

## **The Lessons We Have Learnt: How Sexism in American Politics Sparked Off the New Feminist Renaissance**

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### **Trump and Feminist Erasures**

In the introduction to their edited collection *Feminist Erasures: Challenging Backlash Culture* (2015), Kumarini Silva and Kaitlynn Mendes discuss popular and academic understandings of feminism to consider their impact on women's equality, activism and representations in the western culture. Having sampled both political and media discourses in the English language, the authors conclude that at the time of writing advocacy for women's rights was often belittled or pronounced as too radical and outmoded. By no means was it a recent development. The anti-feminist discourse had been present in the western culture for a while. Most visibly, it gathered momentum in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan's right-wing politics found its fantasy reflection in popular action blockbusters where hard, white male figures dominated the screen, applauded for their uncompromising confidence and physical strength. Although there has been a significant shift in gender politics since Reagan's era, the cultural myth of the 1980s' action hero proved hard to die. And today, some of Donald Trump's sexist discourse seems to resonate with a similar ruthless admiration for the virile white man.

As Sharon Willis argued, the male heroes of big budget films such as, among others, *Die Hard* (1988), *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Terminator 2* (1991) did not appear in a cultural vacuum. They were intrinsically tied to the rise of white masculine identity and its impact on social and cultural hierarchies, as well as gender debates. (Willis 1997) When Hollywood cinema put the narrative of the powerful, white male on the map, intentionally or not, it reinforced collective anxieties surrounding feminist criticism. Although what these action films were propagating was not the only version of masculine identity present in the dominant American culture at the time, their projection of the masculine power was prominent enough to stimulate negative response to feminists and to survive in social and political debates on gender politics.

Silva and Mendes identify some negative responses to feminism—as well as symptoms of anti-feminism—as patriarchal attempts at ‘erasing’ women’s rights activism from the public discourse, be that promoted in writing or through, however infrequent at the time, open acts of social resistance to gender discrimination. If unaddressed, those blatant ‘feminist erasures’ could carry an upsetting potential to halt women’s continuing struggle for equality, perhaps even once and for all. Not only does the desire to expose this backlash culture give the authors motivation for editing their collection of essays but also for elucidating the necessity of propagating feminism. (Silva & Mendes 2015: 1-15)

The publication of *Feminist Erasures* roughly coincided with the formal announcement of Donald Trump’s candidacy for the American presidency. Over the next three years, this notorious politician, who already had a reputation as an anti-feminist, became a symbol of the white masculine threat to gender politics. However, Trump’s sexism—so relentlessly resurfacing during his campaign and during his administration—has unexpectedly catalysed feminist debates and invigorated women’s activism not only in America but also in many other places around the globe. As much as Trump embodied the comeback of imperious sexism in American politics, the response to it that culminated with The Women’s March of 2017 marked a shift in the contemporary feminist agenda. The efficient and successful strategies of mobilising women worldwide, which The March’s organisers enacted, revealed that it was high time to change western feminism’s tactics, outreach and discourses. The post-2017 Women’s March feminism seems to be more inclusive, united, and enthusiastic about propagating its cause among larger populations. For many western women to make that U-turn from their bubble of post-feminist comfort to the second-wave-like activism, it took a common enemy: the current US President and his ubiquitous dismissal of gender politics.

Trump’s campaign took off in June 2015. It was bound by his springboard slogan ‘Make America Great Again’, which to many US feminists sounded like their worst nightmare coming true. Anxiety grew as the campaign progressed, reaching beyond American borders and sweeping around the world. Most notably, it was felt in such seemingly distant places as Russia where, for example, the now legendary feminist protest punk rock band Pussy Riot sang a song whose lyrics ironically repeated Trump’s

motto, as though it was a rallying cry. Back home, the slogan brought back recollections of Reagan's presidency, whose motto 'Let's Make America Great' Trump parroted almost verbatim. As early as mid-2015, it was clear that the parallels between Trump and Reagan go far beyond the striking phrasing affinity between their campaign slogans. Trump's controversial proposals of conservative policies, when paired with his refusal to support or even maintain social welfare, kept recalling more stark similarities with Reagan.

