

The Enigma of Female Misogyny

by Clarissa Hurley

"Feminism is ideology and not a biological condition"

In recent months, events such as the T-shirt affair at Ludlow Hall and the continuing controversy surrounding employment equity at this campus have brought the millenia-old feminist struggle to the forefront of peoples' minds. During the past year, I have spoken with many people about the alarming antifeminist backlash that appears to be sweeping Canadian universities. While I have been encouraged by the few who have expressed their outrage and identified these events as part of a large continuum of societal violence and oppression, I have been equally distressed by the many whose response has been to deny the gravity of misogynist actions and to treat them as aberrant rather than symptomatic.

One argument ever de rigueur among the anti-feminist set which I find particularly disturbing is that "feminists don't speak for all women." Apropos of the T-shirt affair, for example, I frequently hear things like: "Well, Jeez, ya know, women bought the shirts too." This is usually delivered in a tone of smug triumph, as though the speaker genuinely believes that such a platitude can eradicate the validity and obliterate the achievements of the entire feminist movement in one fell swoop. Most distressing is that this attitude manifests itself in women as often as it does in men.

The twisted logic behind this statement seems to be that a misogynist action is somehow excusable when it is perpetrated by a woman. This peculiar view ignores or fails to understand that feminism is an ideology and not a biological condition. Just as some women purchased the infamous

t-shirts, many men - offended and upset by the slogans - did not. Any sexist, racist, or homophobic action is just that - whether it is perpetrated by men, women, children, dogs, cats, or teddy-bears.

Beyond the warped reasoning, however, the "women do it too" argument does raise some important and disquieting issues. The statement is, after all, quite true. Some women were indeed complicit in their own humiliation by buying these shirts, just as millions of women either consciously or unconsciously reinforce the structures of patriarchy on a daily basis. It is easy enough to understand why many men reject feminism. In an revolution, power is not readily relinquished by the ruling class. It is unfortunate that many men fail to see that they have much to gain from their emancipation from the equally unnatural role of oppressor. (her, of course, I speak mainly of white, middle-class, heterosexual men.) The phenomenon of women antifeminists is much more complex.

Feminism is the articulation of human experience from the point of view of women. By extension, it is and ideology and a movement whose goals include the correction of the misrepresentation of women's experience by patriarchy, the eradication of sexual violence, the ending of all forms of oppression-including sexism, racism and heterosexism - and the establishment of economic and political equality between men and women. It is philosophy that seeks to free both men and women from their confining, socially-constructed roles, and promises, ultimately, a more harmonious co-existence between the sexes. That anyone should object to such ends is peculiar enough, but that women in particular should resist the ideology that offers them support, sisterhood

and eventual freedom from male-supremacy has long been a mystery to me.

The factors that motivate female antifeminism are undoubtedly as numerous as they are illogical, and I will not attempt to offer definitive solutions. One possible explanation, however, lies quite simply in ignorance. Ironically, while feminists have striven for centuries to correct the misrepresentation of women, feminism has, in turn, been so misrepresented by the media that there is still very little understanding by either gender, of what feminism actually is. It astounds me that on a regular basis I still have to defend myself in the face of the ignorance of those who inform me that "feminists say this, that, and the other." When asked to supply the source of their oracular wisdom, these guardians of misogynist dogma frequently reply something like: "Well, it's true, isn't it - I heard it somewhere." Even in the sacred grove of academe, where women owe so much to the struggles of their foremothers, I have heard countless facile arguments over questions like who should open the door for whom, as though this is the essence of feminism.

Another possible explanation of the problem of female misogyny may be that women - like men - feel they have too much to lose by embracing feminism. Patriarchy offers certain models of what the ideal woman should be, and promises certain rewards to the women who conform to these rules. As Andrea Dworkin states in her book *Right-Wing Women*: "From father's house to husband's house to a grave that still might not be her

own, a woman acquiesces to male authority in order to gain some protection from male violence...The males rarely keep their part on the bargain as she understands it. ...Most women cannot afford, either materially or psychologically, to recognize that whatever burnt offerings of obedience they bring to beg protection will not appease the angry little gods around them." (14-15) Confident that male contempt is reserved for those who deviate from the patriarchal norm, many women fail to notice or choose to ignore that acts of aggression and violence are perpetrated indiscriminately against all different "types" of women.

I suspect that, at the heart of most female antifeminism, lies a profound - if suppressed - awareness that to acknowledge any example of sexism in one's own life must inevitably lead to the recognition of the myriad manifestations of misogyny which are suffused through the rest of society. This, in turn, leads to a clearer recognition of the philosophies and structures that underlie and maintain the system.

No one is born a feminist in a patriarchal world and anyone who has experienced a feminist awakening knows the horrible feeling of responsibility that accompanies the recognition that she or he cannot selectively condemn a few overt examples of sexism and ignore the often more insidious subtle ones. It soon becomes painfully evident that the struggle against misogyny is a daily one that urges us to confront not only countless manifestations of women-hating but also all of the things we as women do to perpetuate this system. This is

a painful and frightening process which I am sure many women either unconsciously avoid or deliberately refuse to endure. In no way do I censure women who find this responsibility too great to accept and who choose to remain fetishized by men and isolated from other women. What ever individual women do to survive in a male-dominated world is not for me to judge. What saddens me enormously is that these women do not see the rewards and comforts as well as the drawbacks to feminism. A close (feminist) friend of mine said to me recently "It's so exhausting to be this angry all the time." This is true and it is this draining emotional investment that many women fear. Perhaps what they do not realize is that our sense of unity and faith in our ideology does mitigate the frequent frustrations. While the feminist can take comfort in the hope that perhaps her children will not have to be as angry as she is, and in the knowledge that she is actively resisting her oppression, the antifeminist woman will someday awaken to the terrifying realization that "... all the ideals that motivated her to deny herself [are] indelibly stained with blood that she [will] have to acknowledge, at last, as her own." (Dworkin, 17.)



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