

# Feminist summer school: training the new generation of 'suffragettes'

Two-day UK Feminista event aims to mobilise activists and school them in art of campaigning and direct action

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Lizzy Davies

guardian.co.uk, Sunday 14 August 2011 14.39 EDT

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'Feminism is nothing but audacious': UK Feminista trainees hope to stage more direct action such as the recent protest outside London's Playboy Club. Photograph: Daniel Deme/EPA

After just one day of classes at her summer school of choice, Emily Birkenshaw had already learned a crucial lesson: how to "go floppy" when facing arrest. "You're heavier then, so you can't be carried," she said, with the genuine delight of a new recruit.

The 24-year-old been practising by linking arms with her classmates and singing loudly at a pretend policeman. "It just felt really empowering," she said. "If that happened [in real life] – and I hope it wouldn't – I'd know how to do it without getting hurt."

Birkenshaw, a teaching assistant from York, was one of about 500 who descended on Birmingham at the weekend for the [UK Feminista summer school](#), a two-day event aimed at mobilising feminist activists and training them in the art of campaigning and direct action. With new groups, new campaigns and a set of decades-old beliefs being repackaged for the 21st century, leading figures such as [Kat Banyard](#) are claiming a "massive resurgence" in [feminism](#).

If anyone felt intimidated by the "monumental shifts" needed, Banyard, author of [The Equality Illusion](#), told the audience, they needed to look no further than at the mountains moved by their antecedents. "Feminism is nothing but audacious," she said. "It can be done."

For many younger participants of the so-called suffragette school, this was their first real experience of feminism. Birkenshaw signed up because of "a collection of things that have made me go, 'This isn't right!'" One of those things, she said, was walking down the street in "funky dresses and funky tights" and fearing male comments, or

worse. "I don't like the fact that as a woman I have to feel scared," she said.

It was this kind of anger that gave rise, earlier this year, to the SlutWalk marches which took place all over the world and saw thousands of people turn out to defend a woman's right to wear what she liked and not feel threatened. Feminists are determined that this will not be the only headline-grabbing event of 2011. Having already carried out protests outside London's new Playboy Club and direct action against lads' magazines in a branch of Tesco, they are planning more.

In London, a UK Feminista activist group is launching in a fortnight. In Bristol, feminists are mobilising against applications for lapdancing clubs, bombarding the city council with objections and highlighting their campaign at the summer school.

Pink Stinks, the campaign team that took on the "pinkification" of the Early Learning Centre, is preparing to take aim at stores that sell makeup for young girls. And, across the country, feminists are dreaming up ways of combatting government cuts to services such as Sure Start childcare centres.

"This is a women's struggle," said Vita, 50, who has been an activist with the movement for more than 20 years. "We know that women are disproportionately affected by the cuts and it's a way of highlighting that."

One idea for action, which came out of a session on International Women's Day, suggested hanging Sure Start books from the Bristol suspension bridge "in order to show what has been suspended by this government". Vita's plan, meanwhile, is for "all-women" action against the cuts.

Men were, however, welcome in other quarters. In a session on Sunday, Matt McCormack Evans of the Anti Porn Men Project rejected any suggestion that men could not be proud members of the movement. "Yes, men can be feminists because it's a movement with an aim and goal," he said.

Jacob Mirzaian, a 22-year-old student at Leeds University, agreed. One of several men to attend the summer school, he said he had been interested in feminism since school.

"I reckon that if there is this fissure between men and women, then that's something that everyone suffers from," he said. The issues being discussed, he said, had affected the women in his life, including his mother: "It's a second-hand experience."

As wide-reaching and forward-looking as the contemporary movement is, however, many younger feminists are aware of the negative connotations from which it still suffers in mainstream society. "I think there's a massive image problem which sometimes is not helped by women who do not represent feminism in the best way, using it as a catchword to seem 'edgy' and 'rebellious'," said Rachelle Hunt, 22, a student at Bradford University, singling out popstars and celebrities for criticism.

Birkenshaw admitted she had feared people would take her for an "angry, man-hating mentalist" when she identified herself as a feminist. But, she said, a moment in a session on Saturday summed up her response to such reactions.

"This woman said: 'When people ask you why you're a feminist, your response should be: 'Well, why aren't you?'" said Birkenshaw. "Why wouldn't I be here? I'm a woman, I care about women's rights, about my own rights; I care about equality, I don't think anyone unequal, so it just makes sense."

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## **The contemporary feminist's in-tray**

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## Commercial sex industry

Pornography; sex trafficking; lap-dancing and strip clubs; magazines featuring semi-nude women: all these raise the ire of many feminists. However some say there should be more support for sex workers, some of whom identify as feminists.

