

Keynote Address

FEMINISM: A SPENT FORCE OR STILL A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH?

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"Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era"

This feminist event is for all women who denounce the escalating violence and oppression that mark the 21st Century, who rage against the continued exclusion and silencing of women throughout the world, and who are convinced that a strong feminist response is essential for the creation of a fairer future.

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In this paper, I'll be asking two questions: What's going on in the world today?
And: Is feminism meeting the challenge?

In the late 1990s, western governments on the right and the left of politics - or, I guess it would be more correct to say, governments on the right and those barely distinguishable from the right of politics - declared a focus on women redundant, yesterday's business.

Also, feminists like Naomi Wolf declared that the genderquake had happened, it's in the past, the gender wars have been fought and won by women - so let's all celebrate!

Postmodernist feminists declared that we are now living in a post-feminist era. Feminism is over. No more need for it, apparently, because there are now no such categories as women and men. There's one category called "gender" and we're all happily living in a gendered world. Women's issues are non-issues because we've achieved equality with men.

And the media has made sure that it's *that* message which gets out to the general public by privileging the opinions of liberal and postmodernist feminists, many of whom speak out in favour of pornography, prostitution and other practices harmful to women. The voices of radical feminists, feminists who are uncompromising in their call for justice for women, are silenced.

To all intents and purposes feminism, that most powerful movement so focused on bringing liberation and justice to women all around the world, is a spent

force. And I've asked myself often during the last decade and a half, as I'm sure many of you from Western countries have too: Is it over? Am I hanging on to something that's a spent force? We wanted to transform the world, to make it a fairer place for women, and what we see is that the world *has* been transformed all right but, under George W. Bush, John Howard and their ilk, transformed in an extremely negative and destructive way - certainly not in a way that will bring justice for women and other minorities.

The transformation is one which, more than ever before, privileges the already privileged. Economic rationalism, the formation and dominance of global trade and financial institutions has meant increased hardship and poverty for millions of individuals, families and communities worldwide and an increase in wealth and power for multinational companies and their shareholders, and the already very wealthy individuals.

Structural Adjustment Programmes have demanded that the poorest nations on earth reduce their spending on health, education and housing for their people, in order that they can repay debts owed to wealthy countries. It defies logic and robs *us* of every appearance of human decency, that nations like Australia continue to exact such a toll on the poor and disadvantaged while most of *us* live in relative luxury.

Now, what am I doing here? Am I *trying* to depress you? Am I asking you to sit here and listen to me for 30 minutes bringing a message of defeat and despair? Well no, actually. The message I bring today is one of HOPE because I firmly believe - and there is evidence to support it - that, far from being a spent force, feminism is still a force to be reckoned with all around the world!

Today I want to talk about this from the perspective of feminist ethics because, as I see it, one of the tasks of feminist ethics in these early, brutal years of the 21st Century is to try to make sense of what's happening. Then, following our analysis of what's actually going on, our task is, as always, to make a fitting response, to commit ourselves to action which "fits", action which is

relevant to the injustices of the day. And I'm not saying that this is the task of feminist ethicists alone - I'm saying that this feminist ethical task is one in which we all must be engaged.

For anyone who isn't clear about what is meant by the terms 'ethics' and 'feminist ethics' or what the field of study called "Ethics" actually covers, the first thing I want to do is explain that in a couple of sentences. You see, some people think that ethics is simply about being a good person and, while that certainly helps, it's so much more than that.

Then, after giving a brief definition of ethics I want to discuss the three main categories of ethical thought, with particular reference to *feminist ethics*. And then I will ask the very practical questions: So what is happening for women across the world today? and: What is the feminist response?

What is Ethics?

First, what is ethics? In a nutshell, the field of Ethics is about encouraging an engagement with unjust social and political structures with a view to changing them. As this suggests, there are three central concepts in Ethics: Engagement, Reflection and Action.

Engagement with the world.

Reflection on what's happening, locally, nationally and globally.

