

Feminism Then and Now

Introduction – Sarah Keenan*

On 21 January 2014 the LSE Gender Institute held a discussion panel on [‘Feminism Then and Now’](#), the first in its series of ‘Conversations’ to welcome The Women’s Library collection to the school. The panel consisted of writer Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Green Party leader Natalie Bennett, [Freedom Without Fear Platform](#) activist Camille Kumar, University of Bristol researcher Finn Mackay, [Southall Black Sisters](#) activist Pragna Patel, and Birkbeck Professor Lynne Segal. In the same packed lecture theatre which just two months earlier held [a debate on whether rape is ‘different’](#), and in the same week as UKIP leader [Nigel Farage spoke in a neighbouring LSE lecture theatre](#) about his take on this year’s upcoming European elections, the panel reflected on changes and consistencies in feminist activism, primarily in England, over multiple generations. A number of the panellists mentioned the enemy of neoliberalism, and Kumar and Bennett extended that idea to give an analysis explicitly acknowledging [the 2012-2013 campaign to save The Women’s Library](#) from being purchased by, and then relocated to, the LSE. While the LSE is publicly celebrating the arrival of The Women’s Library, this move represents a defeat for the Save The Women’s Library campaign both in terms of the collection being bought by a relatively wealthy and elitist university from a poorer and traditionally working class one (London Met), and in terms of its consequent relocation from its purpose-built, explicitly feminist space in East London to the highly securitised and, for many women, intimidating halls of the LSE library in Holborn. As an audience member, I didn’t manage to ask the panel for their reflections on what the event’s celebration of this move meant for the place of feminism within neoliberal institutions today, particularly for the neoliberal institution we were all sitting in. I did however manage to get permission from Camille Kumar to publish her powerful speech from the panel discussion here.

* Lecturer in Law, SOAS, University of London, UK, email sk128@soas.ac.uk.

Feminism Then and Now – Camille Kumar**

I am an anti-violence practitioner and campaigner; I provided direct support for women experiencing violence for 10 years in various settings in Australia, Bangladesh and the UK, and have been active in the ending VAWG [Violence Against Women and Girls] movement, amongst related campaigning with black feminists and other groups. I was invited today as a member of Freedom Without Fear Platform.

The FWFP formed to express and foster UK based solidarity with the anti-rape movements in India and globally and to give a platform to BME women in the UK to lead discussions around VAWG issues; to make the connections between anti-VAWG struggles around the globe; to counter the imperialist racist discourse that UK mainstream media continuously bombard us with and; to highlight the cynical co-opting of VAWG issues by various groups in the UK who are seeking to further their own racist/ anti-immigration/ Islamophobic agendas. Freedom Without Fear seeks to practice and develop a feminism that is working on the principle that until all are free, none are free.

Violence against women and girls was for me on a personal/political/professional level the starting point for my journey with feminism so it is with this that I will start, and I would like to share a story.

Eki¹ is a young woman I supported five years ago. Eki is a trafficking survivor and had insecure immigration status. Eki had multiple symptoms of ill-health and was referred to us by the psychiatric nurse at a nearby walk-in health centre. Eki moved into our refuge, and we worked together towards Eki's needs and goals. Eki was registered with the local GP. Eki did not feel comfortable or safe to report to the authorities, due to experiences of state perpetrated abuse in her country of origin; her decision not to report was respected. Eki was referred to one of our partner legal firm advisers and received free legal advice to begin the process of regularising her immigration status. Eki was seen by

** Activist, Freedom Without Fear Platform, UK, email freedomwithoutfearplatform@gmail.com.

¹ Not her real name.

one of our in-house counsellors who was able to offer Eki a space she had not had before, to heal, to learn to trust again and to begin to rebuild her future. Eki accessed ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] at the local college and pursued her ambition to become a nurse. When Eki's immigration status was regularised, she was supported into social housing. Eki received legal aid to begin the process of bringing her two small children to the UK. Eki's determination, resilience, and ambition, combined with specialist support she received, enabled her to navigate this complex array of services to heal, recover and create a future for herself and her children.

What would happen to Eki now? Eki is referred to the local service that is now run by a housing association, as the women's service was de-funded. Her worker is not an anti-violence specialist. Eki is taken to the GP but the clinic refuses to register her as her immigration status is uncertain. Eki is told that she can only remain in the refuge for 2 days before she must consent to reporting to the authorities. She is not able to access legal aid. The nearest ESOL course is 75 minutes' bus ride away and Eki can't afford to get there. Eki is supported for 45 days and then she is told there is no funding for her to remain in the accommodation. Eki is deemed 'high risk' as she has told workers she will return to an abusive punter as she has nowhere else to go. Eki is referred to a 'MARAC' – a multi-agency risk assessment conference – where social workers, police, and other 'relevant professionals' share her information. The next day Eki is woken at 3am by immigration officers and taken to immigration detention. Eki is placed in fast track and deported before she is able to see a lawyer.

