

# International Women's Day 2010

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BRINGING UP PEACEFUL FEMINIST KIDS - Claire Russell  
How do we bring up children in the spirit of gender equality and peace?



**Introduction to 2010 International Women's Day**  
event in Wangaratta, spoken by Susie Reid EO

I recently met with two prominent politicians – I won't mention their names – a male and a female, and, in passing conversation I had cause to drop the F – word...

I tell you I was stunned at their response; it was over the top and took me quite by surprise.

Surely this is 2010; amongst mature adults the F-word is acceptable, I would have thought.

We use it in the office ourselves, freely and have many reasons to do so each day.

So why the flinching, the hushing, the horror... when I casually said the word... 'Feminist?'

"No no you can't say that", said one. 'Why don't you talk about *'difference'* how men and women are *different*?'

Why is the word Feminism scary?

Why does it inspire passion in some and terror in others?

We know men and women are different – you can usually tell just by looking at them...most of the time!! But being feminist and thinking feminist causes us to look deeper and what we see is the inequities, here in our country, and globally.

In Australia the male/female pay difference is 17.5 percent

Women have approximately half the amount of super men have on retirement.



The United Nations continue to tell us that women perform 66 percent of the world's work; produce 50 percent of the world's food; earn 10 percent of the world's income; and own only one percent of the world's property.

Maybe feminism is seen as old fashioned; it's over and done with and no longer relevant as our mothers and grandmothers already fought and won that battle. Barak Obama had the same response to improving living standards and opportunities for black people in the USA – for many that issue had already been done in the sixties and seventies and the black issue was embarrassing; passé – but just because it isn't cool doesn't mean it's been fixed.

In Australia, for the most part, we don't hide women away; education is our right and we like to think we have a voice and an active part in shaping our society.

But only two percent of Australia's top ASX companies are chaired by women; three percent have female CEO's and only eight percent of company directors are female. In politics there are two males to one female and though women gain more degrees than males they end up with less pay and more work.

The reality is that women don't make the decisions, the big ones. That filters down; to how our health systems are run; how our courts make decisions, how government and big business affect our daily lives. We are not there, yet, and so inevitably there is an imbalance.

Feminism is not a dirty word; it's a word that represents an imbalance between the opportunities for men and women: to lead, to participate, to own and to be safe –and describes the imperative to make things right.

It's not, dear politicians, a question of difference, it's one of Equity.



## **BRINGING UP PEACEFUL FEMINIST KIDS**

speech by Claire Russell,

When I started to think about what I would say on this topic my first thought was that the two most important people children need in their lives are a man who respects women as a role model (my husband) and an articulate opinionated woman (me) who can point out the ridiculous logic, outdated stereotypes and lies regarding gender which society perpetuates.

How do we bring up children in the spirit of gender equality and peace?

In my opinion it is all about the conversations you have as a family, using books and the media as tools to facilitate these conversations.

Good feisty, opinionated discussion around humanitarian gender based topics started early in our house.



We would discuss topics such as:

- what it was like for children in Africa to get to school each day, how far they would walk and how they had to stand in their classrooms as there were no desks.
- for girls in Africa not to want to go to school because there were no toilets.

- Women living in India who were widowed and outcast.
- About hospitals in poor countries that service wealthy foreigners in preference to poor families with sick children.
- About child soldiers in war-torn countries

So, you would recognize this as good old -fashioned social justice in action.

When I think of the man I married, his family held the same sort of discussions around their dinner table and that came from a healthy background of Scottish socialism and a family of strong opinionated women.

My background in English teaching, librarianship, student wellbeing and now language support in schools has also informed my approaches with my children.

Never one to sit back and go with the flow; my favorite saying is “only dead fish go with the flow”, I was always on the front foot with what my children were reading and watching and what we were saying was important to us as a family.

My children were also exposed to a heavy amount of literature in the form of picture books, then fiction at all the stages which set the framework for gender roles and challenged society’s expectations around male and female roles.

I have both boys and a girl and they all read a range of books, which I directed at them at first, then they started to choose their own titles and I still buy books for them which I know they will like and which will challenge their thinking.

My youngest son Andrew, who is 20 recently saw the film of Maurice Sendak’s “Where the Wild Things Are” and gave me a wonderful review of a book he had enjoyed as a boy. His comments around how it presented the relationships between the characters and how he thought it would make a great film to study at secondary school filled me with pride in his capacity to understand others. So this is a book which presents thoughtful, sensitive boys.

When I reflect on what I channeled in their direction I was more concerned that the boys should read books with both boy and girl main characters, of which thankfully there is an enormous amount, than I was about my daughter’s choice, as there is plenty of choice for girls around adventurous, gutsy, individual female characters, which she was very happily reading.

The boys both read and loved the Alana books by Tamora Pearce. Alana is a girl in the middle-ages who despises all the expected girly activities and wants to be trained as a knight like her brother. My daughter loved those novels as well. If I recommended these books to other boys I knew sometimes they would look at me as if to say “I’m not reading that it has a girl’s name as the title so it must be a girls’ book”. Never one to shy away from a challenge I would push on, encouraging them to have a go at it; always with great success.

Pippi Longstocking was also a favorite of ours. Some of you will think, yes, but it was published in 1945, girls these days wont read that and it must be outdated, I challenge you to have another look at it.

Pippi’s brave, strong, rebellious and defiant behavior offers those of us striving for gender equality in books a role model well worth presenting to our children.



Astrid Lingren, the author of Pippi Longstocking, was a wonderful Swedish author.

One of Australia's preeminent authors, Sonya Hartnett, was awarded the Astrid Lingren Memorial Award for children's and adolescent literature in 2008 for her body of work over the past 25 years which contains some wonderful strong and feisty female characters as well as caring and sensitive boys.

Over the past 10 years many authors have used the themes of women and children surviving in war torn countries and challenging situations such as life in refugee camps and arriving in Australia as refugees. Writing for young people using today's humanitarian themes gives us an opportunity to develop a culture in our children which encourages them to think of and respect others, to have an understanding of what life is like for others in our global community.

From my experience young people thrive on this content.

Television and film offer us a wonderful opportunity for discussion around gender equality. One of our favorite television series was and is "Coupling"

A humorous look at the relationships of three couples; where the men are great role models for boys and girls. They continually search for meaning in their behaviors, trying valiantly to connect with their girlfriends and understand what they need in their relationship, all this with copious amounts of humor. There are no bitchy women, but women who are feisty and keep pushing the boundaries about who they are and who their boyfriends think they are.

So to film; how about "Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion"! What a great couple of girls as the main characters; they dress to please their style of fashion, they refuse to be engaged with behaviors they don't like; but do they care? No. Some of you may have seen this film others may not because the title is a bit misleading. But maybe some girls accidentally watched it, also being misled by the title and had a big light bulb moment around feminism, being an individual and positive relationships. I urge you all to watch it and share it with your adolescent children, both boys and girls. The boys will see determined girls in their full glory, not bitchy, a bit feisty when needed but never bitchy.

So now to the result with my grown up children, the boys attend rallies which support their female friends issues around gender and equality, they all support social justice issues around the world. They support the work of Oxfam and Medicines Sans Frontiers; they are vocal about issues on a political level in Australia. I think they have a real insight into what makes a good society; one where one's gender does not determine one's position in society.

I would love to think that this is due to the good male role model of a father and an outspoken, opinionated mother.

