1 Living in interesting times

‘As long as discrimination and inequities remain so commonplace around the world – as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled and subjected to violence in and out of their homes – the potential of the human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realized.’ HILLARY CLINTON, US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE.¹

THERE IS AN old Chinese saying: ‘May you live in interesting times.’ Women today are living in interesting times and it is not yet clear whether this is a curse or a blessing. Thanks to the women’s movement, gender equality, at least in theory, is firmly on the agenda and has made a real difference to many women’s lives – more girls are being educated, women are living longer, there are more female parliamentarians than ever before; more women are working, and, importantly, women themselves are more aware of their rights.

On the other hand, for millions of women around the world, life continues to become even harder. There are still 1.3 billion people living in poverty and the majority of these are women. So are two-thirds of illiterate adults. Women and children are the main victims of conflict and are increasingly targeted for rape and sexual assault. One in three women worldwide will experience violence in her lifetime. Even in the rich world, the pay gap between men and women persists. In addition, girls and women increasingly have to struggle with cultural constraints that place them firmly back in traditional roles in the kitchen. And this is not just in countries where extreme versions of religion dictate what they may and may not do. Even in the US, the undertow is there, as Hillary Clinton found in her 2008 campaign.
Changes for the better

- More women are working – since 1980, the growth in women’s labor force has been substantially higher than that of men in every region of the world except Africa.
- More girls are being educated – by 2005, 63 per cent of countries had equal numbers of boys and girls in primary school and 37 per cent at secondary.
- Women are living longer – today, in 30 countries, female life expectancy at birth now exceeds 80 years.*
- Women are having fewer children – 50 per cent of women now have access to modern contraception.
- There are more women in politics than ever before and more women at grassroots level as well. There are six female presidents.
- Legislation, from international to local, is recognizing that women’s rights need to be protected.
- There are more liberal marriage laws in some countries and in the rich world/North the average age of marriage is going up.
- Lesbian women in some countries have more rights than they did before – homosexuality is legal in 111 countries and a number of Northern countries now have some legislation recognizing same-sex relationships.
- Female genital cutting has been outlawed in six African countries.
- Women are more aware of their rights, even in poor communities.


Backlash

Much of this seems to be part of a continuing backlash, fueled at least in part by George W Bush’s term in office and the American right wing – see for example in the next chapter on the continuing impact of the ‘global gag’ rule which prevents US money going to any organizations which are said to be linked to abortion. It is estimated that this will mean two million more unwanted pregnancies, 800,000 more abortions, 4,700 more dead mothers and 77,000 deaths of children under five.

In work, in many countries in the North, the gender gap in earnings persists – in the US in 2003, on average, women earned 75.5 per cent of men’s wages. This was down for the first time in four years.
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**Hillary-haters**

As Hillary Clinton contemplated being America’s first woman president, she also had to put up with a barrage of insults – simply because she is female. For example, in November 2007, a woman asked Arizona Senator and Republican contender for President John McCain: ‘How do we beat the bitch?’ Momentarily nonplussed, McCain came back with: ‘That’s a good question’, and proceeded to explain how he would beat [Ms Clinton]. The following week saw the clip being viewed almost a million times on YouTube.

Anti-Hillary websites proliferate on Facebook. They focus on her role in the kitchen and not the political arena, and some are violent. One is ‘Hillary Clinton: Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich’, with more than 23,000 members and 2,200 ‘wall posts’. Another, with about 13,000 members, is ‘Life’s a bitch, why vote for one? Anti-Hillary ‘08’.

But it is not just aberrant voters and social networking sites that buy into the anti-woman propaganda. On his radio show, which reaches 14.5 million people, Rush Limbaugh talks about Clinton’s ‘testicle lock box’. On his MSNBC show, Tucker Carlson says, ‘There’s just something about her that feels castrating, overbearing and scary.’ In her review of a recent book called *Thirty Ways of Looking at Hillary: Reflections by women writers*, Susan Faludi writes: ‘Let’s imagine this book’s concept – 30 well-known women writers talk about how they “feel” about Hillary Clinton – applied to 30 male writers and a male presidential candidate. Adjusting for gender, the essay titles would now read: ‘Barack’s Underpants’, ‘Elect Brother Frigidaire’, ‘Mephistopheles for President’, ‘The Road to Codpiece-Gate’, and so on. Inside, we would find ruminations on the male candidate’s doggy looks and flabby pectorals... We would hear a great deal about how [Barack Obama] made them feel about themselves as men and whether they could see their manhood reflected in the politician’s testosterone displays. And we would hear virtually nothing about their stand on political issues.’

