

Don't forget the F-word

Erica Jong on how the hope she had for women in 1968 has been extinguished

Erica Jong
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It's an artifice of journalism to choose a given year and pretend that year "changed everything". We constantly hear in the United States that 9/11 "changed everything", yet - for most of humanity - life is still as nasty, brutish and short in 2008 as it was in 1008 or 2008 BC. If it is so for man, it is doubly so for woman - since women and children are the main victims of war - if we go by numbers. But can numbers measure pain? Probably not.

It is a good time for me to be thinking about feminism over the past 40 years, as this week I am in Rome with other writers, thinkers and artists (including Bernardo Bertolucci, Joschka Fischer and Slavoj Zizek) for a festival of philosophy to mark the anniversary of 1968. In 1968, there was a great feeling of hope that things might change, that women might escape from beatings and rape and malnutrition in the developing world, and that, in our supposedly civilised world, they might find law degrees, medical degrees, political advancement and economic parity with their brothers and fathers. Not to mention their husbands.

But it has not come to pass. Yes, women have law and medical degrees in great number, write books by the carload and are good at it (why should we be surprised, when our first great poet of love, Sappho, was a woman?), but the world is still not a level playing field. Women are still not safe on the streets or in their own homes. And they comprise, with children, most of the world's poor.

We have spilled oceans of ink, cut down forests of trees, blazed through the internet in light, and the world is still dominated by the sex-bearing appendages rather than clefts. Why? That is the subject for a future book. But I can say that the hope I felt in 1968 has evaporated. Last week, a woman commentator on a supposedly progressive network called Hillary Clinton and Geraldine Ferraro "whores". She was suspended, but she'll be back. Women columnists still make their fortunes by attacking other women, as in the age of Clare Boothe Luce. It is, in fact, a time-honoured way to get a book contract or a political appointment. Trashing one's own gender remains a path to advancement.

There was a moment - 1968 to 1975, let's say - when it seemed that everything would change for women. We were studied, promoted, advanced like a trendy minority. Then came the backlash. "Is feminism dead?" screamed the cover of Time magazine. We were declared dead before we were even half born. The backlash against feminism has lasted longer than the brief flaring of feminism itself.

This has been the course of the movement for women's equality. Born in the 18th century with other movements for equality, our movement has ebbed and flowed with changing generations. We were scarcely enunciated before we became "the F-word" - the word that can't be articulated lest we sound too much like our hated mothers.

In the US, there has been a real ebbing of reproductive rights, equality of pay and equality at law. And women have assisted in their own demise, demonstrating against abortion and "for life", though they don't seem to care so much for the children already

born as for those unborn. There has also been a flood of privileged women with law degrees and prosperous husbands returning to housewifery - albeit a housewifery aided by nannies and caterers. I have nothing against that. But I am astounded by the flight back to the nursery. In 1968, anti-feminist scolds used to predict that the pill would stop women from having babies in the future; quite the opposite has happened. Our daughters are having three, four and five children - if they can afford them. Good for them. But here is what amazes: even the most dependent years of childhood take up only a fraction of women's lives, and the cost of early childhood education, preschools, crèches and such would come nowhere near the cost of war, yet there is no political will in the US to make life healthier for childbearing women and children. That is the ultimate cost of the backlash - and once again, it targets the most vulnerable among us.

Watching this pageant of mayhem and murder one can only conclude, as Jeanette Winterson appears to in her latest novel, *The Stone Gods*, that we are a uniquely self-destructive species, high on our own desire to destroy our planet, starve and maim the world's children. Power is a drug. It craves more and more of itself. Humanity, it turns out, is better represented by Robert Mugabe and George W Bush than by Gandhi or Mother Teresa. Perhaps women hating women is just a shoot off the poisonous vine of misanthropy. We ourselves are the evil empire. And if we elect fools and knaves to hasten our planetary demise, perhaps it is because these monsters represent our own desires for self-destruction.

1968 was a brief flare of hope for the human species. It was extinguished. The thugs with jackboots are back. Some of them have vaginas. Or, as Oprah would say, "vajayjays". Talk about the problem that has no name: we can't even name our own clefts.

Feminism, founded by Mary Wollstonecraft, advanced by Virginia Woolf, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gloria Steinem and Hillary Clinton, has become nameless again. Perhaps a new generation will rediscover it like the shard of an ancient cooking vessel. Perhaps someone will name it again. I'll be there.

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