During his run for the presidency, unlike Reagan, Trump infested global news with his blatant and offensive remarks about women. His sexism was much more obvious than that of the misogynist Reagan, whose many moral cues Trump mimicked elsewhere. As alike as they might have seemed regarding their political background and their investment in conservative social ideologies, there was one significant difference between the two. While Reagan's public appearances were controlled and scripted by his spin-doctors (Aronson & Pratkanis 1991), already in 2015, the self-righteous Trump had enough confidence to express his personal beliefs and opinions in public. He even turned to social media to have the advantage of immediately reaching a wider population. Soon, he earned the nickname 'the Twitter President' and was later described as the first man in the White House who 'has weaponised Twitter, using it not just to reach the masses but to control the news agenda through bluster and distraction'. (Buncombe 2018)

Since Trump took office in January 2017, he has not looked to put women's issues at the centre of his speeches or policies. His judgements, criticisms and responses to women—as loud, arrogant and objectifying as they often are—always seem to be dismissed as marginal and insignificant distractions from what in his view might be more important political issues. Trump's long record of publicly pronounced misogyny runs as far back as 1991 when in an interview for *Esquire* he boasted: 'You know, it doesn't really matter what [they] write as long as you've got a young and beautiful piece of ass'. (Trump cited in Cohen 2017) Almost thirty years of condescending, superficially humorous but deeply offensive public remarks about women attest to Trump's overall rejection of gender politics. And his inherently sexist attitude has not changed since he became the President. One year after his

inauguration, he still diligently posts via his Twitter account @realdonaldtrump and his comments about women are typically sarcastic or written half-jokingly, as if women's concerns, voices, problems and achievements were not serious enough to be worth the President's time. Such tweets indicate that not only does he subscribe but also contributes to conservative 'feminist erasures'. His favourite method of demonstrating his repudiation for gender equality manifests when he dismisses criticism coming from women by sexualising and objectifying female bodies and minds.

Trump's belief in the subservient (and ornamental) function of women in the society is most evident in his admiration for young, sexualised female bodies and his apparent contempt for ageing women. A few examples should adequately illustrate his misogyny, which to many has now become common knowledge. For instance, on 9 September 2015, Paul Solotaroff of *Rolling Stone* magazine reported that Trump had commented on his former Republican rival, a middle-aged woman Carly Fiorina: 'Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that?' (Solotaroff 2015) So blinded by his sexism was Trump that it did not even cross his mind to look in the mirror for a more objective comparison. After all, in his view, when 'America was great'—supposedly during the 1950s' post-war boom—it was socially acceptable to judge women by their physical appearance and to value their youthful looks over their achievements, intelligence, or experience.

Trump's fascination with gender hierarchies and relations between men and women from decades preceding the second-wave of feminism has also become evident in his frequent casual remarks about women in other interviews. It has, however, been most visible in his tweets. He has gone as far as characterising breastfeeding as 'disgusting' and citing abortions as the reason for some women's misfortunes. Elsewhere, Trump called successful women 'over-rated' or 'bimbos', commented on female politicians judging them not by their politics but by their looks, even bragged about watching porn and sexually harassing and groping women. With this record, although it may seem astonishing that he has been voted President and is still in the office today, it comes as no surprise that millions of women globally have resisted his sexism by posting in dominant and social media, as well as by attending street protests. Numerous feminists have now also made strides towards analysing the reasons behind

his political success and the potential impact his sexism may have on the future of feminism.

### **Sexism and Women's Mobilisation**

To understand the background and the scale of Trump's unprecedented, sexist disposition it is perhaps useful to turn to feminist examinations of sexism in the recent decades, when the anti-feminist discourse was much less presumptuous. In her compelling book *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done* (2010), Susan J. Douglas saw the unwelcomed emergence of misogynist jokes in the new millennium as a reaction to contemporary gender politics. She explained:

Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it's okay, even amusing to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women. (Douglas 2010: 9)

At first glance, Trump's discourse on women—his statements in interviews, as well as his jokes and one-liners on Twitter—could be categorised as just an updated version of that infamous wave of enlightened sexism. Douglas proposes that it emerged in the 1990s when American popular culture started to bombard the public with fantasies of female power. Back then, Hollywood films, TV series and women's magazines seemed to have embarked on celebrating many aspects of traditionally understood femininity framed as a choice and a source of empowerment for the featured women, who rarely met any sexism or misogyny on their way to success.

Among other chick flicks, we watched *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), as well as TV series such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (1998-2008) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) with emancipated, beautiful, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class female characters. However, as Douglas further observes, the dominance of such representations in popular visual media might have dulled some western women's vigilance; before they noticed, social acceptance of sexism, often veiled as irony or sarcasm, has considerably increased. It all happened despite the fact that for more than twenty-five years, albeit from different standpoints, feminist critics such as, Tania

Modleski (1991), Susan Faludi (1993), Rebecca Munford (2005) Angela McRobbie (2009) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) have been warning against the potential risks of post-feminist promotion, of de-politicised femininity along with the empowerment of the few privileged, typically white women living in western capitalist countries.

