

# Feminism and democratic renewal

Tess Lanning

What are the lessons we can learn from the history of feminism over the last forty years?

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It is often said that the aspirations and opportunities available to women have increased dramatically over the past century. Once excluded from university, educational achievement is now higher among young women than their male contemporaries. Female employment has soared, and the gender pay gap between men and women in their twenties has almost disappeared. Increased female earning power has also transformed gender relations in some households, driving a small but steady increase in the number of househusbands and men who share in the housework and childcare.

Yet accusations that feminism has largely benefited middle-class women have dogged the movement since as long ago as Emmeline Pankhurst's prioritisation of suffrage over issues of maternity. Thus Jenny Turner has accused feminists today and historically of being 'mostly white, mostly middle-class, speaking from, of, to themselves within a reflecting bubble'.<sup>1</sup> For some, feminism has not just ignored the concerns of marginalised women, but has actively undermined them. Labour MP David Lammy, for example, has argued that the Women's Liberation struggles in the 1960s and 1970s fed an individualistic 'my rights' culture that facilitated the rise of neoliberalism and is evident in the consumerist values among many young people today.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores current priorities for feminism, and strategies and agencies for change, drawing on research conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research

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(IPPR) on how women's lives have changed over three generations. It argues that to construct a narrative of progress, or a broad argument about 'gender equality', is to ignore the ways in which the economic, social and political changes of the past thirty years have been experienced very differently by women from different backgrounds. Yet it also questions those who brand feminism as a sharp-elbowed, aspirational project, and argues that revisiting some of the tenets of second-wave feminism could provide inspiration for much-needed economic and political renewal.

### Feminism, equality and class

After a long period during which feminism was distinctly unfashionable, new networks, books and campaign groups taking on discrimination and sexist attitudes have thrived in recent years, boosted by new technology and social media. Feminist protests and women's rights organisations have called for measures - often but not always legislative - to protect reproductive rights, prevent violence against women, and restrict access to pornography or the growth of lap dancing clubs. In mainstream political debates, the still disproportionate levels of economic and political capital controlled by men are often taken as evidence of an unfinished revolution. In the run up to International Women's Day in 2012, Cherie Blair and several other high profile women argued that gender parity on company boards is a defining issue for women's equality. Wider debates raged on whether legal quotas should force the issue.

Many politicians choose to appeal to women as a broad group with shared concerns around discrimination and sexism. According to former Conservative MP Louise Mensch: 'Most Conservatives would define feminism as supporting equal rights and opportunities for women. In that sense it is a movement of women, not of right or left'.<sup>3</sup> Greater representational equality in positions of power will, it is hoped, challenge the perception of female capability, and provide role models for young women growing up in a male-dominated world; and each of the two main parties has dedicated 'networking' groups to support female candidates. For some, female power is also a model of political change. Head of the IMF Christine Lagarde suggested, only half in jest, that the financial crisis might never have occurred had Lehman Brothers been called Lehman Sisters, and boasted a more gender-balanced boardroom.<sup>4</sup>

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Electorally, it may make sense to assert biological solidarity between women. But broad notions of gender equality risk obscuring feminism as a set of political demands to transform the underlying structures that shape women's lives. While all women may find their gender has an impact on their opportunities, they do not all share the same political priorities. In previous generations feminism has been characterised by intense debates about whether or not legalistic reforms and formal measures of success (the number of women in Parliament, the extent to which gender pay differentials have improved, etc) have created only the semblance of progress - and have left firmly in place the political, economic and cultural inequalities that profoundly affect working-class, disabled and ethnic minority women. Life has not got better for all women. For some it has probably got worse. And demands for 'equal rights' can gloss over the fact that men also occupy different positions of power and class. This begs the question, as critics such as bell hooks have pointed out, of which men it is that women want to be equal to.<sup>5</sup>

