

Dangerous and Persuasive Women
Celebrating a Centenary of Suffrage in Victoria 1908–2008
Keeping the Faith

Speech by Kathleen Maltzahn
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Today, as we celebrate one hundred years of white women's suffrage in Victoria, I'd like to start with a quote which is a favourite of mine, by US writer, poet, and lesbian (and yes, she was one of the hairy-legged variety), Adrienne Rich.

I often use this quote when I'm talking about women who have been trafficked or done prostitution. I use this quote when I talk about lesbians and gay men. Today, I'd like to use this quote to talk about feminism and feminists.

Adrienne Rich had this to say:

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you ... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium [imbalance], as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.

We all know what it is like to hear the world described as if feminism and feminists aren't in it. Google the words 'is feminism dead' and you'll get two and a half million results. We know what Rich means when she says 'it takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void', but we live in a time, I suspect, where we don't always feel confident in our collective understanding, where we doubt our capacity to stand together to resist being erased. We're scared not just that the world is being described as if feminism doesn't exist, but that it doesn't; that maybe the void when we look in the mirror is true, and feminism is withering and dying.

(I'm going to talk in a minute about why I think feminism is in safe hands, but in case my arguments don't convince you, let me add, by way of reassurance, that if you google 'is capitalism dead' you get over four and a half million results, so I don't think we should be too worried. If feminism is half as hardy as capitalism we're pretty safe, I think.)

It's partly in that context, then, I imagine, that the Victorian Women's Trust has chosen 'Keeping the Faith' as its theme for today. It reads to me a little like a call to arms, a call to the faithful, to the true believers. It's also a reminder of those who went before us. It's a familiar theme in feminism, even before, as the quote I'm about to read shows, feminism was even a commonly used word.

I don't know when this statement was made, but it's from Abigail Scott Duniwan, who lived between 1834-1915 and who was a US suffrage organiser. She said:

The young women of today, free to study, to speak, to write, to choose their occupation, should remember that every inch of this freedom was bought for them at a great price. It is for them to show their gratitude by helping onward the reforms of their own times, by spreading the light of freedom and of truth still wider. The debt that each generation owes to the past it must pay to the future.

It reminds me of any number of modern day feminists calling on younger women to do the right thing, to repay their debt, to keep the faith. The work of our foremothers is in jeopardy, they suggest, we need to act. Young women need to honour and protect the work of those who went before them; they need to repay our debt to them; we mustn't shirk our obligation. Feminism, the message seems to be, needs us.

I'm here to argue that we don't need to keep the faith. I'm here to argue that feminism doesn't need us. I'm here to say, unequivocally, that we need feminism. They are, I'd argue, very different things.

In doing this, I'd like to explore two areas.

For the first, I'd like to read you part of a draft statement. As some of you may know, on the 28th of August, in a landmark decision, the High Court found that Fitzroy brothel owner Wei Tang was guilty of five counts of using and five counts of possessing a slave.

On the 14th of November 2008, Project Respect, a women's organisation I'm involved with, ran a seminar with nine Thai and Chinese women who had been trafficked to Australia for prostitution. Hui Zhou, a fabulous young woman from the Fitzroy Legal Centre outlined for the women the key findings in the High Court judgement on the Queen v. Tang. The next day, Project Respect had a weekend away for women in the sex industry, where the women who attended the seminar the previous day developed a shared statement. This version is a draft – we're just checking it with the women, but I wanted to share some parts of it with you. Because of this, I should say, if there are any journalists here, this is not for reporting – we'll have a final version in a few days, but I didn't want miss this opportunity of sharing part of what I think is a very important statement.

We make this statement in response to the 28 August 2008 High Court decision on the Queen v. Tang. We had the same experience as the women in the Wei Tang case.

What happened to us was a nightmare. We can never forget. It comes back to us in dreams. This will affect us til we die. It has changed us.

We were treated very badly. We worked from 11am to 3 or 4 am. We slept only three or four hours a night. Sometimes some of us worked for 24 hours. For four or five months, all we did was prostitution. Even when we had our period, we had to work. Sometimes we worked until we couldn't walk. We had to work until we were very very sick and the customers refused to take us. Only then were we allowed to rest, for one day.

Some owners were not so cruel, but even when they were friendly, they still treated us as slaves.

We were made to feel like animals. Customers were violent. Some of the customers were crazy. They treated us like animals. We were sexually abused, we were dragged, we were hit. Some of us were given drugs so we could work all the time. Some of the women we know have become drug addicts and now they have to keep doing prostitution to pay for drugs.