As much as the popularity of post-feminism or 'girl power'—the self-centred gender politics that rarely looked beyond heterosexual lifestyles of white, western middle classes (Barrett 2000)—might have permitted the resurgence of the conservative backlash against feminism, there still seems to be a considerable difference between 'enlightened sexism' and the one in which Trump seems to be espousing. While the first was relatively subtle, slightly ironic, disguised as empowerment, choice and optimism about the social role of women, the current President is simply offensive and politically incorrect. His comments often verge on condoning sexual harassment of women. Instead of acknowledging 'girl power' as some of the enlightened sexist discourses have done, his brusque and unceremonious manner of speech appears to shrug off the entire history of feminism as insubstantial or peripheral to American culture.

On 27 January 2018, British journalist Piers Morgan who was interviewing Trump for ITV posted on Twitter: 'President Trump has declared he is NOT a feminist. He tells me: 'No, I wouldn't say I'm a feminist. I mean, I think that would be, maybe, going too far. I'm for women, I'm for men, I'm for everyone'. While Trump intends to come across as unbiased, this remark confirms his ignorance of the social history of gender politics. In other words, he publicly disregards the work feminist activists and scholars have been doing for decades to abolish patriarchal privilege. It is this apparent obliviousness to women's rights movements of the past, matched by his singular gusto in pre-feminist everyday misogyny that has filled feminists across the globe with anger. That, in turn, has prompted the recent worldwide political mobilisation of women. Guided by the desire to join forces, many of them rose above earlier divisions and disagreements.

Because Trump's sexism has no trace of sophistication and his jokes about women are unquestionably degrading, he has been declared by some feminist writers as a new type of sexist: crude, immature and orientated towards the humiliation of women to boost his own traditionally framed masculine persona. Among recent critics of

Trump's impertinent masculinity is Naomi Wolf—the writer whose book *The Beauty Myth* (1991), according to some accounts, might have inspired the post-feminist trend (see Gamble 2001). In her article for the *New Republic*, to adequately describe Trump's attitude towards women, she has re-appropriated the phrase 'wolf whistle politics', once used by Wendy Davis, the former state senator in Texas. Wolf explains:

the concept of 'wolf whistle politics' allows us to discern the contours of a contemporary constellation we may not have perceived before. If we trace the thread of vicious, angry, and eroticized sexism—as opposed to the more polite, condescending sexism of the first decade or so of the twenty-first century—we can use the concept of wolf whistle politics to smoke out and name a whole gamut of tactics that have somehow, appallingly, made their way back to America's center stage. (2017)

When matched with some of Trump's policies, which had a direct impact on many unprivileged women's lives—for example, the ban on organisations that offered birth control and abortions in countries dependent on the US aid (Sengupta 2017)—the Twitter President's homespun wolf whistle sexism may be the worst we have seen in an American political figure. But as he keeps walking the halls of the White House with impunity, the sound of his whistle has awakened a roaring wolf: the new feminist movement, united in the protest against the number one sexist in the world, who paradoxically, set in motion a global feminist renaissance. Having returned to the agenda of a movement, now feminism shares some of its commitment to activism and open protest with the second wave from the 1960s and 1970s and, at the same time, honours the intersectional ambition of the third wave. Unintentionally, in his offensive language, Trump reminds all women that, in Rebecca Walker's words, 'to be a feminist is ... to join in sisterhood with women... to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them'. (1992: 4) If Walker refused to embrace post-feminism, so do, increasingly, women who have not previously considered themselves outspoken feminists.

Thanks to Trump's wolf whistle sexism, it has become glaringly evident that no fraction of feminism can be just grounded in privileged lifestyles; it must anchor itself in

activism and the sense of unity of a movement. Nevertheless, it is true that on a day-to-day basis the current Fourth Wave of feminism is most visible via online activities that frequently celebrate private achievements of individual women, who concentrate on their immediate realities and so their posts can echo at least some of the post-feminism focus on choice and personal empowerment. However, social media, such as, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram allow for a plethora of voices, feeding online expressions of both subjective identities and female political agency (Munro 2013; Chamberlain 2017; Rivers 2017). It does not take long for the social media user to notice that many women's online activities have become significantly more politicised. Millions express their discontent with the current re-emergence of sexism in the public sphere, or turn to exposing the scale of patriarchal abuse in everyday social practice, as for example, via #EverydaySexism whose feed is linked to 'The Everyday Sexism Project' launched by Laura Bates in the spring of 2012. Many women have also started discerning some political potential in their own voices, particularly when they join forces. This has become abundantly evident in posts unveiling sexual harassment via the recent #MeToo campaign—the most visible but not the only example of an immensely popular global action centred on women's rights and their concealed abuses.

