

***Feminist is not a dirty word*, by Monica Dux**

Detractors should not sway women who hold feminist values dear. AS SOMEONE who has spent the past year researching popular perceptions of feminism, the question I'm most frequently asked is: "Why are young women so reluctant to call themselves feminists?" The assumption that is often implicit in this query is that feminism is irrelevant to the younger generation and has failed to adapt to modern circumstances. Worse still, as one young woman told me, calling yourself a feminist won't get you laid.

The irony is that, when asked, the same women who deny the label typically espouse solidly feminist values. Equality and justice, choice and respect; these are some of the things that almost all women recognise as the entitlements of their sex. And these broad, optimistic goals are what feminists have always championed, in diverse and sometimes conflicted ways.

There's one obvious way to make sense of this apparent contradiction, or so we're told. It seems that the problem doesn't lie with what feminism stands for, but with the label.

If young women don't consider the feminist label to be important, or are allergic to it, wouldn't it be simpler to do away with it? By ditching the word we could, perhaps, protect the core values of feminism while discarding the apparently unsavoury associations, the stuff that turned women off. After all, what's in a word?

It's a seductive suggestion in a world obsessed with spin and image, where rebranding is seen as a way of improving sales figures on a solid but tired old product. But maybe we're focusing on the wrong question. Instead of asking "Is the feminist label still relevant?", perhaps we ought to ask "Why is it that women with thoroughly feminist values are so reluctant to embrace a word that simply describes those values?"

While researching our book my co-author Zora Simic and I asked women what turned them off the feminist label. The most common answer was that it's the man-hating, hairy-legged lesbian. In a way this wasn't surprising. Since the 1980s most

surveys of women on feminism have returned similar findings. What was surprising is that this hirsute cliché — now more than 30 years old — is still so prevalent in women's minds.

We all know what she looks like. She's unwaxed, unattractive and unfeminine (probably with saggy boobs, given her predilection for torching bras). But while most women can describe her characteristics, they can rarely name a woman who personifies the stereotype.

So, who is this woman that everyone is so eager to disassociate themselves from? "Hairy-legged lesbian" is, arguably, popular shorthand for the radical feminist. Radical feminism, which emerged from the diverse women's movement of the 1960s, focused on patriarchy as the source of women's oppression. It ranged from the extreme (lesbian separatism) to the moderate (a critique of pornography). Yet while the extreme end of radical feminism looms largest in the public imagination, its impact was marginal, more akin to that of an eccentric opposition backbencher than a minister making policy.

Ultimately, the real power of the radical feminist has been in providing fuel for conservative scaremongers, as she's been morphed into a homophobic, simplistic, but enormously convenient stereotype on which to hang old-fashioned feminist bashing. What better way to scare women off feminism than to rattle them with images of an unfeminine monster, determined to force us all into boiler suits and castrate our menfolk? The image screams: demand more from your lives and this is what you could turn into!

Yet, as misleading as it is, this cliché has persisted for decades, an anti-feminist success story. No wonder feminism is so often described as out of touch and irrelevant, when what people have in mind is a distorted stereotype from deep in the last century.

So, should we throw out the feminist label? When you look at it in the light of history, it's an insulting question, one we wouldn't

dare ask any other social group or political movement that has been so vilified and misrepresented.

Labels do matter. They are statements as much as descriptors. They are powerful, especially when we need to articulate our collective concerns and voice our demands. The word "feminism" is the thread that binds together the disparate thoughts and beliefs of those who have championed a more just world for women. Without such a label to pin these sentiments on you're left with a jumble of disconnected ideas and issues floating about in the ether, each one easily picked off and forgotten.

In the act of calling ourselves feminists we are expressing solidarity (not necessarily agreement) with others who share our core values. We're also showing respect to the many women who've championed those values for more than 100 years. Being mindful of their legacy helps us avoid repeating mistakes, but it is also our best defence against feminism's detractors propagating even more false assumptions, cliches and distortions.

Perhaps the word feminism won't be able to shake the unwanted associations it has picked up over the decades. Next time you're asked if you are a feminist, it might be more correct to reply: I am, but not an anachronistic cliché of a narrow version of second wave radical feminism. Bit of a mouthful? Maybe a simple "yes" will do.

"The Great Feminist Denial", by Monica Dux and Zora Simic is published by Melbourne University Press.