

The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism

The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism

Ellie Levenson



O N E W O R L D
O X F O R D

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Quiz – are you a noughtie girl?

1. A good looking, witty, handsome, single man offers to buy you a very expensive dinner. Do you ...
 - A. Giggle, accept and afterwards kiss him on the cheek and say goodbye. After twenty more such evenings he should present you with a diamond ring.
 - B. Offer to pay half, and when he refuses throw your coffee over him and yell ‘There’s no need for misogyny you bastard’ before storming out.
 - C. Accept and take a spare pair of knickers and a toothbrush with you in case you decide to go back to his.

2. Your beloved boyfriend suggests that it would be a good time to have a chat about ‘the future’, and wonders whether you fancy looking at wedding venues this weekend. Do you ...
 - A. Give him your dad’s phone number and say you think he should have a chat with him first.

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- B. Say you don't believe in outdated patriarchal traditions and when he looks upset dump him for being a wimp.
 - C. Take time out to think about whether this is a future you want, and then do whatever feels right for you.
3. Your five-year-old daughter wants to decorate her room all in pink. Do you ...
- A. Say you don't really think pink is girly enough and suggest she add glitter and flower stencils to the wish-list and by the way, doesn't she think she's old enough to start wearing make-up now?
 - B. Say you've never bought her a pink item in her life, why would you start doing so now, and make a note to send her to a feminist consciousness raising summer camp this year.
 - C. Agree, with the condition that she repeats the mantra 'Pink is not only for girls and girls can like colours other than pink' ten times a day before school.
4. Your boss says you have great management potential and suggests you apply for promotion. Do you ...
- A. Blush furiously and then refuse politely. How would you manage to get home in time to make dinner if you had all that extra work?
 - B. Say that's kind but you don't want to move up the company, you want to run it, and that you'll be launching a women only takeover bid at the next AGM.

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- C. Have a think about it and decide whether this fits in with your general work–life balance before asking for an informal chat about the extra responsibilities and the extra money.
5. Your partner offers to take the male contraceptive pill as part of a trial study so you can give your body a break from the extra hormones. Do you ...
- A. Say ‘Actually honey, women’s bodies are designed this way in order to bear children. We should be stopping contraception altogether and making a family – that’s all I want in life.’
 - B. Say ‘Why make the empty gesture, every time I sleep with you the act of penetration feels like a crime against women anyway?’
 - C. Say yes, but because you don’t trust him to remember you secretly get fitted with a coil as well.
6. There is a building site at the end of the road and every time you walk past it you get wolf-whistled. Do you ...
- A. Think to yourself ‘What nice men’, and return later that day with a tray of homemade lemonade for them.
 - B. Flip them the finger and then call the council when you get home and ask that they be given an ASBO.
 - C. Put your head down and ignore them while tutting to yourself – but secretly you feel flattered.

Results

Mostly A

Feminism probably isn't something you have given much thought to in the past. Perhaps you've felt alienated by the concept or you think all feminists have to cut their hair short. But you probably are a noughtie girl, because you believe that everybody should be able to make their own choices just as you have made yours. Read on to find out about some of the areas in which women make choices every day, and why yours are as valid as anyone else's.

Mostly B

You are definitely a noughtie girl – you are a feminist and proud of it. Not only that but you've read all the literature and probably set up a women's group of your very own to discuss the failings of men and society generally. But feminism has changed this millennium – noughtie girls know there's more than one way to be a feminist, and that wearing pink doesn't necessarily rule you out. Read on to find out how women in the noughties are changing the face of feminism.

Mostly C

You're a typical noughtie girl already – full of contradictions and determined not to succumb to anyone's view of feminism other than your own. Read on to see what similarities and differences you have with other noughtie girls, and to find out why your way is the future of feminism.

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Introduction

I gave a speech at my best friend's wedding recently. It was a long engagement so I had sixteen months to prepare. During this time I thought a lot about what I wanted to say. Amid the usual stories of how we met and some funny anecdotes about her life, I wanted to pay tribute to her character. Sarah is, I said:

Thoughtful, always appropriate, great fun, inquisitive, adventurous and generous. Sarah is a feminist, a great conversationalist, a good cook, a brilliant keeper of secrets. She offers advice when it's needed and manages not to when it's not. She's interesting and interested and hardworking and dedicated. She is witty, tolerant and kind.

All of this came easily to me – she really is that great. Except for one word. Feminist. I didn't doubt that Sarah is a feminist, even though her dad had escorted her up the aisle and she had just vowed to dedicate her life to a man. After all, Sarah was using her wedding to make many feminist statements. She would not be changing her surname. She would be giving a speech and she

had a best woman – me – just as her husband had a best man. She deliberately began her own speech by subverting the traditional ‘My wife and I ...’ with ‘My husband and I ...’

