

Some things we need for a feminist revolution

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Abstract

To work towards a feminist society, a strong feminist movement is a sine qua non. This paper discusses ten tools and tips that are useful for the creation of a dynamic and powerful movement. Collective activism, non-hierarchical organising, networks, meeting, spaces, means, education, media, protest and alternatives and fun and rest can help feminist activists in their struggle to have their voices heard and their demands applied.

Introduction

Everything looked so promising in the 1970s, an era of hope for radical feminist changes. Feminist bookstores, consciousness-raising groups, women's healthcare projects, feminist writings and research, feminist media and culture, activist collectives, women's houses, women-run publishing houses, huge protest marches and other projects. Alternatives as well as resistance and criticism to move our society towards a more equal and women-positive place. The feminist activism of the so-called second wave is a source of inspiration for me because at that time women gathered in large numbers to take action together, create projects that envisioned their feminist future and think radically and critically about gender, power and oppression.

But somehow it ended, and although some of these radical initiatives are still there, maybe in a somewhat other shape, a lot of it is gone too. Work and knowledge has disappeared (like the magazines and books that were written at the time and are hard to find today) or forgotten (like analyses about sexism and patriarchy and experiences with activism and alternatives). We do have equal opportunities institutions now, women's lobby organisations and official gender studies courses. But is this better? Can they give us everything we long(ed) for? And what about autonomy, participation and accessibility? Do we want a open radical autonomous democratically organised mass movement or a few professional specialists (politicians, university researchers, journalists) who will do the work for us?

I miss and I missed the second wave – I was born too late – but the feminist struggles of those days serve as an example to me. My activism in a radical feminist collective that's influenced by radical left, LGBTQ and anti-racist movements and in a national women's rights organisation that was founded in the early 1970s, as well as my experiences in anarchist and anti-globalist groups, reading about

feminism's past, discussing with other feminists, writing for a feminist blog, corresponding with feminist zine writers and attending feminist festivals shaped my views on feminist activism. For me, feminism is about ending sexist oppression, and even though previous generations of feminists have not (yet) succeeded in this mission, I believe they were on the right track.

In the second wave of feminism several do-it-yourself methods, democratic organisation structures and radical alternatives were developed and applied. Some of these are also used in radical left and alterglobalist groups today. This text was inspired by those visions and strategies. It's about the idea that we have to – and we can – do it ourselves, as a feminist movement. I offer a few basic tips for building a movement, some ideas and tools to “arm” ourselves, a start to make our ideals real and a checklist for our journey towards a feminist society. The ten “things” that are listed are useful to pay attention to when starting a feminist action group or contributing to building an autonomous movement. A lot of it probably sounds logical and obvious and a lot of it might already be put into practice locally – it just needs to be expanded, connected and made visible. We have to trace what we already have, what we're working on and what we still need.

The tips in this text are only a beginning though. There's more needed to reach a feminist utopia and we have to continue discussing and thinking about feminist strategies. I'd like to learn from the experiences of previous generations of feminists to know which strategies work and to avoid the mistakes of the past. We need a feminist movement that is strong enough to resist and survive a conservative backlash, a network that stretches beyond generations and geographical regions. So it's time to (re)organise and co-operate again and build an autonomous feminist movement. No more little waves followed by backlashes: it's time for a flood!

10 things to build a movement

- (1) collective activism
- (2) non-hierarchical organising
- (3) networks
- (4) meetings
- (5) spaces
- (6) means
- (7) education
- (8) media
- (9) protest and alternatives
- (10) fun and rest

1. Collective activism

The previous generations of feminists have struggled to make this world a better place for women and create a more egalitarian non-sexist society. But there remains a lot to be done and if we don't act, nothing will change. Therefore, if we want to end sexist oppression, we have to organise ourselves and take action, together. From the 1960s on, feminists gathered and formed small groups in which they could discuss and plan projects and actions. Such groups combined the forces of individual feminists. Together they could make much more happen than each on their own.