If a worldwide community of feminists has already turned more vocal and inclusive before Trump's presidential campaign, with him in the picture, the aims and objectives of women's activism become galvanised towards a more united and, in some respects, universal social front. The need for women to adopt 'strategic essentialism' (hooks 2009) and get together despite their other social differences is no longer a utopian ideal of female coalition or the left-wing's wishful thinking. Every time Trump publicly articulates his sexism his words illuminate that, to use Gayatri Spivak's (2015) phrase, 'the contamination of the western subject' with patriarchy is not a thing of the past. His views are often seen as indicative of larger, but increasingly concealed and underlying gender inequalities across the globe. They anger, infuriate and depress us, but they also stimulate calls to action, ultimately shifting many women's understanding of feminism from the politics of lifestyle to the politics of a movement.

### **Early Symptoms of the Feminist Renaissance**

Soon after Trump became the President, many high-profile western feminist writers and activists reacted to his election win over Hilary Clinton. They used the occasion as a pretext to offer a diagnosis of contemporary gender politics in America and beyond. Among such voices, we could hear Gloria Steinem, one of the most famous leaders of American feminism at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, who in 1972—with Letty Cottin Pogrebin—co-founded *Ms.* magazine. Although Steinem at once recognised Trump's political triumph as a setback for women's rights activism, she did not lose heart. Two days after the election, on 10 November 2016, she posted a Twitter link to her article in *The Guardian*, which was pointedly titled 'After the election of Donald Trump: We will not mourn. We will organise'. Steinem's lead read: 'This is a time of great danger, as most of us try to escape control by some of us, and old hierarchies reassert themselves. The risk is great but so is the prize'. (2016). The following year Steinem acted as a co-sponsor of The Women's March and in an interview for *Quartz*, she confirmed that witnessing Trump's astonishing ascendance to power has been 'a huge wake-up call' that resulted in more and more women embracing the label of feminism. In her view, that has been 'a step forward' towards raising women's consciousness. (Merelli 2017)

What might have been otherwise interpreted as 'white-lash' or 'man-lash' (Steinem 2016), a quintessential feminist erasure, or a crushing blow to feminism may in fact have injected many women's rights activists with new hope for regrouping feminist ranks to achieve more efficiency, a somewhat more united front and a wider social appeal. In one way or another, several top figures of American feminism echoed Steinem's call for reassembling feminists to continue the struggle. Among them was bell hooks who declared in an interview for *BUST*:

We have to restore feminism as a political movement. The challenge to patriarchy is political, and not a lifestyle or identity. It's as if we have to return to very basic education for critical consciousness, around what visionary feminist politics really is about. (hooks in Alpraum 2017).

*BUST*, once proclaimed by some among the feminist academia as the magazine at the forefront of post-feminism, now seems to be turning into one of the spaces of politicising women's protests. The intention of its editors best exemplified in their publication of

*BUST: A Feminist Guide to Resistance* (2017), which among other texts—such as an interview with the mentioned bell hooks and an article on the Russian punk band Pussy Riot—features manual-like texts with tips for women who wish to get involved in politics or attend street protests. *BUST*'s current emphasis on intersectionality, women's political involvement and civil disobedience appears in stark contrast to its early days, when it was mostly focused on so called 'girlie feminism'.

