

THE NEW FEMINISM

For a long time it was a word coloured by images of bra-burning demos, the Greenham Common protest and had a stridency that alienated many. It was easy to forget what spawned feminism in the first place – inequality for women in every area from pay to jobs and even the right to vote. But what does feminism mean to you today? Anna Moore spoke to four women with very different outlooks to get a snapshot of what matters – and why



Elaine Wrigley, 47, head of retail with New Look, North and Ireland



Kim Hollis, 57, QC and award-winning barrister



Sophie Keegan, 34, full-time mother to two children



Dotti Irving, 55, CE of PR agency Four Colman Getty



IT'S ABOUT RESPECT

Elaine Wrigley, 47, head of retail North and Ireland with New Look, lives near Wigan with her husband Mark, 50. She has two stepsons and two children, 21 and 18, from a previous marriage.

"When I hear the word 'feminism', I think of the negative connotations – the anti-male, female crusade. Without a doubt, women and men should be given the same opportunities, but it goes beyond 'feminism':

everyone should be respected and feel valued, male or female. For that reason, I'm not sure about quotas in the workforce. I once worked for a company that took a very strong stance on pushing women to the higher level and there was a view amongst staff that they weren't always the best people for the job.

I grew up with a very traditional dad – he never did the ironing and only cooked when mum was very ill. I can't say that was wrong because they had a very happy marriage, but it wasn't how I wanted to live. At 18, I joined the army and was in the first

group of females to do officer training at Sandhurst. Things have changed enormously, but at that time, women were seen as second-class citizens. There was an old-fashioned, chivalrous attitude towards us – we were 'girls'. After 18 months, I was told I wasn't officer material. Luckily I went into retail, and my career in New Look has given me fantastic opportunities.

At 24, I was sent to Greece to open a Marks & Spencer store there. I ended up marrying a Greek man, having two children and staying 12 years. It's much tougher for women in Greece; independent, working women like me were viewed with a lot of disdain. When my marriage ended, I came back to the UK with the children, aged six and two.

My ex has never paid a penny in maintenance, but I can honestly say that working full-time as a single mum was do-able, and not a terrible struggle. I was lucky enough

"As a single parent, the companies I've worked for have been supportive"

to have lots of help from my parents, and the companies I've worked for have always been supportive.

When it came to dating, it just wasn't my focus for a long time and there was the practical challenge of meeting anyone when you have children to look after.

I met Mark seven years ago. We both worked for Asda and he asked me out on the day I was leaving the company! I wouldn't want to be sitting at home dependent on a husband – that's not in my make up – and I hadn't planned on marrying again. But it's lovely that it happened."



PROGRESS IS SLOW

Kim Hollis, QC, was the first female Asian QC in the UK. Now 57 and divorced, she has two adult sons, James, 26 and Anthony, 23. Kim lives in London.

"I've never called myself a feminist – but I've probably created my own brand of feminism. Working in a male-dominated profession, there have been times when it's suited me to make the most of my femininity. But if men chose to judge me solely on the way that

I looked, they'd soon realise I was more than capable by the time I'd won the case!

It's been 33 years since I came to the bar and there are many more women in the profession now – but progress has been too slow, particularly to reach the top. I'm absolutely in favour of quotas – if we're really determined to change, I don't believe we have any other option. We've had decades of talk, and committees, and 'commitment to diversity' and where has it got us? I believe women have certain qualities and abilities that men don't. For example, a woman

"I'm in favour of quotas, if we want change we don't have any other option"

understands what it's like to have a career and be a mother, and, as a judge, or an MP, that has to be a great advantage.

My boys are my greatest love but I never stopped working after having them. James was born in May – and I was back at work in August. Anthony was born in March and two months later, I had a case in Liverpool. I remember sobbing down the phone to my husband, deciding that I couldn't stay in Liverpool as planned and instead would fly up and down from London each day. My husband said I was mad – and that Anthony would be asleep anyway by the time I got home and when I left each morning. As a mother though, I could still see him, could still hold him – and that was important. I could give him a 10pm feed. It was really hard but in my

job, if you go away for a while, there's a risk you'll be forgotten. Those sacrifices helped me get where I am now, but it shouldn't have to be like

that. Women need to be reassured that there's a career path in front of them, that there's more than just 'goodwill', especially if they want to start a family.

