

## NEWS

# Panel discusses the F-word in public

BY MIRIAM KORN

"Are you a feminist?" asked one poster advertising an event for the Week of Reflection. A room full of people arrived to listen and respond to a panel's remarks regarding this question.

As part of last week's remembrance of the Montreal massacre, the Dalhousie Women's Group hosted a panel discussion entitled "What is Feminism?"

The panelists did not attempt to provide a definition as an answer to the question posed in the title of the event. Rather, they approached the matter of how they felt they fit into the feminist movement, and how this affected their respective personal definitions of the term.

"Feminism has a bad name. In social circles, people have begun to think of it as the new F-word," began Hermie Abraham, a member of the Dalhousie Women's Group. "It is important to note that Feminism is not just one thing it is many things. It is a wide array of ideas and feelings."

She went on to emphasize the importance of inclusion of all groups in feminism. "It should be very inclusive. The privileged group of white, heterosexual men is oppressive to different people — people of different ethnic backgrounds, homosexuals and women. It is a sub category of social justice."

Next, Karen Thomas explained why she, as a member of the middle-class white majority who had never been overtly abused, has considered herself a feminist for the past eight years. She described her

**"Who wanted to be Minnie? Mickey had all the power."**

feminist analysis as "shaky at the best of times;" however, "I have had the opportunity to make connections between my personal experiences and the wider society. To me, this is what Feminism is all about."

"At the beginning, there were a lot of things which kept me from knowing the importance of feminism. I did well at school. I kept up with the boys, not noticing the little exclusions. I was told I could be anything I wanted in this world."

There came a point when she began to note the injustices.

She cited many subtle examples from her childhood. Her girls' ringette team was often bumped from the ice in favour of the boys'

## WEEK OF REFLECTION

**B**ecause woman's work is never done and is underpaid or unpaid or boring or repetitious and we're the first to get the sack and what we look like is more important than what we do and if we get raped it's our fault and if we get bashed we must have provoked it and if we raise our voices we're nagging bitches and if we enjoy sex we're nymphos and if we don't we're frigid and if we love women it's because we can't get a "real" man and if we ask our doctor too many questions we're neurotic and/or pushy and if we expect community care for children we're selfish and if we stand up for our rights we're aggressive and "unfeminine" and if we don't we're typical weak females and if we want to get married we're out to trap a man and if we don't we're unnatural and because we still can't get an adequate safe contraceptive but men can walk on the moon and if we can't cope or don't want a pregnancy we're made to feel guilty about abortion and . . . for lots and lots of other reasons we are part of the women's liberation movement.

DAL WOMEN'S GROUP

Pee Wee hockey games. Both her parents worked in the family business, but her mother did all the housework. All six candidates for class president in her high school were male.

She could never relate to any of the female role models the media offered her. For example, she and her twin sister always fought over who would be Mickey Mouse at Halloween. "Who wanted to be Minnie? Mickey had the power," said Thomas. "From a very early age, I identified with the exciting characters. I wanted to be doing all those neat things."

She was encouraged to pursue a Nursing degree because she was "good at science." She believed that her first year of university was the most powerless time of her life. She had felt that she was not valued for who she was, but rather who she was attached to (ie, her good-looking, graduate student, nice car owner boyfriend).

Thus, she decided to "chuck it all and go to Europe." During an extended period of solitude, she developed a sense of self, and started making connections.

Thomas condemned the anti-politically correct movement which says that Feminism limits people's freedom. She points to the many names feminist have been called over the years and how they are all basically meant to "take the heat off the real issue: the pervasive and systemic oppression of women."

She pointed out three aspects of feminism: inclusion, expectation and co-optation

"Women are excluded from positions of power. We are encour-

aged to take the roles of the powerless rather than the powerful. For example, in university, girls are encouraged towards nursing, social work, education. Boys towards law, medicine, business."

She noted, however, that feminism, ideally, aims for a system which avoids power structures, whereby decisions are made by consensus.

"Feminism is not about becoming more masculine, more hierarchical and more oppressive. It is about increasing the value of nurturing and caring in society and injecting feminist values into traditionally male-dominated professions."

Thomas noted that men's help is welcomed, however, "we need help on our terms." Excluding men in certain instances, she explains, is important, because women as a united group still have to develop a sense of self.

Blye Frank, a sociology professor at Mount Saint Vincent University, began his talk about the role of men in Feminism by making it clear that he was speaking as a pro-feminist man, not as a feminist.

"Some men want to be feminists. They want to remove the burden of manhood. Some men continually want it all, including Feminism."

He maintained that as pro-feminists, men had to support women in their fight for equal rights by helping in household chores, and childcare. He noted that men had to resist directly participating (co-opting) the movement, for now.

Meanwhile, he denounced the recent men's movement growing

in North America which encouraged the warrior within every man to emerge. "If men who call themselves feminists are co-opting feminism, this new movement is co-opting Native American spirituality and culture."

He quoted one American pro-feminist man. "We men need a revolutionary honesty. We need to own up to our individual and collective history as men. A history of oppression to women, other men, and in some ways, ourselves."

Thomas had touched upon this in her speech. "We need men as allies, we need them to make supper and take care of the kids," she says, "but it's hard to make allies with men when they are still our oppressors."

"Being pro-feminist is about sharing power," affirms Frank. He adds that this includes "taking up an equal and just share of the labour of the house."

Andrea Currie, of Stepping Stone and the singing group Four the Moment, gave an account of her diverse experiences which brought about the evolution of her attitudes towards feminism.

She grew up in a white middle class family which was very much defined by traditional gender stereotypes. Her interest in feminism was sparked by harassment she experienced when travelling and fostered by subtle injustices she began noticing thereafter.

Her relationship with a lover who was never a university stu-

dent, pointed out how feminism is often limited to the sphere of intellectualism

"Although she fully supported me in my commitments, demonstrations and education, she did not identify herself as a feminist," Currie described her lover. "Nevertheless, she had a strong and definite sense of herself. She under-

**People have begun to think of Feminsim as the new F-word**

stood intuitively the concepts I was studying in my women's studies courses, however, she would have felt uncomfortable in one of these classes. Nevertheless, I learned more from this woman than from any form of academics."

Later, when she began singing with a group of black women, she saw how the movement was not of concern to these solid, admirable women. This was understandable because women of color have to address the issue of white privilege before they could concentrate on feminism.

She ended with a series of questions to be addressed by the feminist movement, and a plea for people to express their beliefs "not in theory, not even in emotion, but in action."

"The personal is political," agreed all the panelists.

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