

Feminism did not fail

Lynne Segal

'You nearly gave me a heart attack', a friend told me, after my talk at the opening session of the event in London celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the first national Women's Liberation Conference in the UK, at Ruskin College, in February 1970. Appropriately enough, the feminist publisher and cultural entrepreneur Ursula Owen had organized this rather special celebration, 'The Way We Were And Are', at the recently launched Free Word Centre, in the old newsroom of the *Guardian*. Free expression, in all its forms, is the *raison d'être* of Free Word, but I soon found myself an object of censure (though hardly silenced) the moment I began my reflections. Mutterings accompanied my opening suggestion that many young women today seem so much more confident, aspiring and sexually adventurous than we had been when we came of age in the 1960s. They appear as almost another species. This was surely, I suggested, one of the effects of those forty years of feminism, combined, it must be said at once, with well-known shifts in economic affairs (the decline of heavy industry and rise of new technology, and administrative, financial and servicing sectors). Frowns deepened as I proceeded, trying to draw in boys and men, class and other inequalities into my assessment.

There is nothing either new or surprising about feminist contention, especially when one is trying to encompass four decades of social volatility of gender relations in a world where the symbolic traction of sexual difference is constantly being repackaged and flaunted back to us commercially as objects for identification and desire. In the face of continual social upheavals, we see a gritty determination put into maintaining some traditional facade of sexual difference as supposedly the only secure sanctuary of love, caring and commitment, bolstering, above all, the myth that traditional family structures will protect us as welfare entitlements are ever further whittled away. As I write, the wives of our political leaders hit the headlines only, altogether disingenuously, as nurturing helpmates of their superior husbands, chuckling over their prominent partner's domestic shortcomings as if

providing proof of their masculine prerogative to rule over us. Times change, but the gender domain likes to keep that a little secret.

In my talk, I wanted to stress young women's diverse energies nowadays, not because I thought gender chauvinism obsolete, or that women have managed in anything like equal numbers to join the men among the elites. It was because more and more people seem today ever further from gaining an overview of the complex underpinnings of the increasingly shaky edifices of traditional gender arrangements. We live in a world in which what is still often psychically 'cherished' as female 'difference' falls outside the near blanket hegemony of fiscal and market concerns, except in so far as it can be used to package commodities to sell to women. Paradoxically, it is this very commercial packaging that is now being highlighted as a source of social alarm regarding the situation of girls and women in today's world. Only five hours before my talk at the Free Word, the media were buzzing with summaries of the latest report on young women that had nothing positive at all to say about their situation in the world today.¹

Disavowing their own politics, prejudices and semiotic practices, media headlines once again directed social concern with women's issues to the crucible where multiple fears have always been most easily displaced, the sexual domain, which is always dense and contested, especially when it comes to the dangers surrounding young women's sexuality. The survey, which identifies young women almost solely as victims of recent cultural shifts, was commissioned by and designed to influence government policy. And coming up to an election, it is currently being deployed in Labour's strategies for dealing with the situation of women. The very existence of the report says much about the legacy and continued impact of those forty years of Women's Liberation – its huge achievements, its inevitable disappointments, the seemingly inevitable dilution or simplification of its more diverse and sophisticated perspectives when served up anew in different times and contexts.

Reporting on the 'sexualization' of young women

First up, so unlike the situation forty years ago, the report's outlook and terminology is an immediate confirmation of today's widespread and significant official concern with the continuing scandal of men's violence against women. This is an abomination that remains globally pervasive (although the scope was not in the remit of this particular report), nowhere more viciously than in sites of war and conflict. Public awareness of the routine occurrence of men's violence against women and children, at home and abroad, and consideration of how to expose, discuss and attempt to eradicate it, were entirely inspired by second-wave feminism. That the report takes the form it does, however, focusing only on violence against women and girls, as if we had not learned that men and boys are also systematically the targets of aggression and abuse in the maintenance of gender and other hierarchies, suggests to me something about the severe limitations of popular conceptions of feminist perspectives. In the media and bureaucratic policy domain, rhetorical frames direct us towards notions of fixed gender contrasts, seeking out the shortest route to the starkest oppositions between women and men. In the process, they kick aside materials for exposing the hollowness of much of the symbolic sway of sexual difference, as we all anxiously negotiate our way individually through gender cliché, constantly revealing the incommensurability between gender norms and practices.