But I still had doubts about offending an audience that I’d mainly never met. When I had written my speech I read it through. And I kept coming back to the word feminist. I thought about it for some time, then decided to say it anyway. Sarah was delighted.

Why is it that I was worried about using this word? I grew up believing that feminism was something to be proud of, not something to keep hidden. In fact it was Sarah who, unwittingly perhaps, helped me to articulate my thoughts about feminism. I was once trying to explain to her about my religion (I’m a non-practising Jew) and how it has an impact on my life. It is everything and nothing, I told her. I don’t think very much about being Jewish on the one hand, but on the other I think about it all the time. It impacts on my humour, my family relationships, my interests, the food I like and the way I look. ‘It sounds like being a woman’ Sarah said. And she was right.

I don’t think every second of the day about the fact that I am a woman – I just am – but it impacts on every single thing that I do and how others perceive me. The same goes for being a feminist. I am a feminist because in so many things I do there is some form of inequality caused by being a woman, whether it is walking down the street alone at night or the bill being presented to the man in a restaurant. Obviously some of these are less worrying than others – I’m delighted if somebody wants

to buy me dinner – but I certainly don't want that decision to be made on my behalf.

Some people say we have equality now, so who needs feminism? Presumably they don't mind that women get paid on average just eighty-three per cent of men's salaries; in effect we get paid until the end of October, then work the rest of the year for nothing. These might be the same women who do all the washing in their household because it is easier to put everything in together, and then find it strange that men just assume washing and cleaning is women's work.

When I asked my friends whether they are feminists, many reacted with horror. They assumed that if they said yes, they could not also be feminine, they could not shave their legs and they would have to hate men. There was a sense that saying yes meant no more short skirts and no more make-up, that it would mean they had to vote in a particular way or have specific interests and that to say they were a feminist would make them part of a specific political movement that they were not comfortable with.

None of this is the case, at least not in noughties feminism. Yet even I sometimes feel uneasy about feminism. My husband has a badge that he picked up from the Fawcett Society, an organisation that promotes equality between men and women. It says 'real men are feminists'. I love him for having it – maybe that's why he got it in the first place – but I'd probably be embarrassed if he wore it in public. After all, feminism can be an embarrassing word. The term seems to make most people think

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of bra burning and hairy armpits which is a shame because while 1970s feminists achieved a lot that women today should be grateful for, they are not the only icons of the feminist movement. I have no intention of ever throwing myself in front of a horse, very little makes me want to chain myself to the railings at Downing Street and my longest hunger strike has been about an hour, but the suffragettes are my feminist icons. What's more, I am a feminist who wears a bra and shaves my armpits. I don't see it as a choice between being feminine and being feminist.

Nor do I necessarily need to know my place in feminist history. You don't need to know what steps we have made towards equality – you just need to know that we're not there yet. We're campaigning to be equal, not less unequal.

When I am asked about feminism and someone brings up the name of a once famous but now long forgotten feminist, I often feel rather stupid when I confess I haven't heard of her. So when I wrote an article for the *Guardian* newspaper about men who ask their girlfriend's dad for permission to marry them and my editor rang me and said 'It's great, but can you add a quote from a second wave feminist' I just bluffed and said 'Of course.' And then as soon as I put the phone down I called my mum. 'What's a second wave feminist?' I asked. She wasn't entirely sure what my editor meant either.

So I did what any self-respecting journalist would do, and googled it. The results threw up a list on *Wikipedia*, a website I tell the journalism students I teach never to rely on. It said:

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Second Wave Feminism is generally identified with a period beginning in the early 1960s. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination and oppression.

Wikipedia then named sixty-six second wave feminists. I had heard of six, one of whom was Oprah Winfrey, who I had associated with black rights and fat rights but not feminism. I knew what another, Andrea Dworkin, had looked like but not what she stood for. Germaine Greer had become something of a rent-a-gob in the UK, and a stereotypical man-hating feminist. I had heard of Gloria Steinem and Beatrix Campbell somewhere in the dark recesses of my brain but couldn't tell you why. I called the other one I had heard of, Hilary Wainwright. I knew her because she edited a political magazine, *Red Pepper*, not because of her feminism. We had a great chat and she helped me with the article, enlisting her mum, Joyce, eighty-five at the time, who was with her when I phoned. Joyce told us about a poem that girls used to say when she was a child. It suggested that using your dad as an excuse not to marry was a feminist gesture, telling the suitor to go to hell. It went:

*Go to father she said,
When he asked her to wed,
Though she knew that he knew,*

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*That her father was dead.
And she knew that he knew,
What a life he had led,
And she knew that he knew,
What she meant when she said, Go to father.*

At the end of our chat I asked Hilary if she was a second wave feminist. 'I'm not sure' she said. So much for *Wikipedia*. And so much for feminist history, when even the big names don't know if they are part of a specific movement or not.