In 1999, Penguin published *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, a collection of essays which had appeared in the magazine's few first issues, when it was still as *zine* run by Debbie Stoller and Laurie Henzel. Back then, *BUST*'s focus on empowerment through choice and sexuality triggered harsh criticism from feminist scholars who saw such promotion of femininity as an invitation for patriarchal backlash. To give one example, having analysed *BUST*'s discourse, Rebecca Munford wrote: 'There is a radical difference between embracing Barbies, blowjobs, sexism, and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas as lifestyle choices and lobbying for changes in legislation and public policy'. (2010: 195) Of course, it is fair to say that 'personal is political', the problem was, however, that in those early articles *BUST* authors focused so much on the intimate, private and everyday practices of western women that larger political ideals disappeared from their post-feminist agenda. Experiences of western females—frequently those from privileged backgrounds—seemed to have been essentialised and taken for all women's reality. Although possibly in response to similar criticisms, *BUST*'s strategies to empower women slowly reoriented towards igniting political consciousness in their readers. The magazine's current turn to more radical cultural and social protests appears to be grounded in a realisation that promotion of femininity cannot avoid politics and to be successful feminism needs to be outspoken about political tactics for fighting for women's full social equality. Today, looking at *BUST*'s Twitter feed @bust\_magazine, we can easily notice a balance between messages aimed at empowering women through their choice and traditional female interests and those that demonstrate the editor's political stance, including retweets of texts and photo collages criticising Donald Trump, be it those with thoughtful analysis or those with comedic undertones.

If Trump has not caused a feminist revolution across the globe, he certainly appears to have prompted the evolution of contemporary women's activism in the west from more lenient approach to gender politics towards more revisionist and reformist outlook. At the end of her book on enlightened sexism, Douglas seemed desperate for change:

But really, haven't we had enough? Isn't it time, Buffy-style, to take a giant stake and drive it right through the beastly heart of enlightened sexism? Because I think that, in our heart of hearts, we do miss feminism: its zeal, its audacity, its righteous justice. So let's have some fun, and get to work. (2010: 306)

If enlightened sexism could be fought back with punchier arguments and intelligent speech, now women have wolf whistle sexism as their much less sophisticated but surely sturdier patriarchal enemy, which crept back in, almost unnoticed. To defeat it, many see no option but to go to the streets and shout.

As much as many feminist authors see the connection between post-feminism and the patriarchal backlash, wolf whistle sexism also feeds off the absence of women's social and political issues from conservative political debates, where women seem once again to be 'othered' and pushed out of the dominant political discourse. It should be acknowledged that after 9/11 the political climate of 'neoconservative militarization and neoliberal globalisation' marginalised women in American social and political discourses. (Marchand and Sisson Runyan 2011: 4) From the beginning of his campaign, Trump advocated the values of neoconservative imperialism and neoliberal globalisation, both designed to further empower the existing patriarchal capitalist superstructure and reinforce the importance of national security. Social problems which traditionally have been of significance to women, such as healthcare, social welfare, gender equality and human rights, were pushed to the margins, opposed, or totally erased from his political agenda. If prior to the Trump campaign, some women resisted their political marginalisation, their protests were usually smaller scale and centred on select issues. In addition, feminists seemed to have been divided, if not internally conflicted, with very few radical voices, so they lacked sufficient social impact.

Having provoked strong social resistance throughout many global societies, the Twitter President, who stood for not just one androcentric political cause but many, may have unintentionally reshaped feminist movement. The correlation between Trump's sexist attitude and the revitalisation of gender politics in the US made press headlines during his campaign. For instance, on 27 October 2016, while reporting on Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama who then responded to some of Trump's sexist remarks on women, CNN writer Frida Ghitis mentioned that a generation of young women who had not believed in feminism, were returning to defending women's rights and 'openly venting about their encounters with sexism' on Facebook. (2016) She concluded:

Trump has not only breathed new life, new awareness into the demands for equal treatment for women everywhere, but in the process, he sealed his own fate. Pollsters say millennials are now solidly behind Hillary Clinton, and women's support may well make her president of the United States. (2016)

Although Ghitis' sanguine prophecy didn't come true, her observations on the awakened feminist spirit proved right. Over the following year, numerous media channels kept confirming the growing popularity of feminist ideologies across the globe. Although opinions on feminism can often sound disparate, some reporters spotted clear connections between Trump and the new feminist renaissance. Chief among them is Katha Pollitt from *The Nation*, who claims: 'Feminism is back, with a vengeance, and you can thank Donald Trump for that'. (2018). Even though Pollitt recognises that not all women subscribe to the feminist agenda, she also clearly frames the contemporary women's activism as passionate and brave; her choice of phrasing, for example, includes words like 'rage' and 'unleashed anger'. (Pollitt 2018)

Indeed, both official media channels and social media now highlight that radical feminism, which has been almost dormant for the past few decades, is on an upsurge. The sweet, enjoyable hymns of empowerment, self-expression and sexual pleasure of the few privileged, which Angela McRobbie once termed 'faux feminism' (2009: 1) are OUT. So is 'the pitbull feminism' of the high-achieving, professional and typically white women who had enough financial assets to balance their careers and family life and dared to project themselves as examples of gender equality across the whole western

society. (Douglas 2010: 217) What is IN are confrontational, brave women from all sections of society coming together under one common banner of exposing all forms of patriarchal discrimination. Worth noting, this somewhat revolutionary anti-Trump feminism—the fierce and vigorous discourse of combat and struggle that is coming back—is not only united by its disdain for the man in the White House, but also, or even more so, by social sensitivity, solidarity, and an attempt to join forces by reaching across social divisions.

