

The Five Main Issues Facing Modern Feminism ^[1]

Despite our collective achievements, sexism today can seem an insurmountable obstacle. These are the fronts we are fighting on.

by [Rhiannon and Holly](#) ^[2] Published 20 May, 2013 - 10:11



An anti-violence against women protest in 2011. Photograph: Getty Images

What exactly is "modern feminism"? Whether you're with the *Times* and see it as "hot, rude and self-confident", with that ubiquitous pub-goer who remonstrates on how it's "unnecessary" because we're not throwing ourselves under horses anymore, or more inclined to agree with this magazine and say that we're all just obsessed with gin and cake, there's no denying that we're seeing something of a new wave.

"But where is the focus of this new wave?" we hear you cry through mouthfuls of Tanqueray and Black Forest Gateau (which, FYI, is making a comeback), "All anyone seems to do is argue on Twitter!" Well, yes, quite. Turns out that, horses aside, there remain some hefty barriers on the road to 21st century equality. Of course, there are the obvious ones: gin, cake, the inability of many of its members to take the piss out of themselves, that douchebag who is suing his gym, and certain bloggers who think the hashtag #killallmen is the embodiment of empowerment rather than straightforward hate speech (apparently it's the same as "tremble hetero swine" or "die cis scum" *in a good way*, both maxims that are unlikely to overtake YOLO as the phrase du jour anytime soon.)

Obviously, the one main issue facing modern feminism is men, and, though we don't want to kill all or even any of them (nor start a hashtag implying that we might), there's no point hiding behind words like "sexism" or "patriarchy" when considering who's really in charge today, and who has the power to prevent us from climbing up there on the phallic plinth beside them. It's men, pure and simple. But before you start calling us aggressive-looking man-hating harridans (again), let's break that down a bit for the uninitiated. By the end of this article, you'll basically be a Gender Studies graduate.

1. The Division of Domestic Labour

Otherwise known as "the final feminist frontier", we actually see it more as the first, because without this one down, gender equality is pretty much a no-go. Our feminist foremothers succeeded in getting some women out of the kitchen and into the workplace, but eight out of ten women still say they do more housework than their male partners, and those with dependent children are even more likely to be slaving away. Contrary to what the *Telegraph* might say, being part of a couple where you both do an equal amount of housework doesn't condemn you to divorce, depression, and a dead husband by 33. What we're talking about when we talk about housework are entrenched ideas that housework and childcare are women's work and, because women are paid less than men, they're more likely to give up their jobs to enter a world of

underpaid drudgery. It should go without saying that making the choice to stay at home is as admirable as any work, and a choice that deserves social recognition rather than eye-rolling snipes about "desperate housewives", but the point is that many can't make a choice when their hand is forced financially or socially. Obvious solutions, such as improved provisions for paternity leave, subsidised childcare, equal pay, and just generally being more like Sweden are frustratingly still a long way off.

2. The Media

Yep, that thing that we've been banging on about for over a year now: the media does a lot to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes, and culprits range from Weetabix (whose sexist ad implies your lad can be a superhero but your daughter can't), to Unilever (skinny women aren't "real" women and/or dark-skinned women should get paler), to fashion magazines (skinny women are the only women), to the *Daily Mail* (eight year old celebrates her curves in unauthorised bikini shot - hasn't she inherited her model mother's legs?) to the sexist scrutiny of female politicians, to the tellybox (just 18 per cent of TV presenters are women over 50), all of which have real-life implications. One study showed that 70 per cent of girls under 7 say they want to be thinner, for example, with the average British woman worrying about their body every 15 minutes. With body anxiety this pervasive, it can be hard to know where to start when it comes to media sexism (though more women in top positions is a big one). Campaigns against lads' mags and the *Sun's* Page Three have been gaining ground for a while now, and adding your signatures to these is a step in the right direction. Organisations such as Media Smart, Endangered Bodies, UK Feminista and AnyBody are campaigning hard on these issues, while young feminists are lobbying advertisers and engaging in sticker sabotage. Every little helps.

3. The Glass Ceiling

As many commentators rightly pointed out after the death of Margaret Thatcher that Maggie "made it through the glass ceiling, but pulled the ladder up after her": a phrase that reminded us all of how reinforced that glass really is. Thatcher herself wanted none of the feminist cause, frequently referring to herself as an anomaly amongst the weaker sex; women successes of the modern age are slightly more charitable, with Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg ostensibly helping to winch her sisters through the ceiling with her bestselling career advice book *Lean In*. Although *Lean In* is based around the idea that - in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt - "No one can make you inferior

without your permission", the reality of the workplace in numbers is that 22 out of 197 global heads of state are women; the percentage of women at the top in job sectors ranging from government to journalism to law in the UK and US levels out at 22 per cent; 18 of the Fortune 500 CEOs are female; women returning to work after having children are likely to see their careers progress downward rather than upward. Personal ambition is undoubtedly an asset, but acknowledging that we must fight overarching sexist structures in the workplace - yes, even through "positive discrimination" - is key.

4. Social Inequality

Around 58 per cent of carers are female according to the Office of National Statistics, with women in full-time work still more likely to be carers than men in full-time work. Transgendered women remain extremely likely to be prejudiced against; lesbian women tend to experience higher levels of discrimination in the UK than gay men. Black African women who are asylum seekers in the UK have an appallingly high mortality rate, estimated at 7 times higher than for white women. The most persistent health disparities, according to the latest EHRC report, were best illustrated by the fact that a quarter of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women reported a disability in the last census, rising to two thirds of Pakistani women in older age groups. This rather depressing state of affairs shows that issues of race, disability, sexual orientation and gender (amongst many other things) often combine to create a reality of extreme disadvantage for certain groups. Most of the time, these groups are female.

5. Violence Against Women

Although it is no longer the case in Britain, a large percentage of the world refuses to recognise rape within marriage as a criminal offence. Meanwhile, here in the UK, 89 per cent of regular domestic violence victims are women, and two women a week are killed by a male partner or former partner. The "banter" culture that surrounds violence against women - jokes about "rape as surprise sex"; "I'd have sex with her" recast as "I'd smash it" - doesn't do this state of affairs any favours. So long as women are disproportionately targeted for violence, our work is never done - which is why the great work of charities like Women's Aid is so encouraging.

Put like this, sexism today can seem an insurmountable obstacle, despite all of our past collective achievements. But it's worth remembering that often, just drawing attention to inequality can be enough to get people on board with

tackling it; consider the huge popularity of Everyday Sexism. If you don't know where to start, places like UK Feminista have a campaign for every form of stigma, ranging from discussions of why people assume that Muslim women wearing headscarves "don't have a voice", to policing plastic surgery adverts in magazines. It's still a tough world out there for The Ladies, and we hope that we've demonstrated how sexism remains at work in 2013. Here's hoping modern feminism will tackle it; as we all know, a fight on many fronts greatly improves our chances.