And **Action** appropriate to the injustices we observe and experience.

So you see, all of us feminists who are engaged with the world, working to bring about justice for women - all of us who are engaged in reflection and action on behalf of women - are doing feminist ethics.

Modes of Ethical thought

Broadly speaking there are three modes of ethical thought and I want to spend a few moments now highlighting those three categories. The first is not one which feminists usually adhere to but the other two represent common modes

of thought in feminism.

If we wanted to put this really simply, we could say the three modes of ethical thought are: Conservative, Liberal and Radical. But we want more than that, so let's build on it.

The conservative, I characterise as an Ethic of Absolutism or an Ethic of Fundamentalism. The liberal, I characterise as an Ethic of Expediency. And the radical, I characterise as an Ethic of Justice.

The first one - an **Ethic of Absolutism** is an ethic of obedience to the law - any law, a law which is held up as containing guiding principles for life. You see, there's no need to reflect if you're a conservative, no need to try to understand what's going on in the world, to understand, for example, why women are still treated so badly. Because some higher authority has said that this is how it should be, and that's enough. The Bible, the Koran, a political leader, religious leader, tribal leader, Indigenous customary law, Sharia law - some higher authority.

The thing is that an Ethic of Absolutism or an Ethic of Fundamentalism never works for women. In fact, women are targetted by fundamentalists who unashamedly proclaim that if women are included in the category "human" at all, it is only as second-class citizens. It's all about men - and why? Because God ordained that it should be so!

Well, let's put that one aside because it's not a possibility for feminist ethics but, in our reflection on the world, we must never forget that some women are forced to live under that kind of ethic - under oppressive political and religious regimes.

The second mode, the Liberal, the **Ethic of Expediency**, is an ethic of individualism which we, in the West, know only too well because the growing conservatism of western governments, whether Labor or Liberal, Democrat or Republican, has encouraged a focus on the individual, on competition, on greed and on a fear of and antagonism toward anyone who appears to be different.

Minorities are OUT; mainstream is IN. It's all about ME! It's about protecting individual freedoms and individual rights. Freedom of speech, for example. Liberals and libertarians talk about that as if the right to say and do as one pleases is a freedom enjoyed by *all*, when it clearly isn't. It's a freedom enjoyed, in the main, by privileged men in any society.

Pornography is a classic example. Men producing and using pornography insist that it's a Freedom of Speech issue. In a democracy, they ought to have the freedom to do as they please, they insist, and if pornography is part of that, then that's their right. But, as Catharine and Andrea Dworkin told us back in the 80s, the very existence of pornography denies freedom of speech to women, robs women of the right to live in the world as equals with men and equally respected. It's still true today that, in the minds of many, women belong not in boardrooms, not in high-powered political discussions, not in positions of influence, but on the computer screen being demeaned and humiliated, or in strip clubs, pole dancing, lap dancing and so on. Look, there's nothing equal about that!

Now, let's take a closer look at liberalism and the individual freedom it professes to stand for. A popular mantra of those operating out of an ethic of expediency is this:

If it will help you achieve your goal, do it! If your goal is to control some of the world's best oil supplies, for example, even if it means waging war on innocent people, even if it means lying to and deceiving your own people - do it! Whatever is expedient. Whatever you need to do to achieve your goal is legitimate. A similar mantra inherent in an ethic of expediency is:

*If it **can** be done, do it!* If your goal is to push scientific research as far as it can go as in the bio-tech industries, do it! Formulate your arguments. Take your science as far as it can go. And when you meet with resistance on the basis that your science depends on the exploitation of women, pay no attention. You see, such mantras "if it will help you achieve your goal, do it" and "if it **can** be done, do it" are liberal expressions of an individual's right to freedom. But

the proponents of such an ethic conveniently ignore the fact that absolute freedom is not universal! In the pursuit of one individual's freedom, that of others is very often sacrificed.

