

THE CONVERSATION

Rape and death threats are all too common in feminist circles, just ask Laura Bates

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Laura Bates has received rape and death threats since launching the Everyday Sexism project. TED, CC BY-SA

From jokes to rape, there have been nearly 60,000 posts by women recounting their experiences of sexism and sexist violence since journalist and feminist Laura Bates launched her Everyday Sexism project in April 2012. Now the material has been collected for the first time in a book of the same name.

I've been familiar with the project for some time. Yet the sheer pervasiveness and repetitiveness which emerges when the material is presented in book form, accompanied by Bates' clear, angry, witty, feminist commentary, is refreshing, depressing and enraging.

If this sounds familiar ...

Everyday Sexism also feels incredibly familiar – and not simply because of the inevitable

echoes with my own experiences. I have read this book before.

It is the book Clare Short MP wrote in 1991, comprised of letters that women had written in support of her anti-Page Three campaign.

It is Sue Wise and Liz Stanley's 1987 book *Georgie Porgie* where, like Bates, they talk about the "drip drip" effect of sexual harassment in reducing women's aspirations, modifying their behaviour and creating a climate of everyday fearfulness.

It is Liz Kelly's *Surviving Sexual Violence*, which in 1988 introduced the notion of a "continuum" of sexual violence: a concept Bates uses to powerful effect.

It is *Everywoman's* 1988 publication of the civil rights hearings on pornography organised by the late Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. There too, women and girls talked about how men's everyday use of porn affected their lives and sense of self, even before the ubiquity of internet porn.

I could go on ...

In no way does this detract from the significance of Bates' book. But it does raise important familiar questions about how the knowledge of the second wave of feminism has been publicly forgotten. This is despite the fact that feminist organisations set up in the 1970s to support women experiencing male violence are now well known, depressingly well used and horribly under-funded.

Bates and the old guard

Refreshingly, Bates herself does not perform this act of erasure: in a discussion at Glasgow's *Aye Write* festival last week, she clearly acknowledged the legacy of the second wave. Unlike so many proclamations of the rebirth of feminism in the past two decades **this fourth wave**, as heralded by her publishers, is not premised on the death of the feminism before it.

Bates' book is the 21st-century equivalent of the consciousness-raising groups of the Women's Liberation Movement. It still has the feel of "newness", of capturing an epidemic of previously untold proportions. The accessibility of the project and its incredible public profile mean it is almost certainly reaching women who missed out on feminism's previous waves.

Most heartbreaking are the accounts from women who have kept abuse secret for years, decades. Feminist analysis of male violence has been around long enough that this shouldn't have happened. But in the face of media misrepresentation, the pervasiveness of everyday sexism and the endurance of patriarchy (a concept no less real because academically unfashionable) it shouldn't be a surprise that it has.

The university context

For those of us working in universities, *Everyday Sexism* poses a number of challenges. It gives grim insight into the pressures our female students and many colleagues face. We still need to know more, not only about campus experiences but also how our institutions respond to them.

When women (and men) are brave enough to come forward, we need to ensure the response they receive within our institutions is appropriate to the century we live in. Not a big ask, although you wouldn't think it to read many of the experiences in this book.

Academics also have a role to play in following up on the research agenda this book sets. One urgent area for investigation is contemporary feminists' experiences of the backlash. While backlashes have existed for as long as feminism, the way that backlash is now experienced is new.

In the first month of the Everyday Sexism project Bates received up to 200 messages a day threatening her with rape and murder. No-one has yet been charged in relation to any of these threats.

Bates' experiences may be extreme, though certainly not unique. In my own circle, hardly a month goes by without one of my feminist friends sharing a rape or death threat they've received. While these are sometimes worn as a kind of badge of honour – it shows we're doing something right - none of us should have to put up with this.

Ignoring the trolls may be useful advice at some level, but having a more systematic account of exactly what feminist public figures endure as a group would be an important first step in understanding the bigger picture behind these anecdotes. Everyday sexists should no longer be able to hide in plain sight. Bates' book makes it clear that we all have a role to play in exposing them.



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