If Hillary were a man it would be a very different story.

www.observer.com
http://seattletimes.nwsource.com

In Britain, women working full-time earn on average 17 per cent less an hour than men working full-time. Their part-time sisters average 36 per cent less an hour than men working full-time. The Fawcett Society, which campaigns for women’s equality, estimates that at current rates of change it will take more than 140 years to close all women’s pay gaps.
Politically, worldwide, we now have six women presidents, which is great, but this is still only six out of 194, which is a pretty poor percentage. In 2007, only 19 countries had achieved the benchmark of 30 per cent representation of women in parliament and this number actually fell from 20 in 2006. As the chapter on poverty, development and work (chapter 3) shows, aid money targeted at women is actually falling, despite all the world’s grand promises on gender equality.

In the Muslim world, fundamentalists’ narrow interpretations of the Qur’an amount to an attack on women’s rights. ‘In any situation where religious fundamentalism is on the rise it will always impact on women because at the heart of the religious fundamentalist agenda is the control of women, of reproductive rights and of the family,’ says Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters in the UK.³

In some cases, beliefs and practices are being dredged up from the past by fundamentalists and recast, sometimes in countries where they were never common practice. In Sri Lanka, for example, some groups demanded the introduction of female genital cutting (FGC) as an ‘Islamic duty’, despite the fact that no-one in Sri Lanka had ever practiced FGC and that it has nothing to do with Islam.

The new administrations in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen few women in positions of power. In Afghanistan, despite the emphasis on women, they have been largely excluded from the rebuilding of their country. Iraq, once renowned for its relative freedom for women, is seeing women attacked and murdered in the street.

In the West, some men – and women – feel strongly that women’s rights are only being granted at the expense of men’s rights. The UK Men’s Movement is at the strident end of this: ‘We regard the assertion that women are disadvantaged as The Big Lie of our time. And feminism is based on The Big Lie. There
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Requiem for a brave woman
Sahar Hussein al-Haideri, 45, an Iraqi reporter working in the Mosul region, was murdered outside her home on 7 June 2007.

Sahar al-Haideri had to die because she was a journalist – an Iraqi journalist who dared to ask questions, and who gave a voice to Iraqis who do not want their country to be torn apart by sectarian violence or ruled by terror imposed by al-Qaeda’s franchise organizations.

Haideri, 45, reported from her home city of Mosul, a troubled place considered Iraq’s second most dangerous location for journalists after Baghdad... She described how female lecturers and civil servants were being targeted and killed.

‘The intimidation and attacks have forced other women in Mosul to give up going to work,’ she wrote.

Staying home was not an option she considered for herself. She went where no foreign journalist could go any more – into the streets, shops and restaurants of her volatile city.

Haideri was a tough reporter but also a caring wife and mother of four. The human touch was never missing from her work. Her stories always reflected this concern for people’s lives – shopkeepers and teachers; mothers, fathers and children; students, hairdressers and janitors.

George Packer, a reporter for The New Yorker, recently wrote in the Dangerous Assignments magazine, ‘The campaign of killing – conducted largely by insurgents and militias – has been systematic. Its purpose is to make journalism impossible.’

Haideri was aware of the risk her work entailed. Every journalist in Iraq knows he or she might be killed at any moment, and repeated threats are commonplace. Many have fled the country, while some leave temporarily in the hope of coming back as soon as the situation improves.

As we mourn her death, the best tribute we can pay her is to remember that she is not the only one on the hit-list. There are many more journalists in Iraq who need our help if we want them to stand up against those trying to silence them.

‘May God save female journalists, most of whom work anonymously for fear of being killed for no other crime than telling the truth,’ Haideri said in remarks that went out on the Institute for War and Peace (IWPR)’s radio show The Other Half. Iraqi journalists need more support of a worldly nature, too.

From an article by Susanne Fischer, IWPR’s Iraq country director, in IWPR’S Iraqi Crisis Report No 233 Part 2, 12 June 2007.
http://iwpr.net/?p=icr&s=f&o=336147&apc_state=henh

can be no greater folly or degeneracy than to provide further support, via Ministers for Women etc, to the most privileged group in our society – women – while
denying the disadvantaged, suppressed and persecuted group – men – any representation at all. Feminism is about women getting something for nothing. The question of whether “feminism has gone too far” is perhaps less important than “why feminism was established at all”. Feminism is an aberration, like Nazism and communism – a blight on our society. 