### **The Women's March and the Present-Day Feminism**

The intersectional character of present-day gender politics was probably most evident during The Women's March in 2017. It took place on 21 January, the day after Trump's inauguration. Dominant media soon hailed it as the largest street protest in the American history with estimated numbers of up to four and half million participating across America who demonstrated their disapproval for Trump's political agenda and his planned policies. It was not limited to the US; marches were also organised that day in other 635 locations worldwide, in countries such as Canada, Mexico, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway and Australia. The idea of staging a mass street protest the President-elect originated from social media. Apparently, Teresa Shook, a woman from Maui, was the first to write a Facebook post saying, 'I think we should march'. (Kearny 2016)

Already in November 2016, several women, including, Evvie Harmon, Breanne Butler, Fontaine Pearson and Bob Bland created concurrent Facebook pages targeted at mobilising women to express their resistance to Trump by marching on Washington DC. Soon, some of these Facebook pages merged under one heading of 'The Women's March'. By that time, Harmon, Bland, Butler, and Pearson, joined by Vanessa Wruble, Carmen Perez, Tamika D. Mallory, Linda Sarsour, Janaye Ingram and Paola Mendoza also set up a formal organising committee. Not only did The Women's March team aim at tackling the event's logistics but also at propagating their intention of uniting women in defiance of Trump and his neglect of human rights. The effects that The Women's March instigated go far beyond a few speeches and a day of vocal group chanting in American city centres.

The March itself seemed reminiscent of The Great Washington March of 1963 and similar events from the decades thereafter. However, it was the first mass-scale protest of that size led by women who potentially would become the primary sufferers after the conservative political win in November 2016. The March also marked a shift in methods of feminist political resistance. The subtler theoretical debates and disjointed expressions of disapproval for acts of patriarchal discrimination, which had started mushrooming in social and dominant media in the preceding years, gave ground to the more radical, physical presence of protesters in the streets. This change of tactics granted women activists more media attention and therefore more social visibility. The organisers made every effort to consolidate their grassroots initiative by providing an accessible space for the articulation of women's concerns; and so, they took the debate on women's rights beyond academic texts, smaller scale conferences, activist press and online platforms, where it had been previously centred.

Although the ample crowds of vocal but peaceful marchers included both women and men, the coordinators of The March were quite quick to make sure the focus of the day was not centred negatively on the new President, but positively on feminism. Cassady Fendlay, the organisers' spokeswoman, highlighted: 'We're not targeting Trump specifically. It's much more about being proactive about women's rights'. (Jamieson 2016) This emphasis on 'being proactive', which first resulted in the comeback of the street protest, later gained both symbolic and inspirational meaning. However, it was not the only sign of the changing face of western feminism. The Women's March has conveyed women activists' return to some of the strategic tenets of the 1960s and 1970s second wave of feminism when the radical politics of the movement aimed at enthusing women to take political action and to shout about discrimination instead of celebrating what has already been achieved.

Even if certain aspects of the pre- and post-2017 Women's March feminism do not seem to be poles apart, and some activist circles simply continue their excellent work for gender emancipation, we can now observe a reinforcement of previously smaller-scale or marginal tendencies and directions. What stands out most is the intensity with which feminist activists value the inclusivity and intersectionality of the new feminist renaissance. To appeal to the largest possible demographic, the

organisers of The Women's March tried to make the event all-embracing. Only four days after Trump's win, in an interview for *The Washington Post*, Bob Bland confirmed: 'We welcome our male allies. ... We want this to be as inclusive as possible while acknowledging that it's okay to have a women-centered march'. (Stein 2016) In line with its intersectional objective, and to lead by example, The March's organising committee also recruited women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to serve as the event's planners, coordinators and promoters.

