

How to Be a Feminist in the Twenty-First Century

Georgia Christinidis
(University of Rostock)

Feminism, the Assault on Women's Reproductive Rights, and Sexual Harassment

In 2006, feminist critic Toril Moi claimed that

We are witnessing the emergence of a whole new generation of women who are careful to preface every gender-related claim that just might come across as unconventional with “I am not a feminist, but_”.

It is a familiar phrase; one that I suspect everyone who teaches gender and/or feminism has heard their students use at least occasionally. In the face of the assumptions usually implicit in this disavowal of feminism, that feminists are “strident” or unreasonable in their demands, or, on the other hand, that feminism has nothing more to offer contemporary women because its aims have long been achieved, I find it not only easy but necessary and urgent to self-identify as a feminist. To argue, as Jan Dalley did in the *Financial*

Times on 20 October 2017, that

“feminism”, as a purely western credo born in America of postwar affluence, is no longer particularly relevant, to me or to others. The principle of equality between the sexes is now sturdily enshrined within a general notion of liberal human rights; feminism has done its work there

seems laughable to me at a time when there is a backlash against those very rights, with various incarnations of the alt-right leading the assault while decrying what they often refer to as “gender madness”, and purportedly ‘mainstream’ politicians like US President Donald Trump, President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, and Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán not far, if at all, behind. A central goal of the alt-right seems to be to curtail women's reproductive rights; this ties in both with the patriarchal view of the family frequently espoused by its members, and with its claim that the comparatively low rates of childbirth among ‘white’ women

amount to a form of genocide. Their anti-abortion stance unites prominent members of the alt-right, like Steve Bannon, with traditional conservatives like Gloria Prinzessin von Thurn und Taxis. Donald Trump's nominations of ultra-conservative candidates to the Supreme Court have given rise to concern that *Roe v. Wade*, the case in which it was found, in 1973, that State legislation banning abortion was unconstitutional, may be overturned in the near future. An increasing number of Republican-controlled states are banning abortion after the first six weeks of pregnancy.

Albeit abortion has been legal in Great Britain for over fifty years, it remains



© Tiocfaidh ár lá 1916, taken June 2017

Anti-DUP march in London

illegal in Northern Ireland. The DUP, currently at centre stage of UK politics due to the Brexit deadlock, are strongly anti-abortion in their stance. While in

Great Britain, between 65% and 93% of the population support the legality of abortion, depending on the reason why a pregnancy is to be terminated, a majority of the population of Northern Ireland think abortion should be illegal if a woman does not want the child, but support its legalisation in cases of rape, incest, or foetal abnormality (Taylor 2017). The legality of abortion within the US is supported by 58% of the population, a relatively small majority ("Public Opinion" 2018), and anti-choice movements are increasingly using the popular media in their effort to turn people against women's right to choose. On 29 March 2019, the film *Unplanned* opened at 800 US cinemas.

It is based on the memoirs of Abby Johnson, a former employee of the NGO *Planned Parenthood* turned anti-abortion activist. Johnson denounces *Planned Parenthood* for profiting from abortions and argues that the legality of abortion does not in fact empower women. It is one of a wave of anti-abortion movies. While it may be tempting to dismiss these developments as primarily confined to the bible belt of the United States or historically Catholic countries like Ireland, Hungary, or Brazil, the anti-abortion message is not confined to single-issue movies like *Unplanned*; rather, it is becoming prevalent in the mainstream media.

The *Twilight* franchise is, perhaps, the most successful instance of this development. In 2012, Dorothy Pomerantz wrote in *Forbes* that

[o]verall, the films have earned \$2.5 billion at the global box office. You can probably double that number when you include DVD sales, cable and television showings and the gobs of merchandise sold annually.

The protagonists, human teenager Bella and vampire Edward, wait until their wedding night to have sex, a decision that is motivated in the story by Edward having been born as a human in the early twentieth century and therefore being old-fashioned. When Bella gets pregnant and her life is threatened by the half-vampire baby who is effectively eating her from the inside, she refuses to terminate the pregnancy, albeit her vampire in-laws unanimously advise her to do so. She explicitly states that she is willing to sacrifice her own life for that of her baby - and her choice of words, too, is significant here. Though it is Bella's choice not to have an abortion, and author of the *Twilight* books, Stephenie Meyers, therefore, argues that the story is not anti-feminist, all other characters consistently use the term foetus, while Bella vehemently insists that what she is carrying, a few weeks after conception, is a baby. Her choice of term is consistent with the anti-choice movement's contention that a fertilised egg is a human baby as soon as conception has taken place. Albeit *Twilight* has garnered

its share of criticism due to the high visibility entailed by its exceptional popularity, its politics are most clear-sightedly summarised not by a liberal critic, but by the conservative James P. Pinkerton in a celebratory article that appeared on Fox News in 2010. He exults in the fact that "Bella, the classic damsel in distress, relies on men to protect her, and she will reward only one with her virginity—and, of course, at the same time, her hand in marriage." Pinkerton reads the *Twilight* films as a paean to Authority with a capital A, and suggests that by watching them, kids will receive "Conservative Imprinting".