## Government cuts

The Fawcett Society has said women are "bearing the brunt" of cuts to benefits and public services. It estimates that by 2015 the average single mother will have lost the equivalent of over one month's income per year.

## Abortion

Amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill could see independent groups- including those with an anti-abortion stance- invited to offer counselling in place of providers such as Marie Stopes and the British Pregnancy Advisory Service.

## Representation in politics and in the boardroom

Women are outnumbered four to one in parliament (144 MPs to 504), which Banyard says has led to a "democratic deficit". Only one in eight directors of FTSE 100 companies are women.

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120 comments, displaying  first

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 Contributor

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**cbarr**

14 August 2011 10:00PM

Clearly a terrorist camp planning action against retailers. Where is the new legislation promised to halt rioting when you need it and robust aggressive policing? These people need to be stopped before they force the banning of pink forever!

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Recommend (64)

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**ReeferSutherland**

14 August 2011 10:03PM

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To the guy above. If you're trying to be ironic, you failed miserably.



**Fungolo33**

14 August 2011 10:04PM

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Is that Sali Hughes, Guardian make up expert, in the Feminists Do It Better T shirt?



**cbarr**

14 August 2011 10:06PM

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ReeferSutherland - I'm not I just happen to like pink.



**WelshPaul**

14 August 2011 10:16PM

[Recommend \(185\)](#)

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Since these young ladies are so dedicated to the equal rights of people of both genders in legal and social matters, I am looking forward to them campaigning for fair treatment for recently seperated fathers in child custody battles.



**Brownly**

14 August 2011 10:22PM

[Recommend \(45\)](#)

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Women are outnumbered four to one in parliament (144 MPs to 504), which Banyard says has led to a "democratic deficit".

Encourage more women to go into politics in the first place then. You'll never get your equal outcome if women don't use the equal opportunities available to them.



**Bartelmy**

14 August 2011 10:23PM

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WelshPaul, that is clearly an issue close to your heart. Have you approached local feminist groups with the idea of joining forces on the issue?

As I'm sure you can appreciate, that's not a scenario women face, and so it doesn't tend to be top of the agenda. There's too much injustice in the world for everyone to fight for everything.:( I'm sure your local groups would appreciate your effort in bringing it to the forefront - the idea that men are the lesser parents is one that damages both genders.



**Bartelmy**

14 August 2011 10:23PM

Recommend (12)

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Brownly; they were.



**Blackleylass**

14 August 2011 10:29PM

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**sailthedarkenedseas**

14 August 2011 10:30PM

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**Blackleylass**

14 August 2011 10:30PM

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**Brownly**

14 August 2011 10:32PM

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Bartelmy

If you mean the discussions encouraged increasing the numbers of women gong into politics and standing for elections, then excellent.

Was tired of the lack of female MPs being put down to misogynism rather than the lower numbers of females getting involved in the first place.



**lucylilly**

14 August 2011 10:33PM

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@WelsPaul, as a young feminist that happens to be a woman, this issue actually is close to my heart. But like Bartelmy has rightly stated, there are issues that perhaps feminist groups feel are more important to them... I don't know, but it isn't fair to assume that all young female feminists don't support this issue!

Recommend (45)

Responses (0)



**scoucesusan**

14 August 2011 10:33PM

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Its good to see the genes of the Pankhurst thrive here.

Emmeline Pankhurst was an admirable person who helped give us the freedom we enjoy today.

All you denegrators get used to it. We will not go back into the dolls house



**MickGJ**

14 August 2011 10:38PM

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**CrowJake**

14 August 2011 10:43PM

It's me Jacob as quoted!

It was a great event, and the fact that it was free was great... some of the best content was the off stage stuff... it kind of escaped the over-riding theme of being schooled as an audience which this article spoke about, it was nice to come share experiences and thoughts on an equal footing... which the scale of the event provided for inevitably.

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**CustosCustodum**

14 August 2011 10:45PM

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**Bartelmy**

14 August 2011 10:46PM

@CrowJake

Jacob, that's how I found it. The event didn't really have any sense of being a 'school' at all, or of having feminists training 'new recruits'. Just a group of like-minded people sharing tips and discussing ideas. It was a great weekend.:)

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**youngfeminist101**

14 August 2011 10:47PM

I went to this event and it wasnt exactly how its made out in the piece... I networked and learned how to feel more comfortable. I

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got to talk to people with the same views as me.

@WelshPaul I would be more than happy to contribute it is an important issue

@cbarr your words sounds like they come from some one who doest understand, try Wikipedia and type in feminism.



