THE “F-WORD”

An Introduction

Feminist.
Bitch.
Fat.
Ugly.
Dyke.
Man hater.
Bra burner.
Hairy.
Butch.
Loud.
Militant.
Radical.
Angry.

These are some of the negative words that regularly surface when I ask people what comes to mind when they hear the word “feminist.” But, for me, “independence,” “strength,” and “equity” come to mind when I think of feminism. After fifty-plus years of the modern feminist movement, many people have negative ideas about feminism. Ironically, many of these same people reap the benefits of feminism in their own lives. From Title IX and educational equity to political representation, women in the United States have greater social, political, and economic equal-
ity today than their mothers experienced a generation ago. First and foremost, feminism simply means that women are the equals of men. A feminist is someone who supports this principle. Study after study tells us that the majority of people in the United States agree with this, but fewer and fewer want to identify with feminism. "Feminism" has thus become a bad word, the "f-word."

I come to feminism from a different view, a view that suggests that feminism is about equality and also equity, empowerment, strength, self-definition, and self-determination. It is an assertion that all women and girls can have not just equality in their lives but also quality of life—in the United States and around the globe. Feminism is about advocacy, activism, standing up, and speaking out. It is about fighting for social justice. And it is about working toward a solution to the continued discrimination and violence we as women face in the world—rape, sexual harassment, trafficking, police violence, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Feminism is about eradicating not just sexism but also racism, ageism, ableism, sizism, homophobia, and transphobia. Most of all, feminism does not have a static definition but encompasses and encourages many types of feminisms. So why do some turn away from feminism today?

THE MYTHS ABOUT FEMINISM

Many myths surround the term "feminism." The word has been distorted, diluted, misrepresented, stolen. So let's take a moment to break a few of these myths down.
Do All Feminists Hate Men?

No. It’s more complicated than that. Take my friend “Jane.” When Jane was five, the boys in her school wouldn’t let her play on the big playground. She wanted to climb and pretend to be a firefighter like the boys did, but they teased her and pushed her off the jungle gym every time she tried to participate. When she was seven, she wanted to play football, but there was only a boys’ team in her town. She was not allowed to play. When she was in high school, she was frequently frustrated that the boys’ athletic teams had more resources—better equipment, new uniforms, and better practice times—than did the girls’ teams. These inequities have long been a source of frustration for Jane. Does this mean that Jane hates all men? No. Does she realize that there have been times in her life when her gender has caused her to be discriminated against? Yes. This awareness is disturbing and makes her apt to speak up about her experiences, but it doesn’t make her hate men. Jane is now married (to a man), a successful attorney, and a mother. She is also a feminist. She continues to confront gender inequity, but, like most women, over time, she has learned that what we are up against is not just men—individually or collectively—but a system that values men over women, a system that promotes men over women, and a system that allows and, some would argue, encourages the violation of women. This system is called patriarchy. Patriarchy—the rule of the father—is at the root of a society that exalts men and the male experience—often at the cost of women and women’s experience. Many young women don’t want to talk about patriarchy—it is too boring, too political, and too 1970s. But, like it or not, we must name the system that orders our society if we have any hope of changing that system.

Patriarchy sets a tone for society—a tone that allows for the devaluing of women and our experiences and encourages the interpretation
of society through male eyes. Patriarchy allows for the overall—covert and overt—privileging of men and their experiences. As a set of spoken and unspoken rules or codes, patriarchy permeates the world’s religions, political systems, and sociocultural structures, which allows for, and supports, the power of men. This explains everything from why for more than 235 years there have been only male presidents in America, to why most Fortune 500 companies are led by men, to why male movie stars often get top billing and are, by default, paid more than women. Patriarchy is also a system that creates, requires, and reinforces strict gender roles, putting men into a rigid box of allowable behavior and denying the validity of varied gender expressions and identities. As a system, it’s important to understand that patriarchy is also connected to race, class, and sexual orientation. That is, if patriarchy were a pyramid, sitting at the top would be straight, white, rich men. And they would most likely be smiling, because they have had it made for a long time. Women, depending on their race, class, and sexuality, are usually not at the top—yes, there’s Hillary and Oprah—but they are the exception and not the rule.