In relation to victimhood and violence, for instance, it is surely important to recognize that part of the way gender norms inscribe symbolic codes of male dominance is by downplaying the perpetual vulnerability of boys and men to fear, abuse and violence (mostly from other men), whether in homes, schoolyards, workplaces, pubs, football terraces, prisons or battlefields. Downplaying men's susceptibility to humiliation and injury, and its profound effects on them, shores up symbolic machismo. Yet, oddly to my mind, some feminists, mimicking men themselves, collude in denying men's personal vulnerabilities. Sedimenting macho rhetorical insouciance, we can read in this latest report:

Although both sexes are experiencing partner violence, more girls are suffering and the impact of this suffering is greater. A significant proportion of girls surveyed stated that violence had seriously affected their welfare; for boys there appeared to be few consequences.

Now, while it is almost certain, and easier to establish, that girls are the more likely to be victims of partner

violence, it seems highly dubious and fundamentally counterproductive (albeit harder to conclude with confidence from subsequent confessions about being victims of interpersonal violence) to assert that boys and men remain largely impervious to its effects. This is all the more obvious when here, as with all the surveys reported in the near hundred-page report, no details of methodology or data are provided.

In other ways, too, this report provides evidence of a regression in the public commentary on the latest call for action to end violence against women, including some presenting itself as representative feminist commentary, when the focus remains on the media 'sexualization' of young women. The report itself was commissioned by the Home Office Violent Crime Unit as part of a new government promise, expressed in the characteristically promotional jingle tones of New Labour: *Together We Can End Violence Against Women*. Linda Papadopoulos was the psychologist chosen to examine how 'sexualized images' might influence cultural norms and affect the development of young people, especially young women. However, since the goal of the inquiry was to act to end violence against women, the hiring committee would appear to have already made its mind up on the outcome of its investigation into the effects of sexualized imagery, with the study itself flagged as a strategy for ending men's violence against women and children, *avant la lettre*. Surprisingly, perhaps, the review comes up with almost no new research or thinking on what the links between the sexualization of young people and violence might be. The bulk of its coverage is of older people's (and especially parents') worries about young people's behaviour, encompassing an amorphous array of their activities as consumers and producers, whether of music videos or fashion photography, and in self-fashioning, including lap-dancing and lessons in pole-dancing.

The emerging jumble of data is sifted and sorted quite precisely for 'finding' the link between sexualized imagery and violence. Research querying the link between pornographic imagery and sexual violence is ignored altogether. This will appear particularly blatant to those who can recall the previous report into this issue commissioned by the UK Home Office, undertaken by Howitt and Cumberbatch in 1990. Though itself conducted in a conservative cultural moment, expressing extreme alarm at pornography's crossing over into mainstream media, and incidentally surveying some of the very same research cited in the latest report (such as the strongly contested data of Neil Malamuth), their findings are now erased from the

record, since these two psychologists highlighted the huge inconsistencies to be found between very similar studies. They concluded their overview of existing research with the claim that there was no compelling evidence of a causal link between the viewing of pornography and sexual violence.² As many media researchers could have pointed out, had they been consulted, there is a substantial body of research that calls into question almost all the claims the current review upholds.

Most disappointingly, despite three decades of feminist debate on the topic, Papadopoulos finds it unnecessary to discuss definitions of, or pose any conceptual questions about, such complex and confusing categories as 'sexualization' and 'objectification'. It simply assumes that 'sexualization' is always a dangerous thing, whatever it is, if associated with 'young' women. This is curious when one repeated need voiced in her report is for greater 'media literacy' to be taught in schools. That seems a sensible suggestion, and indeed, for what it is worth, there is evidence from the USA, for instance, suggesting that when women listened to misogynist rap music, such as Eminem, it is the 'blatant misogyny' of its lyrics which 'is startling to them and it triggers a more careful interpretation and rejection of the premises in the song'.³ Certainly, almost any sort of media literacy, one might have thought, would

raise issues about the reception and context of viewing or hearing 'sexualized' material that are foreclosed in the report, not to mention querying why such diverse cultural productions as fashion, cinematic productions, magazines, music videos, lap-dancing, pole-dancing, are swept up into a single apparently homogeneous category.