Research conducted by IPPR reveals the considerable differences in the impact of social and economic change on women from different backgrounds in the post-war period.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of universities and the public sector benefited many women. Yet social mobility has flat-lined since the 1980s. The vast profits generated by the deregulation of the financial sector saw the wages of a small group of City traders and CEOs soar, while an ever smaller proportion went to those on low to middle incomes. The employment and earning prospects of low-skilled men have been hit particularly hard during this period, by the decline of unions and the shift from an industrial to a service economy, much of which is now staffed by a low-paid, insecure and largely female workforce. Analysis suggests that the narrowing of the gender pay gap among full-time workers partly reflects the stagnation of men's wages.<sup>7</sup> This levelling down - the jobs that women do have always been less well-paid and more precarious - means that inequality within the sexes is far greater than the difference between men and women.

Although sexism and discrimination have not disappeared, many women are able to get ahead as *individuals* in a way that would not have been possible for previous generations. But paid work is not a liberating or fulfilling experience for all women. UK workplaces have never been particularly democratic, and space for autonomy, creativity and influence in work has declined as corporate power has grown; and it is particularly limited for the large proportion of workers, male and female, in

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low-paid jobs. It is when gender interacts with class disadvantage that it is most damaging. The over-representation of mothers in part-time jobs, many of which are concentrated in low-paid sectors with seriously limited progression prospects, leaves many women, and some ethnic minority women in particular, languishing in jobs well below their potential.<sup>8</sup> While many look to the state as the bastion of women's rights, it has also been complicit in this process, successfully using welfare to work programmes to 'activate' single mothers, often into low-paid jobs, even as it failed to provide adequate childcare.

If the market has dominated social relations over the past thirty years, the non-economic sphere - traditionally the 'female' realm - has been severely undervalued. The long-hours culture in many professional jobs forces both men and women to make difficult choices between work and social and family life, while many on low pay work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. People want (on average) more children than they have in practice, suggesting that the decline in fertility rates is one consequence of the choices women in particular are asked to make between career and care.<sup>9</sup> We are all asked to put our role as economic agents before that of parent, partner, friend or activist, and our ability to participate in wider political and civic life is sharply curtailed as a result. Recognising the needs of children and the value of healthy family and community life need not be nostalgic, or constitute a call for a return to a rose-tinted past when men could count on a family wage and their wives dedicated themselves to bringing up children and building community spirit. Instead it means protecting social and personal life from both economic insecurity and long-hours cultures, while challenging the notion that family and community need be the female realm. A radical re-imagining of work and care could enable everybody to fulfil their potential, in home and community life as well as the workplace, and to lift the institutional and cultural barriers that prevent men from taking on more responsibility for domestic work.

## Lessons from second-wave feminism

Since the heyday of feminism in the 1970s much has changed. A liberal feminism has become dominant within the mainstream - not surprisingly given the dominance of liberalism across society. This has led to a loss of some of the insights of other strands within feminism.

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The problem with liberal feminism is that a focus on gender equality and women's rights solely in abstract terms is inadequate - and hence not nearly radical enough. The dominance of this kind of approach in mainstream debate leaves only a weak political voice for the collective demands that are required to transform family and economic life, and support better choices than those currently available. Furthermore, the suggestion of linear progress for women risks reaffirming the current economic and political model, and in doing so could undermine such demands. The task ahead is not one of an unfinished process of enlightenment. The political and economic crises facing us require deep rethinking and radical change. But if mainstream feminist debates today are primarily concerned with middle-class women's interests, as Turner and Lammy suggest, this is a reflection and not a cause of the dominant political and economic model of the last thirty years.

