

DIFFICULT WOMEN

A History of Feminism in 11 Fights

HELEN LEWIS



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Jonathan Cape, an imprint of Vintage,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Jonathan Cape is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

Copyright © Helen Lewis 2020

Helen Lewis has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this Work
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published by Jonathan Cape in 2020

penguin.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781787331280 (hardback)
ISBN 9781787331297 (trade paperback)

Typeset in 10.75/15.75pt Mercury Text G1 Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for
our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



CONTENTS

Introduction: An Imperfect History	1
1 Divorce	11
2 The Vote	39
3 Sex	69
4 Play	99
5 Work	127
6 Safety	157
7 Love	191
8 Education	221
9 Time	249
10 Abortion	277
11 The Right to be Difficult	303
Epilogue: A Manifesto for the Difficult Woman	327
Acknowledgements	331
Sources and Further Reading	335
Index	339

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

George Bernard Shaw, 1903

Or woman.

Helen Lewis, 2020

INTRODUCTION: AN IMPERFECT HISTORY

What does it mean to be a difficult woman? I'm not talking about being rude, thoughtless, obnoxious or a diva. First of all, difficult means complicated, and this book contains a host of complicated women. A thumbs-up, thumbs-down approach to historical figures is boring and reductive. Most of us are more than one thing; everyone is 'problematic'. In this book, you will meet women with views which are unpalatable to modern feminists. You will meet women with views which were unpalatable to their *contemporaries*. A history of feminism should not try to sand off the sharp corners of the movement's pioneers – or write them out of the story entirely, if their sins are deemed too great. It must allow them to be just as flawed – just as human – as men. 'Why are girls to be told that they resemble angels,' wrote Mary Wollstonecraft, 'but to sink them below women?' We don't have to be perfect to deserve equal rights.

The idea of role models is not necessarily a bad one, but the way they are used in feminism can dilute a radical political movement into feel-good inspiration porn. Holding up a few exceptions is no substitute for questioning the rules themselves, and in our rush to champion historical women, we are distorting the past. Take the wildly successful children's book *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls*, which has sold more than a million copies. It tells a hundred 'empowering, moving and inspirational' stories, promising that 'these are true fairy tales for heroines who definitely don't need rescuing'. Its entry for the fashion designer Coco Chanel mentions that she wanted

2 DIFFICULT WOMEN

to start a business, and a 'wealthy friend of hers lent her enough money to make her dream come true'. It does not mention that Chanel was the lover of a Nazi officer and very probably a spy for Hitler's Germany. In the 1930s, she tried to remove that 'wealthy friend' from the company under racist laws which forbade Jews to own businesses. In the name of inspiring little girls living in a male-dominated world, the book doesn't so much airbrush Coco Chanel's story as sandblast it with a high-pressure hose. Do you find Chanel's wartime collaboration with the Nazis 'empowering'? I don't – although admittedly she *does* sound like a woman who 'didn't need rescuing'. The real Coco Chanel was clever, prejudiced, talented, cynical – and interesting. The pale version of her boiled down to a feminist saint is not.

I can excuse that approach in a children's book, but it's alarming to see the same urge in adults. We cannot celebrate women by stripping politics – and therefore conflict – from the narrative. *Unfurl the bunting, and don't ask too many questions!* It creates a story of feminism where all the opponents are either cartoon baddies or mysteriously absent, where no hard compromises have to be made, and internal disagreements disappear. The One True Way is obvious, and all Good People follow it. Feminists are on the right side of history, and we just have to wait for the world to catch up.

Life does not work like that. It would be much easier if feminist triumphs relied on defeating a few bogeymen, but grotesque sexists like Donald Trump only have power because otherwise decent people voted for them. There were women who opposed female suffrage; women are the biggest consumers of magazines and websites which point out other women's physical flaws; there is no gender gap in support for abortion rights. People are complicated, and making progress is complicated too. If modern feminism feels toothless, it is because it has retreated into two modes: empty celebration or shadow-boxing with outright bastards. Neither deals with difficulty, and so neither can make a difference.

Women's history should not be a shallow hunt for heroines. Too often, I see feminists castigating each other for admiring the Pankhursts (autocrats), Andrea Dworkin (too aggressive), Jane Austen (too middle-class), Margaret Atwood (worried about due process in sexual-harassment accusations) and Germaine Greer (where do I start?). I recently read a piece about how I was 'problematic' for having expressed sympathy for the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. My crime was to say that his confirmation hearings had been turned into a media circus – and even those accused of sexual assault deserve better. The criticism reflects a desperate desire to pretend that thorny issues are actually straightforward. No more flawed humans struggling inside vast, complicated systems: there are good guys and bad guys, and it's easy to tell which is which. This approach is pathetic and childish, and it should be resisted. I want to restore the complexity to feminist pioneers. Their legacies might be contested, they might have made terrible strategic choices and they might have not have lived up to the ideals they preached. But they mattered. Their difficulty is part of the story.