One point the media literate would surely make about sexualized imagery, for instance, especially in its more pornographic or extreme versions in less mainstream locations, involves its inherently contradictory affect and effect, being produced or performed quite deliberately to provoke both pleasure and condemnation, lust and prudishness, as the very essence of its modes of activity and arousal. However, reading through the report it is as though the last forty years of feminist and other scholarly contention around the body, sexuality and representation had simply never happened. There is no awareness here that what became known, especially in the USA, as the 'sex wars' generated some of the fiercest controversies ever seen among feminists. Nowhere were positions more polarized than between anti-pornography campaigners seeking greater state control of images and feminist scholars who were often regarded as the most knowledgeable about the media, working at the cutting edge of cultural and film studies, and usually



among those most worried by the continued inroads made by the discourses of anti-pornography feminism into government policy and legal frameworks.⁴ Anti-pornography campaigners such as Catharine MacKinnon, eager to eliminate sexualized imagery through new ways of policing representations, were oblivious to the parasitic relation of pornographic imagery to the most respectable and authoritative phallogocentric discourses of gender and sexuality, whether familial, religious, commercial or bureaucratic, and embraced the most reductive behaviouristic psychology, with its disavowal of fantasy and psychic life.⁵ Meanwhile, the pursuit of legal remedies that enhance the power of state regulation of sexuality was seen by its feminist critics as a threat to any subversive expressions of women's sexual agency and therefore to the possibilities for sexual resignification.⁶ Many feminists, myself included, tried hard to show the folly of hoping to prescribe only politically uplifting sexualized images for popular consumption, aware of a fundamental lack of fit between formations of sexual fantasy in the psychic domain and what might be women's (and men's) support for feminist struggles for equality, justice and autonomy in the public sphere.

Blithely disavowing its complicity in the process of maintaining gender conformity, the mainstream media's main excuse for parading their own most hackneyed images of women today is to do so in the name of 'condemning' the very practice they pursue. This explains the tenacity of the media's interest in discussion programmes addressing pornography – it is simply too easy to be turned on by what we are eager to condemn. Moreover, even when in supposedly condemnatory mode, the visual displays and commentaries on sexualization in the media routinely shun representations that might prove subversive of routine gender banality. It rarely solicits commentary on what more dissident sexual iconography might look like. This tells us something about the problems of official attempts to police gender stereotypes in the media, whether these take the form of hyper-sexualized images of female bodies, reduced to bits and pieces of flesh for a presumptively male desiring gaze, or, in quite a different mode (though usually discussed as if it were the very same thing), parading before us the 'under-sexualized' images of women as blank and anorexic mannequins.

Another odd but frequently cited claim in this recent report on sexualized imagery in the media is not only that it results in violence against women, but also that it distorts and limits women's ambitions: 'Surveys have found that a high proportion of young

women in the UK aspire to work as "glamour models" or lap-dancers.' A high proportion? Could this be the same high proportion that is doing better than boys across the board on almost every index of educational achievement, whether in schools or upon entering the professions in equal numbers to men? Young women's intellectual diligence is a strange preparation, one might think, for that 'majority' in training for a career as glamour models and lap-dancers. This is a finding that Natasha Walter also homes in on in her new book, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (2010),⁷ suggesting (obviously without providing evidence for women's actual under-achievement compared to men) that younger women confuse women's objectification with women's liberation. In disagreement with this view, I would suggest that the media's superficial and decontextualized tossing around of moral anxieties about girls one minute, only to be replaced by another set of social anxieties regarding the underachievement of boys the next, serves primarily as a mere distraction from exploring a more challenging terrain. This would encompass the diverse gender inflections attending systemic features of social and global inequality in societies where class, region and ethnicity remain the essential ingredient that will tell us which young women are likely to hope that becoming a glamour model is a useful career move (unless it is to fund their university education as a bowel enterologist) and which boys will be failing in school (most of whom won't end up as either Wayne Rooney or Dizzee Rascal).