It was like we were in jail – we had no free time, we couldn't go anywhere, we never had freedom. The traffickers treated us as slaves. We didn't have anywhere to go.

It felt like we survived and died at the same time. We had to keep doing what the traffickers said, for ourselves, and for the people we loved. The traffickers threatened us – we were scared they would hurt us and our families. Some of us thought we could be killed. We blamed ourselves for what happened, because we had wanted to come to Australia.

This changed our lives.

...

Before this High Court decision, we felt the public didn't know what happened to women like us and that they would judge us, and we felt that people like us didn't deserve anything better.

But just because we have been prostitutes doesn't mean we are not good people – we had no choice. We did this to survive.

Even if women chose to do prostitution, they shouldn't be treated this way.

When we were told about the High Court decision, we felt glad. We felt relieved, we felt released. Now we have walked out from the darkness. We can again have a good life, like we did before we came to Australia. We can start a new life now.

We feel now that people believe we are real and understand what we have been through. We feel that the High Court Justices respect and understand us. Because of what happened to us, we didn't trust people. Now it seems there are good people in the world. People outside have believed what happened to us. We feel more valuable.

If women can be bought and sold, if women can be treated so badly that the law recognises that they were made slaves, then I think we need feminism.

I'll return to this in a minute, but for now, I'd like to go to the second area I wanted to explore, in this question about whether we need feminism: I want to talk about climate change.

The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) tell us, and I'm quoting directly from them here, that:

- 'The world's poor suffer most from erratic weather and its disruptions because they live in substandard housing in marginal land subject to drought or flood, or in crowded urban areas lacking essential services – and women are the majority of the world's poor.'
- 'In Bangladesh in 1991, 71 out of every 1,000 women were killed in a cyclone and flood; 15 out of every 1,000 men were killed.'
- 'Of those killed in the 2004 Asian tsunami, up to 70 per cent were women.'
- 'In the Darfur region of Sudan' WEDO says, 'where desertification has plagued the land in recent decades, homes are often destroyed, campaigns of intimidation, rape or abduction are waged, and thousands of women and children are caught in the crossfire. The vast majority of the world's refugees are women and children.'
- Lest we think that this is a third world phenomenon, WEDO tells us that '70 per cent of deaths during the 2003 European heat wave were women.'
- And further, 'In New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina drove poor women further into poverty and illness: they were forced into overcrowded living conditions, which raised the incidence of domestic abuse. Loss of child care facilities has cost many their jobs and health benefits.'

When the very climate changes because of man-made action (and I use the term advisedly), when being a woman is a risk factor as the climate changes, I'd argue that we need feminism.

There's a couple of reasons why I've drawn on these two areas, sexual slavery, that most profound form of male violence, and climate change, the result of profound exploitation of the earth, to argue that we need feminism. The first is, that, obviously, these two areas, violence and environmental exploitation, are of huge importance to women, where the impact of the inequality women experience is stark and staggering.

Secondly, without wanting to be simplistic, I'd argue, like many feminists before, that there is a further relationship between the two areas. I'd argue that violence against women parallels the exploitation of the environment. Women, and the earth, are all too often seen as infinitely able to meet the needs of men, as having no real value, as by nature exploitable, as an inexhaustible resource to be plundered. It is no coincidence that the environment is often called mother earth.

Feminism gives us the tools to make that analysis. Monica's book talks about the fact that many women don't call themselves feminists because they don't feel confident to.

They feel they haven't read the right feminist books, or studied the right feminist course. I'd argue that feminism isn't a test you can fail, it's not an ideology you have to subscribe to, it's not a club you must join, it's not a religion where you need to learn its dogma and keep the faith. It's about taking our experiences, and the experiences of other women, seriously, and analysing our world as if we matter. It's about women finding solutions. It is not a duty, not an obligation, not a debt to our mothers or our grandmothers.

Simone De Beauvoir said:

- 'Defending the truth' [and I think what feminism does, what feminists do, is defend the truth, the truth about our bodies, about our lives, about our loves, about our planet]
- Defending the truth is not something one does out of a sense of duty or to allay guilt complexes, but is a reward in itself.'

She says further:

- 'I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for the truth; and truth rewarded me.'

The suffragists and the suffragettes fought for freedom, not to re-impose duty on women, young or old. We don't need to go back to the struggles of previous feminists because we have a duty to; we will go back because we understand our link to them and want to celebrate and learn from them. They found feminism, even when they didn't call it that, because they needed it. It's the same today. Feminisms will continue because it gives us the tools we need. It gives us a way of thinking we need.