So this book isn't about our place as noughties women in the history of feminism. It isn't about looking back at women's place and congratulating society on how far we've come. It's not about knowing your Naomi Wolf from your Virginia Woolf or your Guerrilla Girls from your Spice Girls.

Instead this book will take you on a journey through various aspects of a noughtie girl's life to persuade you that feminism is a real issue for today's women and not just an embarrassing word. And what do I mean by noughtie girl? Well in the broadest sense, noughtie girls are any women alive in the noughties, the first decade of the twenty-first century. But specifically, women born in the seventies, eighties, nineties and noughties are the generation of women I am referring to as noughtie girls. Women who were children or not even born when the UK had its first female Prime Minister, women who have always known they could access legal abortion should they want it, women whose mothers could have taken the contraceptive pill.

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This book is about noughtie girls but it is not just for them. It is for their mums, sisters, aunts and grandparents. And of course for their partners, dads, brothers, uncles, grandfathers and friends. For it is a window into some of the areas noughtie girls need to think about in their lives, whether they are asking themselves who to sleep with, whether to apply for promotion or why the art gallery they are in has no paintings by women artists.

A note however on women who are lesbians. Sexuality is often lumped in with other gender issues, in bookshops and on university courses at least. In part this is because the two issues became bound together in previous incarnations of feminism, where having sex with men was seen as betraying the sisterhood and lesbianism was as much a political statement as an expression of your true sexuality. This is not the case among noughtie girls, who tend to see lesbianism as an instinctive sexuality rather than as a political choice. But as I have no direct experience of many of the issues specifically concerning lesbians I have not attempted to cover these here. Therefore the chapters on sex and on marriage are about heterosexual relationships. Other than that however I hope that this book is interesting for all women.

Being a feminist is what you want it to be. For me, it's about having real choices and demanding equality. We all make different choices; I want the choice to decide who I go out with, who I sleep with, who I marry and if I divorce. I want to choose my own surname and my own title. I want to choose who runs my country. I want to choose when I conceive and, if I do conceive by accident, I want to choose whether I have an abortion or

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whether I keep the child. If I do have children, I want to choose whether I look after them or whether somebody else does. I want to choose whether I wear high heels or flat shoes, whether I wear trousers or skirts, whether I wear make-up and yes, whether I wear a bra. If I want to roller skate down the promenade wearing white jeans while on my period as that famous tampon advert had it, I will, and if I want to take to bed with a hot water bottle and the DVD box set of *Sex and the City*, I'll do that instead. I want to choose whether to go to university, whether to work in an office or at home and whether to accept a job or not. I want to choose whether I cook, whether I clean and whether I do the laundry.

And I want equality. I want equal pay with men. I want equal opportunities for education, jobs, sport and entertainment. I want equality when it comes to responsibility for caring for the vulnerable in society, be it our children or our elderly parents. I want equality of moral rhetoric so promiscuity amongst women is not seen as worse than promiscuity amongst men, so teenage girls who binge drink are no worse than teenage boys. And I want equality of expectation, so boys and girls are all expected to be the best people they can.

Once we have these choices and equality, frankly I don't care what other women do with it. If they want to get married, take their husband's surname, look after their children, cook, wash and clean for their family and take the kids to school every day, then so be it. As long as they believe that everybody has the right to choose whether or not to do these things, then they are feminists too.

1

The sisterhood

First things first – what is this idea of sisterhood that feminists refer to? The sisterhood refers to the idea that we have something in common with other women just because we are women and that because of this bond we have an obligation to help each other.

In some respects this is true – as women we all face certain stereotyping and prejudices, and there are many issues in which all women have a stake. But sisterhood is complicated. After all, we all live contradictory lives to some extent. One woman I know is to all intents and purposes a leading member of the sisterhood. She buys her daughter toy cars and blue clothes as she is adamant she won't grow up forced into gender stereotypes. She is active in women's groups and works hard to educate her friends about women's issues. Yet she is also the woman I think is most likely to try to sleep with my husband.

So what should sisterhood mean to a noughtie girl? Well it doesn't mean that we have to like all women. It doesn't mean that every woman is nice, or deserves our friendship. Women can be stupid, they can be vindictive and they can be shits. But sisterhood means judging people for how they act, not just because they are a woman, and applying the same standards to determining whether they are stupid, vindictive or shits as we would to men. It also means not judging other women by different standards to those we judge men by, not calling other women sluts and not slagging off the way they look or the choices they make.

