

Love me or leave me but please don't let me be lonely: reflections on Million Women Rise.

As a member of the Feminist Activist Forum (FAF), a third wave, intergenerational, queer and trans-positive feminist network, I attended the Million Women Rise march on International Women's Day with an intimate knowledge of many of the divisions in the contemporary feminist movement. FAF was established in April 2007 to act as a forum and meeting space for feminists to do much needed coalitional work in order to strengthen the burgeoning feminist movement in the UK and beyond. Working with such aims in the political minefield which is feminism – as bound up as it often is with emotional baggage and acute memories of personal sexual abuse that are, unfortunately, an all too common experience of growing up in a patriarchal society – has meant that gaining the trust to work together over important issues (such as violence against women) has proved to be difficult. Feminist politics is still personal politics. I am no different – I write as a survivor of sexual violence, of structural violence, and I want to overhaul it in writing and action. I want the end of the senseless and unnecessary violation of women's bodies and lives that occurs every minute of every day in every crevice of this potentially, and often, beautiful world of ours.

My desire for unity amongst the movement was reflected by my behaviour on the march. I began with the FAF contingent – itself a loose coalition of feminists that move fluidly between groups. We were standing in-between the International Union of Sex Workers and the English Coalition of Prostitutes and other groups affiliated with Crossroads Women's Centre. I sang and chanted with these women knowing that for me it was important for a time to stand in solidarity of the work these women choose to do and have every right to choose to do. All capital engenders the alienation of our bodies – if we want to fuck and suck for cash then why shouldn't we in as safe conditions as possible and with the support of self-organised workers' unions? I chanted with the Crossroads women having immense respect for the tireless work they do and have done supporting asylum seeker women and prostitutes, their vigorous research and publications of life-saving booklets such as *For Asylum Seekers and their Supporters: A Self-Help Guide Against Deportation and Detention*.

After an hour of walking through central London a friend encouraged me to move up to the front of the march where there was a different kind of crowd, mainly I think from the Million Women Rise Collective. I didn't see any particular agenda being pushed, just a vibrant body of moving, seething bodies and voices. I weaved in and out of the crowds, singing and dancing, jubilant and alive with the energy. I ran into women I did not expect, people I thought who were only tangentially interested in feminism but was pleasantly surprised to see, women mobilised by the idea of a march to take a stand against male violence with a million other women on International Women's Day, 2008. I bounced to the front of the march, my experience as a vocalist in a punk band serving me well as I ferociously barked out chants with the other women there, chants I believed in deep in my heart, chants I wanted to communicate with the public: 'What do we

want? Justice! When do we want it? NOW! And ‘Hey, ho! Sexual Violence has to go!’ I handed out flyers and newsletters I had made and contributed to, or had been asked to distribute....no there wasn’t a million women marching, there was definitely several thousand. Whatever the exact numbers spirited defiance was certainly generated by the merging of voices and energies walking the streets. In the approach to Trafalgar Square the atmosphere reminded me of the March 2003 protest against Bush and Blair’s illegal war – yes it felt that vital - when I felt that if only the crowd were all saying the same thing, we could have had a revolution. We were strong enough, we are still strong enough, to rip apart the parliament structures that made that illegal war happen and that allows violence against women to happen.

But we couldn’t all be saying the same thing at the anti-war march or even on International Women’s Day. Unity is always a problematic notion in a political campaign, and in the rush for unity we run the risk of creating our own exclusions, our own acts of violence. This is what I believe happened with an incident halfway through the MWR rally where a wide range of speakers read poetry, talked of the funding cuts in rape crisis centres and the Southall Black Sisters, women spoke of their experience in Palestine and Zimbabwe, protested against Female Genital Cutting and other human rights issues. To the side of the stage I could see the English Collective of Prostitutes banner swaying ominously in the breeze. There was a feeling that trouble was coming.

Friends who were close to the stage have told me what they saw. A speaker, Teresa Mackay from the Transport and General Workers Union, was refused her position on the platform. Her speech – about the need to decriminalise prostitution in order to best help women in the sex industry – had been sent to the organising collective the day before for the signers to prepare. Upon reading its content she was then refused to continue as a speaker by the MWR organisers. In response there was a group of women with megaphones at the rally that were attempting to be heard off-stage, speaking about the need to hear sex workers voices. Another group of women from the march reacted by frantically trying to unplug their PA system. They were also intimidating the women by banging pots and pans, jostling among the group in order to seize the equipment. A member of the megaphone group then assaulted a woman who was trying to shut down the protest. All the crowd heard was a rally organiser asking for police assistance on-stage and saying she never expected to see an act of violence between women at a march to end violence against women. The crowd shifted nervously, confused.

The Million Women Rise collective – who called the march to bring together women wanting to highlight the continuation of violence against women and demanding an end to this – have not ever explicitly stated their position on sex work or prostitution in terms of abolitionist or pro-sex work terms. They explicitly state that they support the aims of coalitions to end child prostitution and trafficking but nothing more concrete than this. Like me, who wanted to weave in and out of the crowds of the march, singing and connecting with everyone, they did not want to espouse one central ideology that may alienate one group over another or emphasise one

position as the dominant one. There was certainly a desire for unity, but unity will never come through silencing important perspectives and debates, brushing them under the carpet and pretending that they are not there.

