

Victorian Women's Trust – Monica Dux:

As there's a musical theme today, I thought I'd begin with a song – a little gem I recently re-discovered on an old cassette tape I used to exercise to. However, since even my two year old son covers his ears and says "no mummy! no!" when I sing, I decided it might be kinder to just read the lyrics instead.

Wonder Woman, Wonder Woman.
All the world's waiting for you,
and the power you possess.

In your satin tights,
Fighting for your rights
And the old Red, White and Blue.

Wonder Woman, Wonder Woman.
Now the world is ready for you,
and the wonders you can do.

Make a hawk a dove,
Stop a war with love,
Make a liar tell the truth.

Wonder Woman,
Get us out from under, Wonder Woman. [*I'm a bit challenged by that line*]

Wonder Woman, Wonder Woman.
You're a wonder, Wonder Woman.

Many of you will remember that as the theme song from a 1970s television show of the same name, in which an Amazon princess masquerades by day as a bespectacled receptionist, while on her time off she fights Nazis, Aliens and the like in her patriotic underwear, with only a golden lasso and a pair of bullet proof bracelets.

But oddly, when I put the Wonder Woman song back on after all those years I was unable to listen to it. And I found myself wondering why.

A lot of you might be thinking that I'd obviously just developed some musical taste. But sadly that's not the case. Compared with some of the stuff I still groove along to, Wonder Woman is like a Stephen Sondheim number.

So what was the problem?

At first I thought maybe the song had too much baggage. The guy who'd originally made me the Wonder Woman tape was a big burly bloke who I worked with as a kitchen hand. He once told me that, even though I was a feminist, he didn't see me as the hairy, ball-breaking kind.

I think that was his attempt at a compliment.

Similarly, I think he was trying to flatter my feminist sensibilities by starting the tape with the Wonder Woman song – he was telling me that *I* was a wonder woman; strong, powerful and yet still attractive, only breaking balls when absolutely necessary, in my fight for justice.

Needless to say, Mr Burly Bloke was trying very hard to get into my satin tights, a move which I resisted easily enough without recourse to my lasso. But it wasn't my mixed memories of him (and his unique body odour) that resulted in me fast forwarding quickly past the stirring wonder that is the Wonder Woman song.

While the song was written in the 1970s, for me it resonated in a very 1990s sort of way, and I think that's partly what made me squirm. You see, the 1990s was when I first discovered feminism. But, like many of my contemporaries, I came out of that decade suffering a certain amount of wonder woman fatigue.

Me and my 90s generation grew up in an era when a lot of the big feminist battles for structural reform had already been won – or so it seemed. We didn't remember a time when a woman was sacked from the public service if she got married, when she could then be legally raped by her husband, when abortions were illicit backyard affairs. As a result, my generation's feminist heroes weren't usually real women like Vida Goldstein; they weren't activists or revolutionaries. They were more like Wonder Woman – colourful characters defined by their daring attitudes and their bold individualism.

Some were pop stars, such as Courtney Love, The Spice Girls or Madonna, although often they were literally super heroes and comic book characters, like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. As you can judge from that list of icons, the 90s was a time when feminism went mainstream. Which was all very egalitarian and democratic, but it also meant that it could easily be co-opted by canny marketers and used to sell everything from make-up and chocolate bars to pubic hair removal cream.

In the media, feminism was often reduced to a bunch of easy listening sound-bites about female empowerment, stuff that sounded more like self-help jargon than statements of real political intent. Catch cries like "girl power" "go girl", "super mum" and yes, "wonder woman", were flying around, willy nilly. Similarly, the phrase "having it all" was picked up as a crude reduction of what feminists had supposedly fought for.

It's arguable that, in the wake of all this, society suffered an empowerment overload. It sometimes seems that, as the satirical newspaper *The Onion* once quipped: "Women now empowered by everything a woman does". As a result, "Wonder Woman" style catch phrases are now often used as backhanders, implying that feminism has fed women false dreams and impossible expectations. Feminism told us that we could all be wonder women; that we could do anything, be anything, and have everything. But instead it left us confused, overworked, and unfulfilled.

Or so we are often told.

Poster-girls for this feminism-gone-wrong story are all around us: the thirty-something career woman who'll miss out on having babies because feminism told her she could have it all; the exhausted mother unable to cope with juggling the competing demands of career and family; the recreational pole-dancer who says she's doing it in the name of 'empowerment', when we all know that she's really doing it for her boyfriend. They're all supposedly victims of Big Bad Feminism.