Sexism is a structural issue, not just an individual problem – as we know “the personal is political”. So we can't fight sexism on our own, as separate individuals. You can stand up for yourself, speak out, make the people around you aware about feminist issues and engage in certain little projects or solo actions, but this isn't enough to make real change. Together with other people you can do more and achieve more. The resources, woman-power and knowledge will be greater when combined. Actions organised and carried by a larger group appear more powerful and because of this also more effective. More voices making demands and having their say can push harder on the agenda. Besides, collective action gives courage and support for the activists themselves: we can learn from each other and encourage each other. It's much more motivating and pleasant to work together because you'll feel stronger as a group and understood as an individual, as I've noticed in the groups I'm involved in. I didn't feel alone with my feminist concerns and ideas – they didn't seem odd, utopian or extreme and they weren't ridiculed, there was support for not fitting in society's gender norms and for little rebellious acts (not shaving my legs for example) and the enthusiasm to take action together against injustice and gender discrimination (like sexist billboards, street harassment and so on) is always inspiring. So it's vital to organise ourselves in geographic or thematic groups, collectives, platforms and federations.

2. Non-hierarchical organising

Feminist organisations nowadays are often hierarchically structured organisations. But if we want to end inequality, shouldn't we be setting an example? In a world that consists of patriarchal institutions and companies in which only a few are in power, tell others what to do and decide over everyone else's faith, feminist organisations should try to investigate alternatives for hierarchical organisational models. Having women in the position of manager, director or coordinator just isn't enough. Feminist groups can be small-scale experiments to practice living and working together a larger feminist society. So they should be structured and organised in an egalitarian, democratic and non-hierarchical way. Organising in feminist groups should reflect feminist ideals of sisterhood and equality. Our ideals can not be postponed until “after the revolution”. If you fight against inequality,

then it's only normal that you don't accept unequal decision-making power and hierarchical structures in your own group.

Not only formal hierarchies, but also informal hierarchies which produce invisible elites and power positions should be avoided or removed. The small groups in the 1960s/1970s I mentioned before often suffered from the existence of informal leaders who weren't officially elected, but who still took on more decision-making roles and representational tasks because the unofficial hidden hierarchical structure of the group based on friendships and privileges allowed this to happen (Freeman 2002). The structure of groups should not only be intentionally non-hierarchical but also be consciously structured and open. Non-hierarchy can not be assumed to happen automatically.

There are lots of techniques and roles that have been developed to help organisations work and discuss in a non-hierarchical way and avoid informal leadership as well: clearly defining how decisions are made, agreed division of tasks, rotation of leadership roles (like facilitators for meetings and spokespersons), rounds during meetings, temporarily splitting into smaller groups (when the group becomes too big to discuss and not everyone is able to speak), workshops to unlearn master suppression techniques¹, hand gestures to communicate easier and faster, talking sticks or cards to avoid that some people talk all the time and others don't have the chance to speak, writing down the agenda before the meeting starts, writing down the minutes of the meeting, taking breaks, sharing useful skills and resources, self-criticism and self-evaluation, etc. We can learn a lot from the experiences of second wave feminist groups, radical left collectives and anarcho-feminist activists who both defied sexism in anarchist groups and hierarchical structures in feminist organisations.

3. Networks

One collective isn't going to pull the plug out of patriarchy, but when there are a lot of them working together, we increase our power. And we will need that power, because it's hard to undo thousands of years of anti-feminist socialisation and the institutionalisation of misogynist norms and behaviours.

The number of feminist groups and projects in the world is infinite, but most of them are not connected or don't even know each other. Just like it's better for individual activists to organise themselves collectively, collectives are stronger together than separately. This working relationship should also be structured in a non-hierarchical co-operative manner and local collectives should keep their autonomy. Such networks are useful for sharing information and local news, exchanging ideas, setting up projects or campaigns together, offering support,

¹ <http://hem.bredband.net/b125645/Artemis/Techniques/> (accessed 31.08.2011)

inspiration and solidarity. Where formal networks don't exist yet, groups can co-operate and network informally, supporting each other's actions, distributing each other's publications and keeping each other informed about plans and activities.

