

This article was originally published in Sunday Independent

July / 2013

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FEMINISM

Written by Emily Hourican

Well, it's been quite a few weeks among our political institutions. You might even call it a perfect storm, except that it is more of a miserable downpour. There was 'Lapgate,' which made Dail Eireann look like the winding down of a country wedding – the bit after the bride and groom have gone to bed, along with all sensible folk, leaving a rather raucous atmosphere in which chances are seized and attentions pressed. Except of course it wasn't a country wedding. It was a difficult, emotional debate about the fundamental rights of women in this country. Running concurrently with Lapgate came the excessive focus on Lucinda Creighton's role in that debate. Where the Pro-Life movement might gaze at her with something close to adoration, as if she were a latter-day Joan of Arc, there were plenty of others sneering at her lack of decent political pragmatism. Underlying much of their commentary was the notion that somehow, the fact of her being female was responsible for her inability to put her scruples behind her and just get on with towing the party line. Overly emotional, you see. Then, just as the dust seemed to be settling, cut to the Upper House, our Seanad, where David Norris accused Fine Gael TD Regina Doherty of "talking through her fanny." Now, the comment is certainly vulgar, but then Norris is known for a certain kind of robust earthiness. Was it sexist though? Hard to know really, and much may depend on whose interpretation of the word 'fanny' we're going on – American or English? What is certain is that our political institutions are in quite some disarray, and that sexism – and therefore feminism – is very much on the agenda all of a sudden.

Each one of these incidents provoked cries of 'shame! Sexism!', often from the kinds of people who will not previously have used that word, maybe finding it a bit too shouty and placard-waving for their liking. These will be the sorts of people who steered clear of the students' union in college, who never considered sociology or gender studies as course options, who didn't burn with indignation on reading ***The Female Eunich***; in fact who probably didn't read it at all.

So why are they suddenly forming these unaccustomed words – 'sexism', 'feminism' – and giving voice to them? Well, frankly, because these matters are beginning to intrude on their lives – on all our lives – in a way that finally demands a response. 'Everyday sexism' has its very own hash-tag these days, a twitter account that anyone can add too. Examples of the

random, casual, relentless onslaught – the comments, attitudes, squeezes, approaches – that all women have learned to put up with, even to expect. This isn't the sort of stuff you'd take to an employment tribunal, or work up a discrimination case over. This is the small stuff. Here are a couple of the most recent examples: "I sd 'can I show u my ticket as it won't work in the barrier?' Ticket man sd 'is there anything else you'd like 2 show me?'" ... "teenaged boy at girls' soccer game, re. injured player: 'she's down, she just got her period for the first time'" ... "Had a lovely conversation about the lack of women's Tour De France with my dad today. He said it would consist of shopping." ... "Today four guys catcalled me. I ignored them and they shouted 'look at me, bitch!' Women shouldn't fear this everyday."

You see, it's nothing really; just a few jokes and vulgar remarks, a bit of crude flirting. No big deal. Until you keep looking, and you see the sheer quantity of it; 29,066 tweets, 78,286 followers, and steadily growing.

Lapgate, Fanny-gate, Lucinda-gate, these are, in a way, the flotsam, the wreckage that has floated to the top, bobbing around for all to see. With them belongs David Cameron saying 'calm down, dear' to shadow Treasury secretary Angela Eagle, and a menu at a political fundraiser (ie, yes, with proper, grown-up people) in Australia recently offering a dish delightfully described as: "Julia Gillard Kentucky fried quail – small breasts, huge thighs and a big red box..." Julia Gillard being the female prime minister of Australia. Yes, the **prime minister**. That's how far the rot goes. Even Cheryl Sandberg admitting in *Lean In* that she got 'Most Likely To Succeed' taken off her Yearbook entry, because she was afraid it would mean she didn't get a date for the Prom. There is much more of this in every walk of life. So much so that sometimes **Mad Men** starts to look like astute social commentary rather than retro drama. However, its very visibility is its undoing. We can all get a good, hard look at this kind of everyday sexism, and cry foul.

Worse again is what lurks in the mud at the bottom of the pool. My goddaughter spends half an hour every morning doing her make-up. That is as long as I would spend prepping for a once-a-year gala night out. She's 13, and getting ready to go to school. It's a co-ed school in North Dublin, and no, she is not some kind of make-up addicted marginal. They all do it. "Only a very small number of girls would usually come in without make up," she tells me. "The pressure of everyone looking at you, the need to feel confident and not embarrassed, is what makes us do it." Foundation, blusher, eye-shadow, mascara, lip-gloss; with repeat-applications in the loos at break and lunch.

We all know that pressure, of course, but did we know it at 13? Hell no. This goddaughter hasn't reached the wax-everything, orange-fake-tan, tiny-bandage-dress, hooker-heels stage yet, but she can't be more than a year or so away. We may laugh when we see them tottering into Wesley on a Friday night, the girls with preposterous shoes, crotch-skimming dresses and backcombed hair, but really it isn't funny. These are kids, so why do they feel the need to dress like South American transvestites? They are so highly sexualised at such a young age, that actually 'doing it' or not 'doing it', isn't really the point. It's the awareness of sex as something they have to negotiate that is so depressing.