Apart from cutting across racial divisions, the organisers were also keen to reach out to women of different class backgrounds. Breanne Butler was reported in *The New York Times* to express the organisers' concern: 'We don't want only an upper-middle class of people at this march because no one else can afford to go'. (Rogers 2016) To meet their target of bringing a diverse population, the committee first addressed issues involving travel and its affordability and then embarked on ground recruitment work by visiting churches, synagogues and community centres. It has been a long time since feminists engaged *en masse* in mobilising women through community recruitment events and in-person outreach. Undoubtedly, such actions could be a further testament to the overall change of feminist strategies.

However, no one before or during the March was more eloquent about the need for more intersectional activism than the radical African American feminist Angela Davis. In her memorable and vivid Washington DC speech, Davis contended:

[I]nclusive and intersectional feminism... calls upon all of us to join the resistance to racism, to Islamophobia, to anti-Semitism, to misogyny, to capitalist exploitation. ... What is at stake, and also the possibilities opened up, are undoubtedly greater in the immediate in the US. But as women around the world fight to defend and extend their rights, this protest movement is a sign of the possibilities to build their own movements, whether for the right to abortion in Ireland and Poland, against violence in India and South Africa, against femicide in Mexico and for women's rights as human rights everywhere. (Matthews 2017)

Davis's compelling call for feminism to cut across social divisions, to expand beyond the west, and to depart from any focus on the privileged echoed some more radical, voices

from the 1960s counterculture—the original home to Davis' social activism. By pointing to the intersections of race and gender discourses and through directing today's feminists' attention to the greater spectrum of human rights with more global and collective viewpoint, both the speech and the positive reactions to it solidified the newly desired direction for contemporary feminism.

It comes as no surprise that the first sections of the organisers publication commemorating The Women's March, *Together We Rise: Behind the Scenes at the Protest Heard Around the World* (2018) start with inspirational quotes from two African American poets, Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou. Recited by Alicia Keys in Washington DC during the original Women's March of 2017, Angelou's poem became the protesters' motto—an encouragement for ordinary women to stand up for their right and expose gender discrimination. Lorde's and Angelou's poetry often convey expressive calls for proud rebellion and self-care. Many of their verses had proved morale-boosting for women from underprivileged backgrounds. When the radical and poetic language became the driving rhetoric behind inspiring women's resistance against patriarchy, Lorde's and Angelou's lines—employed as electrifying maxims and epigrams during and after The Women's March—may have confirmed that the dominance of post-feminism in the American culture has shrunk significantly.

The illusion that feminism has done its job can no longer convince American women if they are being offended and discriminated by the man at the top of the political power structure. The March demonstrated that ordinary women are angry and thus more likely to be interested in radical discourse, possibly even more than in any other form of a feminist message. When Angela Davis was applauded in Washington DC, her speech was full of warlike vocabulary: 'militant', 'defend', 'watch out', 'recruit', 'fight', all stemming from military and revolutionary nomenclature. A similar discourse was adopted by other speakers, as well as by the organisers of The March, showing that in certain respects, western feminism has returned identity itself a struggle for women's rights. This perhaps explains the high visibility of older generation feminists during the street protests in January 2017, who, unlike elsewhere, came centre stage to lead the crowds arm in arm with more commonly expected celebrity figures.

And so, the March revealed that to be convincing and socially visible contemporary feminists could no longer just dedicate their time to writing theory books and teaching the already privileged crowds in western universities. They need to get out and openly propagate their criticism of patriarchy outside academia. Feminist writers and activists must also proactively seek alternative teaching routes to reach the non-traditional academic audience, as well as invest in unrestricted access publication and promotions outlets, so that critical feminist thought is not separated from the social reality of everyday life. Even though the speakers during The March shared their feminist agenda with many academics, they could mobilise women by using a much more straightforward, punchy rhetoric and inspirational phrasing that had been carefully developed to reach women from all walks of life.

Even if, as some may claim, The Women's March of 2017 only mobilised those women who had already been convinced that they needed to stand against sexism and patriarchal abuse, it certainly made them more active and politicised. The street protests sparked an upsurge in feminist spirit and strengthened women's vigilance when it comes to gender equality. That is perhaps why they were followed by a whole wave of social media campaigns and smaller scale initiatives devised to invite women to oppose patriarchal abuse or lack of equal gender treatment. When 'feminism' was announced by Merriam-Webster as the word of 2017, there could not be more justification for such a choice. (Criss 2017) The year witnessed the unveiling of sexual harassment in film and TV industries and political circles, #MeToo and #Timesup campaigns, the upsurge in political commentary on women's rights on Facebook and Twitter, the birth of numerous support groups for women, who fall victim of sexual harassment, the growing popularity of feminist podcasts, as well as the open dominant media debates on the gender pay gap and rape cultures. All these can be read as products of the new feminist renaissance. There have also been signs of change towards more gender equality in dominant popular culture in America, most remarkably, when Greta Gerwig, the director of *Lady Bird* (2016) and Rachel Morrison, the cinematographer of *Mudbound* (2016) made history by winning first-ever female nominations in their respective Oscar categories. Although there seems to be still a long way to go for women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds—possibly thanks to the noise feminists made in 2017

