

# THE CORRUPTION OF FEMINISM

When human rights stopped being about freedom, so did feminism.

I am so happy to be here at Big Ideas. If we were in a university lecture hall, I would have to issue a trigger warning that the following content may offend old-style feminists and modern day grievance warriors. If I was speaking at a conference of university students, I would ask that there be no clapping, in case it triggers anxiety. I would ask for ‘jazz hands.’

So what the hell happened to feminism? It’s too early for karaoke, but feminism should be summed up by Helen Reddy’s iconic song:

I am woman,  
Hear me roar...  
I am strong,  
I am invincible.

Sadly, the lyrics of modern feminism go something like this:

*I am woman,  
Hear me whine,  
I am weak,  
I am vulnerable.*

The notion of triage—of prioritizing problems, of addressing those who most need help—has been inverted by modern feminism.

If today’s feminists ran a hospital emergency department, they would be racing to fix an otherwise healthy middle-aged woman with a common cold over a young girl facing a life-threatening injury.

Don’t get me wrong. As Anne Manne wrote so eloquently many years ago, women like me inhaled the benefits of feminism as naturally as the air we breathe.

Today the air is toxic. Today’s modern feminism is a corruption of what feminism should be. It’s become a trivial movement that infantilizes women. And it has taken one heck of a moral detour away from real issues of freedom.

But if feminism is not about freedom, what’s the point of it? If it’s not about freedom, it’s just a lobby group for pet grievances.

Today’s feminists feast at a smorgasbord of whinges, whines, victimhood claims, misogyny games, gender binary discussions, Western world obsessions about pay gaps and quotas and glass ceilings.

Brave riders of the feminism’s third-wave include pop stars like Taylor Swift who recently said: ‘I didn’t see myself as held back until I was a woman.’ As Heather Wilhelm wrote recently for *The Federalist*: ‘Held back from what?’ Building a net worth of \$250 million?

It’s probably too much to expect celebrities to become feminist icons. But when women like Gwyneth Paltrow teach us about the wonders of vaginal steaming, you have to ask—is that really the best they can do?

What about the media—how are they doing? How long have we got?

Let’s start with the keyboard feminists who found so much



**Janet Albrechtsen** is a columnist for *The Australian*. These remarks were delivered at the Big Ideas Forum hosted by the CIS in Sydney, 24 August 2015.

offence with Mark Latham's crude tweeting about a handful of women. Latham gave up his column in the AFR last week. I'm not defending Latham. His gratuitous nastiness always detracts from what can sometimes be a kernel of confronting truth.

But it's uncanny how the sisterhood strikes when it suits—for political purposes, not as a matter of principle.

It's apparently fine for Clementine Ford to call Miranda Devine a 'f—ing c—' on Twitter but it's not fine for Latham to use crude words. I say a pox on them both.

Some years ago, Malcolm Turnbull rang me at home and asked whether I knew what Latham had said about me. I hadn't caught up with the news: Latham had called me a skanky ho in federal Parliament. I didn't know what 'skanky ho' meant, so, while I was on the phone to Malcolm, I googled the phrase. Needless to say, I was inundated with more porn than is decent when you're sitting in your study with young children running around you.

### Like the Plastics in *Mean Girls*, the Plastic Feminists have their own set of rules.

I don't recall a single lefty feminist ticking off Latham for calling me a smelly whore. And, of course, the stunt came about because he was dared to put those words about me into Hansard—dared by a lefty feminist.

There is an in-crowd of feminists. Like the Plastics in *Mean Girls*, the Plastic Feminists have their own set of rules. It's not about wearing pink on Wednesdays, tracky pants on Fridays, and a ponytail only once a week. The Feminist Plastics have rigorous membership rules about believing in abortion, quotas, glass ceilings, and assumed sexism.

The feminist collective is overflowing with unprincipled trivia too. A couple of years ago an English feminist in a London newspaper wrote that after reading something 'I washed my hands with anti-bacterial soap, but couldn't cleanse my mind of rising rage and desolation.'

Was she reading about female genital mutilation? Maybe child marriages? No. The enraged feminist

had finished reading the fictional *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

This poor commentator would probably have to take a vaginal steam bath if she listened to the words of Esther Perel who, in a recent TED talk, pointed out that 'most of us get turned on at night by the very same things we might demonstrate against during the day. The erotic mind is not very politically correct.'

I'll leave that subject to *Cosmo* magazine—save to say that feminists today don't even understand freedom in the bedroom.

And how are our politicians faring on the feminism front? 'The horror!' exclaimed Greens senator Larissa Waters last year. Was she responding to Islamic State's propaganda which says 'It is permissible to buy, sell, or give as a gift female captives and slaves, for they are merely property which can be disposed of' and 'It is permissible to have intercourse with the female slave who hasn't reached puberty if she is fit for intercourse'?

No. The Greens senator was emoting over the fact that a Liberal MP, Michaelia Cash, doesn't wear the feminist label.

Feminism has been corrupted by its skewed set of priorities. When her leadership was in trouble, Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, made asinine claims of misogyny and sexism against opposition leader Tony Abbott.

To coin a phrase from Helen Garner's magnificently nuanced look at sex and power, Gillard had a grid labeled 'misogyny' and she was determined to apply it to the broadest possible field of male behaviour. When Abbott glanced at his watch in parliament, Gillard labeled that sexism, too. Yet that speech about confected misogyny became a defining moment for so many modern day feminists.

On the same afternoon that Gillard gave that speech, a young Pakistani girl, Malala Yousafzai, boarded her school bus in the northwest Pakistani district of Swat, an area where the local Taliban has regularly banned girls attending school.