The ethic of individualism, the ethic of expediency asks: What's in it for me? What's in it for my family, my career? What's in it for my country? It's not a matter of right and wrong, good and bad. It's about the most expedient way to pursue individual freedom and success.

Now, I must add that many Liberal feminists are genuinely wanting to help improve the lives of individual women but, because they refuse to challenge the root causes of women's pain, that is, the structures and goals of mainstream society, they end up actually condoning the very systems which work *against* women.

Australian women in this room will remember that terrible gang-rape of a young woman by several members of the Bulldogs Football club a few years ago in New South Wales. And the subsequent findings of the Director of Public Prosecutions that there wasn't enough evidence to take the matter to court, even though the police and medical practitioners who examined the young woman said publicly that a rape by several men had definitely taken place. So many women were outraged at the thought of those high profile, privileged men getting away with it. But some liberal feminists came out in support of the argument that it could very well have been consensual sex rather than rape.

Subsequent to that, Catherine Lumby, Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, and high profile liberal feminist in Australia, was employed by the NRL, the National Rugby League, to participate in an education programme as a specialist adviser to the game in the area of gender politics, and she agreed to do it pro bono. Now, I found it fascinating that she agreed to do this because it was obvious to everyone that Catherine Lumby was brought in to calm the rising tide of anger building up against the behaviour of elite footballers in this country - to let them off the hook, so to speak - *and she gladly accepted the role!* And one

more thing.... I've always wondered how she, an outspoken supporter of pornography, was able to sound convincing when telling the footballers about the need to respect women!

Now, what do liberal feminists get out of their brand of ethics - the Ethic of Expediency? Well, for a start, they get listened to, and that would be nice at times! They're sought after by the media. And they have the satisfaction that comes from knowing that they and their ideas are affirmed by the majority of their peers. They get all that because they are really careful not to alienate men. Radical feminists, on the other hand, ask: How is it possible to stand against the oppression of women without alienating men when it's almost always men and male institutions who do the oppressing?

That brings us to the third type of feminist ethical thought - the radical - sometimes called an Ethic of Response, sometimes called an **Ethic of Justice**.

Let me take a moment to say that I'm aware that the term 'radical feminist' is a Western term. In the Philippines and other Asian nations, in the Pacific Islands, in many African countries, in countries like Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, I know that the use of the word "feminist" is radical enough and only very courageous women will claim to be feminists. In Africa, the gap between womanists and feminists is very similar to the gap in Western countries between liberal feminists and radical feminists.

I'm using the term "radical feminist" here because it describes so clearly what we who are working for justice for women in all countries around the world are on about. The word "radical" refers to root. If you're a radical feminist, it means that you're not prepared to deal superficially with the issues of oppression women live with day after day. You go to the root of the problem with a view to rooting it out, as we say, with a view to eradicating the problem altogether.

That's why radical feminists are ignored. Because we make it clear that, if ever there is to be real equality between women and men, black and white,

homosexual and heterosexual, the poor and the not-so-poor, drastic structural changes need to be made. Not just window-dressing. Real changes - at the root - where the problems begin. This is an ethic aimed at justice. Radical feminist ethics will accept nothing less than total honesty about the situation of women, and calls on all feminists to speak and act in the world after solid reflection on what is actually happening, so that our speaking and acting is right on target. This is the only chance we have of effecting real change for women.

So, let's *do* some reflection. We've had a brief look at the three main types of ethical thought and we've said that radical feminism, operating out of an ethic of justice, prioritises reflection and action.

Reflection and Action

So, what *is* happening for women across the world at the beginning of this 21st Century? And how are we as feminists intent on bringing about justice for women, responding?

Fundamentalism. What's happening for women? Well, first of all there's the curse of fundamentalism. Women are diminished and silenced by religious, political and market fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism denying personal and social freedoms to women; political fundamentalism deliberately excluding women and silencing all dissenting voices; and market fundamentalism putting enormous stress on women as they struggle with poverty or, in wealthier countries, as they struggle to keep up with the demands of consumerism. Fundamentalism.

