

International Women's Day Address – written and delivered by Zoe Leach

For the 14 awesome years of my life I have almost never been restricted by my gender. I played sport in a team of boys right up until U12's who always included me and respected me as a member of the team. My gender has played little part in the definition of who I am and hope to become. In fact, up until around 18 months ago I thought that for the most part feminism was dead.

Australia and the Blue Mountains is a part of the developed world. In so many ways we are so privileged, but that doesn't mean that our society is perfect. So many small acts of sexism are so normalised that we pretend that we don't notice.

Across my grade a school it is clear that girls are embarrassed to speak up about issues of sexism in our society and within the school because we are often ridiculed for being feminazi's or 'going on about nothing'.

Ever since I mentioned my plans for international women's day at school this is something that I have experienced a lot of, from boys in many year groups but particularly my own.

This made me feel ashamed for speaking my mind about a cause that I am extremely passionate about. Every whisper of Miss Feminist made me feel more self-conscious about my beliefs.

I know that I am not the only person who has experienced the judgement and ridicule of standing up for what is right in regards to feminism. All that I was doing was organising a week celebrating the girls of our school.

However, it is extremely important that we make sure that this doesn't hold us back. I believe that one of the many things that help us conquer those trying to bring us down is knowing others who stand by you when you stand up for change.

Having Nea as a co-organiser of International women's day at Winmalee high has definitely helped me keep going on this event. It is that union that I wish hope to create among young people today as we are at an age when we feel very harshly judged by peers and find it difficult to speak up and stand out.

I know that I'm not the only one to experience little jabs of sexism that we wish to change for the future. Having teachers enter a primary school classroom and ask for a couple of 'big strong boys' to help out with a job can a very irritating moment at school.

Other small issues that can lead to large results are the classic urban myths that we are all told as little girls. Like if a boy is particularly rude to you, he has a bit of a crush on you. Many girls also experience classic throw away lines about acting 'like a girl'.

All of these acts seem very minor by themselves, however over time the consequences are a lot worse.

Studies are showing that half of Australian girls playing sport quit by the age of 15. Studies are showing that teenage girls are playing nearly an hour less sport per week than their male counterparts.

We have created an invisible cut off date for girls playing sport. Between the ages of 15 and 17 girls are either quitting sport entirely or significantly lowering the amount that they do per week.

Other worse consequences also occur to this day due to small amounts of normalised sexism. In Australia girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are the greatest portion of victims of sexual violence. Closely followed by girls aged 15 to 24. In this era of judgement against feminists the proportions of

women suffering sexual violence in Australia has risen noticeably since 2010, despite a declining rate of violence overall.

As women in this country we cannot simply let our guard down to serious issues that affect us all. However, I think that that on this day of celebration we need to also recognise and strive for change in issues outside of our bubble in the universe.

I was scouring YouTube one afternoon a couple of years ago when I came across a video published by a company called Girls Rising. I have always understood my privilege but I never fully realised just how devastating the lives of girls in other countries are. I never fully realised that the horrible things done to girls elsewhere were not because of their culture or economy but their ignorance. It was after hearing Amina's story that I realised that girls in Afghanistan had more rights in 1920 than they do today. The video told a real girl's story leaked out and replaced with a fake name and limited details for her protection.

Amina only received 2 years of education on a broken blackboard and this she perceived as privilege. She was married off at 11 for money, which was spent on a used car for her elder brother. She explained how from marriage she was forced to wear a full burqa against her will. The only opening being cracks in the embroidery over her eyes. Her final lines changed my view of the world entirely.

"As I cupped my son to my breast, all that I felt was impatience. Impatience because we are silenced, disenfranchised, beaten, cut, married as children, sold, raped. When we seek freedom, we are burned. When we speak the truth, we are stoned. When we go to school we are bombed, poisoned, shot. Don't tell me it has always been so; I don't believe in your resignation. I refused ignorance long ago. Don't tell me you are on my side; your silence has already spoken for you. Do not tell me that the blame lies in my religion, in my culture, in my traditions. Change is coming."

This was followed with stories of uneducated girls forced to fight rapists, girls refusing child marriages, Kamlari (the Nepalese word for slave girls bonded to a master) escaping from their imprisonment. Each story explained how an education could change everything.

Because we don't need feminism; but 150 million girls are victims of sexual violence each year. We don't need feminism; but 33 million fewer girls than boys receive a basic primary school education. And despite not needing feminism 80% of all human trafficking victims are girls.

The fact is that whilst our fight may be drawing to a close, for millions of girls around the world it has only just begun. Feminism is not only a fight for ourselves but for those around us and I am motivated not only by my own experiences but by those of others.

I wish for everybody here to join and be motivated in a fight for the education of those living in different situations to ourselves.

I have heard once before that an education is worth dying for because millions die due to a lack of it.

Girls are not the problem they are problem solvers. Want to slow the spread of AIDS – educate girls. Want to boost the global economy – educate girls. Want to save the lives of unborn babies and their mothers – educate girls.

These reasons are only the bare minimum of changes that could be made if everyone had access to an education. One of the most important things that I want everyone to take out of their experience here today is to never stop fighting for the rights of others.

Next International Women's Day I am determined to launch a fundraiser to raise money for the education of girls less fortunate than ourselves and I would love the support of the people in this room to help that happen.

If you are wondering what would change if every child received a proper education, I have one word for you: EVERYTHING.

Thank you for listening, I hope that you enjoy this event.