

Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

The new age of feminism

The in-your-face women's movement has matured into a more subtle, and individual, quest for success

BY LISA QUEEN
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You've come a long way, baby.
You go girl.
Girl Power.
Who cares?

Sure, suffragettes secured the right for women to vote more than 80 years ago, and women burned their bras and marched for equality 25 years ago, but is feminism relevant today?

Not really, if responses from today's young women in York Region are any indication.

Not that feminism is exactly irrelevant, either.

It's more like feminist ideals have become so ingrained in our consciousness that thoughts of actively promoting women's rights aren't given much thought.

"No, I guess they (feminists) have moved on. Society has accepted women for who they are," said 18-year-old Crystal Baker, of Newmarket. "For the most part, women are treated right."

But in the next breath, Baker complains her older brother Craig had an easier time growing up — despite the fact their father campaigned for equal rights a quarter century ago.

"It was, more or less, you're a girl, you have to be home (by curfew). You should get married and have babies. You don't have the strength of your brother so you can't be out after dark," Baker said.

"I fought against it. I was always expected to have better grades, be the best child, be the most intelligent. It bothered me that I was treated differently."

When pressed, Baker said she considers herself a feminist because she believes men and women should be treated equal, "but I'm not going to join a movement or anything."

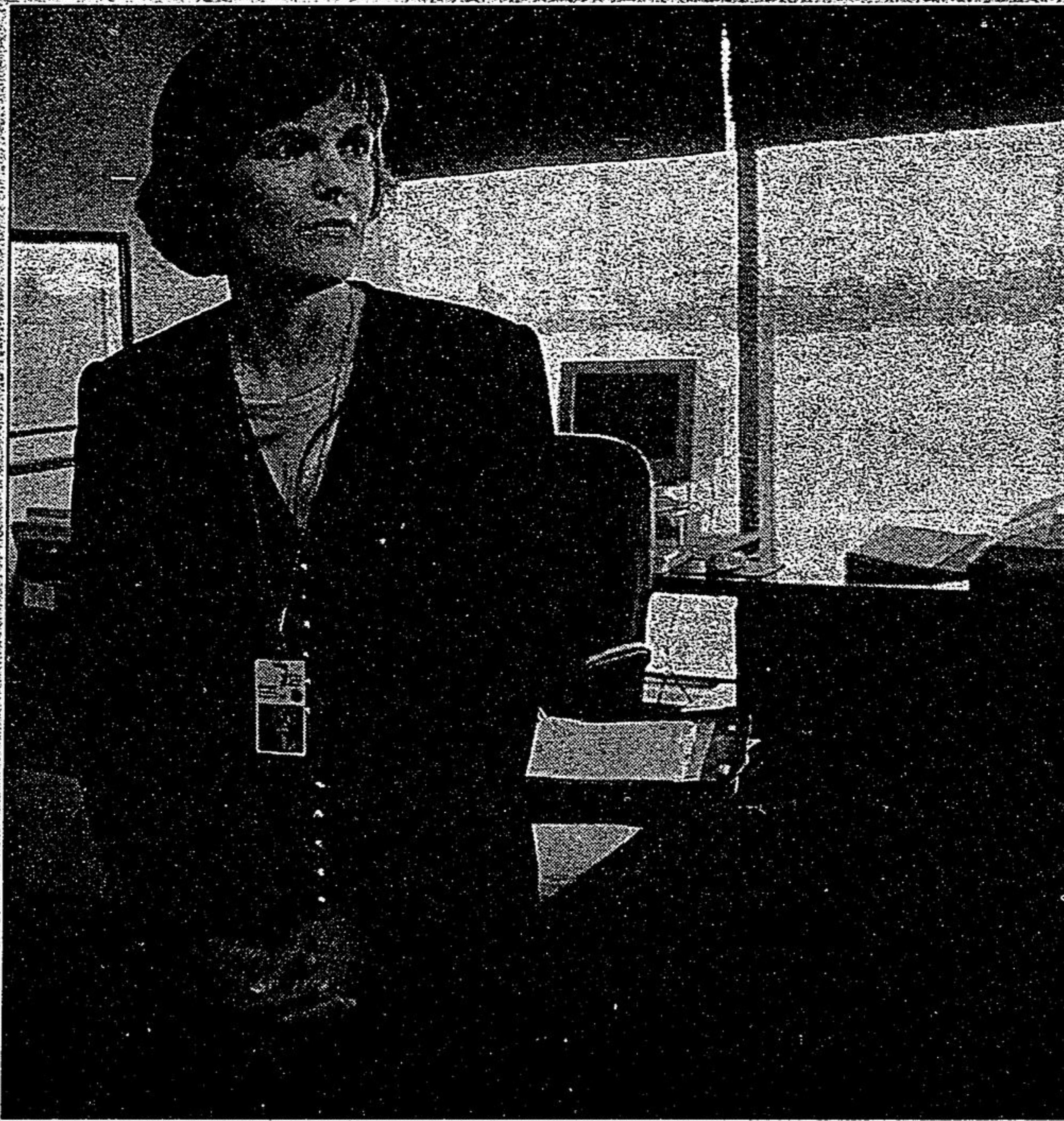
Although she believes in equality of the sexes, Sara Taylor, 19, of Holland Landing doesn't want to be labelled a feminist.

