

WHY I'M a fEmINist

by Lauren Anderson

L'auteure nous dit pourquoi elle se définit comme féministe.

I have put her in my box, I have defined her by my means, and now she isn't free because of me."

—Brian McBay, "First Foundations"

It's Wednesday afternoon, and it's snowing outside, and I've got a final exam in less than 48 hours, but am I studying?

Of course not.

Unfortunately, I'm too angry to study. I'm sad to admit it, but my blood is still boiling over something that happened last evening while I was having dinner. I sat down next to my friend Nick, a computer studies major, who ended up spending much of the meal discussing the stupidity and future joblessness of the arts majors at the table. Although I'll admit it annoyed me to some degree, I've gotten somewhat used to ribbing from the science, computer studies, and engineering science students on campus here; you can't go to the University of Waterloo and major in English without expecting to be the butt of some jokes (my current personal favourite is actually quite clever: "What is the limit of a Bachelor of Science in math as your GPA approaches zero?... A Bachelor of Arts!"). Of course, us artsies have to pretend that we're annoyed or the mathies like Nick assume that we really are as stupid as they make us out to be, so I made an been oh-so-witty-and-clever comment (that I don't remember at this point) to which Nick responded in truly stellar form:

"You'd better watch it I'm not afraid to hit a girl!"

Of course, I responded to this by smiling cutely and saying, "Perhaps you should be afraid of this one. She would very likely hit you back."

And Nick, who must have been pulling a Cyrano de Bergerac with a neanderthal sixth-grade intellect, met my eyes, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Ooooh. A fighter. That's hot."

And so you can see why I'm angry. Or perhaps you can't. I can 100 percent understand if you can't. About this time last year, a friend of mine told me her sister, who was away obtaining a post-secondary education, was majoring in women's studies, and I had a good chuckle. "Why on earth would anyone want to major in women's studies?" I asked my friend, picturing a hairy-legged, bitchy, lesbian stereotype.

Since then, I have decided to do my minor in women's studies. Before I continue, though, it is important to note that I don't exactly fit the stereotype of the women's studies student I had imagined. I'd like to think I'm not too bitchy, I am not hairy-legged (well, maybe a little, but it is out of sheer laziness rather than on principle), and I am not a lesbian. I do, however, have a rather shocking confession to make, a little coming out of the closet to do.

I am a feminist.

Okay, so telling you wasn't quite as awful as I expected. I knew you'd understand. Now, you might be curious as to why I am what I said I am. I have never been the victim of rape, of sexual harassment, or abuse. I have never tried to have an illegal abortion, had my genitals mutilated, or been passed over for a job because I am a woman and not a man. I am not a feminist because it is "cool" or because I have been the victim of any form of any crimes against humanity. I am a feminist because of the 173 solved female homicides in 1999, of which more than two thirds of those were committed by men known to the women (Statistics Canada; Duffy). I am a feminist because in Britain, the United States, and Canada, it is legal for a rapist, defending himself, to keep the woman he raped on the witness stand for hours, and sometimes days, on end, forcing her to relive the rape in order to satisfy his questions. I am a feminist because there are women who die in order to satisfy the contradictory lusts of the man hungry for a 20-inch

waist and a 40-inch bust.

I am not a man-hater, and I would never be so hypocritical as to claim that all men are abusive, that all men are selfish, that all men are insensitive barbarians. I love the men in my life and I will never stop being grateful to them for the love and respect they have given to me.

Nonetheless, statistics are statistics.

Statistics Canada reports that an act of sexual violence or harassment occurs every 17 minutes in Canada. Ninety per cent of these acts are against women. It is reported that at least thirty per cent of women with disabilities in Canada are abused, sexually, physically, and often both (Duffy) and by the time a Canadian woman has called the police to report a domestic assault, she has, on average, already been assaulted 30 times (Beatty).

The United Nations reports that approximately 5,000 women world wide are killed each year by their husbands over dowry disputes. It is shocking to note that the most common method men use to kill their wives is to douse them with a flammable substance and light them on fire (Duffy). Statisticians in India fear that as many as 11,000 Indian brides over a three-year period at the beginning of the '90s were killed or forced to commit suicide by their husbands for not providing an adequate dowry. In Sierra Leone, where civil war is still raging, women have been raped by the thousands and many have been forced to become the "wife" or sexual partner of her rapist (Farrugia).