Then there's the second meaning of 'difficult'. Any demand for greater rights faces opponents, and any advance creates a backlash. Changing the world is always difficult. At Dublin Castle in May 2018, waiting for the results of the Irish referendum on abortion law, I saw a banner which read: 'If there is no struggle, there is no progress.' Those words come from a speech by Frederick Douglass, who campaigned for the end of the slave trade in the US. He wanted to make clear that 'power concedes nothing without a demand'. In other words, campaigners have to be disruptive. They cannot take No for an answer. 'Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground,' said Douglass. 'They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.' Changing the world won't make people like you. It will cause you pain. It will be difficult. It will feel like a struggle. You

must accept the size of the mountain ahead of you, and start climbing it anyway.

Then there is the difficulty of womanhood itself. In a world built for men, women will always struggle to fit in. We are what Simone de Beauvoir called ‘the second sex’. Our bodies are different from the standard (male) human. Our sexual desires have traditionally been depicted as fluid, hard to read, unpredictable. Our life experiences are mysterious and unknowable; our minds are Freud’s ‘dark continent’. We are imagined to be on the wrong side of a world divided in two. Men are serious, women are silly. Men are rational, women are emotional. Men are strong, women are weak. Men are steadfast, women are fickle. Men are objective, women are subjective. Men are humanity, women are a subset of it. Men want sex and women grant or withhold it. Women are looked at; men do the looking. When we are victims, it is hard to believe us. ‘At the heart of the struggle of feminism to give rape, date rape, marital rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment legal standing as crimes has been the necessity of making women credible and audible,’ wrote Rebecca Solnit in *Men Explain Things to Me*. ‘Billions of women must be out there on this six-billion-person planet being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property, now or ever.’ When fighting for equal rights, women often face a hurdle of disbelief: does this problem really exist, if only women are talking about it? We know how unreasonable women are, after all.

Finally, there is another meaning of ‘difficult’ which I try to tease out in this book. Any history of feminism has to start by acknowledging that most revolutionaries are not . . . nice. And women have always been told to be nice. Girls are instructed to be ‘ladylike’ to keep them quiet and docile. (They are made of sugar and spice ‘and all things nice’.) Motherhood is championed as a journey of endless self-sacrifice. Random men tell us to ‘cheer up’ in the street, because God forbid our own emotions should impinge on anyone else’s day. If we raise our

voices, we are ‘shrill’. Our ambition is suspicious. Our anger is portrayed as unnatural, horrifying, disfiguring: who needs to listen to the ‘nag’, the ‘hysteric’ or the ‘angry black woman’? All this is extremely unhelpful if you want to go out and cause trouble – the kind of trouble that leads to legal and cultural change.

*

My favourite definition of feminism comes from the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. A feminist, she said, is someone who believes in ‘the social, economic and political equality of the sexes’. That sounds straightforward, but feminism is endlessly difficult. I decided to write this book because I was tired of it. Looking back on the ‘Fourth Wave’, the burst of activism which began in the early 2010s, it seemed as though we were congratulating ourselves on ‘changing the culture’, when there were few concrete victories to report. And already the backlash was coming. Across the world, from Vladimir Putin in Russia to Narendra Modi in India to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, populists and nationalists were pushing a return to traditional gender roles. The US president grabbed women by the pussy, because ‘when you’re a star, they let you do it’. The #MeToo movement collapsed into a conversation about borderline cases and did not lead to any substantial legal reforms. Abortion rights were under threat in eastern Europe and the southern United States, and had never reached Northern Ireland. Gang-rape cases convulsed India and Spain. Free universal childcare was as much a dream as it had been in the 1970s.

I had personal worries, too. It felt as though the feminist movement was more fractured than previous generations, making it harder to achieve progress on any individual issue. It was more open to some kinds of marginalised voices (those with social media accounts, at least) but could feel hopelessly lacking in focus. Twitterstorms and a culture of instant outrage put the fear of God into sexist advertisers and gaffe-prone politicians, but under all the

noise, were we really moving forward? ‘Cancel culture’ ensured that any feminist icon’s reputation felt fragile and provisional. Often, we had barely anointed a new heroine before we tore her down again. ‘Sisterhood is powerful,’ the Second Waver Ti-Grace Atkinson once said. ‘It kills. Mostly sisters.’ Feminism often felt mired in petty arguments, and I noticed younger women casually denigrating the achievements of their predecessors. ‘Cancel the second wave,’ read one headline. When I talked at an event about the fights for equal pay and domestic-violence shelters, one twentysomething woman casually replied: ‘Yeah, but all that stuff is sorted.’

