

WOMEN VS FEMINISM

Why We All Need Liberating
from the Gender Wars

PREVIOUS BOOKS BY JOANNA WILLIAMS

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from the Gender Wars

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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me and this book has been humbling and I only hope it lives up to her expectations.

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WOMEN VS FEMINISM

This book offers a critique of the new feminism that has become so fashionable today. Its focus is on the lives of women in comparatively wealthy, Western societies, most specifically the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Ardent followers of social media and academic debates will no doubt retort that there is not one type of feminism but many, and nuanced positions can't be lumped together. They have a point, of course. But at the same time there is a dominant feminist narrative that fills newspaper columns, book shelves, speeches at the United Nations and guidance for teachers. This is a feminism that cannot be defined by the sexuality or skin colour of its proponents. Yet it clearly espouses one idea above all others: that women are disadvantaged and oppressed; routine victims of everyday sexism, casual misogyny and the workings of patriarchy. The better women's lives become, the harder it seems that a new generation of feminists must try to justify their purpose through uncovering ever more obscure problems.

This book is in three parts. Part one looks at women's experiences today in education, at work and as mothers.

Although women are doing better than ever before, and often better than men, there is also recognition that life is not as good as it gets – for either women or men. But the problems we face are rarely those identified by feminist campaigners. Part two explores the growing disjuncture that has emerged between the statistical successes women are ratcheting up and the persistent narrative of female disadvantage. We see how a feminism premised upon the notion of women as victims increasingly seeks to regulate not just our behaviour but our innermost thoughts and feelings. The final part of this book considers what feminism once was and what it represents today. The historical gains of feminism provide a context to its current limitations.

PERMISSIONS

Extracts from Chapter 10 were originally published as ‘The Prison House of Gender’ in *The Spiked Review* (October 2016) and are reprinted here with permission.

PREFACE

Criticising feminism does not come naturally to me. As a child growing up under the shadow of my country's first female prime minister, I knew for certain that feminism was important. I wore a badge given to me by my mother with a picture of a washing line and the slogan 'wages for housework'. I had a postcard stuck to my bedroom wall showing a line drawing of two babies peering earnestly into their nappies. 'Oh! So that explains the difference in our salaries!' read the caption. I even had a T-shirt with a picture of a man and woman having a drink: 'Men's brains are heavier than women's brains,' said the stick man before, in the next picture, falling on to the floor head first. I never once doubted that a woman could do anything a man did – so of course that made me a feminist.

In my first year at university, I helped to make a banner for a 'Take Back the Night' march, although I never actually made it on to the demonstration. I can't ever remember feeling afraid walking alone at night. I'd love now to be able to say that my refusal to march was a protest against being told, for the first time, that I should see myself as a victim. The truth is that I wasn't critical of this new direction in feminism so much as bored with it. As part of my degree in English Literature, I had become far more familiar with work by literary critics like Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Toril Moi than I was with Shakespeare, Chaucer or Dickens. Criticism became reduced to 'sexism spotting' and it

didn't seem to matter whether the author was male or female, writing in this century or the seventeenth, our aim was to expose the misogynistic assumptions apparent in the text. Simply appreciating good quality writing was not considered sufficiently academic.

QUESTIONING FEMINISM

The first time I publicly confessed to doubts about feminism, I took myself by surprise. In an attempt at rehabilitating my post-maternity leave teaching career I began a Master's Degree in Education at my local university. One week we learnt about projects to empower girls, to interest them in science and to encourage them to go to university. It was worthy and inspiring stuff but for one issue that was not acknowledged: girls were doing better at school than boys and had been for over a decade. When I raised this with my tutor I was told, 'No one expressed concerns when boys were doing better than girls.' So, I thought, perhaps this is just historical retribution, payback for all those years in which girls lost out. Perhaps that was what feminism now meant.

The following week we learnt about a school initiative to raise awareness of, and ultimately prevent, domestic violence. Children were to take part in various activities such as discussions and role-play exercises, each carrying the same message: women and girls were at risk in their own homes and fathers, husbands and brothers were the violent perpetrators. I thought of my own boys, then aged three and one. I wanted to protect them from knowing about domestic violence; I was devastated by the implication that they somehow carried guilt by association, that their essential maleness, their masculinity, was something dangerous and inherently threatening.

If feminism meant ignoring boys falling behind at school, and telling girls to fear members of their own families as well as half of their classmates, then it wasn't something I wanted anything to do with. I hadn't planned to say this out loud. I didn't even realize it was what I thought until the words left my mouth. But the shock that greeted my outburst was something that I remember vividly. My tutor and my classmates were all equally horrified: 'But you're a woman!' 'You've benefited from feminism!' 'Feminism just means equality and of course you believe in equality!' Although as students we were instructed in the importance of critical thinking, challenging the direction of feminism and its significance to education was clearly a step too far. Being critical meant employing a feminist perspective; it did not mean questioning it. I can't remember what the intended learning outcome was for that particular class but I was clear about my own take home message: when it comes to criticizing feminism, 'You can't say that!'

THE DIFFICULTIES OF WRITING

Since this time I've spoken at public meetings and written articles questioning a feminism that seems to have grown increasingly distant from the reality of many young women's lives. As a result, I'm no stranger to the strength of feeling criticizing feminism evokes. But the more I've been confronted with fourth-wave or intersectional feminism, the more I've become convinced it is detrimental. As I explore in this book, the feminism we have today seems all too often to demonize men and degrade women by imbuing them with a false sense of their own victimhood. My determination to challenge these ideas meant that I began writing this book with relish. As a woman who has always had an interest in

feminism, I thought writing a book on the subject would be easy. Perhaps even fun.

My bravado did not last for long. As I soon realized, a critique of feminism cannot be separated from an evaluation of women's lives. On paper, women are doing better than ever before and, particularly when younger, better than men. But in reality it doesn't always feel this way and the popularity of feminism speaks to a sense of dissatisfaction with life as it currently is. The progress women have made can only be understood when seen in relation to the oppression women experienced in the past. Likewise, women's experiences at school, work and in the home today only make sense when viewed alongside men's lives. Writing about this did not prove to be straightforward; one problem was simply knowing where to start and stop.

Neither feminism nor women's lives have developed as one coherent narrative. Different women experience the world very differently. Feminism is, and always has been, fractured and diverse, emphasizing different issues in new eras. What looks like progress in one direction is matched by moves sideways and backwards in other areas. A book must have a beginning, middle and end and this necessity risks sweeping over contradictions and ignoring the nuances of an argument. I am fearfully aware that many feminist scholars, with far more academic credibility than me, have dedicated entire careers to exploring, in detail, issues that I merely prod and poke here.

Over the course of writing this book my bravado has been tempered by humility. What's here is not intended to be a definitive answer to the twenty-first century's 'woman question'. Instead, it's a series of themed essays that I hope might puncture what seems to be the current consensus around women's lives and raise questions about the direction and purpose of feminism today.