Women in nearly all developed countries have the right to vote, to hold public office, to have equal pay for equal work, to have a career or to own a business, and to choose to be childless, or unmarried, or unmarried with a child. Officially women are equal in the eyes of the law. And yet, women are oppressed, and there is no denying it. Ani DiFranco, in her song titled "Swing," described being a woman as being "weary as water in a faucet left dripping, with an



incessant sadness like a sad record skipping," and that, for some unexplainable reason, rang very true with me. There is a constant state of fear and sadness that women live in that can't be explained away. If a woman is not worried about being killed by her partner,

she is able to tell you everything that is wrong with her physical appearance without ever looking in the mirror.

Both men and women explain away women's oppression by saying that as North American women, we are free to make choices, to determine how we will act, and how we will dress, and who we will be and why. I agree with that, to some extent. I am fortunate to live in a country where I have the right to make choices about my future. I have chosen the place where I will take my post-secondary education, I have chosen my major, and I'm sure at some point I will be in the position to choose whether or not to be married, where I will have my career, and if and when I will become a mother. But at the same time, I have also chosen to kneel on the floor in the tiny bathroom of my place of employment, with my finger down my throat, trying to force myself to vomit the lunch I had just eaten. I have chosen to wear jeans tight enough that I had trouble leaning over to do up the platform shoes I would later have trouble walking in. I have chosen to call male friends to escort me home from classes, from parties, from work, because I was afraid of walking home on my own.

I made those decisions, and I won't pretend otherwise, but in retrospect it really makes me wonder why on earth people consider women to be free from oppression when we still make choices like that, because if we were honest with ourselves, we would admit that they are not really choices at all. If you consider them choices, be serious for a moment. Who would choose to wear away their oesophagus, the enamel of their teeth, and their dignity by inducing vomiting after eating? Who would choose to wear pants so tight as to inhibit regular movement,

eating, even breathing? Who would rather make the choice to inconvenience friends and be a nuisance than walk home, alone, after dark?

A study of high school students in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan showed that 17 per cent of female students control their weight by vomiting, and 12 per cent use diet aids, including diuretics, laxatives, and addictive diet pills (Duffy). The Walk Safe Program on the University of Waterloo campus says that the number of women calling to ask for an escort across campus was about double the number of men calling to request the same. The manager of a Smart Set store reports that women will continually force themselves into pants, dresses, and skirts that are too short, too tight, too small, simply because they "can't believe that they are a size nine now. They always used to be a five or a seven, so they buy a five or a seven even if it doesn't fit because they can't bear the thought of buying the next size up."

We all make choices.

A group of men at Queen's University answered an anti-rape "No Means No" by placing posters in the windows of their residence rooms that read "No Means Harder," "No Means Dyke," "No Means More Beer," and "No Means Tie Me Up" (Duffy). Fifty-one per cent of a random sample of university-aged males reported that there was "some likelihood" that they would rape a woman in a dating situation if they were assured they would not be punished (Duffy). More than half of Canadian high school students surveyed said that they believed that it was alright for a young man to force a young woman to have sexual intercourse with him if she had been a "tease" and had gotten him sexually aroused (Duffy).

I am not a feminist because I am too fat to wear the tight pants, or too ugly to find a man, or too much of a whining, militant activist to be anything but a "feminazi." I am a feminist because no means no, and it doesn't mean "dyke," "more beer," "harder," or "tie me up" and because a few people thought this was even a little bit funny. I am a feminist because "some likelihood" is some likelihood too much. I am a feminist because, like I said, we all make choices.

When I think about the comment that my friend Nick made last night at dinner, I'm not angry at him because he said what he did. Rather, I am angry at what a comment like that represents; namely, that we act the way we do because our gender roles define us, and that because boys will be boys, some girls will continue to live in fear of their husbands and fathers, take laxatives to control their weight, and live lives that are determined by the men they know. If it happens at all, it happens too much.

We all make choices. I chose to get angry over what happened at dinner yesterday evening. I may tolerate being the butt of arts faculty jokes at dinnertime, and even laugh a little because after all, they are pretty funny ... but I will not tolerate being the butt of gender jokes. And I will certainly not tolerate violence against women in any form. Why should anyone be expected to?

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