And sisterhood also means that we are a movement that is greater than the sum of its parts, made up of women who may not agree with each other on every subject, but who have the same basic demands. So if you believe that women should have equality and that women should have choices you are part of the sisterhood, which is basically just another way of saying you are a woman who wants things to be better for all women.

Who are noughtie girls and what do we believe?

One of the reasons people deny being a feminist is not that they don't necessarily believe in the feminist cause, but because they worry that if they are asked whether they are a feminist and say yes, they will then be asked precisely what they mean by that, and struggle to come up with an answer

To be proud of being a feminist, and to persuade others that it's not a woolly position to take, all noughtie girls should work out a short definition of feminism that works for them, prefer-

ably something your nice but slightly thick mate would also understand if you explained it to them.

Every feminist's definition is different of course, as it should be – we're a collection of people with the same values, not one person. But here is mine:

Feminism is about believing that no one should be treated differently, judged differently, afforded different rights or forced into specific roles in society according to their sex.

You could change the last word from sex to race, class, sexuality or age if you wanted and have an equally good definition of not being racist, classist, homophobic or ageist.

So according to my definition, if you decide that caring roles are only women's work then you are not a feminist. If you think it's okay to pay men and women different amounts for doing the same job then you are not a feminist. If you think women should look and act in a certain way then you are not a feminist. And if you have different standards of behaviour for men and women then you are not a feminist.

Other people define feminism differently. I like this from Holly Combe on *The F Word* website:

Does your enjoyment of a book tend to be somewhat hampered if its references to the general reader or subject constantly default to the pronoun 'he'? If so, you're probably a feminist.

Introducing Feminism by Susan Alice Watkins, Marisa Rueda and Marta Rodriguez offers a more traditional definition:

Feminism is about challenging the division of labour in the world that puts men in charge of the public sphere – work, sports, wars, government – while women slave away unpaid in the home, carrying the whole burden of family life.

All three definitions show that we have moved on somewhat from basic demands for women such as the right to have an education, to vote or to work and to keep their own earnings.

Introducing Feminism also looks at the way the women's movement has typically been split into three groups: radical feminists, socialist feminists and liberal feminists. Radical feminists feel that the problem is patriarchy – living in a society in which the whole system is set up so that men have power over women. Socialist feminists see male domination as being mixed up with class exploitation, with the answer being to not just get more rights for women but to fight against capitalism as well. Liberal feminists focus more on equal rights legislation and pro-women reforms.

Noughtie girls do not split along these lines. Our demands are less based on political ideologies and more based on the experiences we have in our day-to-day lives. But if you wanted to categorise the types of women who make up noughtie girl feminists then you could probably split them into the following four categories:

1. *Louds and prouds* are the women who immediately acknowledge that they are feminist. They probably make public statements about their feminism such as

insisting on being called Ms, keeping their surname if they get married and being actively involved in specific causes. They are the first to challenge sexist assumptions and they are happy to let anyone who wants to know, and anyone who doesn't, that feminism is a key part of their outlook on life.

2. *Unintentional feminists* are people who don't necessarily even think about feminism, but they instinctively act in a way that feminists would hope someone would act. So they hold a door open whether for a man or a woman, they buy bar staff a drink not because they fancy them but because they have done a good job, they ask women what title they like rather than make an assumption, they never walk into a room of several women and one man and assume the man is in charge. Being an unintentional feminist is really just a synonym for good manners.
3. *Accidental feminists* don't necessarily set out to identify themselves as feminists. But then something happens to them – they are passed over for promotion at work in favour of a man, or they realise they are earning less than men doing the same job, or they don't feel safe walking home, or they get looked through by the salesperson when trying to buy a car, and this makes them angry. They might not think of themselves as political animals, but they do think of themselves as human beings of equal worth, and their own experience makes them stand up for equality.

4. *Feminisn'ts* are the women who, when talking about women's rights or their own beliefs, start a sentence with 'I'm not a feminist but ...' and then go on to state their beliefs, all of which tally with the causes of feminism. Like, 'I'm not a feminist but I do believe men and women doing the same job should be paid the same' or 'I'm not a feminist but I think men should do their share of the housework.' It is, it seems, the word they dislike not the concepts. I would rather feminisn'ts became feminists, but having a set of beliefs that are similar to those that we call feminism is good enough for me whatever they call it.