I couldn’t blame those women, because I was once complacent about the battles of yesterday. But as I read more, I understood the true scale of feminism’s achievements and the challenges its pioneers had to overcome. I gained more respect for them, and extended more kindness towards the compromises they made. I tried to imagine what it must have been like to survive in a sexist office of the 1960s, fending off groppers and patronising put-downs. Would I have ended up growing a rhino-thick hide, and arguing that women needed to stop thinking of themselves as victims? Maybe. I tried to put myself in the place of the Victorian education reformers, trying to set up women’s colleges. I decided that, like them, I would probably have emphasised the respectability of education, rather than painting it as a radical, liberating force. Would I have thrown a bomb or suffered force-feeding to get the vote? I doubted it. Would I have fallen out with other feminists? I was sure of it.

All this made me want to ask how we got here, in the hope it would help us decide where to go next. What works? What sacrifices are worth making for the greater good? What alliances are bearable in the service of a good cause? What do women need to do to be treated as full citizens, as independent human beings, as the protagonists in our own lives? We are still paid less. We still do more unpaid labour. We are still raped and murdered and abused by violent men. We are still taught to hate our bodies. We still die because

research into sleeping pills and seat belts doesn't include us. We are still under-represented in politics. We still only make up a third of speaking characters in Hollywood films. Feminism has won many battles, but the war is nowhere near over.

A friend suggested a title to tie it together: *Difficult Women*. It was the summer when Theresa May ran for Conservative leader, and the veteran backbencher Ken Clarke was caught on a live microphone (admiringly) describing her as a 'bloody difficult woman'. It was used by the American feminist Roxane Gay as the title of her short-story collection in 2017. And it gave David Plante the title of his memoir of Sonia Orwell, Germaine Greer and Jean Rhys published in 1983, the year I was born.

Difficult Women were popping up everywhere. The word kept recurring as women tried to demonstrate how they were penalised for calling out sexism. The TV presenter Helen Skelton described being groped on air by an interviewee while pregnant. She did not complain, she said, because 'that's just the culture that television breeds. No one wants to be difficult.' The actor Jennifer Lawrence told the *Hollywood Reporter* that she had once stood up to a rude director. Afterwards, a producer took her aside and called her 'unruly'. The incident left her worried that she would be punished by the industry. 'Yeah,' chipped in fellow actor Emma Stone, mocking that criticism: 'You were "difficult".' All these people were edging towards the same idea, an idea which is imprinted on us from birth: that women are called unreasonable, selfish and unfeminine when they stand up for themselves. 'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is,' wrote Rebecca West in 1913. 'I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat, or a prostitute.'

*

A more conventional history of feminism would probably begin in 1792, with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Women. But I'm not a historian, and this is not a conventional history. Like many women, I came to feminism through a pervasive feeling of wrongness with aspects of my life that I couldn't quite articulate. Feminism gave me the words to understand my experiences, and what I saw around me. It reassured me that I was not alone. It made me angry for all the women whose potential was lost and whose lives were restricted by unjust laws and unfair practices. It has introduced me to many of the best and most impressive people I know.

I want to take feminism apart and examine the machinery that makes it so powerful. By looking at a series of fights – for the vote, for the right to divorce, for the chance to go to university – I hope to show how change happens, and how much there is left to do. We will also see the tawdry compromises, the personality clashes and the backlash which accompanies any challenge to the status quo. In choosing my fights and my women, I have focused on Britain, where I live, but many of the patterns, arguments and controversies are universal. British feminism has been shaped by our lack of a written constitution, our parliamentary system and our official status as a Christian country, but also by wider currents such as immigration, declining birthrates and the entry of women into the workforce. I've stayed away from the obsessions of the online hot-take mill, such as arcane debates over vocabulary, because words matter less than actions. And I've chosen an eclectic selection of difficult women, who are all protagonists of the various fights. Each one has something to teach us, without us needing to airbrush the difficult bits out of their biographies.

No one can write the definitive history of feminism – there are many histories, and many feminisms. Even so, it feels daring to attempt any type of history at all. This is an exceptionally individualistic era, and women are often frightened to claim the authority to speak about any lives except their own. That might be prudent and safe, but it is also a misuse of privilege by those who have it. We

shouldn't talk *over* other women, but we can't just talk about ourselves either. A million memoirs don't add up to a history. To make political progress, we need to treat women as more than a loose collection of individuals. We are a class, united by common problems as much as we are divided by differences. Feminism must be broad enough to deal with the fact that other identities – lesbian, immigrant, adulterer – might hold women back as much as their sex. There is no one way to be a woman, and no universal pattern for womanhood. Many of the biggest fights still raging are complicated by the differences *between* women, as much as the differences between us and men.

What's missing from this book? It's hard to know where to start – which is the point. This is a partial, imperfect, personal history of feminism and my hope is that the gaps do not look like deficiencies, but invitations. I can't wait to read others.

Let's start with me, in a restaurant, wondering how to get divorced.