

Australia: Forty years of feminism

Saturday 13 September 2008, by [JARVIS Helen](#) (Date first published: 7 September 2008).

September 7 marks the 40th anniversary of the event that put on the front pages of the world's press the feminist movement, or more precisely its "second wave" (following the long lapse since the strong campaigns of the early 20th century for women's suffrage and emancipation). The newsletter *Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement* reported at the time that "nearly 150 women committed to women's liberation from New York, New Jersey, Washington DC, Florida, Boston and Detroit, converged on Atlantic City to protest the degrading image of women perpetuated by the Miss America Pageant."

The newsletter went on to report: "Our goal was: 'No more Miss America!' Our objections to the Pageant: its racism (there's never been a black contestant); its use of Miss America as a military mascot to entertain the troops abroad and symbolise the unstained, patriotic American womanhood our boys are fighting for; the degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie symbol which puts women on a pedestal/auction block to compete for male approval; the consumer con-game which makes Miss America a walking commercial and oppresses all women into commodity roles; the cult of youth and the American institution of planned obsolescence which makes last year's Miss America as stale as yesterday's news and makes all women 'useless'.

"Our purpose was not to put down Miss America but to attack the male chauvinism, commercialization of beauty, racism and oppression of women symbolized by the Pageant.... Some of our signs read: 'Everyone is Beautiful,' 'I am a Woman, Not a Toy, Pet or Mascot,' 'Who Dares to Judge Beauty,' and 'Welcome to the Miss America Cattle Auction'.

"Guerrilla theater was used to illustrate some of our points. A live sheep was crowned 'Miss America' and paraded on the liberated area of the boardwalk to parody the way the contestants (all women) are appraised and judged like animals at a county fair.

"'Women are enslaved by beauty standards' was the theme of another dramatic action — in which some of us chained ourselves to a life-size Miss America puppet. This was paraded and auctioned off by a woman dressed up as a male Wall Street financier. 'Step right up, gentlemen, get your late model woman right here — a lovely paper dolly to call your very own property ... She can push your product, push your ego, or push your lawnmower ...'"

I well remember hearing the news reports of this action and seeing the daring images — which were mind-blowing to us young radical student activist women. We had never stopped to theorise about sexual oppression, so caught up were we in the heady days of sexual liberation and political protest against racism and the imperialist war against Vietnam. Not that we didn't face sexual oppression every day — in fact we had already begun to take direct action against it — demanding access to contraception, and even chaining ourselves to bars to demand that women be allowed to drink in the public bars of hotels (at that time the Ladies' Lounge was our place).

But to take the next step to start theorising and to form a movement to advance our cause seemed at first to be self-indulgent and distracting from "more important" causes we had to fight. It took some time, and some heated debates, before we in Australia began, during the following year, to set up women's liberation groups — at first really reading circles. Our first public action was to burst onto

the streets of Sydney on December 15, 1969 with a women's liberation contingent in the demonstration against the Vietnam War with silk screened T-shirts, a banner and a pamphlet headed Only the chains have changed.

Feminist discourse is so taken for granted these days, that it seems hard to imagine that such steps as the Miss America pageant protest or our emerging Australian women's liberation movement were so controversial. We could not then have imagined the hundreds of groups, books, journals and university courses that are now devoted to the themes we raised. The second wave brought these issues firmly into the centre of politics.

By 1969 the majority of the women's liberation movement had decided to focus on three key demands: "Equal pay for equal work"; "Free 24-hour child care"; and "Free abortion on demand". Significant gains were made in these three areas. In addition to the call for equal pay, the women's liberation movement campaigned for rape crisis centres, women's refuges, women's health centres, abortion clinics, childcare centres. The movement fractured somewhat between those who wanted to pressure the government to provide such services and entitlements, and those who decided that the movement itself should create them. As the Whitlam Labor government (1972-75) set up formal women's departments and commissions, further fractures developed between the "femocrats" and the activists.

But to reflect on today's reality shows that these key demands are far from being met. After a six-month national "listening tour", Australia's sex discrimination commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, concluded "there is still systematic sex discrimination" against women workers, with women earning an average of 16% less than men". Opponents of abortion are still mobilising to roll back even the tentative entitlements that were won by struggle during the late 1970s and 1980s in Australia, the US and other countries. Despite the consistent 80% public support in Australia for abortion rights, only the ACT has completely removed abortion from the criminal statute, and only South Australia provides free abortion (bulk-billed) at certain clinics. Child care, while now theoretically widely available at least in major cities, is increasingly expensive and subject to long waiting lists.

But the women's liberation movement no longer exists as a force fighting to achieve these goals. Like the other social movements emerging from the 1960s it too suffered from the capitalist rulers' post-1970s neoliberal onslaught aimed at rolling back the social and economic gains made by working people in the decades after World War II. The feminist movement suffered also from the narrow perspective of many its leaders, who saw the avenue for change as seeking to influence the ruling parties and to gain an individual place in the board room and the government bureaucracy. The aspiring "sisters in suits" did not see the need to link women's struggles with those of other working people, and to develop a strategy for a revolutionary transformation of society.

In response to this decline, the "third wave" of feminism emerged during the 1990s, emphasising a consumerist-oriented "self-liberation". Its leading lights were often painted by the capitalist media (and themselves) as rejecting the "humourless" (politically-oriented) feminism of the second wave. But looking back at the images and documents from the 1968 protests I am struck by the boldness, irreverence and humour of those women - are today's feminists so different? In some ways "we've come a long way (baby)", but we have a long way still to go.

P.S.

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http://directaction.org.au/issue4/forty_years_of_feminism

* Helen Jarvis was a founding member of the women's liberation movement in Sydney in 1969 and

spent the following five years in New York where she was active in the Women's Strike Coalition and the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition before returning to Australia. If any reader has or knows where to find a copy of the 1969 pamphlet *Only the chains have changed*, please contact Direct Action, as it is important to have this saved for the record. Helen Jarvis lent her copy to someone a few years ago and it has never been returned.