**HoxtonPaul**

14 August 2011 10:47PM

Where are all the comments about a good spanking then?

You bunch of lame, bullied, pathetic....

I have to say, that this article has more grasp of reality and unisex relevance than some of the political ravings disguised as womens issues I've had to endure for years.

Its simple. You cannot close rape crisis centres. You cannot close womens hostels and support when they escape bad relationships. You cannot cut down on womens health issues and what the hell is vat still doing on feminine hygiene in this country?

You cannot believe that things will ever, ever be equal and relatively safe for women on this planet. I believe there will always be a dynamic that gives birth to feminism. It was an inescapable inevitability of the birds and the bees. The way a two sex reproductive system works, and it wont ever be irrelevant.

Which highlights I think, that there will always be a need for the kind of direct-action, protest and activism discussed at the start of the article. Which means women getting into sticky situations. Because that is how far women have to go to get somethings done.

Now, to conclude. At the start of this article, to whom did you think I was referring to as needing the spanking, and who was the bullied one?

See? Made any gender assumptions?



**Blackleylass**

14 August 2011 10:48PM

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For more detail see [our FAQs](#).



**lowerarchy**

14 August 2011 10:50PM

The Future is Female

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[Recommend \(8\)](#)

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**Bartelmy**

14 August 2011 10:51PM

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@CustosCustodum, may I ask what left you with that impression? Many of the people involved were 'fourth wave' feminists; that is, those who hold the idea that people should do what makes them happy, whatever their gender identity, whether that is something traditionally thought of as feminine or masculine, as long as it doesn't infringe on the rights of others.

I'm also confused as to why pleasing any single group of people would be a goal for any individual.



**sailthedarkenedseas**

14 August 2011 10:51PM

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youngfeminist101

I got to talk to people with the same views as me.

That's fantastic. Why don't you try talking to people who hold different views from you?



**Bartelmy**

14 August 2011 10:54PM

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@sailinthedarknedseas

What exactly do you think she just did?



**lowerarchy**

14 August 2011 10:54PM

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sailthedanksea

Isn't that what she's doing?



**metaspective**

14 August 2011 10:56PM

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THE ULTIMATE BATTLE OF THE SEXES?

Explosive New Satirical Novel: DOG Sharon: The Future is Female!

The action, set in 2012, follows Sharon Brough, an ordinary middle-aged Midlands woman who receives messiah-like powers and with her female followers sets about solving the issues of the age; over-population, pollution, climate change, war, poverty, violence against women, people trafficking, phone hacking and political corruption. DOG is an acronym for Daughter of God.

Sharon soon realises humanity's problems are literally Man-made and reluctantly devises a radical non-violent solution!

âWe don't need gods and goddesses, for we are women â we

gave birth to humanity and we'll solve our own problemsâ â  
Sharon Brough

DOG Sharon: The Future is Female! is a thrilling story of love,  
courage and humour with a crucial message of hope and change  
for the entire planet.

Patriarchal hierarchies have damaged our societies - the  
Lowerarchy can change that, let the debate begin...



**cbarr**

14 August 2011 10:56PM

scousesusan -

All you denegrators get used to it. We will not go back  
into the dolls house

Most women never lived in the 'dolls house' they worked and the  
early suffragist movement as a special interest group failed to  
recognize that in the strange belief that some how they new what  
was best for the working women. I guess times don't really  
change too much feminists still dictate and deride whilst  
ignoring economic conditions.

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**BeatonTheDonis**

14 August 2011 10:58PM



scousesusan

Emmeline Pankhurst was an admirable person who  
helped give us the freedom we enjoy today.

Emmeline Pankhurst (Tory, nationalist, anti-communist, and an  
avid supporter of British Imperialism) fought for the right to  
vote.

Her 'successors' are fighting to stop women getting paid for  
exposing bits that can be seen on any Mediterranean beach.

This in an age where women number pitifully few in Parliament  
and on the boards of our big organisations.

She'd be so proud.

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**sailthedarkenedseas**

14 August 2011 11:00PM

lowerarchy

sailthedanksea

Isn't that what she's doing?

I hope the spelling's better in that book you insist on hawking at  
every opportunity.

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"Try wikipedia and type in feminism' isn't communicating anything useful.



**jamesCB**

14 August 2011 11:00PM

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**cbarr**

14 August 2011 11:04PM

youngfeminist101 -

your words sounds like they come from some one who doest understand, try Wikipedia and type in feminism.