I have dwelt upon this report and its reception because it is so characteristic of the twisted sympathies of a mediascape that is as eager to dwell upon the vulnerabilities of young women as to arraign those same women for their lifestyle choices, while simultaneously smugly highlighting the supposed failures of feminism in its inability to ensure women's well-being, overall. Throughout March 2010, this has been the monotonous tone of assessments of women's situation after 'forty years of feminism'. Thus the journalist Charlotte Raven celebrated this International Women's Day by reflecting that feminism had 'lost its way', informing readers that 'feminism had reneged on its responsibility to present uncomfortable truths', before concluding that 'Paradoxically this generation of women is more vulnerable than any of its forbears. Women's refusal to acknowledge any weaknesses has made them easy prey.'⁸ Raven's warnings are echoed in the feminist campaigner Kat Barnyard's barnstorming text, *The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Women and Men Today* (2010),⁹ which presents us with the similarly

pessimistic conclusion that women are more oppressed than ever today, yet fail to realize it. Even more explicit upbraiding of women and contemporary feminism for their betrayal of the hopes for female emancipation appear in the tone and text of Nina Power's *One Dimensional Woman* (2009).¹⁰ Citing barely any well-known feminist writers, though abundant in its citation of reflections from male philosophers with little interest in or sympathy for feminist politics, Power accuses 'today's positive, upbeat feminists' of abdicating 'any systematic political thought' for the celebration of 'individual identity above all else'.

The price of 'innocence'

There are many reasons for feminists to remain angry, though they are barely reflected in current concerns about the sexualization of young women, which so often double as objections to young women's lifestyles. Forty years ago, it is true, we entered the world comprehensively ignorant about sex. When I was a girl, oh, we were truly 'sweet and innocent', our bodies not yet eroticized, or rather, not that we knew. Some of us had been abused by Daddies, big brothers, uncles, or other adults close to home – but nobody yet knew this, and young women had few, if any, words for or ways of mentioning it. (And if they managed to do so, they might end up in institutions for delinquent women, which even I, a good middle-class girl, knew something about.) Around our bodies there was a blank, no name at all, in my experience, for whatever was 'down there'. When I entered adulthood in the 1960s, we could not have been more ignorant about sexuality, contraception or abortion, though we soon enough knew what it meant to be pressurized by men for sex. This is why we almost all, and certainly I, could soon name friends or acquaintances who died in self-induced or backstreet abortions. We quickly registered the lowered gaze and badges of shame surrounding 'fallen women', those pregnant outside marriage, and heard the many stories of young women whose lives were ruined, one way or another, by unwarranted pregnancy, shotgun marriages, premature ejection from family homes. We also already knew much too much about the resentment and anger of the respectably married woman, whether addicted to Valium, receiving shock or insulin treatment for depression, or simply intensely bitter over the disappointments of her daily life. As often as not, she was our mother, and very soon would be among our female peers. We did not need feminism, then, to be ambivalent about becoming a woman.

Then something happened. Caught up in the political turbulence of the late 1960s, some women,

quite suddenly, seemingly unexpectedly, turned to each other, and that was the birth of Women's Liberation. It seemed to come out of the blue, because female friends were something we usually barely acknowledged in those days. As every woman knew, one way or another, she lived with a certain embarrassment and shame accompanying the lot of being born female. All glamour, all power, all authority, all independent action, resided with, and only with, men. Returning to what budding feminists wrote about their lives, about our lives, forty years ago, to suggest that young women are worse off today than they were forty years ago is so wholly misguided, so abysmally conservative, that it can only suggest how comprehensively the present manages to write over the traces of a mere forty years ago. That past was truly dangerous, in so many ways, for young women unable to make anything like informed choices about how to organize their sexual lives with dignity and safety. Moreover, strangely, it was the emergence of those wretched pin-ups, of the ubiquity of radical young men's braggadocio (even when we loved them for it) in insisting on pornography in their alternative publications, that served to wake women up, to shake women up, into asserting our own collective, and, yes, our own individual, rights to sexual pleasure, equality, and freedom from the surrounding landscape of men's disdain and contempt for women.

This is what pushed us into help make the world Western women now inhabit, when being born female is no longer knowing you exist, absolutely, as a secondary, lesser being than those born a man. I see lads' mags today as one reaction to young men's unease and declining power over women.¹¹ They are sexist and often offensive, though quite how men relate to their frequently ironic and self-mocking text and tone is certainly a question ignored by Linda Papadopoulos. Whatever the gender dynamics in play here, however, the suggestion that some combination of lads' mags and eroticized female bodies constitutes an overriding force keeping young women powerless, or providing confirmation that feminism failed to shift the situation of women, is pigeon-brained. It is the equivalent to imagining that the young women who (usually fleetingly) take pole-dancing classes or, more lastingly, dress in whatever they see as the sexiest clothes do so to prepare themselves for a life of prostitution, or to display a willingness to service any man in whatever way he fancies.