By comparison with the immensely popular *Twilight*-franchise, *The Frankenstein Chronicles* has largely remained below the radar of critical and academic commentary. The critically-acclaimed series was first broadcast on ITV in 2015, but has since been picked up by Netflix. Set in an 1827 London where a serial killer inspired by Victor Frankenstein's experiments dismembers and reassembles the bodies of street urchins, one of its central characters is a poor, underage girl, Flora, who is made drunk and impregnated by a surgeon. In dealing with this plotline, the series rehashes many of the tropes invoked by anti-choice activists. Flora wants to "get rid of the baby", but Marlot, a retired officer who investigates the case of the murdered children on behalf of the

Home Secretary, as well as his Constable sidekick, Nightingale, want to protect her unborn child and place her in the care of a practitioner of alternative medicine. The latter, Daniel Harvey, however, is pro-choice and provides Flora with herbal remedies that induce a miscarriage. Nightingale, albeit distraught, assures her that God will forgive her if she repents, in a manner that is reminiscent of the “hate the sin but love the sinner”-rhetoric of fundamentalist anti-LGBT rights activists. Flora herself is full of regrets for killing her “baby”. Most importantly, however, while Flora’s actions are represented as driven by desperation, Daniel Harvey, the only character who explicitly advocates a woman’s right to choose, turns out to be the psychopathic child killer whom Marlot has been pursuing. Furthermore, his sister, Marlot’s love interest, who is represented in unambiguously positive terms in the series, clearly considers the fact that her brother helped Flora to induce a miscarriage to be just as monstrous as his dismemberment of the street children that he uses in his Frankenstein-inspired experiments.

The salience of anti-abortion topoi in the popular media is not merely evidence of ‘residual’ attitudes that may safely be shrugged off. They occur at a time when a report published by the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development,

presumably not an organisation prone to spreading ‘fake news’ or conspiracy theories, finds that anti-choice extremists within Europe collaborate in a highly organised, systematic, and deliberate manner, with the declared goal of “roll[ing] back human rights for sexual and reproductive health in Europe” (Datta 2018). They affirm that the Agenda Europe “movement would force women to carry unwanted pregnancies, restrict access to contraception, decide who can marry and decide who can call themselves a family. Many will be surprised that they also target divorce and access to IVF treatment.” Though the 100 to 150 members of the “clandestine” network that the Forum was able to identify may sound like a small number, it appears to enjoy significant levels of support among wealthy players willing to bankroll its strategies, including members of the European aristocracy like Otto von Hapsburg. According to the report, Agenda Europe’s to-do list includes points like “Repeal all laws allowing divorce”, “Prohibit sale of all pharmaceutical contraceptives” and, of course, they would like to see “Abortion bans in all jurisdictions, including in international law”. The report suggests that Agenda Europe has hitherto been significantly more successful in its aim to protect what it considers to be the “traditional family” and halt “expanding marriage rights to same-sex couples” than in its attempt to

roll back abortion rights. It registers the network's "rapid professionalization", its successful "network-building" and "placing the right people in the right place", however, and warns that

Progressive actors should take heed that this fight is engaged and that social progress is not necessarily inevitable.

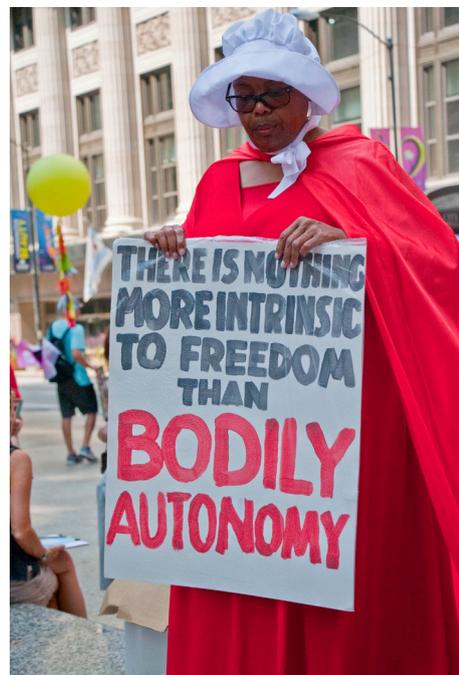
Overall, the situation in Europe as well as in the United States is not one in which we can afford to be complacent concerning women's rights; in the face of professionalization of the anti-choice and anti-gender campaigners, solidarity among feminists is important and necessary.