about the state of gender politics—we have now started to see more and more effort across distinct cultural and social institutions to honour female rights and expose the previously concealed abuse of women, on which Trump's misogyny had capitalised.

### **The New Feminist Renaissance: 'Look Back March Forward'**

Before Trump started his campaign, in popular Internet zines and in social media the term 'feminist' had often been used as a lifestyle label for passive expressions of what was traditionally marked as 'feminine' or elsewhere promoted as 'girl power'. In some respects, the unashamed misogyny of Trump turned into a practical realisation of what some critics had foreseen for a while. Oblivious to politics, the popular narcissistic promotion of womanhood was sometimes conducted in opposition to the previous decades' women's rights activism and feminist theories, hence the term 'post-feminism'. However, post-feminism's emphasis on agency, choice and identity had fallen into the trap of being re-appropriated by Trump—and other misogynists—who manipulated it to fit their supremacist perspective on gender politics and to subjugate the 'feminine' women.

Trump's symbolic and ideological attack on women quite abruptly revealed that—though in many ways beneficial to women in everyday life—de-politicised post- and neoliberal feminist discourses (Gill & Scharf 2011) of empowerment through pleasure and self-expression, made many western women deceptively confident in their social/cultural and political power. It was most visible in social media over the past decade. At the same time, the available political feminist commentary published in books and academic journals frequently remained shielded from public access—be it because of its scholarly jargon or the price for reading full copies—which further contributed to de-politicisation of feminism in popular culture.

Paradoxically, not only has Trump influenced definitions of feminism that circulate in popular culture but also injected women worldwide with a renewed sense of solidarity and political involvement, of which The 2017 Women's March was the most evident but not the only sign. The changes at the centre of the political stage in the US focused many feminists' agenda away from the politics of lifestyle to more collective, intersectional and global approaches to women's rights. Although Fourth Wave

Feminism (Munro 2013, Rivers 2017, Chamberlain 2018) often remains focused on politics of difference rather than on women's coalition, there has been a significant shift from post-feminist approaches (Barrett 2000) towards what bell hooks once labelled 'strategic essentialism' (2009). Women have been brought together despite other social and geographical divisions, to fight for their collective causes in more radicalised and politicised ways.

In their 'Preface', the authors of *Together We Rise* declare: 'What happens now, of course, is up to all of us. It was a march, but it was also a first step'. (2018) Although many feminists changed their tactics, which resulted in growing engagement with women's rights activism and the sharp rise of awareness when it comes to hidden gender inequality, it cannot be denied that neither did the backlash against feminism disappear nor did faux feminism and pitbull feminism. There still exist complacent women's initiatives who align themselves with conservative politics, for example, the self-centred, socially insensitive group using Twitter account @WomenforTrump who define themselves as the 'voice of smart, independent women'. Although such groups still attract followers, a substantial majority of women in the west, albeit with a different degree of radicalism, tend to demonstrate support or at least sympathy for collective women's rights activism.

What Trump made us aware of is that '[c]omplacency is not an option, and so we surge forward anew', as stated on the official website of 'Women's March on London'. While reporting on the 2018 Women's Anniversary Marches that happened on 20 January in 34 countries, their sister site 'Women's March Global' also introduced a new slogan: 'Look Back March Forward', possibly the best and the most succinct expression of the current women's rights orientation. Today's feminists seem to have learnt from past mistakes and triumphs, and the majority agree to work together for a better future for women across the globe. Of course, the meaning of feminism is always subject to interpretation. However, the current and the most productive version of women's rights activism—as the past few years have shown—is the one that builds on strategic unity, radical political attitudes and open promotion of gender equality, as well as on collective, intersectional and transnational approaches. As much as there is space for tactics of empowerment through lifestyle choices that can have educational value,

particularly for younger generations, to emancipate women from restrictive patriarchal expectations and to end sexist discrimination worldwide, this new feminist renaissance needs to continue as a movement.

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