

Don't write off radical feminism - it's always been ahead of its time

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The revolutionary social justice movement of the 1970s still has answers today

Feminism is often portrayed as a dinosaur rudely dying right in the way of progressive change. Younger people today are much more fluent in their understandings of sex, gender and sexuality. There are more terms available than ever before to describe identity categories (Facebook has more than 50 different choices for gender alone). Indeed, research has found pupils in UK secondary schools using more than 23 different labels for gender identity. In this climate, feminism, a movement led by the experiences of one identity, has become seen as backward, trapped in the past. Added to this are misconceptions that radical feminism in particular is uniquely transphobic, with the label of "terf", or trans-exclusionary radical feminist, applied to anyone expressing trans exclusionary views, regardless of their politics or whether they are even a feminist at all.

In fact, far from being behind the curve or opposed to such changes, radical feminism was ahead of its time. The radical feminists of the 1970s were some of the first to take seriously the gender and sexuality debates currently raging through our society. Many of them looked forward to a gender-fluid world of polyamorous and pansexual relationships, where social roles were no longer defined by people's sexed characteristics at birth. Their work helped to secure structural equality for women, more expansive definitions of the family and greater freedom of expression for gender and sexual identities that cut against the grain of heterosexuality.

A key tenet of radical feminism has always been the rejection of biological essentialism - the belief in innate, biological sex roles. The end goal of feminist revolution, said Shulamith Firestone, author of *The Dialectic of Sex*, must be "not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally". As the radical feminist, poet and artist Kate Millett wrote in her classic 1970 text *Sexual Politics*, "whatever the 'real' differences between the sexes may be, we are not likely to know them until the sexes are treated differently, that is alike. And this is very far from being the case at present."

The work of radical feminists put gender under the microscope, including masculinity. This was highly controversial at the time, and still is. They were among the first to study why masculinity is defined through violence, and how it might be changed. Far from promoting a war of the sexes, radical feminists had an even more radical message: women and men, all of us, however we define, are all human beings, and together are capable of growth and humanity. In 1970s Britain, feminists went beyond theorising what family life might look like without the nuclear model, and started building it themselves. They established lesbian communes, ran self-insemination classes and organised networks of gay men to become sperm donors and co-parents. Some raised children collectively. In doing so, they created egalitarian communities freed from the pressure of gender roles.

These second wave feminists started the first refuges and rape crisis centres; occupied the courts of

sexist judges; burned down sex shops; launched campaigns against the institution of marriage and wore badges urging the destruction of the nuclear family. This was happening long before people started using terms such as chosen family or queer kinship.

Their movement was united with other social justice movements: for Black power, for the environment, for peace and anti-militarism. Perhaps it is because of their radicalism, and the potential of the cultural change they were involved in starting, that such a backlash ensued to stop them. Unfortunately homophobia, and perhaps lesbophobia specifically, is still a powerful deterrent to women's engagement with feminism, and, from early on, radical feminism was picked as the cautionary tale, of the certain spinsterhood and rejection that would follow from taking feminism too far.

We should remember that these rebels are not residing in archives. Most are still with us. Radical feminism is not our past. If anything, it's become increasingly relevant to our future. No social movement has healed the structural fractures of racism, class oppression or homophobia, and feminism is no exception. It is also affected by these same fractures – racism, the dominance of Whiteness, classism and transphobia. Just as activists look outwards towards fighting inequality and oppression in society, they also need to look inwards at the forms of oppression within their own movements.

While it was not perfect, there were many successes of that time. The women who started [Reclaim the Night in 1977](#) founded a method of organising we still turn to today after tragic cases such as the murder of Sarah Everard. Then, as now, women said they would not accept a curfew, nor the lie that these tragedies are isolated incidents, or one-offs, or perpetrated by crazed monsters. Women set up Women's Aid and Rape Crisis, alongside their own publishing houses, music labels and journalism. We do not always need to reinvent wheels; we can find answers in radical feminism that can help us move forward now.

There is no one agreed definition of feminism; there are as many different understandings as there are people who would say they are feminist. This is a strength, but there is also a risk that if feminism means everything, it can become meaningless. At the very least, feminism is a movement for women's equality with men in terms of legal rights, recognition and access in the world. But men are not a homogeneous group, and they do not enjoy rights equally. Because of this, feminist activists over the centuries have pointed out that this movement is not a struggle merely for rights with unequal men.

Radical feminism is a revolutionary social justice movement, working for the world as it could be, and for the liberation of women and society; through challenging, changing, and, one day, ending patriarchy as a form of social governance.

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