"I think there are still people who believe in it and go by it. (But) I just go with the flow. I don't think much of things like that," she said.

"I've never had any problems being pushed around. I think it's a great thing, to fight so hard. I just can't see myself standing up and doing it because I'm so chicken."

Jim Newman, a Baptist minister from Aurora, and his 20-year-old daughter Jenn look at the feminist movement differently.

"Women definitely deserved to be treated better than they were and I think they are," Newman said. "Now, I think women have



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Markham Stouffville Hospital president Elizabeth Woodbury believes the feminist agenda has moved to the backburner because it has been generally accepted by mainstream society.

taken their rightful place in society."

He believes the movement has mellowed because it has become part of mainstream society.

"It's definitely changed. It's like any new movement. It always seems radical in the initial stages until it finds its comfort level."

But Jenn Newman, who wants to become a corrections officer, said feminists have become too militant.

"I think some of them get too extreme, the ones really going on about it. They want the same wages but they want men to open doors and pay for dinner. I've seen it."

"Feminism has become a fringe movement, according to Jenn."

But it's not only young women and their middle-aged fathers who are questioning whether feminism has died.

Some of the region's most prominent women admit they were never part of the formal movement. In fact, they believe they became successful because of their own hard work, rather than the protests of the 60s and 70s.

And they argue those still actively promoting equality have gone to extremes, advocating discrimination against men as a way to advance women's rights.

"I don't consider myself a feminist but I do believe men and women are equal in the workplace," said Ruth Burkholder, president of the Markham Board of Trade.

"A feminist is someone who is very strongly (for) women's rights and lobbies to that effect. They're more militant. Militancy doesn't have any place in our society."

York Region's medical officer of health, Dr. Helena Jaczek, was only 16 when she entered pre-med at the University of Toronto in 1967, one of 20 women in a class of 135.

"I had gone to an all-girls high school in Toronto. I was coming from the perspective that I could do anything a man could do, at least intellectually."

Too bad the young men in her classes didn't feel the same way.

"I'm surrounded by these boys. I'm not kidding, these boys in our labs would say, 'Why are you doing this? You're just going to

get married and have children?'"

"I just learned to have a thick skin. I'm going to show you. Of course, I'm going to get married and have kids. I'm going to do this, too."

In medical school, Jaczek encountered sexist professors who tried to push the female students out of the program.

And she later endured York Region's old boys' club, with off-color jokes and being excluded, because she was the first and only female department head — a culture that has since changed.

But Jaczek, mother of 18-year-old Natasha and 16-year-old Nick, doesn't credit the women's movement for her success.

"I took the view you can do all things personally. You don't need to join a movement and burn your bra. In fact, I needed my bra and was proud of it."

While Markham Stouffville Hospital president Elizabeth Woodbury doesn't think feminism is dead, she said it appears to have moved to the backburner because it has been generally accepted by mainstream society.

"No, I don't think it's dead. I think it's much more subtle than it has been in the past. We're not really seeing the kind of overt, almost militant feminism we've seen in the past," said Woodbury, the mother of an eight-year-old boy.

However, Gwen Landolt, the Thornhill founder of the pro-family organization REAL Women, said feminism has died.

"I think feminism is passe. I think it's peaked and gone downhill. The reason is it's become too radical," she said, stressing her group advocates equality between the sexes.

"It's gone to (being) women of color only can be spokespersons. And lesbianism has become very prominent. Many of the leaders are lesbians."

Landolt, who left her law practice to raise her children, said many feminist policies, such as employment equity and universal daycare, have proven to be unworkable.

"I think (Premier Mike) Harris has cut a lot of this nonsense out," she said.

Feminist pioneer Doris Anderson, former editor of national women's magazine Chatelaine, said the movement has faced a backlash since the 1980s.

"But that doesn't mean feminism is dead."

In fact, Anderson, a 76-year-old widow with three grown children, foresees a new wave that will include both men and women fighting for new rights.

"I think it will come in a more general way, the next wave of the women's movement. It will be a revulsion about the way society is going, where the bottom line is everything," she said.

"Everything people care about — Medicare, care of children, care of the elderly — is being eroded. That's not just in Canada, it's in the U.S. and parts of Europe. The world is out of whack."



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