Activity 3 – The Backlash Against Feminism

Are we now living in a post-feminist world, a world in which feminism has accomplished its goals and become redundant? Although the term ‘post-feminism’ is contested and may be assumed to be recent, it is commonly understood to refer to the growing backlash against feminism since the 1980s. The second wave of feminism in the UK and US gave way to the idea that women now have free choice, on par with men, a sentiment that critics of post-feminism disagree with. Scholars like Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill have documented the crucial role that popular media has played in constructing the image of the post-feminist woman who is free to pursue a career, romance and domestic bliss, all simultaneously and successfully, if she wants. Films like ‘Bridget Jones’s Diary’ and ‘Sex and the City’ are considered to be typical examples. Bridget Jones is portrayed as an independent, if somewhat immature, woman who frequently slips up on tasks at work, is obsessed with her body weight and is ultimately in pursuit of a man for a happy, heterosexual relationship. While she is shown to be a liberated woman, who is free to choose what she wants in life, her desire to lose weight and find a man in order to be happy has been criticised by feminists. Scholars argue that such media images ignore the reality of many structural gender inequalities that still persist. A common feminist retort to post-feminism is that “we’ll be post-feminist in a post-patriarchal world” emphasising that, although progress has been made, gender equality has not yet been fully achieved.

Further criticism of feminism alleges that it is exclusionary in its focus on women’s issues and rights. Indeed, it is now not uncommon to come across the argument that men’s issues are ignored/ neglected or even that feminism (and the demand for women’s rights) impinges on men’s rights. There are a number of men’s rights activists (MRAs) and organisations that have come up in response to feminism and have garnered quite a bit of controversy. The role of men in feminism is debated more generally too – can men be feminists or only allies? How can men contribute to the cause of gender equality without ‘taking over’? Such developments are, however, not new. In 1991, the Pulitzer prize winning journalist Susan Faludi wrote in her book ‘Backlash’: ‘the anti-feminist backlash has been set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it.

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2. [http://www.theweek.co.uk/people/62607/mens-rights-movement-why-it-is-so-controversial](http://www.theweek.co.uk/people/62607/mens-rights-movement-why-it-is-so-controversial)
is a pre-emptive strike that stops women long before they reach the finish line.\(^3\) Although Faludi’s book was written in the context of the US, it was (and continues to be) relevant for the UK too. You can read an extract from the book here: [http://susanfaludi.com/backlash-chapter.html](http://susanfaludi.com/backlash-chapter.html).

Let us now consider a scenario. In the UK, the last few decades have seen major changes in terms of gender equality in education. There are undoubtedly more women in schools and universities and they seem to be doing well, so much so that it is now argued that boys are falling behind. Boys are underachieving at GCSEs and are less likely to get 2:1 or a 1st at university (although Oxford\(^4\) and Cambridge have been known to be exceptions to this, with more men than women likely to get a 1st), a fact commonly used to make the case that we should now be worrying about boys and men. Despite underachievement, however, on average, men graduates earn more than women graduates and the pay gap widens as income goes up. Furthermore, gendered division in subjects and professions still persists – for example, fewer than 10% of British engineers are women\(^5\). Of course, this doesn't imply that boys’ underachievement in school should not be of concern; rather that it needs to be comprehensively tackled.

**Task**

Read the following:

- Generation of boys being failed by the school system, The Guardian: [https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/may/03/boys-under-achievement-school-education](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/may/03/boys-under-achievement-school-education)
- The Feminist Perspective on Education, Revise Sociology: [https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/26/the-feminist-perspective-on-education-uk-focus/](https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/26/the-feminist-perspective-on-education-uk-focus/)
- Girls in STEM, IB Times: [http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/girls-stem-these-figures-show-why-we-need-more-women-science-tech-engineering-maths-1540590](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/girls-stem-these-figures-show-why-we-need-more-women-science-tech-engineering-maths-1540590)

\(^3\) [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/13/classics.gender](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/13/classics.gender)


Now consider these questions:

1. What do you think are the reasons for boys falling behind academically in schools?
2. Why are very few girls studying STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects?
3. Do you see any overlaps in your responses to the questions above?
4. As a final activity, consider what you would identify as the three main gender equality issues today? What areas of life do these concern? How would you place these in the context of the historical development of the feminist movement?