

SWIMMING UPSTREAM – Moira Rayner and Fiona Stewart talking feminism

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As generationally disparate feminists, we recently shared the stage of a public forum about women and power, feminism and generational difference. Before this event we didn't really know one another. Neither of us had sat down and talked over the triumphs or defeats of the women's movement, nor had we taken joint stock of our individual lives as reflecting the effects of second-wave feminism. Last week, we did both. Amused, but also a little dismayed at the public portrayal of 'our' debate as an intergenerational squabble, it was time to touch base. Where had the discussion started, who framed it, where had it gone, and had it driven important issues off the agenda?

Meeting for coffee in the legal precinct, we eyed each other a bit warily. Was there common ground between us, or No Man's Land? Wasn't it in our personal interests, mightn't it feed our professional egos, to maintain what had been reported as an adversarial relationship? Was the easy media portrayal true, or a distraction? What a spectacle it would have made, feminists clawing at each other. When we were invited to debate the rights and wrongs of the women's movement on a national tabloid TV program, it didn't take much for us to agree to decline. Sniping at one another would do little to further our shared feminist cause. Nor would it contribute to any celebration of difference, that it's not just okay, but important that feminism should be interpreted anew by consecutive generations of women.

So, on the demilitarised zone between a set of research findings that reported Generation X dismay at not being able to achieve what they had been educated and socialised to believe was their birthright, and the worldly wisdom that this had never been in the gift, let alone the goal, of the women's movement, we set out to discover what had been lost, or might have been misrepresented.

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At the heart of the discussion about feminism as a force for social and economic change is the catchcry that women have tried and don't want to keep trying to 'have it all'. The Deakin research had found a noticeable divide in opinions about feminism among women of different generations. On one hand, the women born in the 'Baby Boom' - some preferred to think of themselves as 'a child of the '60s' - tended to think that feminism has been an unparalleled success. They could remember women having to leave work if they married or got pregnant; women earning less than men at the same jobs; discriminatory laws and attitudes towards battered women and victims of crime. These women have seen big changes in gender roles and expectations.

One generation on, and those same shifts in practice and psyche have moved into overdrive. 'Generation X' women - born in the '60s and early '70s - came of age in a world whose rules of life are 'merely provisional', which to some was a rude awakening. What they were taught would be their legacy from feminism has proven frustratingly unattainable. As Gen X'er Alanis Morissette sings, "Isn't it ironic?" While this Generation's disenchantment is understandable and, indeed, legitimate their fingering of feminism - at least as it has been portrayed in the media - has clouded the important issues: the continued lack of power and poor quality of many women's lives.

So, over coffee we thought and talked and shared experiences. We told each other tales of high personal expectations, of the personal fatigue of trying to achieve such goals in the face of a resistant masculinist society in which women's credibility and experience remain 'the problem'.

Fiona: 'But Moira, you know my generation was taught to 'go for it'. I mean, I don't even have children, and I find the quest to succeed at times totally overwhelming. Is 'choice' really the mustard gas of my generation, as some say?'

Moira: 'Fiona, this isn't new, you know. I tried to 'have it all', too. I was heavily involved in community work, I adopted a child, and I set up and ran my own law partnership, and (just like Generation X, and Y) ended up exhausted. What is new is that you were told you CAN do it. We were told that we couldn't and shouldn't.'

We were both a bit surprised by this exchange. To move on and make sense of our different interpretations of the world, we needed to look more broadly. Here, we agreed, that Baby Boom women were born and taught in the warm post-war optimism of family-formation, the welfare state, the promises of technological progress and readily-available work: but Generation X women were enveloped by a climate of economic stringency, in which jobs are drying up and the race towards more qualifications and greater efficiencies provide little sense of security, as in their personal lives: their high expectations of men and intimacy had translated, all too often, into divorce or failed relationships.

There is no turning back the clock, but where does this leave the feminist legacy? What is it about the 'old trouts' in their 40s and 50s who were the Baby Boomers, and the 'young minnows' of Generations X, Y and beyond, that is different, other than their times? We talked more.

Moira: 'At the end of my first year in Law I was invited by the Federation of University Women to an afternoon tea for female students who had won prizes, as I had. I looked around the room at these 'old' women - they were the age I am now - and listened to their reminiscences about the days when women couldn't even go into some professions (such as Engineering and Law). I remember thinking, 'What would they know?' I went to a couple of their meetings, but they had nothing I wanted or shared.'

Fiona: 'A few years ago when I was still a PhD student I heard Anne Summers tell an academic conference that younger feminists 'should not betray the legacy'. I thought I was being told to be grateful for the battles her

generation had fought for me. I was disappointed that she focused only on the benefits of feminism instead of looking more critically. I felt patronised’.

Moira: ‘So did I. I wasn’t one of those early feminists, anyway. There are many paths to becoming feminist. Mine grew gradually, from working with children and Aboriginals and mental patients and battered wives, which made me think hard about justice, human rights, and equality and the law. My career frustrations made me realise that no matter how hard you work or how much you deserve it, if you don’t ‘belong’ the key opportunities are not going to just come. Even then I wasn’t a ‘political’ feminist to begin with. Take ‘networking’, for instance. Joan and I write about it in our book. Joan consciously built up networks, but I made friends and only later realised they had become a network.’

Fiona: ‘Okay, that might have been effective for Joan, and networking was a catchcry of Women’s Lib., but has it much relevance now? Women rarely congregate by virtue of all being women. In academia, my experience has a lot to do with being overlooked and simply not being taken seriously. I’m still regularly mistaken for an honours student, which says a lot. I mean, I did my doctorate so I would be listened to, but that hasn’t been my experience. While I’ve felt that I’ve earned my place at the table, I’ve discovered the table wasn’t laid for a new generation of women like me’.

Moira: ‘In my case, I finally realised that the mentoring, junior briefs and chances to shine simply weren’t given to even brilliant women in the way they were, and are, to ‘promising’ young men. Or approval was withdrawn once we became competent and more of a threat. That’s why, though I’ve never benefited from equal opportunity laws personally, I am determined that no woman should do it as hard as I did.’

We stopped, looking at muffin crumbs and coffee dregs, and thought, we should write something together about all this.

Moving beyond the debate about change, we thought again about that first key difference, that one generation was told you can't and the other thought that 'you must' aspire. Zelda D'Aprano had said that feminism gave women 'confidence', and this seems to be reflected in the shifting psyches of women (and some men). Using our personal lives as intellectual fodder, we found another issue. Though we should not have to temper our expectations of ourselves and our lives, maybe Generation X women can learn something from their Baby Boomer sisters: resilience, for one thing; and the capacity to imagine a different and better world for another. While the Baby Boomers got this message early, subsequent generations are just learning.

As Heraclitus pointed out, you can never step into the same river twice. But women don't have to swim it alone, and we can change its course.