

Why are women so critical of each other?

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All too often, the feminist promise of sisters supporting each other does not reflect reality. Rosjke Hasseldine considers what is holding women back from leaving the war of attrition behind in favour of solidarity

Rosjke Hasseldine, 14 June 2008

Germaine Greer said at the Fem 08 conference in April that “what worried her about the future of women’s equality and feminism was women’s own misogyny”. As soon as she said this, an audible murmur of agreement rippled through the 400-plus delegates at this popular conference. Though many of the topics that day evoked reactions, and Greer’s own speech overall was controversial because of comments on other topics, this statement seemed to evoke the most audible reaction of collective agreement. It was as if every woman in that auditorium knew what Germaine was talking about and spontaneously reacted from their own experiences with female prejudice.



This is not the first time I have experienced women agreeing *en masse* about women’s criticism of each other. I heard a roomful of female university students share their experiences of female misogyny. My female clients and those who attend my ‘women’s power circles’ tell stories of girlfriends, female colleagues and female relatives criticising them for speaking their truth, for standing up for their rights and for not putting up with being silenced or dismissed. Too often I hear women admitting that it is women’s criticism more than men’s, “that you have to watch out for”. Why do so many women feel unsupported and criticised by other women and feel that they are not given a hand-up in their careers? Where is the good old boys’ network for girls? Where is the feeling of sorority and solidarity amongst women?

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Women’s misogynist behaviour towards each other exposes something deep and dark within women’s relationships. Underneath the popular image of women being good at relationships lies a reality that blocks our ability to support, protect and fight for each other. Something is causing women to hate each other, to feel jealous of each other and to tear each other down. Something is teaching women to use the language and weapons of patriarchy against each other.

We need to understand this deep dark reality if women are to enjoy complete visibility and equality, because without it, we are in danger of sabotaging our progress with our own internalised misogyny. And that is essentially what I believe it is. The ‘bitchy’ adolescent female culture is well documented, but if we see that as a symptom of female adolescence, we are missing something vital. Our young girls are showing us what happens to women’s relationships in a culture where women are not equal or fully visible. These 400 delegates at the Fem 08 conference voiced what all women know; ‘bitchy’ behaviour is not the prerogative of young girls, it happens at all ages!

It makes sense that women would internalise the language and gender beliefs that taught our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers what ‘good’, ‘nice’ and ‘acceptable’ women look like and behave like. It is very hard not to internalise this sexism because the consequences of rejecting it, especially in our mothers’ and grandmothers’ days, was to be ignored, criticised or rejected as a ‘bad’ woman. For many, internalising the language and beliefs of patriarchy was an economic necessity. After all, you cannot burn thousands and thousands of women as witches without it having an effect on women for generations after. It creates a ripple effect that invokes fear around being your own person and speaking out. It makes playing by your own rules a scary choice to make.

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Stepping outside of the designated box of what it means to be female in a patriarchal society has long been threatening, not only for the women who decide they must step out in order to be authentic, but also for the women around them. Competition and jealousy are natural reactions when women are set up to survive in a culture where they are not equal to men. Sometimes the misogynist behaviour between women can be explained (but not excused) as an act of benevolence where women teach each other the rules of survival because they don't want them to face the consequences of breaking the rules. Mothers teach their daughters how to survive. For example, a mother may encourage her daughter to marry a man who earns a good wage and has a respected job even though he is emotionally unavailable. Or worse, a mother may not encourage her daughter to leave her abusive husband because of her own fears of survival without a man. But before we judge mothers too harshly, we need to ask where would they have been taught to expect anything different? What choices did they have to make for their own survival? After all, this is how misogyny works. By limiting women's choices and silencing their voices, many women do not know anything different than how to survive in a patriarchal world.

Jealousy is rife among girls and women. I frequently see women react with thinly veiled jealousy when they see other women stepping up and claiming a level of entitlement they can only dream of. An entitlement they either don't know how to, or don't feel entitled to claim for themselves. Female jealousy is a natural reaction to our collective experience of being invisible and starved for attention. Generations of being the uncared-for carers of everyone else, silencing ourselves so not to upset anyone and putting our needs last, has left women emotionally starved. It is hard to see other women feed themselves with attention, entitlement, self-worth and self-care when you are starving for that yourself. And when we don't recognise how starved we really are, the reaction to criticise, to put down and to tell other women that they are behaving in an unacceptable manner makes sense at some level, even though it isn't OK.

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Feminism has a strong role to play in challenging women's internalised misogyny. This is why fighting for equal rights through changing laws is only half the battle. If the political is personal, then feminism is also an inside job. It is through exposing how women have internalised the language and gender expectations that limited them, that we create a world of entitled women who will not take no for an answer. When women start recognising how they have been taught to survive on a starvation diet of invisibility and silence, they will no longer need to feel jealous of women who expect to be seen, heard, and respected. Mothers will no longer teach their daughters how to survive on a lack of self-nurturing, because they themselves will no longer be trying to survive without meeting their own needs.

Without this depth of understanding about how patriarchy has got under our skin, women are in danger of being like crabs in a bucket. As soon as one tries to escape and manages to get to the top of the bucket, the others pull the escapee back down. Fear of not being liked, of being alone, of the consequences of escaping and standing up for your rights and life, are strong motivators that make women pull each other back down to where it is sad but safe and familiar.

Women have long learned how to survive on a little. But what we are not yet good at is recognising our collective starvation and encouraging each other to claim what we are missing. We are not yet good at acknowledging how awful it feels to be criticised, unsupported, and ignored by other women. It feels like the ultimate betrayal. Women have said that it feels worse than being criticised or rejected by a man because that is what they expect from men. They don't expect it from their sisters. Not being surrounded by or being able to trust the "I'm with you sister" connection with other women hurts us deeply in our relational wiring. Women are wired to want and need connection with other women. We need to be heard and supported by other women, and when we don't have it, or it flickers on and off at will, it harms our development and feels like a crushing loss.

For women to flourish, we need to band together. We need to re-create the sense of female connection we once had during biblical days around the village well and in the Red Tent where women gathered, shared stories, supported each other, and passed on their female wisdom. I am not suggesting that things were great for women then, but I am saying that we have lost that essential sense of community that women had then. The saying “together we stand, divided we fall” is true. Together we are a force to be reckoned with. Divided and alone makes it harder to stand up and say “no”. I hear over and over how hungry women are for empowering, supportive and nurturing female connection and community. We need to recognise and unlearn our internalised misogyny so that we can thrive and save this ailing world.

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