Rather than citing the on-going problems faced by women as evidence that feminism is still necessary, the scriptwriters for this feminism-gone-wrong story use them to expound another version of contemporary life: one in which feminists have had their chance and have failed.

Now, I don't think these arguments are silly; I think they're completely perverse. To blame feminism for the fact that mothers and working women are under-supported (for example) is a case of not just shooting the messenger, but drawing and quartering her as well.

The Great Feminist Denial is an attempt to tackle and debunk this unjustified vilification of feminism. As a starting point for our book my co-author Zora Simic and I surveyed hundreds of women to garner their thoughts on feminism – to see what the woman on the street thought about it all. Predictably, we heard an enormous variety of opinion. Some women thought feminism was over, that they didn't need it anymore. Others thought it was more important than ever. Most women agreed that their lives were better as a result of feminism, although a good many also expressed what you might call empowerment fatigue.

Reading through their confidential, often anonymous responses, I got the impression that very few of our respondents *felt* like wonder women. Even so, hardly any of them blamed feminism for the difficulties in their lives. As women so often do, they usually just blamed themselves. More than one woman spoke of the choices she'd made, and how the problems in her life could be traced back to those choices.

I think it's this comment that finally brings us to the real reason why I was so uncomfortable with that song. It's not that the Wonder Woman intimidates me or

anyone else with her “having it all” lifestyle. Nor is it that she’s a reminder of false dreams that feminism has supposedly peddled us.

I think that the trouble with Wonder Woman, her Super Mum sister and their Go Girl attitude is that they are a celebration of the super individual, able to single handedly right the wrongs of the world. And I wonder if that’s the way forward for feminism. I wonder whether we ought to get back to something more old-fashioned and, dare I say it, inclusive.

So, after that long exposition of why the Wonder Woman song should not be added to your i-pod play list, here’s another song, one that I don’t think has aged at all, and is still guaranteed to put goose bumps on even the most sober feminist.

I am woman, hear me roar
In numbers too big to ignore
And I know too much to go back an' pretend
'cause I've heard it all before
And I've been down there on the floor
No one's ever gonna keep me down again...

Helen Reddy’s song is not about sloganeering, or about pop heroes. Although it begins with an “I” there’s no doubt that it’s a collective roar she’s invoking. And that’s the key – not only does the song speak of pain, of growing, of paying a price for being a woman, it also speaks of community. It’s not about a superwoman, it’s about the everywoman, and she’s an everywoman with a historical memory - she comes with the historical baggage of years of collective struggle, and with sisters who share that sense of struggle.

Of course, that song also came from the 1970s, and we live in a very different world. A world where individualism and personal empowerment are celebrated, and the collective is often ignored. This is not the fault of feminism, or even of those who co-opted feminist messages. It’s bigger than that - a symptom of a broad cultural shift, of the neo-liberalism that has swamped our public life over the last 10 years.

"Choice" is the buzzword in this world. And contemporary women are depicted as having more choices than ever before. Aren’t we lucky! Of course the truth is more complex. “Choice” implies a smorgasbord of options, yet the reality is that few women are able to access everything that’s on the menu. When we look at women’s "choices" critically and examine the circumstances under which most important decisions are made – decisions about work or parenting, for example – we see that women are still acting under various kinds of duress and constraint, particularly as economic circumstances tighten so relentlessly.

And when things don't work out for individual women in our brave new world, they are told that they have only themselves to blame. After all, they made their choices, and now they have to live with them.

It sometimes seems we've lost a way of talking about the state of feminism without falling into the simplistic rhetoric of individualism and choice. But an alternative vocabulary does exist – the language of rights and entitlements. If you swap the language of choice for that of rights, you get a very different outcome, one that puts the onus for righting wrongs onto the community as a whole, rather than on individual women who must sink or swim, with only themselves to blame if they fail.

Yet it's rare to hear talk of "rights" these days – and even when it does slip through it rarely comes to much. Just look at the Maternity leave issue – as one of only two OECD countries without a paid scheme, and with political change in Australia becoming a reality, it seemed that we might finally make some progress in entrenching this minimal right. And what happened? The scheme looks like being one of the first things to be dumped now that economic times have gotten hard.

So, women will be once again be left making tough so-called "choices" about work versus child rearing, career versus family. Most of them will make these "choices" with a financial gun to their heads, with little community support. And if things come out badly they'll just blame themselves.