Whichever type you are – loud and proud, unintentional, accidental or feminisn't – noughtie girl feminism has room for you all. And though we may all come up with a different definition of what we mean by feminist, I am sure we'll all like this quotation from the author Rebecca West:

I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a door mat or a prostitute.

What about foreign women?

This book is concerned with the lives of women in the developed West. Compared to women elsewhere in the world, we have fantastically free lives, though this should not be used as

an argument to stop us getting complete equality in the West of course.

But as feminists is it essential that we are aware of and attempt to change the lot of women elsewhere in the world? Should there be a sense of international sisterhood? For example, should we be annoyed that in Swaziland married women are legal minors unless otherwise stated in their pre-nup, or that in the Democratic Republic of Congo women need their husband's permission to open a bank account, or that in Yemen a woman cannot leave the house without her husband's consent, or that in Saudi Arabia women cannot drive cars or ride bicycles, or that in Syria a man can ask the government to prevent his wife leaving the country.

Ruthie Samuel wrote about the lack of interest in international women's rights in an article for *The F Word* website. She argues that by focusing on the smaller issues at home women in the Western world ignore international sisterhood and laments the lack of attention we give women's rights abroad:

We're talking about fifty per cent of these populations being denied basic rights, abused, disdained and patronised and yet you wouldn't know it from the lack of attention paid to these issues by our media, society and politicians ... This is why UK feminists can't afford to get distracted by debating what we should be wearing and whether or not it matters if we choose to work part time. We need to focus on getting these [international] human rights abuses the attention they deserve.

Whilst I agree with Samuel that we need to condemn human rights abuses abroad loudly and clearly, she is wrong that we can't do this at the same time as fighting for the smaller issues in the UK. Part of the essence of being a noughtie girl is to question the world around us. But it's also to ensure that we question inequality in all its forms. Our battles in our society may not be as fundamental as the battles of women in some other countries around the world, but they are still battles that need fighting. We can apply the sisterhood on two levels – both the need to improve women's lives around the world at a human rights level, and the push for greater equality in our own lives, and while this book focuses on the second of these, it does not mean we should ignore the importance of the first.

A girl's best friends

Love it or hate it, and I loved it, the television show *Sex and the City* did help explain to the world just how important female friendships are to noughties women. For to understand noughtie girls properly you first have to understand the nature of female friendship.

Perhaps it's because we don't live in the same street as our parents any more, or because we stay single for longer, but our friends are the ones we rely on most of all. Our female friends are the people we turn to when we are worried about a job interview, the people whose shoulders we cry on when our hearts are broken, when we are excited about a date, when we

need wardrobe advice, when we need an abortion. They are the people we tell our secrets to.

Yet despite this, sometimes we don't even like our female friends. Certainly female friendship isn't the nurturing, stable, supportive bubble some people might think it looks like. Within friendship circles there are constant battles going on for the alpha female position. We are delighted when someone's relationship is going well, but sometimes we secretly prefer the joy of hearing about it when it has gone wrong. We bitch behind each other's backs, and can be incredibly two faced. Nevertheless, female friendship is the essence of most noughtie girls' lives because it is the most stable thing we have. Relationships may come and go, families may have other underlying tensions, colleagues may move on, but our friends will always take our calls and will always make sympathetic noises, even if they slag us off later without us knowing. In one sense our friends are the only certain thing in our uncertain world.

Such single sex friendship groups with such importance placed upon them are rather new, perhaps the consequence of settling down later and so not being monopolised by a partner or caught up in the drudgery of looking after the home and children too early. Certainly to have this kind of friendship you also need financial freedom so you can spend your own money on going out. And perhaps they are the consequence of marriage no longer being the most important thing in society, so that now we're no longer fighting each other for men, or competing to find a husband, we instead need people to go out and have fun

with. Though fun is not just equated with sex, essentially this means going to bars and clubs to look for sex, or at the very least male attention, and going out for meals and shopping together and examining where things went right or wrong. I am not saying that women are only concerned with finding a mate, and that we can't also talk about literature, the arts, sport etc, and there isn't the urgency there once was, but finding a mate is a huge part of female friendships. By the time we do find our partners, we're so reliant on our female friends that they are fixtures in our lives, plus we need them to talk to about our partner and to get reassurance that we are normal.

Perhaps this is why men often feel threatened by groups of female friends, resorting to calling female-only groups lesbians, or covens, as if we must be either sexually attracted to each other or witches to wish to spend time without the menfolk.