Pornographication. Then, there's what I'd like to call Pornographication. Women are diminished and silenced by the growing pornographication of societies around the world. In Western countries in particular, there's been a marked easing of rules and regulations in recent decades as the major political parties work out what's important to them. Politicians in the West (both right and left) now work entirely according to an Ethic of Expediency. Not: what is

the right and just decision? But: what will get us the most votes? They, all of them, have judged that it is to their advantage to encourage a freer and more permissive society. So, we've seen: a refusal to outlaw pornography; the legalising of prostitution; the increasing sexualisation of little girls as well as teenage girls; the legalising of topless and even totally naked waitressing; the legalising of strip joints; there was even a Nude Car Wash in Brisbane till protesters had it shut down, where men can pay \$55 to have their cars washed by semi-naked young women or \$100 to have their cars washed by totally naked young women - and it was all legal!

In addition, the easing of restrictions to allow for a more pornographic or sexualised society has also eased restrictions in other areas. We've seen legislation to allow the use of IVF embryos for research; to allow cloning in the name of stem-cell research; to encourage healthy young women to "donate" eggs for research. We've seen the legalising of all kinds of cosmetic surgery, the legalising of sex-change surgery. We've seen a greater acceptance of discrimination against women and other minorities in the name of more freedom for the mainstream.

The new freer attitude in Western societies encourages all of us to do as we like, provided it services the needs of the dominant group in society, and provided some industry or other is making a profit.

And not only in Western countries. All around the world, governments are choosing to turn a blind eye to the massive use of pornography by their men and, also, to prostitution - because it's seen as servicing a need. Permissiveness. Women are the losers. And we're expected to be happy about the fact that we are now free to be exploited more than ever before.

Redundancy. The other trend I want to mention is redundancy - similar, I guess, to what feminists have been calling the "backlash". Feminism and feminists have been made redundant, no longer needed, no longer of use to anyone.

The tactic of redundancy requires that the old be put aside. Everything must

become new. Political parties do it all the time. When they win an election and come to power, the first thing they do is replace the initiatives of the previous government with their own initiatives - defund many of the NGOs funded by the previous government and give that funding to others whose philosophy is closer to their own. Also, they change legislation to reflect their own values.

In Australia, as in Canada and other places, the Howard government did what they called "community consultations" on domestic violence when they first came to power, but excluded feminists. Those with the history, the analysis, the knowledge, the experience from decades of involvement in DV services, Women's Refuges, Women's Health Centres, simply weren't invited. Consequently, the government was able to create a whole new approach to domestic violence, Family Law and so on - without any direct feminist involvement!

The tactic of redundancy works. And even when more left-leaning governments come to power, we ought not be surprised when nothing much changes for women. Other things may change, but we and our issues have already been made redundant. And that's the one thing they all seem to agree on.

Response

All right. So how are we feminists responding in the 21st Century to what we see happening to women - the oppressiveness of fundamentalism, the diminishing of women through increasing permissiveness and the silencing of feminists through the tactics of redundancy?

I said earlier that radical ethics, radical feminist ethics is an Ethic of Response as well as an Ethic of Justice. The question always is: In order to bring about justice for women, what is the fitting response? The thing we have to understand and the thing most of us have come to understand, is that the forces working against women today are very different from the way they were ten, twenty, thirty years ago. Their goal is the same - to keep women in a

subordinated position - but their strategies are constantly changing, and we have to keep up.

We have to be prepared to reinvent ourselves - as individual feminists and as a Movement. Not by trying to blend in with the mainstream. Not by dropping the word "feminist", as some suggest. Not by giving up on political demonstrations. Not by talking about domestic violence only in economic terms. All of those initiatives have been tried but what we've learnt is that, when feminists try to blend in, we and our issues simply disappear.