So what can we all do to focus things back in a more Helen Reddy-esque direction? What is it that links us with the activists of the 1970s and before them, the suffragettes from a century ago? I'd like to suggest that it's something I'll call "feminist moments".

I'm talking about the sort of experiences that shock you out of your day to day complacency, and remind you of just how unfair and unequal our world still is for women. Of course they can be big, life changing injustices, but more often than not they are small things, petty and seemingly unimportant. That's why I call them "moments".

For my part, I've had hundreds, perhaps even thousands of them in my life, although some stand out as more memorable than others.

A family Christmas when I was 7; a relative gave my brothers some fantastic matchbox cars, while my present was a couple of pairs of pink cotton briefs. When I tried to join in with my brothers' car game, I was told "go play with your underwear."

As a teenager, my best friend and I walking down George Street in Sydney as the workers on a construction site spilled out and we were crushed among them, all of them leering, whistling, and touching us.

In my 20s, when I saw the full force of the “boys club” in action, as I tried to get redress over a workplace sexual harassment incident. It wasn’t so much the incident that stayed with me, but the response of my male superiors— all good, progressive leftie types — who were meant to help me but who actually pressured me to just shut up and take it.

Now, I’ve had a fortunate life, privileged in many ways. The things I’m talking about aren’t unusual — they’re part of everyday life for everyday women. There are many, many women out there who suffer far greater injustice, far more profound discrimination.

But even looking at the little moments in my life, and in all of your lives too, we can see the symptoms of a world where we are still not full members of club humanity. Whether they’re profound or mundane, they are the symptoms of a broad, ongoing gender inequality.

The moments I’m talking about usually start off as an individual experience, private, and sometimes quite lonely. We might feel a combination of shame, humiliation, anger, sometimes just plain incredulity. Yet they are actually about something very public. They are symptoms of systemic discrimination, and that’s something all women share.

We often let these moments fall by the wayside, as we repress and forget them. But the key to getting something positive and constructive out of them lies in universalizing them, collectivizing the experience. They need to be projected out, onto something beyond yourself. Something that helps you make sense of them and stops you from blaming yourself. And that something is feminism.

Unless women are equipped to think of them in feminist terms, unless you have the language to pin them on, they will come to nothing. But understood in the right way these moments keep us on our toes, remind us of the ongoing need for feminism.

These things aren’t fair, and it’s right that we should stand up and say so. We should complain, we should arc up, we should whinge. No, we didn’t *choose* to be patronized, or touched up; and we didn’t choose to go without maternity leave, and equal pay and we didn’t choose work places that fail to accommodate us, and no one chose to be beaten or even murdered in their own home, by a partner who professed to love them.

I learnt a big lesson while researching my book. I was surprised at how often women were hesitant to share their thoughts on women’s issues with me. They were often apologetic when they did, as if they might get it wrong. Sometimes, I got the feeling that they were scared I would dismiss or criticize their ideas. I found the easiest way to talk to women who had not thought much about feminism was to ask them about their own personal moments, the moments when they knew they were being treated unjustly, simply because they were a woman. It was this question that always opened up a

conversation, as if it was a safe space that we could share, no matter what our different views or ideas were.

It was that simple question that revealed the collective glue that binds all women, regardless of their circumstances. If Vida Goldstein were alive today she would see many things in our world that she wouldn't recognize. But I think we would be able to share stories of our "feminist moments" with her, and I think she would understand them. She would understand the raw sting of injustice that we still feel.

A hundred years after women in Victoria secured the vote we need to keep reminding ourselves that the feminist revolution is still only half won. The problems women continue to face are not the fault of feminism, or of individual women – they are the result of unfinished business, of a society that has grudgingly allowed women new roles and new responsibilities without even agreeing to properly support and accommodate our old ones.

Heroes are important in taking that struggle forward, and women like Vida Goldstein deserve to be remembered and celebrated for the leadership and courage that they showed. She really was a wonder woman, I guess.

But I think we owe the biggest debt to all the ordinary women who came before us, women who lived lives that were harder than they needed to be, but who kept living those lives anyway; women who felt humiliation and confusion in the face of the sexism and bigotry they encountered, and yet turned that private pain into collective strength.

That's why the Monster petition of 1891 is such a startling, potent symbol – it was a collective effort, collecting 30 000 signatures in only six weeks, at a time before the internet or other electronic communications, a tribute to simple hard work and dedication.

The women who achieved that weren't wonder women. They were women just like all of you here today. Yet they're the ones who really won the battles; they're the ones who paid the price and they're the real heroes.

Monica Dux
November 2008.