But perhaps the main reason we need female friends is because we can truly be ourselves with them. My friends and I have an all female book group. Occasionally men have wanted to join us but we have always said no. In part this is because we don't only talk about the book, but also about our love lives, our careers, our recent shopping expeditions. But it is also because with only one sex present, we no longer conform to gender stereotypes. We can be forceful in our opinions, or we can keep them to ourselves. We can admit we don't understand something without it being because we are a woman, and we can draw parallels with other books without being worried we are being too clever. By defining our club by our sex, we

lose the gender stereotypes once we are in it, and instead of being women, we are just people.

Crying she-wolf, or how to recognise discrimination

We need to be aware that things might happen to women that are unfair but are not necessarily a result of sexism. Yes sure, you could make the argument that living in a patriarchal society everything is the product of keeping men up and women down and is therefore inherently sexist, but beyond rising up and killing all men, what can we do?

We can't call everything that doesn't go right for women sexist. Is war anti-women? Well actually it's anti-human. Where there is a panel of three at a conference session and they are all men is that sexism? It might be, or it may be that in that instance the three most suitable speakers were men. A man gets given the job? Perhaps he was the best candidate. Similarly we mustn't assume that every time we see a cleaner and it is a woman, it is a case of discrimination. (It is also possible that the person in question is facing another form of discrimination – class, age, sexuality, disability or race for example.)

I think we're lucky that we're in a position now where institutional sexism at least is largely viewed as unacceptable. To maintain this, and to stop sexism wherever it occurs, we need to name and shame perpetrators and make a fuss where it is happening. But we must also be careful not to shoot ourselves in our collective foot, and call everything that isn't how we want it to be sexist, or we undermine our demands.

How I learnt to stop worrying and love Posh Spice

Despite the fact that sisterhood is about not judging other women, I bet most of us do it a lot of the time. How many of us can open a celebrity magazine and, looking at the women pictured, not judge them in some way? There are those that we think would be our best friends if only we lived next door to them. Then there are those that we think are too fat, too thin, too tarty or not talented. Therefore the following opinion may upset some of you but I am going to write it loudly and proudly. I like Victoria Beckham. I don't know her personally of course, I have no idea whether she is nice to her friends, encouraging to her children and loving to her husband, but as much as I can know about her through reading magazines and newspapers, I like.

So I was quite surprised when some years ago watching a football match on telly in a pub, the cameras panned round the stadium and settled on Victoria, watching the game in which David Beckham was playing. Nearly the whole pub, both men and women, booed at the sight of her.

As far as I'm concerned Victoria should be a feminist icon. As a Spice Girl and instrumental in the girl power phenomenon, she was part of one of the most successful female businesses in history. They made a fortune and even fired their male manager to run their own affairs. She both makes the most of her looks and doesn't hide away when she has a bout of acne. What's more, she even got her man to wear a skirt in public.

And what about the non-feminists, the people who find this kind of thing threatening? Well they should like her too, for in

other ways Victoria is the opposite of feminist thought. After all, she's always perfectly turned out, she changed her name upon marriage and more or less gave up her own career to produce three male heirs. Surely this is the image many men have of an ideal wife.

The novelist Fay Weldon calls herself a feminist yet she provides one of the worst examples of hatred towards Victoria and the rest of the Spice Girls, writing in the *Daily Mail* in December 2007 with her reaction to their reunion tour:

Forgive me for being blunt, but if a generation of our young womanhood has taken to binge drinking, Saturday night sluttishness and 'happy-slappings', I blame the Spice Girls ... Though some will no doubt disagree, and argue that the Spice Girls are simply a slice of bubblegum pop history, I believe the aspirations and attitudes of these five women go hand-in-hand with the decline of our culture over the past decade.

It turns out though, later on in her article, that what bothers Weldon most of all is that these girls not only grew up but they continued, post children, to work and to have their own identities.

Now they're on tour again, soaring above the world in their specially chartered Boeing 747, along with their crèches and their entourage. But this time around the image they project is obviously and entirely contrived, with all that youthful zest replaced by weary cynicism. The difference between those five

breezily-sexual, energetic, bouncy girls singing about Girl Power ten years back and the five sugar-coated, air-brushed, painfully-thin, desperate mums-on-tour is clear to see. Sexy strip-teases, I ask you! Of the five of them, two are married (one of those for the second time and not to the father of her baby), one is a single mother, and two have long-term partners.

It seems to me that the Spice Girls found the perfect answer to being working mothers, taking their children to the work crèche is something that most working parents would love to have the opportunity to do. Does Weldon really believe that women, once they have children or settle down with a partner, are not allowed to be sexy any more, to have their own interests and to juggle their home lives with their working lives? I doubt it.

No, what Weldon objects to isn't the Spice Girls, it's working mothers and women taking charge of their own sexiness and using it as they wish and to please themselves and other women (the majority of their audience), rather than for men. Weldon may call herself a feminist but in this article at least she's just a misogynist in feminist clothing, and so are the women who claim to dislike Victoria Beckham for being a disgrace to women.

