NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Difference of opinion, not poor PR, at heart of feminism debate

Kelly Stewart | Aug. 1, 2014 NCR Today

Women Against Feminism [1], a social media campaign that invites women to explain why they don't need feminism, is about as bleak as it sounds.

It features photos of women, mostly young and white, holding up handwritten placards. The usual claims are represented: feminists hate men, Western women should just be grateful they don't live in the Middle East, rape statistics are inflated. There are tributes to chivalry and home-cooked meals. And "egalitarianism," as those familiar with antifeminist rhetoric might expect, is a recurring theme.

For example, one woman holds a placard that reads [2]: "I don't need feminism because egalitarianism is better." Another woman's sign reads [3]: "I don't need feminism because I believe that men and women are EQUAL, not that women should belittle men." And on and on.

This looks to me like classic derailing [4] -- must we focus on women, can't we just talk about liberating everyone, etc. But feminist responses have generally treated it as evidence of a big misconception at the heart of Women Against Feminsim. "Feminism," Emily Shire writes at The Daily Beast [5], "has a clear PR problem." In an effort to address this "PR problem," Shire and certain other feminists tend, unfortunately, to equate feminism with a vague, depoliticized sort of egalitarianism.

For Shire, feminism is about equality between women and men, but it has "come to be seen as anti-men, liberal, radical, pro-choice, and many other things that it is not." As a result, women who believe in gender equality but disagree with, say, pro-choice politics think feminism isn't for them. Shire says it is: "People do not realize you can be a feminist and pro-life. ... You can be a feminist and disagree with the birth control mandate of Obamacare." On this reading, to believe in equality is to be a feminist, whatever one's politics.

Elizabeth Ballou's article at Bustle [6] doesn't go quite that far. But it does seem to defend contemporary feminism by distancing it from radical politics:

> Call me overly optimistic, but I thought that the outdated image of a feminist as a bra-burning, rage-filled, hairy-legged, smelly, rude, oppressive misandrist had gone out the window years ago. Now that there are plenty of relatable feminist icons to look up to, from Notorious RBG (that's Ruth Bader Ginsburg, for those of you not in the know) to Beyonce, you'd think that feminism wouldn't be a dirty word anymore.

Yes, Ballou is clearly going for humor and, I'm sure, means to parody the sexism and homophobia of the "outdated image." I understand that jokes can come across the wrong way. But by contrasting that image with "relatable" contemporary women, she ends up defending feminism by distinguishing it from the "hairy-legged" stereotype and its usual associations: leftists, activists, older generations of women, lesbians.

What picture of feminism do these defenses give us? Shire makes the point that there's more than one way to be a feminist. That's perfectly true. But she makes that point by downplaying feminism's historic relationships to progressive and pro-choice politics. Ballou lampoons the "bra-burning" stereotype, but she also uses it to make a case for how "relatable" and mainstream feminism actually is. Both seem to defend feminism by depicting it as vague and nonthreatening.

There's a problem with distancing feminism from its political history and defining it as the uncontroversial belief that men and women are equal. I have known many antifeminists. I have yet to meet anyone who claims to believe that men and women are not equal. Put another way: any definition of feminism that makes Pope John Paul II a feminist [7] should be revisited.

But beyond that, I wonder why Shire and Ballou seem so quick to reassure Women Against Feminism that feminism needn't be all that challenging, uncomfortable or political.

Why not make the case instead that, in a sexist and patriarchal society, feminist insights do have extensive and potentially radical implications? That feminism does challenge some of the most basic ways in which we organize our world? That it asks for more than abstract appeals to equality -- it asks us to think in specific terms about gender, race, class, sexuality, exclusion and violence?

If we're going to have a discussion with the folks at Women Against Feminism -- though, frankly, I don't read Women Against Feminism as an invitation to dialogue -- I think we should take them at their word: Many of them prefer "egalitarianism" to "feminism." We should try to understand the difference between the two instead of treating them as more or less interchangeable. We should consider that, perhaps, the problem isn't just bad PR, but a real difference of opinion.

That is to say, there's a time to search for common ground, and there's a time to have the argument. In this case, we should have the argument.

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