The porn industry has inched its way into all of our lives – Playboy t-shirts for six-year-olds – and is now so mainstream that these girls are waxing their pubic hair off almost before they have any, and having show-offy sex with boys who are probably secretly as freaked out by the whole thing as they are, but may also be deciding whether or not to film their encounter on a camera-phone. Instead of the old-style fumble in the dark, teenage sex now involves some serious shaping and 52 positions in a one-night stand. The images, if uploaded, will join the vast repository of Sexy-And-I-Know-It photos and videos of young girls all over the internet; the kind of thing that makes it look like a giant mood board for an R Kelly video. And whatever about the sex itself, that kind of exposure certainly ruins lives.

Now, disturbing as I may find this, it must be said that for younger women, this is their world, and they are equipped to cope with it. They are far less daunted by it than we the on-lookers are. Just as primitive man, looking at our sophisticated society would wonder how any of us can function and process all the data, so we look at them and think, 'eugh, how on earth can they cope with the **pressure**?' But the teenage girls have adapted to their world. They don't find it impossible, but there are signs that they do find it increasingly infuriating.

"More and more young women come to us and share their stories of everyday sexism," says 30-year-old Maureen Considine, who runs Cork Feminista, set up in 2010, with monthly meetings and fund-raising, awareness-raising events, such as the recent V-Day Cork, part of the international V-Day movement set up by Eve Ensler. "What drives them to our door is the experience of inappropriate touching, groping in pubs or comments – although we found very quickly that the harassment is mostly physical, rather than verbal. Street harassment has become a huge thing. So these women come to us and say, 'enough is enough!' Those who are career-minded come because they are very aware of inequality in the workplace, and those who have young daughters are very worried about the future for women." Nearly all are both inspired and dismayed by on-line material; "feminist bloggers, activist videos, online feminist magazines offer great encouragement, but then there is the very severe harassment

that women suffer, whether it's rape jokes on Facebook, sexist insults in chat rooms or within the gaming community," explains Maureen. "There is something about the anonymity of the internet, and the fact that those making the vicious comments can do so from the safety of their own rooms that allows them to go so much farther than they ever would face-to-face."

The pay-gaps, glass ceilings, discrimination and gender inequality are all still there, but, as often happens with the big stuff, they have almost become part of the wallpaper. Just background noise really. It takes something new, often something small but sharp, to provoke the kind of tipping-point that I think we are now seeing. Like this – a friend who works for a media company, attending a client meeting with her boss when she was eight months pregnant recently. "It's a pity that for our first meeting with this client, you have to look like that," he said, staring at her bump.

I mean, sigh... it's the kind of thing that could make you want to just lie down and pull the covers over your head. Or it could make you decide to take radical action, and be A Feminist. And you know what? That word, feminism, is having something of a renaissance, 'a moment' as they say in fashion. Not all young women, of course, but the brave ones, the smart ones, the angry ones, are starting to call themselves feminist again, choosing a label that has been languishing in the shadows. And where they lead, others just might follow.

Roisin Agneau, 24, is an actor and writer who has always called herself a feminist; "my mother was always an activist and brought me up like that. But in school and college I felt I had to restrain myself, not speak up vociferously," she says, "because I would be made fun of for having opinions that were unfashionable. Being earnest and having political opinions was uncool, whatever they were. You had to do irony, keep it light. Why is it that we can't engage with feminism in a serious way?" she asks, pointing out, rightly, that "you don't find black people stepping away from civil rights and making it a joke." For Roisin, like so many others, the biggest issue is "casual sexism. The little things that are hard to place and hard to identify. Jokes, tiny comments, attitudes; things that its hard to call without being told 'oh lighten up'."

24-year-old Laura Condell first heard the word in her sociology course, although she was raised to be a feminist. "I brought up in a house full of girls, but the F-word was never used. It wasn't until I went to college that I heard it. I came home to my mother and said 'you're a feminist'; to which she said indignantly, 'I am not!' because it had such negative connotations." For Laura, the New Feminism is easy and inclusive. "There are these accusations that 'feminism' is for privileged white women; I'm mixed-race, gay, from a low-

income family and have depression, and I don't feel excluded. There is space for it to mean different things to different people, men too."

