

Feminism is About Equality



Feminism is used by some as an insult, where girls and young women in particular, are intimidated with fears of being typecast as a 'femin-Nazi', ice maiden, man-hater, aggressive and other negative female stereotypes.

So what is feminism? It's about gender inequity. It is never about men against women. A human rights' issue, it is where men and women should have equal opportunity and choice. History shows how hard it is to achieve this, where the courageous women of the suffragette movement fought and died for the right to vote. Where with the second rise of

feminism (1960s-70s), ground-breaking pioneers of feminism, identified as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, were vilified as leaders of the 'Jewish conspiracy' destroying family. They spearheaded the battle for equality of sexual rights, pay, education, protection of women and children against violence. Gloria Steinem says. 'The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.'

The feminist movement is re-emerging through the #MeToo movement. '#MeToo has no colour, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. Above all, it's about helping survivors heal' says its founder Afro-American Tarana Burke. As part of this movement, high-profile sex offenders Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby have been convicted.

White Ribbon Australia gives alarming statistics on sexual and domestic violence, which is overwhelmingly against women and children. On average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner. Almost 40% of women experience violence from their partner while separated. 92% of women who identify as LGBTQIA+ experience sexual harassment in their lifetime. The recent horrific and heartbreaking murders of Hannah Clarke and her three young children by her violent husband expose the reality of domestic violence.

Australian police deal with domestic violence every two minutes.

Disturbingly, White Ribbon statistics show that young people exposed to domestic violence, child abuse, harassment and family violence, face social and mental health damage. 1 in 5 students are sexually harassed at university. 1 in 4 young people think it's normal for boys to pressure girls into sex.

Emma Watson, *Harry Potter* actress and United Nations Women Goodwill Ambassador used the wisdom of the Talmudic teacher Rabbi Hillel in a powerful speech on feminism at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to launch the *HeForShe* campaign aimed at galvanizing a worldwide movement of men and boys to advocate for an end to global gender inequality. She encouraged men to take up this mantle for their sisters, mothers and daughters so that they are free from prejudice - but also so their sons have permission to be vulnerable and human, too.

Initially Emma Watson was afraid to declare herself a feminist, due to attacks feminists face. However she overcame her fears, to call men, as well as women to stand up for 'feminism'.

Young, male, actors have joined Emma Watson in the *HeForShe* campaign. In particular, actor, producer, filmmaker, singer, Emmy Award winner Joseph Gordon-Levitt took Emma Watson's crusade further with his campaign #Feminism and declared 'Consider me a feminist'. He ignited debate on



feminism in his *HitRecord* TV series, and sparked important questions in his interview on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* where he advocated for gender equality and supported 'the very long history of the women's rights movement' and its continuing relevance today. Other actors committed to feminism who have come on board are Mark Ruffalo, Australian Ben Mendelsohn, Jesse Eisenberg. Jake Gyllenhaal, declared, 'Call me a feminist.' They are joining with actresses standing up for feminism, such as Maggie Gyllenhaal, Isla Fisher,

Scarlett Johansson, Gwyneth Paltrow, Natalie Portman, Jessica Biel, Helen Hunt, Patricia Arquette, Helena Bonham Carter, feminist icon PINK (Alecia Beth Moore).



High-profile male and female actors now have become role models for feminism. What is the next step, especially for girls, boys and young adults? For feminism to have resonance, it is critical that young people engage in it in a way that is inclusive, promoting, dialogue and empathy. Providing facts and information is interesting but often it does not engage emotionally and is disregarded. When story is not didactic, not telling readers what to think, it is a successful way of connecting young people with ideas, choices and creating powerful learning experiences. Stories are central to human cognition and communication. When we empathise with characters and their journeys, we walk in their shoes. Feminism is no longer just a term. It becomes part of the values that are integral to personality. It empowers young people to make their own decisions about feminism.

I seek to write those stories. When the National Museum of Australia asked me to write a story for young people between 7-10 on the second rise of feminism, I accepted the challenge with enormous excitement. That was until I had to unpack what it meant. This was the time

of the first test tube baby, contraception, the first women's refuges, 'burn the bra', Germaine Greer's 'Female Eunuch'.

I was writing for 7 to 10 year olds. These weren't topics I could introduce. It took me a long time to get to the core of feminism. It was about the right of women to have education, equal pay, to not be slotted into a predetermined roles. It would be empowering girls, like Daisy to be leaders of change for gender equity.

So, in a short, accessible, illustrated novel, filled with quirky and wonderful characters, I wrote *Daisy Sunshine* inspired by my lived experience in an old private hotel. There is the joy of friendship, family and community, underpinned in a non-threatening way by the great issues of feminism:- equal pay, domestic violence, activism, right to education. When student teacher *Sunshine Rose*, migrants Mr and Mrs Papadopolous and their eleven year old daughter Nina, Vietnam War veteran the Colonel, Old Dot, eleven year old Daisy Sunshine and her single mother march in the International Women's Day on 8th March, it invites young people to celebrate feminism and action for gender equality. To my knowledge this is the only novel on the second rise of feminism for children. Importantly it is supported by the education curricula and can become part of school programs.

An even greater issue, is reaching young women as they face the challenges of search for identity, love, meaning, within cultural and societal expectations. I did not have the age-appropriate restrictions of *Daisy Sunshine*, so my two year journey writing *Shadows of Olive Trees* lays bare feminism, giving voice to women. 'To my knowledge this makes Gervay the first writer to reinterpret the lived experience of young women in the seventies for an audience of young readers today – which in the light of recent media debates focussing the perceived differences between older and young feminists seems like a relevant and timely enterprise.' (UTS)

A recent email from a writer about *Shadows of Olive Trees*:-

'... it left me gutted and moved. I completely related to your character Tessa. I grew up with a Middle Eastern, Jewish, very strict father. ...it ... explained a lot of what I feel ... I made things work out anyway I think, without breaking all the rules (just some).

I love your sensitivity in portraying that for immigrant fathers they behave the way they do as 'overprotective' and 'controlling' out of love, which is what makes the story of Tessa and

immigrant families such as hers and mine heartbreaking, but unfortunately the heartbreak may be necessary for girls to reach their potential. It's a universal story, very relevant in the Middle East these days as you know.' From Sasha, Jerusalem.

The United Nations declared the first International Women's Day, 8th March 1975 in recognition of human rights of women and children. We can march too.

Susanne Gervay OAM, Australia Day Ambassador, Awarded the Social Justice Award for Literacy by International Literacy Association. www.sgervay.com

BOOKS on Feminism

Sunshine by Susanne Gervay ISBN 978 1876944 67 4

(Children – National Museum of Australia NMA)

Shadows of Olive Trees ISBN 9780648203544 (FemMedia)