My Cherie Amour

If I haven't put you off with my liking of Victoria Beckham, then I probably will with this defence of Cherie Blair. She's old news now but for the end of the nineties and first half of the

noughties the woman everybody loved to hate was Cherie Blair, the wife of the then Prime Minister Tony Blair. And though they hated Cherie Blair a lot, they hated her alter ego, Cherie Booth (her maiden name), the successful QC, even more.

What is it that made women hate Cherie so? I don't buy the argument that she was an inherently unlikable person, or that as the public grew more disenchanted with the Government they liked everyone associated with it less. I think the answer is much more misogynistic than that, and due to a perhaps unconscious dislike of clever women or women who have power.

With Cherie, people seemed to think she was pulling some of the strings when it came to the Prime Minister making decisions – people thought she had his ear. In fact, as a political animal herself, as an intelligent woman in Downing Street and as his wife, she probably did. This is in contrast to the public perception of Margaret Thatcher's husband Denis, or John Major's wife Norma, both of whom were seen but not heard.

People also hated the idea that Cherie wasn't a dumpy little housewife. She was in fact the woman who had it all. She had lots of kids, a high powered job and a successful husband. In the public's dislike of her there was a sense of 'you can't have it all matey'. Hence there were lots of stories about her not being a good lawyer, or not looking after her children properly or neglecting her image. Yet even when Cherie did sort out her image she received hatred for this. The fact was, Cherie was never going to be most people's ideal woman because their ideal woman is not someone with brains and a job.

This isn't always the case for high profile female partners of male politicians. Compare the press's treatment of Cherie with the reception Carla Bruni, married to Nicholas Sarkozy, President of France, got when she came to London in 2008 – there was an almost universal swooning. Yes, Bruni is a former supermodel, but she is also recognised as being immensely influential on her husband, yet no one accused her of wielding power with the same venom they did Cherie.

There seems to be a double standard here. If a beautiful woman with a career in modelling or something 'feminine' then shows that she has brains and goes into politics (or humanitarian work or film directing or other high profile but demanding roles) everyone says how amazing they are. If on the other hand an intelligent woman with a high profile career suddenly becomes elegant or beautiful, then they are derided for trying too hard and seen as being greedy. People explain this away in lots of ways. In Australia it is called tall poppy syndrome, the idea being that the tallest poppies are the ones that are cut down. In the UK we see it as bringing people back down to earth, or stopping them getting too big for their boots. But the truth is, it's misogyny.

Stealing men

Even when we don't want to be with someone, it's amazing how protective we can be over them. I have no desire whatsoever to be back with a man I dated in my early twenties, but I do rather hate the fact that he had a new partner and a child

before me. As a friend of mine said: 'It hurts when they do something before you, that's why it's called the human race.'

Part of being a noughtie girl is recognising that we are all responsible for our own actions. That's why when we talk about women trying to steal men away (or the other way round) we get it so wrong. We don't have ownership over people, therefore no one can be stolen. When somebody chooses to leave his or her partner for another, or has an affair, that person is totally complicit in this.

But although this may be fine in principle, it can be hard to accept in practice. Three women I know used to work in the same office. The first woman split up with her partner and found another. The second woman went out with the first partner of the first woman for a while. The third one went out with another man who later on ended up going out with the ex-partner of the first woman's new partner. Confused? We certainly were. But for a while at least it seemed like the perfect example of noughties relationships in which we try people out until we find the right one, and in which we accept our ex-partners have new lives to the point where we even accept that this may be with our friends.

But that's not often the case in real life. For though we all thought how very grown up everyone had been, how accepting we were of people having to make their own decisions and about relationships not always working out, how we were grown-up members of the sisterhood, we are all still extremely wary of the new partner of the first woman's first partner.

That's the thing about sisterhood – even for the most feminist of noughtie girls when it's your friends who are hurt the sisterhood takes a back seat and standing by your friends takes precedence.

Do feminists hate men?

There's a great picture by the feminist cartoonist Jacky Fleming which shows two women having a chat. One woman says:

... then he said why was I always trying to change him and I said probably because he's such an obnoxious thoughtless selfish overbearing self-righteous hypocritical arrogant loudmouthed misogynist bastard ...