Going back to the issue of climate change, and back to the Women's Environment and Development Organization, they show simply how feminism makes a difference to this huge problem, both in terms of insisting on noticing women – bringing that collective understanding that Adrienne Rich talked about, and in terms of recognising that women have solutions.

They say, and again I quote directly from them:

- Women produce 60 to 80 per cent of the household food supply in most developing countries.
- During a drought in Micronesia, women sought and found a new source of potable water before government officials recognised them as key to the solution.
- In Kenya, where communities were suffering from a lack of natural resources, Wangari Maathai started the Greenbelt Movement to plant trees, replenishing resources and reducing vulnerability to climate change.
- A recent study in Sweden showed that women's carbon footprint is smaller than men's: they account for only 25 per cent of car usage and only one-third own cars.

They are saying, without using these words, that we need feminism if we are going to survive.

It's the same if we look at trafficking. Sexual slavery has been recognised by the High Court because women, including trafficked women, insisted that they existed, insisted that their stories mattered, insisted the violence against them was real wrong. When 'people with authority', as Rich says, 'described the world and [they were] not in it', we resisted, we took the tools of feminism, we took the collective understanding she talks about, and we stood up, demanding to be seen and heard. That's what the statement I read earlier is about. In part, it is a litany of violence, but it is more than that. It is women who have been thrust into the void, what Rich calls the 'this non-being' – and sexual slavery is absolutely about making women non-beings – showing the most profound courage, the most absolute determination to be seen, and achieving that.

I don't know how we're going to solve the world's problems if we don't take ourselves and other women seriously. I don't know how we're going to solve the world's problems if we don't insist that other people take women seriously. I don't know how we are going to solve the world's problems if we don't challenge men's violence against us. I don't know how we are going to solve the world's problems if we don't stop the male model of raping the earth. Feminism will thrive because we need it. Feminists will thrive because we are needed.

I've heard a lot of women talk about how young women take feminism for granted, how they don't understand what they've inherited, how they are not active. It's not my experience. By the by, I've got to say that I've heard this line since the 1980s when I was in my teens and twenties, and I've always wondered what it is supposed to achieve. If you're one of the young women who is around and engaged, it seems a bit tough to be criticised anyway; if you're not around and engaged, you won't be listening. Regardless, I've never found it difficult to find young women who are passionate about women's rights – sometimes they talk about it as feminism, sometimes they don't. But they're working in that long line of feminist activists who insisted on change, and I think that's what matters. At Project Respect, where I used to work, we have the opposite problem to the one feminist organisations are supposed to have – we've always had trouble accommodating all the young women who want to get involved.

I'd argue if our causes and our organisations aren't attracting young women, we should look as hard at those causes and organisations as we do as the women not coming to them. I think one of the great contributions of Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency was the way it put to bed the idea that young people – and a whole lot of other people – are intrinsically apathetic. Barack Obama talked to people in terms they understood, and offered them ways of acting that made sense, and didn't they take up his offer. And what a gift that is – to realise that people aren't irretrievably distant, that they aren't fundamentally disengaged, they're just looking for ways to engage that make sense in their lives.

I think one of the planks of patriarchy is to make pronouncements on and police young women. I think it one of the planks of patriarchy is to scrutinise and criticise young women. I think one of the planks of patriarchy is to find them wanting, to declare them

flawed, to push them to believe they're not good enough, that the need to do more or be more or have more. It doesn't only do this to young women, but it does it unrelentingly. I don't think we as feminists should contribute to this.

If we have a duty, then, it may be to make sure that we are not the people Adrienne Rich refers to when she talks of leaders who describe the world as if you are not in it. Young women are there; they are using the great gifts of feminists to build lives that generations of feminists longed for and worked for. We should celebrate the options they have. And we should look with new eyes at what they are doing. We should embrace the idea that we won't always recognise the ways of being feminist that young women come up with. I don't mean that we give up, or we don't disagree when other women say things that seem wrong – I am saying that berating young women for not keeping the faith doesn't get us very far. I think if we could start our feminist conversations asking what young women – or other women for that matter – are doing, rather than talking about what they're not doing, we can again build a robust movement, we can again feel hopeful about women's work for change.

And as we look more and more at these issues, types of feminism we haven't imagine will come into being. I think one of the challenges for feminists who worry that younger women aren't doing enough, aren't feminist enough, is to look with new eyes at what they are doing, to embrace the idea that the forms of feminism before us might not be recognisable to use, that they might indeed be new forms, and that younger feminists don't need to confirm to past practices.

I'd like to finish with another quote from Simone De Beauvoir, as a comment on the potential of feminism and being a feminist:

'That's what I consider true generosity. You give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing.'