

**Opening Speech, by FEM Conferences Founder Kat Banyard**

It's thrilling to see so many women and men here today.

Some of you here today I know have been active feminists for many years, some perhaps have only recently become interested in the issues and are curious to find out a bit more, and some I suspect have had their arms ever so slightly twisted to come along... and its fantastic that you are here. A feminist conference that only attracts people who already self-define as feminists has fallen somewhat short of the mark...!

So as the first order of the day it seems appropriate then to first establish what exactly feminism is. Indeed, it is a stark and depressing reflection on today's society that the term describing one of the most important, on-going social movements the world has ever known is so often dismissed and distorted – with mainstream society sold a perverted image of feminism that bears next to no relation to reality. So what is it really? The author Rebecca West wasn't sure. She said that *"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."* Well, lets take it down to its bare bones. The dictionary definition is 'advocacy of equal rights for women'. Yet in the current climate it often takes courage to call yourself a supporter of this notion - to call yourself a feminist - and challenging sexism can feel lonely and isolating. What FEM 07 will demonstrate today is that being a feminist is something to be proud of; further, being a feminist is in fact vital to the fabric of a just and humane society; and that by being an active feminist in the year 2007 you could change the course of human history.

So what is it about the world today that still needs to change? Well, I could stand here all day recanting devastating statistic after devastating statistic about the plight of women across the world:

- *like the fact that women do 2/3 of the world's work, receive only 10% of the world's income, and own just 1% of the means of production.*
- *Like the fact that violence against women causes more death and disability worldwide amongst women aged 15-44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents or war.*

- *And that women still only make up less than 20% of MPs in the UK.*

Or I could just tell you about one woman that I met recently. A woman who fled Congo to seek asylum in England two years ago. A woman whose husband was shot dead in front of her by soldiers. This woman told me how those same soldiers then proceeded to rape her. And how – a week later – they returned to her house and raped her again in front of her children. And the sick irony is she has sought asylum in a country where rape is effectively legal because only 5.3% of reported rape cases in the UK end in the rapist being convicted. This woman's experiences were not unique; she is not an isolated case. What lay behind this one woman's terrifying experiences was a world wide web of culture, law, practices and attitudes that work to exclude women everywhere from positions of power, cause them to live in poverty, and subject them to violence. Every day thousands upon thousands of women's lives are devastated by gender inequalities. *That* is why we need feminism in the year 2007. And *that* is why it is time we started a new national discussion about women's inequality here in the UK.

But that cannot and must not be a discussion by a select few. Gender inequality affects everyone: man, woman, girl and boy – from cradle to grave. Therefore everyone must speak up and speak out against it. And this discussion must also translate into action because the inequalities women experience will not disappear by accident. It will require no less than a total transformation of the most intimate and private relations between women and men. *Only then* will all young girls realise that they are worth the world, and not just worth the size of their waist or how good their clothes look. *Only then* will all young boys fully realise that women are human beings – just like them – and reject the dehumanisation of women through sexual objectification and violence. And *only then* will we begin to see what a fair and equal society really looks like.

Happily, the last few years have witnessed an exciting resurgence in feminist activism, with feminist blogs, feminist campaign groups and various feminist events cropping up across the country. The forms that this activism has taken have been diverse: from students at Sheffield Hallam University successfully preventing the FHM 'High Street Honeys Tour' from coming to their union – to collectives of women and men organising festivals called Ladyfests – which celebrate female music talent – shamefully so often absent from mainstream music festivals. But what is it that we are witnessing with this new activism?

Posterity allows us to group modern feminism in to 'waves' of mass activism: the first wave of feminism characterising the suffrage movement that secured women the right to vote; the second wave in the 1970s giving us countless freedoms we now all too often take for granted. Is this current activism we are witnessing today the burgeoning of a new third wave of feminist activism in the Britain?

Well, I say that is up to us.

We hold the reigns of posterity and we know that (what could be termed) a 'third wave' is long overdue. Let's steer this decade to a new level of feminist awareness and activism - with a movement that involves everyone: the old, the young, women and men. With new laws, legislation, and practices that root out entrenched causes of women's inequalities. With all of society educated about what feminism is and what needs to change. And with feminist groups in every city and student union. Every single person in this room today has the momentous opportunity to be a part of this revitalised feminist movement.

So use FEM 07 as an opportunity to learn about the issues, develop new ideas and tools for tackling sexism, and make links with organisations and groups already working towards women's equality. And if you just do one thing today – join the Fawcett Society – the UK's principle advocate for women's rights – and the organisation set to lead the new feminist movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

FEM Conferences was born in 2004 of an optimism that once people heard and learnt about the reality of sexism – they would never be able to look at the world in the same way again, and would feel compelled to do something about it. I still believe this to be true. In fact, I believe the UK is hungry for a new wave of feminism.

So I am proud and extremely excited to be a feminist in the year 2007. I hope you are too.

Thank you.