Instead, we live in a time when self-empowerment is sold to women and girls as packaged, magazine-cover “beauty” and when “acceptance” is often defined through male attention. As a result, we have women raised in an environment where far too many quietly question their strength, their value, their contribution, and their voice even as they, at times, project a public image of control. Women often embrace a belief that the sexes are treated equally, while accepting the notion that women
are on display, and in existence, for male use and pleasure. American society teaches girls that their value and success are tied to their appearance and convince them to embrace this concept as their own self-definition. Playing into the patriarchy, girls dismiss feminism, all the while claiming equality as their right. The “I’m not a feminist but . . .” generation has persisted, denying feminism but embracing its rewards. And thus, in combination with the ongoing attack on feminism, the myths about the feminist movement thrive.

Are All Feminists “Bra Burners”?

The idea of “bra burning” is still commonly associated with the women’s movement, although bra burnings never happened, at least not as many were led to believe. In 1968, feminists protested the Miss America pageant and, as Ruth Rosen writes in *The World Split Open*, “into a large ‘Freedom Trash Can,’ they threw ‘instruments of torture’—girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, cosmetics of all kinds, wigs, issues of both *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, and, yes, bras.” At the request of city fire officials, the trash can was not lit on fire. The *New York Times* quickly began referring to the event as “bra burning.” And, as Rosen writes, “by then, the media, all by itself, had ignited what would prove to be the most tenacious media myth about the women’s movement—that women ‘libbers’ burned their bras as a way of protesting their status in American society.” The irony is that a vast number of the world’s women do not wear bras, and I dare say that many American women have forgone the experience. But the world has not fallen apart, at least not yet, and when and if it does, I venture to argue that women and their bras will not be at the center of its demise. But, even today, girls and women equate feminism with bra burning and fear an association with such a “radical” movement.
But Aren’t Feminists Fat, Ugly, and Hairy?

In the tradition of Rush Limbaugh, who called feminists “femi-nazis” and said that “feminism was established to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream,” this is classic name calling. Most recently, we saw Donald Trump argue that Carly Fiorina, his then-opponent in the Republican primary, was not attractive enough to be president, saying, “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?” We might as well be on the playgrounds of elementary school or the quads of high school. The goal of this type of name-calling is to attack a woman’s self-esteem, to have control over her actions, and to knock her down. If being a feminist means being fat, ugly, and hairy—traits women fear most in a culture that sets a limited definition for women’s acceptable beauty—then it is no wonder that many women don’t want to be labeled as such. In this sense, Limbaugh and his conservative friends, including women like Christine Hoff Sommers and Anne Coulter, have successfully stolen this word. As Bono once said, we’re stealing it back.

From the early stories of “bra burners,” the media and our society continue to marginalize women and their intellect, convincing many that our issues are individual, rather than structural and political. The attempt is to convince us that relationships, exercise, weight loss, clothing, and, of course, make-up are the critical issues of our lives. Make-up per se is not the issue. In fact, many women who consider themselves part of today’s feminist movement are embracing their lip gloss and demanding equality in spite of it—or maybe because of it! The problem is that society places a higher value on women’s appearance than on anything else, including the fight for our social, political, and economic equality. As a result, our energies are diverted, we question, or deny, our worth, and patriarchy lives on.

In 2001, when I was first elected president of the California National Organization for Women (NOW), I was asked to do numerous interviews. Much attention was paid to the fact that I was the youngest woman ever elected president of California NOW, and reporters had great interest in why someone in her twenties would embrace not only
NOW but feminism. Perhaps not surprisingly, what most reporters questioned me about was whether a feminist can wear make-up. I had been prepared to talk about economic justice, health care, reproductive freedom, LGBTIQ+ issues, and violence against women, but they wanted to talk make-up. The more important question is whether this emphasis helps women to identify with feminism. Or does it dilute the perception of its importance? The issues of make-up, or other popular magazine cover topics like relationships and weight loss, certainly should not replace or overshadow our opinions about policy, economics, or politics. Nor should it refute the importance of feminism and a feminist analysis of society.

I gave my little sister a book called Feminism Is for Everyone by bell hooks and she told me she couldn’t read it because she likes men. Allison, 21, white, pansexual, Colorado

LGBTQIAP2S: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Two Spirit (2S). Sometimes another A is added for Ally. As this alphabet grows with the goal of being inclusive, often LGBTQI+ is used to summarize.

