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“I’M NOT A FEMINIST, BUT…”

By Michelle Smith

Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard recently published her memoir, My Story. In one of the chapters, called "The curious question of gender", she describes men and women in Australia as "trapped in gender prisons". She goes on to describe the effects of the "bars" that surrounded her own cell as Australia’s first female leader.

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Gillard’s iconic misogyny speech in 2012 polarised opinion. Was she legitimately pointing out the insidious forms of discrimination that continue to affect women – even one who has managed to lead the country – or playing "the gender card" to gain some form of advantage unavailable to men?

The varying reactions to Gillard’s treatment are partially explained by the declining number of women who identify as feminists, both in Australia and internationally. Surveys repeatedly indicate that only 15 to 30 per cent of women in the US, UK and Australia would call themselves feminist. Confusingly, however, the vast majority of women support the concept of equality of the sexes, which is the foundational tenet of feminism.

In the past month, in a speech to the United Nations, actor Emma Watson launched the "HeForShe" campaign, which aims to involve men in the fight for gender equality. Watson asks why the word "feminist" has become "such an uncomfortable one" that most women no longer choose to identify with. The feminist label, she suggests, brings with it perceptions of being "too strong, too aggressive, isolating and anti-men, unattractive, even".

Watson is not the first to notice the ways in which feminism has been sufficiently demonised such that the label conjures up the antithesis of what an ideal woman should be. The Great Feminism Denial by Australian writer Monica Dux and academic Zora Simic, published in 2008, for instance, attempts to establish a new way for young women to call themselves feminist in response to so many women resisting the past “seriously ill” model of feminism.

The misrepresentation of feminism is so widespread, and so readily believed, that the number of women who feel the need to actively declare their anti-feminism only seems to have grown since Dux and Simic wrote about the phenomenon. Most visibly, in the past year, the #womenagainstfeminism hashtag has gained traction on social media, with women posting photographs of themselves holding signs with messages that often contain negative assessments of feminism and feminists.

Michaela Cash, the Minister Assisting Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Women – who perhaps hasn’t considered that without the movement she describes as “a set of ideologies from many, many decades ago” women would not be able to vote, let alone be elected to parliament – has also said that she does not associate herself with feminism. (These comments earned her “The Elaine” award, for least helpful remark to the sisterhood, as part of the 2014 Ernies Awards for sexist behaviour.)

In addition to the growth of female anti-feminists, unsurprisingly there are powerful men who openly propagate sexist beliefs about women and contribute to the idea that feminism is unnecessary and irrelevant. Former Prime Minister...
John Howard, for instance, described Gillard's misogyny speech as "nonsense", effectively suggesting that women who perceive sex discrimination are merely imagining it or wilfully trying to gain sympathy. More broadly, a number of "men's rights" associations have emerged in Australia and internationally that promote the outrageous idea that the gender scales have tipped "too far" in favour of women.

Of those women who don't identify as feminist, not all view themselves in opposition to feminism, but instead deny that there is any ongoing need for feminism, despite the fact that substantive gender equality remains elusive. This post-feminist line of thinking might acknowledge the success of second-wave feminism by suggesting that gender equality has been achieved, but views further lobbying for the rights of women as unnecessary.

#Womenagainstfeminism placards often state that the individual woman feels that she has not personally been held back in any way by sex discrimination within her family and social circle. For some of these women, feminism is associated with victimhood. The slippage between feminist and victim is evident in the ways that Gillard was accused of "playing the victim card", synonymising "victim" with "gender", as with the repeated claims that she was "playing the gender card".

In an imagined world where there are no disadvantages to being a girl or woman, where there are no barriers to women's achievement, any suggestion that discrimination or sexism might inhibit a woman's progress becomes a cop out for women too lazy or unsuited to a particular task. In this way, the myth of gender equality works like the American Dream to obscure the social structures that advantage some sections of the community and blame others who fail to achieve without access to the same privileges.

Identifying as a feminist is admittedly more complex today than it once might have been. Recognition of the concept of intersectionality means that no one monolithic concept of feminism can embody the experiences of all women, especially not the traditional feminism largely advanced by white, middle-class women. This leads to further debate and varying positions within feminism thought that critics seize on as exemplary of the way in which feminists, and by extension, women more generally, can only be antagonistic toward one another.

For a variety of reasons, the voices of women who do not identify with feminism have become louder and more numerous. Yet there is an emerging undercurrent of young Australian women who are, like several generations of feminists before them, advocating for what have, once again, become unpopular and almost unfashionable ideas about women's rights.

Two of the more visible, recent examples of innovative approaches to feminism by young women involve crowdfunding campaigns. The feminist collective at Fitzroy High School raised over $12,000 to produce a teaching resource about feminism. One of the students involved in the project, Stella, described the reactions she received to her feminist ideals in a way that sums up postfeminist and anti-feminist viewpoints: "I realised people my age don't think feminism is relevant any more, and they just think it's a bunch of man-hating angry women." In Western Australia, eighteen-year-old Mali Shanti has embarked on a Possible campaign to fund the printing of a feminist magazine produced by girls, Accidental Discharge.

These inspiring projects provide a glimmer of hope that the declining number of women who identify as feminist might also be prompting greater contemplation of women's rights, and how to continue working toward them, among some young women.

Being a feminist is no longer an assumption or expectation. It is a conscious choice in a hostile climate toward women's rights. These projects, among others, will continue to chip away at what Gillard terms "gender prisons", though some anti-feminists and post-feminists would deny the very existence of women's far more cramped cells.

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One Response to "I'm not a feminist, but..."

1. Gail Grossman Freyne says:
   November 18, 2014 at 4:51 pm
   thank you very much for this piece  I have recently returned to Australia and what you describe here is a pandemic. I was especially grateful to be updated on the situation here in Australia.

   Reply

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