

Lizzie Marvelly: Why I still love the f-word

The Kiwi pop singer says today's young women should embrace feminism, a movement sparked by the original hairy-legged bra burners of the 60s and 70s, but that doesn't mean they can't express their sexuality and feminine side. By **Joanna Mathers**.

Helen Clark, Adriana Huffington, Hilary Clinton — Lizzie Marvelly's female order of merit is populated with heavy hitters. But one woman pips this power trio to the post as Marvelly's ultimate female role model — her Mum, Vlasta.

"My childhood was spent surrounded by strong women," she says. "My Mum was such an inspiration; she always worked and encouraged me to be all that I could be."

She took her mum at her word. The 25-year-old Rotorua-born singer has released two albums (the first at 18 after signing a contract with EMI at 17), toured the world and sang our national anthem to crowds of fans at colossal rugby stadiums.

She has even undergone a significant creative metamorphosis, casting aside the "pop opera" mantle to emerge as "Lizzie", pop singer. Trading in the cash cow of soft classical for a less certain but more authentic musical future was a risky move, but one she feels was necessary to ongoing creative satisfaction.

And now a new metamorphosis. Marvelly's latest project isn't musical, it's about giving a new voice to feminism.

She has created a filter-free website offering young women a forum to express their unique identities, experiences and opinions.

"I called it Villainesse because it sums up the way in which great

women have been cast throughout history. The website can be defined as 'badass do-gooding', she says, laughing. Launched just over two weeks ago, Villainesse is unashamedly feminist — a word that often provokes knee-jerk reactions from people who feel it's archaic and anachronistic, a vestige of the bra-burning, hairy-legged 1970s.

It's set against the background of a global movement to reclaim feminism for a new generation of young women determined to champion equality without sacrificing the essence of being female.

"Feminism, even back in the 1970s, which was considered its heyday, has always been always vilified," says Anita Lacey, a senior lecturer in politics at University of Auckland.

In recent times academics and others have pronounced feminism unnecessary — saying the struggle for equality had been fought and won. Lacey says in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, "post-feminism" became very popular.

"There was an idea that there was no need for feminism any more. A lot of young women grew up listening to the message that women didn't need to struggle for equality anymore — that the battle was won."

But the dream of equality is refuted by statistics. According to Women's Refuge figures, one in three women will experience physical or psychological abuse from a partner in their life-

time. Government figures reveal that last year, women earned \$300 a week less than men. Globally, only 12.9 per cent of top management and CEO jobs are occupied by women.

Although some may eschew the term feminism, Marvelly embraces it. "I completely identify with the word feminism," she says. "It is both very simple and very complex."

She's not the first high-profile young female New Zealand entertainer to publicly embrace the "f-word".

Lorde has referred to herself as an "absolute, wholehearted" feminist. She told young American blogger and *Rookie* magazine editor Tavi Gevinson: "I'm speaking for a bunch of girls when I say that the idea [of] feminism is completely natural and shouldn't even be something that people find mildly surprising."

And it's not just Kiwi celebs flying the flag for feminism. *Harry Potter* star Emma Watson was named the United Nations Women Goodwill Ambassador last year. Her inaugural speech, greeted with a standing ovation, tackled misconceptions around feminism.

"I decided I was a feminist and this seemed uncomplicated to me. But my recent research has shown me that feminism has become an unpopular word.

"Apparently I am among the ranks of women whose expressions are seen as too strong, too aggressive, isolating, anti-men and unattractive," she said.

She went on to say that women

should be paid the same as their male counterparts, that they should be able to make decisions about their own bodies and that they should be involved in the policies and decision-making of their country.

She continued: "I think it is right that socially I am afforded the same respect as men. But sadly I can say that there is no one country in the world where all women can expect to receive these rights."

This is the feminism Marvelly embraces. "It's simply about equality. I could show you statistic after statistic around rates of domestic violence and lack of pay parity.

"I think very few people would argue against the concept of feminism if they actually knew what it meant."

Marvelly, for all her light-pop image, is an astute social commentator. Sipping midday tea in a cosy Auckland eatery as wild winds buffet Queen St, she says she was brought up in an environment in which women shone.

Gender equality was modelled in her family — her female relatives were strong and capable, on an equal footing with their male counterparts. This spilled into her school life. Her friends at Rotorua Girls' High School were robust and opinionated, as

were her pop idols.

"That whole Spice Girls 'girl power' thing really made sense to me. I also loved Gwen Stefani — she was happy just being who she was.

"Because of all the strong female figures in my life I really felt that Kiwi girls could do anything."

Marvelly encountered little in the way of gender discrimination in her early years. But this changed after she was awarded a scholarship to King's College in Auckland at 17.

The college is a bastion of maleness: although girls have attended senior school there for more than 30 years, public perception

is of a

school that caters to privileged males. "It was quite confronting going there. I left my home and lived at King's and it was a bit of a culture shock," she says.