Then there's Maggie Armstrong, 29, who calls herself both a feminist and "a boringly girly girl." By which she means "I have never mended a bicycle puncture, never read instructions, I never even wanted a 'career', as such because the word smacks of women trying to prove themselves." Which might make the more militant type of feminist fall backwards off a chair, but these are complexities that Maggie is perfectly content with; "if you call yourself a feminist, you need to be for all kinds of social justice," she tells me sternly. "If you are aware of the oppression of women, you also need to be aware of social oppression and racial oppression. The problem with Cheryl Sandberg isn't that she isn't 'feminist' enough, it is that she is so convinced by the need for female ambition within capitalism, which has been so cruel to so many." For Maggie, feminism begins at home. That's right, with women, not men. "A lot of women seem to be very averse to liberating themselves from what men want, or think they want. It's not all about male sexism. Women can have an appalling opinion of themselves. We are generally intensely focussed on the way we look, and passive, intellectually and around our importance in the world." So has she begun to see that changing? "Too slowly. Not many of my friends would call themselves feminists but I think that's the fault with the word and it being an 'ism', an academic discipline; also that it sounds like an anti-male, anti feminine slogan."

She's right of course. For years we shied away from the actual word, whatever about the concept. It seemed that, if we used the word, we would have to sign up to a limiting set of principles: no leg shaving, no liking men, no reading Jilly Cooper, no wearing pretty dresses, no making silly jokes. It felt like a club with a set of rather stern rules. And some very intimidating icons: Germaine Greer, Andrea Dworkin, even Naomi Wolfe. And hey, why would we even bother, given that the world was going right for us – equal pay, the right to work after marriage, contraception, a brave new world of total equality... But the vision stalled, the rights we gained just didn't look as good close up as they had seemed when shimmering in the distance. They were incomplete, flawed, often bringing new problems along with apparent solutions. And then along came a new generation, and snuck in by the backdoor, carrying cute handbags and cocktail glasses. This was The New Feminism, inspired by Caitlin Moran, Lena Denham and Kelly Oxford. Nobody talked about paradigms or hegemony. Instead they talked about pants and made jokes: "If you can name five Kardashians but can't name five countries in Asia, stick a knife in an electrical socket," (thanks, KO). And they were all the more powerful because of it. Suddenly, feminism was fun. And effective; it took just a week for campaigners against rape jokes and general

misogyny on Facebook to stir up hundreds of thousands of supporters, and force an apology and promise to ‘do better’ from the social networking site.

This was a gang we wanted to belong to. We all read ***How To Be A Woman*** and cheered at the idea of ***Spare Rib*** being relaunched. We laughed at actress Jennifer Lawrence at this year’s Oscars – falling down, cracking sarcastic jokes, admitting to being a bit pissed – and felt that she was on our wavelength, that we all got the same kind of thing about how you could be funny and silly and sarcastic, but still be down with the movement. Then Zooey Deschanel actually used the F-word in a recent interview with the kind of magazine that normally confines itself to marvelling at how celebrities eat real food; actually, both F-words – “I want to be a f**king feminist and wear a f**king Peter Pan collar. So f**king what?” – and we all knew we were really onto something. Not since the early days in this country, when fantastic women like June Levine, Nell McCafferty, Anne Harris, Nuala O’Faolain, Mary Holland, Christina Murphy, Claire Boylan, Rosita Sweetman and Maeve Binchy has there been such camaraderie and ***joie de vivre*** allied to such purpose.

The tenants of New Feminism are wonderfully broad – banding together with other women and men to formally challenge inequality. Reading up on ideas and sharing these with your friends. Choosing to wear no make-up to school or not to have sex with someone. Boycotting brands that advertise alongside rape jokes on Facebook. Voting for women as our public representatives and not always talking about the way they look. Telling our daughters and sisters that it’s ok to dress like tranny hookers if they really want, but they definitely don’t have to behave like them. Believing that the kind of causal sexism we grew up with just isn’t good enough for the next generation.

But, it can look confusing, on the basis that too broad a church is no church, and that standing for everything means standing for nothing. It’s the dilemma around Rihanna and Beyonce; are they icons of new feminism, or actually Trojan horses? See how tricky that one is? When Charles Saatchi put his hands around Nigella’s throat and some old-school activists began immediately clamouring that she leave him, was that supportive, or were they a bit too quick to try and shoehorn her into the role of victim? Was Nigella a woman who had endured a nasty incident and deserved the dignity of being left alone, or must she become a figurehead for domestic abuse, compelled to act for all sufferers? And did it matter how she might feel about that?

These are the enduring problems of feminism – who is it for? What are the battles? If you aren’t with us, are you against us? – and they clearly haven’t gone away. Maybe they can’t,

maybe they are just an inevitable part of something that tries to speak for all women, on all topics? But the strength of the New Feminism lies in the fact that it is prepared for breadth, prepared to make jokes as well as discuss gender quotas, and make way for all who wish to join it, regardless of what they had for lunch or whether they have read Germaine Greer. Suddenly, saying 'I'm a feminist' is the beginning of a lively conversation rather than a strident or shamefaced admission.

Let the dinosaurs in the Dail lumber along in their same old ruts. As usual, the outside world is changing faster than they can imagine. Inspired by exuberance as much as irritation, delivered through jokes, online fanzines, and in sassy 140-character bites, results-driven rather than academically-preoccupied, the New Feminism is irreverent, hilarious, effective. Not so much a wave as an entire incoming tide.

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