To meet the growing challenges of the 21st Century, we must maintain our identity as feminists and feminism as a Movement must reinvent itself. Many of you are familiar with the arguments from Social Movement theory about feminism as a movement being in abeyance at this time. Well, I for one am no longer satisfied with that explanation for the absence of a vibrant Feminist Movement. The argument, presented by US feminist sociologist Verta Taylor and others in the late 1980s/early 1990s, was that all social movements are subject to ups and downs, ascendancy and descendency and that the feminist movement is presently in a period of descendency. As feminists living in a period of descendency, the argument went, there are certain tasks which fall to us - like continuing to research and write, continuing to build a strong foundation for feminists of future generations so that they won't have to reinvent the wheel once the social movement called feminism begins its ascendancy again.

At the time, I was quite satisfied with that explanation and committed myself to the task of patiently contributing to the building of a strong foundation for the future. Subsequent to Verta Taylor's work on this, other feminists wrote about it too. Gisela Kaplan writing in 1995 about the history of Australia's feminist movement, reiterated that this was a time for reflection and auditing (p. 194). More recently, in 2002, Sarah Maddison, writing very positively about young feminists today, argues "that young activists are performing an essential task for the movement's maintenance by sustaining the ideologies and networks

that will be necessary for another strong wave of feminist activism to emerge...". She speaks about "keeping open a political space that 'belongs' to feminism" so that that space can be readily taken up again when the opportunity arises for a different form of feminist activism. While I agree that the feminist movement needs to be maintained and sustained in these difficult times, and that the task of all feminists, young and old, is to build foundations, continue our research and sustain our networks, there's something missing in all that. What's missing is collective activism in the present! I'm not satisfied with the explanation that the Feminist Movement is in abeyance. In fact, I'm wondering if it may simply be a different way of saying that it's all too hard.

In mainstream society's terms, of course it's true - that the feminist movement is in serious descendancy. But since when have radical feminists ever accepted male-focused, mainstream society's views on anything, let alone on the present and future impact of the feminist movement? To accept that our movement is in abeyance and that there's nothing we can do about it is tantamount to saying that the master, i.e., the political and economic power elite which is male, is in control. Is in control of us and our movement!

I know it's true that social movements are subject to ups and downs. It would be naive to deny that. But what I'm saying is that such ebb and flow doesn't just happen. It's engineered! And if we settle for the abeyance theory, we are bringing the feminist movement under the control of the master we have worked so hard to liberate ourselves from! We must not do it!

Haven't you ever wondered why we see feminists at the forefront wherever injustices are being done to women? And yet, there's no feminist *movement* as such? Look at us. We are everywhere in our own individual silos - working for justice for women in our own chosen area/s of interest. As individual feminists working on individual issues, we have reinvented ourselves. There's no doubt about that. We have kept up to date and are still having an important impact against tremendous odds. We are a force to be reckoned with. So, what's this

about being in abeyance?

This is the point - just as we have reinvented ourselves in our own task areas, we must also reinvent ourselves as a movement. And, as I see it, it's simply a matter of reevaluating our priorities, of not letting the malestream dictate our priorities. It's clear that the corporate governance mentality foisted upon us by governments and financial institutions puts us under tremendous stress. We are subject to high levels of stress in our individual lives, as we work to achieve justice and safety and healing for women - as we work to transform societies, countries, the world in our own areas of interest and it's leaving us no time to think together as a Movement. But it's imperative that we do - because, without a Movement, our combined, potentially powerful voice is silenced and we are rendered virtually powerless.

So, as I conclude, let me say again - radical feminists are everywhere, and everywhere working for a fairer deal for women. And that's to be celebrated! But, when radical feminists are everywhere except together, it's a situation which needs to be rectified. So, let's get together more often. We're already doing the hard part. The work we do every day is the hard part. Making it a priority to connect with each other and connect our silos, is the easy part. To decide and follow through with that decision to connect, reflect, celebrate, plan together, to be part of a strong movement again, is to reinvent and recharge the feminist revolution. So let's do it! Let's do together what we're already doing separately, so that the feminist movement becomes once again a fearsome force to be reckoned with.

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