4. Meeting

In a time of faceless internet activism and a lack of visibility of our movement in the media, we might feel alone and disempowered. We can hardly grasp the real size, diversity, creativity and strengths of our movement, if we don't see and meet all those feminists who are out there. The feeling of isolation and being misunderstood by our surroundings can not be solved only by forming feminist facebook groups or discussing on blogs. When we meet in real life, we get a better idea about how big, diverse and powerful the feminist movement is and we'll be motivated to keep on fighting. Meeting each other is important to build a strong network.

Meeting other feminist groups and activists can happen at feminist gatherings and meetings such as feminist action camps, open women's studies conferences, international festivals like Ladyfest, alternative book fairs, brainstorm/skill-sharing weekends, activist meetings, radical summer schools, women's film festivals, international women's day activities and demonstrations. I've always found attending such gatherings inspiring and could bring fresh ideas to my group back home. In the second feminist wave, events like this brought lots of women together and sustained the movement. Today, there exist lots of feminist events and activities and you can organise your own where you invite and meet other feminists. Don't forget to bring your address book!

5. Space

Public space is generally not women-friendly. Women are traditionally encouraged to stay at home, on their own. But we need to reclaim public spaces and create some of our own where we feel safe and welcomed. This world has few (public) places where women, lesbians, queers, transpeople and girls feel totally at ease, at home, free and safe. A woman needs a room of her own as a creative workplace, said Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room Of One's Own*, but women and feminists also need free spaces for ourselves as a group and a movement. That's why feminist spaces are needed: collective rooms of our own.

Spaces where we can be ourselves, where we can relax and meet each other, where activities can happen and plans can be made, where we can talk, organise, educate and learn, find and give support, and inspire each other. Examples of such spaces are women's centres, lesbian cafés, anti-sexist squats, women's art galleries, feminist book shops, women's herstory archives and feminist libraries. The existence of feminist collective spaces can have an enormous influence on the

growth of our movement. We need meeting spaces, workplaces and "safe havens". I've seen that groups and projects rise when there's for example an activist squat or friendly community house to get together. Whenever such locations are known to be feminist-minded and places where feminists meet, it's a lot easier to find other feminist activists (Enke 2007) and plan actions and projects together.

6. Means

Action groups and non-profit organisations need means: financial means, material and a workplace or meeting space (see 5.). To fund our campaigns, buy equipment, print publications and so on, we need to look at ways to raise money. This isn't always easy and may involve some ethical discussions about who to accept funding from and where to spend it on.

Government funding or grants are one possible – but not the only – solution. Even though the State is part of patriarchy, the government's money is better spent on feminist projects than on something like the army. So why not try to send an application? The only risk to keep in mind is that your organisation may become dependent and soften its viewpoints and campaigns. Sponsorship of feminist-friendly enterprises and women's funds (such as Mama Cash²) is another possibility. Other ideas for collecting financial means are benefit concerts/parties, an art auction, selling merchandise (T-shirts, stickers, benefit CD), garage sales, membership fees and donations. There are also ways to save money: look for someone who can make free copies or maybe there are some old sheets and paint on your attic to make banners and flags.

7. Education

Education is crucial for social/left movements, including the feminist movement. It can erase inequalities based on schooling, teach skills and knowledge that isn't taught in school and raise awareness about feminist and other social justice issues. Traditional education often replicates gender norms and doesn't teach feminist values, theory or herstory. By offering alternative additional forms of education, we can try to counter these gaps and shortcomings. The transmission of skills and knowledge can be organised in for example workshops, lectures, interactive presentations, group discussions, educational walks, alternative media and film screenings.