Before the 1980s, many British feminists were closely involved with socialism, and rejected the 'women in the boardroom' approach to equality as bourgeois - in contrast to the US movement, in which liberal feminism has always dominated.<sup>10</sup> Liberal feminists aim to ensure that women are treated on equal terms with men, often through legalistic changes, in a way that abstracts the argument about women's rights from any structural context. For many second-wave feminists the issues were much more deeply rooted than this, and social, economic and cultural change was also necessary. Like liberal feminists, their demands included equal pay, greater representational equality and for women to be able to fulfil their creative potential alongside men. But women from within both the socialist and radical feminist strands also sought to transform the values and structures that underpinned women's position in the home and the workplace. While these two groups differed in their framing analysis (radical feminists focused mainly on male oppression, while socialist feminists emphasised the interaction of capitalism with patriarchy to its own benefit), both groups emphasised that women's responsibility for domestic labour was crucial in their oppression. They called for a shorter working week to enable men to share responsibility for childcare and housework, and for a reorganisation of domestic work through the social provision of childcare, nurseries and parks.<sup>11</sup>

The perception that the 'personal is political' was a crucial part of second-wave feminism. It both referred to the relationship between women's responsibility for care and domestic work and their position in society and the labour market, and reflected how the movement was rooted in women's lived experiences. The

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feminist movement explicitly sought to involve and organise women from all different backgrounds in debates about social change. Active involvement in political activity, including ‘consciousness-raising’ meetings between women, was personally transformative for the women involved. The result was that many women brought feminist ideas into their homes and workplaces. Calls for shared parenting were combined with experiments with alternatives to the nuclear family. My own parents and some close friends shared the burdens and joys of young children by living collectively. It did not last forever, but perhaps it did not need to. Sharing childcare, cooking and cleaning between three couples reduced the load and the cost, and most importantly protected against the isolating effect of parenthood. There was always another adult to talk to, and always someone to babysit, ensuring our parents’ working, social and political lives thrived alongside family life. Such experiences were often regarded as prefigurative, and helped to reinforce a sense that change would be cultural and social as well as economic.

In *Beyond the Fragments* - widely debated in feminist circles at the time - Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright suggested that the experience of organising against subordination had enabled socialist feminists to develop an alternative vision of power, rooted in a belief that people should be able to influence the decisions that shape their lives. They championed worker control or influence over company decisions about investment, and the aims and means of production. They saw labour as a creative economic actor in its own right, and in doing so challenged the narrow focus on pay and public ownership within the traditional left, which had paid scant attention to the impact on employees and wider society of company decisions about how to compete and produce.<sup>12</sup> A key aim of democratic organisations such as mutuals and collectives would be to develop the consciousness and creativity of workers, and to support alternative models of production - more socially and environmentally responsible, and drawing more on people’s talents.

Disappointment with the perceived failure of mainstream political parties (particularly the Labour Party) to transform society led socialist feminists to re-imagine the ways in which the state distributes power and resources. They sought to provide an alternative to what Raymond Williams criticised in 1961 as the tendency on the left to reduce the people they govern to ‘masses’, as objects upon which to act rather than participants in their own fate.<sup>13</sup> As Nancy Fraser describes, ‘[second wave feminists] styled themselves as a countercultural democratizing movement

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- anti-hierarchical, participatory and democratic ... they envisioned a participatory-democratic state that empowered its citizens'.<sup>14</sup> The tendency of the state to reinforce gender, race and class inequalities meant that broader social movements would need to continue to organise in the political sphere, and to involve people in the creation of alternatives to oppressive (or simply unimaginative) state policies. What these alternatives might be was subject to democratic debate within the feminist movement. Some black feminists, for example, called for a more nuanced critique of the family, emphasising the need to protect black families from the racist approaches to policing and immigration that could tear them apart.<sup>15</sup>

These radical political demands were ultimately unsuccessful, and in the neoliberal era a wider critique of class and race differences, political economy and the state was marginalised amidst promises of individual empowerment and economic independence for women. Fraser argues that feminists' calls to end sexism and discrimination became divorced from a wider critique of capitalism at just the time when it was most needed. It is also possible that the level of organisation and influence by socialist feminists was ultimately not strong enough to pose an alternative to the fraught politics of the 1980s. Faced with the urgency of mass redundancies, the miners' strike and the attack on the welfare state, it may have been felt that arguments for 24 hour childcare and a shorter working week would have to wait.