Transgender: is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. “Trans” is often used as shorthand for transgender. Some transgender people identify as neither a man nor a woman, or as a combination of male and female, and may use terms like non-binary or genderqueer to describe their gender identity. Those who are non-binary often prefer to be referred to as “they” and “them.” (National Center for Transgender Equality)

Intersex: a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Intersex is a socially constructed category that reflects real biological variation. (Intersex Society of North America)

Asexual: having a lack of (or low level of) sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest or desire for sex or sexual partners. (Social Justice Advocate’s Handbook)

Pansexual: a person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions. (Social Justice Advocate’s Handbook)

Two Spirit: a sacred term used by Native/First-Nation peoples to represent individuals with a blend of feminine and masculine traits. Used by Native/First-Nation “LGBT communities in order to honor their heritage and provide an alternative to the Western labels of gay, lesbian, or transgender.” (National Congress of American Indians)
Are All Feminists Dykes and Butch?

Let’s face it, society is uncomfortable with women’s sexualities. Perhaps nothing is more frightening to men, and to some women, than a woman whose sexuality is defined outside the context of straight men. Moreover, when women are butch—strong, tough, and unfeminine—they are also threatening because they are seen as not needing male help. If women can take care of themselves and each other—physically and sexually—then what do they need men for? The irony is that we have a culture obsessed with lesbianism—well, faux lesbianism, at least. Sexual pairing of women is common in male-centered porn and advertising. Of course, these women are not there for the enjoyment of other women—but for men, they are the ultimate male fantasy. Calling all feminists lesbians, dykes, or butch is to equate women with these notions of being unfeminine and sexually independent from men. This negative labeling reinforces a narrow definition of woman and femaleness. It is true that many feminists are lesbian, dyke, and/or butch. It is also true that many are not. The more important and disturbing point is the widespread belief of this myth and the acceptance of the notion that homosexuality is an accusation. Homophobia is the problem, not feminism.

Is Feminism Needed Any More?

As I previously mentioned, we are often confronted with the sentiment “I’m not a feminist but . . .” Many believe today that feminism is no longer necessary, that equality has been achieved and that any hardship women encounter must be the result of their own actions. I suppose that this is an understandable reaction, given the feminist message that women can do anything. In other words, if women believe this message but have difficulty in achieving their dreams, then it must be their failure. The myths that surround feminism play into this feeling of failure and discourage women from aligning themselves with feminism. This makes it much more difficult to recognize that discrimination against women is
real and that often gender serves as the source of the barrier, rather than personal “failures.” Making feminism the enemy redirects our attention away from that which serves to hold us back. Instead, we need to be able to celebrate our successes and be proud of ourselves even while appreciating that feminism helped open the way to our opportunities. I have known many women friends who are talented and who work very hard in their careers but who have faced challenges because of their gender. My sister, an audiologist who works with people with hearing difficulties, frequently confronts the assumption that since she has had children and is married, her career is no longer important or has become secondary to that of her husband and colleagues. She has confronted a lack of support with regard to her childcare needs, lack of flexibility with her schedule, barriers to advancement, and attitudes of resentment from colleagues. She is a strong feminist and fortunately recognizes that her work situation is the result of gender bias and discrimination. She also recognizes that solutions to this work-life integration lie in feminist tenets. It is feminism that asserts that we need better support for the multiple family models that exist today—stay-at-home moms or dads, moms in the workplace, dual-parent-earner households, single parents, and all the many combinations we create that constitute family. We still need the support of feminism in our lives and in achieving our many goals.

_Aren't All Feminists Angry?_

A few years ago, I was invited to speak in a classroom at San Francisco City College. The discussion was great—we covered topics from health care and reproductive rights to pay equity and the glass ceiling. And then . . . the inevitable. From the back of the room, a young man raised his hand and said something to the effect that he understands all the “stuff” we were talking about but just can’t get over the “fact” that most feminists he meets are so angry—“Not you, Ms. Seely,” he quickly added. I asked him, and the class, why, given all that we had been discussing, they thought that feminists get an angry label? I guess this young man
could see where I was headed, and he blurted out, “Well, I can understand the anger, but why are they so bitchy?” Here we have it—feminists are “angry bitches.” Why is it that a woman who gets angry is immediately called a bitch? Why, when people are speaking of angry women, are these two terms synonymous? A man may put his fist through a wall, and, while we may think him foolish, we rarely demean his character. But we are extremely uncomfortable with women’s anger. Are people afraid that if women get angry enough, they might revolt? Indeed, our collective anger might cause a stir—to say the least. But, instead, we women learn to control ourselves, not speak out of turn, keep our voices and our heads low, and ask for qualifiers for our speech.