"There were lots of little things that got to me. At the seventh form leadership camp, all the

printouts used the masculine pronoun. And teachers would always answer the boys before the girls. These were new experiences for me."

What happened in the music industry was possibly even more jarring. Marvelly has been in showbiz since she was 15, when she started touring with her uncle, New Zealand

music legend Howard Morrison.

She felt protected from the excesses of the industry at that early age, but when she turned 18 things changed.

"Working in the music industry as a young woman is very interesting," she says with a wry smile.

Her story is similar to that of many young women in the entertainment world — inappropriate touching and other unwanted attention was commonplace.

"It was really hard to know how to handle it," she says. "There were times that I actually felt in danger. At the beginning I'd just freeze and leave the situation. As I got older I

tried to have conversations with the people engaging in the activity, but again, it was sometimes more sensible just to leave."

Villainesse, Marvelly hopes, will help open dialogue around such behaviour. She says that when she was younger there was no public discussion around issues like consent.

She feels it's vital to engage in open debate around the hard issues — consent, sexuality, pornography — and provide a forum in which young women feel safe sharing their voice.

The website was in part born of necessity. Marvelly had long been searching for a place that offered a robust commentary on the contemporary female experience.

In the back of her mind she felt she might start one at some stage, but it took a conversation with a friend late last year to provide the impetus to put these thoughts into action.

"My mate Dave was giving me stick, in a light-hearted way, about how outspoken I was on social media. He commented that it would be really cool if there was a space where woman could speak openly about their experiences."

Villainesse launched two weeks ago and already has nearly 40 contributors. These include students from some of the world's most acclaimed universities and local columnists such as Jacinda Ardern, who penned one of Marvelly's favourite posts so far: "I Am a Feminist".

"People in politics often avoid making statements like that — it was great to have her come out and be so open about her feminism. It makes a change from people like [National Party Taupo MP] Louise Upston, who has claimed publicly that she isn't a feminist. I was pretty shocked," Marvelly says.

Upston last year also claimed that beauty pageants are great for young women to be involved in, a comment met with derision by many.

Marvelly is keen for the website to cover the range of issues facing young women in the 21st century. Villainesse stories range from classroom anxiety and depression to body-shaming, social smoking, classical music, Hollywood "white-washing" and racial tokenism.

Thornier issues are also covered. Under the "No Filter" tag you will find stories on BDSM and multiple sex partners.

Marvelly is the opposite of shy about tackling

these issues. She wants nothing to be taboo on her site; for no voice to go unheard.

“I really feel that there are very few things in life that are inherently good or bad,” she says.

“The most important thing is to be able to have an informed and honest conversation about issues.”

Her attitude towards pornography is a good example. She feels it should be talked about openly and that trying to place restrictions on access will only force it underground.

“If consenting adults are involved in making porn, I have no problem with it.

“But people need to be aware of the context in which it was made and feel free to engage in dialogue about it.”

She has the same attitude towards the way in which pop stars represent themselves through the media.

Some commentators deride the highly sexualised images of stars such as Miley Cyrus and Rihanna.

Marvelly feels that creative young women should be free to explore and present their sexuality in the way they feel fit.

“There has been a lot of talk around Miley Cyrus’ transformation — a lot of people criticised her sexualised image. But it all goes back to the classic ‘slut and stud’ concept — there has always been a struggle around female ownership of their sexuality.”

She says female sexuality should be accepted as normal and natural. “Some women are very sexual beings — and more power to them.

“If they want to represent themselves in those terms they

should be free to do so.

I’m all for self-agency.”

Marvelly has big hopes for the Villainesse site. It already has an international flavour and the writers who contribute from around the world ensure it resonates with an audience beyond New Zealand.

She also hopes it will become a multi-media platform.

She oversees the day-to-day running of the website as editor and moderator, as well as uploading content daily.

The singer is “between albums” and Villainesse is taking up the majority of her time. She loves having a creative voice outside of music.

“I’ve always been passionate about young women having a voice — this is the perfect forum for facilitating that.”

And to detractors who feel that feminism has had its day or is no longer relevant in the 21st century, she has a simple message.

“We need to get rid of the ‘them and us’ attitude.

“When it comes down to it, feminism is just equality within humanity.”

● villainesse.com



Lorde and Taylor Swift



Lena Dunham





“Apparently I am among the ranks of women whose expressions are seen as too strong, too aggressive, isolating, anti-men and, unattractive.”

– Emma Watson

“Saying you’re a feminist is just saying that you hope women and men will have equal rights and equal opportunities.”

– Taylor Swift

“I’m speaking for a bunch of girls when I say that the idea that feminism is completely natural and shouldn’t even be something that people find mildly surprising.”

– Lorde

“I always considered myself a feminist, although I was always afraid of that word because people put so much on it, when honestly it’s very simple. It’s just a person that believes in equality for men and women.”

– Beyonce