Wainwright argues that the vision for a more democratic model of political and economic power could have been an impetus for democratic renewal of the left, but that in the end it was the right that was able to regroup and renew itself. The liberal argument was that greater flexibility would unshackle human creativity and drive innovation, and the feminist critique of the family wage, welfare-state paternalism and state-organised capitalism were used to justify an assault on employee institutions, rights and wages and to scale back the redistributive role of the state.<sup>16</sup> The ideological shift towards liberalism was a much broader phenomenon, within which women's issues were entangled, but its impact has also been gendered - most notably in the commodification of women's bodies.<sup>17</sup> Nina Power lambasts today's upbeat *Sex and the City* feminism that uses the language of empowerment, choice and independence to feed the media portrayal of women as shopaholics and chocolate-lovers, and deliberately provokes anxieties among women about their appearance in order to expand markets.<sup>18</sup> A peculiarly

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sexualised vision of what is beautiful and sexy - unattainable without plastic surgery - is increasingly pervasive (see Alison Winch in this issue on how friendship networks are mobilised in this cause).

Liberal and radical feminists have arguably been more influential than their socialist sisters, certainly in recent years. Their successes are evident in the slow shift in attitudes towards sexism, domestic violence and traditional gender roles, particularly in mainstream debates and among the professional classes. But the loss of democratic feminism is most evident in the thin, almost apolitical, nature of arguments for gender equality. Many activists took the ideas that came out of debates between different strands of feminist thought into wider social movements and pressure groups, often set up to give voice to issues that were not on the political agenda, such as environmentalism, migrant rights and violence against women. But what started as a reaction against mainstream politics was over time emasculated by the state. Many of the same groups that had originally challenged the widespread outsourcing that began under the Thatcher government eventually became dependent on the state as a source of sustainable funding. This made it harder to maintain a critical stance. The NGO-ification of social movements also distanced them from the people whose lives they aimed to improve, and led to women being portrayed as victims and service-users rather than as participants in their own fate.

### **Moving forward - a(nother) moment for democratic renewal?**

The language of women's liberation was appropriated by the right to play a role in its undermining of arguments for the transformation of family, gender and workplace relations; in doing so it created a culture which prioritised concerns that said little to the experience of either women or men. The suggestion that individuals must take responsibility for their 'choices' has made it harder to raise more structural problems, such as the status of care, or to support collective solutions that give support to people in their pathways around work, parenthood and inter-generational commitments. The rise of liberal feminism must be seen in the context of this defeat, but its transformation may lie in the rediscovery of the socialist feminist tradition for today's troubled times.

The fall-out from the global financial crisis has led to scrutiny of the post-



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Thatcher settlement, and hope among some that this could be an opportunity for democratic renewal of capitalism and the state. Feminists will need to fight to incorporate their political concerns into any such renewal. The vision painted in *Beyond the Fragments* was of feminists joining forces with each other and other groups into a broad political alliance for change. This alliance would not be centralised or party-centric, but would meet regularly to debate and would come together to fight on points of agreement. In this way feminism would not simply be rooted in gender, but in an understanding of the different ways in which men and women from different backgrounds are oppressed - and an understanding of the common good.

This vision suggests what a radically different form of politics might look like. But the barriers to creating a political movement out of today's fragmented landscape are potentially more challenging than those that ultimately defeated socialist feminism.

The first obstacle is the near disappearance of democratic debate about the means and aims of feminism. Feminists, whether in radical or liberal circles, are rarely forced to argue, acknowledge or engage with those who may disagree. Broad narratives about progress and bland uncontroversial notions of gender equality are only one consequence of this. Racist undertones to the debate around the French decision to ban women from wearing the niqab in public are a more sinister result of such limited thinking. Many self-declared feminists (alongside various male journalists) support the French government's insistence that women uncover, blaming 'false consciousness' for any Muslim woman who asserts her right to religious expression (see *One Dimensional Woman* for an inspired critique of this position). More intra-feminist debates about the cultural issues affecting women - such as how to approach the sexualisation of popular culture that has led to a resurgence of feminism among many young (and older) women in recent years - would help to ensure that such issues are informed by open, honest and vigorous deliberation. Men, too, must be part of this process.

