For the past 30 years women in the United States and parts of Western Europe have, as employers or employees, voters, property-owners, drivers of cars, users of birth control or purchasers of mortgages and health insurance, been treated by the legal system as equal to men. Not everybody might be able to take advantage of this equality: women are limited by economics and social constraints, just like men. Nor does reality always match the letter of the law: women are not always able to achieve in practice what they could in theory, just like men.

But for the first time in western history, equality exists on the statute books, ready to serve as the basis for legal challenges or complaints. This is a genuine revolution, one more far-reaching than any in my generation realise, and one whose impact is still being felt. It also spells the death of feminism -- for beyond equality, there is little that organised women's politics can achieve. Feminists can argue -- as many do -- that legal advantages, as opposed to mere equality, should accrue to women. Or they can take up the cases of individual women or groups of women who have been badly mistreated by particular men. The former will create resentment; the latter is legitimate, but hardly amounts to a political movement.

In fact, most women do not require changes in the law in order to work or live happily in our society. Whatever else they require -- changes in attitudes and prejudices, for example -- cannot be achieved through legislation or "activism", but can only happen or not happen with time. If feminism is no longer necessary, that is because it has become a victim of its own success.

Anne Applebaum, 33, is a columnist with the Sunday Telegraph and is writing a book about the Soviet gulag

Genevieve Fox

Fashions come and go, but feminism, however new, is never going to make a comeback on the cultural catwalk. Natasha Walter argues that women haven't achieved parity, in the work place or in the home. She's right: if money equals power -- and it does -- Girl Power is only skin deep.

But who cares? While Walter should be commended for daring to say that the feminist battle is not yet won, it's hard to see who she

thinks is listening. The Spice Girls generation, one would hope, not just older generations who may already harbour the splinters of feminism in their hearts. But how does Walter hope to make these younger women, who see feminism as deeply uncool and weirdly beardy, sit up and listen when her message is so dry? What they need is the Bridget Jones Diary of feminism, a cultural hit that inspires them to pick up, and pass on, the feminist baton.

Does a movement for women's rights still have a place? Yes, says Walter. But she fails to define this movement, except in negative terms. It is a mainstream movement, she says, characterised by pragmatism and diversity. Can such a movement exist? Where are its teeth? Who are we going to follow down the yellow brick road to equality? Walter offers a frustrating mix of idealism, unanswered questions and no solutions.

How, for instance, are the concrete, material changes women are looking for to be effected? One answer, says Walter, is to reorganise working life. Here's hoping. I am not convinced younger men are so optimistic about the future that they are willing to step into the "feminine kingdom". Men celebrating new work patterns and no job security is a long way off.

Nor am I convinced that today's feminism is either fierce or impatient. It may be simmering, but not in a collective pot; it's not everywhere, and it's not a movement either, not yet anyway.

Hopefully the statistical evidence Walter amasses will send shock waves through the younger generation and they'll notice the inequality that lurks beneath the glitz and glamour of Girl Power. The next shock will be wondering what they are going to do about it.

Genevieve Fox, 33, is a freelance writer

Katie Wharton

As a dutiful daughter brought up to work hard, play hard and beat men at their own game I am unavoidably a feminist; but whereas my mother imagines women marching towards a single "material and concrete" goal and gaining the "keys to the masculine kingdom", my feminism is not a debate or a movement, it's more like a conscience or a bias. I feminist-criticise everything, as if it's an artistic sense, allowing me to imagine new female equivalents to things I don't like.

Ms Walter seems to be much more socio-economic than I am. I recognise that first priorities have to be a room of one's own and five hundred pounds a year, but many young women can afford to be more ambitious and you don't want feminism to become something emotionless and altruistic for them, like giving to Amnesty International. Aiming for "nothing more and nothing less than equality" may engage my mother, but I personally want a lot more than equality -- I want to succeed on feminine rather than masculine terms (discovering exactly what feminine terms are in the process).

Meaning well, Natasha Walter blends into the wallpaper like a school textbook, when her subject matter has the potential for a glittering and unorthodox film. Girl Power is instantly recognisable because it's charismatic, daring and destined, like the best Fifties sirens. It uses glamour to inspire confidence, and confidence to get away with whatever it wants. The Spice Girls have faith in the overriding force of personality (or "positivity"). Where Natasha Walter drily repeats first principles, they are making it up as they go along.

All this may sound like fantasy-feminism; but if it isn't exactly sensible, like when French Feminists imagine a whole new female literature, at least it emphasises that nothing is decided yet. Natasha Walter's pragmatism just makes me feel boxed in and tied down.

Katie Wharton, aged 17, is studying for her A-levels

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