

Feedback on: CAN MEN BE FEMINISTS?

The women of Isis International-Manila ask if men can be feminists.

For me, encountering that question raises more questions than answers.

One. What is a feminist? Are there any minimum requirements to becoming a feminist before one can enjoy sporting the label? Who judges these things?

Two. Do men need to be feminists? Do feminists want to have feminist men around?

Three. Do I want to be a feminist? Will anyone believe me if I do decide to become a feminist?

Romel Lalata

Policy Review and Editorial Services, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines

Dear Romel,

We are not from Isis International-Manila but let us share some thoughts:

There are many perspectives to this question. People from the "mainstream" fear the feminist label. Many times when we have forums with so-called "mainstream" people, they say, "Oh, you do very good work" when referring to our Women's Action Hotline service. Then they would add, "It's a good thing that you're all feminine unlike many feminists who look like..." (???)

They say feminist have tight assholes who need to loosen up.

Yet, it is true that many feminists lack a sense of humor. But hey, is rape funny?

Then there are those who ask: What does a feminist look like? We say: Who cares, as long as she gets an equal say. And to those who say "You don't look like a feminist," we respond: "Watch out—we disguise ourselves as **human beings.**"

So, do men need to be feminists? Do feminists want to have feminist men around? We do. Especially if in addition to being feminists they're handsome too. We also say "Your boyfriend bakes

cookies? Marry him..."

*Anonymous
Arugaan ang Kalakasan, Inc.
Quezon City, Philippines*

Yes, I believe that a man can be a feminist. The philosophy one chooses to adapt is not necessarily limited to one's gender. It is the person's state of mind, the way he or she perceives things, that matters. One need not be a woman to be a feminist.

*JC Mendoza
University of the Philippines*

I think the word feminist is quite sexist. If we are striving for the equality of men and women then gender should not be an issue itself. The important thing is we regard and treat people based on their merits, character and capabilities and not because of their color, race, religion or gender for that matter.

*Anonymous
Philippines*

A feminist is someone who upholds the rights of women. Being a feminist doesn't require one to be a woman. A man can also be a feminist just as long as he believes that women should be treated equally with men and are regarded with dignity and respect instead of discriminating them and treating them as second-class citizens.

*Anonymous
Philippines*

No, the macho image of men will always be a hindrance. Men still doubt the capabilities of women.

*Regi Reyes
Statistical Coordination Officer of
the National Statistical
Coordination Board
(NSCB) Philippines*

Can't be, because if men become feminists then that's an outright admission that women are superior. But men can respect the

thinking of women. Men will always believe they are on top of the situation. It is a weak man who agrees to feminist views.

*Ruben Litan
Information Researcher
NSCB*

OPPOSING VIEW ON IRAN

Contrary to reports in western media that Iranian women are abused, treated as appendages to men and are useless, we found them to be the opposite, as we toured Iran recently at the invitation of Fatemeh Hashemi, president of the Iranian Women's Solidarity Association, and daughter of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Half of university students in science and medicine are women. At the large Blood Transfusion Service of the Blood Research and Fractionation Center, half of the doctors in a team of 140 are women. A woman, Dr. Huri Rezvan, is the manager.

If the Philippines has the National Commission on Women, Iran has its Women's Affairs Office headed by a brilliant lawyer, Shahla Habibi, who is also the President's Adviser on Women's Affairs. The Women's Affairs Office prepared the agenda for the women's participation in the Global Forum in Beijing where Iran sent 100 women headed by Fatemeh Hashemi. From all accounts, the Iranian women made a hit with their 20 position papers.

Iran has 42 women's national organizations. Among the more prominent ones are the Women's Solidarity Association, Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution, Association for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development.

We noted that rural women, about 21 percent or 11.5 million of the population, are major players in the economy of the country. They are well-educated and literate and not only do they produce food for the people but that they contribute substantially

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to the export earnings through the carpet industry. Next to oil, carpets are the second biggest dollar earner.

The government has set up 2,000 family planning centers all over the country that give away free contraceptive pills and gadgets. Some 16,500 health workers (58 percent of which are women) see to the health of the people.

Women's sports are fantastic. Faezeye, President Rafsanjani's second daughter, is the moving spirit behind sports. Iranian women athletes have won in international tournaments such as in the world championship of 1992 in Germany; in the 1993 First Islamic Countries Games; in the 1993 women's shooting games in Germany and Korea; in the 1994 chess tournament in Moscow, Hungary and India; and in the 1994 shooting games in Japan and Beijing. Besides these sports, they are also engaged in skiing, mountaineering, fencing, judo, karate, taekwando, hockey, squash, rowing and cycling. What do you say to that?

In politics, Iranian women play major roles. In the last session of the Parliament, the nine women members introduced 20 bills and succeeded in having 10 of them approved. In last March's national election, of the 30,000 candidates, 30 were women with Faezeye leading the pack. The sister of Imam Khomeini, Faridah, is also very active in politics. She heads the Women's Population Foundation and fielded some 10 women in the last elections. She is highly educated and very patriotic, too. The two members of Parliament we met, Madame Salchi and Vahid Nasijerdi, were very vocal about women's rights in the home and society. Both introduced 20 bills, including nursing mothers' right to feed her baby while at work and providing women nurses with pension after their mandatory retirement. The two women also won four months of paid leave for

women pregnant for the first child. Not a bad performance for two of the nine women in Parliament.