The second problem is that many of those working for social change have become reliant on elite politics to bring it about. Access to sympathetic politicians under a Labour government added impetus to the abandonment of strategies to organise, educate and agitate for political demands. Labour increased spending on cash benefits for families, introduced a minimum wage, broadened access to

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childcare and extended maternity rights. But many onlookers were frustrated by the lack of ambition on the development of collective solutions to reproduction and childcare, and the blind spot when it came to measures that would require employers or fathers to compromise in favour of greater shared responsibility in the home, such as shorter working hours and paternity leave. The democratisation of the market and the state envisaged by Women's Liberation in the 1970s and 1980s was a world away from New Labour's top-down, centralised statecraft, which replicated the weak influence of employees and communities in companies' decision-making processes. This was partly due to the shortcomings of those in power, but wider civil society also failed to provide impetus for transformational politics. Some female MPs previously active in the women's movement found their more radical demands side-lined in the administration's first term largely because they lacked a wider coalition of support to make the political case to male colleagues bent on 'consensual' politics.<sup>19</sup>

Socialist feminists understood that whether feminist demands make it onto the mainstream political agenda depends not just on sympathetic MPs, but on the strength of voice behind those demands. This lesson is further reinforced by the history of the Scandinavian countries. The higher levels of women's equality achieved in countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark have been won through broad feminist mobilisations, in which trade unions and pressure groups have lobbied alongside feminist politicians for state resources, public institutions and social entitlements to support better choices around work and care, promote shared responsibility, and improve the lives of carers, children and the elderly.

An over-reliance on political representatives and women in power to transform the structural conditions that underlie gender-based injustices (among others) places high expectations on what individual politicians can achieve. But it also fails to present any challenge to today's crisis of elite politics, which is increasingly removed from the experiences of those it represents - and may even risk reinforcing it. The celebration of women in power conveniently dismisses Margaret Thatcher as the illiberal exception, but there are plenty more. John Pilger has chastised Germaine Greer and other prominent feminists for cheering Australian prime minister Julia Gillard on the basis of her gender, while ignoring her poor record on Aboriginal rights.<sup>20</sup> If feminism stands for a more ethical politics - as it once did - Gillard's decision in August 2012 to lock up vulnerable asylum

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seekers in processing camps outside Australian territory is yet another blow to her apparent feminist credentials. Many women, once indoctrinated within the corridors of power, seem to take on the received wisdom, culture and values of the institutions they occupy. As do most men.

A key question for feminist renewal, then, is whether those working for social change are able or willing to rediscover the tradition of organising in the political sphere. The return of a less sympathetic government has provoked a small shift in this direction. Resistance to austerity measures has led to some interesting new political alliances between trade unions, charities and campaign groups. They have mobilised around the analysis that cuts to the public sector will disproportionately affect women, who rely on it both as workers and service users. These new alliances have allowed different organisations to coordinate their messages around issues on which they agree, most recently in response to government changes to maternity and shared leave provisions. But to define oppression solely in terms of gender reduces the possibility of a broader alliance with other social movements. It is also an abstraction that makes a victim of women. Surely men made redundant or affected by changes to benefit entitlements have been hit harder by the cuts than most middle-class women? Which things do we want to protect, and why?

The most urgent problem is that the infant alliance does not yet encompass a clear vision or strategy to address the deep political and economic crises facing the country. In the absence of an alternative vision, the anxiety that achievements are being lost can lead to simply a defence of the status quo - a status quo that was once thought nowhere near good enough.

There is currently the possibility of a decisive new political moment. But we need to do more than defend past gains. And this brings us to the most pressing challenge. Feminists need to re-engage with a critique of the nature of political and economic power, and set out a radical agenda for change that is rooted in people's lived experiences, rather than relying on abstract notions of equality through which success can be benchmarked.

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## Notes

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