By not allowing Teresa Mackay's speech to be heard at the rally, the Million Women Rise collective committed an act of discursive violence. A physical act of violence within the crowd then followed it.

We need, as a movement, as a world, to know violence when we see it, and when we perpetuate it. Violence can take many forms. Violence is also containment; silence and silencing. We cannot, as a feminist movement, practise these policies of silence and containment any longer. We cannot pretend that contradictions and differences don't exist between us, or refuse to see more than two sides of the story. It is possible to attempt this and still be able to stand side by side, in unity, although I know from my experience as an organiser that this is never easy.

We cannot say that some women's voices do not matter – which is essentially what happens when we try to ignore the fact that sex workers and their allies exist. These women – and men, and transgender and intersex people - also have stories and policies that should rightfully be heard when talking about sexual violence. We cannot afford to replicate the practices of patriarchy. If we do that we will never win, we will only become absorbed once more into its ugly machine, appearing as a horrible inversion of what it tries to feed us. Surely there is common ground to be found between abolitionists and sex work feminists around the issue of women's safety? If this is placed at the heart of our concerns and actions, then points of convergence and empathy around these issues might arise, where previously there had only been division....

There were other issues I found problematic being on the march; I felt like part of a privileged, if structurally oppressed majority – my bio woman status giving me the right to march in solidarity with other walking cunts, boobs and wombs, to stand against the male violence against 'us.' As I began the march, laughing, hugging and connecting with friends I saw a trans male friend of mine standing outside the parameters of the march, video documenting the movement of bodies and the reactions of bystanders. My heart heaved – why was he not here standing by my side? Oh, he had 'defected', joined the other side – his biology had been transformed, the ghost of his female body shaded by his beard – but his alliance with the women's movement was pertinently clear to me. I also saw very few trans-women on the march. Since the publicity did not explicitly state that trans-women were welcome, I presume they stayed away.

On the subject of 'diversity,' the strength of the Million Women Rise initiative was that it was led predominantly by non-white women – unlike the feminist and queer collectives I am part of. It was also very intergenerational and these are tremendous achievements. Nevertheless, it was not just the lack of a visible trans-contingent that I thought the march was weakened by. In the world we are living in today, our feminist strategies need to include men. Men need to hear the passionate and

informative speeches of that day. However, even a mixed-sex presence at the Trafalgar Square rally was not fully clear or welcome: stewards were initially told to keep men out of the square but were later told to try and keep the crowd watching the stage women only. Later in the afternoon some men made their presence known by childish climbing on the lion statues and wiggling their arse about, (yes I thought they were pricks, I felt angry and stuck my finger up at them – a feeling/ moment of violence on my behalf).

Speeches rattled throughout the square underneath the towering glare of Nelson's column, a statue that asserts the monumental patriarchal colonisation of space that is an all too regular occurrence in our cities. In light of the feminist speeches booming uncomfortably against that militaristic amphitheatre, I cannot help but feel that men need the opportunity to join the feminist movement, to truly understand and deconstruct their relationship to male violence and privilege, and to understand how they perpetuate the systems of oppression. Men need to learn how to be good allies to women. I am not saying men are oppressed in the same ways as women. What I am saying is if society is going to ever change men will have to be part of that movement.

It was so inspiring and empowering to raise a collective rage against male violence and let the public see it, but there are problems with a rally of that size being so exclusive. I don't think the march was inclusive of all women – clearly trans-women and sex workers were not welcome as evidenced by the demographic and events of the march. Of course every oppressed group has the right to define their space but please let us not fall into the old trick of saying some women are oppressed but some are more oppressed than others. Questions have to be asked around issues of ownership here – who 'owns' feminism and the struggles for women's liberation by setting up these exclusions? Such a powerful revolutionary possibility cannot be contained or owned by anyone, and I am unhappy to be able to be part of the privileged group just because of my bodily organs.

If we really want to transform society, to liberate it from normalised abuse and violence, every person has to make an effort in every moment of their lives to achieve this. We must look into our hearts, thoughts and actions in order to find out what violence really means, what violence really does. I am not saying these things to be sectarian and I want to emphasise that I am so grateful to the Million Women Rise collective who had a grand vision and went with it. We need more actions like this, acts of daring and risk that offer spaces of information, intervention, visibility and connection. However this vision needs to be re-visited in order to see if it worked. We need to see if it is politically effective in the world we find ourselves in today where male violence – from the cultural manifestations to inter-personal violence – still dominates the fabric of our relationships, to exclude men and those of other gender identities. We need to be making alliances with as many people as possible in order to end it. In the words of Patti Smith, 'people have the power,' and it is people who need to come together and say ENOUGH to the violence of white supremacist, capitalist hetero-patriarchy and explore how it is embedded within us all. Let us remove, cleanse this virus and learn from

each other; only through this shall we overcome, through openness, love, and possibility.

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