As yet, in the area of reproductive rights, the anti-choice agenda seems to be driven by an extremist minority, albeit a well-organised and dangerous one. The #metoo-phenomenon, however, has drawn attention to the casual acceptance of sexual harassment in the mainstream of Western societies that tend to understand themselves as committed to liberal humanism and the rights it entails. While I am normally sceptical of hashtag activism, sometimes, and in my view with some justification, referred to as 'slacktivism', the responses to #metoo have proven it to have been necessary: what made #metoo different, and what eventually prompted me to also post under the #metoo hashtag on facebook, was the derisory response that some (predominantly, but not

exclusively self-identifying as male) people felt was acceptable in the face of the overwhelming number of narratives of sexual harassment and discrimination. The continued existence of such attitudes even among some academic colleagues, and, on the other hand, the concerns of many women, some of whom are also academic colleagues, who were reluctant to post their stories for fear of a backlash, means that here, too, solidarity among feminists is imperative.

The Horns of the Feminist Dilemma

Yet—I am almost tempted to say “I am a feminist, but” at this point—while I know which side I am on in



© Charles Edward Miller, taken on 26 August 2018

Protest rally in Chicago against Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court. Costumes inspired by the recent Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel *A Handmaid's Tale* play an increasingly central role in feminist protests, illustrating the almost exclusive focus on sexual and reproductive rights at such events.

these debates, what concerns me, as a self-identified feminist, is that the ground over which they are conducted is too limited. The focus of mainstream proponents of gender equality and women's rights appears to be as firmly on female reproductive capacities and female sexuality as that of the right-wing extremists. Reproductive rights and freedom from sexual harassment are important, no doubt, but their centrality to debates over women's rights implicitly confirms a biologicistic conception of what it means to be a woman, and one that reinforces the long-held view that women are more determined by their biology than men at that. By extension, it would appear that women who are not being and have never been sexually harassed (though the #metoo phenomenon leaves one in doubt regarding the existence of such a group), who are not in need of either an abortion or an infrastructure that enables them to better combine family responsibilities with their careers, do not, presumably, need feminism. Some so-called feminists might even argue that such a person does not fully qualify as a woman; womanhood, all too often, is conflated with the ability as well as the desire to bear and raise children, and feminism, all too often, is seen as coterminous

with family-friendly policies. Yet women are still overrepresented in relatively low-prestige, low-pay jobs and the gender pay gap is not entirely reducible to the career breaks that are still considered a natural corollary of women's ability to bear children (though the fact that the mother typically takes a longer career break than the father is not 'natural' but a consequence of the aptitude for caring that is a central component of the way in which femininity is socially constructed). Furthermore, businesses are encouraged to employ more women based on their supposedly 'feminine' qualities, like empathy and emotional intelligence; as recently as December 2018, Rosie Millard wrote in *The Independent*: "I think that the typically "female" traits of collegiate working,



© Reclaim Reklam, taken on 27 February 2010

It is symptomatic that an image search yielded only a Swedish example of a feminist campaign focused on something not related to reproductive rights or sexuality. The hacked advert draws attention to the fact that women's earnings in Sweden amount to 83% of those of men.

emotional intelligence and keen antennae for sensitive issues are key to today's boardrooms." Here, a restrictive image of femininity is put forward even by those who would promote women's rights. The implications of promoting women to boardrooms primarily based on their supposedly specific skill set is empirically problematic; also, it is a corollary of the exultation of women's emotional intelligence and other 'feminine' qualities to assume that they lack the stereotypically 'male' qualities, such as bravery. Yet as Christina Patterson (2019) points out in *The Guardian*, "It's a cliché [sic] that women aren't brave enough. It's also a lie." The reason why women should be promoted to boardrooms isn't any specifically feminine skill set; it is simply the fact that hitherto, they are underrepresented due to discrimination. Affirmative action is needed to overcome this situation, as it is needed in the case of 'race', not because there is a specific black or feminine skill set, but because of the injustice of discrimination itself.

Nevertheless, in addressing these issues, mainstream feminism will almost inevitably be caught on the horns of a dilemma: what Moi describes as liberal humanist feminism, in its focus on formal and legal equality between men and women, fails to address and combat the devaluation and marginalisation of qualities that are frequently regarded as stereotypically feminine (2002, 15).