Consciousness-raising groups and reading groups are two other methods commonly used by feminists which serve the purpose of education and raising awareness very well. In consciousness-raising groups, which were popular mainly

² <http://www.mamacash.org> (accessed 31.08.2011)

in the second wave, women share experiences and personal stories to discover the fact that their personal problems as women are political. Consciousness-raising groups can make women aware of the system of sexism and the necessity of feminist activism. Such gatherings of women can also lead to planning and organising actions to counter the sexism that was discussed. A feminist reading group looks similar to a consciousness-raising group, but it starts from an essay or a book instead of from personal experiences. The conversations can be theoretical, activist/strategic, personal or a combination of those three.

The group discussions in reading groups, consciousness-raising groups and workshops can contribute to making and sharing DIY research and theory about gender, emancipation, politics and society. The production of knowledge should not be left to so-called experts, professionals or observers/outsideers. Because we as feminist activists experience our activism first-hand and have valid opinions that deserve to be heard, we should document and analyse our collective experiences in the patriarchal system and our resistance to it and write down, share and publish our own feminist theories, criticisms, herstory and strategies. This kind of theory production and distribution is accessible and inclusive too, something that's lacking in academic surroundings.

8. Media

Patriarchal propaganda is targeted at us daily in the shape of advertisements, films, TV soaps, magazines, papers, video clips and so on. Through repetition of sexist messages in the mainstream media, sexism is being normalised. The "malestream" media is never neutral nor objective, even though they claim to be. Certain messages, images and speakers are chosen and others are silenced or ignored, and this choice is influenced by cultural norms, hegemonic opinions, economic interests and political ideologies. Feminists criticise the content of mainstream media (gender stereotypes, women's issues being ignored, etc), its representation of women, the working conditions in the media industry and the exclusion of women at decision-making levels.

As feminists we can react to the sexism in the mainstream media in different ways: feminist journalists can try to change the mainstream media from within, activists and pressure groups can analyse and criticise the media industry and feminists can make their own media. Creating our own media means being able to voice and spread our feminist opinions and ideas. It can target the feminist movement itself or a broader audience. Feminist media can be made in any medium – zines, blogs, film, radio, self-published books, etc – and subject-wise it can be very diverse: f.e. sharing experiences and theories about sexism in society, talking about what your ideal feminist world would look like or reporting on actions and projects. Feminist media can also be feminist poetry, posters and street-art, music and theatre. All of them create a forum on which feminist ideas are expressed, spread and discussed.

In the previous decades, magazines such as *Schoppenvrouw* (Belgium) or *Spare Rib* (UK) and riot grrrl zines were an alternative for traditional consumer-oriented women's magazines which focus on beauty, attracting men and housekeeping. They also offered a means of communication among feminists and between feminists and the broader society. Nowadays, digital media such as blogs can reach huge numbers of people craving for feminist literature, but paper media still flourish.

9. Protest and alternatives

So now we know how to organise ourselves and what we need, but what will we do in our groups and networks? How will we fight patriarchy, misogyny and sexism and create the world we dream of?

When working towards a feminist society we need activism that questions and fights against what's wrong in our current society (i.e. protest) *and* activism that builds something new and creates a better world here and now (i.e. alternatives). We have to be critical of sexism and other forms of oppression and their manifestations. We point to shortcomings and injustices in our society and make visible what has been normalised and naturalised (like gender roles and racist prejudice) in order to change it. It is important to raise awareness about violence, discrimination and oppression and to show that this can and should stop. Some examples of actions that can be used to resist and protest sexism are: blockades, occupations, street theatre, adbusting, protest letters, DIY media, Take Back The Night marches, boycott actions, radical cheerleading, strikes, a noise demo, filing complaints and placing huge banners on buildings or lamp posts.