Nah I'm good I'll continue to take my view of feminism from comrades who have witnessed it at work. People like Clara Zetkin who recognized the issues of conflicting rights and the bourgeoisie feminists as the oppressor.

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**youngfeminist101**

14 August 2011 11:04PM

@sailthedarkenedseas I do all the time, locally there are not to many feminists- other than a radical group and I don't really like the radical stuff. I just believe in equality and women's rights. And I assume you are really in to music maybe rock/ metal... so I bet you spend lots of time talking to people who don't like it and like music you don't like... right?

[Recommend \(15\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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**Anax**

14 August 2011 11:05PM

**C**

Men were, however, welcome in other quarters. In a session on Sunday, Matt McCormack Evans of the Anti Porn Men Project rejected any suggestion that men could not be proud members of the movement. "Yes, men can be feminists because it's a movement with an aim and goal," he said.

Grim news, but liberal-minded people can take heart. Women who enjoy porn outnumber these men by the million.

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**scousesusan**

14 August 2011 11:05PM

@BeatonTheDonis

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I was speaking as a woman. The Suffragists and the Suffragettes fought in their different ways to give a vote to women. It actually took WWI to achieve this but only for women over 30. I always vote - I owe it to them and I am proud to acknowledge the debt I owe them

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**[SamVega](#)**

14 August 2011 11:07PM

[Recommend \(10\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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If you're not doing anything sexist, then you have nothing to worry about...



**[sailthedarkenedseas](#)**

14 August 2011 11:09PM

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youngfeminist101

I just believe in equality and women's rights.

Who in their right mind doesn't?

And I assume you are really in to music maybe rock/  
metal...

Not my cup of tea really.

so I bet you spend lots of time talking to people who  
don't like it and like music you don't like... right?

You'd be right.



**[cbarr](#)**

14 August 2011 11:13PM

[Recommend \(26\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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scousesusan -

It actually took WWI to achieve this but only for  
women over 30.

Not really there was already a gradual movement to womens  
suffrage much as there was one for men with property owning  
women being able to vote in local elections for example by 1894.  
Women didn't gain parity till 1928 but universal male suffrage  
didn't occur until 1918 so the movement to suffrage once the ball  
was rolling was as much about the gradual movement of  
economic and property ownership as anything else coupled with  
growing trade unions movements.



**[SouthManchester](#)**

14 August 2011 11:13PM

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[Responses \(0\)](#)

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Good place to pull then Jacob,you being one a few blokes there!

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**CrowJake**

14 August 2011 11:26PM

Good place to pull then Jacob,you being one a few blokes there!

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[Responses \(0\)](#)

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A good place to "conversation pull" Seeing as I wasn't looking for anything else, and even if I was I'd be horrific at it. Or "political pull"... and I didn't meet any of the guys there for very long, but given a chance we could have just have easily as me with any female attendees ended up having "opinion foreplay" and "perspective sex".



**SouthManchester**

14 August 2011 11:33PM

Opinion foreplay & perspective sex mmmm.....

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**remoteviewer**

14 August 2011 11:46PM

Have feminists applied for minority status yet?

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[Responses \(0\)](#)

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**parse**

14 August 2011 11:49PM

**scousesusan**

Its good to see the genes of the Pankhurst thrive here. Emmeline Pankhurst was an admirable person who helped give us the freedom we enjoy today.

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[Responses \(0\)](#)

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And her daughter Christabel was an arsonist in the cause who went on to hand out white feathers to any British man who wouldn't fight the Hun in 1914. Admirable genes my arse.



**whatwedoissecret**

14 August 2011 11:56PM

Since these young ladies are so dedicated to the equal rights of people of both genders in legal and social matters, I am looking forward to them campaigning for fair treatment for recently seperated fathers in child custody battles.

[Recommend \(68\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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Or perhaps, WelshPaul, young men could get off their arses and campaign for this, seeing as it concerns them and all. Why should it be women's responsibility to fix everything?

I think you'll find most women and most feminists support gender equality in all spheres of life, including the family courts.

What tends to annoy is when men sit on their arse and moan about feminists not doing enough on their behalf when **men** actually getting together, organising and fighting against gender prejudice would be incredibly effective but it very rarely seems to happen.



**HopeLast**

14 August 2011 11:57PM

[Recommend \(63\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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What is the connection between the Guardian and UK Feminista.

This must be the second puff piece in as many weeks.

There are hundreds if not thousands of feminist activist meeting up if not everyday everyweek.

Unfortunately for them they do not have the contacts that allow them to secure funding to put on a free event.

This is unfortunate as these are the feminist who do have something to share with other women.