But my question is, why aren’t we angry? All of us—female, male, gender non-binary alike? And why aren’t we speaking up and acting out? I believe that the stereotypes I have described were assigned to feminists because of fear—fear of women collectively speaking out and standing up to the gross inequities and atrocities we face daily and globally. Years ago, Robin Morgan said that sisterhood is global, and it is timely to remember this and that collective sisterhood is even more powerful. What would the world look like if we said “no more”? No more to violence, no more to inequity, no more to lack of representation. What if women stood together, joined forces, and understood the common thread of oppression we collectively face? What if we realized our power? What if?

We live in a culture where women are not safe in their homes, workplaces, or schools, or on the street, where someone is sexually assaulted every ninety-eight seconds in the United States, where one in four women suffer severe physical violence by an intimate partner, and where one in four women experience sexual harassment on the job and 48 percent of girls in grades 7 through 12 report experiencing sexual harassment at school. Women are stalked, intimidated, humiliated, and violated in both their everyday lives and their “make-believe lives” of entertainment—on television, in movies, and in video games.
Less than 24 percent of the members of Congress are women. Women hold a mere 4 percent of S&P 500 CEO positions and only 19.4 percent of all S&P 500 board seats, and are far less likely than men to hold leadership positions in unions, despite their growing participation in union-based labor. Women still experience pay inequity based on both gender and race. According to the National Women’s Law Center, women earned on average 80 percent of what white men made in 2016. When race is considered, these statistics change dramatically; African American women earn 61 percent, Latina women 53 percent, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women 62 percent, and Native American women 58 percent of what white men made in 2016. The figure for Asian American women is estimated to be the highest, at 85 percent, which still isn’t parity and is also a bit misleading, as the experience for women under this broad classification is greatly varied.

Women have to fundraise with benefits, walks, runs, and the like to raise money for health research and services because our issues are disproportionately ignored by the National Institute of Health and other research arms. Women’s reproductive health choices are consistently up for debate, with the male-dominated Congress and state legislatures blocking funding and resources and, although abortion has been legal for more than forty years, women still travel extended distances, suffer shame and blame, walk through dangerous picket lines, and put themselves at risk—not because of the abortion itself, which is ten times safer than childbirth and even safer than a tonsillectomy—but because of anti-choice extremists who believe that picketing, violence, and fire bombing are “pro-life” acts. And, yes, this makes me angry.

If all this were not enough, in the year 2016, we elected a man with no experience whatsoever to the highest political position in the land. And we did so following an outrageously racist and misogynistic campaign where Donald Trump threatened to build a wall to keep out Mexicans, encouraged the denial of civil liberties to anyone assumed to be Muslim, made fun of people with disabilities, called women too ugly to harass, called Hillary Rodham Clinton a “nasty woman” in the middle of a can-
The "F-Word"

didate debate, and was recorded boasting about his own acts of sexual assault. Since his election, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports daily of increased acts of violence against Muslims, people of color, and women. And, yes, this makes me angry.

We still have no constitutional amendment securing rights on the basis of sex—or sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, for that matter. To the contrary, efforts to pass an ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) are dismissed as passé. Those most dedicated to its passage are often very resistant to expanding the ERA to include LGB-TIQ+ peoples, so if passed, even though it will be a significant gain, the ERA will immediately fall short.

With violence in our lives, pay inequity and a lack of equal representation at work, challenges in balancing family demands without adequate support or accommodation, inadequate access to and research on women’s health issues, and politics that define our rights without our being fully represented in the decision-making process, women continue to fight for equality and equity. We have made many gains, but we are not there yet. Better, yes; equal, no. Perhaps more disturbing than all these realities is that so many people today believe that women are equal—that it’s all good, no worries. Well, there are worries, and perhaps the first and most significant worry is that people—particularly women—continue to believe that equality exists even in the face of so much evidence to the contrary.

Why am I a part of the feminist movement? Because my anger is legitimate. And because I believe that passivity is exactly what the radical conservative right wants from us so that it can continue to violate our rights and limit our resources. I also believe that anger is useful when we channel that energy into creating positive social change and improving lives. I believe that women are fierce—we are leaders, role models, and visionaries. I believe that we deserve more; we deserve better. I am a part of the feminist movement because I want girls to learn our history, to know our strength, to appreciate the gains made, and to pick up the fight. I am part of this movement because women have no secure future
without feminism. I benefited from the work of feminists before me, and I will continue that work until all women everywhere enjoy a life of true social, political, and economic equality. And I am a part of this movement because, when the next generation of children ask me what I did to help, I want to be able to tell them that I did do something, that I thought of them in my actions and fought for their safety, their health, and their right to equal opportunity.