Seeing cartoons such as this, and book titles such as *Are Men Necessary?* by Maureen Dowd, my edition of which is illustrated rather starkly with two walnuts placed to look like testicles on the front cover, it would be reasonable for men to ask 'do feminists hate men?' After all, even in children's musicals women are rather disparaging of their menfolk – in *Mary Poppins* (the film, not the stage version) Mrs Bank's sings *Sister Suffragette* and walks around with a 'Votes for Women' sash and proclaims:

*We're clearly soldiers in petticoats
And dauntless crusaders for woman's votes
Though we adore men individually
We agree that as a group they're rather stupid!*

Not so different from the quotation from Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons: 'I married beneath me – all women do.'

But of course noughtie girls don't hate men. Nor do we think all, or even most, men are misogynist or women haters. What feminists hate is the way society works so that women have fewer choices in their lives than men do. Men should hate their lack of choice too. Other than a very few men, how many really can afford to work flexibly to see more of their children? How many can enter typically female professions without encountering sexism? Think how quick people are to assume that male primary school teachers are gay.

But if men are also treated unfairly by society, shouldn't they have a movement of their own? I sometimes wonder what a modern day men's movement might look like, if men were to organise and campaign for equal rights.

A men's movement would definitely campaign for better paternity leave and the right to flexible working. They would look at access to children for men separated from their children's mothers. They might focus on illnesses that affect men – male infertility, prostate cancer etc. And perhaps there would be an attempt to stop jokes based on penis size. They would campaign to end advertising that showed men bulging out of their underpants, making ordinary men feel inadequate. They would appeal to women not to be scared when they are walking behind them on a dark street. Their posters might have slogans such as 'I'm a man not a rapist'. They would draw attention to the statistics

that show one in six men will be the victim of domestic violence during their lifetime.

A man's movement like this would not be a bad thing. Whether it is necessary however is debatable, for all those things are effectively achieved through the women's movement. We want men to take an active role in looking after their children and we want working practices to be such that men can take extended paternity leave just as women do. We don't want to assume that the main breadwinner in the family will automatically be the man. We want men to live long and healthy lives and to not feel inadequate. We don't want to feel afraid of men when we walk down the street. Therefore feminism is a men's movement as well as a women's movement, which is why all men should also consider themselves feminist.

The invisible woman

Some women I know tell me that they feel they have become invisible, not just to men but to women too. This is particularly the case with middle aged women – no longer deemed sexually attractive and no longer fertile, they are literally looked through by other people when trying to buy a drink, when applying for jobs or when just walking down the street.

Linda, a friend of mine in her forties, married with two children, says she feels invisible all the time.

I often think I am invisible. At my kids' school I am referred to either by my partner's name or as my children's mum. It's not

that I don't love being these things, but I am a person in my own right too.

Another woman says the same:

I am always seen as someone's partner or mum, or just another scruffy overweight lady standing at the school gates or scowling in the supermarket. I've gone from being called 'love' (which I really don't mind) to 'madam' which I hate. And worse, to doctor's receptionists, schoolteachers and even cold bloody callers, I'm referred to by my partner's surname when we're not even married.

Other women tell me of being in queues at restaurants waiting to be served and just being ignored as if they are not there. But it's not just men doing this that they complain about, but women too.

Perhaps one of the worst things about this invisibility is that women realise they have effectively always been invisible except for their desirability. What they thought was attention in their youth proves to be nothing much more than sexual interest or desire anyway. Women may have fooled themselves into thinking that it was their personality people liked, but the truth is interesting people rarely become boring and wits rarely lose their humour, so if the attention has tailed off then it is unlikely to be that. No, the sad truth is that the attention wasn't often based on the being interesting or being humorous in the first place.

Hopefully one of the good things that will come out of being a young feminist in the noughties will be that we have identities separate to that of our partners or our children and that the way we view ourselves is far less centred on beauty than in the past. Perhaps we need to have the confidence that noughtie girls have and that we have gained only through the feminist advances made by previous generations to be able to demand attention in our own right when we are middle aged women ourselves, something that will be helped by our financial independence that means businesses will not be able to afford to ignore us.

But in the meantime it seems to me that a vital part of the sisterhood is ensuring women are not ignored, either by men or by other women. This is easier said than done – after all, if you are under thirty-five and reading this ask yourself when you last spoke to a woman twenty years older than you who is not a relative or one of their friends, or a colleague or someone in the service industry?

At the moment, for women who are over a certain age, it seems like a case of the poem *I met a man who wasn't there*, though here I have changed the subject's sex:

*As I was walking up the stair,
I met a woman who wasn't there.
She wasn't there again today,
I wish that woman would go away.*

Middle aged women may not be seen as exciting, though some

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are of course. They may not be thought of as sexually attractive or even sexually active, though many are. They may not shout the loudest or spend the most. But if noughtie girls are to have any hope for visibility as they age, we must start noticing the middle aged women currently around us.