

Intelligence Squared Debate: Feminism has failed.

22 September 2010 Melbourne Town Hall

Wendy McCarthy: third speaker for the opposition.

Well it seems as if some of us live on different planets. Stephen Mayne thinks that feminism is about women on boards, god help me. (although I will recognise that there are six thousand women registered to be on women on boards.)

Virginia has seemingly forgotten that no woman read the news on ABC until 1982 because their voices weren't authoritative, she is lucky she got the job.

And Gay is in a position to make changes.

I want to say to you today that feminism has been one of the powerful social movements of the last 40 years. As a working grandmother, I am glad I have got that title and I can see enormous changes during that time.

Feminism was never a political party, it is not a thing. Monica has given you some of the theory around that. It was an idea that happened across the world in the sixties and the seventies and it wasn't something that you waited to get something from you actually had to do it. Sisters had to do it for themselves. We need to remember that. We don't just sit around like little princesses hoping that it is all going to work for us. But luckily some of the changes have happened.

Before feminism, as women we had no voice. We certainly weren't on the front pages of the magazine until we started to act up and out. That got us there very smartly. And one of the great successes of feminism, which I noticed that the other side did not mention, is the education of women. And education is still the main game in every country in the world. And in this country 55% of graduates are female. When I went to university less than 20% of the intake was female. It was of course a very long time ago.

Before feminism it was hard to find your voice. Because the cultural assumptions were so extraordinarily different about what women could be, might be or who we were. For my University scholarship I had to score more marks than a male because it was thought that they would stay longer. On the other hand when I got married after three years my bond was waived because marriage was a suitable career for a woman butI couldn't go back to teaching.

When my friends got married in the Commonwealth public sector they both had jobs on Friday. On Monday he did and she didn't and that was the case until 1966 and as far as we know the only thing that happened on the weekend to change their work suitability was that they had sex with each other. Of course they may have had before but at least we now know that it was legitimate.

In the 1960's abortion was almost inaccessible and women died. In my own experience to get an abortion required 30 phone calls, 63 guineas - large amount of money, cops patrolling up and down the road and a vain hope that someone would give you some advice when you left the premises.

They didn't give you contraception. If you were lucky you got a pill a panadol equivalent and advised you to have a good lay down but not with a bloke. And that was it.

Contraception was the prerogative of doctors. When I went to my first doctor to get contraception he said I can't give you a script until you are married. It was 1964 and I said I'm getting married in three months so he said he would date it the day of the wedding.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Pill's availability in Australia but it was not available to unmarried women and when you did buy it, it was classified as a cosmetic with a luxury tax placed on it so it was very expensive and not available to all. One of Gough Whitlam's first acts was to remove to take the luxury tax from the Pill. Even Family planning clinics didn't see unmarried women easily.

Childbirth was also a doctor's choice. You went along and said you would like to have a baby and he said don't worry I will knock you out. I look after all my girls really well. Really? I had not heard that it was so easy and I wanted to do it my way. It required a lot of work to find the doctor who encouraged you to try for a drug free birth.

This is what feminism was about..... women supporting each other and taking up challenges to change things for the better for all of us. In work we had jobs not careers. And there were legal impediments, like the marriage bar which prevented women from working after marriage. One of my friend's mothers was a pharmacist and in the fifties she married a bank manager at the ES&A now ANZ Bank. When they went to a town in Queensland she was told by the bank you can't work because what would everyone say? That we the bank weren't paying the bank manager enough money to support his wife? And so she became a volunteer worker and she received her first pay cheque forty years later. She said I will never bank it I will just put it there to remind me of how hard it has been.

Feminism has worked for her. It might have taken a long time but it has worked.

The balance sheet is positive

Consider the following:

Equal pay - the unions didn't support equal pay, corporations didn't support equal pay, it was women who went to get equal pay. And I am not pretending that we have it today. But we have more rights about how to negotiate it than we ever had.

No maternity leave existed. When I was teaching as soon as I announced my pregnancy they said right we will take you off those classes because you won't be coming back. If I came back it was as a casual worker. That has changed.

And then of course the ultimate cultural assumption, my favourite response to the Women's Electoral Lobby survey in 1972 which polled every candidate for parliament to see what their views were about women.

Sir John Cramer, then the member for Bennelong, in response to what is a woman's greatest attribute said 'I think the greatest attribute for a woman is her virginity.' This is 1972. Now for those of us that had lost it we wondered what our residual value could possibly be. Not politics.

My argument is that change didn't just happen. It is not inevitable. Inevitability has never worked for social movements. You have to get on with it. Across the world women's groups in the sixties and the seventies talked and campaigned about access to contraception - yes we now have it.

The right to abortion - it's not legal but we can get one.

Equal pay - not perfect but a lot better and with legal processes that we can utilise.

Child care - still one of the big unanswered ones because the cultural assumptions around the value of children haven't changed. On the other hand, I am increasingly seeing that feminism has created spaces for men to be better parents and to enjoy their children and have much more equal relationships. It was one of the dreams of the feminist movement.

Discrimination legislation which is national and enabling.

Changes in divorce law - no fault divorce since 1975.

More women in parliament was one of the early objectives.

Throughout the seventies -that decade of consciousness raising during which we forced Australian politics and political parties to respond to women issues.. Business and the public sector were slower to act but in the 80's a lot of things were fixed up.

And what do contemporary feminists dream of? We dream of leadership now. It is not just about women on boards it is about leadership. But we didn't have that language in the seventies we talked about being equal . We talked about flat structures and no hierarchies.

Leadership didn't come until after those feminist conversations. It began as women in decision making, when 20 000 women at the Beijing 1995 World Conference talked about the lack of women in decision making and how it had to change.

So what do we want now?

We want to write the legislation so we need to be in parliament. We are on our way. And has nobody on the other side noticed that we have a female Prime Minister, a female Premier, a few female Governors and a female Governor General?

We are suddenly finding a difference.

We want to be leaders in Spirituality and Religion.

We want to create wealth and write the cheques.

We want to demonstrate that there are better ways to run businesses that are more child friendly,

We want to make sure that all girls go to school and

We want to stop a woman dying every two minutes from child birth.

Feminism has been enabling for women. It has encouraged risk taking and has helped diminish what Simone de Beauvoir described as the concept of women as 'the other'. What more can we ask other than it continues to benefit all of us. But you have to be engaged to be successful.

And a sign of success is surely the article I read last week in the Guardian which said that the number of obituaries for significant women is growing.

Surely a sign that at least we are noticed in our dying.

Thank you.