

Finn MacKay, 2008.

Five years of taking back the night! Five years of marching together to shout a loud NO to rape and male violence. Thank you for putting your feet on the streets for women, for closing down London, for our issues, for once!

Thank you very much for coming tonight from all over the country. Coaches, from Birmingham. Groups from Liverpool, Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester. Thank you for marking the International Day to End Violence Against Women with us here in the capital on our fifth revived national Reclaim The Night march.

Big thanks are due this year to our Trade Union sponsors and supporters – to the NASUWT for sponsoring this venue. NUT and Unison for their continued support and to all our Trade Union comrades. Thanks are due also to all the individual women and groups around the country who have given out flyers, organised transport, forwarded emails, stuck up stickers, spread the word, brought friends and made this event the great success it has been.

Thanks to the women on the organising committee who have put a year's worth of work into making tonight happen – Jennifer, Ashley, Julia, Kate, Becky, Caroline, Sandrine, Laurie and in particular Becca, for putting 100% into this event every year. Thanks also to our signer Kate, to the men's group who held their vigil in support of our march and to the men who have organised this rally venue tonight, and in particular to Adrian.

We have marched tonight because we still have to. We have marched together tonight as women because we have a struggle to win and each of you knows it. We live in a society where all of us, in all our diversity, know what it is to live with the fear, threat and reality of male violence. Some of us live with this when we walk home at night. Some of us live with this in our workplaces. Some of us live with this in our homes and families. It is a shame on our society that there are an estimated 80,000 rapes every year, over 300,000 sexual assaults – and meanwhile, a rape conviction rate that stands at the lowest it has ever been, one of the lowest in Europe at only 5.3%.

We are living in a society in backlash. By that I mean a backlash against the successes that women have made. Successes that were gained by our sisters who have gone before us. Indeed, nothing that we take for granted now, was ever given to us, nor was it easily won. The fact that we can vote, that we can get a formal education, that we can work, that we have access to safe and legal abortion, that we have laws against domestic violence, FGM, rape in marriage. All the gains we have made have been secured against all the odds. And the climate we are in now is no easier, nor will our successes be any easier gained. For we still have much to win. And increasingly, what we are fighting for are our most basic of freedoms, and the battlegrounds are being drawn across our very bodies.

Everywhere we go, we see ourselves demeaned and objectified in magazines, on billboards, in our media. We see ourselves for sale on our high streets and in the small ads of local papers. We see our young people increasingly sexualised. We see the so-called "sex industry" normalised as a career choice for our daughters. Is this

the price we are expected to pay for making relatively tiny advances in formal employment, for closing the pay gap by fractions, for clinging on to the very basic and restricted rights we have to abortion when we need it, for being seen in positions of power, for daring to take up public space? Well we never agreed to this trade-off. And we will not sacrifice our basic rights, nor our dignity and humanity to any backlash.

For we are involved in a liberation struggle and that means we don't stop until we get there.

We know it won't be easy. Everywhere we look we see signs of that. This year alone women will have spent over £1 billion pounds on plastic surgery. According to some surveys up to 63% of girls would rather be glamour models than doctors or teachers. Pole-dancing is considered a good way to get girls into PE. There are more licensed lap dancing clubs in our country than Rape Crisis Centres. Less than 1 in 10 Local Authorities have support services for women involved in prostitution. One in 3 Local Authorities have no women's refuge at all, for those fleeing domestic violence. And whether we like it or not, this has happened on our watch. But it sure as hell doesn't have to happen in our names.

And you have made that clear tonight. You have withdrawn your consent. By marching together as women, for all those who have paved the way and for those that can't be here. You have marched for the 2 women every week murdered by a violent male partner. For the 1 in 4 women who are raped, for the 5000 young people prostituted on our streets tonight as every night. For our sisters around the world who represent the poorest of the poor, those most displaced by wars, those without education, those most affected by environmental destruction. You have marched not to speak for these women but to speak out for them. And in so doing you have sent a message to those who would silence us, to those who would keep us in the home where we are actually most at risk. You have said, we know. We know that it is always safer to resist.

A few years ago the End Violence Against Women Coalition held a reception for the survivors of male violence and the families of those who have lost their lives to male violence. At this reception many of the guests expressed surprise that there was such a movement around the issue of men's violence against women. They had no idea that so many women, so many groups and organisations were working tirelessly to make sure no other family, no other woman went through what they had. Now, we may not be able to stop male violence against women overnight, but we can change this. Right now.

We can make sure that every woman knows that there is a place for her, that there is a movement for her that needs her to be part of it. We need Feminist Networks in all towns and cities, we need to link with our sisters and brothers internationally who are involved in similar struggles.

We need to build on our proud movement, on our history, so that in another 5 years we will be able to say: look where we are now. Look how far we have come. Look what we have done for women.

And so to those who think that the women's liberation movement in this country has been and gone, I would say think again. For we have merely been re-grouping. And new women have been finding us, and finding their voice.

And tonight you have raised your voices. You have stopped traffic, just as we will stop violence against women. You have closed down the streets of the capital, just as we will close down those institutions that try to repress us. You have taken back the streets, just as we will take back our movement from those who would package it up and sell it to us. As if it can be found in 'Miss Naked Beauty 2008'. As if it can be found in a new magazine, a new diet or a cosmetics company. NO!

No, our liberation will not be found there and we will not be fooled. It is up to those of you who know this truth to shout it louder than ever before, so that all women can hear it. Join us. And ask yourselves this: Are you the generation that will finish what our sisters started over 30 years ago? Are you ready to win our longest revolution?

You have taken back your night and you have won the day. Now reclaim your right, to a movement of our own. Thank you very much for coming, see you on the front line.