A gunman boarded the bus, too. He asked for her by name, pointed a gun at her and fired three shots. One bullet hit the left side of Malala's head, travelled through the length of her face, and lodged in her shoulder.

Imagine, just imagine, if Julia Gillard had made a heartfelt speech about Malala rather than herself on that afternoon in October 2012.

Don't get me wrong. We can walk and chew gum. But we are so gummed up with Western grievances such as sexism and pay gaps that we fail to try walking in the shoes of girls who need to escape from child marriages or women who have been the victim of so-called honour killings.

Feminism has become corrupted by its cultural infirmity, too—by a deep-seated Western self-loathing. While hostages were still being held at gunpoint by a terrorist in the Lindt café last December, many high profile Australian women rushed to join a feel-good hashtag campaign—#WISH, 'women in solidarity with hijabs.'

Putting aside the fact that these women immediately assumed Australians would default to Islamophobia, why didn't they show more concern for the hostages inside the café—or even have a more nuanced debate about the fact that millions of women are forced to wear a veil as a medieval form of oppression?

Hashtag campaigns? Pay gaps? Quotas? A man looking at his watch in parliament while a woman speaks? Trigger warnings? Jazz hands? Feminist labels? They don't make my list of Top Ten issues around the lack of freedom facing women today.

Feminism's focus on trifling, petty grievances debases our public conversations. More importantly, it undermines the intellectual scaffolding around freedom.

The corruption of feminism is not a women's issue. It's best understood as symptomatic of a wider and deeper malaise. It emerges from a decades long corruption of human rights.

Once the notion of human rights became untethered from classical notions of freedom, feminism was destined to do the same. It is no coincidence, for example, that the corruption of feminism occurred at the same time as our commitment to free speech has faltered. The very notion of free speech doesn't seem to cut it anymore. It's about fair speech instead, about not offending or insulting people.

Forty years ago, the Left abandoned libertarian notions of human rights and embraced a new definition that elevates egalitarian rights. As

Attorney-General George Brandis has pointed out, the shift began with the elevation of the right to 'equal concern and respect'—a notion developed by legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin.

'Equal concern and respect.' What on earth does that mean?

Yet here was the beginning of a recalibrated human rights movement in favour of victimhood as defined by the paternalistic Left. Feelings have become the measurement of human rights.

This new victimhood movement has ditched Enlightenment ideas around the very notion of what it means to be a human being. No longer are people seen as autonomous and resilient and rational beings. Under this new framework, people are seen as weak, as vulnerable, as quivering mass of nerves in need of protection—so weak we need trigger warnings, and jazz hands and laws that prohibit words that are offensive or insulting.

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The marketplace of ideas, where we critique, analyse, and sharpen ideas, is being usurped by a crude market place of outrage where human rights legislation and anti-discrimination bureaucracies buttress the new victimhood movement.

Two viruses, victimhood politics and a persistent strain of anti-Westernism, have corroded our most basic freedoms. These viruses have weakened our ability to defend our most basic values. Fundamental human rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, are being offered to certain minority groups at discounted prices. Hence free speech becomes fair speech.

Our cultural appeasement carries costs. It emasculates our values. It means that in Australia, a conservative government that claims to have free speech in its DNA refused to reform the Racial Discrimination Act.

Cultural appeasement has horrendous physical costs too. In means almost 4,000 cases of female genital mutilation reported in Britain last year and 11,000 cases of so-called honour-based violence over the past five years.

There should be no reduction, no discount, no half-price sale of our fundamental human rights. And that means no silence around the importance of these values.

A few months ago, Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallstrom delivered a scathing assessment of the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia. Remember, women can't drive, can't marry, can't have certain medical procedures without permission from men. Child marriages are common. So is public segregation of the sexes.

What happened? The Oppression Opera returned to town—that familiar chorus of bleating about Islamophobia that we have heard at regular intervals ever since Salman Rushdie wrote a book called *Satanic Verses*. The Arab world condemned the Swedish foreign minister for Islamophobia. Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador to Sweden. At least there wasn't a fatwa this time.

What happened outside the Arab world was even more disappointing, and yet predictable. Wallstrom's defence of women's freedom was greeted with silence in the West. As Nick Cohen wrote in *The Spectator*: 'Outside Sweden, the Western media barely covered the story. . . . The scandal is that there isn't a scandal.'

The scandal is the strategic silence of modern feminism around freedom for women. It is much easier to attack the gender pay gap than

female genital mutilation or child brides or so-called honor killings, which logically may require you to make judgments about cultures that oppress women.

Feminism's warriors, both male and female, have become the natural allies or useful idiots of those opposed to Western freedoms.

Why is Ayaan Hirsi Ali derided as a 'rock star who has done well for herself'? Why isn't she celebrated as a woman who has felt firsthand the constraints of culture and religion, a woman dedicated to Enlightenment values of freedom, reason, and inquiry?

The real feminists, those fighting for women's freedom, don't sit at the centre of feminism today. So how the hell can we get feminism back on the freedom track? The future of feminism is inextricably linked with the future of human rights. When the latter rediscovers classical notions of liberty, so will feminism.

As Abraham Lincoln said so eloquently and so succinctly in 1863, liberty is an 'unfinished work' and it is up to us, again quoting Lincoln to 'take increased devotion to that cause.'

By doing that, feminism will one day return to the unfinished work of freedom – and when it does, more women, and men, will applaud it.

And not with any weird shaking of jazz hands.