What, following Kristeva, she calls "radical" feminism, on the other hand, even in "praising the superiority" of women, at least in some respects, "runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism [...] by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places" (12). There is some evidence of this stance in the mainstream 'liberal' media: in 2017, it was announced that the role of the protagonist of *Doctor Who*, one of the longest-running and most popular British television series, often considered as iconically British, would, for the first time, be played by a woman. Some fans were outraged, though why a time-travelling alien with the ability to regenerate into a new body when he/she dies should not be regenerated as a woman is not clear (Flury 2017). The uproar that greeted the news shows the necessity of these kinds of casting decision. Nevertheless, the changes to the Doctor's character that accompanied the casting decision—what showrunner Chris Chibnall describes as a "new mixture of Doctorishness" ("Doctor Who" 2019)—are problematic from a feminist perspective. As a woman, the Doctor, who in his last few male incarnations sometimes behaved in an authoritarian way (Ecclestone), tended to lack sensitivity and awareness of the needs and personal boundaries of others (Smith) or even seemed to lack empathy completely (Capaldi), leading fans on the

asperger/autistic spectrum to highlight the character's significance to them as a generally positive portrayal of behaviour patterns often linked to autism (Evans 2017), suddenly exhibits continuous concern for her companions' emotional state. Thus, the apparently emancipatory decision to cast a female doctor ultimately serves to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Where liberal humanist feminism implicitly devalues qualities stereotyped as 'feminine', 'radical' feminism devalues women who fail to exhibit those qualities—Moi adduces the example of Margaret Thatcher, whose enthusiasm for the Falklands War was framed as evidence of her lack of femininity (174). This does not entail any approval of Thatcher's stance concerning the Falklands War on Moi's part; but criticism of warmongering does not necessarily have to be linked to a politician's gender, or the qualities that one would expect them to exhibit based on that gender. Moi explicitly, and rightly, rejects any position "that tries to define some women as 'real women' and others as 'deviant'" (175). In refuting this position, however, she appears to once again define women based on their biological bodies and thus runs the risk of endorsing an essentialist view of femininity, despite her earlier acknowledgement that women need to "reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical" (12).

Such a rejection of the very dichotomy between men and women, masculine and feminine, would require saying goodbye to the expectation that women ought to be more sensitive, caring, and empathetic than men. Nevertheless, it does not mean that discrimination of people who exhibit these traits ought to be tolerated, whatever their biological characteristics. While women are, indeed, discriminated against as women, fighting discrimination does not require one to acknowledge any essential 'reality' of womanhood beyond the shared experience of discrimination, any more than fighting racism requires one to accept any 'real' basis of 'race'. In order to combat discrimination, feminism is nothing less than superfluous. On the contrary, it still has a long way to go.

Works Cited

Dalley, Jan (2017). In "The Meaning of the F-Word—Feminism in Five Voices." *Financial Times* 20 October. <<https://www.ft.com/content/0284b792-b522-11e7-aa26-bb002965bce8>>.

Datta, Neil (2018). *Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists' Vision to Mobilize European Societies Against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development.

“Doctor Who: Everything We Know about Jodie Whittaker’s New Doctor” (2019). *Radio Times* 7 January. <<https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2019-01-07/doctor-who-jodie-whittaker/>>.

Evans, Richard (2017). “How ‘Doctor Who’ Has Given Me Clarity with My Asperger’s”. *The Mighty* 17 June. <<https://themighty.com/2017/06/what-doctor-who-means-to-me-person-with-aspergers/>>.

Flury, Annie (2017). “Doctor Who: Fans React to Jodie Whittaker Casting.” *BBC News* 17 July. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-40626224>>.

Millard, Rosie (2018). “What Does It Take to Be a Successful Woman in Leadership? Seeing Other Women Make It Before You”. *The Independent* 2 December. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/women-leadership-ftse350-board-gender-pay-gap-university-hull-a8663411.html>>.

Moi, Toril (2002). *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge.

--- (2006). “‘I am Not a Feminist, But...’. How Feminism Became the F-Word.” *PMLA* 121.5, 1735-41.

Patterson, Christina (2019). “Why So Few Women in the Boardroom? Because Men Won’t Listen to Them.”

The Guardian 15 March. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/15/women-in-the-boardroom-listen-men>>.

Pinkerton, James P. (2010). “Conservative Imprinting in ‘Eclipse?’” *Fox News* 1 July. <<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2010/07/01/james-p-pinkerton-eclipse-twilight-saga-vampires-stephenie-meyer-books-review.html>>.

Pomerantz, Dorothy (2012). “Looking at ‘Twilight’ By the Numbers”. *Forbes* 16 November. <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dorothypomerantz/2012/11/16/looking-at-twilight-by-the-numbers/#4ddabf0d3195>>.

“Public Opinion on Abortion” (2018). *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life* 15 October. <<https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/public-opinion-on-abortion/>>.

Taylor, Eleanor Attar (2017). “British Attitudes to Abortion.” *Nat Cen: Social Research That Works for Society* 3 August. <<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/blog/british-attitudes-to-abortion>>.