

# I'M AN INDIGENOUS FEMINIST — AND I'M ANGRY.

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**O**NKWEHONWKE. KANIONKE:HAKA. INDIGENOUS. MOHAWK. FEMINIST. It is impossible for me to see myself without all of these words at the same time.

I have a raging feminist point of view. I recognize that the strong, raw, and unapologetic womaness (or feminism, for that matter) that permeates mainstream activist movements in reality was rooted in Indigenous, matriarchal cultures around the world. I'm also tired of having to justify the matrilineal/matriarchal wording battle folks; women had respected positions of power and significance in leadership roles in lots of our societies, so let's just stick with the matriarchy one, okay?

I love being Native. My long, jet-black hair tells me where I've been and holds the teachings of longevity and growth my grandmothers still whisper to me. My culture roots me in everything that I am,

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and if I could speak my language, I could tell you more than in this English language of the colonizer.

But don't call me Pocahontas. I refuse to be raped by another white man, and have corporate America exploit my truth into some misogynized, conveniently oppressive fiction.

So I stand today as a proud, Indigenous feminist.

But I don't fit in with the pretty white girls who still hold the power in this new working world of gender equity. I never have. In fact, I'm actually still angry.

I'm angry that feminism has been taken away from us. The women in my community, in many Indigenous communities around the world, started what we would now call "feminism." Our matriarchal societies concretely demonstrate that women were in charge of land and resources, and had respected positions of political significance. Reproductive rights? That started with us, too, since our women made decisions about family and had methods of contraception long before the clinical invention of the birth control pill. But I rarely hear any of this discussed in these so-called circles of "equal opportunity."

Sometimes my anger is my only defence. And I would like to not be pigeonholed as the "angry woman of colour" in order to get my issues across. It's time to recognize that Western colonial notions of "polite discourse" aren't the norm for all of us. Those of us who are surviving racism are kept sane by our anger and grief; otherwise more of us would be dead.

So let's be honest. Feminism was not invented from a movement of the 1960s. It's not just about Gloria Steinem, and it certainly is not only about your sex. The truth is that when we don't intersect or identify it with race, class, and sexuality for that matter, the same people will continuously lose out.

I'll admit that learning about the work of women like Nellie McClung and other early white suffragettes helped me come to terms with the whole notion of women's rights. But I know now that I didn't get the full story (many of them were flaming racists!) since the rest

of us in communities of colour did not get these rights. Emily Murphy was definitely a racist, and, as a First Nations woman, I don't exactly see the most truthful or even existent depiction of our culture in any mainstream lens of "Canadian history."

This is not to say that Emily did not help put forward meaningful advances for women in Canada; but she simultaneously degraded people of colour. And not just any kind of degradation; we're talking about the publication of her book *The Black Candle*, which is full of her xenophobic prejudices, her vocal association with Anglo-Saxon "cleansing" groups, and the passing of the Indian and Residential School Act with her on the bench.

That's not true feminism to me, and I don't understand why we put her and the "famous five" up on a pedestal without fully stating what they were really all about. It's a good thing that others were and have lobbied against Emily Murphy's politics and her blatant racism because, if she had it her way, the recognition of a woman as a "person" wouldn't apply to me — or to any other woman of colour, for that matter.

I grew up in a strong woman household where I learned about the dynamics of sexism and gender inequity at an early age. My mother, grandmother, and aunts were all vocal Onkwehonwe women who rarely shied away from an opportunity to speak out against the discrimination of women, and taught me the importance of owning your sex in its entirety. I owe the strong, vocal voice I carry today to these courageous females who still refuse to be silenced.

However, I've always found it interesting that the dialogue around standing up for women's rights is one that gets left by the wayside in our communities, specifically with the younger generation. Let's be honest: gender still plays a significant factoring role in much of the oppression that exists all over the world. In 2006, women made 71 cents for every dollar a man made in Canada. Internationally, we perform two-thirds of the world's work, but earn only one-tenth of the income, and own less than one per cent of the world's property. Looking into our own

Native communities, we know that violence and sexual assault occur at soaringly higher rates to our women than to women of any other race.

“Where are your women?” This is what we used to say to the Europeans when they came over to broker manipulative deals for our lands and resources, since for us it was totally out of order for women not to be present or be disallowed to even make these kinds of major decisions themselves.

As Haudenosaunee, we are a matriarchal people! The clan mothers, the ceremonies, and the traditional teachings we have about the significant power our women held all prove this. So why isn’t this a message the young women in our communities are getting concretely today?

It’s all definitely worth reflecting on how different things might be if our next generations knew about where we came from and called on their ancestral female strength to make it through these gender-based oppressions that we nonetheless face. I think our job now is to find practical ways to translate all of this into modern terms for our young people to use so they can recover what past generations may have lost, and re-assert themselves as the resilient, fierce, ain’t-gonna-take-any-crap females we’ve always been — and who are also feminists!

This is a discourse many feminists before me have had to battle with over the decades, but it’s still happening. We all need to make a more concerted effort to teach our younger generations to fiercely challenge these socially constructed systems of equity, and furthermore question how things like “multiculturalism” and “diversity” are supposed to fit in — but which in fact often erase our individuality and lump us into “the other.” We’re not really equal when we’re supposed to uncritically buy into cheering when white women are praised for winning “women’s rights” and painfully forget who was hurt in that same process.

And it wouldn’t hurt to acknowledge where feminism really came from, either.