

Gender Institute series of 'Conversations' to welcome The Women's Library: past, present and future

Feminism Then and Now

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I'm delighted to see the turnout this evening (and sorry for those being turned away since every seat is full) – one more sign of that the feminist movement is alive, vibrant and kicking out hard, as it should be given the state of the world today.

The topic we were given was "Feminism: Then and Now".

That begs the question "When is then?"

Since we're here marking the move of the Women's Library to the LSE (after we sadly lost that wonderful, purpose-built, lottery-funded facility – a reminder of how women's groups, women's institutions have always struggled for funds, struggled for long-term stability), I think we should focus on the "then" of some of the collection.

I think back to exhibitions I saw in the wonderful central space, and it was some of the suffragette banners, and those of other causes in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century that stick in my mind, so I thought I'd focus on those.

One that I noted down during a Women's Library visit, not famous, but I like it, was made in 1908, designed by Mary Lowndes, from the Women Shorthand Writers group, which says: "Shorthand writers: speed fight on".

If we think of what was the "enemy" then, I'd identify the chief one as ideology of feminine frailty and purity, of the claim that women were unfit for public life in any form, even voting. Homes would fall apart, children would be uncared-for, women turned into hagged harridans, by the mere act of winning the vote.

It was an argument that frequently descended into clutching at straws – one of my favourites is the claim that women couldn't be allowed to vote because they'd be able to go home, change their clothes and come back to vote again ... Rather reminds me of some of the arguments I have with climate change deniers...

And even our friends were often struggling to work out how to accept and frame our new presence in the campaigning era. One of my favourite quotes is the title of a study of women's groups in Liverpool from 1890-1920 – “Mrs Brown is a Man and a Brother”, said by a trade union leader attempting to praise and include a female campaigner.

So to the now ... To identify the “enemy” now, at least a single enemy, is not so easy. On the level of rhetoric, few will deny the right of women to be in public life, in paid employment, given at least equal treatment – well that's unless you count a certain Nigel Farage, ex-City man, who this week came out and said that working mothers were “worth less” than men in the City. But I wouldn't count him ...

Now, if I were to identify one single enemy now it's a force not specifically directed against women, but that's doing them immense damage: it's the ideology of neoliberalism, of small government, austerity and concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. . Others tonight will no doubt talk about other critical issues: violence, failures of representation, racism ... but I'm going to focus on this.

It's a development of the last 40 years or so, something I was reminded of by the words of the historian Sheila Rowbotham, referring to campaigners in the Seventies: She said: “We thought welfare-based capitalism would be democratised. We didn't believe it would be so radically diminished.”

I turn to a piece of research from the Fawcett Society (and I suppose I should make a declaration of interest here – I'm one of the trustees of the society, and should you like to find out more there's a contact sheet up the back) which found that on average over their lifetime, one fifth of a British woman's income comes from benefits, while for men than figure is one-tenth.

The bedroom tax, the cuts to council tax benefit, the welfare benefit cap the slashing of legal aid, - all of the attempts to make the poor pay for the crisis created by the (overwhelmingly male) bankers – are falling significantly more heavily on women. And the loss of services means women as carers, as community stalwarts, as the final backup, are facing an even heavier load.

The Women's Budget Group last year crunched the figures – single pensioners, predominantly women, have lost more than 10% of their income, while single parents (92% female) have lost 15.6%. Public sector jobs, dominated by women, are being slashed, while 63% of private sector jobs (often of course the same jobs, with poorer pay and conditions) are going to men. The gender pay gap is growing.

Those are the numbers, and they're horrifying, but it is when you get down to the level of the individual that the human suffering becomes evident.

Many of you may know Jack Monroe, of the blog A Girl Called Jack. She spoke at Green Party conference this year about the experience of feeding your three-year-old a Weetabix, practically the last food in the house, and then have him ask for more, when there was no more. There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Our levels of inequality have raced past those of the 1930s, and have surpassed those of the Edwardian level. More for those at the top means less for those at the bottom – and a majority of those are women.

Until a couple of years ago, there was a huge barrier to addressing that. The ideology of neoliberalism had gained such a hold that voters, people in the street, would just shrug and say: “things are bad, but we have to let the rich get rich and hope we can rise in their wake”.

But now there's a growing, increasing realisation that we can't build a society on minimum wage, zero-hours contracts; that relying on family care for infirm and disabled can't work in a society

where two-wages are a survival minimum, while if the government has its way we're all working to age 70 or beyond; that rich multinational companies simply have to pay their taxes .

There's a recognition that our society has to change, radically, for all of our futures. But what's less clear is what it needs to look like.

In the Green Party we've got lots of ideas – a basic income for every member of society, so that they don't have to worry about putting food on the table and a roof over their heads. Cutting full-time working hours to allow a decent work-life balance for everyone, while banning exploitative zero-hours contracts and making the minimum wage a living wage. Ensuring multinational companies and rich individuals pay their taxes, while benefits allow everyone who needs them to live a decent life.

But to keep it simple, I'd like to make a simple claim for every woman, every person, in Britain – they should have access to enough resources for a basically decent quality of life – good food, a warm, comfortable home of an adequate size, the ability to jump on a bus and join friends for a cup of tea in a café without worry. Britain is the sixth-richest economy in the world. We can achieve this. We must achieve this.

And we must achieve it within the limits of our environmental resources. Currently in Britain we're consuming three times the resources we can afford. We have to cut back – which means that those who consume the most must cut back a lot, so everyone has enough.

I'm going to finish with more from Sheila Rowbotham: "In the Seventies we assumed once you made a gain it would stay there."

We don't need to go back to the suffragette era, of those wonderful banners – our vote isn't under threat. But the gains of decades of the development of the welfare state, the evolution of the workforce to give women at least the protections of maternity leave, sick leave, and stable, secure employment, the access to education and training (in an age of soaring student debt) are all threatened.

We need to fight for them –and to do that we have to fight the ideology of the "small state", of the supposed inevitability and even "right" of rising inequality. This is the major feminist battle – it is the major battle for every Briton in what Occupy calls the 99%.

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