I was asked to speak on what the contemporary priorities of feminism are, as I see them. I see everything as a feminist issue, whether they are labelled as such or not, and all feminist issues must connect to other movements for social change. I am a black feminist and for me the struggles against imperialism, patriarchy and racism are entwined and cannot be separated. I facilitate a group for young women in West London who have experienced sexual violence and when I told them about this evening's event and asked what they think is the main priority for feminism, one of them said 'a safer world'. Violence is the point at which patriarchy is most tangibly felt in our lives: and

Eki's story is a clear example of the need for intersectional analysis in any movement for change.

The violence of poverty, repression and abuse Eki experienced and the impacts of so called austerity measures on her journey are clear. However, behind Eki's story are questions: how did she end up in refuge in the first place? What were the contexts in which she experienced violence in the UK and her country of origin and how is the UK Government implicated in this? The dominant narrative of violence being perpetrated by sociopathic individual men against defenceless female victims does not ring true for Eki, and hundreds of other survivors. In Eki's story it is clear that violence can be unrelenting and there are visible and invisible perpetrators as increasingly the forces of the state collude both with the perpetrators and with other structures of oppression to torture women and girls and repress our spirit, aspiration and voice.

Within Eki's story are more questions: why is there a growing insistence on referring to violence as something that is 'much worse over there' or that is perpetrated by black men 'over here' when that is clearly not the reality? The violence perpetrated by white men, and by the UK state is completely invisible in our media and Government rhetoric. We all heard about Rochdale but did we hear about the 110 child victims on the south coast exploited by gangs of white men? Eki's story is nowhere to be seen.

The UK Government says that it cares about violence against women and girls, but what are they actually doing about it?

The state has shifted its approach to VAWG to being one completely focused on the criminal justice system. The 2004 Domestic Violence Act [Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004] institutionalised this and this shift has particularly damaging implications for BME women. For example, the widespread use of the MARAC. The reality of the MARAC, as is clear in Eki's story, is increased surveillance of working class, migrant, and BME populations; MARACs, for many survivors replicate the very same power and control dynamics that they are seeking to escape.

And currently, under the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Bill the Government is pushing through the criminalisation of forced marriage. The government sees this as crucial, however we know that the majority of women don't want to report to police about the violence they experience and over 90% of BME women state that receiving support from a BME service was the most helpful factor to accessing safety, the very same services that the Government is cutting back on. This legislation is not about safety or justice; it is another example of the Government's hypocrisy, and its cynical use of VAWG issues to intensify repression, criminalisation and Islamophobia.

So, what needs to change for Eki's journey to be radically different? What do we campaign on? Is it against austerity? Is it against immigration control? Is it working to create a world in which violence does not happen in the first place? And, as feminists, do we stop and reflect on the outcomes of our campaigning carefully enough?

When reflecting on the work of the ending VAWG movement, some thoughts came to my mind:

The raised profile of violence against women issues has its positive outcomes, such as funding for services, however it has also led to the competitive tendering of services, and we are faced with corporates like G4S winning contracts for sexual and domestic violence services, at the expense of women organising. This raised profile is also used to justify increased policing powers and prison expenditures, leading to tragic killings like that of Mark Duggan and companies like G4S benefiting from the expansion of imprisoned/detained populations. Anyone who has had to endure the criminal justice system as a survivor of violence or their supporter knows that the criminal justice system is far more likely to re-traumatise a woman than offer her any sort of justice, yet criminal justice continues to be packaged as a solution to violence.

While anti-trafficking activism has brought the trafficking issue to wider attention, the increased profile has also been used as a justification for increased harassment and

police perpetrated rape of women working in prostitution as their homes and workplaces are raided, and we see increasing numbers of women being criminalised, immigration detained and/or punished for their experiences of violence. We have seen a doubling of the foreign national prison population in the last 10 years, and we know that already at least 1 in 3 women in prison have experienced sexual abuse.

We need to look at the impacts of the competitive marketplace we have all entered and how much we have been removed from founding aspirations and principles. There needs to be more critical analysis of the ways that our campaigns for change are exploited in a neoliberal capitalist society and ensure that we do not align ourselves with groups whose fundamental vision is inherently different to our own.

I don't know that the priorities of feminism have moved that much since we started on this project of disrupting power; but the lessons we are learning are there and available to us – a resource that we must avail ourselves to. For feminism to be what it says on the tin, it must be continually evolving, shifting and diversifying; where patriarchy seeks to enforce authority, feminism seeks to declare privilege; where patriarchy seeks to create a single 'rationalised' truth and repress all else, feminism seeks to simultaneously hold many truths and be the witness bearer to secrets; and where patriarchy seeks to divide, subjugate and conquer, feminism seeks connection, equality and collective struggle.

Feminism is being re-branded, re-packaged and renovated at every moment, put through a white-washed, pink pounded, conveyer belt of commodification and people are swallowing the bullshit, buying the wristband, the book and the t-shirt. Assertions of feminism and claims to the name come from the most unexpected quarters and we must remain vigilant. In solidarity with the women who protested the takeover, I would like to comment that the women's library was not saved by LSE, but was in fact taken over in the face of much protest – a 12,000-strong petition and an occupation – severely restricting access to the collections and removing them from their purpose-built home and one of the last remaining dedicated spaces of feminist activism to move it here, an inaccessible academic space where a platform was recently given to a rape apologist.

Feminism cannot be taught or bought, it is a doing word. I will leave you with the words attributed to Indigenous activist Lila Watson: if you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together.