They are not the only ones to see feminism, and the gains women have made, in this light. Some of this may have been fueled by the focus on gender – one research study in four countries in Africa shows widespread confusion about the term ‘gender’. The report notes: ‘Gender legislation and shifts in gender relations have had some positive effects, giving women in these countries access to new resources and activities, seeing them participate more fully in public life, supporting them as household heads and so on. It has also had many negative effects, including increasing men’s hostility towards change, and exacerbating tensions between women and men in families.’

Sometimes this resentment spills into outright violence. A South African report suggests that high levels of violence against women recently reported in some studies may be partly fueled by male backlash against the progress women have made. Researchers have referred to this as ‘neo-patriarchy’ – a new attempt to exert male authority, in this case through a culture of sexual violence.

Finding a new word for feminism

One of the problems is that women’s rights are seen by some – or used by some – as a largely Western agenda. Karma Nabulsi, a politics research fellow at Oxford University in Britain, says: ‘When the political élites face battles with the Islamists, all of their opponents’ arguments are being cast as “We want to get rid of the West”, and women’s rights are part of that.’

This restriction of women’s rights as part of an
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anti-West agenda is not found only in the Muslim world. In Uganda, which has a positive record on women’s rights, an amendment to the Land Act which would give married women the rights to own land was rejected by President Museveni on the grounds that he wanted to save the world from the mistakes of the West. ‘It is like telling the Karimojong [nomadic herders] that Parliament had passed a Bill allowing women to share cows,’ he said. ‘There will be a civil war.’ The Women of Uganda network says: ‘His ideological stance is trapped in a 1960s’ time-warp, and the questions he raises on gender are out of step with what is now the general understanding of what constitutes gender issues. The President’s analysis of issues is contradictory in that while he is loathsome of Western values, he projects a social evolution that is determinedly Western and capitalist.’

Suddenly, women’s rights have become an import, along with Coca-Cola, Levi jeans and pornography. The irony is that a huge amount of the thinking and the pushing through of women’s issues over the last 10 or 20 years has come from women in the countries of the Majority World/South, who saw the inequalities with which they lived and decided to do something about it. ‘The notion that feminism is Western is still bandied about by those ignorant of history or who perhaps more willfully employ it in a delegitimizing way,’ says scholar Margot Badran. ‘Feminism, however, is a plant that only grows in its own soil.’

For some Muslim women, veiling has become part of a wider statement against the West. Where 25 years ago, liberation meant throwing off the hijab [veil], today, women who would never have worn the veil before are doing so, in large numbers.

The aftermath of 11 September 2001 continues to haunt us, pushing a security agenda that undermines civil liberties and forcing people to choose specific identities that separate them into narrow groupings.
– ‘with us’ or ‘against us’, Muslim or Christian, black or white.

In many Muslim countries, women are arguing for the right to define what it means to be Muslim in their own terms. Saad Hamid, a lawyer advising the Palestinian women’s legal reform movement in Gaza, says that many in the Arab world are searching for avenues to advance women’s rights within the context of Islam. ‘Solutions to 90 per cent of the problems exist within Islam if you want to find them,’ says Hamid. ‘What we’re trying to do is show that there are different schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Saying I know nothing about it, and I want to banish it and have purely secular laws, that’s ridiculous.’

Writer Leila Ahmed noted in her novel *A Border Passage*: ‘Generations of astute, thoughtful women, listening to the Qur’an, understood perfectly well its essential themes and its faith. And looking around them, they understood perfectly well, too, what a travesty men had made of it.’ ‘My problem is not with Islam, it is with the culture of patriarchy,’ says Iranian human-rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi.

One of the early feminists, Rebecca West, may have been British, but she summed up quite accurately the essence of feminism and what it still means for most women wherever they live in the world when she said in 1913: ‘I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.’

It is interesting that in the last few years, young women in particular have been starting to call themselves feminists. Women’s organizations in Britain and the US have produced T-shirts proclaiming; ‘I am a feminist’ and a Google search reveals a number of
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Turning into a Muslim
I was at a conference in Birmingham which I went into as normal, my usual mixed-up self, full of odd thoughts and random worries. As that day, 11 September, unfolded, I turned into a Muslim. Of course I was born a Muslim in Iran, I grew up as one under the Shah in the 1950s and 1960s, but I had never really thought about it, it wasn’t an issue, just there in the background. But after that conference I took a taxi back to the station. The driver was a Muslim, and when he realized I was one as well, he slowed right down. He asked me what we could do, as Muslims, about this terrible event, and about our own position. We progressed across that city at around ten miles an hour – and talked and talked.