We also observed that sexual harassment is unheard of. We like to think that Iranian women's clothes have something to do with this. By tradition, women wear scarves and the Hijab outside the home. They are fully covered from head to toe. Which does not seem to bother them. Girls of nine years start wearing the *hijab* and scarf. But do not think that their clothes are all boring. Because they can discard the scarves and hijab when there are no men around, the women take to fashionable clothes, made locally or in European fashion houses. Madame Effat Hashemi, the First Lady, was very elegant in her suit when she received us at the Presidential House. However, Iranian women are not allowed to be photographed without the scarf and hijab.

Moreover, drug addiction, drunkenness and gambling and womanizing are nowhere in sight. We were told that to discourage the habit, drug offenders are heavily penalized. Drinking and gambling are not allowed in public but one may drink and gamble to death in one's house.

Islam allows four wives under certain conditions. But because these conditions are almost impossible to meet, very, very few men have four wives. Besides, we were told by both men and women, when one truly loves another, it is not possible to be unfaithful. Love, as in all religions whether Islam or Christian, is sacred, sublime.

*Leonarda N. Camacho
Metro Manila Council of Women
Balikatan Movement, Inc. Quezon
City, Philippines*

I want to give you an update on the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*. We have made many accomplishments *this year*. We found a grandchild that was born in captivity and he now knows his true identity. Another significant contribution was a reunion

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between a son and his father whose mother had disappeared.

The French magazine *Marie Clair* conducted a survey of the most important women in the world. "I was one of the women mentioned in this list. The entry in the magazine stated "Rosa Tarlovsky de Roisinblit, Vice President of the Abuelas de Mayo in Argentina. This dean of the Abuelas de Mayo who continues to pressure authorities..."

Well, as you can see our struggle continues to be arduous and long. I hope you are doing well. Thank you for your solidarity.

*Rosita Roisinblit
Argentina*

(Rosita was featured in WIA's first issue in 1995. We appreciate her continuing communications with us.-Ed.)

From the E-mail

ISRAEL: STAGNATION RATHER THAN CRACKDOWNS

From Israeli feminists, forwarded FYI.

Robin Morgan

"The election of right-wing Benjamin Netanyahu as the next prime minister of Israel is bad enough. The enormous gains of three religious fundamentalist parties (increasing their electoral strength by 50 percent in the Knesset) is much worse. Since Netanyahu's Likud party won only 32 seats, and the religious now collectively hold 23, the Likud will require the approval of the religious in every coalition move they make. For gays, this does not bode well.

"Gay rights in Israel had greatly improved in the last four years: In 1992, discrimination at work based on sexual orientation was made illegal. The next year, the army formally ended most discrimination against gay men and lesbians. In 1994, the Supreme Court recognized benefits to same-sex spouses

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employed by El-Al Airlines and Tel-Aviv University. And in 1995, the law was amended to grant pensions to same-sex partners of deceased civil servants. Even a number of public institutions have made concessions to same-sex spouses (blood banks, the census bureau, the names registry, etc.). And our nightlife was just beginning to get off the ground.

"In general, I do not believe that these achievements will be rolled back or even come under all-out attack by the new government. What is clear, however, is that the ascendancy of the religious spells the end of further gains during the lifetime of this government.

"Modern Israel had only

opposed to the Jewish-religious or Arab schools, which educate about half the children in Israel). In the secular system, the booklet had not yet gained wide exposure, but there was hope. Now that hope is gone.

"Where gays will feel the hot breath of the religious on our necks is the stigma, the delegitimization, and the demonization of our style of life. This will get worse, and fewer gays will feel comfortable coming out. The already-existing fear of losing jobs or clients—especially for teachers, medical personnel, social workers, psychologists, and the like—will get worse, despite the law that prohibits this. The vast majority of gays in Israel are still deep inside the closet, and the closet will become even deeper.

"I do not believe that our two active organizations will be outlawed: CLAF, the Community of Feminist Lesbians, or SPPR, the Society for the Protection of Personal Rights. But both will be handicapped in legislative lobbying and advocacy. And although the courts are ostensibly inde-

pendent of the legislature, they too are influenced by the *Zeitgeist*.

"Yes, some religious political leaders are renewing the language of "the abomination of homosexuality" and have threatened to enact legislation that would undermine previous gains. But I don't think they would be successful in persuading the secular component of the new government (Likud) to go along with it.

"Right now, there's a lot of posturing going on.

"You know what? I think the fundamentalists will be so busy introducing religious studies into the secular school system;

Netanyahu's
election does not
bode well for gays
in Israel.

recently begun to squeeze out of the vice-grip of the ultra-Orthodox, who still have a monopoly on life-cycle rituals (marriage, divorce, and burial) and dominate other key areas of family life (child custody). Progress in these areas will be hopeless-to-nil as long as the religious are running these shows.

"One glimmer of hope will certainly die out. In 1995, the Ministry of Education issued a booklet that describes homosexual and lesbian partnerships as an alternative kind of domestic arrangement, no disparagement in tone or content. This booklet had been prepared for the so-called "secular" school system in Israel (as