The list of supposedly top issues is so out of touch with the issues that women's groups are actually tackling that it is hard not to wonder whether this isn't some government plot to make feminism some sort of hobby for leisured ladies.

Who ever conceived that women with no practical experience of outreach to women from diverse communities should get this feminism by numbers approach.

If all they want to do is be a mixed equality group why not just sign up for Fawcett.

This whole event is a calculated insult to the existing skills within active women's groups and only colludes with the establishment that has been trying to undermine the politics and methods of workings that grew out of genuine grassroots autonomous groups.

My only hope is that the unimaginative participants in this top down event reflect on the privilege they consumed over the weekend, and calculate the real cost of this self indulgent fantasy and donate the equivalent amount to their nearest women's groups. And moreover the Rosa Fund explains on what basis they would fund a group that has no track record of achievement and whose last event clearly didn't create any measureable "outputs".

At a time when communities are nervously reflecting on how well we can or can not live together this weekend is one of pure adolescent indulgence.

If this weekend had really been about feminism their would have been a representative coming together of women who work in communities.

This facile ego trip is the most stunning public testament that

feminism has been coopted by and elite self aggrandising group who presume to instruct others.

Isn't UK Feminista one of the groups who went for cheap headlines rather than a true feminist analysis of porn and violence against women and promoted some obscure male media fantasy as being a learning event.



**sailthedarkenedseas**

15 August 2011 12:14AM

whatwedoissecret

Since these young ladies are so dedicated to the equal rights of people of both genders in legal and social matters, I am looking forward to them campaigning for fair treatment for recently seperated fathers in child custody battles.

Or perhaps, WelshPaul, young men could get off their arses and campaign for this, seeing as it concerns them and all. Why should it be women's responsibility to fix everything?

They did. Fathers for Justice, the media treated it as a joke.

[Recommend \(51\)](#)

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**HopeLast**

15 August 2011 12:54AM

Feminist investing in women surviving in divided communities

In view of the extreme breakdown and undermining of any sense of shared communities it has been agreed that those who attended the UK Feminista Summer School for free, courtesy of grant money, should show their true commitment to equality by sending the fee they should have paid to women working on the front line.

Please donate the amount you think you should have paid to your local women's group, rape crisis centre, refuge or local women's campaign.

Add your name to show you really care about women living next door to you, or down the road, if you want to show the true spirit of grass roots diverse feminism.

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**CrowJake**

15 August 2011 1:07AM

You know hopelast, I agree with a lot of what you say, especially regarding incredible top-down-ness of the event.

but the value in it being free is that people who can't afford the money can go, if they can afford the travel costs, so there isn't actually enough left over to donate to anywhere.

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I don't think it's fair to assume that by going there and meeting people, every attendee and presenter shares uk feminista's views, I certainly don't ... I don't know how you could argue Women Asylum Seekers Together isn't front-line. Good criticism but tarring everyone with the same brush somewhat makes it hard to accept those criticisms when to be honest if applied to the right targets are 100% apt.



**Aoiichi**

15 August 2011 2:07AM

You know, I'm actually pretty concerned over their vendetta against things like strip clubs and pornography (personally I think that things like these are more taste issues, than gender). Nobody is forcing the women who work in such establishments to do so- indeed, one interpretation of them could be that they are actually empowering women, and have given rise to a different set of feminists as noted in the article- but by trying to shut them down, banning them, such activities will be forced underground- and then there will no regulation, no official support and benefits for any of these workers, and they'll have done more harm to these women's rights more than any MALE PIG that might have used their services.

Suffragettes? They're rolling in their graves.

walking down the street in "funky dresses and funky tights" and fearing male comments, or worse. "I don't like the fact that as a woman I have to feel scared,"

I don't want to feel scared, either. I don't want to fear being branded a stalker or creep because I happen to be walking on the same side of the road as a woman, or a pervert if I greet them when I pass.



**Icarusty**

15 August 2011 2:22AM

"This woman said: 'When people ask you why you're a feminist, your response should be: 'Well, why aren't you?'" said Birkenshaw. "Why wouldn't I be here? I'm a woman, I care about women's rights, about my own rights; I care about equality, I don't think anyone unequal, so it just makes sense."

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and she must realise that this sums up the hypocrisy of feminism in one statement. You care about women's rights, then you say you care about equality. Therefore, why did you not mention you also care about men's rights as well, since it is of equal importance to you (supposedly).

If feminism was about equality, you would call it equality. There is nothing stopping the equality movement from arguing about

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abortion and the sex industry. And by its very nature, it would campaign for equal representation in the boardroom and sharing a "fair" (though that it itself is impossible to find) burden of the cuts.

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