When we speak out against something or criticise something, we might need to offer possible solutions or suggest what we want instead. Instead of "waiting for the revolution", feminist activists and collectives can experiment with, develop and build feminist alternatives that reflect the image of what a feminist world could look like. Whatever is missing, we can do, create or make it happen ourselves, right now. For example: feminists in the second wave have taught courses about women's history or female artists when this wasn't part yet of the curriculum at regular schools, they have founded women's houses and shelters and they've written alternative women's magazines. Other examples are Jane and Women On Waves (who both carried out abortions in places and times where this was/is illegal)³ and *Our Bodies Ourselves* (a collectively written book that encouraged women to examine their own bodies and demystified healthcare). Creating alternative non-sexist language is relevant too for feminists, such as the word *Ms* – to replace *Miss* and *Mrs* which refer to women's marital status – that was invented

³ Jane, also known as the Abortion Counselling Service Of Women's Liberation, is a group that was part of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. Women On Waves are pro-choice activists from the Netherlands who travel with a boat to the coasts of countries where abortion is illegal to perform abortions for women in need. At the same time they criticise the anti-abortion laws.

by American feminists and has now become a common word in English vocabulary. Gender neutral words like *se* – to replace *she* and *he* – are added by transfeminist activists. All of these alternatives can serve as an inspiring example for others – showing that things can be different.

10. Fun and rest

For me, feminist activism is a lot of fun. It's exciting, relaxing and empowering. The feminist movement offers an open, warm and safe space where I feel at home and where I can be myself and make friends. It gives me energy and inspiration – especially when everyday sexism can be so frustrating and disempowering. I enjoy going out at night with markers and stickers in my pockets, brainstorming and making plans with friends, laughing about each other's anti-sexist jokes, sharing experiences and learning, writing for a feminist publication and receiving feedback from readers, visiting feminist festivals and meeting feminists from other places... I love creative activism: making banners, designing funny stickers, drawing feminist comics, doing craft-street-art actions, painting feminist slogans on T-shirts, watching performances of feminist theatre, playing in a feminist band...

But sometimes activism can make you stressed and exhausted. The road to revolution can be long and hard because of set-backs, backlashes or continuously negative comments. Sometimes you need a break from the action and the constant fight against patriarchy. Sometimes you feel alone, powerless, worn-out... Then it might be time for some rest. It's better to take a break or holiday or go slower than completely burn out and quit activism. This freedom to withdraw as long as necessary to refuel your batteries has to be supported by the movement, because activism shouldn't be self-sacrifice. Feminist activists have the responsibility to look after each other and make sure we don't get discouraged. Sometimes feminist free spaces can be resting places too and going to a women-only/queer party, watching a feminist film or just a hug can already help a lot!

Conclusion

After decades and centuries of feminist activism, there remains so much to be done to transform this world into a place where everyone is free and equal. The struggle we are facing to oppose and eradicate sexism and patriarchy, along with ableism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, classism, capitalism and other forms of oppression, is not an easy one. We need to end oppression and inequality not only in our society, but also question such behaviours, power relations and privileges in our own movement and in ourselves. These are difficult challenges, but they must be dealt with if we want our feminist dreams to come true.

Building a sustainable movement by working on the ten "tools" I've outlined is only a beginning. We always have to rethink what we need and what we want. Once we

have a network consisting of millions of feminist collectives, organisations and consciousness-raising groups, alternative media, educational projects, sufficient financial means, spaces and events to meet, diverse forms of activism and time to take a break, we can keep going and look to the future. But we have to keep in mind, we can't do without any of them if we want to succeed in ending patriarchy. Equal Opportunities Ministries and gender studies programs are not enough. So in order to move forward, we have to look back at previous waves of feminism, learn and take inspiration from their ways of organising and taking action.

Checklist

- individual awareness and change
- feminist action groups
- non-hierarchical organisation structures and democratic decision-making policies
- networking and co-operating with other groups
- gatherings and meetings
- (financial) means
- free spaces
- education, skill-sharing and awareness-raising
- feminist media
- protest actions and campaigns
- alternatives
- rest
- fun
- database of local, regional and international feminist initiatives
- ending sexism

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