A central part of my upbringing was the strong sense that I needed to become independent – that was no different for me or my brother. Having your own income and career means you're able to make all your own decisions.

Your life is your own. I'm not saying it's wrong to stop at home and be supported by your husband, but it's not a choice I'd ever make." >>



CHOICE IS KEY

Sophie Keegan, 34, is a full-time to mum to Sylvie, two, and George, seven months. She lives in Sheffield with husband James, 39.

“For me, feminism is about women having choices. That could be whether to be a full-time mother, or to combine work and motherhood or not to have children at all – all without being judged.

Full-time mothers should be highly valued. It’s so important, we’re raising tomorrow’s citizens, but I’m constantly asked when I’m going to back to work. I’ve even been called a ‘lady of leisure’!

James works from home a lot so we share the ‘drudge’ – cooking, cleaning, bills and shopping. He’s thoughtful, but inevitably, it’s not 50/50 as it was before we had children.

When I first became pregnant, we were renting in London, which was far too expensive so we decided to move back to my hometown of Sheffield. James works for a cultural relations organisation so he can work flexibly from home and regional offices. I’d

been a web manager with a charity for five years and wanted a similar arrangement, but they weren’t interested.

After Sylvie was born, I looked for part-time work and job shares, but couldn’t find anything in my field. One recruitment agent told me that lots of employers wouldn’t look at me because I had a toddler! I view full-time motherhood in a positive way as I know I’ll never regret this time with the children.

Financially though, we’re stretched. We have no spare money, no savings or pension and each month is hand to mouth. Most of my ‘mum friends’ have gone back to work but they’re no better off as childcare is so expensive.

One thing I’ve found very helpful is joining my local Women’s Institute – Seven Hills, Sheffield. With an average age of 34, it is so popular they can’t take any more members this year. It’s more about networking than jam making. I’ve met police

“Full-time mothers should be more highly valued”

officers, PRs, designers, some with no children, others with kids who’ve grown up. The speakers and events are really interesting.

We had the Arctic Monkeys’ tour manager last month, and this month, it’s beer tasting!

Having a daughter has made me aware of the pressure on girls to behave in a certain way. She goes to a playgroup in the woods, which involves running, climbing trees and paddling in streams. She’s one of the few girls there as people seem to think only boys enjoy doing that. I want Sylvie to grow up believing women can do anything.”



PRACTICAL TACTICS

Dotti Irving, 55, is chief executive of PR agency Four Colman Getty. She’s divorced, lives in London and has a daughter, Tess, 28.

“I’m a feminist but I find myself wanting to put an adjective in front like a ‘practical feminist’. When things come up that make me unhappy, I’ll protest, but most of the time, I’m the type who likes to just get on with it. It’s probably my upbringing. I

read that almost all the female billionaires in the world are from China. It’s the ‘one-child policy’ so if that child is a girl, you treat her

no different to how you’d have treated a son. I’m one of three daughters. My parents were business people, running hotels and bars. My mum worked until she was in her late sixties – bringing us up at the same time. We were raised to believe there was nothing we couldn’t do.

When I got to university, I was outraged to find that wasn’t necessarily the case! For example, women were only allowed in the student

“Successful women are often described as hard or pushy”

bar on Fridays so I remember joining a protest sit-in.

I went into publishing and left Penguin after my daughter was born to set up on my own company. Penguin was a lovely company but 20 years’ ago most people at the very top were men. I thought I’d never get through the glass ceiling. I worked long hours and I did feel guilty about Tess, but that eased when my husband, a journalist, went freelance to be around more. We also had a great nanny – who at first I paid more than I earned.

Successful women are often described differently to successful men – they are ‘hard’ and ‘pushy’ instead of ‘resilient’ or ‘assertive’ and I’d like that to change. I’ve had a fantastic career but it’s not because I sat and plotted it all out. It was having the courage to give things a go – and the confidence to fail.

It’s often noted that Four Colman Getty is predominantly female but that’s not deliberate – I interview everyone, usually twice, and just choose the best person. It sounds an awful cliché but women work differently. They

are less confrontational, more inclusive, more emotionally attached to their work.

The focus on how women look is tricky, especially with age. I’ve never done any Botox or cosmetic surgery. It always shocks me when a friend goes away for two weeks only to return with a face I can’t recognise. Older women have to fight back. You can be more ‘out there’, more outrageous. I think that’s the best thing to do!” **w&h**

CREDIT NAME



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