

## **Symposium highlights feminism and gender issues**

**By Rachel Phan**

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Laurier Brantford's inaugural F-Word Symposium on Thursday attracted nearly 160 people for a panel discussion that focused on feminism and gender issues.

The event, held at Laurier's research and academic centre, was organized by a committee of Laurier Brantford faculty members.

The panel was preceded by an F-Word Fair, where people were invited to remake Barbie dolls and to stop by a number of information booths for different Laurier and community groups.

The panel discussion began with opening remarks by Laurier Brantford Dean Bruce Arai and Lesley Cooper, principal and vice-president.

"We have spent 10 years building our relationship with the Brantford community, first physically with the buildings and now intellectually with an event like this," said Arai. "We've come a long way, but we still have a lot of things to do."

Cooper gave a rousing speech on what it was like growing up in Australia when young girls were groomed for domestic duties and when the only possible career choices were as air hostesses, stenographers, or for the super ambitious, teachers and nurses.

"These were the constraints I grew up with and I am thankful to the women's movement for changing my life," she said. "I am grateful for the feminists before me and after me because they have made my life better and have enacted the social change that allows me to live the life I lead."

Following the introductory speeches, Kate Rossiter, one of the F-Word committee members, introduced the panel and the aims of the discussion as an attempt to "keep the conversation going" on feminism and to "enable the next generation of movers and thinkers."

The panel consisted of Lyla Miklos, an award-winning broadcaster and self-proclaimed "queer, feminist activist," Margaret Toye, a professor of women and gender studies at Laurier Waterloo, Bryn Ossington, a part-time women studies student, also on the Waterloo campus, and Alicia Sayers, a journalism student at Laurier Brantford.

The panel worked through a number of different issues, such as the difficulty of identifying as a feminist, the stigmas and stereotypes of the movement and whether men could be feminists.

Ossington, the only male panelist, identified himself as a feminist.

"There is not a large community of men in the feminist movement, and, for that reason, I am willing to identify myself as a feminist in a room full of people," he said.

"Feminism is a struggle for men and women alike. It's important to drop this stigma that it's just about women's issues because it's really about us as a society and how we can make it better for everyone."

Ossington also expressed difficulty with the lack of understanding over his choice of studies.

"People just don't understand why anyone would want to study Women Studies, let alone a heterosexual man," he said.

For the other panelists, being female did not make it any easier to identify as a feminist.

"I used to be one of those people who would say 'I'm not a feminist, but...,'" Dr. Toye said. "I was very nervous about it at first, but I decided to claim myself as one because I thought, if more people called themselves feminists, it would expand what being a feminist meant."

For Miklos, becoming a feminist seemed natural since she claimed to have been "genetically encoded with feminism from day one." Having been raised as a Jehovah's Witness, Miklos struggled with the patriarchy of her upbringing.

"My gut was saying, 'This is not me,'" she said.

"I knew it in my bones that I was a feminist, but it was still hard to claim the word for myself because cutting off my religion felt like cutting off a limb."

The panel also touched on the common stereotype of feminists as "raging, man-hating lesbians" as another factor in why it is difficult for people to identify as one.

"We all know these stereotypes of feminists," said Toye. "These are very powerful images, and for students especially, these reasons are why it is so hard to identify as a feminist. It is already hard enough to live in this world."

Toye also stated that the other feminist "myth" of the "strong woman" is alienating for people, such as those with disabilities, who "don't feel strong and feel like they can't be feminists because of that."

At the end of the discussion, the panelists weighed in on the future of feminism and what should happen next.

"It should be everyone's collective responsibility because, if you're a man, you have to think of your mothers, sisters, girlfriends and daughters, and the lives you want them to lead," said Miklos.

"I believe that women can do anything. And when the passion's moving you, don't kill it. Listen to it and act on it."

Rachel Phan is a Laurier journalism student and writer of the Laurier Life column that appears regularly in The Expositor.