So what about these myths and labels? There’s no question that the backlash that writers like Susan Faludi have written about is real. But there is also no question that women and girls are at risk. I believe that it is more important to counter these attacks on feminism with the truth of our lives. The biggest truth is that feminism, in its true definition, is supported by a majority of people. Ask women to tell their stories. Talk to your mothers and grandmothers. Learn our history—particularly the history that has been left out of our school books. Tell your story. One of the greatest gains of the feminist movement was that it recognized the legitimacy of women’s voices. Use yours. Stand up. Speak out. And speak often.

**WOMEN HAVE THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT TO THANK IF . . .**

You vote.  
You read.  
You wear pants, skirts cut above your ankle, short-sleeved shirts, or any clothing that shows your skin.  
You travel without a male chaperone or you drive a car.  
You use, or have ever used, birth control. Or your birth control is covered by your insurance company or by state or federal funds.  
You have had, or anyone you know has had, a safe and legal abortion.  
You have given birth at home, developed a birth plan that was utilized during your hospital birth, your partner was present for the delivery; you have adopted a child, or you have chosen not to have children.  
You own property or have credit cards or a bank account in your name.  
You participate in sports.  
You have run for and/or held elected office, worked on the campaign of a woman who was running for office, or voted for a woman candidate.
You have a job in the paid labor force or actively choose to stay home in the unpaid labor force to raise children.
You go to college.
You are studying religion or have become a member of the clergy.
You are openly lesbian, living with a partner; you share domestic partnership; or you were married as part of a same-sex couple.
You choose to marry, to keep your last name, to build an egalitarian marriage, or to cohabitate or remain single; you have the right to divorce.
You marry whom you want to.
You leave an abusive husband or report a rape or sexual harassment—you have legal recourse for violence against you.
Wearing corsets is a choice, not a mandate, as is wearing make-up, a bra, or high heels.
You serve in the armed forces and receive veteran’s benefits.
You decide to cook or become a chef.
You pierce or tattoo any part of your body.
You climb trees, run, jump, do somersaults, or skin your knees.

**SPOTLIGHT ON FEMINISM**

*Sometimes I feel like my whole life has been a process of coming into feminism and being a feminist.* Mandy, 27, white, queer, New York

*Women want equal rights . . . who wouldn’t be for that besides people who are threatened by a strong willed woman who doesn’t need to depend on a man?* Katrina, 22, African American, lesbian, Virginia

*I think that I’ve always been a “feminist,” even before I knew it or knew what the term meant.* Morgan, 27, white, heterosexual, California

*It would be foolish for me to NOT identify as a feminist since the educational, social and career opportunities that I enjoy are a direct result of past feminist struggles.* Mingzhao, 21, Chinese American, heterosexual, California

*As a feminist, I am often teased. People have called me a “femi-Nazi,” a term I abhor and, as a Jew, find repulsive.* Amy, 23, Washington, DC

*Personally I love the word and am proud to identify as a feminist. The word has been stolen from us and we need to reclaim it, redefine it for our generation and what’s going on in our world now.* Katherine, 23, Caucasian, bisexual, Florida

*I am a feminist because I never liked hearing camp counselors ask for “big strong boys” to help set up the bonfire and “nice young ladies” to set out the picnic. I am a feminist because I got sick of reading textbooks written by white/heterosexual/able-bodied/middle-class men about themselves, and the god-like role they had played in shaping the whole human history. I am a feminist because I am scared to think that men can pass laws that limit my reproduc-
tive freedom. I am a feminist because I believe in compassion for all living things, and damn a world that says might makes right. Elspeth, 22, bisexual, Michigan

It was with extreme trepidation that I decided to become a self-declared feminist. I was very familiar with the implications of such a declaration in terms of how society would perceive me . . . In reality, I had always been a feminist because I have always believed in the equality of men and women. Marina, 21, Cuban, California

There’s no, “I’m a feminist but . . .” for me. I’m a feminist. Period. Cynthia, 33, white, heterosexual, Massachusetts