I am a scholar, a teacher, somebody who engages in arguments, in dialogue, reasoned debate. For the first time, I was someone who had started getting hate mail. It came from people who had just seen that I was on TV or on the radio, without knowing what I had said beyond maybe a sound bite. Thus I was categorized as Muslim, troublesome, by people who I had never met and who had never heard what I have to say in any depth. I would get these vile postcards, and I remember my head of department scribbling on one of them: ‘We don’t all think like this my dear!’

Now there have been notions and proposals about solidarity kicking around in the Muslim community for years. People talked about it, but, in extremis, it began to make a sort of sense. I had not made a habit of announcing my identity, it was not relevant, but as that period unfolded, I felt I no longer had any choice. For years I had been denouncing the policies and practice of places like Saudi Arabia, but suddenly there were all sorts of issues on which I felt it inappropriate to voice criticisms. Those times didn’t seem the right time.

It has also meant I found myself in meetings alongside all sorts of strange bedfellows, people who I had, in some cases, previously refused to be in the same room with. I chaired meetings where I found myself in some degree of sympathy with fundamentalists there. Why was that? Because we had been categorized as Muslim terrorists together by the outside world.

Maybe it is because I am used to working within liberal academia, where it is less of an issue, than in other harsher places where Muslims are trying to make themselves invisible, but all of this has brought out the Muslim in me, an attitude of ‘I will face you all’. I object to being cowed.

Haleh Afshar is professor of Middle Eastern politics at the University of York.

new books with a feminist title or agenda – *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman’s Guide to why Feminism Matters* by Jessica Valenti,\(^\text{11}\) is one. Valenti notes that ‘Feminism is a pretty amazing thing,’ and says: ‘I don’t know why I didn’t call myself a feminist until I was in college. I certainly was one way before then. I think we all are.

‘I mean, really, what young girl hasn’t thought at some point that some sexist bullshit is completely unfair to women? The problem seems to be putting a name on that feeling. “Feminism” is just too scary and loaded a word for some women. Which is really too bad. Because feminism is a pretty amazing thing.

‘When you’re a feminist, day-to-day life is better. You make better decisions. You have better sex. You understand the struggles you’re up against and how best to handle them. I wrote *Full Frontal Feminism* because I spent a really long time feeling completely confused about why more young women wouldn’t embrace something that to me was clearly the greatest thing ever...

‘Most important perhaps, was my desire to write something that explained not only why feminism is so necessary and relevant, but also why it’s so damn cool.’