Feminists, I have said, have reasons for anger, and certainly for sorrow, but far better ones than those mentioned above, beginning with the ever-deepening

social divisions between women. Though women still lag behind men in career paths, should we want to, it is quite as easy to observe their style and demeanour in the upper echelons of authority and power as it is to keep judgemental eyes focused upon young women's apparent obsession with glamour and self-display. Unlike forty years ago, women today do not lack images of other women as powerful – sometimes all too powerful – agents in the world. The problem is rather that the existence of more women with power and authority at the top end of the social spectrum in itself does little, if anything, to improve the lives of women at the other end; just as the existence of glamour models and pole-dancers does not keep Hillary Clinton from representing US power in global contexts, any more than it did Condoleezza Rice before her. Indeed, the relationship is quite the other way around in the servicing domain. Those sexist and sexualized images of women in the West are not enticing women who can avoid it into domestic care work (or paid sex-work); they are enabling more affluent women to escape the harshest burdens of such labour in order to sustain their careers. Conversely, the new army of paid domestic care and sex-workers are rarely women who grew up surrounded by these titillating Western media productions, but more likely to be women from poorer countries from far afield.

Nor, despite the chidings coming from commentators like Raven and Power, has 'feminism' proved quite so feeble as to fail to notice these shifts. For decades there has been a remarkable production of ever more sophisticated feminist scholarship across institutions of higher education (some of it perhaps threatened by cuts to higher education). It was never going to be easy for such erudition to translate into the musings of the mainstream media, with its steady commitment to the proverbial. Moreover, feminism has never been reducible to any single set of theoretical or activist dilemmas, even forty years ago, be they the marginalization and disparagement of women, inflated claims to women's shared virtues, universal victimhood or the enduring linguistic challenges of their symbolic entrapment in hierarchical difference. Rather, what has been persistently troubling over all these years is finding adequate ways of articulating the similarities and differences between women themselves, as well as between women and men; especially as the uneven developments of technological change and increasingly turbo-charged financial markets have drawn certain sectors of people into privileged cores of its workforce, while ejecting others into ever less

protected and exploitable segments of the workforces on which it depends.

The huge diversity in women's and men's life experiences is evident, despite and because of the continued hold of gendered markings and sexual preferences as sites of identity, whatever their intrinsic instability. Some veteran feminists, such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, have kept themselves busy recording the voices of those they call 'global woman': the distinctly gendered experiences of immigrant domestic labourers, nannies and childminders, forced by economic necessity to leave their own homes and children behind to service the personal needs of others elsewhere.¹² There is no way of thinking usefully as a feminist today without thinking globally. Feminism is not dead, nor even resting, and some of us at least are trying still, from whatever bunkers in which we reside, to move forward, to learn from past mistakes, and to be heard.

Notes

1. Linda Papadopoulos, *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/Sexualisation-young-people.pdf.
2. Dennis Howitt and Guy Cumberbatch, *Pornography: Impacts and Influences. A Review of Available Research Evidence on the Effects of Pornography*, Commissioned by the British Home Office Research and Planning Unit, Home Office, 1990.
3. Michael Cobb and William Boettcher, 'Ambivalent Sexism and Misogynistic Rap Music: Does Exposure to Eminem Increase Sexism?', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 37, no. 12, 2007, pp. 3025–42.
4. See Mandy Merck, *In Your Face: 9 Sexual Studies*, New York University Press, New York, 2000.
5. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1993.
6. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997; Lynne Segal, 'Only the Literal: The Contradictions of Anti-Pornography Feminism', *Sexualities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1998, pp. 43–62.
7. Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, Virago, London, 2010.
8. *Guardian Review*, 6 March 2010, p. 3.
9. Kat Barnyard, *The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Women and Men Today*, Faber, London, 2010.
10. Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman*, Zero Books, London, 2009.
11. Bethan Benwell, 'Ironic Discourse: Evasive Masculinity in Men's Lifestyle Magazines', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2004, pp. 3–21; Lynne Segal, 'Men After Feminism: What's Left to Say?', in *Slow Motion, Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, 2nd edn, Palgrave, London, 2007.
12. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, eds, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Granta Books, London, 2003.