On the other hand, some young women think that

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**Defining feminism**

The word ‘feminisme’ was first coined in France in the 1880s, and referred to a social movement for women’s rights. It was not used widely by women until the 1970s when the Women’s Liberation movement used it to mean anyone who challenged gender relations; ‘the principle that women should have economic and social rights equal to those of men’. Feminism then became multiple ‘feminisms’ as Third World women, women of color, lesbian women, and working-class women claimed it as their own and moved it beyond a social and political movement to one claiming economic justice as well. By the mid 1990s the media in the North heralded a ‘post-feminist’ era. But many of the basic feminist demands have still not been met.
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Women’s rights 900 BC-2008</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>900 BC</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>In ancient Sumer (Iraq), Egypt and Japan, adult women can own property, play active roles in the marketplace and even be clerics. In the Andes, giving birth is seen as equivalent to taking a prisoner of war and death in childbirth is as honorable as death in battle. In pre-colonial Latin America, some native cultures practice what anthropologists call ‘gender parallelism’ valuing equally the distinct and overlapping tasks performed by men and women. The agrarian societies that followed tend to be less egalitarian.</td>
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<td>In the <strong>1400s</strong>, trade brings new status to women in some countries. In Nigeria, among the Igbo, a wealthy woman can buy a ‘wife’ to work with her and Yoruba women elect their own female representatives to protect their trading interests.</td>
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<td><strong>1776</strong></td>
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<td>During the French Revolution, working women march on Versailles to demand bread. In 1791 this inspires French playwright Olympe de Gouges to issue the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen’. She is executed by guillotine when the French Revolution rejects demands for women’s rights.</td>
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<td><strong>1759-1797</strong></td>
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<td>In Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft rejects conventional family authority, believes in female education, and bears a child out of wedlock. In 1792 she writes <em>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</em> which becomes a catalyst for much later feminist thinking.</td>
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<td><strong>1848</strong></td>
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<td>The world’s first women’s rights convention (with men as well as women) is held in Seneca Falls, New York, setting the agenda for the women’s rights movement.</td>
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<td><strong>1850s</strong></td>
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<td>In Brazil, women’s urban newspapers such as <em>O Jornal das Senhoras</em> (Ladies’ Journal) complain that marriage is ‘an unbearable tyranny’ and women deserve ‘a just enjoyment of their rights’.</td>
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<td><strong>1880-1890</strong></td>
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<td>The Japanese women’s movement is founded. Kishida Toshiko is jailed for a week after calling for women’s horizons to be ‘as large and free as the world itself’. The Government bans women’s political participation during the 1890s.</td>
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<td><strong>1861</strong></td>
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<td>In Russia, the emancipation of serfs raises women’s expectations of equality.</td>
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<td><strong>1893</strong></td>
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<td>New Zealand becomes the first country to give women the vote.</td>
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<td><strong>1896</strong></td>
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<td>In the US, the National Association of Colored Women unites Black women’s organizations, with Mary Church Terrell its first president. The NACW becomes a major vehicle for reform during the next 40 years.</td>
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<td><strong>1890-1923</strong></td>
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<td>In the late 1800s Islam is used to justify the education of women. In 1923 Huda Sha’rawawi founds the Egyptian Feminist Union. Women are at the forefront of the battle for independence from the British.</td>
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<td><strong>1911</strong></td>
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<td>Socialists observe 8 March as a day to honor the women who had organized strikes for better working conditions in the 19th and 20th</td>
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1913 In South Africa traditional women's organizations such as Manyano act as savings clubs for poor women. They are also at the forefront of the fight against apartheid.

1920 In the US, African American women meet to discuss how they can 'stand side by side with women of the white race and work for the full emancipation of all women' (Lugenia Burns Hope).

1926 In Turkey, as part of his program for modernization, Kemal Atatürk abolishes polygamy, makes schools and universities coeducational, gives women political rights and recognizes the equal rights of women in divorce, custody, and inheritance.

1929 The 'women's war' in Nigeria is a response among Igbo women's trading networks to the planned imposition by the British rulers of a new tax on women's property. The British put down the revolt by firing into the crowd, killing 50 women and injuring 50.

1941 In the US, almost seven million women take jobs during the war; two million as industrial 'Rosie the Riveters' and 400,000 joining the military.

1947 Gandhi expresses strong opposition to male domination of women, and India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, calls for equal educational and work opportunities for women and men. Nationalists adopt the slogan 'India cannot be free until its women are free and women cannot be free until India is free.' The 1947 constitution guarantees equality between the sexes.

1948 In Egypt, Doria Shafik forms the Daughters of the Nile Union. In 1951 she organizes an invasion of the Egyptian parliament by women and in 1953 creates a women's political party that is then suppressed by the government.

1959 In eastern Nigeria 2,000 women protest their declining status by occupying and setting fire to a market. They negotiate a resolution that eliminates all foreign courts and schools and expels all foreigners.

1977 Argentinean women constitute themselves into the 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo' to defy the murderous military junta that seized power from President Isabel Peron.

1975-2001 The birth and growth of the feminist movement. First international women's conference in Mexico, launching the United Nations Decade for Women and the formation of women's groups all over the world, including feminist newspapers, student organizations, professional women and lesbian feminists. Followed by conferences in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). Women's rights become enshrined in law in many countries.

2001-2008 Women continue to organize for their rights, while at the same time facing a backlash against their successes.
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lap-dancing and wearing as few clothes as possible is sexual liberation. Erica Jong, feminist and campaigner, on the 30th anniversary of her novel *Fear of Flying*, said: ‘The women who buy the idea that flaunting your breasts with sequins is power – I mean, I’m for all that stuff – but let’s not get so into the tits and ass that we don’t notice how far we haven’t come. Let’s not confuse that with real power. I don’t like to see women fooled.’¹²

It may be that it is time to open our eyes, reclaim women’s rights, and perhaps to reinvent the word feminism as something universal; to take it back to its roots and to make it something that women can claim as their own. Only then will things really begin to change.